

The Pennsylvania State University
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**“WE DON’T WRITE JUST TO WRITE; WE WRITE TO BE FREE”:
A RHETORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF SPOKEN WORD IN LOS ANGELES**

A Thesis in
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by

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Abstract

Hip hop is an artistic sub-culture that permeates society as graffiti writing, rap music, break dancing, (Smitherman, 1999; Forman, 2002; Ramsey, 2003) and more recently, poetry. Hip hop poetry, with its roots in African American rhetorical traditions, is a complex and extensive art form that stems from spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry is an umbrella term for five different genres of poetry: performance poetry, hip hop poetry, slam poetry, Taos poetry, and Nuyorican poetry. It is defined as poetry that is written on the page but performed for an audience. Hip hop poetry, more specifically, “tends to forefront rhythm, improvisation, free association, rhymes, and the use of hybrid language, from rich poetic phrasing to the gritty imagery of vernacular” (Weiss & Herndon, 2001, p. 70). Hip hop poetry also serves specific functions. Hip hop poets act as conduits for literacy education, identity development, political awareness, and activism within their communities. In its simplest understanding, hip hop poetry allows artists to adopt standard aesthetic norms with room for poetic justice. It also creates space for artists to accomplish their own unique purposes. In this sense, art becomes a space for social action, a space where groups can mobilize and generate a sense of power and voice.

Using rhetorical ethnography as method, the author embarks on a seven month journey through the Los Angeles spoken word scene to observe how spoken word communities perform collective identity. The author also explores spoken word as a counterpublic collective that engages in oppositional discourse. Through ethnographic observation, interviews, focus groups, and rhetorical analysis, the author analyzes the performance of collective identity, membership, and counterpublicity, and describes the ways in which the spoken word counterpublic collective attempts to confront oppression.

This study exposes the interdependence among the study of identity, counterpublicity, and performance. The author concludes that identity directly affects the motives behind a counterpublic collective coming together and performing counter-hegemonic discourse. Ethnographic exploration of counter-hegemonic discursive performance uncovers the ways in which spoken word artists attempt to transgress dominant ideologies and carve space for new meanings to emerge that validate their lived experiences. Rhetorical analysis of the performance illuminates the ways in which spoken word artists are also supporting and reinforcing dominant ideologies. The researcher offers rhetorical ethnography as method and makes suggestions for future studies concerning the multifaceted aspects of counterpublic collective identity and performance.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter 1	
Welcome to the Spoken Word Poetry Scene: An Introduction	1
<i>Poetry and the Harlem Renaissance</i>	3
<i>Poetry and the Black Power Movement</i>	9
<i>Hip Hop and Poetry</i>	11
<i>Purpose</i>	14
<i>Summary</i>	14
Chapter 2	
Coming to the Stage: A Literature Review.....	16
<i>Identity</i>	17
<i>Collective Identity</i>	21
<i>Space and Collective Identity</i>	26
<i>Performance, Performativity, and Identity</i>	31
<i>Counterpublics Theory, Identity, and Space</i>	34
Chapter 3	
Manipulating the <i>Nappy Tongue</i> at <i>Da Poetry Lounge</i> and <i>A Mic & Dim Lights</i> : Method and Methodology	40
<i>Rhetorical Ethnography</i>	40
<i>The Field Site, Data Collection, and Quality</i>	46
<i>Gaining Access via “Respect.”</i>	48
<i>Sampling & Recruitment</i>	50
<i>Data Analysis and Write-Up</i>	55
Chapter 4	
My 1 st time with a Mic and a Spotlight.....	58
<i>Aesthetics and The Spoken Word Movement: Why we do it.</i>	59
<i>The Form and Function of Hip Hop Poetry</i>	71
Chapter 5	
Welcome to the Los Angeles Spoken Word Scene: Becoming a Member, and Performing Collective Identity.....	79

<i>Interaction and Practical Consciousness Knowledge: Becoming a Member and Performing Membership</i>	87
<i>Performing Collectivity, Performing Ownership</i>	111
Chapter 6	
Next on the Mic: Counterpublicity and Spoken Word	118
<i>Counterpublics Theory and Hip Hop Poetry</i>	118
<i>Writing for Freedom</i>	127
<i>Critiquing the Counterpublicity of Spoken Word Poetry: The Rhetorical Leaks Out of Rhetorical Ethnography</i>	132
Chapter 7	
Thanks for Coming out and Goodnight: A Discussion.....	158
<i>Performance, Storytelling, and Ownership in (Counter)Public Spaces</i>	158
<i>Limitations of Study</i>	166
<i>Future Research</i>	167
References.....	171
Appendix A Interview Protocol.....	184
Appendix B Focus Group Protocol.....	185
Appendix C Observational Protocol.....	186
Appendix D Institutional Review Board Consent Form.....	189

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Chapter 1

Welcome to the Spoken Word Poetry Scene: An Introduction

During times of struggle, people band together and confront their social problems.

This analysis is concerned with how one network of poets bands together to form the Spoken Word Movement and confront oppression, hate, racism, sexism, and a host of other social issues through engaging in counterpublic rhetoric, exercising rhetorical power, and performing collective identity. Stemming from scholarship by Fraser (1989; 1990), Asen & Brouwer (2001), Warner (2002), and Squires (2006), counterpublic is an adjective that describes a type of discourse or rhetoric that is distinct and oppositional from dominant discursive practices. Counterpublic collectives are groups that come together to perform counterpublic rhetoric or engage in counterpublic discourse directed towards specific aims. Counterpublicity refers to the public expressions of counterpublic rhetoric through varying media resources (Squires, 2002). Poets engage in counterpublicity through performance at poetry readings in their host cities and nationally and internationally through televised performances and touring. Through this engagement they build and maintain rhetorical power simultaneously. Rhetorical power describes the specific ways in which a text affects its audience (Mailloux, 1989). According to Mailloux, a text provides evidence of rhetorical power in its 'ideological performance' because it asks the reader to be critical as it observes the power in the narrative and experiences its affects while consuming it. Because this analysis is focused on a counterpublic collective that performs poetry, I argue that rhetorical power not only exists within the written text, but also within the individual that performs the text, and the performance of the text as spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry, and more

specifically hip hop poetry, is the public performance of poetry with adherence to specific form and function that stems from a Black aesthetic, and is inspired by hip hop and public poetic performance from previous eras like the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

Spoken word poetry is the newest aesthetic revolution merging the boundaries of emotion, politics, culture, generation, and orality. Born in the 1960's, contemporary spoken word poetry continues the thread of using words as motivating and solidifying forces because of their ability to move masses, create change in communities, and revolutionize people. In this light, poetic performance in the public sphere has afforded minorities a particular kind of literary freedom, namely the freedom to generate and disseminate knowledge about one's self in the form of written statements and use them advantageously (Kutzinski, 1983).

Poets have the potential to be critical and creative, thus poetry has historically been a site for resistance and freedom through literacy (Kutzinski, 1983; Fisher, 2003; Bennet, 2003). To trace African American poetry in the United States is to make sense of a rich history embedded in protest, revolution, and objection, as well as assimilation, marginalization, and hegemony, reminding us that Black history is not a monolithic story or episode, but a multi-layered reality of struggle with identity and place in an oppressive society. To understand hip hop poetry in contemporary society is to continue this thread. Spoken word poetry continues to be a rhetorical tool in public spaces because of the ability to perform identity in new and inventive ways. The following review embarks on a brief journey to uncover the rhetorical performance of identity through poetry in African American history in an effort to understand poetry's role in the context of public

discourse and social action. Specifically, I trace the patterns of identity performance in poetry during the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Power Movement, and Hip Hop Poetry as evidenced in historical contexts, themes, and content. This cursory examination is presented as a way to gain insight into the historical impetus and discursive emergence of contemporary hip hop poetry.

Poetry and the Harlem Renaissance

The historical context of the Harlem Renaissance began in the early 20th century. While some scholars argue the Harlem Renaissance began after World War I, Gerald Early (1991) says that scholars largely agree that the Renaissance began in 1915 when African Americans began to migrate to the urban north. Early argues that the Harlem Renaissance marks the peak moment of the New Negro Movement, which dated from 1908 to 1938, and claims that in order to understand Black poets from the Harlem Renaissance, we must understand the New Negro Movement first because it was the New Negro Movement that made the Harlem Renaissance possible.

The New Negro Movement represents a shift in thinking for Blacks in America. Spurred on Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion of boxing, and his lifestyle, Blacks realized that they could assert themselves in society, becoming masters at different art forms and sports among other things (Early, 1991). “The New Negro was basically the Black who asserted his rights and manhood, who wanted to best the White, who was reckless, independent, bold, and superior in the face of Whites” (Early, 1991, p. 26). Because of the conception of the New Negro Movement, Blacks began making history with poetry, music, novels, and other forms of entertainment, creating the Harlem Renaissance. Other consequences prompted the renaissance as well.

The summer of 1919 was a particularly horrific summer. The Ku Klux Klan had come back, with a vengeance, inspired by D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* as well as the end of World War I. Black men by the thousands had fought courageously on the fields and trenches of Europe to make the world safe for democracy (White, 1998). They returned home expecting to receive for themselves some of the rights they had defended for others. Instead, they encountered a campaign of terror so murderous and bloody that the summer of 1919 became known as "Red Summer" (Tolnay & Beck, 1996; Zangrando, 1980; White, 1998).

Poetry and literary works sprang out of this horrific state, creating an opportunity to study African American identity performance thematically. Assimilation represents one theme of Harlem Renaissance poetry. Some Harlem Renaissance writers adhered to traditional poetic structure and sought integration into American society (Jennings, 1998). Poets used traditional forms like sonnets, haikus, and limericks. Their use of structure showed a need for assimilation because they were outcasts and wanted to belong in a literary society. The content suggested other motives. Poets used metaphors and indirect references to oppression and injustice. Their main goal was to show America they were talented enough to gain access to the same things as White America. Poets drew metaphorical character descriptions of Whites versus direct descriptions. Poets talked about dominant society, but in a more covert, witty way. Writers projected protest poems that carried anger without revenge (Jennings, 1998). The poetry didn't call for action, but a certain disposition (White, 1998). Poets asked the audience to react instead of act; not attack, but defend. An example of this type of renaissance writing generated from Countee Cullen. Cullen wrote poetry with race consciousness, but used English literary

traditions. His poem, "From the Dark Tower," written in sonnet form, illustrates his disposition as a poet, signaling his readers to wait for redemption instead of enacting agency.

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlasting while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made eternally to weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumble, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

Cullen believed that popular English aesthetics represented the dominant forms of poetry and that poets who wrote in other forms were experimenting. He wrote:

This country's Negro writer may here and there turn some singular facet toward the literary sun, but in the main, since theirs is also the heritage of the English language, their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their times. The conservatives, middlers, and the arch heretics will be found among them as among White poets; and such a fever, or symptoms of such an ague, will prove upon closer examination merely the moment's exaggeration of a physician anxious to establish a new literary ailment. (p. 39).

Langston Hughes, another famous Harlem Renaissance poet, experimented with the blues in his writing, but had different reasons for experimentation. Cullen's quote holds potential to explain Langston Hughes' testing of different forms, but Hughes felt differently about Black poetry, White poetry, assimilation and difference. Defending a comment he made about Black poets who write for a White audience using White forms as wanting to be White, Hughes argues:

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meaning and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading, I answer questions like these from my own people: do you think Negro writers should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to White folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about Black people? You aren't Black. What makes you do so many jazz poems? But jazz to me is on the inherent expression of Negro life: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against wariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile (Hughes, 1973, p. 43).

While Cullen wrote standard English poetry with race consciousness, Hughes wrote Black folk poetic forms with indigenous self-consciousness.

Hughes, a self-acclaimed and publicly-acclaimed revolutionary writer and poet, produced his most outspoken poetry in the 1930's (Berry, 1973). He dealt with inner struggles about the effects of marginalization and poets' private literary desires. As Berry (1973) notes,

In order to satisfy his public, his critics, his publishers and himself, he faced an ongoing inner struggle between what he wanted to write and what his audience expected him to write, between his public image and private self, between his performance and his integrity (p. xi-xii).

Bennett (2003) discusses the balancing act, noting that in order to become a part of the public sphere minority poets had to assimilate or try to find a delicate balance between marginalization and assimilation. Dominant constructions of poetry and society were not always open to minority writers, let alone minority subjects. Hughes, as a Negro writer who speaks of Black issues, could not please multiple groups simultaneously; he had to struggle with himself and his production, producing enough poetry to keep himself, his critics, his publishers, and his consumers satisfied. In his own clever way, Hughes was

even able to acknowledge the move towards assimilation for some Black scholars and leaders. In his poem, “To Certain Negro Leaders,” (1931), he writes:

Voices crying in the wilderness,
At so much per word
From the white folks:
“Be meek and humble,
All you niggers,
And do not cry
Too loud”

Hughes and Cullen are only two of many Harlem Renaissance poets, but show the diverse array of artistry. However, there are underlying themes that move across generations, time, and the type of oppressive situation for Blacks; albeit situated in race, class, gender, or sexual preference, the poetry is political whether covert or overt tactics are used. Whether examining poets as diverse as Claude McKay (1889-1948), Richard Wright (1908-1960), Julius Lester (1939-), or Margaret Walker (1915-1998), all of their poems concentrate on issues of identity, Black experiences, power, objection, or oppression. The following five poems printed in *Soulscript* (1970), rely on different forms and character descriptions, but they are all political in content.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accurséd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O, kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!
Claude McKay, 1919, “If We Must Die”

I am black and I have seen black hands
Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the fists of white workers,
And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—
Some day there shall be million and millions of them,
On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!
Richard Wright, 1934, “I Have Seen Black Hands,” verse IV

If there were not a war
I would smile at the acne-blemished
Kids with rifles on their backs
Julius Lester, 1967, “lxxvii”

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace
be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue
forth; let a people living freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full
of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our
spirits and our blood. Let the marital songs be written, let the
dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.
Margaret Walker, 1968, “For My People,” excerpt

We have been believers
We have been believers believing in our burdens and our
demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and pray; the
long suffering arise, and our fists bleed against the bars with a
strange insistency.
Margaret Walker, 1968, “We Have Been Believers,” excerpt

Claude McKay and Julius Lester write in standard poetic forms and refer to dominant society as “their” and “acne-blemished kids” respectively. Richard Wright and Margaret Walker utilize free verse and speak in first person plural and singular voices. Despite the minor differences in form and referents, all five poems are political in content and illustrate the performance of identity through poetry. Each poem takes as its subject the idea of fighting back, no longer waiting in the dark suffering, but moving forward through a transition period of war, fighting, bleeding, and revolt. Each poem declares a shift in identity for Blacks and resonates with Walker’s excerpt from “We Have Been Believers,” when she writes, “We have been believers/... Now the needy no longer weep

and/ pray; the suffering arise, and our fists bleed against the bars with strange insistency.”

They each mimic the cultural milieu that bled into future artistic movements like the Black Power Movement, and continues to bleed into the hip hop poetry of today; there is a struggle for freedom, but Black identity will prevail.

Poetry and the Black Power Movement

The era between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power Movement is not a popular object of study in the Liberal Arts, but African Americans continued writing poetry and fighting for equality in the United States. Because change did not happen fast enough, the Black Power Movement emphasized separation and empowerment. The Black Panther Party poets and the 1960's Beat poets created different poetics that emphasized aesthetic separation instead of assimilation. Black poets created poetry to educate, enlighten, and motivate African Americans; they sought to create mobile communities separate from dominant society. Their methods influenced Blacks to instigate, consider, and accept social change. Their themes consisted of turning language into weapons, stopping police brutality, and redefining racial names (Jennings, 1998). During the Black Power Movement, Black poets used character descriptions that were more vulgar and overt than their predecessors. Poetic performers shouted particular lines, dramatized specific phrases, talked directly to the audience, worked their voices like instruments, and recited poetry with musical accompaniment. Poets relied on Black vernacular to create solidarity, evoke realism, and intimately relate writer to reader or listener. Poets slowly adopted free verse in addition to standard forms. The following excerpt from “A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand” by Amiri Baraka and the untitled poem by Kathleen Cleaver illustrate the call to action and quest for mobility.

We have waited for the coming of a natural
phenomenon. Mystical and romantics, knowledgeable
workers
of the land
But none has come.
But none has come.

Will the machinegunners please step forward?

Amiri Baraka, 1969, "A Poem Some People will have to Understand,"
excerpt

Although we are supposedly free
To go to school and give birth and get married and
Drive Cadillacs
The pain involved and the struggle required
Just to live in this madness for one more day
Is more than a man can say
He must just pick up the gun
Refuse to run
Stand on his feet
An act like a man
...Demand that he be free

Kathleen Cleaver, 1968

Cleaver and Baraka both continue the themes of no longer waiting for change, but enacting agency and making change happen. Much like the poetry presented in the previous section, Cleaver and Baraka ask specifically for a change in disposition and a shift in identity. They ask the reader to step forward and demand his freedom. While the authors modified the forms and language, identity remains an important feature.

The history of African American poetry exposes a great deal about the cultural milieu of Black and White America. The framing, form, and language may have been diverse, but the themes of poetry remain consistent since earlier African American poets and portray the political environment and quest for a shift in thinking and identity. Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammond, and Phillis Wheatley wrote protest poems as early as 1776 (Hughes, 1997). Poetry of the 20th century continued to illustrate cultural situations and

different critical responses to those situations. Through themes like assimilation, protest, activism, politics, and revolt, poets illuminate the struggle and offer solutions. African American poetic history paints the varying degrees of political appeals and the many contributions to public discourse regarding blackness and dissent with society. Poets have always written complaints about slavery and protest, creating and defining themes that poets of today continue to develop through the thread of hip hop.

Hip Hop and Poetry

Hip hop is an artistic sub-culture that permeates society as graffiti writing, rap music, break dancing, (Smitherman, 1999; Forman, 2002; Ramsey, 2003) and more recently, poetry. Hip hop poetry, with its roots in African American rhetorical traditions, is a complex and extensive art form that stems from spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry is an umbrella term for five different genres of poetry: performance poetry, hip hop poetry, slam poetry, Taos poetry, and Nuyorican poetry. It is defined as poetry that is written on the page but performed for an audience. Hip hop poetry, more specifically, “tends to forefront rhythm, improvisation, free association, rhymes, and the use of hybrid language, from rich poetic phrasing to the gritty imagery of vernacular” (Weiss & Herndon, 2001, p. 70). Hip hop poetry also serves specific functions. Hip hop poets act as conduits for literacy education, identity development, political awareness, and activism within their communities. In its simplest understanding, hip hop poetry allows artists to adopt standard aesthetic norms with room for poetic justice. It also creates space for artists to accomplish their own unique purposes. In this sense, art becomes a space for social action, a space where groups can mobilize and generate a sense of power and voice.

Groups that are powerless historically have been able to find a voice through artistic and cultural production (Hebdige, 1979; Beckman, 1991; Bennet, 2003; Fisher, 2003). Hebdige (1979) refers to artistic movements as subcultures—communities in which style is used as the primary means to challenge hegemonic structures. In a society that privileges whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality, and age, the youth, the poor, people of color, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities are often left powerless and voiceless. Poetry, when understood traditionally as a high art form, represents a very hierarchical form of culture that is exclusive and oppressive. Hip hop poetry is a part of a larger subcultural movement that redefines poetry’s role in public spaces (Eleveld & Smith, 2003). The spoken word movement recognizes the potential cultural force that poetry represents and possesses and uses that force to empower the powerless and give voice to the voiceless. Poets of the spoken word community use the “Master’s tools,” as Audre Lorde calls them (1984), to create a voice and power within their own communities, and eventually, greater society. Hip hop poetry as a subcultural movement utilizes the spatial realm of the stage as well as ideological and stylistic tools to challenge academic understandings of poetry, and greater hierarchical systems of oppression in society. Spoken word artists locate power in the spoken word and have increasingly gained voices within their own communities as well as greater society with the introduction of the National Poetry Slam, HBO’s Def Poetry Jam, BET’s Lyric Café, and commercial advertising.

The art form is rapidly spreading like a wild fire internationally and creating a space for social change to occur in multiple communities across multiple generations and cultures. Spoken word’s potential as a revolutionary tool has become so popular and

widespread among today's poets that they refer to it as the Spoken Word Movement. While I would not consider the Spoken Word Movement a social movement in the academic or historical sense, spoken word poetry venues and poets have experienced an enormous increase in popularity and number, and those that participate do engage in social action as poets, hosts, and/or audience members. In this analysis, I refer to it as the Spoken Word Movement because my participants refer to it as such, however, I am not suggesting that it is a social movement.

Extant research has examined art as social action, but the Spoken Word Movement as it is lived today remains largely unstudied, leaving a void in the literature concerning spoken word as a discursive phenomena relating to collective identity. The present study seeks to fill that void by offering what I call a rhetorical ethnography of spoken word poetry, poets, and their communities.

Spoken word communities present an opportunity to look at collective identity performance because it revolves around the articulation of identity in oppressed and power-laden communities. This analysis is concerned with spoken word, the rhetorical uses for poetry in public spaces, the power in poetic rhetoric, and the ways in which communities create and disseminate a performed identity based on gaining rhetorical power. In short, I am locating a particular community's performance of collective identity and their roles in the public sphere as a counterpublic collective. I put forth the following research question:

RQ: How do poets use poetry to perform collective identity within the public sphere?

Purpose

With the present project, my purpose is to understand the cultural processes of a spoken word community in the public sphere. Specifically, I describe the role of poetry collectives in a counterpublic space, and their performance of collective identity and membership. I want to understand how a spoken word poetry community uses poetry to resist oppressive environments and gain power internally as individuals within a collective and externally as mobile communities challenging society. I also want to describe the processes of creating, maintaining, and performing collective. Specifically, the primary purpose of this study is to gather, analyze, and describe data that illustrates how poets use poetry to perform collective identity within the public sphere.

Summary

The next six chapters embark on a journey with the spoken word poets of Los Angeles and me as we travel through space and time, challenging our immediate and larger environments. Chapter 2 begins the journey with a review of current literature exploring collective identity, performance, and publics theory. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology. Chapter 4 starts in the beginning of my story when I had my first experiences with poetry and spoken word, progresses through the process of becoming a spoken word artist, and captures the form and function of spoken word poetry along the way. This chapter exposes my own biases as a former spoken word artist-turned-critic and provides an interpretation of my experiential lens. Chapter 5 begins with my story as an ethnographer in the Los Angeles spoken word scene. It offers a thick description of becoming a member of a performance collective and learning how to perform the collective identity through organizational membership and power. Once the poet is able

to do these things, they are able to contribute to public discourse and become a public agent through gaining a voice. This process comprises the first half of Chapter 6. The second half of Chapter 6 offers a critique of spoken word from an ideological and metaphorical standpoint, and illustrates how spoken word sites act as spaces for democratic struggle and how the rhetorical events act as commentaries of our country. Finally, chapter 7 offers a discussion of the findings, contributions to the fields of rhetoric and ethnography, limitations of the current study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Coming to the Stage: A Literature Review

This analysis is concerned with how collective identity and performance function within counterpublic space—a space designed and utilized by individuals who feel excluded from public or dominant spaces due to political, cultural, familial, or social differences. I set out to locate how spoken word artists create and perform collective identity, and how identities and art function together in society with respect to counterpublic space.

Counterpublics theory offers a lens for understanding collectivity and social action because it situates identity and oppression within a democratic context, highlighting the ways in which members of counterpublic-collectives utilize space to address issues of freedom and domination. Counterpublic collectives consist of individuals seeking similar others that are excluded by dominant society based on identity; they obtain their counter status from exclusion of dominant channels of political discourse and a lack of political power (Warner, 2002). The primary goal of counterpublic-collectives is to affirm identities that are suppressed or distorted by dominant discourse. Counterpublic theorists are concerned with how and why collectives form due to oppressive and hostile environments. I am concerned with how actors form counterpublic-collectives and fight oppression and adversity through artistic means. Specifically, I explore the rhetorical artifacts members produce in opposition to dominant cultural forces and the spaces members create and occupy as havens for performing collective identity. Thus, I situate this study in the bodies of literature concerning the roles identity, collectivity, and performance play in collective social action and

counterpublicity. The chapter is divided as follows: *identity; collective identity; performance, performativity, and identity; counterpublics theory and space.*

Identity

Scholars define identity in several ways. Some scholars agree that identity is an inherently communicative process and should be understood as a transaction where messages are exchanged (Burke and Rietzes, 1981; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). Other theorists extend beyond this idea of identity as a transaction and focus on identity as a social process (Pizzorno, 1978; Melucci, 1989; Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Frith, 1996; della Porta & Diani, 1999; Jackson, 1999). This process entails the “the manner in which individuals, groups, communities, cultures, and institutions define themselves” (Jackson, 1999, p. xiii). Thus, identities have individual, social and communal properties (Hecht, 1993; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993), are embedded in multiple layers and social ties, and are interdependent (Thoits, 1983; Stryker, 2000; Stryker and Burker, 2000). Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity constructs identity as a social process, rooted not only in the individual and society, but as relational, communal, and enacted as well. There are four layers proposed in the theory—personal, communal, relational, and enactment—and they emphasize the interdependency of identity.

Personal Identity is a “characteristic of the individual stored as self-cognitions, feelings about self, and/or a spiritual sense of self-being” (p. 79). It is a process of self-definition, exposing the “direct relationship between identity and one’s ability to self-define” (Jackson, 1999, p. 9). According to Hecht, there are three assumptions of personal identity: (1) identities are hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to the self

as an object in a social situation; (2) identities are meanings ascribed to the self by others in the social world; (3) identities are sources of expectations and motivations” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79).

Identity as enactment assumes that “identities are enacted in social interaction through communication and may be defined as those messages” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). Even though all messages are not about identity, identity is a part of all messages and may be expressed as a part of a message or as the central significance (Hecht, 1993). Burke and Rietzes (1981) understand the link between identity and performance through meanings. “The meanings of self are established and assessed in terms of the meanings of the performances generated by that self within the culture of the interactional situation (Burke and Rietzes, 1981, p. 85). Butler (1993; 1995) situates identity in performance as well, suggesting that identities are not static understandings or facts, but instead are rooted in and performed through everyday practices. In order for an identity to exist, or for someone to claim an identity, the values of that identity must be performed (McAdam and Paulsen; 1993).

Identity as a relational frame suggests that communication has both content and relationship dimensions (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967), and that identities emerge in relationships to other people and are enacted in relationships (Hecht, 1993). What occurs in these relationships is primarily identity negotiation and building. “Identity is mutually constructed in social interaction and emerges as the property of that relationship because it is jointly negotiated” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). Several scholars have taken to the study of identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Whittier, 1995, 1997; Tinsley, 1998; della Porta & Diani, 1999; Jackson, 1999, 2000;

Brett, 2000; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Jackson, 2004). According to these scholars, there are two types of negotiations: they can be contractual (Jackson, 2004; Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992), or they can be based in conflict resolution (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992).

The differences between the two manifest in the nature of the transaction, and the feelings from the negotiations. If the negotiation is primarily between two parties where there are differences without conflict, there may be more positive emotion. If there is conflict, anger is usually present prior to negotiation (Brett, 2000). Regardless of the nature of the transaction, negotiation is a form of social interaction (Brett, 2000); it is a process that involves two or more parties trying to resolve perceived differences or incompatible goals (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992).

In line with relational identity and negotiation, a strong sense of a collective “we” may not always be present (Lemert 1994; Billig, 1985). Because identity is a dynamic and social process, feelings of belongingness within collectives that originate from shared identity are not static, but fluid (della Porta & Diani, 1999). Just because an individual identifies with a movement does not mean s/he shares the same allegiances or loyalties (Melucci, 1994; Diani, 1995). Allegiances are not always hierarchical either. A person can have multiple allegiances that are of equal importance and if scholars insist on examining identity as a source of coherence, it will often result in neglecting important forms of multiple identities (Calhoun, 1994).

Frith (1996) contends that the reason for identity negotiation occurs in performance. When people perform their identities, it is the aesthetics of that performance as opposed to the situation, organization, or context, where conflict arises between the society, the group, and the individual. It is through performance that the

process of negotiation takes place. It is deciding what sounds right, feels right, and looks right that poets both express [them]selves and lose [them]selves in an act of participation (Frith, 1996). While processes of negation are relevant to the relational frame, identity can also be seen to exist as a *communal frame*.

Identity can be studied as communal when the group's members identify with something that bonds the group together (Pizzorno, 1978; Cohen, 1985, Philipsen, 1987; Melucci, 1989; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Hecht, 1993). In the communal frame, identity is situated in the group instead of the individual or interaction, and identities are jointly held, remembered, and taught to new members (Hecht, 1993). Communal or collective identity is a widely studied aspect of identity. With respect to social movement scholarship, scholars tend to study the ways in which individuals conform to fit groups, which results in a shortcoming of the literature (Robnett, 2004). Because several processes of identity are left out, Robnett (2004) suggests theorists include processes of identity negotiation within collective groups that focus on the individual instead of merely the larger social movement's. In social movement theory, collective identities are often defined only within the political realm (Robnett, 2004, 5). Theorists focus on the process of identity convergence or divergence within a collective versus the effects of identity negotiation on collectivity. Several scholars study social movements from the perspective that when individual members become engrossed in a social movement, "they internalize new self definitions as part of a collectivity that interprets the world politically" (Pizzorno, 1978, as cited in Whittier, 1997, p. 762; also see Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1989; and Robnett, 2004). Instead of relying on social movement contexts, Robnett (2004) suggests locating processes of identity within the individual and

processes of negotiation within social, cultural, and structural influences, focusing on reflexivity. She offers a “new approach to the study of collective identity process in social movements that includes an analysis of individual-level processes and identities arguing that while interactive discourses, frames, and culture influence collective identity construction, reflexivity is a central process through which these influences are mediated” (Robnett, 2004, 6). This approach is useful to the present study because it allows the researcher to place agency back in the individual instead of locating his or her decision making strictly within the collective context. Thus, the concepts of collective identity and collectivity are critical dimensions of this study.

Collective Identity

Conceptualizing and defining collective identity can be arduous. Researchers from various disciplines conceptualize collectivity in myriad ways. According to Jenkins (2002), there are four general assumptions about collectivity as a subject of study: the general social science paradigm takes for granted that collectives exist, and consequently, are not important sites for explanation or research; other scholars downplay collectives and their roles in the human world; some researchers reduce collectivity to cultural and physical realms, focusing on tangible manifestations like artifacts and discourse; and finally, some scholars place focus on the individual. Placing focus solely on the individual represents a problem of collective identity. Collectives should not be understood as products of individuals communicating; instead, they should be understood as a product of human interaction that encompasses individuals communicating (Jenkins, 2002). In addition to human interaction, membership, practical consciousness knowledge, behavior, and boundaries also distinguish collectives from other types of social systems.

Membership is an effective way to differentiate collectives and other types of social systems. Social systems do not necessarily presuppose a conscious sense of membership. Using Marxist terminology, we can differentiate between collective and social systems in general with class-in-itself versus class-for-themselves. A social system represents the former, meaning a class with no class consciousness. Collectives are classes that have class consciousness (Malešević & Haugaard, 2002; Jenkins, 2002). At a general level, a collective can be characterized as a bounded system of social order that is produced and created by the members of that system (Malešević & Haugaard, 2002). Even though membership is a defining characteristic, the notion of “collective” is much less visible and tangible than individual members that comprise it. At no point in time are all members together because of space and time constraints; at the same time, the term “full member” is hard to define (Jenkins, 2002). Thus, membership offers a plausible starting point, but collectives are more than their individual constituent parts.

Even though membership is a key factor of collectives, what creates membership and a sense of collectivity is the practical knowledge of that membership (Malešević & Haugaard, 2002). According to Jenkins (2002), collectives exist through bodies of knowledge that incorporate tradition, appropriate collective symbolism, and constitutional procedures. Collectives operate according to *practical consciousness knowledge* (Giddens, 1984). Practical consciousness knowledge represents the foundational constructs through which a collective operates and forms the discourse of a particular community. “Collectives exist in, and as, symbolic constructs and complexes, which are, necessarily to some extent, known about, understood, and manipulated by individuals” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 35). Each member must know certain pieces of

conventional wisdom about the history, purpose, and culture of the group that make it distinctive from others. In order to be a part of a collective, individuals have to at least know something about the collective and they have to know how to perform membership. For instance, there is a complex array of practical consciousness knowledge to be a poet. Poets must have basic knowledge of poetic standards and aesthetics, and a shared knowledge of history and prose at least. For individuals wanting to join the spoken word movement, they must understand that it is a movement, that the primary mode of performance is poetry, and that there are processes involved like going to venues, signing the list, and performing poems among other things like appropriate behavior.

Behavior and interaction also define collectives (Jenkins, 2002). Knowledge of collectives influences what individuals do, and collective membership is brought into being in part by doing appropriate things. However, individual behaviors cannot be said to be determined solely by membership of collectives. Collectives must have at least some consequences for individual practice, experience, and the nature of interaction between individuals.

Collectives also exist within boundaries. The boundaries are blurred due to recruitment, depletion of members, and vagueness about the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, “the boundaries of collectives are not fixed and are continually produced and reproduced during social interaction between members and non-members” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 36). Finally, according to Jenkins, collectives have two central properties: they are always meaningful and material. From this literature, we can conclude that collectives are distinct from social systems because of membership, practical consciousness

knowledge, behavior, and strategically blurred boundaries. Another valuable link to understand collectivity is the role of identity in the process of building a collective.

Identity and collectives are tied to one another because identity is an overlapping set of collectives whereby individuals are defined by their membership of racial groups, ethnicities, nations, etc. (Malešević & Haugaard, 2002). Within the many different collectives, individuals transform, create, and negotiate their identities. Once transformations take place, participants define their memberships and those memberships become salient within the collectives. Once membership is salient, other identifying factors can emerge. For instance, membership of the Los Angeles poetic community is salient to its members. Once a member defines him or herself as such, then sub categories of membership like poetic style, genre, and level of participation emerge.

Rupp and Taylor (1999) offer a framework to conceptualize collective identity with respect to salience and layers using the terms organizational identity, movement identity, and solidarity identity. As members of small and discrete groups, members express organizational identity. Members of the Los Angeles poetic community exercise organizational identity and loyalty by going to specific poetry venues and events and sharing the space as poet, host, or audience member. Movement identity is comprised of the larger social issues at play and the members' greater understanding of their role in that movement. Spoken word artists as activist within an oppressive dominant society make up the movement identity. They construct it through naming the movement as the spoken word movement or spoken word revolution and naming themselves as spoken word artists or poets. At times the movement identity can conflict with organizational identity when certain organizational groups value one type of performance over another

(i.e. political poetry versus Slam poetry); but there is a fundamental understanding of larger social issues that need to be addressed. The movement identity is salient at national slams, spoken word expos, and conventions. Solidarity identity is constructed at the most basic level and involves distinguishing an *us* versus *them*. Although this distinction is a blurred and mythical one, the *us* is the stage poets, community members, and social activists; the *them* is the page poets, academics, oppressors, or conventional society and its ideologies. Solidarity identity is a widely studied aspect of collective identity because it is the process of delineating difference with dominant society. Forming a collective solidarity identity is a “process of elaboration of collective consciousness, generally involving active strategies of inclusion and exclusion: we are defined... as being different from how they are” (Melucci, 1989, pp 22). By nature, the solidarity identity is oppositional to what it determines to be dominant cultural practices. “Collective identity links a social movement’s community through affirmation of member’s common interest in *opposition to dominant groups*” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Polletta and Jasper (2001), offer a comprehensive definition of collective identity in a way that merges the aforementioned categories of solidarity, organizational and movement identities with the individual, though not in those terms. They contend that collective identity is:

Individuals’ cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relations, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (p. 284).

A people’s collective identity is comprised from their community memberships, the performance of identity within those communities, and the institutions or organizations to

which they belong. In addition, Polletta & Jasper contend that “collectives are expressed in cultural materials-names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on but not all cultural materials express collective identities” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p. 284). Collective identity is comprised of the connections between individuals communal, personal, and organizational identities and is expressed through cultural materials or products.

Space and Collective Identity

To begin looking at the role of collectives in social movement, we must look to why and how collectives form. To answer the questions of reason and process, this section focuses on space and social networks. Increasingly, in social and historical research, scientists are attempting to integrate the study of social networks and their historical and cultural context in terms of collective identity building (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). This approach is particularly satisfying because it “enables us to account for both the micro- and macro-social factors” (Pfaff, 1996. p. 92). Scholars are questioning how groups maintain rich collective identities despite living on the margins and what types of spaces aid in the definition of a collective. The spaces people use to create, define, and maintain collective identities can prove important. Focusing on communal areas and activities can provide a source for understanding group solidarity. A focus on family or equally small spaces can reveal the socialization process of collective identity building.

In a study of the White Power Movement (WPM), Polletta (1999) found that focusing on space is one strategy that explains how members of the Aryan nation maintain their collective identity because as a nation, they are ostracized and fear

displaying their beliefs about racism in public. According to Polletta, the WPM persists largely because of the “intense commitment, rich variegated culture, and strong activist networks that members cultivate in the movement’s free spaces” (1999, p. 285). Polletta goes on to argue that these spaces don’t provide much for studying beyond identity construction. She says that, “to claim that free spaces are important for developing and sustaining collective identities in the WPM, or any other movement, does not explain much beyond the opportunities they provide for identity construction (Polletta, 1999. p. 285). In order to fully understand how free spaces aid in collective identity construction, maintenance, and performance, we must study those free spaces, their various subtypes, cultural and structural figurations, and respective contributions to movement perseverance.

There are two types of spaces important for collective identity maintenance: indigenous-prefigurative spaces and transformative-prefigurative spaces (Polletta, 1999). Indigenous-prefigurative spaces in the WPM are characterized by “dense, interpersonal ties and insular, hidden networks where members reinforce their collective identity by participating in various prefigurative symbolic practices” (p. 289). These spaces are small in size, exclusive, intimate, and characterized by long-lasting relationships where members create an environment that encourages safe and open expressions of radical ideologies. Within these spaces, members are able to support the movement’s goals and discourage participation in mainstream ideology. Transformative-prefigurative spaces act as larger spaces for members across the continent to come together. They play a critical role in sustaining the WPM because of their ability to congregate members across fragmented networks in physical, discursive, and virtual places. Within the

transformative-prefigurative spaces, members can engage their prefigurative ideologies and develop solidarity. Spoken word venues act as indigenous-prefigurative spaces. Members learn the culture, aesthetics, and norms of the spoken word movement. National competitions, expos, and conventions, venues in cities other than the poets host city act as transfigurative spaces. Poets that travel or attend national events exercise their knowledge of the spoken word movement and continue to build the movement identity of spoken word.

Melucci makes note, however, that space is not always a valuable entity within collectives. In certain spaces, collective identity is largely based on national membership. In Europe, the collective identity is “that of a group located in a specific national territory endowed with meanings” (Melucci, 1989, p. 55). However, we can conceive of collectives as located in various meaningless spaces. For example, diasporic identities have no national territory. From these studies we can conclude that space always plays a role in collective identity, but not necessarily in the formation of that identity. Space can be a motivating factor due to the lack of space, or it can be a source for formation and maintenance. It may or may not be territorial and may or may not have an exact meeting location.

Space is an important aspect of the spoken word movement because of displacement and the tensions between the page and the stage. Rimmerman (2002) claims that groups that constitute social movements are responding to structural and cultural marginalization. These groups seek to identify strategies that challenge the hegemonic structures that constrain life choices. From the view of structural marginalization, “stage” poets have been marginalized by “page” poets. Stage poets agree that the performance of

a poem takes precedence over its written form (Weiss & Herndon, 2001). Stage poetry is delivered by the people for the people. It captures individuals' experiences in the form of stories and is used as a teaching and motivational tool within the speech community. Stage poets are generally a population of common people that experience the lifestyles that precede the rhetoric of political policy. Page poets, in contrast, adhere to specific aesthetic norms. Classical or contemporary specified form, possible publication, and objectivity are three important goals for the page or academic poet. The ideology behind most critiques of spoken word link "good" poetry with the academy and "bad" poetry with the "inarticulate, illiterate masses" that find their space on the stage (Rodriguez, 2003). Rodriguez notes that critics of spoken word poetry generalize and attack instead of recognizing the art as deserving of critical inquiry and being "open to the transfigurations, with the vision and intelligence to deal with complexities of cross-art creation, not just knock them out of the water" (p. 209). Weiss and Herndon (2001) make the distinction between the stage poet and the page poet claiming that "the actor is the writer who exaggerates the importance of delivery over that of the written word. The poet is the writer who crafts her work so that it can remain on the page and still convey meaning" (p. 70).

Traditionally, space has been recognized as innocent or apolitical, and carrying no implications of power and authority (Forman, 2002). As illustrated with "page" and "stage," space can carry critical implications. Medina and Rivera (2001) refers to the new tension between the spaces of stage and page poetry as paradoxical. He says it is difficult to maintain integrity on the page and the stage. There are countless "bad" poets on both sides of the spectrum and it is a "constant battle to filter out quality poetry that is suitable

for both the page and stage” (Medina and Rivera, 2001, p. xx). Poetry can be political and cultural without forfeiting the passion of language. Regardless of this argument, however truthful, a mythical binary exists that extends from the historical high culture/low culture binary. This is an important distinction to note because it influences the social establishment and all of its constituent parts. One central connection for many stage poets is the performance of that binary as well as the active displacement of that binary. As Goffman notes (1983), whether locating performance in the technical, structural, political, cultural, or dramaturgical, the entire social establishment is always connected and working together. We must understand the spoken word movement collective before we can understand the entire aspect of its performance.

From this review, it is clear that collectives are distinct from social systems due to membership, practical consciousness knowledge of that membership, and blurry boundaries that comprise the exclusiveness and limits of any one collective. We can also conclude that identity influences collective in at least three ways: (1) there is a basic solidarity identity, or silhouette, that bridges all members on a general level and is separate from individual identity; (2) there is an organizational identity that is comprised of smaller groups within the collective; and (3) there is a movement identity that connects all members through an overarching desire for mobility and political activism. Social movements, the spaces they occupy, and the spaces they are influenced by are important for understanding collective identity because they help researchers locate reasons for a collective forming in some cases, and reveal how collectives are constructed and maintained. The next key aspect to discuss is performance.

Performance, Performativity, and Identity

Performance is a widely studied phenomena across the social sciences.

Goffman (1959) defines performance as:

All the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute to other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants" (pp. 15-16).

In this sense, everything we do in interaction comprises an act or performance. Schechner (1985) defines performance as “restoration of behavior or twice behaved behavior, that which can be repeated, rehearsed, and above all, recreated.” While both of these definitions provide useful starts for understanding how participants enact the self, it is important to explore several distinctions.

Judith Butler creates one plausible distinction using the term performative (1990, 1993, 1995). In her discussion of gender reality, Butler (1995) says:

If a word might be said to do a thing, then it appears that the word not only signifies a thing, but that this signification will also be an enactment of the thing. It seems here that the meaning of a performative act is to be found in this apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting” (p. 198).

Butler says that constructions like gender are performative, meaning gender only exists to the extent that it is performed. Performative identities, then, are those that are embodied by actors and performed to the point that they are believed to be real. Without the performer, the actual construction would not exist.

With this distinction, we can separate socially constructed identities that are performative from interactions that take place where other types of constructions are purposefully performed in the manner Schechner (1985) refers to—an act that can be rehearsed and recreated. Kubiak offers a similar distinction between performance and

performativity as well. “Performance as a more or less consciously elucidated act or series of acts can never be performative, in Butler’s terms, because performance is to *apriori*, too conscious of itself and its biases and internal social forces. Performance is more a showing than a becoming. The forces at work in performativity are more insidious, hidden, concealed, and self-concealing” (Kubiak, 1998, p. 91). In this sense, performance is a conscious effort to influence during interaction or create an impression. Performativity is the subconscious performance of a societal role or norm. Poets perform rhetorical identities like “stage poet,” “hip hop poet,” and “page poet.” Personal identities with respect to culture, sexuality, gender, and other socialized metaphors are performative. Race offers another space to further illustrate this distinction.

Race is performative in the same way that gender is performative (Butler, 1993; Ehlers, 2003, 2004). By naming a subject as a racial being, the discourse is calling into being that which it names (Ehlers, 2004). The actual act of naming an individual as “raced” is what makes the subject a racial person. Miron and Inda (2000) concur that regardless of race appearing to have an “inner essence,” it is only accepted as a norm in society because it is reiterated and enacted to such an extent that it appears to be static. Race is constituted through the mandatory repetition of racialized norms (Ehlers, 2003). It is performative and exists because we allow it to socially. Performativity, then, “rests upon a constitutive theory of language [and]... presupposes the idea that words are active as well as descriptive...and has the capacity to do things with words, whether provoking an estrangement between meaning and performance or creating new meaning” (Slinn, 1990, p. 64). Performance on the other hand is a purposefully created account of being.

Actors can choose to perform any type of character, including a performative character, but it is still a performance.

What makes this distinction necessary when discussing the Los Angeles Poetic Community is that the performances of rhetorical or created identities as well as the performances of performative identities are at play simultaneously. Performers perform their rhetorical identities as stage poets discussing their performative identities as gendered, cultured, racialized, and sexualized beings. This study is not concerned with the subconscious performativity of personal identities, but rather the deliberate performance of performative identities as political activity. The investigation focused on the members' abilities to use the stage as a space for consciousness raising, education, resistance, and activism about, against, and for oppressed or stigmatized identities. As Carlson notes (1996):

Looking back on the development of performance from the mid 1990's, one of the most striking features is the steadily growing interest in a social or political function... This performance involved with the concerns, desires, and even visibility of those normally excluded by race, class, or gender from consideration by the traditional theatre or indeed by modern performance (p. 144).

In short, those who are excluded by dominant outlets ban together to create their own outlets; they create performance collectives. Within those collectives, members have space to perform their resistance and their art and pursue artistic social movement. As Carlson notes, autobiographical material—material that spoke to performative identity—was one of the first manifestations of feminist art with a consciousness of the political and social dimensions of such material. “The study of individual identity and different cultures, with particular attention to disadvantaged, excluded, or oppressed groups

characterizes much of the most imaginative and proactive performance work in the United States” (Carlson, 1996, p. 163).

Several authors have studied how personal identities are performed. What has not been studied until now is how collective identities are performed. One would think that performing Ku Klux Klan membership is different than performing collective identity associated with a fraternity. To become a Ku Klux Klan member, one must dress in the traditional garb and essentially hide his or her personal identity. When performing fraternity identity, one is allowed to embrace the individual and the personal identities. While Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity(1993) is a useful starting point to differentiate between the communal, personal, and enactment layers of identity, there are no specified theories delineating the specific ways in which social networks perform collective identity. The previous section examined the processes of identity performance and maintenance in social networks. Next, I focus on counterpublics theory, and its relation to identity, space, and collectivity.

Counterpublics Theory, Identity, and Space

Counterpublics theory aims to explain oppositional social action and democratic practice, or lack thereof, as it is experienced through communication and discourse in public spaces. Michael Warner (2002), defines public spaces according to seven attributes: (1) it is self-organized; (2) it’s a relation among strangers; (3) the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal; (4) publics are produced through ‘mere attention’ to speech; (5) social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse constitute a public; (6) the publics existence is reliant on the circulation of that text, which make it temporal and historical; and (7) publics are the product of the ‘poetic

world-making.’ In contrast, counterpublics are alternate spaces that are aware of their subordinate status and come into being by an address to indefinite strangers, which become socially marked when addressed, and do not have the privilege of acquiring agency, but often acquire it in relation to the state through performance (Warner, 2002). Warner (2002) asserts that counterpublics are defined by their tensions with and dissent from larger publics. They maintain an awareness of their subordinate status and are usually related to a subculture. For Eberly (2002), in her discussion of Nancy Fraser, counterpublics serve two roles: (1) to support the subordinated members among themselves; and (2) to train members of these groups to engage in activities directed towards wider publics. Because counterpublics are scenes of association defined by subordination and dissent from larger publics, it is necessary to discuss identity in counterpublics.

Identities in counterpublics are crucial. They call publics into existence, simultaneously shaping and maintaining them. However, identities do not define counterpublics solely, the relationship is reciprocal. “The primary goal of new social movements is the affirmation of identities suppressed or distorted by regimes of power and legitimation” (Asen and Brouwer, 2001, p. 8). In counterpublics there is a re-institution of private lives and private voices raising private matters because dominant society, in its rise and gain of power, is naturally exclusive. Counterpublics, then, are physical and discursive spaces that create and are created by emerging identities that seek to challenge hegemonic structures.

Counterpublics also serves as spaces to challenge hegemonic understandings of identity. “Counterpublics are scenes of association and identity that transform the private

lives they mediate (Warner, 2002, p. 57). The counterpublic, according to Asen and Brouwer (2001) is “comprised of a multiplicity of dialectically related spheres rather than a single, encompassing arena of discourse” (p. 11). Counterpublics obtain their counter status from exclusion of dominant channels of political discourse and a lack of political power (Warner, 2002). Counterpublics seek to gain entrance into dominant discourse without sabotaging the collective identity. They do this through counteraction and demonstrations that force the public to recognize the collective identity without having to change it to fit into pre-existing dominant ideology. They seek to “confirm the specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or some other axis of difference... and engage in communicative practices beyond the supervision of dominant group” (Asen and Brouwer, 2001, p. 9).

Fraser and Nicholson (1990) go one step further and offer the phrase subaltern counterpublics. They define these spaces as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (p. 29). Through oppositional discourse, counterpublics are able to challenge public discourse and domination. “It can mediate the most private and intimate meanings of gender and sexuality, work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate associations, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy” (Warner, 2002, p. 57). Even though dominant norms are rooted in our bodies and speech, they can be redefined and transgressed. Warner does note that publics and counterpublics are damaged because of their reliance on mediated communication;

however, it is through mediate networks that counterpublics become visible. He states (2002):

A counterpublic: (1) enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; (2) its exchanges are remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; and (3) its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like (p. 36).

Because there are ways to get around dominant discourse, the utilization of counterpublic spaces that are not controlled by a larger public allows room for previously oppressed discourse, especially in performance.

Through performance, hip hop poetry challenges dominant ideologies. Hip hop poets serve as conduits for education, identity development, political awareness, and activism within their communities, bringing to the forefront things normally excluded from dominant discourse. In its simplest understanding, hip hop poetry allows artists to adopt standard aesthetic norms with room for poetic justice, creating space for artists to accomplish their own unique purposes. As subcultural movement, hip hop poets redefine poetry's role in public spaces by challenging hegemonic structures (Eleveld & Smith, 2003).

Space is a commonly studied phenomenon. From Arendt's (1993) perspective, space depends entirely upon a public's ability to use it and its ability to be heard and seen. Space is tangible and defined by the ways in which people share it. Physical and discursive spaces are two important spaces to discuss in terms of hip hop poetry. The use of the stage represents the central, physical space separating hip hop poetry from the

academy. Hebdige (1979) argues that this stylistic space represents a conscious attempt to counter the structural and marginal constraints of dominant society, in this case, academically published, page poetry. The discursive spaces of hip hop manifest in multiple and dynamic ways, and are concerned with the performed text. Hip hop poetry offers a unique situation to study the performance of identity within the collective because it allows us to look at an individual's performances of cultural, familial, sexual, corporate, and/or other identities, and simultaneously witness the performance of a collective groups' identity that centers on spoken word and performance. Together, the performed, discursive, and physical spaces of hip hop alongside the collective identities that emerge create the communities of hip hop poetry. Because the communities of hip hop poetry confront dominant ideologies, counterpublics theory offers a plausible starting point.

From this review, we can conclude that The Spoken Word Movement is a network of poets, audience members, and hosts that serve as a vehicle for organization, education, and resistance. Not only do spoken word poets consistently bout political hegemony, they are also on a mission to resist poetry's elitist ideology concerning space. Space is a social construct (Lefebvre, 1991) and a significant aspect of the hegemonic order (Forman, 2002). "Spatial relationships are organized along the lines of subordination and domination—relationships of power—that are consensually and coercively maintained (Forman, 2002, p. 6). Academe represents the authoritative figure of literary forms. Spoken word artists seek to defy the special classification of the "stage" as a socially constructed, inadequate space, and desire to move forward to an academic space that deems performance poetry as an equally challenging and meaningful poetic

form. This binary is not exclusive to spoken word poetry or hip hop. It stems from a long line of African American performative art and culture.

We can also conclude that hip hop poetry exists because of collective identity, the performance of that collective identity, and the many individual identities rooted within the collective. What we do not know however, is who and what makes up that collective identity, the ways in which it is performed, how individual identity processes affect that identity, how members manipulate the aesthetics to gain rhetorical power, or what they do with that power. Because I am conducting an ethnography, I choose not to rely on specific research questions, but instead allow the site to reveal important hypotheses. While my research purpose foregrounds this study, it is important to allow hypotheses about this group to be revealed through fieldwork and conclusions to emerge from the data. Therefore, I put forth the following, previously mentioned, general research question to address these shortcomings:

RQ: How do community members use poetry to perform collective identity within the public sphere?

Chapter 3

Manipulating the *Nappy Tongue* at *Da Poetry Lounge* and *A Mic & Dim Lights*: Method and Methodology

Poetry venues and communities are potentially rich research sites because of (1) their ability to display how an oppressed group uses rhetoric and poetics to gain a voice in society, and (2) the high volume of cultural experiences rooted in social processes of identity. Despite the richness of the research site, its historical foundations and social actions have gone largely undocumented and understudied. Some scholars focus on poets' use of poetry to gain a voice in a public sphere (Bennet, 2003), and the use of African American tropes and rhetoric in literacy communities (Fisher, 2003). While these studies support the notion that there is potential in the spoken word movement as a research site, what needs to be studied and documented now is the history of the Spoken Word Movement, the different genres, styles, and tropes, the rhetorical power and practicality, and finally, the actual social movement potential of spoken word and its classification as such. In addition to these needs, there is also a gap in the literature related to communal identity performance. This study is focused on hip hop poetry in Los Angeles as a site for counterpublicity and collective identity performance. I employ a triangulated approach using rhetorically grounded, ethnographic participant-observation, interviews, and focus groups to collect data, and metaphoric criticism to analyze the data. This chapter offers a detailed description of my methodology and research practices, and is divided as follows: rhetorical ethnography, the field site, gaining entry, sampling and recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and write-up.

Rhetorical Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of culture from within (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It is a method used to study culture as it is created and lived in a naturally occurring setting. From a communication perspective, ethnography is studying the linguistic processes of a culture to illuminate the influence of cultural beliefs on communicative practices. To employ ethnography is to submerge oneself into a cultural group, become a member, and study the cultural processes as they manifest in communication. Ethnography is often used to give voice to those who are historically excluded (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004) and, consequently, the best method for this study.

Tracy (2002) refers to this perspective as a cultural one. From this perspective, the researcher is focused on how everyday talk reflects communicators' identities. Tracy (2002) treats identities as "relatively stable things existing prior to particular conversational moments and brought to interaction" (p. 17). The cultural perspective is concerned with making visible the influence of social practice and structures that are outside of any individual's choosing, but ultimately have a role in identity development and are reflected in identities. The rhetorical perspective, on the other hand, highlights individuals as choice making agents.

From the rhetorical perspective, the researcher is concerned with how everyday talk builds identities; in other words, how the text influences cultural identities. The rhetorical perspective is strategic and evaluative. "It leads us to think about the moral reasonableness and practical effectiveness of different sets of everyday speech" (Tracy, 2002, p.22) Each person's choices about how to talk build her unique identities that are dynamic, enacted through talk, and changing from one occasion to the next. The rhetorical approach foregrounds three things: it highlights individual agency, it is

evaluative and concerned with affect, and it is problem centered, attentive to the dilemma of social life. Each of the perspectives is essential, yet problematic when taken alone.

Both rhetorical criticism and critical ethnography allow the researcher to investigate and deconstruct systems of power, but in different ways. Rhetorical criticism searches for underlying power structures and ideologies through rhetoric, focusing on the language, image, or appearance of an artifact. Critical ethnography focuses on the systems of power evoked through cultural processes. “Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose” (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). Using both methods allows to researcher to understand power as a set of symbols and a process. The researcher is able to identify the systems of power at play as they are adopted and performed by the community under study.

Both perspectives can provide complementary views. To only rely on ethnographic understandings of culture is to neglect the power in the interaction and the persuasion of texts. To only employ the rhetorical analysis is to miss out on the cultural understandings of texts and the ways in which they are co-created and co-developed. To use both is to locate ways in which talk builds and reflects identities. A rhetorical analysis of the poetry is centered on text and space as they are constructed, packaged and delivered for an intended purpose. It allows the researcher to see how the venue participants use their communication effectively and in what ways, not only in terms of identity building at the personal level, but also in terms of collective identity building and social movement. The ethnographic analysis is concerned with the community as a counter-hegemonic collective, its cultural processes, and the ways in which the culture is

ultimately mobile and moving towards social change through the use of poetry. As Tracy (2002) puts it, seeing double is a gift, not a distortion.

The term rhetorical ethnography is central and necessary because it suggests a shift in the rhetorical and ethnographic processes. In this analysis, there is a focus on text and everything becomes the text. The performer, the poem, the host, the venue, and the audience all become meshed into the Spoken Word Movement and the researcher is able to study the context and the processes of the entire spectacle simultaneously, focusing on the rhetorical power that is gained and used as evidenced by the poets, the poetry, and the audience. The text and the context are central to the process of observing.

As a rhetorician, I always find myself wanting to study rhetorical artifacts, but I feel like an imposter gazing at texts with minimal historical contexts. Dimitriadis (1999) warns rhetoricians against offering criticism without sufficient cultural context, stating that when a critic relies on “his own close listening to reach his conclusions, not providing sufficient historical context to understand how these texts might function vis-à-vis complex evolving idioms in particular consumptive ways, he can potentially miss the point of the text or alternative understandings or conclusions” (p. 357). This is often the case in research on hip hop. Readings based on insufficient historical contexts that covet a priori the kind of work lyrics do without taking into special consideration genre, artists, or producer, are unable to fully grasp hip hop culture or music. Too many alternative understandings are immediately cast out and literature becomes littered with insufficient readings of an entire artistic culture. Many critics are guilty of downplaying the importance of context, looking at texts more broadly. Rhetorical ethnography forces the rhetorician to fully submerge him or herself in the cultural and contextual processes of

constructing, performing, and deconstructing rhetoric. de Certeau may have been an advocate for this method, arguing that, “by situating the act in relation to its circumstances, ‘contexts of use’ draw attention to the traits that specify the act of speaking and are its effects” (1984, p. 33).

As an ethnographer, I find myself consistently looking into cultural groups that utilize some type of text. This is a product of my subconscious attempts to study rhetoric under the guise of ethnography. Prior to this study, I realized what I was doing and I immediately set out to marry the two methods in a way that creates symbiosis. I wanted the method to be rhetorical criticism with room for the performance, storytelling, and self-reflexivity that ethnography allows. I want the method to be ethnographic and creative with room for the criticism that rhetoricians uphold. In rhetorical ethnography we are able to do just that. We naturally become grounded theorists, generating theory from our interpretations of cultural processes and rhetorical participation. We allow our field notes and artifacts to speak to us through out experiential lenses and write their stories in creative, interesting, and rigorous ways. Rhetorical ethnography allows the rhetorician and the ethnographer to work as one unit, crafting a critical study fully submerged in the historical context of the artifact(s) as they are being constructed, (re)constructed, (de)constructed, and performed. It gives rhetoricians a chance to study movements as they are lived instead of criticizing movements thirty years later and playing a persistent game of catch-up.

It is not enough however to just engage the rhetoric of a particular community and label it rhetorical ethnography. All communities utilize some type of rhetorical text in their everyday ways of being (Benson, 1989). In example, in a recreational quilting

group, the actual quilts and the discourse of the community become the text. However, when the day is finished, if the members generate quilts only for warmth or visual aesthetics in their home, there is nothing at stake. The HIV/AIDS memorial quilt on the other hand represents an opportunity for rhetorical ethnography. There are major aims at stake, namely raising funds to help those infected with HIV/AIDS and research, to educate and create awareness about HIV/AIDS, and to provide a space for memorial and healing (The Names Foundation, 2005). What is necessary in addition to the community's production of a text is the specific use of that text in the community. The community under observation must rely on a particular shared text as a collective and use that text in a democratic light whether it is to educate, motivate, mobilize, or free a people. What a rhetorical ethnographer studies is a texts' intended use and satisfaction of that purpose as well as the collective's creation, maintenance, and use of that text as they occur simultaneously. In my case, I am looking at a poetry collective and the effectiveness of their poetic performance as an agent for counterpublicity in the public sphere. I am also studying a spoken word community, how their collective identity emerged(s), how it is performed, and the ways in which they create, maintain, and use their performative texts as participants in a counterpublic space. As an ethnographer and rhetorician, I am interested in locating the ways in which both methods symbiotically unite to offer a comprehensive perspective of rhetorical text as they are produced, consumed, and made effective by their creators. Triangulating both methods as a qualitative researcher enhances and facilitates the purpose of this research in the city of Los Angeles.

The Field Site, Data Collection, and Quality

Two of most popular spoken word cities are Los Angeles and New York. For this particular study, I chose to base the ethnography in Los Angeles, CA, where I was already acquainted with a poetry community and had access to the venues. In Los Angeles there are multiple poetry venues on any given night of the week. Different poetic communities travel together between these venues and participate in different poetry events including slams, open-mic nights, and feature performances. These spaces are multicultural and house people that are influenced by different elements of hip hop with different oppressed identities that desire the presence of similar others. Most of these locations share three goals: to be a space for collective community building, information sharing, and active mobility as a larger community of activists. Thus, the spoken word venues of Los Angeles offer an opportunity to study texts as they are created, shared, and utilized in the public sphere.

I visited eight locations over the 7 month period beginning in September and culminating in March: “Da Poetry Lounge” at Greenway Court Theatre, “Green” at the Un-Urban Cafe, “The Flypoet Spoken Word & Talent Showcase” at the Conga Rom, “A Mic & Dim Lights” in Pamon, “Nappy Tongue” at Shabazz in Carson, “Coffee on 6th” in Los Angeles, “Escapism” in Culver City, and 5th Street Dicks in Lemiert Park. Because of my limited time, I chose to submerge myself completely in two locations based on the atmosphere and poets. “Da Poetry Lounge” and “A Mic & Dim Lights” are the two longest running venues in the Los Angeles area, and are home to the largest number of poets influenced by hip hop. “Da Poetry Lounge” is held every Tuesday night from 8pm-midnight, and “A Mic & Dim Lights” is held every Thursday night from 9pm-midnight.

Each week I visited up to four venues, totaling my time in the field to approximately 210 hours, not including special events, parties, interviews, or focus groups.

In addition to participant-observation, I conducted exploratory interviews and focus groups to aid in analyzing my field-notes. I conducted nine interviews and two focus groups with poets and hosts, and 22 interviews with audience members, totaling 99 single-spaced pages of transcribed interview and focus group data. I also sat in on three poetry workshops for aspiring spoken word artists and one business meeting for a poetry troupe.

I chose to triangulate participant-observation, interviews, and focus groups in addition to maintaining detailed notes, prolonged engagement in the field, thick description, and member-checking to meet the four trustworthiness criteria set forth by Lincoln & Guba (1985), credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Maintaining detailed notes of the entire process are important for any project. I tried to be as meticulous as possible during the data collection, analysis, and write-up stages, leaving behind an audit trail replete with a process log, journal, and day planner. I also spent over five years observing and participating in spoken word poetry in the United States, and seven months specifically in Los Angeles. In this write-up, I offer thick-description of what occurred in the field and the members' voices. Over the course of the project, I frequently met with members to share my findings and discuss whether my interpretations were accurate. After members were aware of my purpose at the venues, they began to ask me about my study and my interpretations. Through member-checking, I learned that my interpretations were consistent with their own understandings and that I was building a strong rapport with the members.

Gaining Access via “Respect.”

Gaining rapport is one of the most important aspects of qualitative research and involves the establishment of social relationships (NMHRC, 2001). Every ethnographer faces the challenge of being accepted as part of the collective group under study. We struggle to become members and get inside views. We put ourselves in interesting and compromising positions at times, wanting to be a part of the in-crowd so we can write the lives of our subjects. In most instances, ethnographers find interesting and provocative topics along their journeys as members, write the stories of their subjects’ lives, and intersperse their experiences. Few of us write the actual story of our experiences becoming a member. This phenomenon is partly due to the fact that many of us never become full members; we are accepted on a conditional basis as a researcher.

In spoken word, respect is the equivalent of rapport. There are three ways to gain respect: (1) perform well, (2) know someone else with enough respect so that people respect his or her friends as potentially great performers, (the host or someone who has won a previous slam can usually pass respect on), or (3) build a reputation as being real. Performing well is the most popular way to gain respect. Many members remain faceless and nameless until they perform and “rip,” “blaze,” or “bless” the mic. Once a poet or member does this, and does it well, he or she gains access into the cliques and exclusive groups within the collective. Poets who perform well often help other poets by passing on respect. Although most people in the spoken word world build respect by performing well in a city, it is difficult to get traveling gigs without have respect in other cities. Once a poet builds a reputation in one city, s/he will help friends gain respect in their home city by promoting them. They will also rely on popular friends from other cities to promote

their names so they can perform in those cities too. Once a poet is known all over the country, then s/he can help others gain respect. The final way to build respect, *keeping it real*, is necessary for all members of the spoken word network, whether performing or not. *Keeping it real* is a popular term used by members of the spoken word network. The term refers to those who are as honest as possible in any given situation. Being real and speaking truth is germane to respect because the art form is centered on consciousness and mobility. Members are critical of newcomers who talk about raising consciousness, but are inactive. A poet may be able to make a name for himself through performing well, but if he is not doing work in communities, or speaking his own truth, then he will only have a fan base; he will not be respected. For non-performers who are not honest and active, they become lost in the crowd.

My experience as a poet and audience member in the Saint Louis' poetry circuit illustrates this concept. When I arrived on the scene, I sat at my table and no one really paid any attention to me for about three months despite my outgoing personality and willingness to talk to anyone. Three months after I started going to the different venues, I finally performed. It wasn't until then that people knew my name and were interested in talking with me. Once I established myself as a poet that could "spit" on a weekly basis, and spoke about truths in my life, I achieved respect and access into the poet's private lives. I knew that I could rely on this technique to gain access in Los Angeles, but I did not want to perform because of my own vulnerability as a writer and performer. Instead, I relied on friends and being real.

Revisiting my first hour in the field, I relied on people I knew to get me in the door, but because I was a non-performer, once I was inside I had to build my respect

through keeping it real. I communicated nonverbally with the people I was sitting near and verbally with the doorman, but the real interaction was missing, leaving me feeling like an outsider. Over the course of my time in the field, however, my status and camaraderie among the other members changed. The more I talked to people about my project, about my experiences as a graduate student studying spoken word, and as an artist in general, the more I felt accepted. The more I talked about the movement, struggling with social change, and trying to make a difference, the more I felt accepted. I connected through disclosing my understandings of spoken word's potential for making change, and creating a sense of identification with the poets and audience members participating as social agents. I was fortunate enough to experience the process of becoming a member, not just researcher-outsider with limited access. The process of becoming a member lasted for the first three months of my time in the field and directly affected my ability to recruit participants. The closer I was to being a member, the easier it was for me to schedule interviews and focus groups. The next section discusses sampling and recruitment in greater depth.

Sampling & Recruitment

The current study is rooted in hip hop poetry and collective identity, thus, I employed purposeful sampling. My units of analysis include a spoken word community, events, members, poetry, and conversations. During all of my time in the field, including interviews, I utilized the same field note strategies. This sectional provides a more thorough understanding of my units of analysis, sampling, recruitment strategies, and field-note procedures beginning with community.

Community was used rather loosely in this study. I began each interview and conversation about it using the term community. After the first two weeks in the field I realized that there was not a large spoken word community that reaches across venues, but a large amount of small communities of seven to ten people that exist in a network. From the pilot studies in St. Louis between 1999 and 2002, I gathered that there were distinctive groups of poets that always performed together. They joined inside and outside of the venues, formed a tightly knit family, and moved from venue to venue as one unit. In Los Angeles, there were multiple families that composed communities that had different trails much like St. Louis. I decided to follow one community of families in Los Angeles, which led me to several different events.

I observed and participated in three types of events, slam poets, open mic nights, and special events. Slam poetry events highlighted how poets gained rhetorical power systematically. Poets were assigned a numerical value based on their performance. The performer with the most points won the title. Open mic nights emphasized sharing because they stress using the voice to gain rhetorical power in the form of education and raising consciousness. Finally, I considered “Ladies Night” and the “Fly Poet Showcase” as special events. The host and manager of “Fly Poet,” John Hensley, invited all of the poets that performed and paid them. The event was held the first Wednesday of every month and the cover was \$15. Ladies Night represents the final special event. Ladies night is hosted and executed by all women at “Da Poetry Lounge.” Men were not allowed to do anything on the mic after the night began. At any given event, I had an abundance of potential participants, or what I referred to as members, and many conversations. I took notes about conversations I had with people while at the venues, on

my way to the venues, or leaving the venues. I was able to take notes during many of the conversation that took place inside the venues. For those that took place outside of the venues, I had to rely on my memory and write the stories as soon as possible. Many of the conversations proved useful during data analysis. The next section details how I defined a member and my criteria for selecting them for the study.

I referred to the people of the Los Angeles poetry scene as members of communities instead participants. As Jenkins (2002) notes, it is virtually impossible to define membership in a collective. Because of the continuous fluctuating that occurs in groups, especially those as fluid as a spoken word communities, I relied on any specifics about membership to be revealed during the ethnography. Prior to this study, I loosely defined a member as a person that frequents spoken word events on a regular basis and engages in the spoken word process as a poet, audience member, or host. I did not consider those that came once and never returned members, but guests. After completing my time in the field, this definition remained sufficient. My criteria for selecting members and poetry rely on the form and function of hip hop poetry.

I chose to use the genre of hip hop poetry because the form and function of hip hop poetry are the most conducive to cultural criticism as put forth in the literature. The performers and poetry I sampled are defined by hip hop poetry's aesthetics and functions. The members I chose to sample from for the study were either self-identified hip hop poets, poets that delivered poetry with an obvious hip hop foundation, or audience members who I saw in attendance on a regular basis. I sampled poetry delivered by self-identified hip hop poets and texts that fit the rubric of hip hop poetry. The longer I frequented the events, the easier it became for me to identify the genres poets used and

the hip hop poets of the crowd. I collected hip hop poetry samples as supplemental materials in addition to fieldwork. These materials include purchased chapbooks and CD's, visits to personal web pages identified by the authors, and audio/visual recordings of poetry through cable television and poets' personal archives. I collected most of the supplemental materials during events, interviews, or while I recruited members to participate. Because I chose members to participate based on their performance of hip hop poetry or membership in the venues, I did not have a set of criteria for excluding participants.

Recruitment became easier over time as I became more of a member. I recruited each participating member the same. After poets I identified as hip hop poets performed, I found time between poets, during intermission, or at the end of the night to approach them. I introduced myself, "Hi, my name is Amber," and I explained why I was there. "I am writing my dissertation on spoken word poetry and how it is a space for people to gain a voice and express their struggles artistically. I liked your performance and I would like to interview you if you have some time." We would automatically venture off into a conversation about the power of spoken word and how much potential it has to move masses. The conversations lasted less than two minutes, but they were filled with positive interactions that validated my research, validated the art of spoken word, and uplifted all those involved. I connected with all interviewees before I left the venues so they would remember me when I called and want to do the interviews. I was successful in all cases. Not only did the participating members remember me, they were all eager and excited about my project, being heard off the mic, and being a part of something positive. I interviewed all members within a week of approaching them.

I recruited focus-group members similarly. I recruited members for the first focus-group during Poetri's Poetry Workshop. Poetri's Poetry Workshop is four-week long class that met once a week for three hours. Poetri introduced me to the class and explained why I was involved on the first day. Over the next four weeks, I got to know each of my classmates closely. On the last day, I asked all of the participants to stay for two hours for a focus group. Eight of my 11 classmates agreed and I interviewed them as a class for a total of 90 minutes. I recruited my second group of participants after Ladies night. I asked each of the hosts from the event to participate in a focus group the two weeks leading up to the event. At the event, I invited two additional poets using the same script as the interview recruitment. They both agreed and a total of five women participated in the second focus group. We walked over to a diner after the performance to conduct the focus group and it lasted for two hours. During each event, interview, and focus group, I utilized a variation of the three column approach to writing field notes presented by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995).

The process of writing field notes in the venues offered a unique and exciting experience. Because it is a space of poetry first and foremost, many writers frequent the space to get inspired, write their own poems, and hone their skills as performance writers. With that said, several people are always writing in their notebooks, bent over their tables, concentrating deeply. My notebook fit in perfectly. I began the process using three column approach, focusing on the process first and foremost in the center column, its relation to theory in the first column, and my own reflection of that process in the third (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1996). After my first two nights, I began to question that approach and strayed away from it only slightly. I used two column notebooks to

document the processes that took place and their relationship to theory. I kept a journal for my own self-reflections. After each event, I completed an observational protocol sheet to document in where I went, what I experienced, and my thoughts. While my time in the field began in October of 1999, in St Louis, MO, my Los Angeles ethnography began September 13th, 2005, and concluded in March of 2006. To analyze the data I collected I employed two methods. I used NVivo to code my data for cultural processes and metaphoric criticism to analyze the events, poetry, and conversations rhetorically.

Data Analysis and Write-Up

The data-analysis process in ethnography is on-going and begins with the first moments in the field (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). To manage my data, I used the software program NVivo 2.0. In the beginning, I had two bodies of data, field-notes from my observations and transcripts from my interviews and focus groups. I began analyzing my field notes by typing each event into a memo as a story. I then read and re-read each memo looking for patterns. As I developed more memos from my field notes over the course of the project, the patterns became clearer and I started looking for processes of becoming a member, performing collective identity, and counterpublic engagement.

After I completed all of my interviews and focus groups, I transcribed the data myself to both become familiar with the data and to ensure accuracy. I also looked for patterns and took notes in my journal as I transcribed. After I completed all of the transcriptions, I imported them into NVivo. Using both the field note memos and the transcripts, I started the process of open-coding. I sifted through my data and looked for patterns in the different processes of becoming a member, choosing to perform poetry, and choosing to stop. I also found patterns relating to counterpublicity, democracy, and

struggle. I found distinctive narratives revolving around who becomes a member, the process of going from audience member to poet/audience member, to host, and the inner conflicts and struggles associated with performing in public and utilizing the voice. As processes began to clarify, I started building the narrative of this project through axial and selective coding and found the three prominent processes that became the subject of this analysis, becoming a member through storytelling and learning and performing practical consciousness knowledge, and performing membership through ownership and more storytelling are the subjects of Chapter 5. Performing/challenging counterpublicity are the subjects of Chapter 6.

To perform the rhetorical aspects of this project, I extracted two events, one conversation, and one poem to criticize rhetorically through metaphoric criticism. Metaphoric criticism is the process of critiquing the subject matter, or tenor, of a text, and the metaphors, or vehicle, used to describe the text (Richards, 1965). The twentieth century brought about a new understanding of metaphorical power in rhetoric. Rhetorical critics reintroduced metaphor as symbolic force of reality; they constitute meaning, stipulate action, and organize attitudes (Black, 1962; Burke, 1969; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Leff, 1983; Osborn & Ehniger, 1962). By paying strict attention to the types of metaphors that people of the Los Angeles spoken word network use, I was able to analyze the ways in which members of the network both enforce and deconstruct dominant ideologies. I utilized the layered approach to write this narrative and analysis.

Ronai (1995) argues for the layered approach as a postmodern technique to ethnography. In her article delineating the effects of her abusive childhood, she incorporates multiple voices to ensure the telling of a story from perspectives that are just

as important as the scientific understandings of them. She defines a layered account as “a postmodern ethnographic reporting technique that embodies a theory of consciousness and a method of reporting in one stroke” (p. 396). With the layered approach, power is shifted from scientific, technological approaches to an “impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the space and construct an interpretation of the writers’ narratives. The readers reconstruct the subject, projecting more of themselves into it, and taking more away from it” (Ronai, 1995, p. 396). The processes of incorporating multiple types of experiences as well as projecting self into experience were particularly important when examining spoken word communities. As a participant-observer with a focus on both rhetoric and ethnography, writing the analyses using the layered approach created two conditions: it allowed me tell multiple stories simultaneously so that the reader could understand the experience of witnessing multiple entities at one point in time; and it allowed theory, narrative, and analyses to build together through process, offering explanation, thick-description, and integration simultaneously as the paper progresses. In short, this approach is emotional and critical. It gives the readers a glimpse of personal experiences as they are lived from multiple angles and offers a balance of theory, analysis, and praxis. The dates denote a shift in voice from the author’s perspective as researcher, storyteller, spoken word artists, and poet. Infused with these voices are also the voices of the spoken word artists in Los Angeles. My own self-reflections are written in italics.

Chapter 4

My 1st time with a Mic and a Spotlight

The first time someone witnesses a spoken word event, a lot of different emotions, thoughts, and questions arise. Newcomers are mesmerized by the talent, moved by the spirit, puzzled by the art form. Because of the heavy reactions, newcomers come back more than once, seeking answers to their questions, wanting to know how it is done and exactly what it is that moves their spirits with such grace and energy. The first few experiences with a spoken word community are crucial because they answer those questions, and those answers become the fuel for a new generation of spoken word artists. This chapter starts in the beginning when I had my first experiences with poetry and spoken word and progresses through the process of becoming a spoken word artist. Along the way, I introduce the foundation of spoken word and its form and function. Because it is my story, this chapter paints a personal interpretation of my experience and exposes my own biases as a former spoken word artist turned critic. This is my story.

August 1, 2005. When I arrived in Los Angeles, California, and settled in what would become my new room and new life for the next year, I was excited to start my study and begin exploring, but things changed. Two weeks before my self-imposed start date, my little brother got arrested, becoming the first in our family to go to jail. Predictably, my family didn't know how to deal with it. We were afraid, angry, depressed, vulnerable.

For the next four weeks, I found it very difficult to do anything besides sleep and cry. I didn't feel motivated enough to take one step; beginning my study felt like climbing a mountain. I struggled with the idea of getting up to go to these events. I didn't want to meet new people and learn new things. I just didn't want to do it. On September 13th, 13

days after my projected start date, I received a phone call, the first of many to come in the future. It was my little, 19 year old brother calling from county jail. As the words, "It's your little brother," fell disparagingly from my mother's mouth, something sparked inside me. He was stuck there, immobile, fearing for his actual life. I was lying in my mother's bed, completely immobile and unable to live my life. I had to do it for him, for myself, for the spoken word artists who had the same struggles in their lives and just needed an ear to listen. This was my motivation to finish school, motivation to value my life, and motivation to do the things I need to do to ensure the lifestyle I want. Before I could say hello, I jumped up, ran to the top of my stairs, threw on my shoes, grabbed my keys and a sweater, and left the house.

On my way to the event, I remembered why I used to go to spoken word spots, why I felt compelled to be in those spaces, every week, religiously. It was precisely for moments like this, when I feel alone, helpless about my situation, voiceless and powerless in a society where power stems from the voice and our ability to be heard, followed, praised. It was a place for me to exercise my agency, find my voice, and spread my words as small, healing pills in a world of sickness. It was my medicine, and it still is.

Aesthetics and The Spoken Word Movement: Why we do it.

A critic advises
Not to write on controversial topics
Like freedom or murder
But to treat universal themes
And timeless symbols
Like the white unicorn
A white unicorn?
Does it believe in integration?
And why not a black unicorn?

Dudley Randall, 1965, Black Poet, White Critic

In order to understand why or how spoken word can be considered medicine we must look to the aesthetics. Aesthetics are important tools for understanding and judging particular art forms. To study any art form, researchers must understand it within “a context that reflects its aesthetic goals and the tradition from which [it] has emerged” (Gladney, 1995, p. 291). The communicative practices of hip hop poetry are firmly rooted in African American orality. From narrativizing and structural signifying to call and response and tonal semantics (Smitherman, 1999; Ramsey, 2000), hip hop poetry further illuminates the manifestation of a Black oral tradition as resistance rhetoric. Because of hip hop’s direct lineage to the Black arts movement, hip hop poetry is an offspring of the Black aesthetic. The Black aesthetic is a code or list of rules Black authors have created over the years as criteria for understanding, judging, and critiquing Black art from a state of Black language, consciousness, and experience (Hill, 1980; White, 1998; Nwabueze, 1987; Carol, 1971; Govan, 1974).

Govan (1974) offers a comprehensive definition for a Black aesthetic having borrowed from various Black artists. The first three characteristics apply to Black art in general and the following six refer specifically to Black poetry. The list declares that (1) all Black art, regardless of any technical requirements must have three basic characteristics that make it revolutionary: it must be functional, collective, and committing; (2) Black art must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life; (3) individualism is a luxury Blacks cannot afford, Black art must commit to collective revolution and change; (4) the Black poet must believe in art/poetry as weapons; (5) Black poetry must be didactic and stress the responsibility of the work of art to teach or in some other fashion to relate to the

Black community; (6) the poetry should regard the language of the streets; (7) the poetry must celebrate Afro-American and African cultural and national heroes; (8) Black poetry has a close relation to Black music; and (9) Black poetry cannot tolerate white, western, European, or American critical standards nor does it show any regard, special or otherwise, for a white audience.

The Black aesthetic is its own resistance rhetoric to that of mainstream artistic critique. It provides the code, both artistic and political, and places the value of Black art in presentation and purpose; however, this code is not exclusive or exhaustive. To attempt to capture an art form that is consistently changing and adapting throughout different generations for different political environments in an accurate and fully defined aesthetic would automatically limit its capabilities. The Black aesthetic serves as a contextual reference for Black art, and is rebuilt and recreated continually through originality and the search for relevance (Gladney, 1995). The continual search for originality and relevance is apparent in most African American art forms.

In African American performance, steady tension exists between tradition and innovation. Gates (as cited in Richards, 1995) describes this tension as “repetition with difference.” It is the jazz musician, hip hop poet, or preacher’s ability to solo in a jazz performance, write a hip hop poetry piece, or deliver a sermon that extends from the same sounds, aesthetics, rule and norms, but adds a private twist or personal extension to make the performance unique and different. Understanding these tensions are fundamental to understanding African-American performance, particularly language based performance. Gerald Davis (1985) offers three categories that are all actively manipulated by those present or involved: (1) the expectation of potency and emotion as

generating motives in African American performance; (2) the organization of sensual perceptions into a systematic and codified series of expressive responses, and (3) the balance between tradition (customary, habitual, and dynamic usage of folk ideas in performance) as a structural framework and contemporaneity a shaping force internal to the event. This tension offers a unique frame for understanding and conceptualizing the use of classical poetry forms, Black art aesthetics, and African American oral traditions in addition to newly developed aesthetics stemming from each performance, improvisation, reading, or audience member response as they directly influence the poets. We must pay strict attention to the ever-changing performative elements of aesthetics as well as the collective identity of the group because they directly influence the performances. We must pay strict attention to why and how a group performs. Why are artists so drawn to this mode of expression; why was I so drawn to the flame? The answers are revealed in my story.

September 6, 2000. It was my senior year in undergrad. I was applying to grad schools and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I was a McNair scholar and became friends with one of the girls in the program, Kelly. She was 21 but I had just turned 20 so there weren't many places we could go to hang out together. She invited me to Troy's on Park on a Wednesday for open-mic night. We drove separately and met up at the venue. The front door was in the center of the small café style bar with two large windows on either side and small, white linen covered tables tucked inside. Eight or nine other tables covered in white linens and votive candles created a close intimate setting. The space resembled a jazz club where cigar smoke looms above heads and sophisticated people in three-piece suits and A-line skirts gather to talk about politics and other grown

things. The back of the café hosted a small bar and the stage sat adjacent to the bar on the right side. A hallway was to the left of the bar that led to a lower-level with restrooms and a space for a second bar.

Kelly and I met up outside and walked in together. We opted to sit on the left side of the café, against the wall, between other tables. I noticed the small stage and the three man, home band named the Usual Suspects first. They played jazz tunes quietly as people continued to file in. I took notice of the small tables and the brightly painted walls covered in musical paintings by C'Babi Bayoc. In one painting, a man gently strummed a guitar painted to look like a beautiful Black woman. In another, a conga player in a bright green shirt with slightly graying hair played a bright orange drum. I took notice of the different people in the space; they seemed much older and distinguished. I, too, felt grown inside this space, sporting a grey, pinstriped blazer, turtle neck, jeans, and boots. I felt like a novelist poet, someone important.

When the night began, Doug, the host, welcomed everyone, introduced the Usual Suspects, and read the rules. He asked us to turn off our cell phones and pagers and said that every poet had five minutes or two poems, whichever came first. After Doug's introduction, I started making assumptions. From the look of things, I felt like I was in a remake of Love Jones and at any moment, Darius Lovehall would bless the mic, confess his lust for me, and talk about being the blues in my left thigh, but wanting to become the funk in my right. I was right and wrong at the same time. Some of the poets used the musical accompaniment and spoke in low, seductive tones about sex, intimacy, and relationships. Other poets did things differently; they shouted, screamed, yelled. They spoke with fire, passion and heat as they denounced our government's practices, cursed

white supremacy, danced the tango with corporate America and riddled our lives with their guilt and fervor. They gave me goose bumps and chills, and as I left that place at the end of the night, I felt a change. In one night I learned more about myself, my culture, my anger, my happiness, my love and my hate than I ever thought possible. I wanted more, more of this poetry, more of this expression, more of this passion and energy.

After that night, Kelly and I became close friends and moved in to an apartment together about five blocks from Troy's with two other roommates. We visited Troy's every Wednesday night together for two months straight, and every Wednesday I grew more hungry, more aware, more passionate, more involved. I saw my life unfolding on stage with every line, every story, every performance. I saw my face in the faces of those poet prophets, prophesying my life, sharing my experiences, and retelling my stories. I would go home inspired every Wednesday night and read my own poetry and think about writing. I would ask myself if I could do that. I began re-reading poetry that I wrote, but I felt it was too amateur, too young. I got discouraged from performing and settled for being an audience member until I met him.

October 18, 2000. I have never been one to walk into a new place and introduce myself to people and make friends really fast unless that is the goal. Thus, two months inside the space went by fast without me talking to any of the poets or getting to know anyone in the audience. People knew me by name and would say hello, but I wasn't a part of the in-crowd. I would come every Wednesday, pay my \$5.00, sit down and absorb my culture, my life, and things I could relate to. But in one night, it all changed.

I arrived at Troy's with my three roommates about 9pm, took my seat in one of the unoccupied windows and prepared myself for the night's events. I noticed a

gentleman in a Black sweatshirt, jeans and simple tennis shoes. It was his glasses, hair, and face that kept my attention. He wore an afro, had a small distinctive nose, small lips, and huge brown eyes. He rarely smiled, but when he did, it was beautiful. He stood by the bar and I immediately pointed him out to my roommates and they agreed, he was cute. When he read his poem, I was mesmerized. He was funny, witty and sincere. He was my new crush. For the next two weeks I talked to my roommates obsessively about him, and would watch him at Troy's, wondering about him, who he was, what his real name was, but I never got the courage to ask.

November 1, 2000. My roommates suggested I speak to him. I ignored their suggestion and continued my staring. Finally, one of my roommates thought of something seemingly brilliant at the time. We were in a poetry set, write him a poem. Jennifer slid me a pen and a napkin and I began to write a poem. Halfway through the poem, he noticed me writing on a napkin and sent me a sheet of paper. His gesture boosted my confidence, he was watching me. I continued writing, but I could not build the courage to send it to his table. Eventually my roommates grew tired of my cowardly pursuit. Jennifer grabbed the poem and passed it to him before I could stop her. I sat blushing, embarrassed for fifteen minutes when, all of a sudden, a poem was returned to me, accompanied by his phone number.

I sent him another poem and we became friends. He would come over to my apartment and we would write together. I would concentrate on writing something I felt good about, but couldn't come up with anything until one day when I was riding in my car listening to "Superstar (Come back home)" by Luther Vandross. The words started pouring from my mouth. I grabbed every loose sheet of paper I could while driving down

the freeway. I didn't care, I had to get the words down. I knew it would be the poem I could perform.

I shared the poem with my friend later that evening and he suggested I perform it. I still didn't feel ready, but I wanted to please him, show him I could do it, make him like me as more than a friend. I began to practice. I memorized the words and practiced in my head all day long and practiced out loud at night. I practiced every day until the week before I was to leave to go home for Christmas break.

December 1, 2000. It was the last Wednesday before I was to leave. The entire day I was nervous, practicing the words in my head, afraid I would forget, afraid I would stumble over my words, afraid I might actually be good. When I arrived at Troy's, I spoke to Doug and told him to put me on the list. He was surprised since I never read before and he called me up second. When he introduced me, he said, "Up next we have a virgin to the mic. This is her first time performing so let's give her a big round of applause. Amber Jaye." I slowly walked to the stage, whispered instructions to the band, and approached the microphone. I was so nervous my legs shook violently beneath me and I found it difficult to stand. Finally, I took a deep breath, and began to sing the words of "Superstar."¹

*Long ago and oh so far away.
Actually a few days ago from what seemed to be an eternity
I fell in love with you
After the second show
Yeah, that fast cuz it was your words
And your guitar, and you sound so sweet and sincere
But your not really here
It's just the radio
Damn, I feel so dumb
Don't you remember you told me you loved me baby*

¹ The italicized lines are song lyrics from Luther Vandross' "Superstar (Until you come back to me)." These lines were sung. The non-italicized lines are poem lines. These words were spoken.

Don't you?
You said you'd be coming back this way again
At least that's what I got from you
Baby baby baby baby ohh baby
Or maybe I was just confused, but
I love you
I really do

The music kicked in perfectly, just as I asked them to at the beginning of the poem, after the singing. The performance went smooth and I felt good about it. When I finished, the crowd roared with applause. They were supporting me, a newcomer, and encouraging me to continue. I felt their energy. My legs never stopped shaking; hours after my performance they persisted, but I did stop sweating and was able to relax. Throughout the night several people came up to me and told me that I did a wonderful job. I was high off the adrenaline from the performance, clapping, and compliments. I knew that I would be doing this for a while. I left for Christmas break the following Friday.

December 3, 2000. When I arrived in Los Angeles I linked up with a dear friend, Akweta. She and I were both aspiring writers so we would write obsessively together. It was with her that I began crafting "Searching for my Sol." I was experiencing writers block so I asked her for a topic. She told me to write about my father. The words came instantly.

My daddy left me when I was two.
And now in you, man, I'm searching.
Searching for my soul in more ways than one cuz apparently when he left
He took bits and pieces of my sun
My *sol* as some would say and left a hole in my *Corazon*
To be filled by who?
A man cuz my daddy left when I was two.

I showed her the writing and she grew sad. She looked at me with despair and said, "Amber, you can't just leave it like that. It is so sad. Keep writing." I continued, and, once again, the words just poured out of me.

So I started searching for my soul
I searched in clubs, in class, at the park
Riding in my car I searched
I searched all over the world thinking my soul had a form,
Approximately six feet tall, brown eyes and all
Big bod, pretty smile, phone number on a business card, I searched
And after years of hide'n'seek, I could understand why he was hiding from me
Didn't he want to find his soul in me?
A bitter sweet partner to whom I complete?
And then I realized
How can I complete you if I can't complete me?

I showered her the new addition and she urged me to continue.

So I stopped my search
Put my bag down
Tied up my horse and thought for a while
My past
My childhood growing up
My smile and its roots
The tears begin to erupt
I was thinking and thinking until I started doing things differently
Started twisting my hair
Breathing incense
Writing poetry
Going to spots to read
Read my words, read others words
Until I embarked on a book
One day my soul just opened up while in the meantime stared me in the face after
yesterday I cried cuz I had experienced the coldest winter ever while uncovering
the Celestine prophecy
I filled myself with knowledge
Endless thoughts of me
The scent of life
The speed of Black beauty
The value in the valley
Opportunity knocked when my search had ended only to find that it had just
begun
When I stopped searching for my daddy
And found in myself the ability to love me.

I memorized the poem that day, and that night Akweta and I went to Higher Grounds, a coffee shop and open mic venue. I was allowed to do two pieces so I decided to read “Tribute to Luther Vandross,” and “Searching for my Soul.” The band knew the song and they played it a little too fast. I got my first dose of improvisation. I had to speed up a lot of the poem and lose lines in order to keep up with the music. It ended up working out fine. “Searching for my Soul” worked out even better.

After that night, I knew that I could write and perform poetry. I knew that I had undeveloped talent waiting to be formed and shared. I officially became a spoken word artist and spent almost all of my spare time writing poetry and rehearsing my performance.

During the rest of my trip, I visited different open mic venues, one of which was the Da Poetry Lounge. I did not perform again, but I did have a chance to listen to different types of poetry and spoken word. The poets in these venues sounded amazing to my untrained ears. Every poem left me speechless and I learned that I had a long way to go in terms of crafting my own style and finding my own voice. I would spend the next six months doing just that.

When I got back to Saint Louis in January, I was armed with over twenty poems and a new spirit. I didn't just want to be a spoken word artist, I wanted to be good, I wanted people to listen to what I was saying and learn from it. I wanted to make a difference using my poetry. I felt like I had the power to change the world in my notebook, I just needed practice and a powerful delivery. I went to every open mic night in Saint Louis for the next six months. In addition to Troy's on the Park, I went to Club

Viva on Mondays, Legacy Books and Café on Fridays, and Jazz at the Bistro the first Sunday of every month. When Troy's on the Park ended, I began going to the Red Sea on Wednesdays and slamming.

I performed a lot of pieces about love and relationships in the beginning because I felt comfortable with the subject; I knew it and it knew me. When I got the courage to write and perform my first political piece however, it gave me an entirely new confidence and motivation. I read a piece called "Black Dot on White Canvas" and David A. N. Jackson gave me a copy of the Willie Lynch Letter. Reading those words helped me to realize the power in language. I knew I had that power in my words; I had the power to open minds and change how people saw the world. I began writing political poems, poems about sexism, hatred, rape, and issues in Black communities. I wrote poems about being Black and a woman and how that made my body a contradiction. I wrote poems about the glass ceiling, not having a voice, hate crimes, body image, and foreign policy. I wrote so much that I filled over five journals in a 12 month period. My hands and my heart could not stop writing because there were so many stories that needed to be shared. I was a spoken word artist in a sea of artists, waiting for my time on stage to share my stories, highlight my struggles, and let others know that I related to their stories and struggles. As I continued writing and performing, I learned there was a method to spoken word. The fire that exploded from the mouths of each artist followed an aesthetic and had a theme. As Sanchez (2001) notes, "every generation brings something new to this thing called craft, to this thing called poetry" (p. xv). Traditional poetic forms continue to dominate poetic scholarship, but hip hop poetry demands a new discourse specifically relating to its form and function because it is not just poetry, but it is poetry. It is not just

rap, but it is hip hop. It is something like hip hop meeting poetry in the middle. It is performance; it is hot; it is fresh; it is everything we need it to be and is constantly being reinvented, reshaped, and recreated. It was and still is hip hop poetry, and its form and function exist through us.

The Form and Function of Hip Hop Poetry

In order to fully grasp the potency of hip hop poetry, we must recognize the multifaceted nature of the craft. As Shusterman notes:

Failure to recognize the traditional tropes, stylistic conventions, and constraint-produced complexities of Afro-American English has introduced the false belief that all rap lyrics are superficial and monotonous, if not altogether moronic. But informed and sympathetic close reading will reveal in many rap songs not only cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights but also forms of linguistic subtlety and multiple levels of meaning whose polysemic complexity, ambiguity, and intertextuality can sometimes rival that of high art's so called "open-work" (1991, p. 615).

The rhythm and rhyme schemes are the most distinctive aspects of hip hop poetry, but if we examine the layers of meaning between the rhythm and rhyme, we find a richly detailed history of culture. The lyric—the subject matter and written construction, style—the tonal quality and level of originality presented in delivery, and flow—the sense of rhythm and timing—are what separate one emcee from another and create the "intangible style" of hip hop (Salaam, 1995). The following section illustrates the complexity of hip hop poetry's form according to polysyllabic rhyme, internal rhyme, consonance, assonance, alliteration, sprung rhythm, slant rhyme, modified rhymes, and tone. I offer a discussion of each of these tactics and I draw upon two poems that utilize all of these tactics well for examples: "Children of the Night" by Saul Williams (Anglesey, 1999) and "College Town" by Amber Jaye (2003).

The simplest difference between hip hop poetry and other poetics is the polysyllabic versus monosyllabic rhyme scheme. A well written hip hop poem uses a polysyllabic rhyme scheme to create an internal rhythm. In “Children of the Night,” Saul Williams uses polysyllabic rhymes schemes with two patterns. They are illustrated with the bold face, gray and Black text.

Must my spine be aligned to **sprout wings**?
I’m slouched **in slang steps**
and kangol’d **with gang reps**
but my orbit rainbows **Saturn’s rings**:
mystical elliptical
presto
polaris

Internal rhyme consists of words or phrases within a line that rhyme. “Children of the Night,” also exemplifies the way internal rhyme can create a rhythm without a voice.

Internal rhyme is used here on six different levels and is highlighted by the colors of the text.

Self is **thē servant** to **serpents** with **wings**
Three is **thē beginning** of all **things**
Try **angles** when wreck **tangle** your **wings**
Know **yē** are **thē sum of your burdens**
Pile **stones** and **unearth ancient learnings**
See self as **ghost of your servings**

Consonance, assonance, and alliteration refer to the piling and repetition of sounds to create a desired effect. Saul Williams places emphasis on consonance within each line to create several internal rhymes and a steady rhythm:

A tumultuous army of
Beggars and bastards
Witches and harlots
Madmen and idiots
Dancers and lunatics
Losers and lovers
Sinners and singers

Students and teachers
Poets and priests

Sprung rhythm is a poetic device, invented by Gerald Manley Hopkins, for creating rhythmic flows within a single poetic line by densely packing alliterative phrases that, when read, sound markedly different from rhythms and phrasings of everyday language (Weis and Herndon, 2001). Identifying sprung rhythm entails counting a stressed sound instead of a syllable. The sounds create a sudden rhythm inside the line. The extensive use of the short *ă*'s paired with the -b-, -g-, and -s- create a densely packed rhythm within the 3rd line taken from "College Town"

Tall shopping **carts**
too **small**
for 8 **black plastic bags**
Her cup
Runneth
Over.

Slant rhyme occurs when a modified rhyme is used in conjunction with a steady rhyme pattern so that the sound is slightly altered. This device creates an opportunity to change the rhyme within a consistent rhythmic scheme and, thus, adds to the overall effectiveness because the audience is caught off guard waiting for a specific sound. This keeps the audience "on their toes" and warrants "supersonic²" ears. The following line from "College Town" utilizes slant rhyme with the swift change from *ways* to *advantāge-us*. The rhyme continues with *empty handed*, and then goes back to the original use of the long *ā*:

We be the consumers of thrift shop clothing, retro **ways**
We be the advantageous
Empty handed

² Supersonic is a phrase that was used in a 1988 song titled "Supersonic" by J.J. Fad, a three women rap group. The phrase refers to people that can hear almost everything because they either pay too much attention to other peoples conversations or have really superior listening capabilities.

Coming to the table but the tuition bill is **paid**
Pining, moaning, rioting, rage
No reminders of a culture, childhood **days**

Tonal semantics and performance are what bring the rhythm to life and strategically increase rhyme effects. Tone refers to the notion that the sound and “meaning of a word can be changed simply by altering the pitch of the word, or changing its stress—basically, the way one can change the word *yeh* from a simple response to a stern challenge simply by moving the tongue” (Jones, 1968, p. 26). By positioning the tongue strategically and using sound to stress certain syllables or phrases, the poems rhyme patterns and actual rhythm can change drastically. Performance is important in hip hop poetry and carries significance because of tonal semantics. In the case of the Black preacher, a written sermon does not carry the weight of a live sermon because the voice is missing. Oral performance is a chance for the author to bring forth his/her intended rhyme scheme and rhythm that is not apparent solely on the page. It is the precise marriage of the aesthetic and cognitive that make rap music and hip hop poetry powerful (Shusterman, 1991).

The functions of hip hop poetry are what make this type of poetry remarkable. Hip hop poetry is not just the complex use of rhyme and rhythm, but the determination to use such complex forms while being devoted to a purposeful function. Hip hop is the poetry of mission and revolution. According to Shusterman:

It is dedicated to the defiant violation of this compartmentalized, trivializing, and eviscerating view of art and the aesthetic. Such rappers repeatedly insist that their role as artists and poets is inseparable from their role as insightful inquirers into reality and teachers of truth, particularly those aspects of reality and truth which get neglected or distorted by establishment history books and contemporary media coverage (1991, p. 625).

The idea that art must reverberate with functionality that serves to better the condition of a community is consistent with the Black aesthetic (Gladney, 1995). Sutton (in press; as cited in Fisher, 2003) and Weiss & Herndon (2001) value spoken word poetry venues as a space for groups that have traditionally been silenced, marginalized, and ignored. These types of venues give voice to the voiceless and allow members to share their lives and experiences. The art forms purpose is clearly to assist people with their survival in an environment that is hostile (Gladney, 1995). These communities act as stress relievers and encourage participants to write and share their work in ways that are useful and functional for the community. Not only do Black communities reflect these motives, as discussed earlier, hip hop poetry is popular across cultural, global, generational, sexual, and racial borders. This community-centered art form is a search for an artistic culture that is conscious about societal issues that confront all marginalized groups regardless of ethnic make-up. This is no surprise. Spoken word is an extension of hip hop, one of the most influential art forms and cultures in American history.

The cultural relevance of hip hop can be seen across global arenas, shaping poets that advocate various political agendas. Anglesey (1999) discusses this in her portrayal of Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian spoken word artist influenced by hip hop. She writes:

The music of Hammad's poems, while tinged with hip hop rhythms, takes flight in response to her ardent desires. She believes a poem's range should embrace community, and to this end, she sets out to create "movement" in the fullest sense of the word...with observations of alcoholism, sexism, racism, and political oppression" (Anglesey, 1999, p. 39).

Carl Hancock Rux embraces the idea of music and phrasing influencing how he approaches writing and performing verse (Anglesey, 1999). Spoken word artists and poets Saul Williams (Anglesey, 1999; Eleveld & Smith, 2003), Jessica Care Moore

(Anglesey, 1999) and Tracie Morris (Weis & Herndon, 2001) have all adopted styles directly influenced by hip hop. This can be seen in their modes of delivery and topics.

Through the art of poetry and hip hop, spoken word poets birth messages that expose negative parts of culture, devise methods to improve them, and essentially rewrite stories and preserve them in their own culturally rich words. Poetry, in this use, is a tool for education and motivation. Poets deposit meaning into history through language and spread that meaning throughout the culture. Understanding the meaning behind poetic verse is to understand the past and present ideologies of culture, but we must understand them according to their own aesthetics norms, rules, and values. We must approach the research site from a different place, one that fuses the entire social establishment.

Richards (1998) agrees and maintains:

Not only should we analyze what is “there” on the page [or written text performed on stage], that is scrutinize those meanings we produce based upon the multiple discourses in which we and the script are embedded, but we also need to imagine and to write into critical discourse how these interpretations imply contradictory positions that are likely to result from the materiality of theater, that is, from the semiotics of movement, tones, silences, costumes, and spatial arrangements onstage, as well as from the reactions of spectators in the auditorium” (Richards, 1995, pp. 72).

To do so, according to Richards, is to approach an unstable research environment that displaces the researchers preconceived understanding of the art or text as merely written and/or fixed as well as her privilege to understand it according to a greater discourse. It creates a space for the spectator and reader to become more involved in the process and points to the “folk custom of collaborative, artistic production” (Richards, 1995, p. 73). It also offers a “model of community that is significant for non-theatrical activity, for the audience is recognized under this framework as both homogenous and diverse, in some senses solidified by sharing a particular performance event, yet segmented by its

production of a variety of meanings.” (Richards, 1995, p. 73). Essentially, spoken word performances invite participation, interactivity, and community engagement.

In conclusion, understanding hip hop poetry’s aesthetics, form, and function are germane to its performance and scholarly understandings. Potential hip hop poets learn the aesthetics, form, and function through participation at different venues, thus, a poet’s first experiences within a venue are defining moments. As scholars, “failing to analyze hip-hop forms and ideology critically and intellectually may lead one to dismiss an art form capable of transmitting ideas to a community in dire need of positive solutions” (Gladney, 1995, p. 292). Hip hop and spoken word poets’ ability to simultaneously discuss amazingly rich narratives without wasting words whose only utility rests in their ability to serve the rhyme, is the most obvious proof that hip hop poetry deserves to be a vital utterance in academic discourse. Spoken word poetry deserves to be recognized as a genre of poetry. Hip hop is worthy of conversation other than those of blame, pointing, and sacrificial, sacrilegious texts that treat it as a scapegoat for everything negative in society. Dialogue concerning societal outcomes should no longer take precedence over those concerning the artistic integrity and function of hip hop poetry. Instead, spoken word poetry in general should be discussed in terms of its value and academic place in society. Regardless, however, of the ways in which authoritative figures judge the art, it is important to the artists; every accolade, every triumph, and every performance is meaningful and necessary.

Spring Semester, Senior Year, 2001. By March, I was getting requests to do poems and people were starting to recognize me outside of poetry venues. I was getting emails about my poetry and how it helped someone struggling. I would get phone calls to

do shows in Saint Louis and requests to feature. During the summer months, I was invited to record a track for a compilation album produced by Floyd Boykin Jr. Following that session, I was invited back to record my own CD of poetry as Floyd's first artist. I also traveled to Los Angeles, performed, and was invited to do a feature the next week. In the Fall of 2002, I was named Poet Laureate for the cities Black Pages and I began studying spoken word as an ethnographer. I attended the spoken word expo in November and was invited to perform live for a Chicago radio show, a show that would turn into another compilation album. I began to receive several invitations to travel to other cities and perform, but something in me was changing. This project is about that change, about the processes a poet goes through and how those changes come together to represent a commentary of the spoken word movement and society in general. It is about the coming together and the tearing apart. It is about confronting our struggles and causing new ones. It is about sharing our stories.

Chapter 5

Welcome to the Los Angeles Spoken Word Scene: Becoming a Member, and Performing Collective Identity

Becoming a member of any group as an ethnographer poses challenges, but can be rewarding. We are able to get to know the members and the cultural processes of the collective under study in more intimate ways. We forgo our researcher-outsider personas and become one with whom we are studying; we become members. Membership in the realm of spoken word poetry is particularly vital. The last chapter illustrated the notion that learning the aesthetics, forms, and functions of spoken word is germane to participation. The second chapter introduced the concept of practical consciousness knowledge as necessary for a collective's existence. The members must know that a collective exists and must know the rules of the collective in order to perform the culture. The only way to learn the aesthetics, form, function, and practical consciousness knowledge fully is through participating as a member. My membership in St. Louis afforded me the knowledge of the spoken word network. In Los Angeles, I had to become a member all over again and learn the practical consciousness knowledge, perform membership, and document how others performed membership. Over the course of my time in the field I was able to discern how the spoken word collective of Los Angeles performed their identities because I too became a performer.

With every interview, conversation, cheer, shout, tear, and sigh, I helped reconstruct and reinforce the existing collective I refer to as Los Angeles spoken word. Because of my status as a member, I have the privilege of sharing how one community performs membership of a collective and the layers of meaning attached to that

membership and collective identity. I must admit that becoming a part of the collective was not easy. It took time, patience, and a few falls, but it was worth it. This phase of the fieldwork presented an obstacle for me. Even though I am a member of the movement and solidarity identities as a spoken word artists from St Louis, I did not know anyone in the Los Angeles spoken word scene personally. I am a social butterfly in spaces where I am comfortable and know the norms; but in a new space where the norms are foreign and the people alien, I am a lost cause. This chapter focuses on becoming a member of a collective, learning the practical consciousness knowledge of the group, and performing collective identity as a member. I delineate the processes of becoming an organizational member, learning the norms of the organizational collective, adopting the collective identity (and reconstructing and challenging it simultaneously), and performing the collective identity. Before I could understand the collective under study, however, I had to recognize its status according to its members. I used my interviews to gauge what community meant for Los Angeles based spoken word artists and how they saw themselves as a part of it. This chapter begins with a discussion of community and continues into performance.

Community emerged an important, albeit controversial, subject of this study. My informants and I never reached a consensus regarding what constitutes community, but through the different levels of analysis and discussion, I constructed a working understanding for this project. One poet, Paul Mabon, said there are definite communities, even though he thought they were just cliques in the beginning. He has a poem that reads, “Rhythm cadence, rhythm cadence/ until it sticks/ are you rehearsing your verses for cliques.” After being a part of the spoken word scene in Los Angeles for a

while, he realized that people had their own circles of friends, what he calls families. And in the movement, “There is one community, many families.” Jerry Quickley offered a similar response, stating that:

The idea of community is very important, but its execution is a different thing. There is talk about family and looking out for your peers, but you realize that community can be much smaller. It is not the 174 people that claim community. In real life it is the 3-6 people that you are really down with. That is not to be cynical or dismissive of an entire community, but those folks that you deal with frequently, those folks that hook you up and you hook up so you have strong connections. Those people become the more meaningful subset of a larger community.

Quickley also disclosed similar sentiments regarding people trying to be a part of a community for the wrong reasons. For Mabon, it is rehearsing verses for cliques. For Quickley, it is people wanting to get on, trying to be Hollywood.

In response to the one community many families metaphor, Marc Gonzalez offered another response:

I think you have to ask what is the definition of a community? If it is bunch of people in any area sharing a common moment, then it is a community. If it is a set of people with a similar set of values and structures who are tied in to one another and look after one another, then in a lot of ways it is not community and for certain people it is. I think the person who said one community many families, I think that off the top of my head yeah that is right because there are different cliques and different groups and they are all kind of linked together, but not really, and I am like that is not community, that is a neighborhood. Community is the linkage of those families, not only for self-interest but the better whole of the family.

From the bulk of the responses, I conclude that the spoken word movement is an entire network of communities, neighborhoods and families, most of which have similar common goals: to uplift humanity, redeem their voices and history, and challenge greater society through entertainment. As Questean stated:

I definitely think it is one community; I don't really see the separations. Going to New York and being in Los Angeles, it is pretty much just one community. It is the same messages. Everyone is talking about the same thing. They're talking about relationships with people, a lot of messages about race and about how their race has affected them and their life situations, there are a lot of poems about sex, consciousness, uplifting the human race through conscience evolution, and being more aware of the truth in situations.

This network of spoken word artists and audience members is universally understood as something important to strive for if spoken word artists are going to make any real difference in greater society beyond pop culture, specifically in the realm of resistance and power struggles. The spoken word poetry network is a united effort of poets and artists that wish to challenge society. Like any community, neighborhood or family, however, there are members who do not share the same intentions but enjoy the entertainment and social factor nevertheless. Together, this network of families, communities, cliques, and individuals create the counter hegemonic collective called spoken word. This is my story of acceptance into the Los Angeles network.

September 13, 2005. The first night in the field I arrive at Greenway Court Theatre on Fairfax and Melrose at 9pm and park my car in the makeshift parking area on the high school lot. As I walk toward the theatre, I expect to see a large group of fashionably dressed, youthful Californians sporting afros, dread locks, Mohawks and other gel infested hairdos, crowded around the 20 feet steel gates that guard the entrance into this new youth culture. Instead, I am approached by a handsome Asian gentleman who asks me if I am here for Da Poetry Lounge. He tells me it has moved to Fais DoDo for the month of September due to a special event at the theatre. I walk back to my car and begin my journey from Hollywood to the hood growing anxious thinking of what I am missing and what I am getting ready to experience for the next few months.

I arrive at Fais DoDo, park, and proceed to the entrance. A young man greets me at the door and asks for my ID because the event is 21+. I pass him my ID, tell him my name, and explain why I am here. We briefly talk about my project and when Da Poetry Lounge will move back home. He tells me there is a 5\$ cover for the night and as I reach into my purse, he puts his arm around my shoulder, leans in, and whispers in my ear, "You still date Black men, don't you?" In a questionable, astonished, and almost embarrassed tone, I whisper "yes?" and slide him a twenty. He gives me back a ten and two fives and ushers me to the second floor.

As I approach the top of the steps, a lot of things are running through my head, but none revolve around his comment. I am more interested in the abundance of people, and getting to a seat soon enough to start taking notes.

When I get to the top of the stairs, there are about 40 people sitting in an area suitable for 20. People are sitting on the coffee table, the floor, and the bar where I find a small nook behind a support column and the sound booth next to three women. I can see only a small portion of the stage and almost no audience members below from my little spot on top of the bar.

I take note of the space once I catch up to my surroundings. It resembles a dinner theatre. There is a medium sized stage with red velvet curtains and the walls are burgundy. The space feels somewhat gothic in décor. On the main floor, there are seven to eight rows of seats directly in front of the stage, booths behind those chairs and tables along the sides of the room. In the back, before the balcony, stands a bar and 5 or 6 bar stools. The bartender serves both alcoholic beverages and food. The balcony hosts two

couches and several chairs, but not nearly enough for the 40 or so audience members to sit down.

Poetri, a Def Jam poet and one of the co-hosts and co-founders of Da Poetry Lounge, is on stage and asks the audience members, "Who likes George Bush?" Almost no one in the audience says yes. Poetri phrases the quest differently, "If you like George Bush, raise your hand." One male Caucasian raised his hand. The crowd boos. Poetri brings it back to peace by saying that we have to respect peoples' opinions and tells the audience to give it up for him because he was not afraid to share his opinion in front of a room full of Black people. The audience laughs and Poetri questions the gentleman about liking George Bush. He says he likes him because he helped the people of Iraq by removing an evil man from power and he thinks he has done good things for our country. Poetri then tells the audience to clap for the gentlemen, because despite his views being "obviously wrong, he had the courage to stand up for what he believes." The audience claps and Poetri calls the next poet.

I am not sure if it is fate or destiny, but I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason. The first poet I listen to as an ethnographer in Los Angeles is a woman with a slow, mellow flow and her poem is about the prison system. She speaks about the conditions of prison grounds, about the unfair treatment of inmates, about people just like my little brother who shouldn't be in jail. She affirms my reason for being here and I realize I need these stories just as much as everyone else in this room.

As the evening progresses, I notice that the crowd is quiet. At the end of performances, they clap and offer the occasional scream. For the most part, they submissively attend to the poetry and between each performance, they chat. I don't feel

any energy or warmth, not even from those sitting next to me on the bar counter. I feel alone, amputated from the phenomena under scrutiny like a perforated edge dangling for dear life. I am attached because of the words, detached because of the people. I know I must synchronize myself with this collective, with this group, with this community. I must participate. I must become a member.

Once the second half starts, new audience members and poets arrive and several people leave, creating space to move around and meet new people. For some reason, I still don't feel comfortable getting up, introducing myself to people and interacting. I am sitting very close to three girls on the bar, but not making any attempt to talk to them or introduce myself. I am still alone. Back on stage Poetri tells each person in the audience to introduce him or herself to at least three other people they do not know. Everyone begins to mingle. Some of us get up and actively move around, parading our personalities. Most of us are able to remain glued to our seats, extending our arms farther than is comfortable, barely able to shake a hand. I do the latter because I know standing and moving around creates vulnerability. I finally introduce myself to the three girls sitting on the bar with me. I immediately begin to feel different. We start sharing stories. One girl asks me what I am writing and I tell her I am just taking notes for a school project. Another girl makes a comment on the lack of good poetry from the first half. We start sharing stories about the poems, focusing on one event we all enjoyed, the "Naked Pool Party."

Because we are sitting right next to the sound booth, we get to see the aspiring rappers approach the sound engineer and ask him to play their tracks during their performances. A 20-something White guy gives the sound engineer his CD. He says that

he is 3rd, but has to change clothes so he shouldn't play the track until he is standing on stage, ready to go. Much like the other girls sitting next to me on the bar listening to this conversation, we are wondering what he is changing into and what he is going to perform. When Poetri calls Skin&Bones to the stage, everyone starts to laugh. He has a bright neon beach towel wrapped around his waist, large blue fins on his feet, bright children's arm floaties barely fitting his arm past his wrists, and neon green goggles covering his eyes. His poem/rap is called "Naked Pool Party." By the middle of the performance, the entire audience is singing the hook and clapping along,

We're gonna have ourselves a naked pool party
We're gonna skinny dip until we look like prunes

As we laugh and chat remembering the chorus, we bond through our stories and their common points. We are all here because we like spoken word and need to listen to others articulate their struggles; their articulations help us deal with our own problems and struggles. We all agree that while many of the messages in the first half of the lounge were poignant, much of the poetry was pretty bad. We continue laughing about some of the specifics and I begin to feel a sense of identification with these girls, a sense of belongingness; however, my comfort doesn't extend beyond this space. It ends here, in this balcony, at this bar, when we leave for the night. I realize there are no clear boundaries or rules concerning what makes one a member of a collective, I have to figure it out by exposing my vulnerability and becoming a member. I can no longer sit on the outskirts, waiting for members to tell me what I need to know. I have to learn it myself through becoming a member, interacting with other members, and gaining an understanding of practical consciousness knowledge.

From the literature review, we know that it is not just interaction that helps define membership; it is the type of interaction. We also know that practical consciousness knowledge is more than a binding phenomenon; it is crucial to membership and the enactment of that membership. The next section tells the story of learning practical consciousness knowledge and becoming a full member through interaction. The italicized sections are a continuation of my own experiences in the field and the different experiences that taught me different snippets of practical consciousness knowledge. The sections that follow expand upon the practical consciousness knowledge and are titled as such.

*Interaction and Practical Consciousness Knowledge:
Becoming a Member and Performing Membership*

September 20, 2005. I arrive at the Poetry Lounge for my second night of observation and begin looking for a seat. I approach the steps to go back up to my lonely balcony spot and I slowly and unsurely place my feet on step one, and then two. At step three, I abruptly turn around and head to the main room. I feel the sudden urge to sit with people, introduce myself, ask questions, and do more than just share stories. I want to get to know people and allow them to get to know me. I approach a Black woman sitting alone at a table. I ask her if she is sitting with anyone and she says no. I introduce myself and we begin talking. She immediately asks me if I am going to read when she notices my notebook and what appears to be a journal. I say no, but explain to her why I am here. We talk about school, what it's like being a graduate student and teaching college students. We talk about poetry and performing. Our conversation is temporarily interrupted by a White gentleman approaching us. He hands us a flyer announcing a hip hop spoken word night called Escapism. It goes down Thursday, September 29th from 7-

11pm. When he leaves, his show becomes the topic of conversation. We talk about how the flyer looks and what type of show it is going to be. We talk about his Whiteness, how he interrupts us, and whether or not his interruption is a commentary of his respect for Black women. We decided against that idea because of his flyer. It speaks of hip hop, peace, love, and escapism. His flyer tells us his story and our conversation create a shared sense of self and identity in this space as Black women.

We continue talking as the event begins. Shihan, co-founder and co-host of Da Poetry Lounge, hits the stage and asks the audience if anyone has seen the film Constant Gardner. As people raise their hand and shout yes or no, he spoils the ending, laughs loudly, and begins his spiel about tonight being a slam night and the rules of slam. In the middle of telling us there are eight slammers, he cuts himself off and suddenly begins telling a story about his latest tour in the Southern parts of America. From shiny gold teeth in Ft. Lauderdale to experiences with racism in Virginia, he commands the crowd and has a comedic appeal. Abruptly, he goes back to the rules. "Turn off all cell phones, two-way pagers, and anything else that tics, watches, whatever." He announces the five judges and asks them to raise their hands. They score the poetry on a scale from 0 to 10. "Zero means stop writing, 10 means it changed your life." The audience starts to laugh and Shihan switches again. He starts to tell a story about slave narratives and how bad slavery really was, referring to a new PETA campaign titled the Animal Liberation Project. The ads are controversial and painful and compare human suffering to animal suffering, One displays an elephant and a slave side by side with chains around their ankles. Another displays a chicken and a slave burning alive. Even though Shihan is an articulate performer with a swift tongue and clear delivery, he has trouble articulating

the real hurt and grief that the narratives reveal as he fumbles over his words and engages the audience with fillers. As an audience, however, we feel the anguish of his message and we chime in. One audience member displays his agreement with Shihan's feelings about slavery and shouts, "It is so un-American." Another audience member retaliates and says, "No, it is very American." Several people shout "yeah" to the latter response while others laugh, moan and grunt in agreement. We are creating a shared memory of slavery, of America, of our place in this society.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge. These first few moments of the night create a great deal of shared knowledge about appropriate conduct, Slam poetry, the construction of a shared memory, members' abilities to talk to the host while he is on stage, and the host's styles. The appropriate conduct issue Shihan raises is turning off sound making devices. The rules of Slam are simple. Poets have three minutes to perform and there are three rounds. Judges are randomly selected from the audience. Poets with the lowest scores are eliminated each round. The judges score on a scale from zero to ten with ten being the best (later in the evening, we find out what constitutes bad poetry and good poetry). When we discuss the PETA campaign and Shihan's travels, we learn that this is a space to discuss social issues and that it is okay to respond to what the host says. We learn that through the responses and feedback, we are creating an understanding of our country, its history, and subjects like slavery.

Back to the Field. After Shihan's introduction, he calls the first poet to the stage, the calibration poet. This poet, much like long races, sets the pace of scoring. Judges are able to see other judges' scores, how the audience responds to those scores, and what the audience expects. Nikki Blak is the calibration poet of the night. Her poem is called Boys.

It is about young Black males on the block, standing on corners, their bodies bound by ignorance, their lives misogynistic. She receives a 9.8, 8.2, 7.3, and two 9.5's. The highest and lowest scores are thrown out leaving Nikki with relatively high marks. The slam begins.

Shihan yells for "Hootie" and waits for the next poet to come down. No one walks towards the stage. Shihan calls the name again, "Hootie," and still no response. After the third call a gentleman walks up to the stage and questions Shihan, "Are you asking for Hemdy?" Shihan nods in agreement, says "Give it up for Hemdy," and the man gets on stage, noticeably angry because Shihan pronounced his name wrong. After his performance, I speak with Hemdy about setting up an interview time and he recalls the night's events. It makes him feel less respected, like he is not a part of this collective. He discloses that he has been in competition with both Shihan and Poetri so they should know his name. When Shihan pretends not to, it bothers Hemdy and he feels insulted. This leaves a bad taste in his mouth and he says he will never come back.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge Part 2. I learned a very important lesson about humor after this event occurred. At first, I felt bad for Hemdy and what happened. I felt a sense of domination from the host, as if he was there because he was power hungry and needed a space to exercise his dominance over someone or something. I assumed the power structure was unfair. However, the more I got to know Shihan and Poetri, the more I realized the roles that humor played in their hosting styles. Shihan feels his primary responsibility as a host and spoken word artist is to enlighten and humor plays a critical role in that enlightenment. As agents of artistic social change, we have to be able to both laugh at ourselves and be humble in our approach. He says:

Apathy is a really big thing. I know from working with high school kids. And not even just high school kids, but people are so apathetic. It is hard trying to motivate them to realize that there is a reason to care about what goes on. How you get that message across is how you do it. I try to make them laugh and then they go “ohh, that is kind of true.” I mean the hardest thing I find in doing poetry is making someone laugh because when you make someone laugh, it is such a vulnerable state. People cover their mouths when they laugh, they screw up how they look when they laugh, and once you make someone laugh it opens them up to invite more messages in. They are more open to hear what you have to say.

In his response to Hemdy, he confessed to being confused at first, the name on the list looked like Hootie and he thought Hootie was a new poet. After the miscommunication, he thought it was funny because the word “Hootie” has some comedic appeal. He wanted to use humor to neutralize the situation. He wasn’t abusing his power as a host, but trying to get a laugh out of the audience and out of the poets preparing to Slam. Unfortunately, his tactics did come at a cost. He lost a poet and prospective positive influence.

A similar experience occurred with Poetri on September 27, 2005. The first poet of the night was a gentleman named PGS. His poem was about God helping those that help themselves. As I sat there watching the performance, my first response was “This poem is terrible.” There were several clichés and too much repetition of the word, “ourselves.” He also moved around the mic, which made it very hard to concentrate on his epiphany that God helps those who cannot help themselves through those that can help themselves by denying ourselves. It was a tortuous and painful experience. When Poetri returned to the stage, he immediately began making fun of the poet. He said he got lost in the “ourselves” and repeated the word “ourselves” over and over again. While the audience laughed I questioned whether or not this was a democratic space or a democratic struggle. Was it okay to make fun of someone else’s feelings, ideas, and close, intimate thoughts? Was this oppressive? Was this an example of a host abusing his

rhetorical power? My initial feelings were yes, but this type of humor and hosting did seem to have a place in the spoken word movement and in democratizing the mic? But was it the most effective way?

I began a poetry workshop with Poetri as a part of my field experience and got to know him on a personal level the following month. During our last meeting, I conducted a focus group with all of the participants in the workshop. During that focus group I specifically asked Poetri about his hosting style, humor, and the instance with PGS. Poetri said there is an important space for humor in hosting because the host has a difficult job to do. He has to balance the night and keep the energy high. Great performances do this alone, but when the poetry isn't good, the host has to neutralize the event and bring it back to peace. To the unsuspecting visitor, however, Poetri may leave a sour first impression. One respondent in the focus groups stated:

I used to think Poetri was rude and cocky, but once I got to know him, he is a great guy. He says what we're thinking, he helps neutralize everything and help poets make a smoother transition into the audience through laughter. People follow Poetri. If he brings it back to love and happiness, then people will think it's okay.

*Back to the Field. Hemdy finishes his poem, the slam continues, and the competition is steady. Scores range from 5.6 to 10.0. When a judge holds up a score card below a 7.5, the crowd boos. The lower the score, the louder the booing. The audience never boos for a perfect 10, they cheer at the top of their lungs in agreement with the judge. There is very little consistency between scoring even though the content and delivery of each poem is very different and warrants different responses. The poets that perform overdone, cliché, "f**k the government poems" receive just as many points as the poets who perform something new and ingenious. For example, one poet performs a*

poem about pretending to forget his poem and goes into a spastic freak out session where the audience sees him progress from trying to prove he's cool and will remember the poem, to feeling incompetent because he can't remember the poem, to banging his head against the wall like Robert Dinero in Raging Bull because his career as a performance poet must surely be over. Even though his performance is inventive and edgy, he doesn't make it past the 1st round. In the end, Paul Mabon and SoulStar go head to head. SoulStar is a novice poet, six months into the game and still performing cliché love and revolutionary poems. Mabon is a Def Poetry Jam poet and host of his own spot. Their scores are close, but their performances aren't. SoulStar exudes potential, and he will get there soon. Mabon is a veteran. Mabon eventually takes home the title, but it isn't by a landslide as one would expect. It is by 6/10ths of a point.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge. The poetry, when juxtaposed to the judging and booing, created a different type of practical knowledge concerning what constituted good poetry. Just like any performance, everyone in the audience has a different opinion and response for each act depending upon their reasons for being in the space. The audience as a whole was much more gracious and accepting of poetry than the five specific judges. Every low score was accompanied by booing from the audience regardless of the caliber of the performance. The judges on a whole never agreed. One performance received a 10 from one judge and a 5 from another. Apparently each poem reached its patron differently. I attributed this difference to how much a judge is able to relate to a poet's experience. Of course, no single night in the field could ever get at this type of practical consciousness knowledge; it took interviewing and sharing to make the connection. During my second focus group, my informants and I were able to hash out

what makes a good poem: (1) whether the poet is real or not, (2) if the audience can relate, and (3) the delivery. If the poet is sharing his/her experiences in a sincere manner, the poet is real and considered good despite his/her ability to “rock the mic.” If the poet is able to relate to his or audience through a sincere message that makes sense to the audience, then the poet is real. If both of these things occur, and the poet has a great delivery, then the poet is great. If the poet only does the first two things, then the poet is good. If the poet only does the third thing, then the poet is a fake.

Back to the Field. During the Slam, I take particular notice of three performers: Questean, SoulStar, and Paul Mabon. I write in my notes, I should interview them. After my interviews with Paul Mabon and Soulstar, I am beginning to feel even more a part of the community. I feel like I am slowly making friends. Soulstar invites me to come back and see him perform at 5th Street Dicks and Paul Mabon invites me to ride with him and his friends to A Mic & Dim Lights. I accept the offers and inch closer to becoming a member of the collective. By the following week, I begin to feel different, like I belong.

October 4, 2005. I arrive at the poetry lounge a few minutes late and someone is in the middle of the performance so I have to wait before I can be seated. As I am waiting, I see several people I met at the start of this project. I see Paul Mabon, whom I recently interviewed. I see Poetri, who I have been talking to about interviewing. I see St Louis, the doorman. They all great me with hugs, which is a little weird and little cool. They aren't professional, pat on the back, “Great to see you even though I don't really remember your name hugs,” either. They are “down home, come squeeze me and make me feel loved in this space” hugs. Real hugs that make me feel like I belong there. As I hug each one of them, they ask me how I am doing and how my project is going. I offer a

rehearsed answer because I am still somewhat in shock by the squeeze fest. I am excited. I feel like I am officially a partial member, like I just joined the spoken word “boys” club. While I feel a part of the boy crowd, I am left wondering, where are the women?

October 6, 2005: Riding in Cars with boys. During the interview with Paul Mabon at the local library near his house, he invites me to go to him and his other poet friends to A Mic & Dim Lights open mic in Pamona, CA. Every Thursday, he and his friends get together and carpool for the 45 minutes drive. En route to Paul’s house, he calls me to let me know that he is running late because he met a friend from out of town in Hollywood. I volunteer to meet him in Hollywood and give him a lift to his house. I weave through Hollywood traffic on the 101 and get to him in little time. When he and his friend approach the car, Paul takes a moment to introduce me to Khari B Disco Poet as “someone fabulous doing fabulous things like writing her dissertation on spoken word.” Khari B gets my attention immediately. His hair is corn-rowed to the center and sticking up in the middle of his small head like a Mohawk. He has on red and Black and exudes power from his small frame. Judging from his look, I feel like he has a lot of interesting and provocative things to say. In the car, we talk about spoken word and my study. Khari B takes a moment to reflect on his career, his craft, and work. We share stories about our struggles as artists trying to live. We also make note of something we have in common. In addition to hosting a spoken word venue in Chicago called Not Yo Average Poetry Set: The poetry set 4 people who hate poetry sets, Khari B teaches at Purdue University. Khari B believes in his art and he believes in the power of spoken word. For him, it is most important to “talk the talk and walk the walk.” For him, there are too many poets doing too much talking and not enough walking. We continue sharing stories about

different situations we have been in and different struggles we have had to face as college instructors, as poets, and as artists. I feel very connected to Paul and Khari in the car, in this moment, but there is something different about this connection from my connection with the girls on the bar in the beginning of this study. There is substance behind this connection; I have the feeling we are going to be friends long after my study ends.

When we arrive at Paul's house, everyone is there and ready to go. One of Paul's friends is driving a minivan so most of the crowd goes with her, including Khari B and Nikki Blak. I decide to drive because I have to work the next morning and don't want to be stuck in Pomona. Paul rides with me. We continue our conversation, but eventually we drift on into other terrain like relationships and living in Los Angeles. I feel good in my car, with someone I am slowly considering a friend. someone who used to be a stranger, but I still don't have any girlfriends I can laugh and joke with in this space. I choose to sit next to Nikki Blak in an effort to change this and begin taking notes about the venue.

A Mic & Dim Lights is a spot in Pomona, California, in the Cal Poly theatre. The theatre has theatre seating for about 50 people and there are also chairs on the floor to the left of the stage and a deejay booth to the right. To the right of the stage stands a tall canvas, approximately 6'5", with the painting is of a young man in hip hop gear reading from an illuminated book into an illuminating microphone. Resting in the background is a large painting of a microphone stand with a brain resting where the microphone should be. The brains shape resembles old school microphones from the days of Motown and the Temptations. The brain appears to be looking at a bright red book titled Poetry. At the bottom of the painting is a table with a light emanating from it shining on the subject of the painting, and amplifiable brain.

The night begins around 9:45pm. The hosts name is Besskepp and tonight is the 5th anniversary. The host asks everyone to do the 1st poem they ever did here. So far, poets are acknowledging his request. One poet mixes a bit of acting into his poetry, creating a sort of rhythmical skit about love dying. Others recite their first poems from memory as if they did it yesterday while some struggle through entire performances, but laugh and joke all the same. It is not about the poet and the poetry so much as it is about celebrating the history of a spoken word venue that has lasted for such a long time. In one interview, Nikki Blak said poetry years are like dog years, “You can do so much in so little time and it gets old very fast.” For this spot to last this long is remarkable. I have a feeling why it has lasted endured. It is one of the very few places in the Inland Empire that houses ethnic people with voice and stories from lived experiences in a democratic environment. People come here because they relate to the stories the poetry tells and to the lives of the storytellers themselves. They also come here because of the host. People refer to him as genuine, caring, and supportive. He is fair and everyone gets a chance to express themselves.

As the night progresses, Besskepp asks Nikki Blak to bless the mic with her poem. She performs “Boys” again. She is a regular here and from the cheering and clapping when her name is announced to the cheering and clapping that follows her back to her seat, it is apparent that the crowd loves her. After Nikki Blak, Khari B the Disco Poet hits the stage.

Khari B still sports his small red T-shirt, jeans, and corn-rowed Mohawk. He is like his hair, a mixture of different genres and styles. He is part funk, part rock n’ roll. He begins his performance by shouting at the top of his lungs.

I do this to liberate the Black people all over the world
I do this word to fly
With every breath
My sword of liberation
This pen has stood against every weapon
This is my blessing and my curse

As soon as I begin to get bored with this same song, the same mantra of “Why I write” poetry, Khari B takes the entire room for a roller coaster ride. I think he is yelling the first verse, but I am wrong. Now he is yelling. Large, round sounds form like balls of fire in his mouth and he spits them like a dragon, slapping us with mesmerizing energy and force. After his self-indulgent parade of why he writes, no one expects him to go where he does. He says that even though he is an oxymoronic slave to this thing called poetry because of his responsibility to revolutionize, every now and then a poet needs some good sex. He uses the metaphor of the church and speaks like a preacher using religious rhetoric to paint a picture of good sex. He uses the tone of a minister and preaches to the crowd about the kind of sex he needs. He describes how good the sex should be and never lets a syllable go by without showing us what he means. He dives into the second part of the poem, head first, throwing his entire body into it, pulling the audience with him. He runs through the theatre seats, touching audience members, falling to the ground, jumping back up and doing it all over again. He is a teeny tiny ball of indestructible energy. He reminds me a those lame shark movies where the person is getting dragged through the water by a presumed shark and is seen thrashing all over the surface of the water. That is Khari B, gravity has nothing on him as he thrashes through the crowd. Even I am mesmerized, left asking myself, how he does it. The things we can do with poetry, I love it.

After Khari B's performance, Nikki and I just stare at each other and laugh. There is nothing we can say. We are both left wanting more, yearning for more. I am excited, pulsing, energized. This is what good poetry does for the audience; it makes you feel, it brings you out of your numbness, it moves you.

*After Khari B's performance, Besskepp announces the feature of the night, Jerry Quickley. I have read several of his pieces, but I have never seen him perform live. I immediately notice his clothing, his style. He appears to be very comfortable in a non-descript t-shirt and pants, not concerned with anyone or anything except his work and his audience. He carries a small napkin with him to wipe the sweat from his brow. He is a large man with a bigger afro and an even bigger presence. I immediately notice the first poem as the poem published in *Spoken Word Revolutions*. It is a comparative piece between contemporary times, slavery, and hip hop. I write down some of the lines like, "you some fickle niggas," and, "maybe this is where God lives." He continues his set and shares an experience he had the night of the first bombing in Baghdad and a story about his ex-girlfriend and how performing a poem about her is a violation of his agreement with his counselor. He performs a funny poem about cats and monkeys and finally, he performs "The Relevance of Hip Hop." Quickley is witty, humorous, entertaining, and real. I feel like he lived every experience he shared yesterday. At the end of his set, he just moves away. No flashy statements or the normal peace that concludes most performances. As he moves away, Nikki and I begin to share stories about his performance. Some of his lines hit us hard and make us think about who we are in this space as women.*

After the feature, Besskepp calls up Brutha Gimel. Brutha Gimel sings “Happy Birthday” Stevie Wonder style on behalf of Da Poetry Lounge and goes on to do a piece about ghetto poetry labeled hip hop. He says hip hop was his venue of expression when society robbed him of his structure; hip hop was the perfect substitute. As he performs, he personifies hip hop. His clothing, hand gestures, and body language ring with hip hop cadence. He even has a hook. The audience starts to really get into his performance. Our feet start shaking really fast and our heads bob to his beat of his words. By the second hook, we know the lyrics and sing along.

I’m a Soul Brutha
Can’t be faded
Hip hop afrocentric
And its ghetto related

Brutha Gimel starts dancing and the crowd continues bobbing their heads and chiming in. Nikki and I start tapping our feet to the smooth flow and laugh at Brutha Gimel’s jokes. We become close sitting there, together, as women.

When Besskepp gets back on the mic, he acknowledges Brutha Gimel as the only poet/performance artist from Da Poetry Lounge that comes on the regular. Brutha Gimel is proud of that, in our interview he refers to himself as the ambassador, bringing all of the venues together.

The rest of the night I take notice of the camaraderie. When poets get to the stage and talk about their first poems, why they don’t remember them, or tell stories of how they started writing, the audience members are able to finish their sentences, finish their stories. The people here know each other and their poetic experiences very intimately; they know each others names, each others styles, how each poet has grown and where they have gone. They really know each other. There is something special about this spot,

about its energy, about this experience. I think this may be the closest I have ever felt to something democratic.

The end of the night approaches at 11:51pm and Besskepp concludes with a farewell poem.

i got a message for you all
im way before my final call
im trying to stay away
from the prisons and stained stalls
and when the rain falls
i cant hear a faint call
"man forget these bullets"
and substitute them for paint balls

As soon as he begins, almost everyone in the audience chimes in. The members of this space know the poem and take part in saying goodbye with him. The repeat end rhymes and entire phrases.

and that way instead of dying
we'll be buyin hella clorox with tide
instead of wearing bullet proof vest
we'll be wearing tie dye shirts with pride
forget lets go outside
we need to stay inside
sit our butts on these chairs
so we can build an insight
I'm tired of fist fights
like I'm tired of gym tights
I'll be in Pomona CA
with A Mic & Dimlights!!

I feel warm inside as I witness this entire performance. It is unity personified. I feel good in this space.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge. The last segment of field experience signifies an important lesson in potentially democratic spaces. Besskepp is a fair host that prides his venue on being democratic. When people talk about Besskepp, his poetry, and

his hosting style, several things stick out; he is invested in community operations and teaching the youth how to articulate their ideas and their identity in productive ways, he is a well-known artist with several accolades including Def Poetry Jam and national Poetry Slam titles, and his spot is a place of comfort and ease. Besskepp males A Mic & Dim Lights. The venue's appeal sits with its host.

Back to the Field. October 8, 2005. Tonight is Coffee on 6th. I arrive early and Paul introduces me to the band. There are about 7-9 people here, I sit close to the stage, which is comprised of an area rug and a microphone in front of a couch. It is a small coffee shop shaped like a long, narrow rectangle. The only row of seats are against the west wall with a few small tables between chairs. The coffee counter runs along the east side of the café. There is a camera behind the counter and it is wired to televisions outside so that people can watch in and outside of the venue. There are pictures of famous Black female singers and groups. Shortly after I arrive, others begin to pour in. Paul knows almost everyone that comes in the door and if he doesn't, he introduces himself. He stands on a chair and hangs three sheets of printer paper along the ceiling. They say Eshon Burgundy, Destinee, and Sox. He gets down and returns with a fourth sheet labeled, Khari B Disco Poet Chicago. These are the four features of the night.

At 9:36, the show starts. Paul begins the evening announcing that the last night of Coffee on 6th is November 19th. He then asks the regulars how they are doing in their own lives. After speaking to the regulars, he invites two inductees to become regulars. He says that if you have been there more than two times in a row, then you are a regular and should be inducted as such. To be inducted, you must stand between Paul and Bomani as they hold their hand up high together to form what they call the trident triangle of faith.

They recite, "By the power invested in me, I now pronounce you a regular." And the inductee must say, "I'm a regular." People in the audience laugh at the spectacle. It is a fun way to interpolate the audience.

After the Trident Triangle of Faith induction, Paul announces that it is something they do to make people feel a little more comfortable. To get the energy flowing, Paul asks for a discussion question for the night. One person brings up God and religion, it gets thrown out quickly. Another brings up cheese and says he's been thinking about it lately. It also gets thrown out. Finally, one person suggests talking about how to tell a crazy person to leave you alone. Different people take turns coming up to the mic and stating what they would do in that situation. One person says talk to the person, another says tell him or her you will stab their ass and make them dump you. Manuel suggests that crazy isn't always that bad and Nicholas says that he was in a psych ward and suggests the other person just roll with it and sympathize.

After the discussion, Paul asks if we are ready to hear some poetry. He says that two poets will begin the night and then the features will perform. He then introduces me, tells the audience what I am doing there, and says that I will write down everything they say. The audience laughs and the poetry begins

The poetry of the night resembles other venues I have visited thus far, but once again, Khari B's performance takes many of us by surprise. What interests me about his performance tonight is how he spends his time. Most poets try to rush a million syllables into each second, resulting in too many poems in one set because they think they have something extremely important to say. Khari B does something different. He begins his set with one poem. Just like his performance at A Mic & Dim Lights, he spends most of

the time screaming, yelling, running, and jumping. After one poem though, he stops. He becomes calm and speaks quietly and controlled. He talks about doing work and being active in our communities. He says that, "Without mentioning any specific names, I had a conversation with a certain someone about walking the walk and not just talking the talk. I want to emphasize how important it is for us to give back and to take ourselves and our abilities and responsibilities seriously." He proceeds to invite his spoken word students who traveled with him from Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, up to perform their own poetry for the rest of his set, giving them a chance to voice their opinions in a more culturally rich environment than where they are from. Instead of performing 20-30 minutes of poetry, he does about eight and dedicated the rest of his time to his students, despite the fact that he is selling t-shirts and CDs, and could be using his time to promote.

At the end of the night, Nikki and I stand outside waiting for Paul. He invites many of us to his place for a small after-venue gathering. As we stand outside, we both begin to comment on one gentleman in the spoken word scene who flirts with every woman he meets. I tell her that on my way out of the door, he pulled me by the hand and said the only reason he was at Coffee on 6th that night must've been to meet me. I politely smiled and walked away. He confronts me at least four more times throughout the night to spit some other lame line, officially annoying me. I tell Nikki about my encounter with the gentleman. She begins to laugh hysterically. She says that he has used to same lines on her in the past. We start to talk about the poetry scene and how it has turned into a type of social event for many people disinterested in the social action aspect of spoken word. Our stories are similar. I feel connected to her and ask to schedule an

interview. As we get in her car and head off to Paul's house, I sense a complete collective identity coming closer.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge. The previous sequence of events emphasized the power of poets that talk the talk and walk the walk, and the detestation of poets that only talk, especially if they aren't talking the right talk in the first place. Poets that do things for their communities and the youth are held in high regard. Poets that do not are shunned. This rule is quite simple and straightforward. In such a close and intimate setting as a spoken word venue where everyone knows each other, those who do not do the work are easily exposed. Khari B talks the talk and walks the walk. His conversation in the car before *A Mic & Dim Lights* illustrated that he had important things to say. His poetry backed that up. Bringing his entire poetry class from Purdue University to Los Angeles so that they could see what is like to be in a major city with culturally diverse venues that they normally would not have access to symbolizes him walking the walk. The other gentleman, however, who frequents spoken word venues hitting on women, talks a great game when it comes to activism and revolutionary work, but does very little to back it up and negates much of his talk by reducing women to the objects of his affection.

Back to the Field. November 8, 2005. The final connecting piece for me to establish full membership with this collective identity happens tonight. It is Ladies Night at Da' Poetry Lounge. The hosts are ladies, the poets are ladies, the deejay is a lady. When I arrive, Poetri, St. Louis, and a few others greet me with hugs again. I make my way inside and am able to identify the three hosts, Crystal Irvy, whom I have been talking to on the phone, Simply Kat, and Tamara Blue. All women are famous LA based poets

and have performed at the National Poetry Slam as Hollywood team members. Simply Kat and Tamara Blue have also performed on Def Poetry Jam. While they are setting everything up for the night, I walk over to Tamara and introduce myself. We met the week before but only spoke briefly. I also introduce myself to Simply Kat and Crystal Irvy. I let them know that I am doing my dissertation on spoken word and would like to interview them after the show. They agree to an interview after the night and scurry off to finish setting up for the rest of the evening. I find a seat with a friend of mine who has joined me for the evening. As the evening progresses and key events take place, I recruit two more poets to join us for the focus group. During the focus group interview, we share many stories in an attempt to define ourselves, interpret each other stories, and show that we can relate to one another.

At the very beginning, when I ask the girls to state their name, age, and ethnicity, they immediately begin sharing in ways that spark identification among us all. Damn Yo, one of the poets, responds with, "I'm Damn Yo, and I am Black." The other girls tease her, asking her what other ethnicity she can claim. She says she is also Filipino. When Tamara Blue responds, she says, "I'm Tamara Blue, and guess what, she's Black y'all." Damn Yo interjects, "regular black," and we all start to laugh together. Finally, Simply Kat states her name and ethnicity. She says, "I'm Simply Kat, and I'm a struggling White, Irish woman in America." Immediately, all of the girls break out into the Grammy award winning song from the Hustle and Flow soundtrack, "You know it's hard out here for a pimp." As they enact the hip hop so heavily flowing in their performance of identities, they also perform a strong collective "we" that is laced with the struggle and pain of a community. It isn't about just being Black in this space, it is about the many

levels of struggle that tie us together regardless of ethnicity. It is also about the conscious decision to confront those struggles publicly. It is both acceptable and important to “be real” about who you are, ethnicity or otherwise.

As the interview continues, we talk about sexism in spoken word and about being women. We talk about being poor, starving artists and students, and we can all agree with Damn Yo’s sentiments when she says “Hunger is not real; hunger is not real” in response to commodification and whether or not selling your craft is damaging to the art form or your credibility as an artist. We go on to talk about being commercial and being real. We also struggle with ideas and statements, trying to find a common ground with each other when we don’t agree. Throughout the entire interview, there is an unwritten rule of agreement, an implicit understanding that the goal is not to agree to disagree, but to be real with our explanations and feelings. There is also a sense of wanting to agree, as if we were trying to reach a consensus. When one woman differed in opinion from the rest of the group, she would try to patch up her ideas until the rest of the group understood and agreed. In many of the conversations, we achieve consensus. In some of them, we do not. After 2am, we are all tired, sleepy, and ready to pass out. I have to force the end of the interview. Most of us have to leave for work in less than four hours, and some of us live an hour away. We end the interview feeling good about our roles as females and poets in the world of spoken word and as women in general and I leave feeling a sense of accomplishment knowing what it takes to be a member, and more importantly what it means.

Practical Consciousness Knowledge. After connecting with these girls over dinner, I feel accepted like a full member. Once we take the measures necessary to feel that

connection, I begin to learn the more hidden and underlying aspects of practical consciousness knowledge. Here are some of those things:

- Signing the list in *Da Poetry Lounge* is a difficult task. The list is usually a sheet of computer paper with 11 slots on it, no more, no less. Every aspiring performer rushes the list at the same time because *Da Poetry Lounge* is the place to perform in LA if you want to be seen. If someone really wants to perform, they must arrive early and sit near the list.
- Good poetry and bad poetry is a little more difficult to assess, but there is a formula to it. Good poetry is poetry that comes from the heart, discloses truth about experience, and is real, not false. When a poet is able to perform a poem that encompasses these three things, then the audience and other poets can relate to it and that relation is key to being a good poet, If the audience cannot relate, then it is not good. What makes an extraordinary poet is a person's ability to write poetry that others can relate to and perform the poem in exciting, fresh, emotional and energetic ways. It doesn't have to be about performance, but when the performance is good, it makes the poet even better.
- Cadence is another difficult term to define. I found myself writing about cadence a lot, but it took the focus group after ladies night to really solidify what the cadence is and how it operates in spoken word. There are two prominent cadences to discuss in spoken word poetry, old school and new school. The old school cadence is the sound that resonates from the Beatnik, Civil Rights movement, and Black Arts movement poetry. It is the slow, mellow, up and down sound of Sonia Sanchez and other prominent poets of the time. Each line sounds similar and

breaks with a long, drawn out “and,” “cuz.” or “I.” The new school cadence is an adaptation of the old school cadence and hip hop. It has new rhyme schemes influenced by the standard 8-16 bar rap and at times, there is even a hook. It has the speed associated with a rap song, averaging anywhere from 90-110 beats per minute. There are still breaks, but not always on the ‘and’ or ‘cuz’. They occur more at the end rhymes of the lines. Most poets follow this cadence, but put their own spin on it, creating a unique style. Only the trained ear would be able to pick up on the subtle differences. To most, a lot of poets sound the same. Several people have made a name for themselves and other poets can be accused of biting or stealing their cadences. The phenomena of biting or stealing someone’s performance style ties cadence in with good poetry and bad poetry in interesting ways. If a poet performs in another poet’s cadence, but is speaking from the heart, then it is okay. If a poet uses another person’s cadence and does it often to create a certain response and it is not speaking from the heart, then it is not okay. New poets use the old school cadence a lot when starting out. Most veteran poets recognize this as newer poets trying to find their own voice. It is not okay when a new poet turns veteran and is still using the old school cadence.

- Another pearl of practical consciousness knowledge is the power structures of the movement. The host exercises the most power next to the owner of the venue. The deejay and established poets are next in line. They can influence the night and who gets to perform. Among the established poets there is a tier; just like acting there are A-list, B-list, and C-list poets. After that, you have your audience members. The audience members are extremely important. If the audience is

absent, or if the audience has absolutely no energy, the night suffers. The novice poets bring up the rear. They are merely finding their own voices and learning the ropes and rules. Alongside the levels of poets there are different types of poets as well. The *traveling poet* has turned his art form into a career, touring to different cities, venues, college campuses and poetic events. She has a collection of products from chapbooks to CD's of recorded poetry and makes her living off selling or "slinging" these products like "amethyst rocks." The *failed rapper* just wants a mic and an audience, still living dreams of making it big in the music industry and becoming the next 50 Cent. These poets usually have their own tracks and hop from venue to venue hoping to be discovered. The *peddling poet* performs with an agenda, using poetry to seek popularity, a social life, or some other dream. The *revolutionary poet* uses her words strictly to excite the masses and create social change. The *rookie poet* just wants a voice. The *therapeutic poet* just needs someone to talk to about her struggles.

- There are families or cliques. If you are not in one, you can join one if you either perform well or do something to prove that you should be in it. Def Poetry Jam will grant most access into the preferred clique; to many, it is the pinnacle of spoken word, the goal to be reached.
- In an open-mic setting where there is an occasional slam, the points really aren't the point; the point is building relationships between the audience and the poet through being real and telling true stories about experiences. In a slam setting, the points are almost always the point.
- There are cadences and there is an aesthetic, period.

- Hip hop is relevant and all around in the body language, the tone of voice, the lyric.

At the end of the night I felt a sense of camaraderie with the girls I interviewed. We were like old friends getting together for dinner. It was at the precise moment when we were walking to our cars to go home that I realized what it takes to become a member. It takes relationships with other poets. It takes a certain level of intimacy and equality. It takes acceptance in at least one family among both the men and the women. And it takes the performance of acceptance and collective membership. The final section concludes this chapter with a discussion of performance, collectivity, and ownership.

Performing Collectivity, Performing Ownership

I experienced becoming a member of this collective through interactions that revolved around storytelling and learning the practical consciousness knowledge of the collective. Both of these processes occurred together, and the varying degrees of learning and becoming were at times dependent upon the other. For instance, I couldn't learn the more hidden aspects of the movement without becoming closer to a group of poets through sharing and finding the moments where we could relate and build our identities together. Thus, learning the practical consciousness knowledge and interacting with other members via storytelling were the first steps to becoming a member and being able to perform membership. The next step was ownership.

My field notes, personal experiences, and interview and focus group transcript data revealed an important aspect of performing membership through ownership. Several members of the collective would continually say "This is ours" or "This belongs to us." These statements raised flags for me and I began to look for evidence of ownership in the

performed poetry and venues. One important phenomena revealed in the field notes is the act of naming. Naming is an important aspect of identity. Jackson (2002b) posits that:

The link between naming and identifying antecedent realities has transformative potential because of the power we have as African Americans to reshape and re-center our intellectual legacies and to legitimize our experiences without waiting for the discipline to do it for us or without assimilating to “mainstream” disciplinary trajectories as though we do not belong to the mainstream” (p. 47-48).

There is power in ability to name oneself according to prior realities apart from mainstream culture. Some poets felt the need to give the genre a name, creating a sense of ownership and distinct identity from other forms of mainstream poetry. Poetri named the art form po-hop, infusing poetry and hip hop. I infuse the two as well, only more formally as hip hop poetry. Other poets referred to the entire network of spoken word performance as a movement and went so far as to record a spoken word movement anthem. The hook, “Spoken word is something we do; Poetry is something we live.” While filtering through my old poems looking for material that would add to this analysis, I found lines of my own that expressed the importance of ownership and creating an aesthetic appropriate to the art form of spoken word. In one poem, I wrote “We better watch this poetry shit/ Cuz if we don’t create an aesthetic/They will take it from us and return it back to us as somebody else’s!”

These attempts at ownership reflect the performance of collectivity in a concretizing and definitive way. In an interview with Nikki Blak, she said:

What I noticed about the audience is that they’re all different and every venue is different; but demographically, it is more Black people everywhere. This is our art. This is ours. On his *Black on Black* album Mos Def said, ‘people ask, where is hip hop going.’ He said its going wherever you’re going because you are the art. This is going where I am going, and I plan on going a lot of places.

Damn Yo responded similarly, stating that, “This is our renaissance. This is our Harlem renaissance. And everything will be in the books. One day all of this will be written down.” In addition to ownership, performing membership, is rooted in the identity of the member and whatever title s/he occupies. As an audience member, judge, host, poet or deejay, there are different ways to enact membership as part of the collective.

Weiloch (2002) relies on the processes of distinction, antagonism, popular cultural aesthetics, and political activism to illustrate how collectives become collectives and perform collectivity. He says through their rhetoric, social movement collectives consciously juxtapose themselves against other forces to distinguish the collective and paint make the opposing forces look like the antagonists. They also engage in politically active rhetoric, explicating their struggles and missions. All of the rhetoric of the collective tends to adhere to the popular cultural aesthetics of the group. I argue that it is through these processes that members perform collectivity, but they use their bodies to enact the identity and stories to express the identity. Through storytelling, the artist is able to disclose and perform his identity purposefully. Through the body, the poet is able to deliver his poem in a way that uplifts popular cultural aesthetics of the group, reinforcing the importance of practical consciousness knowledge. Without having access to practical consciousness knowledge, it would be very difficult to gauge the popular cultural aesthetics of a group. In essence, once a members decides which role she will play, she embodies the identity of that role, albeit audience member, poet, judge, or host. Once that identity is embodied, it becomes as much a part of the persons original identity as any other and affects the other identities. The role of poet is as much performative as it

is performance and the stories that the poets tell are a reflection of those roles and identities.

Situating performance and collectivity in this study, the performance of collective identity occurred on three levels: the individual, the organizational, and the movement. As an individual, I performed as an ethnographer, poet, and audience member through story telling, poetic performance, note taking, etc. As an organizational member, I performed through loyalty by going to certain venues more than others and finding a home venue at *Da Poetry Lounge* and *A Mic & Dim Lights*. Other members perform organizational membership by showing the same loyalty to multiple sites as well. On a movement level, we perform through ownership and devoting time to certain events. Members will frequent specific venues as part of organizational identity, but will go to national poetry expos, conferences, and the National Poetry Slam every August, whether performing or not, to perform the movement identity. On a movement level members also perform through ownership. They say “This is ours,” “We built this,” “We made this,” “This is belongs to us.” The ‘us’ usually refers to the speaker and other spoken word artists specifically. For those interested in spoken word as movement, they predict the future of spoken word in statements like: “This is the next hip hop,” “This is the next rap,” “This is blowing up,” but are always quick to qualify these statements based on acknowledging hip hop’s quick growth and popularity, but denouncing its commercialism.

While collective identity is performed at three levels—the organization, solidarity, and the movement—this project also illuminates the ways in which collective identity is constructed and ultimately performed. The process is three-fold and cyclical.

New members are always leaving and coming creating a recurring process of (re)construction and performance. The three parts of the process are storytelling, performative storytelling, and ownership.

The three levels of collective identity are all performed through storytelling. The initial storytelling occurs in conversation between audience members, between audience members and poets, and between poets. These conversations take place between, during, and after performances, and generally revolve around the poetry of the night, likes and dislikes, and the reasons or intentions for being in the spaces. As these stories are told, they reflect and build the identity of the group simultaneously, adding to and teaching new members about the practical consciousness knowledge of the group. For example, a new member may ask someone how to sign the list or what it takes to perform. Someone may make a negative comment about a poem and others may or may not agree and offer reasons why. Hidden among the answers are pieces of practical consciousness knowledge and cultural aesthetics. These narratives reinforce and reconstruct the collective identity. Once a member feels comfortable with the practical consciousness knowledge of the group or feels the desire to perform membership, s/he does so through performative storytelling.³

Performative storytelling characterized stories that members perform utilizing the popular cultural aesthetics, norms, rules, and tropes of the collective. Members take on the identity and begin sharing that identity through performative means. For example, a poet may recite poetry that adheres to the specific popular cultural aesthetics of the collective, there may be conversations regarding performance that validate the group's

³ These processes don't always occur in the same order. At times a person may be very new to the venue and not know the rules and choose to perform membership anyway.

collective identity and shun inconsistency, a poet may perform a poem about spoken word and its aesthetics, or a poet may speak in a particular cadence in an effort to highlight and uplift the collective, show loyalty, or gain entry. The act of performative storytelling is performing our identities on purpose through stories; it is telling stories about our identity as both poets and members of a spoken word collective or as individuals with issues stemming from race, sex, education, etc. In spoken word movement, most of these stories fall under the guise of poetry, but can also be found in conversations. Once a person becomes a member through storytelling, ownership is the next step.

The more comfortable or accepted a member is, s/he will begin performing collective identity through ownership. This stage represents the more formal act of constructing, reinforcing, and performing collective identity through the act of naming or claiming it. Members do this in different ways. Some members name the movement as spoken word or the next hip hop. Others name themselves as spoken word artists, revolutionaries, poets or audience members. Some perform distinctions through phrases like “this is ours,” and “we need to create an aesthetic for our shit.” One member went so far as to create his version of the spoken word anthem. As potential members frequent the spaces, new and older members perform and own the art, other members leave, and the collective identity is constructed, (re)constructed, challenged, reinforced, and performed. As Fouss notes, “performances articulate the divisions within a community by constructing, maintaining, reinforcing, or renegotiating the relationships amongst community’s members” (Fuoss, 1995, p. 94). The performance of collective identity merges the divisions within a community by the same processes.

In conclusion, this chapter illustrates the process of becoming a member of a spoken word community in Los Angeles. The salient moments for me as an ethnographer were the moments of identification, the moments where I connected with a person I was talking to, found common ground, and disclosed my identity as a person struggling with the same issues. These issues were disclosed and performed through story telling. Telling stories about our identities through close criticism of poetic performance or our reasons for being in this performative environment in general were those things that caused us to see eye to eye and embrace the moments and the individuals. We bonded through our stories, sharing, and mutual identification with one another. The next chapter discusses in great detail the collective as a whole and its mission to deconstruct dominant ideologies through poetry.

Chapter 6

Next on the Mic: Counterpublicity and Spoken Word

Chapter five outlined the process of becoming a member and performing membership within a collective challenging society. Most spoken word artists in the Los Angeles area are on a mission to reduce some type of struggle in their immediate lives or society in general. As noted in chapter four, spoken word exists as a space for small communities and larger collectives to challenge greater society through poetic performance. Counterpublics theory offers as a plausible launching pad for discussing the spoken word movement as a site for communal activism and the democratic struggles that ensue. This chapter offers a detailed description and analysis of the counterpublicity of spoken word in two phases. In the first phase, I offer an in-depth depiction of spoken word poetry, counterpublicity, and the performance of poetry as a forum for social activity. I also describe why and how poets are using spoken word as social agents, and the rhetorical power potential that is both gained and utilized in performance. The second phase offers a critique of the rhetorical power of spoken word as evidenced in the field through metaphoric criticism. I discuss how spoken word is a site for democratic struggle in addition to counterpublicity because of dominant ideology reinforcement. I analyze one poem, one conversation, and two events. Beginning this chapter with the first phase, I describe the counterpublic contributions of spoken word, opening with Ladies Night, a poetic event sponsored by Da Poetry Lounge. There are two female feature artists, a female deejay, 3 female hosts, and an open mic sign up list only for women.

Counterpublics Theory and Hip Hop Poetry

November 8, 2005. Shaden, a friend of mine, and I arrive early. We approach twenty-foot tall, intimidating steel gates and St Louis, the doorman guarding the gates. I ask if we can go inside the Greenway Court Theatre and he says, “No, doors aren’t open yet.” I talk with him for a few minutes and continue pleading. Finally, he grants us entrance and Shaden and I go inside. As we enter the familiar place, locate a comfortable row to sit in, and get adjusted in our red velvet chairs, Shaden asks me if I am going to perform for Ladies Night.

I immediately feel the gut wrenching anxiety forming in my stomach. Her question reverberates like the thousand questions I have already asked myself. Why am I so afraid to perform, to exercise my voice as a member? Am I afraid of being disp(l)aced as a researcher?⁴ This cannot be the answer, I have intentionally announced my study and feel good about doing so. Am I afraid of failing? Not necessarily; but maybe it is the combination of the two. It is the self-reflexive moment of evoking and enacting where the researcher is expected to be the official, the expert, and the critic (Supriya, 2001), but becomes the spectacle and the critiqued, leaving a volcanic hole of vulnerability. I can feel it in my clothes, in my words, in my breathing. When I become spectacle, I become vulnerable; I become disp(l)aced as the researcher on stage. I enter a territory that is both formal and familiar. I have to do it for myself, for my audience, and for my analysis. I have to experience that vulnerability as a cultural process inherent in this space.

Shaden finally convinces me when she says do it in honor of women. I begin searching my mental rolodex wondering what I should do. What is appropriate? It is

⁴ Ethnographic disp(l)acement occurs when ethnographer doing observational research is pointed out as “*more researcher than observer, more engaged in the analysis of place than human activity than in actually experiencing social space as a sincere cultural participant*” (Alexander, 2006, p. 53, italics in original).

Ladies Night. Do I do something for women? Do I do something addressing the men? Do I do something that lets men know how women feel about certain things? Do I just perform and have my voice heard as a woman? I go through several pieces that could be considered appropriate. Many of them are cast out immediately because I am not sure if I remember all of the words. Others I toss out because I think I should do something dedicated to how women feel, especially about our bodies and our sex. I finally settle on a piece.

Ladies Night begins as three hostesses step on stage. Crystal Irvy represents revolution in her red, black, and green ensemble, replete with a head wrap. Simply Kat represents diversity, with her lower class Irish identity in this very Black space. She stands with her legs shoulder width apart, weight shifted completely to one side, face in a smirk. She looks tough, like a B-Girl standing in her B-girl stance. Tamara Blue readily calls herself a thick chick and represents the body. She stands poised, confident in her ability to tell stories of her life. In full force, they announce that tonight is Ladies Night, the list is open and all the open mic slots are for women; no men will grace the stage tonight. One of the hosts remarks that two weeks before tonight there were only two women who performed. This night is an attempt to change that. As the hosts wait for women to sign the list, the deejay sets up her station and starts blasting underground hip hop. As the grooves fill the room, so does the energy and anticipation as we wait for what is to come. It all begins with Fly.

Fly is a dope poet. She approaches the stage gracefully, sporting an outfit that is post Punky Brewster—a mixture of Urban Outfitters meets even more color, more style, more avant garde, “I don’t give a shit, I am ME” wear. She immediately confides in the

audience and tells about her inability to separate love poetry from political poetry because it is all about freedom. Everything about her performance is real and passionate. I notice my heart is beating rapidly and I am starting to sweat. My turn is coming soon, I am 3rd on the list. I begin rehearsing what I am going to do in my head making sure I remember all of the lines, all of the rhythms, all of the cadences. I try to remain calm and continue writing my notes about other poets, their poetry, the audience, and their responses. I finally settle with the fact that I can't. I am too nervous.

As the night progresses, I try to calm myself down and pay attention to the poets and performers. The poetry tonight is good, hands down. It is one of the best nights I have ever experienced here. Not only are the performances exciting to watch, the topics are serious and important. The poet after Fly performs a poem about silicone implants and loving her body regardless of her cup size. Her poem is a parody, focusing on what it is like to have big breasts. In the end, she pulls two oranges out of her shirt and lets the world know that she is proud of her small chest despite what society tells her. After her performance, another woman talks about being naked in front of people as a metaphor for wanting to be on stage and another discloses her struggle with an abusive relationship and domestic violence. Another woman confesses that she hates herself because her mother is on crack and she is watching herself fall into the same substance abuse problems. The next woman talks about being more than just a pussy and deserving to be respected. I know I have to come correct.

When my name is read off the list it sounds too familiar. Amber Jaye. I am sitting in the fourth row of the theatre seats. I have to work my way down to the floor, past the women and men sitting on the floor, up the stairs of the stage, and past the men and

women sitting on the stage until I can firmly grasp the mic in my hand and start my ode to women. The host that announces me sees where I am walking from and asks the crowd to continue to clap until I make it all the way to the stage.

The crowd starts to clap as I maneuver my way through the small walking space. It only takes a few seconds, but physically and emotionally, many things happen in those seconds. My body shakes uncontrollably with persistent muscle spasms in my legs, hands, and feet. The crowd's clapping begins to die. My body continues to sweat, I can feel the perspiration on my shirt and my back. Thankfully I am wearing a blazer; no one can see the soaked armpits, a key sign of nervousness.

At this point, I am only at the end of my row and the clapping almost ceases. I know I need the energy of the sounds. I turn at the end of my row to head down the steps and raise my hands, making a clapping gesture so the audience knows to continue clap. They begin clapping louder. I feel the energy, the anticipation pumping through my veins. I start to remember what it feels like to have an entire room making noise for you, encouraging you and intrigued by you. When I get to the stage, the deejay continues spinning loudly. I expect her to stop when I approach the mic, something a more experienced deejay would do, but she is new to this and doesn't know. My first line comes out faint over the loud boom boom bah of the base. The audience cannot hear me as the words pour out of my mouth like a leaking faucet.

My outer shell is not representation for my inner being.

This could crush a person, but I don't let it crush me. I turn and look at her to signal for her to stop, she turns it down slow and I know I have another chance. I move closer to the mic and feel the anxiety bubbling in my stomach, like a potion being churned and turned

into energy. Finally, I catch a spark and familiarity nudges me in the back, I throw myself into the poem.

You cannot look at my butt
And tell if I am smart or dumb as rocks
You cannot misinterpret my hairstyle
As black consciousness or sell out
And my breasts do not represent
Low self-esteem because they are tiny
Or whorish tendencies if they were a double D
My outer shell is not representation for my inner being.

The audience stares blankly at me. Some look half-way amused, others just gaze with expression that say, "Just because you are up there doesn't grant you the satisfaction of my attention. Make me pay attention!" The room is silent. Waiting for a hint of assurance, a "Yea Girl "so I know they are hearing me, feeling me, understanding what I am saying, I continue my poem and begin pulling on my pants, my shirt, my jacket collar.

My clothing does not have stigmas
Written across the chest
Like polo or guess. My mini-skirt
Was not made by Fuck Me Please,
My hip-hugging jeans by Grab My Ass,
Or my low-cut V by Stare at Me.

The audience starts to shake their heads, acknowledge they understand what I am talking about. I even hear a few moans and humphs. I continue.

I am not a Snickers bar.

The audience begins to laugh like they know what is coming next. They know now that I am a funny poet, using satire and wit.

You cannot pick me up,
Unwrap me,
Taste me
And return me
If you do not like my response.
I mean what?

Did you expect me to laugh
When you mistook me for a stripper
And grabbed my ass cuz I like to dance?

The audience begins to clap.

Did you think I was going to mutate
Into Prostitutes R' Us
Cuz you spit some whack ass pick me ups.

They clap harder.

Ohh I get it!
You thought I was going to jump
For joy cuz you blowing
Your horns at me from your Nigga toys!

*The crowd goes wild; some clap, others stand and clap, others just yell so loud I have to
pause for the noise to die down before I can continue.*

I am not a street walker.
But I have been told by several men
on several different occasions
that I am one big bowl of contradictions.
I can't be as
or think as
or act as,
I can't really be like this.
I look to typical.
I'm supposed to represent
the frail, dainty, stuck up yellow bitch.

*I hear several moans and groans, but now I am in my spirit, in my groove. I know the
audience is with me, I know they get what I am saying, that they can relate.*

But in reality I am exactly opposite.
My internal versus external existence is off a bit.
I am one big bowl of contradictions,
like a knife with prongs,
a spoon that's sharp,
a fork that's suitable for cereal.

The laughter escalates.

They say to me.
You can't possibly have farted like that,
gave me dap like that,
sported gap hoodies like that,
backed it up at the club like that
then spit poetry the next day that was ultra fat.

My response:
"yes I can because I am an ornate,
beautifully engraved flask
with KoolAid in it."

*The crowd goes wild with laughter and clapping and they continue clapping throughout
the next lines.*

No! You can't be as smart as you are,
as down to earth as you are,
as motivated and sports oriented as you are.
You can't be sexy and ar-
ticulate.
And I know I just didn't see you scratching your armpits.
Girl, you are a wine glass with forty ounces of beer in it.

You can't kick it with the fellas like you do,
graduate with an MA at 22,
be a feminist and a revolutionary too.
You can't be conscious and cute.
You are not consistent.

*I take a moment to breathe, catch my breath and let the noise level drop again. I step
away from the mic and speak lower than usual.*

Because I am 5'8", 145lbs, with a cool hairstyle, yellow skin, bright smile, you
know, model material.

*I slowly move back to the mic, my words getting harder and harder, louder and louder,
faster and faster. They tumble out of me like bricks, swollen and full. I feel good. I feel
comfortable. I feel safe and secure on stage.*

I'm perceived as supposed to quiet, stuck up and conceited, athletically
uncoordinated, terrible with kids, always got my hair and nails did, but above all,
stupid and ignorant. Obviously those that judge me don't know me because I

don't give a shit about this. Looks can be taken any second and beauty is not universal. I look within for fulfillment. I house new metaphors that transcend your perceptions. I don't fit into your fucked up categories.

So who is the contradiction?
Mr. and Mrs. Poetry,
Mr. and Mrs. I am fighting the good fight
and as long as I am alive
I will strive
to change the world
one poem at a time!

It's you! Because you shouldn't
have judged me by my image to begin with.

I take a step back, soak up some of the laughter, the clapping, and the energy. I know that I have made my contribution to ladies night. I met my expectations as critic and expert. I am still credible, I am still the expert. I can relax now.

The next performer really catches my attention and everyone else's in the audience. She talks about the hole in a woman's head where her voice should be. She tells the audience that she has a gun to shoot silence dead, shouting "Die Motherfucker Die Mother Fucker Die!!!" The crowd goes wild at the sounds of her words, her gestures, her performance. This is exactly what this night is about, giving voice to the voiceless, attacking silence head on with a mission to free those who feel constricted, not just by society, but by the poetry scene too. Ladies Night is here to free me as a writer afraid to perform, to free other women afraid to perform, to free all of us women afraid to speak in our every day lives. This stage becomes our opportunity, our fortress, our sanctuary to speak.

The night continues and topics range from men being smart enough to "pull out on time," the struggles of lady DJ's, using our words to replace propaganda, revolution, safer sex, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the south. By the end of the night,

the bulk of performances are about our bodies, sex, and relationships, things that women go through and never tell anyone, the things we harbor inside, waiting for a safe forum within which to share them. This is one such forum. And oddly enough, tonight represents the highest caliber of poetry I witness since the beginning of my study, making the final comment of the night one of the most poignant and important comments made. "Ladies, make sure they know we are here and we do have a voice." I leave the space feeling energized, feeling good, enjoying the fact that I am a woman, remembering why I write poetry in the first place.

Writing for Freedom

The reasons why poets write and perform poetry discloses the counterpublic motivation behind spoken word. The genre grew out of a need for people to come together with similar others and express their identity and their lives in enriching and uplifting ways. The aforementioned experience in addition to the discussion of literature presented in the second chapter illustrate the notion that counterpublic collectives want to challenge dominant ideology in an attempt to introduce subjects like racism, familial struggles, and sexuality, topics that are highly sensitive and rarely accepted in public discourse. Introducing these topics brings individual and communal identity issues to life, validating the struggles simultaneously. During my interviews and focus groups I asked the poets why they wrote poetry and where their motivation grew from. This section highlights several responses and further illustrates Marc Gonzalez' notion that "We don't write just to write; we write to be free." In response to why he writes, Jerry Quickley states,

The reason more than anything else was because I wasn't finding a lot fulfillment in the institutionally designed creative activities and proceeds. I wasn't feeling the

music playing on the radio. I wasn't feeling what I was told to write in English classes. There was very little that I felt was designed for me or about me and that was a good form to contain my thoughts. More than anything else it was a reaction to the institutionalized racism of the American education system and the American educational system and white supremacy being what it is, the last thing in the world entertainment companies around the world were concerned about was what little kids, in the ghettos of NY or any other city, particularly little black kids were listening to or what they cared about. As far as they were concerned, we didn't buy records it was white kids of the suburbs that bought records and it was adults that bought records and much of the writing and performing that I did was a response to that. You can feel that chill. You knew you were getting no love. But we also knew that our lives were valid and that what we were going through was vibrant and important. It didn't matter if it was vibrant and important to record labels or to other institutions, it was important to us. So, what you do is end up writing about the things that you know and the things going on with you. It was just a reaction to the absence of our stories being told anywhere really.

Marc Gonzalez adds to this notion, focusing on spoken word's roles not only in the individual lives it mediates, but on a national level. He says:

We won the West Coast Regional competition and it really expanded my views and horizons to how spoken word was affecting not only specific states and regions but the nation as a whole; as a way for disenfranchised and disheartened people within different communities to reclaim their voice. From then, it became kind of one of my focuses to use my writing as a means of drawing more clear connections and parallels between different struggles in different parts of the globe and creating continental connections through culture. That is when I'd day spoken word started taking on a whole new concept for me. a whole new way of viewing not only writing but the way in which writing shapes the ways in which we view the world. For me, as a person who loves to write and share, who loves to view history and collections of people's stories shared from a certain perspective that then power and politic shape as normalize and subversive history, writing became a way of reclaiming history and reclaiming voice and introducing knowledge, and claiming knowledge places.

In an environment where dominant society oppresses and silences minority identities, people rely on non-normative, public space to perform their identity. People need to have their experiences, histories, and lives validated. As aforementioned, Warner (2002) posits that counterpublic collectives are able to just that. The notion that counterpublic collectives are able to mediate the lives of oppressed and silenced groups

by members speaking and performing their lives is further illustrated by the case of PJ, who refers to himself as a “40 year old white guy with a bunch of education,” who the audience presumes has a voice. In response to why he performs and writes, he said:

In the beginning, it was just speaking poetry, but recently, [it became] the way the world changes most quickly in the most positive way. Most poets are working on something. For me it was about being silenced and not being to speak up so it feels good to do what I do, even though I see the other side of this. Because spoken word is giving voice and it is a forum for people who are unheard in our society, sometimes I feel like I have a lot of people who think about race and our culture as a battle stage. I know it is hard to get past the fact that ‘fuck, you’re a 40 year old white guy with a bunch of education. We hear from you all the time. You’ve been heard.

What spoken word does then, is create a forum for people to disclose their identity and their struggles with life and society in general regardless of preconceived notions of who deserves a voice in a counter-hegemonic movement or who is “supposed to be oppressed.” It creates space to redefine oppression and the victims of oppressive environments. It creates an empty canvas, where all life experiences and truths are valid as long as they are real. When I approached audience members and asked why they frequent spoken word venues, it was this precise reason; they wanted to be around something real, something uplifting, something conscious. A young man at a *A Mic and Dim Lights* said:

The first time I came here was exciting because I heard about this poetry and my friend brought me. It did more than inspire me, it changed my life. This woman was up there with her poetry about how she couldn’t take care of herself so how could she take care of her man. It affected my life. It opens up your mind to not just writing but to the fact that you can be a better person, or think of what you are doing, or just change your reactions to other people. I hope to get more knowledge, more inspiration, more different points of view from different people and what their beliefs are. And of course, the rhymes are amazing, even the people who are doing it for the first time, it is unbelievable.

Three audience members at Da Poetry Lounge had the following to say:

I come here because it is a place where people can be real and share the creativity in their hearts. It is a spiritual and intellectual experience for me. I hope to have a different perspective other than my own and to learn from them and adjust my thoughts and open my mind.

I come here to hear what people's expressions are. It is an inspirational event where you can understand people's opinions and views of life. I hope to be able to change philosophy, or theory of people's lives. I want to make it better, or become different, or stand out. I wish I had talent like these people.

I come because I get to see the world through someone else's eyes and see other people's lives through poetry. I feel like I have as many problems when I hear their stuff. Art is an imitation of life.

As discussed earlier, dominant norms are rooted in our bodies and speech; however, through counter-hegemonic spaces, those norms can be redefined and transgressed because a counterpublic creates a space for the exchange of opinions distinct from authority (Warner, 2002). There are ways to get around dominant discourse. The utilization of personal spaces and created commercial spaces that are not mediated or controlled by a larger public, but instead owned by the counterpublic allows room for previously oppressed discourse, especially in performance. Marc Gonzalez articulated this very idea in the next passage. He stated:

What spoken word does is it brings to analysis not only the concepts of public and private, but it deconstructs it through a performance. And by that I don't just mean talking about communism, capitalism or what is private and what is public. I think the very fact that a person is up there speaking and can create a performance space wherever they want because what they own is there body and their voice, then they have the power to make any space public for themselves and reclaim it. The more people do that, the more they reclaim these privatized spaces (and by doing so I don't mean regulating ourselves to 9pm-midnight open mics whether it is in south central, east la, the Bronx, queens, Santa Ana, Jerusalem, wherever), I think it becomes public when a person decides to even take the old concept of guerilla theater and public performance art and just walking down the street and turning any place they want to into a public space. By doing that, it doesn't mean I'm going to read and nobody else can because that is just a reclaiming for yourself it is a different form of privatization. But it is a reclaiming of space for all people to participate.

Two scholars have studied public space as they relate to poetry specifically (Fisher, 2003; Bennet, 2003). Fisher (2003) asserts that spoken word venues exist to provide African Americans with a platform to share their ideas, whether grounded in personal experience, politics, or other pertinent issues. Fisher refers to these spoken word communities as African American Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities where predominately people of African descent participate in literacy or literacy-centered events outside of traditional school or work settings. Fisher (2003) describes three particular uses for hip hop poetry in communities: (1) a personal search with respect to identity, personal growth, and development; (2) an extended search for a local black community with which to exchange ideas and information; and (3) a movement to understand meanings for blackness in a global context. Even though this art form began as a distinctively Black art form, and I situate this study in African-American history because of that, the art form today is not exclusively African- American. Sutton (in press; as cited in Fisher, 2003) and Weiss & Herndon (2001) value spoken word poetry venues as a space for groups that have traditionally been silenced, marginalized, and ignored. It is a space for all marginalized and oppressed groups whether based on race, sex, culture, age, education, income, religion, or other factors. Not only do Black communities reflect these motives, hip hop and hip hop poetry are popular across cultural, global, generational and racial borders because these types of venues give voice to the voiceless and allow members to share their lives and experiences. The purpose of this art form is clearly to assist people with their survival in an environment that is hostile towards them (Gladney, 1995, p. 297). These literacy communities act as stress relievers and encourage participants to write and share their work in ways that are useful and functional for the

community. This community-centered art form is a search for an artistic culture that is conscious about societal issues that confront all marginalized groups regardless of ethnic make-up.

In this light, I am able to define the spoken word movement as counterpublic, acting out the motives of African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities in a multi-cultural way and creating a subculture that engages multiple identities and generations. Within this counterpublic space, there is a struggle against domination, unfortunately, there is also a performance of domination. I want to problematize spoken word as a counterpublic enterprise and space for dominant ideology deconstruction because of dominant ideology performance. Every person, group, community, or in this case, counterpublic social movement, relies on some type of rhetoric whether it is a text, event, artifact, or combination of those things. In this instance, the rhetoric consists of poems, stories, conversations, and events within the spaces of spoken word. At the heart of each of those rhetorical moments there are multiple stories waiting to be told, heard, and understood. Not all of those stories are conducive to human uplift and the erasure of oppression. Some stories are contradictory and some stories reinforce the very dominant ideologies they attempt to deconstruct. The next section offers a critical assessment of spoken word poetry as a site for democracy because of the moments of contradiction and dominance.

*Critiquing the Counterpublicity of Spoken Word Poetry:
The Rhetorical Leaks Out of Rhetorical Ethnography*

During my time in the field, I found myself taking notice of the moments where I felt *othered*, silenced, powerless, or just plain weird because of what was being performed, read, or talked about. Rosenfield (1968) discusses our researcher identities as

being three-fold; we are simultaneously the spectator, the participant, and the critic.

When we are submerged in an event, each of those roles offers a different lens or understanding of the rhetoric taking place. The different lenses we wear can explain my feelings of weirdness in this space prematurely.

Within the spaces of Los Angeles spoken word, there were poets and audience members attempting to deconstruct dominant ideologies. The dominant ideologies I witnessed being discussed the most were racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and imperialism. When poets performed poems that spoke to my experiences and clarified my life for me as a victim of one of those ideologies, I felt a sense of empowerment, hope and positive energy. The same poem however, could invoke feelings of anger and silence depending upon the metaphors used by the poet or the institutionalized modes of dominance that leaked out of the text like an infected wound. I took careful notes during these moments of weirdness, knowing that there was something important within the crevice of that contradiction; in the small cracks lurked significant data where empowerment met silence, clarity met confusion, and dominance met subordination. In the end, I realized the bottom line—we all have multiple identities and at any given moment, those identities can severely contradict one another. When poetry spoke to one of my identities but reinforced dominance over another, I experienced moments of cognitive dissonance. This section highlights those moments in the field, offers a critical analysis of them and why they exist, and illustrates the inadequacy and promise of counterpublics theory as a lens for understanding social movement collectives because of them.

To analyze these moments in the field, I relied on metaphoric criticism because the contradictions were situated in the metaphors. In spoken word venues, where poetry was the binding factor, poets, audience members, and hosts used metaphors freely. Because the space was so multicultural, there were abundant opportunities to offend individuals based on the metaphor of choice and the dominant ideologies attached to them. Because metaphoric criticism is the process of critiquing the subject matter, or tenor, of a text, and the metaphors, or vehicle, used to describe the text as a site for reality construction and maintenance (Richards, 1965), it offers a lens by which to view the insidious ideologies that lurk over the surface of spoken word and its potential as a space for collective activism. Even though there were countless moments like these during my experience, I focus on the following critical moments and their respective, corresponding ideologies: “A Good Clean Ass F*****g” and heteronormativity; “Ladies Night” and sexism; walking to cars with boys, sexism, and internalized racism; and “The points *are* the point,” slam poetry, and commodification.

*“A Good Clean Ass F*****g” and Heteronormativity. Coffee on 6th with Disco Poet Khari B. October 8, 2005. The evening progresses like any other poetry event and I enjoy my time in this space, but when Khari B hits the stage, the energy changes, and night officially becomes interesting.*

Khari B’s begins his fifteen minute feature with a poem titled “A Good Clean Ass Fuckin” When he says the title the audience and myself are astonished. Anal sex is not normally considered appropriate public discourse. It is a very private, almost embarrassing conversation for most that engage in anal sex, let alone those that don’t. He begins.

My guys weren't born gay
And my gals weren't into anal sex
But nobody told the cats that were fucking them, No.

These words hit me hard. I want to know the point of the poem, of the performance. The poem can't be a commentary of the down low because he speaks of women. It can't be a commentary about homosexuality; he denounces that in the very first line. I want to know why "ass fucking?" He continues.

My guys were into good times good music
Just good people, hard working good people.
My guys dug the girls and my girls dug the guys for the most part.
But they definitely weren't gay or even curious about anal sex.

So they fucked and they fucked and they fucked
Some good ole' fashion down on the farm gut busting ass fucking,
And we, me and all my guys took it.
As our asses were penetrated and ripped a part we bent on over, bent down into a figurative pillow and took it. But the pain felt too bad.

Just as I begin to get grossed out by image of a person bending over into a pillow in agonizing pain, Khari B continues and I realize the point of the poem. The image of anal sex is a metaphor for the cruel and unequal treatment of oppressed minorities. This poem is a commentary of the power structures in American society. Khari B continues.

I screamed out loud, I screamed for the millions of men and women just like me in silence, I lay on the ground screaming, I ain't gone take this pain laying down much longer. This assed up position just ain't working for me and I may not be able to walk yet, but at least I can stand and begin to fight for my violated ass...And I scream for... that physical pain.

That physical pain is already felt every time we interview for a job and hope that our hair is not too nappy, that we don't look too threatening, that that pale man sitting across from us does not think we are too smart or not dumb enough, that physical pain under every burning scalp, behind every colored contact, through every constricting dye inside of every restricting pair of jeans we buy without enough room in the crotch or the ass.

That pain I already felt every time we receive 2/3rds to a half of our check we already put up with some crazy shit to get in the first place and still have to turn

around and give a portion of what's left to white gas, white oil, white electricity, white rent, and white water and white car payments to drive on white roads in white cities that beam of white smiles at our lack of opposing screams, that physical pain...

I scream, I scream in the name of James Byrd Junior who found that being systematically fucked was not enough for some of these fuckers in a small southern town so they brained him and chained him to the back of a pick-up and took him down a small Jasper, Texas road. As his beautiful ebony skin and mutilated limbs were violently torn off and his blood blended with the gravel to make a sinister paste of forget-me-nots his involuntary martyrdom was silenced with his death. His red hot screams of agony were not continued but suppressed in the name of justice slowly served to satiate the masses at least as long enough as it takes to get us to be quiet.

And how can one render justice for such an atrocity anyway? Justice is blind to us folks. She feels around in the darkness of our asses and just gets to smacking. Smacking us with perverted civil rights and laws to hold us back. Smackin us with taxation without proper representation. Smacking us with paper leaders, antagonistic community occupation, substandard schools and sorry medical coverage. Yeah, justice just gets in there and gets to smacking talking about "who's your daddy, who's your daddy, who's your daddy? And we scream, America! ...Ask the earth ask the earth who is continually being fucked by that same insane candy ass fucker that's packing our fudge or ask your own infringed ass when assess for yourself all of the opportunities that have been closed to you when you knew all along that you had what it took. And for those of you that have managed to make your mark despite the fight, ask yourself why your number is so few realizing there are tons of us, tons of us just as smart as you.

Our asses, with broken muscles, over-stretched holes and polluted prostates beg for us to scream, beg for us to scream, I refuse to accept any future fuckings I refuse to accept any future fuckings, I refuse to accept any future fuckings. Fight that urge to learn to enjoy the fuckings. Hate and resist the musical moisturizers that teaches us to bend over reach behind us grab hold of that red white and blue dick and assist in sticking it in, riding it like Lil Kim, til our asshole cannot contract and all that bullshit we believe in comes falling out of our mouths, I refuse to accept any future fuckings. Let the fucking fear be real to your ass and give us some rest and time to heal. And in the meantime, scream, in the meantime scream, in the meantime scream, "raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh" and scare them away from our masses of asses.

I am left in complete silence, both empowered and dumfounded by his courage. I feel the anger and excitement from thinking about power structures in America, but I also feel angry at Khari B. Why "ass fucking?"

As I re-read this poem I began to look at it through a metaphorically critical lens and my anger began to make sense. Not only is this poem a commentary of the dominant power structures that reinforce oppression and imbalance in the economy of life, I argue that though the metaphor of anal sex, it is also a commentary of many homophobic and intolerant understandings of male homosexuality. Through clustering, I focus on two bodies of metaphors: gay and anal sex. The gay metaphor is used to paint the negative imbalance of American society's treatment of minorities. The metaphor of anal sex, as well as the performance and personification of it, is used as a vehicle to describe the ways in which institutionalized racism painfully affects minorities through actual situations, circumstances, and events that take place daily in the United States.

From the beginning of the poem we know that the poet is not gay and that his circle of "guys and gals" aren't gay. Khari B qualifies gayness as being bad in the first few lines, stating that his guys and gals were good, hardworking people, not even curious about anal sex. This creates a distinction between good people and gay people who engage in anal sex. As Khari B begins describing anal sex, we also know that his sentiments are those of repulsion, disgust, and pain; he describes the anus as being penetrated and ripped apart, using adjectives like gut busting, over-stretched, and polluted. He references common and degrading tropes of male homosexuality through introducing images like fudge packing and pillows⁵ to further illustrate the metaphor of anal sex. He also references rural farming as a site for ass-fucking, suggesting an animalistic and dehumanizing practice. This places male intimacy in a space of subaltern living and knowing, perpetuating the stereotype of rural culture as "ass-backward,"

⁵ Fudge Packer and Pillow Biter are derogatory names used to describe gay men. They both incite images of anal sex, the most common act of intimacy associated with male homosexuality.

literally, and thus associating gay male sex with the same image. While this metaphor works to illustrate the pain and vulnerability associated with being a minority in America, it works against gay rights activists' plea for equality.

Khari B uses the metaphor of getting ass-fucked to discuss common situations and circumstances that cause minorities to suffer. Khari B draws on issues of inequity in the work force, self-hatred due to distorted body image, and the desire to perm the hair or wear colored contacts. He also focuses on the specific act of brutal racism done to James Byrd who was dragged by a pick up truck in Jasper, Texas. His blood mixed with the asphalt is compared to various types of discharge secreted during anal sex. Khari B also personifies Justice, or lack there of, as a man who sodomizes minorities and dominates the situation by asking "Who's your daddy?" and smacking the ass of the victim. The smacks to the ass come in the form of taxation without proper representation, poor political leadership, a lack of education, and negative media portrayals of minorities.

Both of these acts are seen as degrading and dominating and further perpetuate the attitudes of gay male sex as sodomizing, uncivilized, dangerous, and painful behavior. Various scholarly articles tackle the media representation of homosexuality as a negative enterprise. Scholars suggest that while homosexuality has experienced a great increase in visibility, they are still marginalized, stereotyped, and silenced (Gramson, 2002; Gross, 2001, Walters, 2002). Media representations link homosexual practices with sexually transmitted diseases, sex-crimes, and hyper-sexuality; instead of being associated with love, they are troubled, dirty, dangerous, and deviant (Zhang, 2005). Much like media images, Khari B's poem erases the sentimental and pleasurable intimacy commonly silenced with respect to male relationships, further ostracizing gay male activities and

desensitizing the public. This rhetorical image creates no other alternative but to think of anal sex as a negative, alien, animalistic, and disgusting enterprise, further illuminating popular discourse surrounding male homosexual intercourse, especially intercourse that takes place in correctional facilities where anal sex is seen as a violent invasion of personal space and a crime. We don't discuss men in prison, or any other space, as having relationships or engaging in acts of intimacy where pleasure is the important factor versus inflicting pain or punishment on a fellow inmate or sexual partner. The title further supports the paradox present in this poem.

If we look at the irony of the title, it is clear that this is a parody of one presumably negative situation to describe another negative situation. "A Good Clean Ass Fucking" wittily places contradiction between "clean" and "anal," and "good" and "fucking." Anal sex by default is not clean because the rectum and intestinal track are used to pass waste. Fucking as a metaphor for sex is used to describe dirty, raunchy, loveless sex. When sex is a product of love or an act to produce children, it is referred to as "love-making" or "procreation," not "fucking." Taking all of the metaphors present into careful consideration, it is clear that Khari B's poem performs to functions, it successfully describes the pain associated with being a minority and forces the audience to experience that pain through performance. It also perpetuates dominant ideology concerning homosexuality.

"Ladies Night" and Sexism. From the first night of being in the field, I took note of the lack of women performing at the venues. There were women in the spaces, watching and listening, but they weren't performing. I began to ask people that I interviewed why that was the case. I got different responses from different informants,

but all of the responses had one thing in common, they all depended on a larger dominating ideology, sexism. This section tells the story of significant moments in the field where I experienced sexism or acknowledged sexist overtones. I begin with interview comments pertaining to the lack of female performers. When I asked a female informant about a lack of women in poetry, she said:

That is good questions because women are gifted with language. I think we naturally excel in it. I don't want to say that we are the best writers, there are amazing male writers. But I think women have an ability to be expressive because of our nature. I do think that there is a lot of bullying and politics that goes into it and I think that might be why we are not. A lot of times, I don't want to be bothered. Most fields are dominated by men. That is just the way it is. But there are so many reasons probably why. I think that ultimately what it comes down to is that women and girls are not encouraged. We are preoccupied and distracted. Trying to find a husband and trying to be cute. And a lot of women who get into poetry are trying to be cute. It is not something that they do, it is not something that drives them; it just trendy, it is cute.

Another male respondent took a long pause and then had this to say when asked the same question:

I have yet to figure out why that is. There are so many women that come out and watch. But maybe it boils down to fear of being on stage and being in front of audiences because there are probably more women that write and don't read than men that write and don't read. Most men who write in some way have an objective to be heard. It is often in a man's nature to be heard."

He went on to critique the role of women in hip hop in general:

There are some poets who love the culture and they hip hop slang and references to the culture, the whole nine. Often they are writing poems to try to save hip hop. Not that hip hop is dying, but in the mainstream it is. The culture is overly saturated with lollypop, overly sexual content. Look at the women in hip hop. It is hard to distinguish them from the men. My theory is that a lot of women aren't doing well in hip hop because they try to take the same road men are taking. If I want to listen to something a man is saying, I will go pump Mob Deep or something. And sometimes we want women to be women. To be nurturing or something. And I know there are a lot of women that want to break that mold, that archetype. But there are some things that are gender specific and there are some things that just because men do it, women shouldn't because men shouldn't be doing it. And that is the way our society keeps women out of a lot of things. Our

society or the world even tries to keep women out of things that men are doing because we know it is wrong, like war, and the military, and women on the front line. War is bad itself and it is a place that most men don't want to be. I remember reading a survey in an article on ex-military men who fought in wars and 96% or so said they absolutely did not want to go to war and had they known they'd be going to war, they wouldn't have enlisted so I can understand the fuss about women joining the military and being on the front line.

If we look closely at both of these responses, we can see the need to introduce feminists critiques and point the finger of shame. The first respondent offers a critical assessment stating that women are not encouraged and turns around says that many women frequent poetry venues "trying to be cute." We aren't concerned with the performance so much as we are concerned with finding a husband, stuck in a state of preoccupation and distractedness. The second respondent only adds to this critique, stating that women may be afraid to be on stage because it is not in our "nature" to be heard like men. Even though we are supposedly trying to break the gender barriers and forgo the feminine archetype, he says that men still "want women to be women, to be nurturing or something...there are things that are gender specific." As he goes on to compare spoken word and hip hop to war and the front line, he moves deeper and deeper into a dominant sexist ideology, drawing distinctive boundaries between what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine. These cases illustrate how silent the hand of hegemony really is, creating both men and women who blindly continue enable gender roles in our society and create an alternate necessity for spoken word within spoken word.

These issues surrounding sexism and sexist ideology are not isolated events or opinions. They are mirrored in spoken word venues and spaces. No two venues are alike, but there are salient issues that mirror society in general. If we revisit Ladies Night at Da Poetry Lounge, we can automatically detect a problem; there is a need for a Ladies Night

in a space that is supposed to embrace subordinate identities, deconstruct domination, and create a voice and shared history. If we look at the poetry of the evening more closely, most of it is geared towards greater issues of the body and performing gender in society. If we survey the event closely, we notice that much of the night is spent addressing the poetry scene in addition to society at large. At the end of the event, I interviewed the three hosts and two of the performers because I wanted to know more about this need, this necessity to create a socially responsible event within a supposedly socially responsible setting. The conversations painted a seamless story of sexist ideology upheld by men and women alike. The informants agreed that much of the Los Angeles poetry scene is dominated by men and that Ladies Night is an attempt to make women feel comfortable in a masculine arena. The following three excerpts illustrate this idea.

I think that women may at different times be intimidated to come to the mic and to even sign the list. I think that women hosting it made them feel more comfortable to showcase their poems and their abilities, to come out and share (Tamara Blue).

I think it is hard to get on the list physically and I think it is hard to get on the list mentally. Physically, when whoever is hosting just says the list is open and puts it down there is physical struggle so to get there is hard (Crystal Irvy).

Well, I think when it is all women you don't feel the pressure to be intense and ragh ragh on the mic so you can actually have an opportunity to speak and be listened to without having to yell or feel like they have to have the power or intensity of a man. So tonight was good because you could actually just listen and not have to get onstage and have to worry about okay I gotta give it to em like this and hit em' hard. I can just speak and be who I am. I don't think it is like that all the time but I do think that when a lot of men get on the mic, men do tend to bring stuff a lot harder, well not word wise, but in terms of their voice and their presence. And sometimes as women, I am an intense poet myself, but that doesn't necessarily mean I always want to be that. I have stuff that lyrically I think is dooper than just coming out and going ragh ragh ragh, but when a man steps on stage and does that I feel like I gotta match it. And when it is hosted by all women, I don't feel like I have to match that; I am not competing with a man. I can be a woman and be happy to be a woman on stage and just say whatever I need to say (Simply Kat).

Not only it is a physical challenge to get on the list when mostly men are fighting and “hustling” for a spot, but it is also mentally challenging. When a woman does hustle to get on the list, there is the added pressure to perform well. Three of the respondents converse about this notion over dinner. The first respondent remarked, “on top of that, you hustle so much to get on the list that you almost feel an obligation to have to be good to have to be...” The next poet chimed in, “yea, because out of 11 people, you like 2 chicks. Like one of the 2 women.” The first respondent continued, “and it isn’t just that you don’t feel comfortable, you feel like you always gotta do some shit.” The third respondent added:

I think it is what you said about being comfortable too. I think if 3 other women could have hosted tonight with the same amount of openness, the energy would have been completely different. Honestly, I have been around other female poets and felt like it’s a competition, like its only one spot for a girl and you can’t have more than one female poet, they are only going to have one and they are only going to have one black one. So I have to beat everybody out (Tamara Blue).

Another interesting conversation that took place during the focus group after Ladies Night was the notion that in order for a woman to be successful on the spoken word scene, she had to sleep with a male in a position of power. The conversation went as follows:

Crystal Irvy: No, really, she was like all the successful poets on the scene slept with somebody. And I was like man, I’m really not going to make it. I’m abstinent.

Tammara Blue: And this is your hobby.

Crystal Irvy: So, that is really the mentality of some female poets. And you will see that when some female poets come on the scene they will try to attach themselves to a male poet. Especially a male poet in a position of (she raises her hands signaling quotes and places emphasis on the next word) “power.” One of the things that gets me is there are people who I don’t necessarily think are great writers, and when I hear their stuff I don’t necessarily like it , but I see why it

appeals to people. I see why she will get picked to be on Def Poetry, because there is an audience for that. And I am not just talking about women. So, like the whole power structure thing about men being in power and all that stuff, that is real in the real world, but some of the stuff that happens, at least in the LA community, is women imposing on themselves.

Me: Well, do you think that a lot of that goes on in society too?

Tammara Blue: Yeah, yeah, and I think that a lot of it comes out of wanting to have male attention. I know a lot of people think Shihan is a pool boy, I can openly admit that that was something I went through. Coming from a different venue that was my home venue where I didn't have to worry about anything there, but coming to the lounge, reading my poem that everybody liked at Mic and Dim Lights, and then reading it at the Lounge and Shihan saying my name wrong, man I came back and I did it again and he said my name wrong again and I was like I am not coming back here because he just doesn't like me. and I was introduced to him and he knows who I am and why can't he say my name right? And one day he called and asked me to do a set slam and I was like for some reason, it made me feel so validated. That he was like ohh, Tamara is good enough to do a 12 minute set and I remember I was like whoa, Shihan called me and asked me to do a set slam, and I went to do the slam, and I won.

On talking about the way a woman dresses and looks on stage, one respondent had this to say about a particular male poet in the arena: "Honestly, in slam, [he] is pretty. [He] gets an 8 for stepping on stage." Another followed, "that is like you onstage and having cleavage." All other respondents shout in congruence, speaking over one another: "No, it doesn't work the same. If I get on stage with my stuff up here, they are going to look at you like 'Oh no.' Being a woman means you can't dress provocatively. Being a man, when you are fine, you automatically get props. It's not the same for a woman"

When taking all of these stories together, it is evident that sexism is real in the spoken word counterpublic just as much as any part of society because it is an underlying ideology enacted in performance subconsciously. Rethinking Butler's theory of performativity (1990), it is clear that while spoken word artists approach the stage to purposefully perform their identities through poetry, there are always underlying

performances of gender relishing in the background. These performances permeate all matters of communication, albeit poetry, conversations, or the interpretation of an event; they are persistent.

“Walking to Cars with Boys” and Internalized Racism and Sexism. Revisiting the first night, September 13, 2005. If we recall the series of events at Fais Do Do the first night of observation, the young man at the door listened to why I was there and when I finished, he leaned in and whispered, “You still date Black men, don’t you?” In a questionable, astonished, and almost embarrassed tone, I whispered “yes?” and slide him a twenty. He gives me back a ten and two fives and ushers me to the second floor.

As I approached the top of the steps, I didn’t give much attention to his comment because I was so excited to finally start my study. I did take a moment to write down what happened just in case a moment like the next took place.

October 4, 2005. On this particular night at the Poetry Lounge, I invite a friend who is interested in Slam and performance poetry. He is Jewish and from Jerusalem. At the end of the night, we pack up our things and head outside. On the way out, I stop to say goodbye to my new found poetry friends. As I am saying goodbye, my friend gets a phone call and walks about fifteen feet ahead of me. As I approach St Louis to say goodbye, he asks me if he can walk me to my car. This is the same man that greets me with phrases like, “How is yo’ pretty fine ass doing tonight?” There are clear problems with his choice of rhetoric that I will not go into detail discussing, but it does make me uncomfortable in social settings. I decline his offer and politely let him know that my friend will walk me to my car. When I point toward my friend, St Louis immediately smirks and says, “Awe, you and Selome!” I respond, “What does that mean?” He

proceeds to tell me I am a sell out because like other women in Los Angeles, I don't date black men. His voice gets louder and louder and his rant turns into a chastising as he continues to yell at me. I am not sure how to deal with this event. I start to walk away insulted, feeling like a child being reprimanded for dating outside of my race. When he yells "that's bullshit," I realize he is not going to stop and I reach my breaking point. I yell back, "That right there is that backwards-ass, Midwest mentality and that is why you will never walk me to my car!" I walk away, disappointed in myself for giving in, angry at the situation, infuriated that my friend had to witness such an account.

I play this moment over and over again in my head, asking myself, "What just happened?" I was publicly chastised for doing something perfectly normal, introducing a friend to a spoken word event. Because my friend wasn't black, there was a problem. Because my friend was a male, the antagonists assumed that I was dating him. In addition to these issues, the antagonists regularly refers to my body parts and my image, using greetings like "Pretty Fine Ass" and "Sexy." These terms create a sense of sexual objectivity, thus, this conversation invokes racial tensions and reduces me to a sexual object for both the man I am with and the antagonist. For the antagonist, it is apparent in his rhetoric when he utilizes suggestive metaphors like pretty, fine, ass, and sexy. By assuming I am dating the gentleman, the antagonist offers no other option for the basis of our friendship. The only reason we would be together is intimacy.

After the incident took place, I asked one interviewee what he thought of the situation. In casual conversation, he explained to me that both of the gentlemen who made the comments date outside of their race, but they take black women with white men offensively and personally. Even though I wanted to think that we were past public

chastising for racial difference, communication scholarship suggests that American society still holds negative views of interracial couples; regardless of the acceptance of interracial marriages and couples, discrimination persists (Root, 2002). Docan (2003) posits that, “intercultural relationships of nearly every type have been recognized as unacceptable, abnormal, and “mixed up” throughout long stretches of history in the United States and around the world” (p. 2). Due to our history, the majority of Americans have strong attitudes concerning interracial couples (Mills & Daly, et. al., 1995).

My next night in the field, a young man performed a poem about interracial dating. He talked about how his own mother taught him not to be prejudiced towards other cultures and races, but to treat them the way he wanted to be treated. Ironically, when he brought a young woman home to meet his mother, his mother refused to accept her into the family because she was not black. By the end of the poem, he came to the conclusion that prejudices are so deeply ingrained that, even in times of conscious insistence for equality, we are still subconsciously prejudiced. Individuals tend to consciously and subconsciously conform to social prescriptions about race the moment they are cued by racialized bodies. Several scholars explore this notion of social constructivism and refer to it as body politics (Butler 1993; Grosz, 1994; Jackson, 2006).

The conversations that took place highlight more of the small inconsistencies in counterpublic social movement. Movements are comprised of many individuals with many different and competing identities. Even though the antagonist was a poet, worked at a spoken word venue, engaged in performing from time to time, and was affiliated with a performance group that used poetry specifically as an agent for social change in high schools and juvenile prisons, he still defaulted to a position of offense and disgust when

he saw black women with non-black men. In addition, our incident was not an isolated one. Recalling the very beginning of this section, the man at the door asked me the very loaded question, “You still date black men, don’t you?”

“The Points are the Point,” Slam Poetry, and Commodification. The final event I examine is Slam poetry and its association with commodification. Slam poetry is qualitatively different from spoken word or open-mic performances due to the level of competition involved. Poets are scored on a scale of one to ten by randomly assigned audience members, thus the dynamics of the entire event are different from a regular open-mic night; however, it is still a part of the entire network of spoken word poetry.

There is a national poetry competition held every August. During the rest of the year, cities hold Slam competitions in their States and eliminate the poets with the lowest scores until they have a Slam team of four poets with one or two alternating poets. Teams from different cities come together in August to battle for the championship. The 2005 competition took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Several controversial things happened during the event, most of which were taped and put into different documentaries. On October 4th, 2005, Shihan, one of the founders and hosts of Da Poetry Lounge, showed a portion of a documentary filmed on the Hollywood Slam Team. To offer a little background information, the Hollywood Slam Team won the title the three previous years, and has been in the last round the past five years, the only team in Slam history to accomplish this. Before showing the fifteen minute clip at Da Poetry Lounge, Shihan prefaced the showing, stating that the competition was a negative experience. The tape began with footage of the team getting ready to perform. We saw them rehearse and get warmed up. As the tape progressed the tension of the Slam grew thicker because there

were audience members and fellow poets booing the Hollywood team and a few other teams. Ironically, the scores for the Albuquerque team were alarmingly high and the scores for other poets who were booed were rather low. Usually, the national poetry slams end in a close, adrenaline packed, suspenseful frenzy where fractions of a point make all the difference. At this particular slam, the Albuquerque team was so far ahead, no team would be able to catch up in points, even with perfect 10's. Together, the booing and the scoring raised many eyebrows, and poets and audience members began to protest. When the slam coordinators presented Albuquerque with the trophy, several poets, including some of the Hollywood team members, stood on stage and in the audience holding up their arms in the shape of an X as a form of protest. Announcements were made regarding booing at a poetic event, and the tension escalated to a full blown argument with threats of violence. At the end of the video I was silenced once again, wondering, "What just happened?"

My immediate reaction was, "This is the antithesis of poetry!" On the official website of the National Poetry Slam and Poetry Slam incorporated, the mission statement read as follows:

The mission of Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI) is to promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds, foster education, inspire mentoring, encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language (www.psi.com).

The website also states the slam motto, "The points are not the point, the point is poetry," and its history:

Former Asheville, N.C. slammaster Allan Wolf coined the phrase, "The points are not the point; the point is poetry" prior to the 1994 National Poetry Slam in

Asheville. The phrase has become a mantra of sorts, reminding poets and organizers that the goal of slam is to grow poetry's audience.

If we take a deeper look at the history according to the man who coined the phrase, the competitive edge of slam poetry was created to create a wider audience for poetry, not for slam. Another famous slam poet had this to say about the motto:

New York City poet Taylor Mali, a member of multiple championship teams, has modified the motto to read, "The points are not the point; the point is to get more points than anyone else," but we're pretty sure he's got his tongue planted firmly in cheek when he says that (www.psi.com).

I was left wondering, what happened to the points are not the point? I am not so sure if the webmaster of psi.com interpreted Taylor Mali's argument correctly; maybe the point is to get more points than anyone else. Before I could fully formulate my own opinion, I began asking follow-up questions during my interviews. These are some of the responses I received.

To no fault of the Albuquerque team itself, I think the home court advantage put a bad taste in a lot of the competitors, the visitors' teams. I thought it was whack. I thought it was whack! I think people, once they decide they want to stand up and speak against something, it is their right as one, citizens of the united states and two, as poets, we should be able to adhere to our rights as individuals. You know, queen Sheba getting up and saying something about it and them taking offense to that is wrong. They should have looked at it as some how these people feel that they were done wrong then why do they feel that way. They are speaking out, and as poets, we often get on stage and say, speak out if something is wrong, speak out about how you feel. But, once she got up and did that, now she is being reprimanded, that is hypocrisy. (Brutha Gimel)

Man, I was there and I was so angry and watching that again made me angry again like fuck that shit. I am just mad about the whole situation because there shit was not dope, but the city was booing the whole time. They don't deserve to fucking be champions (Dam Yo)

I think it was what you see, the best and worst of slam. It's great, and there is a lot of really great stuff that slam does. It helps people with finding their performing voices. But also, people come with their own baggage to those events. So people with certain issues are going to have issues in slams. (Jerry Quickley).

From these responses we can see that poets themselves have different understandings of slam poetry and its role in spoken word. Apart from these responses however, we can still locate the roles of slam poetry and how that affects the economy of spoken word. I offer a critique from four perspectives—the audience, the cheaters, the protesters, and the spectators—and use two dimensions, qualitative and quantitative points. Qualitative points refer to the messages of rhetorical text. What is the point of a specific piece of rhetoric or utterance? Quantitative points refer to the numerical value assigned to a piece of rhetoric. If I think a poem was written and performed well, I am going to assign a higher numeric value, maybe a 9.8 versus a 9.2. From Poetry Slam Incorporated, the National Poetry Slam official website, we know that the first point in that statements, “The points is not the point,” refers to quantitative points and the second point refers to qualitative points. When we rethink the Albuquerque National Poetry Slam, I am tempted to change both points to represent qualitative points.

When we look at the experience from the audiences’ perspective, if audience members are booing then the point of the poetry is not the message. If the audience was more concerned with the message, they would digest each poem as an idea or thought and cherish the moments as learning experiences. If we revisit the audience interviews from the beginning, audience members journeyed into spoken word spaces for the learning experiences; they wanted to be exposed to new ideas and experiences. During my interview with the women of Ladies Night, informants supported the notion that booing is not an alternative. One respondent remarked that even though she may not like an idea or a poem, she never boos, she just doesn’t listen to the poet or she uses the moment as a self-reflexive one, taking in the poetry and trying to understand why it created tension for her.

Thus, when an audience boos during a poem, we know that the message or qualitative point was not the point, but instead trying to skew the quantitative points by tempting the judges with booing.

When we look at the experience from a potential cheaters' perspective, it is obvious that the qualitative point is not the point. Even though it is unclear as to whether a team planted judges in the audience or if anyone was responsible for cheating, if people do cheat, they are not invested in sharing consciousness in ways that only poetry can, but in creating winners and losers. Thus, the point is not qualitative here either.

For the protesters, the point is also quantitative. The protesters are so invested in a fair match that they have lost site of the reasons for Slamming in the first place.

According to Marc Smith, the founder of Slam poetry, slam was created as a fun competition to help people sharpen their modes of delivery and writing in a performance setting.

The spectators represent the individual slammers or audience members who didn't participate, but instead just watched and commented on the stupidity of the entire situation. For the spectators, the qualitative point *is* the point, and the competitions edge slowly crumples like a stale cracker. From the spectator's perspective, he is unsure as to why people even care about the scoring or about the points. From the spectators perspective, the whole point is to share and assigning numbers to such a qualitative enterprise as poetry is silly to begin with.

Jerry Quickley and Marc Gonzalez offer insight into the diversion from qualitative points to quantitative points using commodification and the economies of performance. Marc Gonzalez states:

After my first Slam I decided it was kind of whack because it really breeds a competitive edge to poetry which can be fun in certain instances, but then began to actually bring out the very ugly elements of people, similar to capitalism and the way competition works in that. I am not one of [the] people who hate on Slam and become anti-slam, I think it has a function that it fulfills and it has a purpose and people want that purpose to be all encompassing and almost hegemonizing for the spoken word scene.

For the performer who may have regulated their words to their chapbook or notebook and hasn't shared thinks, "I wanna share this," they go to a slam and they see people clapping. That clapping becomes a form of validation, and it becomes a motivation for them saying, "I want that. I can rock this mic, I can rock this stage."

For Marc, the performance of Slam poetry becomes a commodity because the poets use poetry for personal gain in the form of validation, fandom, or opportunity to make money in future because the getting the most points opens the doors for a poet to make money from touring. Jerry Quickley enhances this argument. He states:

The last time I participated in a national poetry slam was 2000 and it was in Rhode Island. We went up against the Boston team the first night and they planted judges in the audience and I thought this is silly. What does this have to do with my work? Nothing. So I am just going to do the poems I want to do. And after a couple nights I was ranked number one from all the poets there and I was going into the semi-finals. I just continued reading the poems I wanted to read. One was about 4:10, one was about 3:45, they were both about 4 minute pieces. And people were like ohh dude, how could you have done that, you were like number one and you could have won...and people didn't get it. I am thinking you are going to go all the way there and not do any of the poems you want to read so you can keep up this false ranking? It is like whatever dude, I was ranked number one and after the two nights I'll be ranked number 6 or 12, the fact the my ranking changed, I could care less. But, a lot of people think there lives are going to change if they do well at the National Poetry Slam. Like somehow there are all of these great college gigs waiting for them out there if they could just win this title. And that title means nothing. In fact, there are many colleges that hold it in contempt. If you show up as this slam person your viewed as a freaking commodity. You are not viewed with a great deal of respect. And of course that varies from time to time. Not every campus is like that, but I am not making this up, it is not a un-sedimented thought. Even published authors...ask Patricia Smith how she feels when she goes to college campus and they identify her as a slam poet.⁶

⁶ The standard time limit in all slams is 3 minutes. Judges deduct points from the overall score for going over that time limit. By intentionally disregarding it, Quickley lost a spot in the championship round.

Marc Gonzalez shared a similar experience when he spoke about being on his second slam team. After he made the team, he immediately quit because he wanted to prove to the poets and audience members that it isn't about slamming; it is about sharing. He states:

I achieved what a lot of people want which is a spot on the national slam team, and I stepped away from it to show that look, this isn't the end goal, we don't write to be part of a slam team, we don't write to even win a slam, and realistically, we shouldn't write to share our words, we write because what's in us has this volcano effect. It has been sitting there simmering and now it is starting to rupture and it has to erupt and flow out of us otherwise, we are going to internally implode. And society is the same way and our writing then becomes that basis of eruption and saying look this is what needs to happen. The point isn't slam, and even though slam has the rhetoric of the point isn't the point, it is because that is why you are participating. And I think for me stepping away from that was the cementation for me as well as proving to others that look, this isn't your focus, you can do this.

In the end, I realized that Slam is very different from spoken word in general because it pulls spoken word away from its original purpose, to educate and resist, and pushes it towards being a commodity. Like Poetri says:

Slams, to me are totally different [from open mic poetry readings]. Slams were invented for competition because this guy was like you know what, people are not interested in poetry, I have to make people interested in poetry and if it make it a cut throat competition, people will become interested. He didn't think it would blow up like it did. But poets were doing their poems and the thrill of competition was there and people were trying to outdo themselves. Before, everybody who competed, the points were really not the point. But now, the points are all about the points.

If poets sell themselves like products; they have a target audience and a quota. This experience then, is a commentary of commodification, illustrating what happens when the point becomes quantitative, and for this event, false. Not only are the points awarded to Slam poets arbitrary, they don't mean anything or hold up outside of slam poetry. They are not nationally recognized awards or accolades. They will not land a poet the perfect

job, make him or her rich, or change his or her life. They merely give poets dibs to a title that changes every year and is only significant to those that participate.

To conclude this chapter, when researching counterpublic discourse and collectives, and in greater society in general, we must address the institutionalization of dominance because these counterpublic collectives, despite their necessity, can potentially recreate and reinforce dominant power structures. They are products of the same society they are attempting to counter, thus a space to reinforce societal norms. When Warner (2002) asserts that counterpublic collectives are able to redefine and transgress dominant norms through enabling a forum for the exchange of opinion distinctive from power and mediation, he is both correct and incorrect. Counterpublic collectives are able to directly challenge dominant norms, but they are subjected to the institutionalized modes of oppression that plagues our society and prompts the counterpublic spaces in the first place. The exact dominant ideologies counterpublic collectives attempt to deconstruct are the very dominant ideologies they are capable of reinforcing in the same breath, the same poem, the same performance, the same event.

Counterpublic collective's reliance on dominant cultural symbols forces theorists to question the clear boundaries of public sphere studies. There are no real counterpublic or public spaces, they are both intertwined, and at times, interdependent. Certain public spaces may in fact uphold non-dominant ideologies while purporting them simultaneously. The spaces are not clearly distinguished, they are blurry, and oftentimes members unaware when they are blurring boundaries. When a poet speaks his truth concerning what it means to be a sell-out in the poetry world, and at the end of his poem, refers to poetry sell-outs as "Modern Day Faggots," he may not see a problem in his

rhetoric. For him, he is merely denouncing a certain practice. For someone critical of anti-gay rhetoric, he is exposing his prejudices, and possibly hate, towards a fellow marginalized group. Situations like this one expose the weakness of counterpublic spaces as sites of resistance and freedom. Drawing clear lines between what is considered public versus counterpublic illuminates a critical moment for public sphere theorists. We need to begin asking questions that shed light on the interdependency of both sectors and the creative ways in which some counterpublic collectives may be attempting to deconstruct all forms of dominant ideology, whether invisible or clear, through performance. It is precisely in these moments of critical reflection that poets, like myself, begin to transition and shift away from spoken word poetry.

Present day. As I look back on my experience as a new spoken word artist in St. Louis, the reasons for me joining were simple. I needed to belong to a community and be around people who were going through the same problems I was and had a solution for confronting their struggles. I found that community in the Spoken Word Movement. I was able to learn about myself, about my situation, and about my environment. I was able to teach others and pass on knowledge. At some point, however, I began to see the repetition. I noticed how my performance felt restricted. My fellow poets seemed to be saying a lot of the same things over and over again. The same information that once felt productive, was beginning to feel limiting. Submerging myself back in the environment for this analysis, and taking a critical stance, I see why the discourse is limiting. It is because of our reliance on dominant cultural symbols and the constant transitioning of poets and audience members that grow beyond the community. The Spoken Word Movement is always in a constant state of transition. New poets and audience members

join, and seasoned poets and audience members leave. The door is always open to those in need of the poetry and those that have grown beyond it. When we grow beyond our community, we naturally transition into other things. I no longer needed the poetry to tell my story; I moved on. I found a voice in other spaces that were more productive like the college classroom. The Spoken Word Movement, however, continues to exist, and more people continue to join and leave, and the stories continue to build and reflect the communities.

Chapter 7

Thanks for Coming out and Goodnight: A Discussion

At the start of this project, I set out to locate some of the cultural processes of the Los Angeles spoken word scene and posed the following research question: How do community members use poetry to perform collective identity within the public sphere? Over the course of this journey, I found and articulated two processes: (1) the creation and performance of collective identity, and (2) the construction of counterpublicity and reinforcement of dominant ideology through the rise of rhetorical power. Community members use poetry and storytelling in conversations to create, maintain, and perform membership. Collective identity is primarily performed through adherence to aesthetic norms, storytelling that spreads practical consciousness knowledge and enforces the aesthetic norms, and storytelling that defines and/or professes ownership. The collective is a part of the public sphere in counterpublic and public ways, simultaneously addressing issues of domination and enforcing them through rhetoric. In this chapter I perform three additional tasks: I offer a discussion of my findings in relation to current communication scholarship and its practical implications, discuss the limitations of this study, and suggest goals for future research.

Performance, Storytelling, and Ownership in (Counter)Public Spaces

Hip Hop Poetry. Understanding hip hop poetry's form, function, and practical consciousness knowledge are imperative to performing and studying it. On a basic level, the form, and function of spoken word poetry directly follow from the black aesthetic. The form mimics the rule that black art must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life. Spoken word

poetry's form is littered with sophisticated rhythms, rhyme schemes, and delivery. The function of spoken word poetry follows from the black aesthetic as well. Spoken word artists use poetry as a vehicle for organization, education, and resistance. The practical consciousness knowledge of spoken word is comprised of the rules and norms of participation. Potential hip hop poets must learn the form, function, and practical consciousness of the collective in order to act as members. The first experiences with spoken word comprise the defining moments where future poets learn the collective identity through storytelling and observations of storytelling through poetry and performance.

Performing Collective Identity. Storytelling builds the collective through individuals seeking out similar others in regards to the performative aspects of collective identity. Through interaction, the major similarities emerge over time and create the grand narrative of the group, defining its status as social network. The different groups of similar others come together to create venues. Those venues create the organizational identity and in turn, invite new members who redefine, reconstruct, and reinforce the collective identity of the organization and the movement through telling more stories. As the performance of that collective becomes accepted on a large scale, it becomes concretized and aesthetics are put in place to uphold the integrity of the movement and its participants. When a poet, audience member, or host performs according to those aesthetics, they are usually praised; when they go against that aesthetic, they are chastised. The building and performance of collective identity continues through this pattern and the grand narrative becomes ingrained and alive through embodiment by its members. Once the norms of the spoken word network become familiar and future poets

gain access to the collective, they become members. Together, the members are on a mission to combat dominant ideologies and oppression, and create a sense of agency and mobility through poetic performance. Through the creation of a shared space rooted in performance, members feel a sense of belonging and safety in an otherwise hostile setting.

Once a part of the collective, members performed collective identity on three levels—the individual, the organizational, and the movement identities—through story telling and ownership. On an individual level, members perform as poets, audience members or hosts. On an organizational level, members perform through loyalty. Certain members frequent certain spots on a regular basis to show their loyalty and maintain their status. On a movement level, members perform by devoting time to national events. Members will frequent specific venues as part of organizational identity, but will go to national poetry expos, conferences, and the National Poetry Slam every August to perform movement identity.

The three levels of collective identity are all performed through storytelling and ownership. Storytelling occurs during conversations between members and during performance. Each poem is a story and each conversation tells a story. On an individual level, stories may share opinions about poetry, likes and dislikes, reasons for participating or performing, or different struggles a person may be going through. On an organizational level, stories are about different venues, different events, and different poets and host that frequent venues. On a movement level, stories are passed around about national events, the movement identity of spoken word, and ownership. Ownership occurs through naming and the specific act of claiming the movement and its participants.

Members name the spoken word network as the spoken word movement, po-hop, hip hop poetry, and other titles. Members refer to themselves as poets, spoken word artists, and hip hop poets. They also say things like “this is ours,” “we built this,” “we made this,” “this is the next hip hop,” “this is going to blow up,” and “this belongs to us.” As these stories are told and performed, they reflect and build the identity of the group and simultaneously teach new members about the practical consciousness knowledge of the group. Once a member feels comfortable with the practical consciousness knowledge of the group or feels the desire to perform membership, s/he does so through performative storytelling. Performative storytelling characterized stories that members perform that subconsciously utilize the popular cultural aesthetics, norms, rules, and tropes of the collective. Members take on the identity and begin sharing that identity through performative means. In short, spoken word network members in Los Angeles become members and perform their membership through storytelling and ownership on three levels, the individual, the organizational, and the movement level.

This theory of collective identity performance further extends Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity by exploring the ways in which each level—personal, relational, communal, and enactment—bridges together to create a model for collective identity. Members perform, or enact, their personal identity through interaction and storytelling, which is constituted through relationship building on the relational level, and come together to perform the collective identity on the communal level. This marks one major difference between the individual’s identity performance collective identity performance. Individual identity processes occur on each level, but not necessarily simultaneously. Collective identity performance combines all levels simultaneously

because it is rooted in enactment, and is reliant on the individual interaction relationally with the communal.

Counterpublic Collectives. I can define the Spoken Word Movement as a counterpublic collective, but I also recognize the dominant ideologies that persistently litter the space and blur the boundaries between what is counterpublic and what is public. I found that poets embodied a particular counter-identity and used their poetic talent to climb the ladder of rhetorical power through contributing public discourse. Rhetorical power manifested in different ways with respect to the poetry and the poet, or the performer and the performed. In terms of the poets, rhetorical power manifested as the ability of members to participate in poetic events, and in some cases win slam poetry contests or perform on national television shows, so that their voices were heard in larger arenas. In doing so, members voiced their opinions and created awareness about specific issues that influenced their involvement in the movement, and also raised questions for the audience or caused the audience members to think critically about their own situations or beliefs. As noted in some of the audience interview responses, several members visited poetry venues because they made them think and question certain practices or beliefs. If enough rhetorical power was gained, the poet emerged beyond the local and national group, utilizing global media as a forum for social change. For the poetry, rhetorical power manifested in the same ways Mailloux (1989) suggests; rhetorical power was clearly visible in the ability of a text to provoke understanding critical thought simultaneously. As an audience member, I wanted to know more about the context, the reasons why the poem was written, or the purpose behind the poem. I

actually applied my critical thinking to the poetry versus ignoring it. The poems exercising rhetorical power made me hungry for more poetry.

In addition to rhetorical power, I observed the process of collective identity building and maintenance within a hip hop poetry counterpublic collective and the process of gaining and using rhetorical power within and beyond the community. I also observed problematic counterpublic performances. Counterpublic theorists uphold the belief that counter-hegemonic collectives are capable of affecting dominant society through the re-appropriation of cultural symbols in public places. In line with Butler's theory of reclaiming the body through language (1993) and Richardson's theory of feminism as reverse discourse (2000), counterpublic agents are able to re-appropriate their symbolic expressions in ways that give meaning to new systems of thought and essentially redefine "stigmatization as status" (Weiloch, 2002).

Weiloch (2002) contends that collective identity binds social movement to its members through the members common interest in resistance to dominant society, or *opposition to dominant groups*. What Weiloch finds interesting however, is the idea that social movement actors only have access to dominant production, which they use to create counter cultural products in response to the dominant group. Because of this limitation on cultural production, it must be acknowledged that the cultural objects that social movement actors use to express their resistance are, in fact, part of a larger symbolic system; however, these artifacts have power and impact when demonstrating dissatisfaction because dominant society recognizes them as alternative, counter-cultural status systems (Weiloch, 2002). For the hip hop community under study, poetry is the cultural product in use, or what Wieloch refers to as *oppositional capital*:

Oppositional capital can be defined as the broad cultural field of symbols drawn upon by active social critics whose visions of transformation range in scope from the local (subcultural) to the sociocultural (social movement). The same symbols that can be used for subcultural or countercultural expressions can also be tools for political activism. These symbols are part of an economy of signs that are generally held to be oppositional (Wieloch, 2002, p. 54).

In the spoken word counterpublic of this study, members have access to certain types of cultural symbols and turn them into performance poetry. Because these poets are borrowing from dominant symbols, they may be able to redefine certain elements, but at a cost. As illustrated in the previous chapter, when a poet relies on acts like anal sex to metaphorically address the pain felt by black people on a daily basis, he does two things: (1) successfully illustrates the agony, trauma, and fear associated with being a subordinate in America; and (2) reinforces dominant ideology concerning what it means to be a gay male and engage in gay sex—it is equally agonizing, traumatic, and fearful. When women come together to create a Ladies Night, sexist ideologies concerning the spoken word movement and the woman's body seep out of the stories and the poems, however, the males of the spoken word movement gaze at this body as a spectacle, a leaking thing on stage. Similar to these events are the institutionalized racism and capitalistic tendencies that leak out of the system like a puss-filled wound waiting to erupt at the first chance. When put in a certain position, certain members will perform *hidden transcripts* (Scott, 1990) that support dominant ideologies to the detriment of the movement. Through performances of racism, sexism, or money hungry greed, there are individuals chasing poetic dreams to make a living versus trying to live better. This is a real reality for spoken word as Marc Gonzales suggested in his interview when he said, “There are those who live life to be a better writer and there are those who write to live life better.”

While the term counterpublic seems appropriate for defining this spoken word community because it combats dominant ideologies, this community poses challenges for the study of counterpublics theory because it also perpetuates dominant ideologies in performance and blurs the distinction between what distinguishes counterpublicity and publicity. Every night in field welcomed protests against and the support of hegemonic ideals. Several moments warranted a precariously scrutinizing eye, one that specifically looked for the negative cases—cases where the work being performed had both positive and negative effects. Counterpublic theorists must remain critical and open to these moments because they further illustrate how the ubiquitous hands of domination work to strangle the potential out of sub-cultural movement, albeit through direct means like co-optation or through implicit means like limiting the discourse. Counterpublic theorists need to take into account the cultural symbols that counterpublic movements draw upon in an attempt to show either the inconsistencies between a groups desire to do good work versus the work that is actually done. We cannot assume that just because a group is considered a counterpublic that they only engage in counter-hegemonic discourse. As Pezzullo notes (2003), forcing a social movement or collective to fit into a single public oversimplifies. “Some social movements...are made up of varied groups and forms of activism that reflect multiple identities, concerns, and opinions. That variety should be an integral part of assumptions underlying future studies of publics and how they are related to social movements....” (Pezzullo, 2003, p. 361). It is not clear how a social movement or counter-hegemonic collective engages in counterpublicity or publicity until a researcher is granted access to the collective identity of the group and allowed to digest the rhetoric and performance of the collective. Through rhetorical analysis and

ethnographic observation, we can acknowledge the reproduction of dominant cultural symbols in performance collectives and the ways in which some counterpublic collective attempt to transgress the boundaries of dominant cultural symbols through invention and creativity. The practical implications of this study suggest that we must continue building upon rhetorical and qualitative methodology to enhance our own understandings of collective identity and performance. We must also continue studying other spoken word collectives and performance collectives as well as collectives that don't rely on performance to get a deeper understanding of collective identity performance when on stage performance is not the mediating factor.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study fall under method and subjectivity. Methodologically, my timeline did not account for a lengthy period of time in the field. I spent a total of seven months submerged in Los Angeles spoken word. While I reached my point-of-saturation early in the study, it was at the level of observation. If I participated more as a poet, judge, and possibly even a host, I am sure the network would have revealed more significant phenomena. In addition to my time in the field, having other ethnographers in Los Angeles would have been extremely helpful. There were several nights where I had to choose between going to two or more venues or events. I chose where to go based on the characteristics of hip hop poetry and which events I thought fit with the description most. However, an event description and what actually takes place are two different things. An event that I may have missed could have been a key event for this study. Within different venues, there were also a lot of stimuli. Listening to poetry while trying to document audience reactions and conversations posed

several challenges. I approached these challenges by focusing on one aspect of the space every night. If and when things took place that didn't fall under my focus, I took the time to document them as well. Over the course of my time in the field, I began noticing repetition and knew what to expect of certain people. This helped me to focus on several things at a time. However, the first few weeks were difficult. I know that I missed out on a lot of poetry and a lot of audience reactions. Having more sets of eyes and ears would have proven useful every night in the field.

In terms of subjectivity, my previous knowledge of spoken word from Saint Louis and my biases about spoken word as a former participant create a distinctive lens by which to view the network. Because this is an ethnographic study, it is assumed the subjectivity is not necessarily a limitation, but a necessity. I readily assume and honor my biases throughout the entire paper however, and challenge the reader to make his or her own assumptions about conclusions.

Future Research

This study exposes the interdependence between the study of identity, counterpublicity, and performance. Identity directly affects the motives behind a counterpublic collective coming together and performing counter-hegemonic discourse. The performance of counter-hegemonic discourse illuminates the ways in which counter-hegemonic collectives are either supporting certain facets of dominant discourse or attempting to transgress it, and thus helps the researcher to understand the multifaceted aspects of counterpublic collectives. In this section, I offer future research suggestions for the study of identity, counterpublicity, and performance in relation to theory building, spoken word, and methodology.

Scholarship that theorizes about collective identity and counterpublicity continues to grow in our field. This project pushes scholars in the direction of collective identity performance and ownership in both performance and non-performance networks. The findings of this study suggest that performance based collectives perform collective identity through storytelling and ownership. Future scholarship should continue to study collective identity performance in performance based groups, but also extend it to non-performance based groups to gauge the different modes of collective identity performance and begin building theories.

Future research on counterpublic-collectives should investigate how counterpublic collectives are approaching their dependency on dominant cultural symbols and whether there are any cases where counterpublic collectives have been able to transcend those symbols and or use them to their benefit without sacrificing the progress of other social movements. For every counterpublic collective understudy, the researcher must ask: Do counterpublic collectives really counter hegemony, or do they counter some dominant ideologies and reinforce others? If the former is true, the researcher must locate the ways in which the collective is able to define and transgress dominant cultural symbols through performance. If the latter is true, the researcher must make it her business to uncover the ideologies the collective seeks to transgress and redefine and locate the ideologies they consciously or subconsciously reinforce. In doing so, researchers will begin to uncover the connections between counterpublic and public spaces.

Future research on the spoken word movement and hip hop in general needs to address at least two things: the history of the new spoken word movement and the new counterpublic spaces of hip hop. Researchers need to document the history of the new

spoken word movement. Spoken word is not a new phenomenon, but the current generation of spoken word as it manifests today is new. Many founding mothers and fathers of the new era of spoken word are still alive and residing in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, and offer potential for a dynamic oral history. Currently, the only written histories of this new era document the history of slam poetry. Researchers need to focus on the other venues and voices that lead to the rise of spoken word in the 1990's. In addition to studying the history of the new spoken word movement, scholars need to focus on hip hop as a counterpublic enterprise and look at the different ways young hip hoppers are continuing the legacy of hip hop through challenging their immediate environments. In addition to spoken word, there is clown dancing or krumping. Clown dancing is the latest subgenre of hip hop dancing and originated in South Los Angeles. It has already gotten the attention of the public eye in the documentary *Rise* and is gaining momentum as a response and alternative to inner city gang and drug violence in South Los Angeles, Compton, and Watts. These sites are great candidates for rhetorical ethnography.

Rhetorical ethnography opens doors to the study of culture, performance, and rhetoric in action. Hauser (1999) suggests that rhetorical scholarship of public spheres should reveal the process of a public's emergence. Ethnographic research is concerned with just that, process. Pezzullo notes, "To capture a sense of the emergent process, participant observation is an attractive alternative...because public sphere scholars may affirm the importance of cultural performance unrecognized by mainstream culture and, in the process of interpretation, offer a record of them" (p. 361). Rhetorical ethnography affords the researchers the opportunity to do two things at once:(1) document the

emergence of a public, counter or otherwise, (2) and interpret its performance. As a rhetorician I find myself in the precarious position of predicting the future of public sphere studies and simultaneously feeling relegated to its past. Rhetorical ethnography presents the opportunity to embrace present public spaces and study the ways in which its inhabitants are coming together and performing counterpublicity. Our history and our present are both equally important and meaningful. As rhetoricians, we should embrace the opportunities ethnography presents and begin studying movements as they unfold in addition to doing archival research.

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Appendix A Interview Protocol

Introductory Remarks: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me tonight. This **interview** will probably take about 5-15 minutes, or longer depending on where the conversation goes. As I mentioned to you before, I'm conducting these interviews with some of the Los Angeles based poet's and audience members. I want to know about your writing experiences and the utility you have found in writing and performing poetry. The information from these interviews will be pulled together and used to discuss the role of poetry in society as a tool of social mobility and agency.

If participant is an informant, continue reading here: This **interview** will be kept in a confidential place. However, because you agreed to serve as an informant, it may be used to document historical facts and your name may be published as a part of the document. Let's begin.

If participant is not an informant, continue reading here: Because you did not agree to serve as an informant, this interview will be confidential and your personal information will not be attached in any way to the interview. Let's begin.

- Tell me about yourself?
- How often do you come to these events?
- How long have you been coming?
- When did you start performing?
- How long have you been writing?
- How long have you been performing?
- Why do you write poetry?
- Why did you write specific poems?
- What do you find yourself writing about the most?
- What do you think of the term hip hop poetry?
- How would you define hip hop poetry?
- Where else have you performed?
- Have you used poetry in any other media or venue?
- What kind of changes have you experienced in your life since you started performing?
- Do you feel a sense of belongingness to any poetry based communities? Why?
- Do you feel accepted? Why?
- Do you feel like you're part of the community? Why?
- How would you define your status in terms of membership? Why?
- Do you know anything about the history of the spoken word movement?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the spoken word movement?⁷

Thank you so much for taking your time for this **interview** and for all you've shared with me.

⁷ These are only questions to get the ball rolling or to get back on track. I want the interviewee to talk freely about whatever s/he wants in relation to poetry or the Los Angeles poetics.

Appendix B Focus Group Protocol

Introductory Remarks: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me tonight. This **focus group** will probably take about one hour, or longer depending on where the conversation goes. As I mentioned to you before, I'm doing these focus groups with some of the Los Angeles poet's and audience members. I want to know what the experience has been like so far and how connected you feel to the establishment. The information from these focus groups will be used to discuss the role of poetry in society as a tool of social mobility and agency.

If you have agreed to serve as an informant, this **focus group** will be kept in a confidential place. However, because you agreed to serve as an informant, it may be used to document historical facts and your name may be published as a part of the document.

If you did not agree to serve as an informant, this interview will be confidential and your personal information will not be attached in any way to the interview.

If you have a problem with confidentiality, remember this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate or change your level of participation at any time.

- Do you all see yourself as members of the Los Angeles Poetic Community (LAPC), or something else?
- Do you feel a sense of belongingness at the LAPC? Why?
- Do you feel accepted? Why?
- Do you feel like you're part of the community? Why?
- How would you define your status in terms of membership? Why?
- Why do you all come to LAPC?
- How would you define hip hop poetry?
- Have you used poetry in any other media or venue?
- What kind of changes have you all experienced in your life since you started performing?
- Do you know anything about the history of the LAPC?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the LAPC? ⁸

Thank you so much for taking your time for this **focus group** and for all you've shared with me.

⁸ These are only questions to get the ball rolling or to get back on track. I want the members to talk freely about whatever they want in relation to poetry, community, or LA based poetics.

Appendix C Observational Protocol

This protocol will be used to guide the observation of the Los Angeles rhetorical ethnography. For each event, I will document the setting of the event, activities, engagement of members, participation of the researcher, and any other unique or general activities specific to the event.

THE SETTING

1. Objectives of the Event as described by the host or hostess:

2. Activities planned for the session:

3. Date of the session: _____

4. Approximate number of members present: _____

5. Time of event: _____

EVENT ACTIVITIES OBSERVED

6. Major activities observed and amount of time for each:

Check the box next to each activity observed during the session and fill in the total amount of time, rounds, or number participants for that activity if applicable:

Slam poetry ___ minutes

Open mic poetry ___ minutes

Audience judging ___ rounds ___ poets

Feature poetry ___ minutes/poets

Evidence of collective identity by any present members (If checked, please site specific examples on page 3):

Participate in exercises that create distinction _____

Participate in antagonistic exercises _____

Engage in political activism discourse _____

Exhibit popular cultural aesthetics _____

Evidence of rhetorical power _____

Other (Please Specify)

_____ minutes ___ rounds ___ poets (If applicable)

Appendix D Institutional Review Board Consent Form

Dear _____;

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Jackson in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at the Pennsylvania State University. I am conducting a research study to locate the ways in which poetry can serve as a tool for social movement and mobility. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

Your participation can involve any of the following three options. Please indicate with a checkmark whether your participation will include an interview, focus group, and/or digital video recording of performances.

- Completing a 60 minute interview about your experience as a poet and audience member in Los Angeles poetry venues.
- Completing a 120 minute focus group about your experience as a poet and audience member in Los Angeles poetry venues.
- Live recording of your poetry performance at poetry venues solely for research and presentation purposes.

If you agree to be digitally recorded during your performances, all digital files will be stored in a password protected computer for two years following the study. Only Ronald Jackson and I will have access to the digitally recorded files. After the study is completed, performances will be chosen for their inclusion in presentation materials, and will be kept on file and used solely for this purpose. Those performances not chosen will be destroyed by fire following the two year period.

Your full or partial participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at anytime. You may also choose not to answer certain or all questions during the interview or focus group. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used unless you agree to have your name used in the final manuscript and during presentations. If you agree to the usage of your name, you will be thanked formally in the final manuscript.

In order to maintain confidentiality, this informed consent form will be filed separately from interview notes, demographic information and the subsequent interview transcript. If you do not desire to have your name used, you will be assigned a pseudonym for use in transcription, data analysis, and reporting. All identifying features (e.g., name of respondent, last names, professional title, etc) will be changed in the reporting. To ensure confidentiality for focus groups, if you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not reveal to other people what individual participants said.

All materials collected for this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet or on a password protected computer and only the principal my advisor, Dr. Ronald Jackson, the Office of Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board (IRB), and/or I may view these records.

There are foreseeable risks or discomforts if you agree to participate in the study. The possible risks include having your identity revealed in the publishable manuscript (only with your permission), increased anxiety levels due to having to share your feelings about your experience with a stranger, and a minimal degree of psychological discomfort if questions elicit memory of a stressful event, conflict episode, or unpleasant interaction. The likelihood and seriousness of these risks are deemed to be very low, in fact negligible.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation in the research include the help documenting of a present-progressive historical movement and having your poetic identity written in history since you are affiliated with the spoken word movement.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact me, Amber Johnson, at (314) 504-4410 or Dr. Ronald Jackson at (814) 865-3461 or at alj160@psu.edu or rlj6@psu.edu respectively. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office for Research Protections at (814)865-1775.

Sincerely,

Amber Johnson

You will be offered a copy of both forms to keep. You are making a decision whether or not to participate fully, partially, or at all.

Your initials here indicate that you agree to use your name. If you decide not to, your name will not be attached to any of your interview or focus group data or used in reporting. If you do agree, what name would you like for me to use in the manuscript? Please indicate here _____.

Your initials here indicate that you agree to be videotaped during your performances.

Your initials here indicate that you agree to the use of your recorded performance for research and presentation purposes only.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

AMBER L JOHNSON, PhD

amberjaye1@yahoo.com

EDUCATION/RESEARCH

PhD: Pennsylvania State University, Conferred August 2006

Major: Communication Arts and Sciences

Minor: English

Dissertation Title: *"We Don't Write Just to Write; We Write to be Free": A Rhetorical Ethnography of Spoken Word in Los Angeles.*

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Ronald L. Jackson II

MA: Saint Louis University, Conferred December 2002

Major: Communication

Advisor: Dr. Robert Krizek

BA: Saint Louis University, Conferred May 2001

Major: Communication

Ronald E. McNair Scholar

McNair Senior Thesis: *The Effect of Nonverbal Cues on Perceptions of Sexual Consent*

Senior Thesis Advisor: Dr. Karla Scott

GENERAL AREAS OF SCHOLARSHIP

Identity Studies

Cultural Studies

Performance Studies

Counterpublic and Public Theory

Qualitative Research

Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetoric and Poetics

Rhetorical Power

Intercultural Communication

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Fixed Term Faculty, The California State University at Long Beach

COMM 333- Interpretive Communication Literature

COMM 130- Essentials of Public Speaking

Graduate Teaching Assistant, The Pennsylvania State University

CAS 457- Studies in Public Address, World Campus

CAS 100A- Effective Speech, 8 sections

CAS 497- Gaining Student Compliance, Continuing Education

Teaching Assistant, Saint Louis University

CMMA 493- Communicating Across Racial Divisions