

'Woord' for Word:

Spoken Wor(l)d-(ing), Self and Other in the Netherlands

-A narrative ethnographic approach-

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Speak

Tell

your story

show us who

We are

through telling

who you are

Speak to me of your pain

Speak to me of your dreams

Speak to me of your elation

Tell me

what shouldn't

what should

what could

BE | ing

Is what We are

Being is not *the* question.

questions breathe:

(Tell me)

how what to be

who to be

what Being is?

How from the minute to the mighty

From dot to tree to cosmos

Being vibrantly makes itself known

How language illuminates

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Introductory note

Truly undoing the dualism that resides in our western minds is a task I won't achieve anytime soon, at least not through writing. The simple 'I' that I start with is related to a You and a We. So before getting very far, there is already an 'I' the subject, regarding this world of objects around me. Depending on what qualities we grant this 'I', my gaze may be seen as more or less objective, and perhaps one might even be tempted to say, more or less true.

*(un)Fortunately, I do not write from a position of sufficient authority in any field to confidently navigate language and the required form(at)s in such a way as to either fully honor or disavow the required "institutional regimes of truth" (Rabinow, 1991, p. 73). This could make for more interesting reading, or lead to vagueness and confusion. Is the worlding¹ in the title an emancipatory effort engaged in by the Spoken Word artists that feature in this thesis? Or am I the unwitting imperialist who in attempting to give voice to the voiceless (Lughod) (...), **others** them as much as doing anything else? Am I creating an image of a **Self** and an **Other**, more than truly engaging in a dialogical conversation with 'the field' and the people in it?*

*At certain points below I offer some of my background: white, middle-class with working class roots and older roots to the land, poet, student, professional, Sufi, do-gooder, oaf. I could go on to offer these aspects of identity as disclaimers of any (cultural) appropriation by show-casing the multi-faceted nature of my identity. This, however, would not excuse me, nor give me credentials that would prevent me from essentializing or any other pitfall. It does, I hope, show that I do not enter the field naïvely, or at least not without an awareness of my own naïveté. Lastly, before we truly begin, an issue I would be remiss not to mention; this is a written thesis on a **Spoken** art form, obviously important aspects of the form do not carry into this medium. I will do my best to bring aspects of that dimension to life, but will necessarily fail. I would suggest the reader sometimes read aloud sections of the thesis (especially those involving poetry) to get a better sense of this dimension. Beyond being spoken aloud there are other harder to grasp aspects of this (and any other) practice(s), that I think are very relevant here. Whole tomes and even religions have been built around notions of the ineffable nature of reality and human experience, I will not settle anything in regards to those debates here, and if anything, my concluding argument would be that such things cannot be settled, ever, whether in written form or otherwise. Mystery is there not for resolution, or for anything, other than (the experience of) itself. Precisely, that which is hardest to grasp in writing, is what makes Spoken Word so powerful. To be swept up in the current of life as it sweeps you by, to be in it, from it, and be it fully, while at the same time be part of the arc of its dance, as you (but who are you?) trace words, meaning, movement across a space that is neither canvas, painter or brush and all of that at once, changing continually...*

¹ 'Worlding' here refers to its use by Gayatri Spivak (1985) in the essay: "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives". A project of forcing the native to inscribe himself as Other through 'worlding' their supposedly empty homeland, a process in which a large part of colonial society is implicated.

Chapter 1. Setting the Scene

Introduction

This thesis revolves around Spoken Word. In the Spoken Word scene, people—who refer to themselves as word artist, Spoken Word artist, poet, writer, performer, writing performer or performing writer—recite poems to an audience. Occasionally (but infrequently) the performance is accompanied by music. The poems are written “to (mainly) be heard” (Van der Starre, 2019, p. 1).

In the broadest sense of the term, the history of the spoken word as performance goes back a long way (Foley, 2002): from the griots of West Africa to the troubadours of Europe (and the *seanacháí* of Ireland and many, many more). In more recent history, Spoken Word has come to the Netherlands via the United States and has mixed with existing forms of stage poetry (notably a tradition of performance poetry stemming from the 60’s when that aspect of poetry gained in prominence). In the US, the Spoken Word tradition has been heavily influenced by the Harlem Renaissance poets in the 1920s and 1930s, the Beat poets in the 1950s and 1960s, and the generation of poets from the era of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s; such as Gill Scott Heron and the Last Poets. *Slam Poetry*, a format in which poets compete with each other, has also been of great influence, as has the American TV series Def Poetry Jam (2002-2007) and, of course, rap music and hip-hop culture.

In Spoken Word texts often have a social theme in addition to a personal one. Spoken Word artists often belong to socially marginalized identities, based on elements such as migration background, neurodiversity, sexuality, class or gender. The pursuit of making visible, recognizing, or emancipating these identity(s) and changing existing social structures are an important part of Spoken Word. Aspects of this dynamic —emancipating marginalized identities by relating personal stories of lived experience to oppressive societal structures— come to the fore in the recent controversy² surrounding the Dutch translation of 'The Hill We Climb', the poem (and first poetry collection) by black American Spoken Word artist Amanda Gorman, which was recited by her during the inauguration of Joe Biden. The Dutch publisher Meulenhoff selected a young Dutch white queer poet Marieke Lucas Rijnveld to translate Amanda Gorman’s poetry. This quickly led to outrage, especially among the black Spoken Word community in the Netherlands: Should a white person try to capture the lived experience of an outspokenly Black³ Spoken Word artist when there were plenty of talented black poets in the Netherlands? These and other questions are not easily or unproblematically answered. Ultimately, Rijnveld acknowledged the complexities involved, Meulenhoff acquiesced and sought collaboration with the Spoken Word community and named Zaire Krieger (an outspokenly Black Spoken Word artist) as translator of Gorman’s work. This controversy brings attention to some

² Read this article for a brief and partial summary: <https://lithub.com/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-controversy-over-a-new-translation-of-amanda-gormans-poetry/>

³ Capitalized here to indicate Blackness as a political identity rather than simply a skin-color.

of Spoken Word's signature elements, such as the importance of community and authentic expression of the self, and Spoken Word's connection to lived experience, identity, and political consciousness.

Why study Spoken Word? As stated above Spoken Word is related to one the oldest (artistic) expressions of humankind: Poetry. It is an instance of this expression that (especially taken together with its big little brother; hip-hop) holds appeal to large numbers of (young) people—making it worthy of study alone—but in this time where the literary establishment often complains about a lack of interest in literature, examining those literary forms that do manage to command attention is worthwhile. Next to its importance as a form of artistic expression, Spoken Word also weighs in on societal issues (as can be seen from the Gorman controversy above); in fact a large part of its *raison d'être* is not only weighing in on social issues, but positively transforming them. Taken into account the vehemence of contemporary public debate which hinges in part on cultural identity⁴, an art form such as Spoken Word, which is a carrier of cultural identity and speaks directly on many of the issues of identity (and other issues) that form the linchpin of public debate (as exemplified by the Gorman controversy), makes it even more worthy of study.

Furthermore, in this time of increased rationalization, (ecological) destruction and cultural strife, Spoken Word can be both antidote and weapon in the protection of the sanctity of life. This increased rationalization—which Weber called the “shell as hard as steel” (Baehr, 2001)—goes some way in explaining both the destruction of life, people’s participation in it, and the war for meaning that accompanies it. Spoken Word artists—their role going beyond what Gramsci called the “organic intellectual”⁵—offer an anti-dote to rationalization by offering stories that surpass western rationalism, through embracing different ontologies (Smith, 2012) (Guadeloupe, 2018) (Yako, 2021) (Kimmerer, 2013) as well as valuing the full spectrum of (human) possibility (Carrithers, 2005) (Ingold, 2017) (Lorde, 1984).

In the Netherlands, (the perception of) Spoken Word has slowly evolved from being seen as ‘just’ a subculture to having permeated mainstream (pop) culture as well as the driving literary establishment in recent years. For example, the well-known Spoken Word artist Bab Gons performed during the Night of Poetry in 2019, and rapper Typhoon—who calls himself a poet (Van der Starre, 2021)—reached a broad audience and critical acclaim with the hit album 'Lobi Da Basi'. This year, Spoken Word artist Amara van der Elst read a Spoken Word piece titled “Freedom” at the yearly national remembrance of the dead, the fallen of various wars. There are countless of other examples of Spoken Word artists who are employed for advertising campaigns, events, corporate or educational workshops, perform or program at well-known venues and festivals, win prizes, become poet laureates of many large cities

⁴ Or consider the phenomenon called the culture wars: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/13/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-culture-wars-but-were-afraid-to-ask>

⁵ A number of the Spoken Word artists I have spoken too, explicitly labeled themselves intellectuals and not academics. Precisely because they abhor the Ivory Tower and wish to root their intellectualism in the every-day world of a people, echoing Gramsci concept of the organic intellectual. For a modeling of the rapper/poet as organic intellectual see: “Antonio’s B-Boys: Rap, Rappers, and Gramsci’s Intellectuals” by Nathan D. Abrams (1995)

and get published in all kinds of media.

This evolution in the awareness around Spoken Word⁶ in the Netherlands has not yet been translated into academic inquiry focused on Spoken Word. There is more to be found in the English literature, which mostly relates to the situation in the United States, including studies on Slam Poetry (Somers-Willett, 2005) and Spoken Word in educational contexts such as universities, schools, community centers or adult education (Merriweather, 2011; Williams, 2015; Fisher, 2003). Spoken Word is sometimes discussed as a critical pedagogy in the context of rap and hip-hop (Biggs-El, 2012), or as an alternative and critical source of knowledge for the dominant culture (Fisher, 2003; Chepp, 2012). However, there seems to be relatively little attention for Spoken Word as a stand-alone phenomenon, and there appears to be no consensus in the literature about a precise definition of Spoken Word or a demarcation of the genre, nor about (the relative importance of) the different historical roots of Spoken Word. Furthermore, there is virtually no academic literature on Spoken Word in the Netherlands. Though attention is paid to reciting poetry (Dera, 2014; Franssen, 2012), Spoken Word itself is barely visible in Dutch academic contexts. In her dissertation on what poems mean to people, Van der Starre (2021) passingly pays attention to Spoken Word in relation to the literary establishment. In an earlier publication (Van der Starre, 2017) she focuses on Slam Poetry and performance. I engage with the existing literature when relevant but also enjoy the freedom that being one of the first to address this subject academically provides.

This knowledge-gap is interesting, when considering such a culturally relevant phenomenon as Spoken Word and cries out for attention. Next to my own personal interest in Spoken Word as a practitioner and my broader interest in the underdog or the voices of the oppressed, I believe Spoken Word provides an excellent entry point for what Tim Ingold (Ingold, 2017) calls talking *with* rather than *about* the people we study (with) as anthropologists. According to Ingold, anthropology should be the study of human possibility and not be limited to ethnography as a description or documentation of a supposedly static practice. Spoken Word provides such a suitable entry-point because Spoken Word artists often explicitly position themselves as intellectuals (and often look at academics with disdain⁷) and activists, and are often explicitly engaged with questions of (human) possibility and flourishing that Ingold believes anthropologists are well-suited to address. Thus, rather than naïvely entering the problematic task of representing authentically the voice of the Other (Spivak, 1988)—as if that task were achievable— anthropologists are faced with a group already determinedly engaged in the conversation we are so eager to join. A conversation in which the speakers engage a multitude of forms, voices and positions, not reducible to representations of singular identities (hooks, 1992)⁸. A conversation

⁶ It also remains to be seen how far this awareness will permeate, mainstream 'white' society seems to (re)discover Spoken Word every few years according to Babs Gons (from a comment on Linked-in).

⁷ I myself have sometimes evidenced this stance but also in conversation with numerous Spoken Word artists has this topic arisen.

⁸ bell hooks purposefully does not capitalize her name in order to now excessively draw attention to her person, but rather let the focus remain on her work: <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/hooks-bell-gloria-jean-watkins-1952/#:~:text=As%20a%20writer%2C%20she%20chose,ideas%20rather%20than%20her%20personality.>

leaving no one outside its scope, which is held in the present, but echoes out through the ages both to the past and future, shaping what our future looks like and what identities get space to be. With this thesis I hope to further ideas, methods, tools and practices that ultimately will lead to a broader (human) flourishing of the world. To help bring forth a desired future for the benefit of all. As such I hope to contribute to “conceptual lines of thought” that create more space for love, compassion and wisdom. To me this means attempting to understand the complexities of life, and upsetting existing dualisms and nefarious hierarchies in such a way that living beings and this great system we call the World in which they reside are no longer negatively impacted by them. That our systems of thought and culture become attuned to helping the conditions for a flourishing of life rather than its destruction as currently seems to be dominant society’s path.

Although such desires might be deemed unscientific, sentimental or wishy-washy, there is actually a large body of evidence-based work which scientifically underpins human flourishing as rooted in empathy, compassion and belonging (Seligman, 2011) (Larry Stevens, 2018). More broadly speaking across the sciences, I would argue there is a move towards holistic and ecological perspectives (Lovelock et al, 2016) (Stengers, 2005) (Raworth, 2017). Also, in anthropology it can be said, next to the discipline’s problematic history (Ortner, 2016) (Ferguson, 1997) that our core method of ethnography is empathic in nature, proceeding from the dictum: “I could have stood in your shoes” (Carrithers, 2005, 434), this empathic perspective can lead to a moral imperative of compassionate action (Setha M. Low, 2010).

My own personal drive for studying Spoken Word stems from a life-time spent listening to and engaging alternative knowledge and art sources such as rap, hip-hop and spiritual practices such as Sufism and Buddhism and wondering why these forms of knowledge are often given less credibility in our “institutional regimes of truth” (Rabinow, 1991, p. 73) than for instance legal-scientific discourses. To make it more concrete, what makes the words of a poly-math, poet and intellectual like Tupac (or Audre Lorde or other poets for that matter) about his society weigh the scales of truth less than a sociological treatise about that same society? Sometimes a partial answer reveals itself to me, oftentimes together with more questions. It seems to be complicated cocktail of power, race, gender, history, socio-economics and world view. There are many nuances and lenses relevant to this topic. Who gets to speak for whom? Why do we value some voices more than others? In this thesis I attempt to take some first steps towards answering these questions as I continue to grapple with them. It describes an ethnographically inspired case study of the Dutch Spoken Word scene and thus attempts to start filling the (academic) knowledge gap in the field of Spoken Word. Besides addressing this knowledge gap, my hope is that by understanding this art form—which is also partly activism and aims to influence the public debate—we can get better as a society at having conversations about our collective identity and future.

This is a conversation Tim Ingold (2017) claims anthropologists are uniquely positioned to contribute too. From this dialogical perspective it makes sense to want to address first what Spoken Word artists *themselves* get from the practice, rather than, for instance, only applying existing theories to the fieldwork, or focusing on more linguistic aspects of the poetry or sensory ones of the performance. As such,

this research started using a methodology based on 'grounded theory' (Strauss, 1994); first the field was engaged, then in conversation with and reflecting on this engagement a more comprehensive theoretical framework was formulated. The first part of the fieldwork on which this thesis is based was undertaken as part of a wider research group coordinated by the Endowed Chair of the Meaning of Cultural Participation, a collaboration of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and the LKCA (National Knowledge Institute for Cultural Education and Amateur Art) and led by prof. Evert Bisschop Boele. The overall theme of this research group was to find the meaning of cultural participation for participants in different cultural practices. Because of this interest in practice and meaning, ethnography as a method and theory of practice as a theoretical starting point were seen as relevant, since both focus on what people do and say (Boele, 2017). The initial research question was:

What is the meaning of cultural participation for Spoken Word artists in the Netherlands?

To an extent this question speaks to existing theoretical debates, or at least draws on them, such as the long-lasting foray of the social sciences into determining how our environment constitutes us and we in turn constitute it. This co-constitution is addressed in this question mostly through the concept of a cultural 'practice' as taken from the 'Theory of Practice' (Bourdieu, 1977) (Reckwitz, 2002) in which our behaviors and beliefs give rise to one another.

This question also reflects matters of policy, as it relates to the cultural sector: how to view culture, which culture is deemed high-brow etc. Culture in this sense refers mainly to art or artistic expression. Currently, if they still speak of culture (Abu-Lughod, 1991), anthropologists generally hold a more comprehensive view of it: the domain in which (human) beings generate and experience meaning, that is, almost everything that humans do. The two issues are related, it is not merely coincidence that a wider net is simultaneously being cast around what constitutes culture—as the domain where humans generate and experience meaning—and culture as art (a realm of expression that has an esthetic component). In my view, this is part of a wider move in dominant culture and academia towards a more relational, processual (Mosse, 2010) (Tsoukas H., 2002) and as such a more complex multi-dimensional perspective (Nell, 2007) on the world: one might equally say (as above); more holistic, systemic or ecological. This movement is neither singular or total and examining it is not the objective here, it does however help to situate this thesis in the current moment.

This thesis does not seek to definitively answer the debates on what art or culture respectively are. Neither does it exhaustively address all the ways that meaning is found and generated in Spoken Word as a cultural practice, nor its implications for Dutch society or (anthropological) theory. What it does attempt to do is to be one example of how to sincerely (Yako, 2021) enter into a field, be in conversation with it, and reflect this conversation back, both at the field itself, the institutions from which it was launched and the larger society in which both are situated. That being said, I mostly steer clear of grander debates on what Dutch

identity is, or in-depth discussions of some of the issues at play; such as racism, colonialism or gentrification or mental health. Not because these issues are not important or relevant, but precisely because all of them are relevant. Thus I could not treat one sufficiently without neglecting another. That being said, I do sometimes discuss these issues when the material warrants it and I do make some larger claims on how they share characteristics and mechanisms; such as essentialization or objectivation. However, my main focus remains on how Spoken Word artists navigate and attempt to affect the society around them, rather than how it holds them down. One cannot address one without addressing the other, but this approach brings a different focus.

Due to the nature of the requirements of a Master's thesis (showing an ability to conduct scientific research and relate it to relevant theories) and a genuine desire to situate both practices (academic anthropology and Spoken Word) in relation to each other, a more extensive theoretical framework was devised. I hope this was done in such a manner as to provide exchange between practice and theory, although I fear that due to the format, it was necessary to privilege theory and academic practice over (the field) experience. In part to rectify this, sometimes a more free or artistic mode of expression is sought, where I feel the material justifies it, or I can rightly pull it off. This will be addressed more thoroughly when I discuss the methodology in more detail below.

Since Spoken Word artists are—and often consider themselves to be—intellectuals in their own right; they too bring theoretical perspectives to bear on the world and their own practice. I reserve most of these perspectives for the chapter where I discuss the practitioners, called *Actors*. But traces of that can be found in some of the sources used so far, such as the literature by Smith (2012) and Yako (2021) on decolonizing methodologies and different types of ontologies. Given increased valence for me through the work of Spoken Word artist Lyla June⁹, who also taught me a lot on matters of identity, wholeness and the sanctity of life. It is also found in the works of bell hooks¹⁰ and Audre Lorde, both writers who have great currency in the Spoken Word community. After the initial foray into the field I further refined my research question less as a question that is open-ended and intended for inductive research (as is the one above) and more as a question to guide us through the material towards a conclusion. To that purpose I introduce the following (research) question and accompanying theoretical framework below¹¹:

⁹ But also through interaction with my 'informants'.

¹¹ I am aware up to this point this thesis can seem reflection and theory heavy, however dear reader, please keep in mind, that this reflection came forth out of dialogical process in (and with) the field. A process that shall receive more attention in following sections.

Theoretical Framework - Story¹²

How are iterations of Self and Other, residing in the cultural archive, crafted into hybrid narratives by Spoken Word artists in the Netherlands, as they itinerate through identity and voice in affective performances of critical personhood?

Self and **Other** are meaning-full constructs in/around the individual and collective psyche (i.e. culture). As anthropologists have long since been aware (Barth, 1969), boundaries around each are erected in order to make meaning (Nigel Rapport, 2000) and navigate the world, these boundaries are more porous than they might seem at first glance. Both the apparent solidity of the boundary and its porousness form a necessary part of human life, that is, they perform a function and have effects. The ability to act as an agent/self in the world (Jung, 1976), the need to project taboos (Fanon, 2008) (repressed parts of the *Self*) onto the *Other*, are functions that boundaries perform. While their porousness represents an acknowledgment of the partial, contingent and temporal nature of boundaries, as well as the necessity for out- and influx in any system or part there-of, and the liminality (Harry Wels, 2011) that is a necessary part of processes of social change. Our notions of Self and Other are neither fully conscious nor static and are mixed up with the contingencies and structures of social and economic life. As different cultures and societies meet in unequal ways they give rise to newer forms still. In this continual meeting of cultures, processes of making Other and Self have both intensified and been made more problematic. As the projected Other came ever closer—as citizens from the so-called periphery arrived home in the metropole (Fanon, 2008), (traditional) identities changed, and the pace of change became ever faster—the violence towards Other(s) (and Self) also changed, becoming simultaneously more insidious and visible. This has led to challenges in the cultural perception of Self (Wekker, 2016) as found in the *cultural archive*¹³. The term cultural archive was first coined by anthropologist Wendy James (1999) in her study of the Uduk of Sudan and later associated with the collection of essays “Culture and Imperialism” by post-colonial scholar Edward Said (1993). Gloria Wekker (2016) uses it to shed light on how the national Self-image—as

¹² When composing the narrative of a play often a differentiation is made between story (the sequence of events), and plot (how those events make emotional sense). While not a complete fit, I have chosen to present the theoretical framework as a type of story in the sense intended here because it provides the scaffolding for the plot. What is taking place at the cultural/societal level? How is what’s taken place part of a larger story about how our society functions, generates and maintains itself. I have named the chapter where I discuss my use of the deep story as plot, because it pertains to the emotional resonance and logic of the scene (as a plot does).

found in the Dutch cultural archive—of the Dutch as a tolerant and innocent nation¹⁴. This image is being challenged by (the vocal presence of) descendants of enslaved people (and others) claiming their full position as Dutch citizens and criticizing those traditions that show that the actual violent colonial past of the Netherlands such as Black Pete, and that in the menacing vehemence of the backlash to this resistance we find that this violent past is still present in today's world (de Abreu, 2018).

The cultural archive is where the bulk of past interactions leave their trace by shaping how we treat and see each other today and how we make sense of the world. The term 'archive' has an apparently neutral meaning in that it refers to a record that is kept, yet historically archives have often been instruments of power and thus a non-neutral point of contestation. Gathering data into archives was used by administrators of all kinds to control and keep track of populations. Simply put winners write history (Spivak G. C., 1985). A process in which anthropologists themselves (have) play(ed) sinister roles (Ortner, 2016). During revolts archives were often the first structures targeted, for instance to destroy the records of debts that kept people in servitude (Graeber, 2011). By inserting 'cultural' in front of archive we make the term more democratic in a sense. It makes clear that everybody adds to this cultural repository throughout their lives and that we can find ways of exhuming the presence of the oppressed and vanquished in it. The cultural archive as such contain our official past, our conscious and unconscious notions of ourselves, our place in the world, as well as our lived experience, which includes the (public) conversations we have.

However many attempts are made to (scientifically or otherwise) justify or explain the world, ultimately these models of the world must come to us in the form of **narrative** (Spivak G. C., 1985). A *narrative* is also a model of the world, but one that usually acknowledges its own potential as a mediator for action and the fact that it is but one of many models. These models are always **hybrid** (Mambrol, 2021) in that they are always in connection with one another and previous iterations of themselves, whether directly borrowing from each other or from the cultural archive. In this way nothing wholly novel can be told, although in the experience of telling we constantly renew ourselves. Even though the power to broadcast narratives and the cultural appeal of narratives varies wildly, in theory everybody has the power to craft new ones. This makes creation of our joint narrative if not a (potentially) democratic at least a collective effort. Narrative is not only a story, but also the structure, emotional resonance and acting out of that story. Like anthropologists, Spoken Word artists consciously craft (and also act out) narrative to elliptically elucidate societal structures. However—contrary to many anthropologists—they do so in an artistic manner where they centralize their own lived experience and explicitly take a moral stance, often with the purpose of not only elucidating but also transforming societal structures. The group of Spoken Word artists that were part of this research do this in idiosyncratic ways and to varying degrees, but they all do it.

¹⁴ According to James Baldwin whiteness always considers itself innocent:
<https://eu.dispatch.com/story/opinion/columns/2020/07/23/column-finally-movement-is-disrupting-white-innocence/42089849/>

An **iteration** is a repetition, but one that hopefully gets closer to a desired result. Spoken Word artists *itinerate* (Ingold, 2011), for they are not simply repeating a code or rehashing a narrative but re-writing it. From the plotlines to the main actors and to the ontological universe in which the narrative is set. Navigating and wayfinding, looking for the goal of the journey as they are traveling their path. They are trying to change a situation; to get away from it as much as to get somewhere new. The term 'itineration' captures part of the **nomadic** (Braidotti, 2010) (Gilles Deleuze, 1986) aspects of **identity** and the paradoxical ones of **voice** (Weidman, 2014). *Voice* being what people say, how they say it, who hears them, and the positions and places they say it from. The paradoxes (Laura Dixon, 2021) are multiple, as alluded to through Spivak in the introduction; *Can one speak for another? Is the voice not then transmuted through the position from which it is spoken? If we give the voiceless a voice, or if they claim one for themselves, do they then not cease to be voiceless? Identity* being how people see themselves and their place in the world. Finally, Spoken Word artists attempt the above through **affective performances of critical personhood**.

Spoken Word artists get on a stage and perform in the literal sense of the word, but they furthermore do so in particular ways using specific forms and utterances with the intention of having an effect on (affecting) the world through their audience. To the extent that their actions and utterances bring to life identity(ies) they can be said to be 'performative' (Butler, 1990). The **main argument** of this **thesis** is:

Spoken Word artists use the performativity of their performances to actively bring forth a desired future. A future in which there is more space for them to perform their respective identities as they see fit, rather than the role or identity prescribed to or projected unto them. They do so from a belief in the richness of the diversity of (human) life. Through self-expression they elucidate societal structures, prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community.

This is why the words iteration (as repetition towards a desired result) and itineration (wayfaring) are so poignant in this case. In the words of Audre Lorde:

"Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."

I would like to pair this quote by Audre Lorde¹⁵ with a quote by Carrithers from the article "Anthropology: A Moral Science of Possibilities" (2005, p. 434):

"that fundamental sense of possibility has been amplified by the growing conviction that any particular sociocultural arrangement is mutable, labile, far less determining

¹⁵ A famous black lesbian poet and intersectional activist 'avant la lettre', whose multiple identities were often the first thing she listed when she spoke.

or determined, far more historically contingent than we had thought: even the rules, anywhere, could have been different and are becoming different. It is as if the arc of cultures which Ruth Benedict invoked had turned out to be fractal in nature, each culture dissolving to display further arcs of possibilities and alternatives”

If, as Carrithers and Ingold (2017) hold, anthropology is indeed the science of human possibility and if poetry as Lorde puts is “a bridge across our fears” towards “a future of change”, then it makes sense to join these two models of narration as is attempted in this thesis. Seen from this perspective, one could say that anthropologists map and relate different directions of becoming Self and Other, and poets provide us ways to navigate those differences.

Spoken Word artists bring forth desired futures with varying degrees of intent in differing styles, some through use of what in another context might be called pre-figurative politics (Graeber, 2002), they act and live (in community) in such a way as they would want the world to be. Most do so by using their lived experience and showing it to the world, sometimes in order to call attention to a lived experience that people might not know about—and thus raise awareness about it—but more often I find the motivation is calling attention to their lived experience as an example of how to be self-aware and to let others know they are not alone. The heightened awareness of self and other can then become the basis for transformative action, and while action is not always the explicit goal, awareness usually is. Of course, it can be argued that any action is transformative in that it moves and changes us and carries us into the future. On the other hand, regardless of whether transformative action is the stated goal, the act of coming together in specific ways to create space for an awareness of specific ways of being is transformative in and of itself. Additionally, we can say that action without an awareness of the current situation or the intended goal is more likely to flounder. This explains part of what Spoken Word artists do. If their intended goal is pro-active change towards a “desired future” it is necessary to be aware of those “iterations of Self and Other” that reside in the cultural archive, as well as what the desired future entails.

Affect (Ian Skoggard, 2015) has a multiplicity of meanings, part of which originate in theater performance (Schaefer, 2021). Next to attempting to affect the world (as mentioned above), Spoken Word artists can be said to do so through creating emotional resonance that continues to vibrate well beyond the confines of performance. They also seek to directly affect the world around them. Their performances are affective in the multiple saliency that this concept carries, here referring to the myriad ways that people are affected by these performances. Mainly: the ability to affect the world, the ability to create emotional resonance, and the way that both continue to resonate in and mix with the world. Thusly, affect can refer to a feeling or an intensity of a feeling, or the way that feeling moves across bodies and through spaces in a motion with no clear end (Rubin, 2012).

The performance of a poem usually has multiple origins; from the particular traditions of poetry or art that the artist hails from, reference to historical events, or relevant moments of lived experience which coalesce through the artist into a poem. The poet first writes and then performs it, all this time carrying the poem and its

meaning with and in them(selves). Once the poem is performed (however many times) it creates an experience in which performer and audience are joined, in new and familiar ways. This experience resonates through the audience and they carry it with them. This might be repeated or other people might see a recording of the poem, people might even have very negative responses to the poem. All of this is alluded to by the term *affect*, making the use of the word more than appropriate because it allows for chance, happenstance, ambiguity and conflict; concepts that are all very much part of the cultural conversation that Spoken Word Artists are attempting to affect.

Lastly, we come to *critical personhood*, I say personhood rather than **citizenship**, because personhood allows us to take in different kinds of subjectivities without centralizing notions of state and power (whilst not ignoring them), this means including in this way of speaking also non-human beings¹⁶ and a wider variety of human ways of being than are generally included or acknowledged in debates that centralize states and state power. There is definitely a movement in the Netherlands where people with a non-white migration background agitate for full inclusion in Dutch (cultural) citizenship (Ong, 1996) (Esajas, 2018) on top of the legal (de-jure) citizenship which they nominally do but in actual fact (de-facto) do not possess at all times¹⁷ (Gario, 2018). Spoken Word also plays a role in the movement towards inclusion as (cultural) citizenship (Gario, 2018). Notwithstanding the extensive literature (see (Sian Lazar, 2013) for an overview) on citizenship as an analytical category and a vector for political action, the main drive of what Spoken Word artists are doing resonates better with personhood, as it captures the moral imperative of empathy that lies at its core. That is to say, the imperative: treat/see me/us as (a) fellow (human) being/person(s) triumphs the imperative: treat/see me as (a) Dutch citizen(s). With this I have not exhausted the number of relevant concepts and theories, nor explored the ones I do mention fully, however, with this framework I hope to be able to address those components of Spoken Word that I have found to be most important.

Script/Methodology

Because this thesis started with examining the meaning of Spoken Word *to its practitioners*, an ethnographic research design was chosen. The main method of

¹⁶ Different ontologies, create space for different subjectivities. For instance queering gender identities, different cultural identities, or aspects of identity based on neurodivergence as this thesis frequently addresses (TallBear, 2015). Next to this indigenous people (and increasingly the scientific community) posit beings of the natural world as persons or even as nations. Many cosmologies, mythologies and folk tales, ascribe personhood to all kinds of fictional or natural beings, often personified as animals. Trees, forests or mountains are also often deemed worthy of worship and/or personhood. In Buddhism (and other religions) sentience is extended also to the mineral world and indeed all of creation. Where this was previously considered a form of sentimental unscientific anthropomorphism, it is now increasingly anthropocentrism that is questioned. Together with the fact that personhood is sometimes granted to highly destructive corporations. This broader sentiment is nicely captured in Lev's poem to follow; 'radically social' but also in Audre Lorde's notion of interdependency which will also be discussed.

¹⁷ As evidenced by the responses of the legal system to activists against 'black pete' to name but one example: wrongful detainment, beatings, death threats etc.

ethnography is participant observation (Bernard, 2017). Furthermore, in ethnographic research, interviews are conducted and documents and artefacts that play a role in the researched practice are collected as data. In my research, participatory observation took on the character of observing participation (Kaminski, 2004), a term that emphasizes participation in the studied practice (similar to the so-called halfie-, indigenous, or insider-ethnography (Abu-Lughod, 1991)). I chose this approach because I was part of the Spoken Word scene before I started studying it and it more honestly describes my involvement. For this thesis, I studied events centering around or giving a place to Spoken Word, as well as taking the stage myself, which helped me to experience and describe Spoken Word from multiple perspectives. I took notes during and after these events in which I mixed observation with first analysis, (self)reflection, and self-expression (poems). Conversations ('informal interviews') with practitioners and audience members took place during my participant observation, sometimes they would spontaneously occur and at other times I deliberately tried to engage informants.

Additionally, I conducted formal interviews with eight Spoken Word practitioners. The interviews took the form of a natural conversation in which I introduced the research and invited the participant to share their vision. During the interview I mainly tried to let the story of the interviewee (and the conversation) flow and I followed my natural interest when asking questions. Sometimes I brought up pre-conceived themes at the end of the conversation or when the conversation faltered. I strived for diversity in the interviewees: in notoriety and prominence, in gender, in cultural background, and in engagement with and involvement in the Spoken Word scene. The interviews were transcribed, then coded. I coded the interviews using concepts from prof Boele's model of cultural meaning—which I will address when discussing some of the interviews—I also made additional codes where needed. I visited websites, watched online performances, interviews and blogs, and collected other documents and artifacts such as tickets, books and posters, all of this in order to be able to use as a triangulation of sorts and as what might be deemed a "scavenger methodology" (Wekker, 2016) (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13).

This research draws in part on the continued participation and affiliation with the (international) Spoken Word scene of the author, myself. I have participated in events and publications and hung out with poets in many different places: from Amsterdam, to London, to Nairobi. These various scenes all had a specific flavor, influenced as much by the locality as the people taking part. During *this* fieldwork I engaged with a number of events, poets and scenes in a number of places in the Netherlands. I visited a variety of events; from national poetry events, to small back-rooms in local venues with amateur performances, sometimes I happened onto events and poets in the course of my work as an (action) researcher or personal life, at symposia or festivals. Some of the events featured only Spoken Word artists, whilst at other events the offering was more broadly inclusive of various (verbal) art forms. I also struck up friendships and hung out and shared poetry with poets in my home. There was one format that I visited multiple times in multiple locations so as to get a deeper sense of at one least one group. I was in Utrecht numerous times, but also visited Arnhem, Nijmegen, Rotterdam and Amsterdam and also participated in online-events.

By watching how Spoken Word presented itself in different places and with different people, I tried to get a picture of the meaning of the practice for the practitioners and how that meaning is created. The approach of this ethnographic research can thus be characterized as nomadic (Braidotti, 2010), multi-sited and post-exotic (Elie, 2020), and pragmatic (Becker, 2020). This approach breaks with the now outdated view that there are monolithic static cultures that must be recorded in one place. People and cultures are not static and unchanging but dynamic and porous. Moreover, people do not belong to a single culture and cultures are interconnected. A person or culture is not immutable and neither is a poet or scene. It is precisely in the contradictions, differences and provisional frameworks (for example around a culture) that it becomes clear not only what meaning is, but especially how it is created (Kurzman, 2008).

After completing the initial data collection and a preliminary analysis, I decided to write and use a variant of the 'deep story' as part of my methodology (Russell-Hochschild, 2019). A deep story is a story based on a concise metaphor that expresses the essence of the analysis. A deep story can evoke a range of emotions in the people it concerns. Based on the initial analysis, I wrote a deep story of Spoken Word and gave the people who participated in my research the chance to respond to it. I incorporated their reactions into the final analysis. I chose to use a deep story for two reasons. First, it is a form of process validation (Flick, 2007) towards the research field. Second, it is a way of talking *with* people rather than *about* people (Ingold, 2017). As stated above Ingold distinguishes between ethnography as a documentation of a culture and anthropology as a science of human possibilities. Ingold emphasizes the transformation that the anthropologist undergoes in the field: not only are the examined subjects dynamic and porous, the researcher is too. That changes the role of the research subjects from being studied to discussion partners; discussion partners with a vision on what kind of (human) lives are possible and with a drive towards engendering those ones that are desirable. From this point of departure, it makes sense for a researcher to (re)-present their voice and display their story holistically—for example in a deep story. Certainly in this study of the Spoken Word scene, where power and inequality play a major role, this use of the deep story leads to a beautiful congruency between the methodology and the character of the researched practice itself. It is precisely this congruency that is celebrated by Ingold in his collection of essays *Being Alive*, in which he calls on the anthropologist not to look away from the field when it comes time to write, but to stay in touch with the researched practice.

Furthermore, I have to briefly reflect on the fact that I am not only a researcher but also a poet. Both words have general as well as more personal connotations. Moreover, both words refer to specific (professional) practices with their own ways of being, doing and talking. The writing, watching and being of the researcher and the poet each have distinct norms and rules and each aim to have different effects on the world. For me, these two aspects of my identity are difficult to separate. As a poet I am often analytical and philosophical; as an anthropologist I often use poems in my field notes to interpret what I see. My poetry sometimes gives me easier access to closed communities than my being an anthropologist; my being an anthropologist

sometimes gives me easier access to institutions than my poetry. I believe the combination adds value in offering a counterbalance to the esteem of certain forms of knowledge over others by means of so-called "*institutional regimes of truth*" (Rabinow, 1991, p. 73). Counteracting too far-reaching objectification and rationalization of life (Weber, 2017) can take place through alternative forms of knowledge and other ontologies (Smith, 2012) such as poetry (Cahnmann, 2003). Because I am a Spoken Word poet myself, and I systematically reflected on my positionality throughout the research this ethnography is partly auto-ethnographic (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2012; Ellis, 2002). I consider this auto-ethnographic component of my research not only as a resistance to a dominant objectifying worldview, an attempt to gain epistemological freedom and re-cognizing the situated knowledge that an anthropologist acquires in the field, but also as a celebration of human existence.

In keeping with the narrative theme of Spoken Word and the juxtaposition of anthropologists and Spoken Word artists as storytellers, I have taken the following quotation from Carrither's "anthropology: the moral science of possibilities":

"our capacity to participate in our uniquely human form of complex social life is founded in the ability to find and follow a thread of narrative through a skein of events. This capacity has a passive side, being able to interpret human cause and human effect, but also an active one, being able to use storytelling to convince others of our interpretation. On this view a story includes (1) characters, with their feelings, memories, intentions, and attitudes, (2) their actions, (3) the effects of those actions on others' feelings, memories, intentions, and attitudes, and (4) so on, as those others may respond to the actions of the first, making up an unfolding plot. Stories, in other words, are synthetic, linking characters to their thoughts, to their actions, to the consequences of those actions, to the further characters and reactions of those affected, and onward in potentially limitless chains" p. 443

There are now many authors from different disciplines that centralize story telling as the fundamental human capacity for meaning and reality making. Most famously Yuval Noah Harari in his book 'Sapiens', but also Emily Esfahani Smith (TED, 2021) when she states story telling is one the key components of human meaning-making. In that light the structure of the thesis is loosely based on the components of a story as stated by Carrithers above and on the theme of storytelling more broadly. This serves a dual function of providing a structure to the thesis and also in assisting to operationalize the concepts from the theoretical framework, by looking through the combined lens of narrative structure and theoretical framework at the data and triangulating where possible different viewpoints and sources, I hope to substantiate the main argument of this thesis.

Thus, the first chapter is called "setting the scene" in which the initial theory ('story') and societal context are introduced, then the part which mainly describes the methodology is called the "script". After this follows a chapter which discusses a number of the interviews and main informants called "actors", then a chapter which addresses mainly the fieldnotes called "actions", then a chapter called "the plot" in which the effects of those actions are discussed, including the deep story and the

auto-ethnographic elements. Last but not least, there is a brief concluding chapter or “epilogue”. In these chapters I do not limit my discussion solely to “actors” or “actions” for obviously there is an overlap between the two, rather I have tried to create a natural flow and blend theory and data within this flow, the structure serving as a “thread” through the thesis.

In writing a play there is a narrative arc, consisting of three elements: exposition, rising action and resolution. The introductory chapter might be considered the exposition or setting of the scene, the chapters on actions and actors might be considered rising action and the deep story and conclusion might be considered a resolution of sorts. As said before, the aim of this thesis was to be in dialogue with the field and the people in it. Despite this being an academic work, I have tried to shy away from implying a relationship between a (white) impartial observer with *facts* and (non-white) research participants with *opinions* (de Abreu, 2018). I have tried to do so in such a way that I hope shows that I am aware of the ‘proper’ ways of doing research by utilizing and referencing the correct methodologies and canonical thinkers where appropriate. Yet I have also tried to be creative and sincere in my engagement with and presentation of the material and tried to find wiggle room for a more daring approach. In this respect, it is worth quoting at length Louis Yako with words I wish I had found a decade earlier:

“When I was doing my doctorate in cultural anthropology at Duke, while some academics only considered “rigorous” research when students cited what they perceived as the ultimate authority on certain topics (usually chosen Euro-American scholars), I found it very empowering when Walter Mignolo reminded me that “theory is wherever you find it.” If you overhear an old lady on a bus saying something that can shatter everything you know about a certain concept or theoretical framework, do not even hesitate to theorize her words and give her full credit for it. It is possible for graffiti in a poor African American neighborhood to theorize and capture the race reality more than anything written by privileged Euro-American scholars on the topic of race. It is likely that a refugee in Europe might have a more insightful assessment of how democracy works in France or Germany than a privileged professor in either country writing from the ivory towers and from a privileged perspective. It is possible to find insights in a blog by buried writers whose insights might be way more original and groundbreaking than articles published by pundits, journalists, and writers on the payroll of the Empire whose works appear in the NYTimes, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and other imperial publications that try to propagate the false impression of free thinking and objective writing. My key point here is not necessarily to favor any source over another, or to pay attention to some sources and ignore others. **Rather, the point is to treat any insightful perspective solely based on the value of the content not on where that perspective comes from or who published it.**” (Yako, 2021) (emphasis mine)

Chapter 2. Actors

I interviewed several poets and spoke to several more in the course of the fieldwork. While actors can also refer to institutions, the audience or even if one was being creative, a venue or medium, I limit myself here mainly to a selection of the poets that I interviewed and myself. I made the selection for pragmatic reasons (i.e. I had most access to them) or because they represented what Weber (2012) called 'ideal types' or because they provided heuristic contrast with such ideal types. I will not discuss in detail all of the interviewed here, but make a composite picture that provides support for my main argument, which might benefit repeating here:

"Spoken Word artists use the performativity of their performances to actively bring forth a desired future. A future in which there is more space for them to perform their respective identities as they deem fit, rather than the role or identity prescribed to or projected unto them. They do so from a belief in the richness of the diversity of (human) life. Through self-expression they elucidate societal structures, prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community."

In the introduction I say that Spoken Word artists often belong to one or more marginalized identities. Simply listing marginalized aspects of identities does not make a thesis, however, it makes sense to substantiate what I mean by this and how this relates to the people I interviewed. Of the people I interviewed three had black Surinamese or Caribbean roots (in the people I saw on stage there were many more) of which two were women and one was adopted, one was Turkish-Jewish-Moroccan-Dutch and male, the three remaining ones were white, all of which were neurodivergent, i.e. one had ADHD, another had anxiety and a third was bipolar. Furthermore, at least one expressed a non-binary approach to gender, one other interviewee also expressed some (undiagnosed, but under treatment) issues around attachment. I did not set out to establish the various aspects of identity, so I did not ask for this information directly. For this reason it could be that I missed other aspects of identity that were not mentioned. All of the poets that were interviewed also addressed these aspects of identity in their work to varying degrees. As a general rule the spaces I visited in the east (and middle) of the country were more white and in that sense less culturally diverse, although the spaces did often give off vibes that are often referred to as either 'hip' or 'alternative'. In Amsterdam and Rotterdam the spaces were more culturally diverse and on a number of occasions white people were in the minority. That being said, in events that had paid entrance, performers were relatively more often non-white, whereas the audience was relatively more often white or mixed. I will return to that observation later. It might be worth re-iterating here, that identities are plural (hooks, 1992) and dynamic (Braidotti, 2010), co-constituted through social performances (Butler, 1990) and lived experience, and that they are positional—meaning that they vary from person to person, place to place, and time to time based on unique context—and furthermore that there is a difference

in the intersecting (Devon W. Carbado, 2013) identities we ascribe to *ourselves* and those that *others* ascribe to us.

I do not have enough information here to make claims on the prevalence of or cultural stigma around mental health in various cultural groups, it is however at least interesting that all the white people I interviewed and some of the ones I saw on stage exhibited some degree of neurodivergence¹⁸. Furthermore of the Spoken Word artists that I interviewed 4 were vegan or vegetarian (that I am aware of), I myself am also vegan, and know many more Spoken Word artists that are. Perhaps it is not strange that people that concern themselves with issues of justice decide to forego animal products, but it is very high above the national mean of 1%. Taken together this makes me wonder (and no more than that for now) whether there is somehow a relation between a certain psychological sensitivity towards suffering in the self and others which also drives one to express oneself poetically or at least artistically. In fact, Wallace (1991), Wakefield (1991) and Roy (1996) have found for various groups that creativity and sensitivity are linked and while this is not a thesis in psychology it does provide a rough triangulation for this matter. Thus, giving a sense of possible mechanisms that might link suffering and empathy to creativity. Driving Spoken Word artists to successfully create the affective performances that are the subject of this thesis. Affect also helps us here again, because it refers to both the possibility of affecting others but also the possibility of being affected, also understood as sensitivity or vulnerability (Abadía, 2021). During the very first event that I visited, I talked about vulnerability and nervousness with the host, who said a performer needs to be a little bit nervous in order to connect with the audience. Indeed, according to researcher Brené Brown (2012), vulnerability is the prerequisite for connection.

My goal for this chapter is to give an intimate sense of the varied motivations that might cause people to write and be part of the Spoken Word scene, and thus illuminate the contingent idiosyncratic nature of this scene. I do this by constructing partial biographies for some of the interviewees in so far as they help me explicate the main argument of the thesis. I then go on to supplement these biographies with quotes and other insights from the interviews. I start with myself, because I am most intimately acquainted with myself and because I believe that the closest we can come to objectivity is by laying bare our subjectivity (Yako, 2021). Furthermore, I think that snippets of more subjective writing call to life the life-world of ethnography more compellingly and accurately than dry exultations of theory alone. While teleological reasoning about cultures and especially the linear positive progression that was once ascribed to so-called advanced versus primitive cultures has rightfully gone out of fashion (quote). Telos in the sense of purpose and having a goal is very much alive within people and cultures. The reason why I bring this up and why I refer to the contingent and idiosyncratic nature of this practice (and most practices for that matter) is that I want to strike a balance between different modes of explanation. On the one hand, as human agents with our fluctuating drives, missions, motivations, meaning-making etc., and on the other hand, the fickle finger of fate as it steers us this, then that way, leaving us to make sense of our path in its wake. That is also why

¹⁸ Or whether perhaps neurodivergence can serve as an entry point into an art form privileging marginalized identities

I start with myself, not because I think I am THE exemplary Spoken Word artist or because I like talking about myself that much, but because the insight I have into my own life allows me to better show the mix of chance and inclination that shaped my elliptical path towards and through the scene of Spoken Word. Through showing the contingent nature of my path while not disavowing a sense of telos and specificity as they too matter, I hope to give more flesh to the empathic dictum of anthropology mentioned above: "I could have stood in your shoes."

Partial (auto)biography of my life relating to Spoken Word - My story as our Story

For my 9th birthday my sister gave me the Greatest Hits (double)-Album by Tupac. He'd been shot and killed the previous year and in her infinite wisdom my sister had decided she would rather see me become a hip-hopper rather than a 'Gabber'¹⁹. I owe her a lot. Little did she know, that 9-year old me would fall asleep every night listening to Tupac describe life in the American ghetto's in a journalistic style interspersed with emotional appeals, party music, and masculine posturing. Even less could she know that by age 18 when the last of his posthumous albums was released I could rap all 24 of his albums almost verbatim from the top of my head. While the educational system was trying to fill my head with now mostly defunct (and detrimental) theories of economic growth, Tupac was describing the dark side of this growth in the heartland of global racialized capitalism.

Perhaps there seems to be some incongruency between a young Dutch white boy from a little farmer's village listening to rap from the American ghetto's, but there is more than simple exported consumerism at play here. As Tupac says in the documentary "Tupac: Resurrection", he made music for the underdog or people that sympathize with the underdog. Thus his music found a home globally with people that shared this sense of sympathy with (or being) the underdog.

In my home town I was bullied but I found homes elsewhere. Tupac—as was my grandfather—was a member of the communist party in his youth. His mother was a famous Black Panther and Tupac remained politically active throughout his life. Part of his purpose in engaging with music and popular culture was to eventually use the influence that fame brought to affect political change. His music told me about a reality that was below the radar of dominant discourse. When we would visit larger cities, I would ask my mom why all the people in the poorer area were black. His anger, sensitivity and incisive social commentary rang more true as explanation than any textbook ever has.

The second home that I found was in Sufism, in a somewhat unlikely turn of events my father was introduced to this spiritual lineage in Amsterdam via a current that originated in Islamic India. At age 12 I received a Sufi name 'Alim' and received a spiritual mission from my teacher: to write poetry every day. I also became infused

¹⁹ A style of electronic music associated with bald heads, trainers, track suits and (hard)drugs.

with a sense of social justice that was present not just in my family but in the larger Sufi group. Some of the teachers had been active with Martin Luther King in the sixties in Alabama and were involved in peace-activism in Iraq. Both these spiritual and intellectual homes showed me fundamentally different ways of looking at the world than I was taught in school. They also showed me the power and beauty of different lived experiences and of sharing and celebrating stories of how the world could and should be.

Only in college did I start to find the critical theory and the intellectual language to express the concepts behind this journey. Especially at SOAS university I was exposed to a whole range of critical thinkers and, most importantly, to students that expressed this thought in action and art. This was my first real introduction into Spoken Word, perhaps not coincidentally this seemed to coincide with a movement in the Netherlands towards more discussion of race and the colonial past. Only later did I find out that the Fanon I discovered through Spoken Word artists (and rappers I met while at SOAS) had been popular in my mother's day too. On my return to Holland I was encouraged to join a poetry collective for a series of workshops. Because of unclear circumstances I was only invited for the fourth workshop, the night that a famous poet showed up: one of the founding members of the Last Poets²⁰. I was not yet familiar with his work, but was impressed by his powerful presence and especially his poetry. That night I told my mom I had seen the God of poetry. I got to speak my own poetry in front of him and it was warmly and kindly received. I did not yet know at the time that I was talking to one of the Godfathers of rap, the artistic expression that had influenced me and so many across the globe or that his son had collaborated with my hero, Tupac.

Later, after I had spent some time in Kenya where there was also a vibrant culture of Spoken Word, hip-hop and reggae (amongst others), I returned for a number of evenings to this poet and received his stories. The stories were often captured in poetry and ranged from stories about race, to reflections on theater plays and the nature of being and reality. A darker story also came out, about how race had influenced his art and life. He spoke of an experience that many gifted young black people know, that intelligence is not recognized in them by the educational system. He consciously shied away from that system, and (like me) found a home in a spiritual community at a young age. Later he fled from the United States in a conflict around money with his bandmates who wanted to make a record with White Man, while he wanted to start a black-owned label. What also seemed dark, is that despite or perhaps because of his tremendous sensitivity and gift with words, he seemed stuck in repeating the stories without clear resolution.

A synchronicity in our lives which we traced together was that in the same weekend that he lost his partner and the mother of one of his children I started seeing my partner (and now mother of my child). I mention these events because they give meaning to my life and they influence how I see the world. Synchronicities inhabit my

²⁰ The Last Poets is a reference to a South African poetry collective from the 1920's that believed they would be the last poets before violent revolution would break out. They were at the height of fame during the 60ties and 70ties and lived through a resurgence in recent years as the popularity of hip-hop and Spoken Word has grown.

world and imbue it with meaning, as they do for some of the poets I interviewed during this research. It is important for me to mention these synchronicities, because they feature so little in academic literature, except (mostly) when described from an outsider's perspective (Guadeloupe, 2018) (Jung, 1976). Academia is built around a rational framework, yet I will let these events sit here, without rationalizing them. Their meaning lies in themselves, not in what I might later rationalize about them. They do not need to be, do, or prove anything beyond what they were in their happening, to paraphrase one of the poets I talked with for this research. Their not-needing-to-be-true does not make them untrue or less meaningful.

Since the above experiences I have tried to infuse my work as a researcher with a respect for the arts as an independent and vital knowledge form and as an expression of different lived experiences. This is what led me to Action Research, I felt this was one the few forms of research that I knew at the time that honored not only the lived-experience in the form of stories of people but also honored their potential as actors and authors of their own fate; it furthermore went some way towards at least dampening the somewhat solipsistic claims to truth of academics. While not perfect, it started to allow me some tools to engage with people openly and showed me ways to attempt to bridge the gap of the rational objective language of academia and the living poetry of every-day life. In the course of my work as an Action Researcher I would come across Spoken Word artists at various points. Doing work with a community in an informal settlement in Nairobi I found them. Doing work in an impoverished neighborhood in Groningen, I found them. Working with young artists and filmmakers and a Neighborhood University in Arnhem, I found them. A painter with psychosis scribbling stanzas on the walls of abandoned factories next to a slum in Nairobi; a Palestinian-Dutch youth worker/rapper/filmmaker turned Spoken Word artist; a Somalian-Dutch student and Spoken Word artist; a Dutch artist openly struggling with mental health issues while being a successful poet; an Afghan-Dutch artist fighting gentrification in Amsterdam; an aboriginal polymath poet wandering Europe passport-less while self-publishing his poetry. People using their art to address injustices of all kinds. The list is a lot longer, but let me zoom in on one story that exemplifies something of what Spoken Word can be and to start to introduce one of the main characters of this thesis.

When my work on this ethnography had started I was still involved with a project around young filmmakers in Arnhem. Working with a kind of organizational consultant-cum-youth worker who used her access to the leaders of organizations and institutions to privilege the stories of marginalized people, and not only privilege their stories but put them in the driver's seat, to truly reverse the narrative of who has the knowledge. During the course of this work I mentioned my new research on Spoken Word and somebody referred me to Lev Avitan²¹, an Arnhem native Spoken Word artist with Moroccan-Jewish-Turkish roots. He became my key informant and also a friend. I first interviewed him way back in early 2020, right before the pandemic

²¹ When names of informants are mentioned it is so only with permission. I sometimes opted to include their names, because it is more fitting of a thesis which aims to treat participants as conversational partners rather than participants to be protected by anonymity.

became wide-spread. The person who referred me to him said that he was too big for art alone and indeed, his art is some of the most political and most intellectually supported poetry I know. That first meeting we talked for over an hour about his art and mine, about life and the world and how to change it. When he sketched his political vision for the future I said: "I am with you," which coincidentally were also lines in his poetry. Later, I met him in a session with another activist-poet about gentrification organized by the same consultant-cum-youth worker I mention above. He did a piece echo-ing ubuntu philosophy (which I will discuss later), tying social critique to ecological awareness, tying everything to everything in an interconnected web. He said he missed community so I invited him to my home. He stayed for a few days, we went for walks in nature, discussed life, love and happiness, he read stories to my daughter. It is from this perspective that I share part of his story here with his permission. His words will sound throughout this thesis, explicitly and also indirectly.

His-story-that-is-our-story

Lev grew up in an impoverished area, an area that many of his friends have trouble getting away from. He sees the harm this environment does and the harm the larger society does to people in this environment. He says it is no wonder his art tries to address these issues. His sister was one of the people targeted by the tax-scandal, where many mostly non-white poor people were wrongly targeted for fraud based on racist prejudice at the tax office. His mother moved from Morocco to Israel as a little girl. His father was Turkish in bad health and not very close to him, he also had a Dutch addicted step-father that he was close with. He celebrates what his environment meant to him next to relating to the shame of not having enough. He also shares the story of the whole street lining up to hug him, waving and singing his mother onward to the next life when she passed earlier this year, even though corona did not permit such gatherings. He went from studying music at MBO level²² to studying philosophy at university level. He emphasizes the lack of recognition for his intellectual abilities from most of his teachers, as do many gifted non-white students that went on to become famous poets, rappers or intellectuals (the Last Poet mentioned above, Malcom X, Nas, Mitchell Esajas and on and on). We talk about the lack of awareness around race he encounters and the bias from professors he encountered even at university level. People with little qualification teach courses on race by simply regurgitating their prejudice with only a hint of scholarship, they don't take his critical questions seriously and even tokenize his experiences (a common refrain for many non-white (Spoken Word) (artists)). He started expressing his anger in music as a rapper—something he still does for therapeutic purposes—then moved on to Spoken Word²³, where he found more room for nuance and slowly cultivated that anger into productive art. On stage he likes to get his political message across in as clear as possible a manner, his art serves his message—never the other way

²² What we might call practical schooling.

²³ Notably many Spoken Word artists start out as rappers.

around. This is not exceptional for Spoken Word artists, but he is on the more political side of the spectrum between Art & Politics.

When he comes to my house for a few days we share many stories, we share perspective(s) on love, life and art. We talk about the colonial matrix of and the wound it harbors. We talk about the nature of reality and how race plays out in society and at universities, we talk about what art means to us. We share an evening of poetry and walks in nature. I also ask him to comment on the 'deep story' I wrote about Spoken Word. He does not change a thing about it, except one line about black activism. He does not disagree with the line, but says I might be overstating at least to the extent that some white poets, active in the Dutch Spoken Word Scene might be scared off by it. Which is interesting because he had a falling out with some of these very poets recently about a topic very closely related to this. The poets had said that the "Truth is in the middle" with regards to the results of the then recent national election in which right-wing parties had taken a lot of votes. This had angered Lev, he found it difficult to be friends with somebody who was willing to take people that denied him the right to be in this country (based on his cultural background) seriously. So he cut off the 'digital' friendship with the poet in question. Even though he did this, he still found it important to tell me to cut out the line about black activism from the deep story, in case I put off the poet in question. This appeared to me to emphasize the importance of diversity and community in the Spoken Word scene even in times of conflict; attention was given to ensure each voice a place. Of course this one interpretation does not prove the argument, but in the rest of this thesis I hope to offer more evidence of the importance of diversity and community in action in the Spoken Word scene.

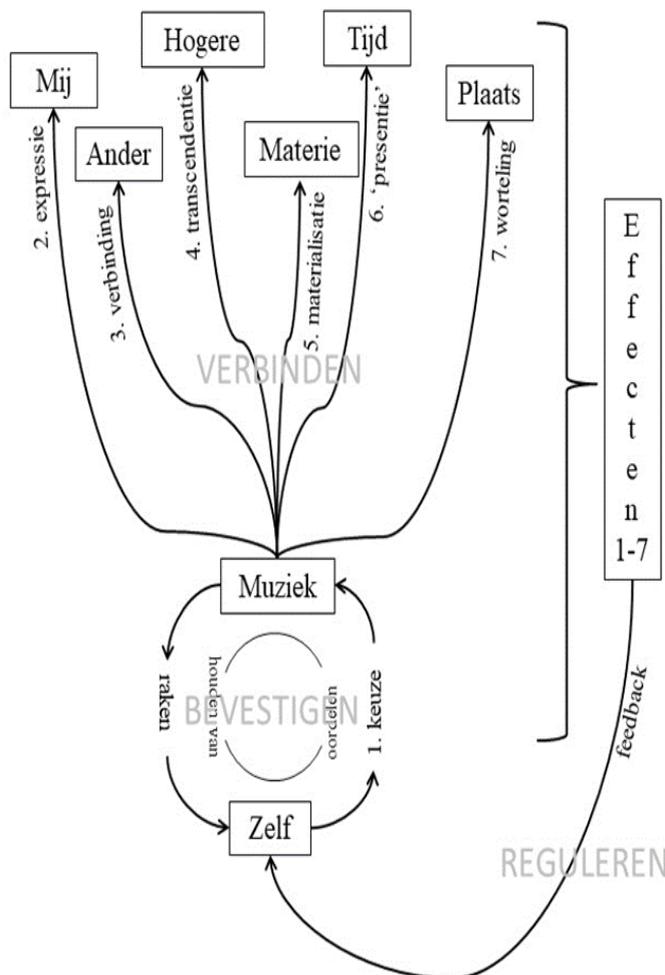
Interviews

I will comment on and tie in elements of these biographies especially in the deep story. First, let me offer insights from the interview with Lev. Before I do so I wish to briefly introduce the model for meaning created by prof Evert Bisschop Boele (inserted right) that I used to code the interviews. He built it using grounded theory interviewing over 40 people about their relationship to music. While the way meaning is attributed in Spoken Word turned out to be different in some respects, there were many similarities and even though I eventually strayed from a too strict adherence to the model and the codes it provided, the process of coding and working with the model definitely shaped my thinking and eventual conclusion.

I used this model because I wanted to test if this model based on grounded theory could fit the data I had gathered in a similar open and dialogical way. The model was useful for describing and interpreting my data. It allowed me to identify and relate key elements, and as a result was key in formulating my preliminary analysis (which I will allude to shortly). However, the model did not allow me sufficient space to grapple with more complex inter-relationships between Self and Other. I feel it is precisely how these two dimensions overlap; so how Spoken Word artists experience meaning through expressing (S)self in relationship to others and attempting to affect the world in this manner. Especially, how this takes place in a context of existing hierarchies of power which Others them in relation to a normative

Self of the dominant society. In other words, the model was helpful to elucidate the mechanisms through which individuals generate meaning as they relate to the world around them, but it did not give sufficient attention to matters of social hierarchies and power. While a valuable tool, it was perhaps too neutral for a cultural practice which deals so directly with issues of power. To phrase it differently still, the model helps to describe and categorize the practice, but for the main purpose of this thesis—to be in dialogical relationship with the field—it spoke too much from within the existing power structures. For this thesis I set out to discover not only the different types of connections that people form with others, but why they form those connections in specific ways and what that means to them, and what it feels like to do so.

The model distinguishes three main functions of cultural participation as found in Boele's model for cultural participation: **affirming**, **connecting**, and **regulating** self and others (Bisschop Boele, 2013; see Fig. 1). *Self-affirmation* occurs when the feedback loop of making active choices in their practice and being affected by this practice leads to the feeling: 'this is who I am', this is the realm of likes, dislikes and also 'taste' as they shape self-image. *Connecting* takes place in many different ways, but has to do with instances where the self is in active relation to the world around it.



This happens in six ways: 1. People connect to the world by making themselves visible to their environment (expression); 2. by relating to or forming relationships with the Other; 3. by transcending to higher planes (of self, beauty, religion, spirituality); 4. by focusing on the material world (in the case of Spoken Word perhaps with a poetry collection, tangible income, or a notebook); 5. and by placing themselves in time (connecting to the past, being in the moment, or wanting to shape the future) 7. and place (e.g. to a city or stage).

Affirming the self and connecting the self to the world results in effects that can be used to influence or *regulate* the self, others, and the world—for example, by listening to a poem to evoke a certain feeling, or writing a political poem in the hope that it will bring about social change.

Needless to say, the model is a schematic and simplified representation of a complex reality. The different parts are active simultaneously within specific practitioners and practices in idiosyncratic ways and their order in the model does not necessarily relate to their relative importance.

The model helped me group the interview-data and see that the focus was very heavy on three aspects of it: *self-expression, connection with others and influencing the world*. There were other aspects that were also important and each poet exhibited a slightly different mix of motivations but these were present with all poets. In fact I often found them as necessary parts of one cocktail; Self-expression in community/connection with others to affect/influence the world. This mix exhibits itself differently for different poets, let us start to explicate how by examining actual data, starting with Lev. Below are three quotes from our interview that best sum up his approach to Spoken Word:

"Politics should be clear, with a message. If you interpret my message wrongly, then you can assess and dismiss me wrongfully, or you take dangerous actions, I really don't want that. I notice that in the way I write, I am very much occupied with you understanding my meaning exactly as I intended you to. And in any case, of course you will link (it) with the things that already live inside your mind, what is there and what is not, but (I) actually hope to limit that journey as much as possible, to be as clear as possible. Is it then still beautiful? Is it still art? A lot of the ambiguity is gone."

Lev

Here he states very obviously his intention to spread his political message in no uncertain terms. He is more than willing to sacrifice artistic qualities if they get in the way of that clarity. Interestingly, he does very much admire the use of metaphor and ambiguity in another well-known Spoken Word artists that I also interviewed. In that sense, it shows again his ability and the ability of the scene to harbor a diverse set of expressions. He is clear about what he wants to achieve, but he does not want to limit another's expression and can even be moved by it. In Lev's case we see a clear focus on *connection with others (as a code and part of explanatory model)*, but more than with most other poets (that I interviewed) this connection is mainly conceived of in terms of *political* community. In the quote above the emphasis is perhaps more on how Lev wants shape society, in the quote below there is more focus on how society shaped him. Practically, this also gets expressed in Lev's attempts at political organization and linking with other artists, academics and social workers. You could say that two moral questions-turned-imperative guide Lev's (artistic) practice: *What should connection (with others, with the environment) look like? And how can we as a community achieve that ideal form of connection?*

"So I think, the next ten minutes you are going to hear about, what did society make of me, and what do I want to make of society? Society apparently... Apparently, that I see this type of injustice has to do with how I was raised. I come from underprivileged neighborhoods, do you then think it is strange that I talk about it? I come from the part where my neighbors are mostly in debt, and how they deal with their children, ...

and ...²⁴, and different cultures, all those kinds of things. Police in the neighborhood, I experienced that, so then it's not strange that I talk about that. So really hyper-personal, except at this stage it is no longer about how I feel about all this. Yes, of course that lies under it, and you can hear it from my tone hopefully. So of all the things I don't say, I talk about my feelings about this." Lev

This quote is important, firstly because it shows Lev harks back to and anchors his art in his personal lived experience. Secondly because it shows a very common feature of Spoken Word; poets using a personal story as illustrative of larger societal structures²⁵. Thirdly, it shows a common feature of (Spoken Word) artists; they start to write out of anger or suffering and to express themselves, but then the art evolves into processing these emotions and turning them towards having an effect on the conditions that were the cause of some of the anger and suffering to begin with. Furthermore, it shows a sometimes arbitrary distinction between what is sometimes called thought or theory and personal feelings and emotion. Even though Lev's art has evolved to address the societal structures he mentions, it remains infused with deep feeling.

This resonates with Deleuze's distinction between art, science and philosophy as three knowledge forms; art serving to (broadly speaking) generate new qualitative experiences of emotion and sensation; science serving to describe and measure the world and formulate it into explanatory functions; and philosophy serving to generate new concepts for understanding the world (Arnott, 1999). Importantly, and relevant here, the different knowledge forms as conceptualized by Deleuze are not fully separate, but fluidly merge into another, thus supporting the argument that we should take artists seriously as authors of our cultural stories. These stories are not simply fiction, but actively shape the world we inhabit, and the "we" that inhabits it. The following quote by Fred Moten beautifully further disrupts the divide between theory and poetry: "I never thought of these two things (theory & poetry) as so utterly different... I do think in the end they constitute two different forms of description. I think it's the same work, you know... People have different approaches to things and lot of it is just kind of temperament, you know..."²⁶

The next quote illustrates the main argument and supporting theoretical framework of this thesis very well, it also introduces a poem by Lev that will be discussed shortly.

"The longed for result (for this poem), and what I often receive as feedback, is that people say: 'wow, I really did not know what to expect with this poem, I thought you were serious.' Do you know how sick that is? That when I say on stage: 'I hit my wife, I rape your daughter, and so on'. You get it? That (confusion) became precisely the point of this poem. I started out performing the poem to show: look at how society treats me. Then the point became that if you believe this (racist ideas about me), it

²⁴ Unclear recording

²⁵ In the movie *The Wisdom of Trauma* Gabor Mate offers the suggestion that sharing the story of our trauma, is also part of the step towards healing, hopefully that is something that Spoken Word artists can do with our cultural story.

²⁶ *The Black Outdoors* [Video file]. (n.d.). Retrieved August 31, 2020, from <https://fhi.duke.edu/videos/black-outdoors-fred-moten-saidiya-hartman> 51:50-53:00.

shows something about our society. It shows racism. (It is) Not my anger, not my pain that shows, 'oh (there is) anger, oh (there is) racism, he is (must be) sad...' That's why I started sounding slightly less angry. I looked at the effect of what I say, and (my self-expression) got a lesser function." Lev

So here again we see a poem, which started as self-expression and a way to understand the world, slowly transformed (based on the interaction with the audience) into something that is supposed to elicit a certain response from the audience and ultimately help them achieve an awareness of how they viewed the performer (Lev) as a racialized other. It saddens me that he failed to receive compassion for the identity projected onto him by society and the hurt this caused him, and that still he serves as an educator to the people that Otherize him.

Carrithers (2005, p. 434) states that:

"Stories, in other words, are synthetic, linking characters to their thoughts, to their actions, to the consequences of those actions, to the further characters and reactions of those affected, and onward in potentially limitless chains." . If we frame this process in terms of the statement above by this quote, we can see a number of things here that help us identify elements of the structuring theoretical framework and the main argument of thesis. Stories are different based on position; first Lev builds a story out his lived experience (which is in turn a composite of his unique person responding to a not uncommon set of circumstances present in a unique manner in his life). However, this story holds different emotional and explanatory salience for different people. It also shows another entryway into how narrative (and thus society) can be transformed; next to opening up vistas on different lived experiences, it is also possible to thread a different route through the chain of events and characters, to re-align them in new ways creating new meanings.

Though initially it started as self-expression of anger and alienation mainly, the piece was transformed through interaction with the audience. So Lev and the audience are presenting different S(s)elves to each (O)(o)ther in a feedback-driven process, this is partly the 'sauce' of everyday life. We meet each other and play roles in each other's lives. However, this happens in specific cultural contexts, where there are prescribed (though not always explicit) roles for us to play. What is significant is that the Spoken Word artist, in this case Lev, becomes cognizant of the images of Other projected onto his self. When his initial attempt to communicate the pain this causes is barely understood, he consciously plays into this, and uses this mis-projection of Other unto his self to confront people with the Othering they do. Although we share a world (as Lev and his audience also do), people inhabit very different stories within that world, different stories about events and the characters that feature in them. An intervention is made, one could say, on a personal level; Lev makes clear to his audience the effects of their prejudice on his being self. On a collective level, one could say, a mirror is held up to Dutch society and how it Others. In terms of the Carrithers quote above, it can be said that Lev is creating a new story by making people aware of the stories they inhabit, and how their actions, thoughts and the consequences thereof are related to other characters, i.e. people.

Viewing this dynamic from the guiding theoretical framework/question (which I'll repeat here once more):

“How are iterations of Self and Other, residing in the cultural archive, crafted into hybrid narratives by Spoken Word artists in the Netherlands, as they itinerate through identity and voice in affective performances of critical personhood?”

Lev plays with different versions of himself and the people in his audience (which can stretch beyond the people in the room) as individuals, but also the images and projections attached to that in the cultural archive; the Dutch white person as good and innocent, yet also the actual historical violence perpetrated by the Dutch nation, the projection of violence onto the Other (in this case Lev). In this playing or iteration new versions/iterations of self and other are produced (for instance in the moment of interaction between Lev and his audience, or in the moment that Lev comes to see his personal suffering as indicative of larger societal structures). Through this new relating of self and other a hybrid narrative is formed, it is composed partly of elements of old stories, yet it features new characters (self and other, persons), new events (new meetings/conversations), and new possibilities. All of this touches on who we are as people, what this means for the Dutch identity and self-image. Meanwhile experiments of voice are done; who speaks, in what tone, from what position; affect is played with and utilized in emotion even as it travels through the entire assemblage (quote), and our current dominant societal constellation is critically questioned. Implicit in all of this is also a belief in the meaning of coming together and working through these things, even though not all parties involved might become part of this exchange for the same reasons.

We’ve now looked at the perspective offered by Lev in the interview quotes on his own craft through two different lenses; Carrithers’s framing of how story functions for human beings and the perspective offered by the theoretical framework. Before we address how this supports the main argument, let me introduce the actual poem:

The Stranger

I am the monolith, immovable

I won't succumb to reason

Assimilation is foreign to my index and syncretism is perceived as treason

I am unrestrained anger, probably sexual frustration. Probably because I left my wife in Al Safiah in danger So, when your daughter is crying

I was the one who depredate her

I am proudly narrow minded

need to know nothing more than 604 pages And when your son is bruised

I was one who struck annihilation

I am submissive

*My native tongue is explicit
primal violence is all i illicit.
So when He speaks I promised I'd listen*

*He tells me to go,
I blow and take as much families with me How can you kill someone
that already wants to go quickly?*

*I am that Muslim you were looking for
I am that Muslim here for you to hang your whole opinion on I am your bias, I am
your idea of me it seems
that I only come alive in fantasy or tv screens*

*You might know me as deplorable mentality medieval
Lack a moral code
am forced to mutilate my feeble*

*I am the fortune-hunter in the west
While my home front lives opulent
I am the vulture who seeks for your office and tries to topple it*

*I prey on your jobs
I am cheaper than anyone white and Christian at the same time I'm indolent
and a leech on your welfare system*

*I am devilish manipulation
my smile will assail your women, and if they come
They will wake up oblivious at 6 and only hear my lord singing*

*Don't you realize I am the epitome of male
See how I parade with my pride
I am all that you wish*

you could do to your bride

I am that Muslim you were looking for

I am that Muslim here for you to hang your whole opinion on. I am your bias, i am your idea of me it seems

that I mostly come alive in your fantasy and on tv screens"

This is the English original, find a Dutch adaptation in the footnotes below of when Lev performed this at a anti-racism protest in Nijmegen in 2018²⁷. I base part of my analysis here on that recording, but also without watching the video the analysis holds. I have also seen him perform it live in Rotterdam at "Geen Daden Maar Woorden" ("Words Speak Louder Than Actions") festival. The poem itself also knows multiple iterations, some pertaining to textual difference, some to different performances for different audiences. As I stated above, we can easily see that Lev's poem (almost exhaustively) addresses many of the projections/iterations onto in this case the Islamic Others as found in the cultural archive. It is also relatively easy to see how this work came in part from his personal lived experience.

Let us return to the main argument of the thesis:

"Spoken Word artists use the performativity of their performances to actively bring forth a desired future. A future in which there is more space for them to perform their respective identities as they deem fit, rather than the role or identity prescribed to or projected unto them. They do so from a belief in the richness of the diversity of (human) life. Through self-expression they elucidate societal structures, prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community."

In the introduction I stated that insofar as utterances bring to life certain identities they can be called performative (Butler, 1990). While an identity is very clearly being called to life here, in this case, the performativity is being cleverly played with; the intent is not to make the stereotype real, but to shed light on it, so as ultimately to banish it. It might not seem very clear from this poem that "desired futures" are being brought forth, but obviously the performance of such a poem at an anti-racism protest is clearly in support of a "desired future". Evidently, "societal structures" are being "elucidated" "through self-expression," in this case the racist stereotypes found in the cultural archive and how they relate to one another. The prefiguring is taking place in this case, in the being together, in the audience listening to Lev, and in the woman that comes and holds an umbrella over his head against the rain while he speaks. A "belief in the richness and diversity of human life" and claiming space for their identities as they see fit is less self-evident from this piece, although implicit, I will address that further with a another poem by Lev. The poem is quite long, but since it addresses the main issues of the thesis directly and since this thesis is supposed to be a conversation *with* the poets that were part of the research, I believe it can warrant

²⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=FpHqCV99EEM&t=38s&ab_channel=Doorbraakeu

such a lengthy engagement.

The context in which I first heard this, was at a kind of online symposium with various artists, thinkers, social workers and activists around the release by one of them (also a Spoken Word artist) on gentrification. The night was peppered with Spoken Word, including this piece by Lev:

Radically Social

I have come up with this term to indicate something specific about the human condition. Namely, that at the core of our existence we cannot be thought without each other and without environment.

Although this sounds self-evident, we mostly do not find this always present relationship, between you, me, us together, in the world and everything in it, back in the ways we understand ourselves.

What I see, actually, is that we have started to understand ourselves in terms of the individual. Literally individual means: 'single person', 'something that forms a separate whole and indivisible'

And there is truth to that. Only you think your thoughts and only you feel exactly what you feel, only you live identically the life that you lead and only you experience it as you do.

That is all true.

But, is it not so that I have a certain influence on your thoughts? Perhaps I can never fully decide what they are, but can influence them to a degree, for instance, when I come with good arguments;

if you find me charming or even attractive and so are more easily open to be influenced by me. Let alone, if you would look up to me, or if I was a good friend or even a parent of yours;

or a figure like a teacher or a role-model, about which you've learned that they're good sources of information, somebody you're allowed to be influenced by.

my question then becomes, do you think all your thoughts are absolutely original and arose sealed in a vacuum? Look, what you have done with all those bits of influence is absolutely original and indeed pretty much unique to you, so I do not wish to challenge your unicity,

but think away all the people since you were a child and see what thoughts remain, better yet, remove the trees, the streets, the cupboards, the stuff, the birds, caterpillars, the butterflies, everything that somehow

needs oxygen, or is physically graspable or measurable, take it all out and tell how much you think would remain of you.

A bit silly perhaps. But I think it says something about the fact that we can't not deal with each other. Another example.

Let's imagine, there is a quarrel and BOOM, you hit me in the arm, and I punch you back. Is the bruise on our shoulders not indicative of something?

A memento of our meeting, a bruise as a kind memory that we leave to each other when our ways part again.

Another example, let's imagine we were colleagues and you make a remark that goes down badly with me. I get up, explode, start waving my hands as I do when emotions are high.

I look as if I could eat you and with full intensity I yell all my frustrations at you, right in your face. And you start crying. Could those tears then be said to be separate from my actions? Am I not also responsible,

even catalyst of your sorrow, your tears? How in heaven's name are you an individual, solely alone, if I can touch you on so many different layers. If we can touch each other on so many different layers.

If you pet your cat and she purrs, then your touch is also a cause for a change in feelings.

So that is the first part of radically social: namely that we are so fundamentally connected to each other that we cannot be thought of as 'solitary individuals'. That is the radical part.

The social part says, that this not just some kind of metaphysical observation about the way the we Are, but that responsibilities also arise from this necessary connectedness.

Social as a word, finds her etymological roots in the expression "to care for company". That does not just mean that you like having company, I for instance also appreciate your company, but 'caring for company' means something deeper than that.

Caring for it, refers to you being conscious of the fact that you are with company. And that has influence on what you do. I suppose? An example is that I do different things without company in the house than with.

I live with housemates, a blessing during this lockdown, and I care for their company, by walking with a towel around my waist instead of naked. I am aware that they also use the kitchen.

and so I clear the countertop after cooking and I quickly clean the pan so that they can use it.

If we take the words together, so radically social, then this idea of company and caring for it don't stop at the your household. Am I not in company with my neighbors when I toss all my trash on the street in front of my door

and let them experience a very unpleasant smell- and neighborly interaction? Am I not in company if I open my car window with the volume on 83 and drive through West at three in the morning?

Am I not in company with the city, we that share the same walking paths, the same municipal regulations, the outsized chance of meeting each other in supermarkets, theater halls, or school cafeteria's?

Let us go further, am I not in company with this whole country, do we not have a shared physical environment through which we move trustingly, were we not taught since our youth that we are a nation.

Irrespective of my ideas about nation-states and other arbitrary boundaries. Is there not an attempt with as a result a whole number of commonalities that go back to our idea of citizenship, that means nothing else

but company before the law.

Let us go further still, am I not in Tanger, Morrocco after only a three-day drive. Why would our companionship stop at the Mediterranean. Is not everybody whose has to endure life on this godforsaken planet in some way our companion?

Are the hands that sew the soles of my Nikes to the fabric, not also my companions, purely by the fact that their presence in my life is so clearly traceable. Is the vegetable seller through which I procure dinner not also my companion because without

them I would have an empty plate in front of me, is the miner who mines precious metals under dangerous circumstances with risk of death not also my companion, because without him I would not have an iPhone.

Let us put it more expansively. Are the bees and the bumblebees not our companions, because without them there would hardly be pollination. And the bugs, the butterflies, birds and snails. The earth for being fertile, the sea for the water,

Are we not in companionship with the trees, because, well I don't have to tell you how important the trees are. Better yet, it is not at all the case that we have to recognize them as company because they are important to our existence.

The point is that we are companions because we can't not dealt with them. That they matter to our existence only shows the extent of our companionship. But even if our lives

did not depend on these things, then still their existence would impinge on us through the fact that we find ourselves in the same space.

A household, a street, a neighborhood, an area, a city, a country, a continent, a world and everything outside and within it. We have each other to be with, there is no escaping that.

And that we influence each other so much in the make-up of this god-forsaking planet, means we have to keep caring for each other's company. Move with awareness through our existence.

A notion like 'individual' and how central that has come to be in our society mainly serves the noticing and heeding our own needs.

I hope that with radically social we can see ourselves as inseparable part of an immense companionship. A companionship where we are not the same, but each of us different.

and that is where the beauty lies. A companionship where we care for each other and each other's differences." Lev (authors translation)

I believe this text, next to being a beautiful one in its own right, relates more directly to those aspects of the main argument of the thesis, that were reflected less in the previous poem:

*"Spoken Word artists use the performativity of their performances to **actively bring forth a desired future**. A future in which there is more space for them to perform their respective identities as they deem fit, rather than the role or identity prescribed to or projected unto them. They do so from **a belief in the richness of the diversity of (human) life. Through self-expression they elucidate societal structures, prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community.**"*

I have put in **bold** those elements that we find most clearly in the text above, the other ones are there too but less pronounced. Lev's presence at the symposium speaks clearly of a push towards a desired future, especially as the text directly aims to call forth a world where people are more mindful of the (larger) community in which they find themselves. There will then also be more space for identity as a person sees fit rather than one prescribed to them. Note that the unicity and diversity of human lives is also celebrated, not posited as opposed to unity or togetherness, but togetherness is seen as a necessary condition for unicity. He is calling attention with the piece to the nested nature and necessary reliance of elements of the social and natural²⁸ world on each other, not only in practical terms of survival, but in the very shape and content of our being. In doing so he alludes to a larger sense of self, he shows how impossible it is to fully separate one element, being or identity from the larger whole. This knowledge cannot only transform our sense of self as individuals but can also expand it to much wider community. With this entirety he is **"prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community"**.

Since a celebration of difference and diversity are such an important part of Spoken Word, and such contentious terms in society more broadly. Let us call on Audre Lorde to shed a bit more light on how they can also function beyond, the fear that difference so readily instills in many humans:

"Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of

²⁸This tying in of the natural world, is part of why I see Spoken Word as a possible protector of the sanctity of life more broadly. To re-story the world around us as an interdependent whole.

difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged." (Lorde, 1984, p. 111)

This powerful quote speaks to some of the confusion surrounding identity politics and the so-called culture wars, and cancel-culture. I will not delve into the full debate here (since that would be another thesis by itself). The key terms here are *interdependency* (very obviously present in Lev's poem), *nondominant differences* and a *plurality of identities*. Interdependency because we literally depend on each other for our existence, in practical but also less tangible ways; we make up each other's life world. Nondominant differences because of course there are differences, it is not that everybody needs to be alike, that we need to, want to, or even could erase all difference, but that we stop implementing hierarchies throughout these differences. I believe this is relevant for the public debate because it speaks to the charge of reverse racism that is sometimes uttered in response to identity politics. Its object is not to vilify one identity and raise up over and above the formerly marginalized identities over other ones, it is that we want to address the hierarchies of oppression that have been built on top of difference through fear at the behest of power.

This also speaks to cancel-culture, because it is those that deny another person's right to exist that get 'canceled' mostly. I am not here justifying cancel-culture, or thinking I have now found the resolution for the complexities around these issues, nor the problematic ways in which these beautiful ideas sometimes find practical application. However, I do feel it sheds a clear light on the operative thought behind diversity and difference in the Spoken Word scene and what "a more beautiful world" (Eisenstein, 2013, title) might look like, and does look like in the microcosm of spaces where these ideas become lived reality, for instance on occasion during a Spoken Word performance.

Lastly, it helps to again emphasize the plurality or multiplicity of identities, when Audre Lorde got on stage and listed multiple of her identities, she was not ranking one over the other, she was showing some of the factors that influence how she experiences the world. We can see this as threatening, or we can see as an invitation to open ourselves to the multitude of ways within ourselves and others that experience is shaped; in this way difference becomes not what separates us, but what connects us, because it is only difference that allows us to connect. If we were all the same, no relating would be possible. It is our diverging, our difference, that become the thread of connection that allows to relate. The other must be different for how else to be perceived as separate, but simultaneously there must be elements of self present in the other for connection to work at all.

Other poets

As stated at the start of this chapter Lev is on the extreme end of the spectrum when it comes to the political nature of his practice. Since he is also of a philosophical bent

and is geared towards making his message as unambiguous as possible, it makes it easier to incorporate his poetry into an academic work such as this and to clearly identify the main drive behind his work. As said before, the poets all exhibit the key elements as identified in the main argument of the thesis, but they do so to varying degrees. The degrees to which they do so seems to be related to a number of factors; personal/cultural history, personal disposition, personal experience, closeness to the scene, locality and multiplicity of scene(s), level of accomplishment. The purpose of this chapter was to start to provide the reader with an intimate sense of what drives Spoken Word Artists to what they do. That being said, I focus here mainly on the conversation we've had and a bit of the insights that have come out of my immersion in the practice. This means I give less focus to the broad range of activities that Spoken Word artists engage in when they are not engaged directly as Spoken Word; when they live their private lives, consume, work, create other art or their political affiliations.

Another poet that I interviewed (from now on referred to as poet 1) is quite well-known in the scene and also moves with relative ease in the literary establishment. From the poets that I interviewed he does this with the most ease, although there are one or two others that also do this. In the wider scene there are more which do this, and this seems to be on the rise as the stature of Spoken Word in the Netherlands rises too. Poet 1²⁹ gives as a dual explanation for the different silos and his movement between them. Firstly he states that both worlds—the literary one and Spoken Word one—have some insular traits, however he refuses to be limited by either. Part of the reason he says he moves through both worlds is because he always let himself be drawn by his own enthusiasm; he consumes all kinds of poetry, and thus does not limit himself. He also comments on the nourishing aspects of the community aspect of Spoken Word, affirming part of the main argument of this thesis. However, he also shows that this community is not uncomplicated, at times he experiences the community also as stifling. Certain themes get repeated, and there is such cohesion that sometimes, the necessary friction for artistic progress is somewhat missing. He expresses a desire for a community of peers to truly discuss quality with, a quality that he believes is under threat to due to the rise of all kinds of different groups that propagate Spoken Word. He sees this as a good thing, but also one that threatens aspects of what Spoken Word is and what it could be. He believes a further focus on quality could be achieved without losing the aspect of community and authenticity that we both value. That is actually what he likes about the more established literary scene, that they have these acerbic polemics which he thinks drive the quality of the art.

This is the poet that Lev looks up to, he uses ample metaphor, but also personal story. He also elucidates societal structures with this, but a lot less explicitly than Lev, in fact, he dislikes too much explicitness, the stories, images and metaphors

need to speak for themselves. There is something to be said for this, I feel, because it means bowing down less to the demands of being understandable and thus imbibing much of the dominant narrative by accident. He also explicitly states that he writes for himself mainly. A reason why many start writing, but some appear to lose track of when becoming successful and starting to perform a formula. Then they have to re-engage their true motivation to write; a process that he has been through. That being said, I do believe their achieved mastery remains part of what they then do. He speaks of performing with ease and reaching a high technical level—techniques of enunciation, word play and performance—that bring the whole of his performance to life. I share with this poet a love for the ineffable, for mystery, for the reality beyond language, but also a resistance to the limiting categories of language as they relate to the societal sphere.

There are some elements of his practice and views on Spoken Word that I wish to highlight through quotes. Firstly, he comments on what drives Spoken Word artists to perform, he places them in a larger artistic sphere but at the same time we find echoes in this quote of what another poet (who I will discuss later) calls a sense of **urgency** to tell their story:

"I think it is simply, moving from, in the first instance, an intrinsic need to tell stories or communicate something." Poet 1

The following quotes are given because they highlight specific aspects of my main argument around narrative can manifest. Mainly in this poet's drive to create a new narrative with an un-Dutch lyricism; through playing with self and other and identity on the level of narrative, but also at the constituent parts of language; grammar, syntax, vocabulary, meter. Creating new forms, halts, breaks, ruptures, rerouting of flows. A topic I would love to study in more detail.

"I think the throwing open of a new Dutch narrative, with which I wish to say that there are a lot of perspectives that deviate from the way that people are used to employing literature to tell stories, (stories) that deviate from the norm or from (the usual) perspective.." Poet 1

"One of them (of his motivations for writing) is looking for an un-Dutch lyricism. I want to attempt to develop a fundamentally different approach to the Dutch language for myself. So with that I am also totally not interested in being understood. I always say: Never in my life have I understood a poem. I receive work, and whether I have understood it or not is irrelevant. Or it moves me, or something moves in me, or not. But it starts with receiving the work. I give two shits about the analysis."³⁰ Poet 1

³⁰ Canonical poet T.S. Elliot seems to share this sentiment: "Communication" will not explain poetry. I will not say that there is not always some varying degree of communication in poetry, or that poetry could exist without any communication taking place. There is room for very great individual variation in the motives of equally good individual poets; and we have the assurance of Coleridge, with the approval of Mr. Housman, that "poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood." [T.S. Eliot, "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism"]

The first quote speaks to a number of the topics that have been addressed so far; that there are stories left untold by the dominant society and its literary forms—stories that relate to different ways of being, different subjectivities, but also different perspectives and different modes of story-telling. Because of how power operates these perspectives are oppressed. Free expression of these perspectives serves the dual function of challenging the premise of these structures—usually a supposed inferiority of the oppressed that is maintained through othering which relies on empathic distance—by showing (the worth of) these stories and by celebrating the richness of human diversity. Celebrating this diversity is intrinsically valuable and it serves to prefigure the ‘desired futures’.

The second quote is a bit more complicated at first glance, but offers a perspective I am very happy with. Firstly, it relates to the introduction, in which I alluded to the ineffable and said it could hardly be done justice with words. That being said, I believe great art (and certain other modes of being; (spiritual) ecstasy, peak flow experience etc.) can give tantalizing hints of it and sometimes engender what one might call experiences of the ineffable in people. Receiving a poem, whether in the first inspiration, or in being receptive to its performance by another, can exemplify this. It is experiential, partaking of the full range of human sensibility, but notably not dominated by reason alone—similar to the experiences of synchronicity I also referred to elsewhere. A poem or an experience moves through someone and moves them in a certain way, having additional effects beyond that first stirring, like an affect. But even affect here is too limiting a concept, too tied to a certain discourse about reality. The poem or the experience cannot be tied down in its meaning, that would be turning it into something it’s not; like saying a wooden table catches the essence of the tree. If you want that essence, you can only stand in front of a tree and *experience* it.

The poet privileges experience beyond dualistic notions (where there would be a realm outside of experience too) over containment, where we can say we have grasped, understood or somehow gained power over a thing. Of course I am here engaged in a work of analysis, but in my mind the analysis is of the scene as whole, of what type of stories are being told. I am engaged in an act of translation, a conversation between the art form Spoken Word, and the mode of understanding, which is anthropology. I analyzed Lev’s work because it lends itself to a specific type of analysis; it is quite expressive and it explicitly mentions the themes I wish to address. But I would never assume to say that through analysis I have somehow explained away the mystery of poetry, or gained primacy somehow.

Secondly, in the second quote we again find the drive to use language and allow it to do other things in the world than it has previously done: “an un-Dutch lyricism”, I believe is a good example of Audre Lorde’s idea of poetry as the “skeleton architecture of our lives”. Although the poet says they are not interested in being understood, they obviously still get on stage and perform for people, and a strong political and spiritual drive still speaks through their poetry they perform, they are however doing so from a place, where they privilege their own story and experience, rather than established norms of what counts as art.

Thirdly, it speaks to a number of the motivations this poet has, some of them having to do with the sense of community. However, this poet is much more focused

than (most) of the other poets (I interviewed) on the artistic value of his work and this artistic value is to a large extent its personal meaning to him. This concept brings nuance to the main argument rather than tearing it down. Earlier I said that many poets start writing out of a need to express themselves. As they then increase in skill and sometimes fame, they become more aware of techniques and style that engender a certain response from their audience—all part of learning a craft. However, a risk looms here if people become too focused on eliciting an external response and get separated from the original, internal impulse to write; they can end up feeling alienated from their own art/craft/work. In this quote, I see a commitment to personal and artistic integrity: to create with sincerity, and let praise and appreciation by others be a by-product of that creation. Furthermore, what is important here is that this poet elsewhere in the interviews states that he needed the welcoming environment of the Spoken Word community to develop his craft. Now, however, he is at a stage, and he believes the community is too, to have a discussion about what quality means in the scene:

"But we do have to have the conversations about quality. What is good? What is not? Why not?" Poet 1

He believes this can coincide with still having the safe community spaces that nourished him as an beginning artist. Taken together this poet again represents an idiosyncratic illustration of the main argument in abbreviated form; *using self-expression to create more space for different subjectivities*. Similarly the theoretical framework; he *itinerates* (journeys) through *different iterations of Self and Other through affective performances of critical personhood*. At all the levels of the *cultural archive*; shaping a new narrative, new language, figuring out who he is as an artist and a human being, in relation to a larger (un-)Dutch identity.

"So what I will mainly look at (in the context of teaching), is how do you create space in a text for the presence of performance? Of gesticulation, of intention.

Author: In a text?

*In a text. So how do you write towards the type of **sacred moment of interaction**? I think that is where **the core of Spoken Word** resides for me. I have my preferences, but that is because I have been very much influenced by the type of poetry that I read. So my leaning is much more towards that kind of poetry, but for other people it is much more towards a kind of activism, for other people it is much more towards a kind of storytelling, for other people it is much more towards comedy." Poet 1 (authors translation and emphasis)*

He brings an element to the table that is less notable in other poets but which is very meaningful to me and captured in Prof. Boele's model through the code; *connections with something higher/transcendent*. He calls it the sacred moment of interaction. It strengthens the thesis in that it places the interaction with the Other at the level of

transcendence. By situating the experience (of community) in time in such a way; where poet, poem and audience are merged into one place-time continuum, it represent a whole other level of being where self and other are momentarily transcended and one can only assume³¹ transformed in the process.

In his description of the sacred moment of interaction, he also describes how he tries to make space for that moment in his text. So here we see a skill-full use of craft (he also teaches creative writing) to mold words in such a way, that they contain space for a moment of interaction. There is an interesting dynamic at play there, in which the text not only serves a certain goal, but the interaction with the audience influences and determines the art, the expression and composition of words. It becomes clear that this is an art form "that is meant mainly to be heard" (Van der Starre, 2019, p. 1) but also that live performance is a crucial element of it. Already with Lev and poet 1, instances can be seen in which the performance not only influences the artist and the audience, but also fundamentally the art itself, both its purpose and its performance. Thus, it is once again an illustration of how Spoken Word artists *itinerate through iterations of self and other* showing a different aspect of their *affective performance*; one where self is subsumed in the experience of a larger *Self*, illuminating one possible 'desired future'.

Furthermore, it again becomes apparent that although Spoken Word means one thing to poet 1, he acknowledges the range of different approaches that can branch out from the larger scene (i.e. a focus on poetry, activism, comedy, storytelling).

Composite picture

Two poets have now been discussed rather extensively, to give a clearer idea of the motivations and the type of people that join this scene, I wish to take elements of the other poets that jump out to paint a more complete picture. Of course I talked to a limited sample of poets, but I do believe these elements to be instructive in gaining a greater understanding. I will not tell everything, partly for lack of space, partly to be concise, and partly because some elements better belong to the Action or Plot chapters, but I believe by showing here some of the protozoan elements of the 'deep story', I better substantiate the claims I make therein.

Poet 2:

I first met this poet when he was training us how to give a Spoken Word workshop on decolonial history in the Dutch museum of the tropics, full of colonial artifacts. Like many Spoken Word artists, he started as and still is a rapper. He is also neuro-divergent, and actually receives quite some attention for the work he does on this. He also like many Spoken Word artists hosts events and has a podcast, and has also taught at an arts college. He is also on a number of commissions related to art funding and does programming for festivals. This poet talks about his role as a gate-keeper because of this. He is white and now (almost) middle-aged. Because of this his own stuff gets less traction sometimes. He tries to create space for the next generation, but is also wary of only telling one type of story about marginalized

³¹ And in fact substantiate from personal experience and the interviews.

identities. He is the first to mention the concept of *urgency*, and states that oftentimes, the urgency and authenticity of the story can matter more than the technical skill of the delivery. He also explains that most Spoken Word artist cannot live from their art alone.

Poet 3:

I first met this poet when he was part of a talkshow at a large poetry festival, I did some poetry in a recording booth in front of him and got props (praise). He has a lot of positive energy and is also positive about the opportunities for Spoken Word. When I talked to him he had just won an award for this cultural work. He too was a rapper first. He often emphasizes the value of Spoken Word to young people, helping them find their story and process their emotions, whether they go on to be poets or not. He is aware of his role model function. He is also part of larger organization that organizes a lot of events around hip-hop culture (graffiti, photography, fashion, rap, spoken word, theater, dance). He is also on a number of funding commissions. He hosts his own Spoken Word platform and speaks a lot about the respect he has for other people and what they are doing, he most clearly emphasizes the room for (and richness of) diversity in the scene, saying there is space for everyone, and there is no need for competition.

Poet 4:

This poet is one of the founders of Spoken Word in The Netherlands and has hosted multiple nights, published her own poetry as well as anthologies with others, travels the world with her art, and has also started a poetry collective which gives Spoken Word workshops to young people in many cities in The Netherlands. She also writes columns and straddles both the Spoken Word world and the literary establishment. She stresses there is a lot of opportunity for young people.

Poet 6:

This poet is young with an notable appearance, dyed hair, alternative get-up, comes from the family line of the owners of a famous coffeeshop, went to art school. Writes for herself but started sharing because she was encouraged by friends to do so and because she feels it might help others deal with the mental health struggles she has faced. She went to art school, and is still figuring out the most suitable creative outlet for herself, she likes to perform as a punk singer because of the large persona it allows her to display.

Poet 7:

This poet is a frequent attender of one of the platforms I visited, they struggle with anxiety, and are not fully gender-conforming. They (like other poets) also share on social media, one day they hope to become the poet laureate of their city. They are part of a network of beginning poets that share work among themselves.

Poet 8:

This poet falls most outside the Spoken Word scene and more in the traditional scene. She writes columns, has a book of poetry out, and is working on her autobiography, she has Surinamese roots but was adopted by a strict Christian family. She started writing poetry at an early age and much later found out that her dad was a famous Surinamese poet, indicating perhaps a genetic gift was bequeathed to her.

One poet that I did not formally speak to, but often talked with informally is worth discussing briefly. He was the host of one the poetry nights I visited a lot. When we first met, there was a sense of having known each other much longer. He openly discusses various phobias that plague him, such as a phobia of traveling by train, quite challenging for an itinerant performer. Yet, he also speaks of that he is never more in the moment than when he performs, something akin to the sacred moment of interaction that poet 1 talks about. Furthermore, he is the poet that offers the reflection that a bit of vulnerability is needed to connect with an audience. He is outspoken both in his personal life and in his poetry about various social justice issues.

Chapter 3. Actions

Where the previous chapter focused a bit on the (type of) actors involved in the scene, I want to use this chapter to create more of a sense of what the scene looks like in practice, how these poets move through the world. The next and penultimate chapter will then discuss how this moving affects the world. I wish to start with some quotes from the interviews that illustrate something of the nature of the scene before I share selected excerpts from my fieldnotes for the purpose of “thick description” in support of the general thread of this thesis. It is hard to separate actions, effects and actors, but this chapter is mainly intended to provide a backdrop to the stories. The deep story, and the characters revealed in the rest of the thesis, did not take place on an empty slate, they took place at venues, with specific vibes, in specific contexts. Let me suffice to say, that as many stars one can see with the naked eye (outside of urban settings), there are moments where people come together to share poetry.

“I think that in Spoken Word community building is a very important aspect.” Poet 1

*“With which I wish to indicate that that classical literary world can feel very intimidating. And I think that the Spoken Word unfolds much more, something like: **come and tell your story.**” Poet 1 (author’s translation and emphasis)*

Selected Field notes

There is no way to truly honor the totality of the field or my experiences in it. I visited many places and events over a longer period. During the interviews people sometimes gave me true gems that helped me formulate my intuitions into coherent thoughts, the conversation with the field often handed me the concepts I needed to approach it with thought. That being said, these snippets of field notes, mainly give an impression of the scene, they only rarely explicitly exemplify the whole argument of this thesis in one go. The main argument was formed out of a dialectic process of going back and forth between the field, the interviews and the literature, and then finally the deep story and the poets I talked to. In this manner I have selected excerpts that highlight specific aspects of the scene, my hope is that the total material as presented throughout this thesis, help to make clear how the deep story was built. For instance, the sense of community is offered explicitly in the interviews, but it is hard to capture from the fieldnotes alone. It lies in the warm applause or snaps every poet got, the respect with which people were listened to as they poured their heart out, the absence of (explicit) judgment, it was in looks and glances exchanged, it was found in the diversity of people, sharing space, and making time for each to be heard. It was also the content, and the belief that people deserve to be heard.

Spoken Word in action 1: Tapschrift Nijmegen

When taking the train to Nijmegen, you can see the old HONIG factory from the bridge over the Waal. Long known as a brand for home cooks, a new culture and identity is being cooked up here now, and many home writers are sharing their work in this space. Because creatives have done the preparatory work, project developers

can convert their cultural capital into financial capital by building hip (and expensive) apartments for yuppies (young urban professionals).

Demolished factories on the waterside with hollowed-out facades, forgotten space for now. Graffiti on the wall: "No honey without labor". I feel myself, only have to stay with myself, and from that space I meet others, without explanation or acknowledgment of being.

Never pity
 Everything is now
 in the moment
 No need for drugs
 I am space
 filled with light
 touching darkness
 kissing her
 with these words

Inside tatty, lived-in, stylish, jazz, Berlinesque (think recycled furniture, posters from the distant past, Fritz-Kola and hipsters). I feel at home. Writing my observations alone on the couch, I probably don't stand out from the other poets. What poet doesn't have a notebook with him? I sit on a long couch against the wall that extends to the window, overlooking the river. In front of the sofa is a tech-stand, a couple of rows of chairs, all facing a microphone on a stand. I walk out, there is a lot of chatter, a lot of English, people are smoking. Almost want to smoke too, it's always a good time to connect. Some people order beers, not everyone drinks.

The first recitations, also prose. Some poets read about their childhood trauma from an alcoholic mother, others about drinking a lot while lodged between sweaty bodies at a festival and drinking the hangover away with cola. Almost everyone has either brought an audience/friends or has been there before, the poet on trauma receives a lot of support, the sweating poet laughing applause.

During the break I talk to the owner of the café, he has won a prize for creative entrepreneurship without subsidy, but with the arrival of the yuppies and the coming move to another building, he has doubts whether he wants to continue. Drinking is encouraged, as there are rules at Tapschrift:

Rule n.1: Get drunk (I get the feeling that this rule was more strictly enforced in the past, now some people drink only a little);

Rule n.2: Don't read from your phone.

There are poems about transience, love, drugs, and also absurd poems (for example about green people without limbs), one person improvises. Afterwards I get into a

conversation with the organizer, we hit it off. He thinks I have a good reciting voice, he wants to book me and use some of my lines of poetry. I tell him what I've read from Audre Lorde (a noted black feminist lesbian poet, precursor of intersectional theory), that we write the world we want to see. He tells me about tics and anxieties that he suffers from, something that he is open about publicly and that I admire. He also tells me that having a little bit of nerves helps to connect with the audience, tension creates vulnerability and wanting to get it right might also make you relatable. You learn and change through the world, your poetry changes with it, with other poets this process accelerates and is entered into more consciously.

- poetry is possibility, knowing beyond words -

The above excerpt is a short vignette of my first field-visit, it is interspersed with bits of my own poetry. It gives a feel for what some of these nights feel like, and what kind of spaces they take place. It hints at the type of interaction and content, how baring your soul is received by an intimate crowd. It shows that these kind of places for starting artists are often found on the margins of cities—inescapably part of the gentrification process, creating value for those developers that swoop in and end up developing condo's—and how these events are carried by the efforts of (in this case) a community of volunteers. It furthermore indicates something of the range of different poems offered. Also it gives an idea of the organic manner, in which theory and insights are exchanged among poets. Lastly and perhaps most importantly it supports the main thesis of how expression of the self is used in connection with others, to affect the world. In this case by creating a sense of community and creating space for different identities to be.

Spoken Word in Action 2: Spraakuhloos ('Speechless'), 5th Anniversary

Things feel different in Rotterdam, raw and urban, unfinished. I like it, am being welcomed by smiling faces. People are beautiful. Lots of non-white people, I become aware of my whiteness. There is an open mic in the lobby beforehand. The open mic is dope, lots of snaps (form of applause that is created by letting the thumb and middle finger 'snap'). One of the poets talked about this in his interview. There are many political themes: police brutality, black womanhood, locality, celebrating Rotterdam. The well-known Spoken Word cadence³² is widely used. During the research I was told several times that I had to be in Rotterdam for 'real Spoken Word'. I find this 'real' Spoken Word during the open mic before the main program. There is a clear sense of community and shared practice to be founds in the snaps, topics, and cadence.

The organizers do not perform themselves, but bring in the people they like and have experienced in their own journey on the main stage. From 'real' Spoken Word to cabaret, dance and harp; they are all top notch. 'Real Spoken Word' is up first,

³² "Do all slam poems sound the same?" <https://www.digitalpoet.net/all-slam-poetry-sounds-the-same>

embodied by a black woman, who beautifully recites about the deeply romantic love with her husband, deep feeling, a personal story with an element of struggle. The rest of the performers are people whom the Spraakuhloos team has met on their journey or who they want to give a stage. Their openness to other art forms (music, dance, cabaret) suggests a shared core; the essence of being an artist. This shared pursuit of beauty and skill in connectedness transcends the specific genre of the Spoken Word. What the acts seem to share is that they all clearly tell a personal story. The dancer tells that story with his body, the harpist with her harp.

I share this excerpt, because it gives insight into one very significant aspect of Spoken Word, the sense of community and pride of place in a large transcultural³³ city like Rotterdam and the type of topics this engenders (different from the previous excerpt from a more white location). Also it gives an indication why an art form such as this might feel more welcoming to a person with a migration background, purely from the perspective of being in a 'safe space' where your experiences are supported and carried by the group. At the same time it shows the openness of the scene, through the diversity of iterations of Spoken Word, but also through the openness to other kinds of performance as exhibited by the showcase of many different crafts in this event.

The above two vignettes are broadly illustrative of the type of events I visited, there were many more some of which I allude to throughout this thesis; from activist meetings on gentrification, to neighborhood festivals or corporate workshops, anywhere there is a need for community or authentic storytelling we might find Spoken Word. Since this is only a Master's thesis we cannot cover all the areas in which Spoken Word features heavily. For the sake of this thesis I have mainly focused on Spoken Word artists; those poets that either make a living with or devote a large portion of their time towards their art. A great number of these artists make a living in part through giving workshops, sometimes in community centers, sometimes in schools, sometimes in prisons. Even though the setting is different, the goal and effect is often similar, while its specific expression might differ a lot. Several poets mentioned to me the importance of giving people the tools to find their voice, their story and express it, to root that story in relation to the larger world.

So even though, for instance, the people that attend workshops in an educational, punitive, or even corporate setting might not all go on to become (paid) poets themselves. They are still using *self-expression to bring forth desired futures in community with others*; perhaps they are learning to express their inner selves for the first time, or to *relate their personal story to societal structures*, or playing with society's perception of them. Of course the poets giving the workshops can also in this case be said to be *itinerating through the cultural archive with affective performances of critical personhood*, when they engage in this work. Throughout this thesis I have focused mainly of the aspect of performance as it takes place on a stage, but to borrow from Shakespeare and Butler, if the whole word is a stage, then we are

³³ "involving, encompassing, or combining elements of more than one culture" from yourdictionary.com

continually performing it into being. These types of activities; of coming into different relations with portions of ourselves, the world and its people (wherever we find them) are a crucial part of *bringing forth desired futures* and exemplify what Biggs-El, (2012) calls a 'critical pedagogy', especially when it directly challenges dominant narratives and received histories, with versions that more closely correspond with a more true excavation of the cultural archive (Spivak G. C., 1985).

Part of how this relating happens is through recognition of the self in the other, this can take a number of shapes. For instance it is quite common for somebody to have the sensation after hearing a poet speak: "wow, you really expressed something that I have always felt, but did not have words for." I know this, because I have often felt it, and have myself been approached by people in the audience with this sentiment, and heard similar stories from other poets. Another form that this recognition can take is that we feel an affinity not so much with the story or feeling being expressed but with the person doing the storytelling, we might recognize something of ourselves in them or recognize something we want to aspire to or get away from, this also partly how the roll-model aspect that one poet offers in the interviews comes about. A third way that this relating happens and to me this is the key aspect specific to Spoken Word more uniquely than the previous two, which are more of less endemic to social life. Is that of hearing a story that one is unfamiliar with, a story of a person that we might consider other. It could be a story about race/racism, neurodivergence, gender or power relations, a person might share a story from this kind of subjectivity which is unfamiliar to the audience and thus open up vista's that show the self in that other. By telling humanizing stories from the subjective perspective of many different identities the audience is given the opportunity to relate to that other as self. Obviously the art is not always about these topics, or told from a first-person perspective, but when a person that is perceived as other comes to telling all kinds of different stories, it also humanizes them in a way, because they show their humanity in the range of their interests and types of expression. I would say that there is an overlapping set of values and drives in this community and that they all in varying degrees of explicitness in their lives and poetry are expression of the main argument and guiding framework of this thesis. That being said, the scene has it (border) conflicts, contradictions, imperfections and exceptions. To show the complexity of the scene and the integrity of my research I also wish to briefly discuss some of these more complicated aspects of the scene. In part without resolution and in part because the exception gives further support to the main thesis.

Boundary making

The nature of boundaries around a 'culture' tells us much about it. In the chapter on Actors I had previously discussed that poet 2 wanted more polemics around quality. Elsewhere in the interview he also said that for him there is more freedom in being able to move across various (literary) scenes. There was not an indictment as such, but a statement that the same qualities of community and the common topics that are part of this community -such as a lack of competition- can also feel stifling. Furthermore poet 2 was upset that together with becoming more

popular, the quality of Spoken Word was perhaps also being watered down. In his words “they decide at 22, oh, Spoken Word is cool, and then at 23 decide, now I’m going to teach other people.” He makes a distinction when he sits down to receive a piece of art, between technical capacity and the story that is trying to be told. A metaphor that I offer, based on my work as a chef which he wholeheartedly agrees with: “When I sit down to eat when friends cook for me, I consciously tune in mostly to the intent behind the food, rather than the exact preparation, whether everything is done *exactly* right.”

When I was part of a Spoken Word theater play about the colonial history of Amsterdam, some of the poets involved told me about some of the in-fighting in the scene, some people not speaking to each other any longer, or only booking their friends, or using a podium they created to only showcase their own work. Also a well-known award-show around Spoken Word was boycotted by some artists, because they felt the creator was using the increasing stature of the scene for their own gain. People have put a lot of energy into building the scene and then it was felt that others (often rappers) came and profited from that. I have heard more off-hand comments about rappers that are unsuccessful turning to Spoken Word instead. A bit of necessary background is also that as Spoken Word gained in stature, funding for arts and culture was being cut due to austerity measures, so some of these comments reflect artists trying to deal with a changing circumstance with regards to opportunity and income. It is noteworthy that many rappers and spoken word artists feel that Spoken Word offers more space for vulnerability whereas rap relies more heavily on bravado. Another aspect of boundary making can be as I mentioned before that people hire from within their network (when it comes to paid performances) this can make for Spoken Word scenes within cities for instance Rotterdam becoming more insular toward people from outside the city, cities also differ in the experienced openness of their scene, Rotterdam being seen as more culturally diverse, Amsterdam as more open to different styles and new people for instance.

One time backstage a well-known white artist tells me that for him everything is Spoken Word without the need for capitals (literally spoken word), indicating that sometimes he feels a bit threatened by the new popularity of Spoken Word and how people with a migration background perhaps have more cultural traction. In another unguarded moment, I hear him describe his own work and work by others curated by him as Spoken Word and selling it thusly to a festival. There is a tension there, on the one hand being wary of the label and its associations and on the other hand utilizing that label for professional gain. Besides the fact that all people have different motivations and actions that are on display differently depending on the (temporal) context, and that anthropologists should not hold people to account for inconsistencies that they themselves are also party too. I do feel this tension is important to mention. This tension is partly explicable through the complex nature of authentic performance of identity. In Somers-Willett (2005) we find this tension, too, in poetry slam contest, it seems that the person that most authentically performs a non-white identity to a mostly white progressive audience wins. Thus, cynically it can be said, that the non-white people market their (marginalized) identity, and white people

display their progressiveness. Of course, the picture is more complex. White people are still exposed to art that they would otherwise not hear perhaps, the black artists get to showcase their art. Also artists and audience are not necessarily unaware of this dynamic .. gives an example and I can give one from the Dutch context (at a festival which features two of the poets interviewed for the thesis, including the time I saw Lev do the poem, 'the stranger')

"I also meet Dorothy Blokland, with whom I did the Poetry Circle Nowhere workshops in Amsterdam, and who now gives workshops herself. She confuses me with another white poet, a funny moment³⁴. One of the poems she recites is about the elephant in the room; herself, as the only non-white person in front of an all-white audience. Her poetry tells about how she was sexualized at a young age and how her black boyfriend is having a hard time finding a good job. I experience her performance as powerful: she has a theater background, her strong facial expressions and movements convey emotion very well.

We chat for a while after the performance. We talk about friends we have in common. She tells me that you have to network very hard to make a living from Spoken Word. Later we meet a friend of hers who also performed, she and I connect over the fact that she also has a young child at home. It becomes a bit awkward when I say I'm an anthropologist: "Ah, so you're studying us like natives in the jungle long ago," she says. I quickly say that I'm a poet, too. So even though the discipline has evolved on its own, the image some people or groups have of anthropologists is still shaped by centuries of interactions that often had a less positive connotation, and that (unfortunately) sometimes still happen that way (Smith L. T., 2012)."

This vignette shows some of the complexities around race. We also see this complexity poet 2, who finds himself sometimes locked out of the option to perform because he is less interesting (white middle-aged), and then on the other hand programs for festivals, where he feels he has to balance, the telling of untold stories, with not letting those stories becoming stereotypical voyeuristic stories told of marginalized identities. Another aspect in which this is expressed by is the idea of tokenism, this takes many forms and is too complicated to explain here, but briefly put in this context it might refer to a black artist being invited to a mostly white corporate event for the sake of (pretend) 'diversity'. Some artists refuse these kinds of assignments, others take them, determined to outperform and outshine their token role. We see it too, in a matriarch of the spoken word scene, saying that she sometimes cringes when she sees a very young black woman performing a black woman poem. I believe all of this is somewhat related to the point earlier about people doing tricks. Performance of any kind requires practice, yet there is a tension between practicing and repeating endlessly a piece of art, to let it come across as effortless and real. Furthermore there is a tension in creating space for an identity to be, yet also having to wade through all the tropes and associations tied to that identity in the cultural archive. Furthermore, we usually get through everyday life in the

³⁴ Further complicated by the fact that whenever I try to recall this event the first name of another black female acquaintance of mine pops to mind first.

Netherlands mostly ignoring the complexities around race, or taking very clear moral positions on the matter, the reality is more messy and implicates many of us in one way or another, in addressing these issues through art, we are given another example of how Spoken Word Artist itinerate through Self, Other and the cultural archive to bring forth a desired future. This more complicated aspect of this, shows that is true wayfinding, the vision of where to go is not always clear, sometimes there are delays, outdated maps, dead-ends or we get lost and never are we assured of reaching the goal we are setting out for, or even that the goal will always remain the same. When I say Spoken Word artists are calling forth desired futures, I am not making a wooly-eyed statement about a practice that I love. I am saying that with the means at their disposal, including their messy complex selves, and the various others in the cultural archive, the artist are attempting to vison, or *world* this desired future into being. I am saying that that we had better learn from the more positive aspects of this practice, because the wiggle room for misunderstanding one another is shrinking fast.

Chapter 4. Plot (Effects)

Whereas the previous chapters respectively; set the scene, introduced typical characters in that scene and described some of what they are involved with, this penultimate chapter before the conclusion is intended to culminate in something that honors the diversity of practices but is recognizable to practitioners Stengers (2005). As stated before practices/cultures and the people in them are dynamic, this chapter therefore cannot be exhaustive of all affects related to spoken word, especially if we consider what Carrithers says about stories and (Rubin et al, 2012) about affect, that both have the potential to move onward through the world in limitless chains of novel combinations and effects. This chapter then mainly gives the 'deep story' built with the help of the preceding material and feedback process with the artists involved it reflects on this process and the research process more broadly, including its auto-ethnographic elements. At the end of this chapter I hope the layperson can have an understanding what Spoken Word is about, an understanding that does justice to the reality of Spoken Word as experienced by the practitioners. I hope this can set the scene for the conclusion and help substantiate the argument I have built.

To start this chapter off, I would like to offer the observation that so far many if not most Spoken Word artist have been auto-didacts. As the scene has grown more and more workshops and curriculums have sprung up and podiums with room for mutual learning. One could say that one effect so far of the actions of Spoken Word artists has been a greater drive for recognition and what one might call either institutionalization or professionalization. These changes bring their own risks and opportunities for the scene. I would like to think it offers greater opportunity for us to learn and utilize the perspective that Spoken Word offers. In order to do so I believe we cannot simply categorize it as either art or activism or whatever other label might be attached to it. I believe the main lesson is, to take seriously, the capacity of all beings as they contributed to the shared story that we inhabit. Our dominant worldview is not yet very good at that. It creates a mass of so-called unskilled labor (Standing, 2016), let's other's specialize deeply (Foucault, 2011), resulting in a somewhat siloed society, where the scientists are warning us of world's end, but they can hardly get the story across, in the resulting insecurity old reflexes of hatred seem to flare up. Meanwhile we sideline our story-tellers to the realm of entertainment. Somewhere in this tower of babel of ours, we must again find time and space to hear one another, from a place of openness, to know how to move forward. In the words of poet 1 after I offer my paraphrasing of Audre Lorde:

"Language makes it possible to dream. We even write reality, we create through our words." ³⁵(author)

³⁵ Poetry comes from the Greek 'poiêtês' "to make, create, compose"
https://www.etymonline.com/word/poet?ref=etymonline_crossreference

"Wow, beautiful. And I sincerely believe that. That is why I think that is so important that artists and writers have a 'seat at the table' when it comes to formulating our future. Not from political considerations, but because the artists' perspective is so important in the cultural dynamic of the imagination." Poet 1

This relates to humankind but it also relates to the Dutch situation:

"When somebody does something great here, something that is true, and essential, and truthful, then we should acknowledge that. That is a moment in time, a moment that changes something in the larger Dutch narrative. "

Before I finally share the deep story, let me offer a final reflection on voice, especially those of the marginalized. As I said in the introduction through use of Spivak it is not possible to unproblematically transmit voices (Laura Dixon, 2021) (Spivak G. , 1988) of the marginalized. One further problem that I have alluded to, is tokenism, relatedly I wish to mention elite hijacking (Táíwò, 2021), that is a phenomenon where we see that a person from a marginalized identity gets to speak for people and comes to represent the views of that whole group (whereas tokenism is thinking that they are no longer marginalized simply because they are allowed to speak). Táíwò argues there might be facets of a person lived experience—in the form of opportunities or a particular background, or a certain eloquence, which has given them the opportunity to speak and be heard—and perhaps those aspect also make their views different from the people they are supposed to represent. This does not mean that they should not be heard or speak. It means that we should be critical of the types of conversations we have in what type of (metaphorical) languages, as well as who is invited to speak. A reminder not pat ourselves on the back too soon. In the context of Spoken Word I believe this means that we should take their words as an invitation to truly consider our own position and that of others in our world-making-system, as well as the relations in between. We might learn from Spoken Word artists how to become better listeners and better story-tellers, if we truly listen, and do not confine them our ourselves to the societal silos we have created for ourselves.

To introduce the 'deep story' let me offer these words by Pádraig Ó Tuama: "Poetry is for those of us who are experiencing the desire to have some kind of language that makes some kind of sense for us in the here and now."
(*ForTheWild Podcast*)

As stated in the introduction a deep story is a story or metaphor that is supposed to resonate emotionally with people that are part of a practice (Hochschild, 2019). I believe this coincides with Stengers (2005) view that description be given in a non-exhaustive way but that people might agree with the description, in keeping with a dialogical approach (Ingold, *Being Alive*, 2011), rather than can also be the case, that the participants feel betrayed by the anthropologist (Mosse D. , 2004)(Smith L. T., 2012) after the fieldwork is done. This thesis has been about how spoken word Artist

make meaning in the world (Kurzman, 2008), this chapter has been about the effects of their story. Next to giving a brief summary and an emotional insight of the practice and how people come to part of it, it also helps us indicate how Spoken Word artists themselves see what they do. This deep story was written in its initial form based on the fieldwork, interviews and analysis I did, partly in conversation with the artists themselves. I then shared this deep story with the artists and gave them the opportunity to give feedback. What you see below is the final version incorporating their feedback, after the 'deep story' I will reflect on the process and the possibility of further feedback.

'deep story'

"Spoken Word is poetry with an emphasis on performance; on how it sounds and the connection with the audience, there is often (but not always) a certain recognizable cadence to be detected in a recitation. Often (but not always) it is received by a larger community that instantly understands the message of the poem and uses it to reinforce their identity. It can take place on a stage as part of the arts, culture or literature, but it moves more broadly through society and is employed in prisons, museums, schools or symposiums. Often a poem is based on personal experience or an observation that is linked to a larger story or human theme. Often (but not always) a poem is political/activist and aims to convey a message or bring about a change (in consciousness). It has a rich history in the black community as well as in the Hispanic community of America. The roots go back much further. Today it is used by many groups of people, especially when they are not heard elsewhere. It often demands recognition for the humanity of a certain identity (or some aspect of it), it might call attention to how certain subjectivities are repressed; the black person, or the person who has a non-normative gender identity, or the person who is neuro-divergent, or the person who is poor. Or/and perhaps the poem celebrates something, offers comfort, expresses anger or sadness, or shows the wonderful absurdity of the smallness of everyday life. Perhaps it speaks of something greater, perhaps God or collective consciousness or Love. Perhaps it contains anything and everything we might consider human.

Maybe you write to be seen or to make visible, or to make people feel seen. Maybe you write purely for yourself, to understand yourself, because it feels good, or simply because it is what you (have to) do. You started because you thought in poems, or because someone stimulated you or there was someone (a poet, an artist) you looked up to. You scribbled in notebooks about your emotions for a long time, your scribbles grew in volume and definition. Maybe you are a rapper or a theater maker before, and now you have found a home in Spoken Word to express yourself. Perhaps you have been knocking on the door of the (literary) establishment for years to be allowed in, perhaps you now move effortlessly through the different worlds of language, literature, and performance. Perhaps self-expression is what is most important to you, perhaps it is the message or the art. Maybe you associate your poetry with a political practice, maybe you don't. You feel that something is not right in the world, you are sensitive and you are looking for words for what you see and experience, you are looking for authenticity, and the search for this truth will probably never end."

I shared this story with poets together with a brief introduction on the deep story similar to that in the methodology section and a brief background to Spoken Word similar to the one in the introduction. Most poets found this deep story spot on. There were some critiques, of course: one poet thought its tone was too cautious and too general, another poet had me remove the sentence about the black activism origin of Spoken Word because not all poets would agree with it and it had already been emphasized enough. One poet called for the same elimination, not because Spoken Word does not have a rich history within the black community, but because it also does in the Hispanic community, and many others. For this reason, while important to indicate its genesis, emphasis needs to be placed on the diversity of groups and expressions that are now associated with Spoken World, as well as the open nature of the scene this results in. My interpretation of Spoken Word below should therefore not be seen as a strict determination of the value of Spoken Word, but as an attempt to represent a greatest common denominator—with its many frayed edges—in a hybrid and dynamic community.

I was of course very happy that the poets that engaged with the deep story recognized themselves in it to very large degree. I was also grateful for their additions. To test it further or expand on it one could imagine having a symposium around it, or a podcast, or invite poets to write poetry about it. Or on the contrary share it with audience and get their perspective. I believe the methodology as I utilized it was very valuable in staying in conversation with the field, and eliciting novel responses as well as to have a kind of short summary of it available. That being said, further study could be much more dialogical still, I still feel in this research and especially thesis, academia had the upper hand so to say. I can imagine a situation where poets could offer similar reflections on the role of academia and a new synthesis or collaboration between the two would arise from that process. One might imagine a policy debate on underprivileged neighborhoods, psychiatric care or income distribution enriched by the first-hand perspectives that Spoken Word artist bring, not just enlivened with a show element, but adding actual food for thought and action. I believe our society is dealing with an information overload but a perspective deficit (Twaalfhoven, 2020). I believe incorporation of Spoken Word into a number of institutions and places could provide great added benefit. A history lesson that incorporates in art the perspective of the enslaved, or an economy lesson that shows what poverty can feel like.

Auto-ethnography

This form of ethnography carries a number of benefits; acknowledgement of subjectivity, access to field and material and also a number of drawbacks; risk of partiality and missing a 'novel' perspective. The specific form I tried to take by incorporating not only my subjective experiences but also to capture them in poetry was something that brought me pleasure and I hope also enlivened the material in a relevant matter given the topic of this thesis. Furthermore as stated before I feel as long as this is done in awareness of epistemological ramifications, it can be a powerful statement with regards to the nature of knowledge.

Auto-ethnography is an ethnography of the self, this thesis dealt with "iterations of Self and Other residing in the cultural archive", in keeping with Braidotti (2010) and also Abu-Lughod (1991) I have tried to blur not only the idea of a distinct Self and a distinct Other but also of distinct cultures that contain them. Using (artistic)

auto-ethnography was part of this, blending the different parts (poet/scholar etc) of myself. I believe we find part of the answer for some of the problematic nature of past and current practices in anthropology and beyond regarding this notions of Self and Other in the guiding framework of this thesis, especially with regard to the cultural archive. It contains, language, images, thought forms, interactions and ways of being, that were constituted by and remain immersed in those of the past. Thus a new paradigm of thought is usually constructed out of the rubble of the old, and even once a new paradigm is announced, the old ways continue to display their power in thought and action.

I have studied this phenomenon of Spoken Word, that I am partially immersed in, yet I have my feet in many other cultures and practices too. I am a halfie-anthropologist in the sense that I belong partially to this culture of Spoken Word. I am also neurodivergent in the sense of having ADHD, dyslexia and an addictive personality, I have a background that is rooted in non-western spirituality and also have some working-class roots, yet for all intents and purposes I am middle-class and white with all that that entails. Yet I have chosen to study this practice that privileges the voices of the oppressed. I still feel justified in doing so, it has been a great pleasure and honor. Yet a conundrum remains; I could have highlighted other behaviors or motivations that spoke less directly to the Other as distinct. I could have put more focus on a universal humanity, although then at the risk of glossing over real differences. In the end I hope I have balanced well; the real oppressions and power hierarchies that exist in the world and the vectors through which they operate, taking my cue from Spoken Word artists themselves. Difference is real, and sometimes used as justification for oppression, we cannot ignore this. We must fight the oppression but celebrate the difference. We can do this while at the same time acknowledge shared humanity, shared being, of which difference and interdependency are a necessary part. One final metaphor, as Levi-Strauss (2001) says, likely at some time the sun will implode and in any case, even the grandest human structures wither before the swirling of infinity. The boundaries constructed are contingent, temporary and in flux. Think of the figures the sea leaves on the beach as it retreats, mud-flats filled with eddies and current, small dunes on the sand, sometimes an ancient footprint is uncovered³⁶, telling us of our ancestors, giving an idea of how they moved through the cultural archive. Yet each tide, each time we must make ourselves anew. Looking at the past might inform our poesis (creation), looking at our fellow beings and seeing there the difference and similarities might also do so. Erecting temporary boundaries might help us create different *selves*, as long as we do not make the mistake of thinking our boundaries are eternal. The only eternal is the present moment, where we meet each *other*, again and again.

³⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/feb/07/oldest-human-footprints-happisburgh-norfolk>

Chapter 5. Epilogue (Conclusion)³⁷

The main argument of this thesis was:

"Spoken Word artists use the performativity of their performances to actively bring forth a desired future. A future in which there is more space for them to perform their respective identities as they see fit, rather than the role or identity prescribed to or projected unto them. They do so from a belief in the richness of the diversity of (human) life. Through self-expression they elucidate societal structures, prefiguring possible desired futures for the self as individual and the Self as community."

I marshalled the following theoretical framework as a guiding question:

"How are iterations of Self and Other, residing in the cultural archive, crafted into hybrid narratives by Spoken Word artists in the Netherlands, as they itinerate through identity and voice in affective performances of critical personhood?"

I believe this rather complex framework helps us provide a theoretical grounding for how the main argument plays out. Furthermore, the data; interviews, fieldnotes, auto-ethnography, literature, artifacts, poetry, deep story (and it's use as methodology) and other sources that were part of this research bear this out. Perhaps a different anthropologist would have found different data and used it to tell a different story. I believe the story I have told is most relevant to the practice of Spoken Word, to myself and to the people I was in conversation with. I feel I have done justice to reality. As it is still unfolding, this story, like most stories remains unfinished. I can only hope to be part of its story in the future and that the fickle finger of fate let's some of what Spoken Word artists set out to accomplish come into being. To the point where the larger society learns to celebrate difference and becomes skilled in flowing through different perspectives, and acknowledging co-authorship of our shared future. Furthermore, I believe only such a co-authorship with true (intellectual) humility about the basis of our truth-claims can produce a social science, that does not merely reproduce the prejudice captured in the languages, images and social relations that make up the cultural archive. In other words, only by truly listening to one another, to be truly interested in the perspective of others and how their story was made, including our own role in it, can we hope to create a shared narrative, that possibly provides passage to a liberated future.

³⁷ The research the formed the basis of this thesis was started in 2019 before the outbreak of corona, the last bits of fieldwork were conducted in 2021, and the writing too. At this point the full trajectory of corona still seems unclear, but it would be strange not too mention the difficulty a lot poets experienced with regards to their income and mental health as they ceased to be able to perform for a time. It seems most of them found creative ways of doing so.

Afterword

All that remains is a ginormous thank you to everybody that made this possible: the poets firstly, my supervisor and partner (and my little Zefah for motivation), everybody from the master, my proofreaders, countless scholars, and teachers (in whatever shape they came).

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