

**The Performance Of Feminist and Decolonial Critique:
*Spoken Word Poetry as an Affirmative and Popular Critical
Practice in the Public Space***

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Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Spoken Word and Critique</i>	8
<i>Methodology</i>	10
1. Theory: Critique, Performance and Potentiality	14
<i>Critique in Crisis</i>	14
<i>The Performance of Critique</i>	18
<i>Performance, Critique and Spoken Word</i>	21
2. 'I Spit Simply for a Sick Society': Spoken Word Poets as Feminist and Decolonial Critical Actors	24
<i>'Each Poem is Creating A World': Critical Storymaking/telling</i>	25
<i>'The Skeleton Architecture of Our Lives': The Language of Spoken Word</i>	29
<i>The Personal is Political: Autobiography as a Critical Device</i>	33
3. 'The Critic is the One Who Assembles': Popular Critique in the Public Space of Spoken Word Performance	37
<i>'Make a Community and Try to do Something': Critical Audiences of Spoken Word</i>	38
<i>'Amen, sister, tell it!': Reciprocal Critical Power and Audience-Spectator Communication</i>	41
<i>Affective Resonance and its Transformative Potential in Spoken Word Spaces</i>	45
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	54

“Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought [...] It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before”

Audre Lorde
Sister Outsider

Introduction

January 21st 2017. Washington DC. Following the American presidential election and the inauguration of Donald Trump the preceding afternoon, the Woman's March on Washington was orchestrated as a collective and embodied critical response to the lack of political representation, injustices to women, People of Colour and LGBTQI+ rights, and the perceived misogyny, corporatism and inequity within American society. Taking to the stage to rally the crowd of approximately half a million demonstrators, actor Ashley Judd, 'the breakout star' of the March, 'brought the house down' and 'garnered millions of [online] views' with her 'fiery rendition' of *Nasty Woman*, a spoken word piece by Tennessee teenager Nina Donovan. Judd 'waxed poetic' in her critique of the right-wing socio-political environment of contemporary America, and in doing so connected and responded to an audience, both at the March and online, who received the experience of the spoken word poetic performance as a critical rallying cry to strive for an alternative reality. Appropriating the tag of 'nasty woman' to indicate an empowered critical consciousness, Judd's recital affirmatively engaged with the current political situation, in order to posit a new consideration of identity and equality, and has since been identified as 'one of the most defining moments of the March'.¹

March 8th 2017. Utrecht. In support of the direct protest action, *Strike 4 Repeal*, which was organised to pressurise the Irish Government to hold a referendum on the abortion rights within the country's constitution, I joined a small gathering of allies congregated in Utrecht to add our voices to the critical debates surrounding reproductive freedom in the West.² With a click on the internet, and a projection screen, we gathered together to watch *Heartbreak*, a recorded spoken word piece by Irish poet Emmet Kirwan who critiqued his country's political prejudices towards women's rights, 'where terms like sexism and abortion are used as political footballs'. As Kirwan used his poem as a pledge to 'help to create an Ireland that will stand in awe of all mná [women]',

¹ Melia Robinson, 'Actress Ashley Judd became the breakout star of the Women's March on Washington', *Business Insider*, January 21 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.nl/actress-ashley-judd-womens-march-on-washington-2017-1/?international=true&r=US> and Chloe Tejada, 'Ashley Judd's Women's March Speech Was Written by a 19 year old Poet', *The Huffington Post Canada*, January 23 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/01/23/ashley-judd-womens-march-speech_n_14334944.html

² *Strike 4 Repeal* website, last accessed May 10 2017, <http://strike4repeal.org>

the visibility of his emotive and physical engagement with the issue that the Repeal movement aimed to critically intervene within, the affective dimension of the urgency and passion behind the spoken word performance reverberated around the room as we experienced the power of his poetic polemic.³

Within the current discourse of ‘crisis’ that permeates our globalised world⁴ these two encounters with spoken word performance, both positioned as responses to crisis points of destructive inequality and hardship within the contemporary climate, sat as moments of profound mass critical engagement: virally with the case of Judd and materially resonant within the context of the small room in Utrecht. For along with the discourse of crisis, comes the accompanying dilemma:

If today’s ‘world as it is’ is one in which systematic destruction, exploitation, and ecological catastrophes are our everyday news [...] What [do we] do in the face of the violent realities shaping our today? How to approach them so as to avoid the return of the same – once again hatred and violence, further exclusion and destruction – and instead another opening becomes imaginable.⁵

Critique of the West’s contemporary social, political, gendered and racialized hegemonies is bound up with the responsibility to provide a solution and productive alternative to the crisis points of today, and yet the medium and process of such a critical exercise is a site of debate. As Bruno Latour discusses in his post-critical text on how the practice of critique has ‘ran out of steam’ within the contemporary trend of ‘knee jerk’ and destructive conspiracy theories: ‘Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?’⁶ For Latour, this crisis in critical approach, rooted in a reactive oppositionalism creates tensions in its instinct to disparage and tear down versus the production of an alternative position, whilst also creating a strict differentiation between academic and popular forms of critical practices. Therefore, considering such

³ Laurence Makin, ‘Heartbreak: Emmet Kirwan’s dazzling short film shows pressures on young Irish women’, *The Irish Times*, January 18 2017, <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/heartbreak-emmet-kirwan-s-dazzling-short-film-shows-pressure-on-young-irish-women-1.2941325>

⁴Ghassan Hage, ‘On stuckedness: the critique of crisis and the crisis of critique’, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015) and Benjamin Noys, ‘Grey in Grey: Crisis, Critique, Change’, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 4(2011) pp45-60

⁵ Kathrin Thiele, ‘Affirmation’, *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele eds. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017) 28

⁶ Bruno Latour, ‘Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004) 225

arguments within the social sciences and humanities on the efficacy of the role of the critical academic, the question of how to respond to today's moments of crisis and socio-political injustices – from gendered violence and inequality, racial discrimination, right wing political growth, environmental destruction, economic collapse, war and dispossession – is one to be engaged with urgently.

And yet, as the two anecdotes at the opening of this thesis exemplify, critique is not limited to the hallowed halls of the academy, critique is not limited to being a pursuit 'reserved for the elite'. If post-critics argue that 'it has been a long time, after all, since intellectuals were in the vanguard', critique as a practice should be considered beyond the environment of academia, and the Enlightenment roots of its 'debunking impetus'. In other words, it is important to acknowledge how the critic can 'protect and care', how one can get closer to what is being critiqued and not reject it outright and shy away. Therefore critique as an oppositional practice finds its antithesis in the notion of critique as an affirmative practice, which associates critique with more not with less.⁷ As a critical tool that moves beyond a simply oppositional position, affirmation 'offers a different register for thought and practice' that allows for time and space before automatically saying No/Yes. Not only a tool for critiquing and diagnosing 'what is', affirmation is also about crafting the possibility for envisioning transformation and change, by avoiding distancing and dissection on the part of the critical actor. Affirmation as a critical tool taps into a sense of endurance and therefore a recognition that 'life and thought' are intertwined. The recognition of the entanglement of things within 'the world as it is' and the need to critically operate within that affirmatively, could allow for 'a different attitude as ethos.[...] and maybe even a different 'humanness as praxis' to be 'enabled'.⁸

Therefore, this need to readdress the functioning of critique, the reaching for new tools in which to engage with the world and its crises, saw myself, millions of internet viewers, a crowd of protesters and Utrecht's *Strike 4 Repeal* solidarity gathering bond with the critical voice of the spoken word performance poets. Thiele's call for envisaging a means of approaching the contemporary world that will open up the space for potential may be an intimidating one to answer, but these instances of spoken word signify a shift from critique as an oppositional and/or academic exercise to critique as a

⁷ *ibid*, 225/232

⁸ Thiele, 'Affirmation', 25/28

popular, and most importantly, performed practice; a performed practice which provides the potential for forms of feminist and decolonial critical interventions within the public sphere.

As Rebecca Slater argues, in reference to the wave of popularity feminist spoken word poets have garnered following the 2017 US elections, in terms of both live gigs and online shares and views, and the resonance that their work has caused in these 'troubled times':

in an online age overwhelmed with up-to-the-minute news, opinions, memes and videos, these young writers have returned to one of our most ancient literary forms as a way to cut through the noise, and get their voices heard⁹

Therefore, I shall argue that by 'cutting through the noise' of an oppositional and competitive form of critique which tends to devalue and overrule, spoken word as a lived, vocalised, affective and witnessed practice, can have the potential for a form of critique that provides alternative discourses and the sense of potentiality and positivity in relation to change. By engaging with a research question which investigates to what degree spoken word performance poetry acts as a feminist and decolonial critical intervention that is centred on affirmatism, creativity, the productive potential for change, and popular engagement I shall discuss the use of the poet's critical voice as a conscious tool for producing alternative narratives, identities and epistemologies and also the efficacy of critique within a shared public space of live performance, which encourages communal engagement. Don Share, editor of *Poetry Magazine*, may argue that 'poets are always swirling around in the maelstrom' of each epoch's turbulent times¹⁰, but I wish to argue that this swirling is not merely one of lamentation on 'the state of things'. Indeed, I shall discuss how poetry as a spoken and performed art form can inherently be an affirmatively critical practice which, as Valerie Chepp argues, works as a 'cultural tool' for spoken word poets to combine critique with activism and thereby

⁹ Rebecca Slater, 'Verse goes viral: how young feminist writers are reclaiming poetry for the digital age', *The Guardian*, November 27 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/27/verse-goes-viral-how-young-feminist-writers-are-reclaiming-poetry-for-the-digital-age>

¹⁰ Don Share interviewed by Megan Garber, 'Still, Poetry Will Rise', *The Atlantic*, November 10 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/still-poetry-will-rise/507266/>

'raise[e] awareness about social inequalities and buil[d] communities that are healthy and politically empowered'.¹¹

Spoken Word and Critique

Spoken word poetry as an artistic medium of critical performance, may currently be seeing a 'renaissance' within the cultural and social spheres of feminist and decolonial activism¹², with poets as the new critical vanguard for 'millennial activists' wishing to critique the Western society they find themselves in, but its roots are far from recent.¹³ Birthed in Ancient Greece, and with its current manifestation influenced by the Beat poets; the Blues; the Baptist songs within the Civil Rights movement and 1970s punk rock, spoken word as live performance art is deeply rooted in the historical linkage of storytelling, personal narrative, identity and the alternative ways of utilising and portraying each. Thereby the medium's concern for what Flynn labels 'the experience of a generation growing in states of 'otherness' provides the opportunity for a creative shaping of a political critique which uses oral culture and politics within a frame of creative performance, popular spectatorship and expression.¹⁴ Although spoken word poetry can be categorised into different offshoots and specific influences, including those for competition – Slam – and those with musical accompaniment – Hip Hop – I shall focus generally on spoken word as that which can be defined as the oral performance of polemical narrative that was consciously written for the reception of a live audience.

Chepp contextualises the contemporary spoken word community within a larger 'tradition of specialised knowledge and oppositional politics rooted in [...] popular cultural oral traditions'¹⁵, and indeed the connotation of the medium, largely due to its championing of autobiographical topics from those with self-defined 'marginalised identities', is one which is recognised for its potential for giving Foucault's 'subjugated

¹¹ Valerie Chepp, 'Activating Politics with Poetry and Spoken Word', *Contexts* 15(4) (2016) 44

¹² Susan Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (University of Michigan Press, 2010) 6

¹³ Chepp, 'Activating Politics', 47

¹⁴ Karen Flynn and Evelyn Marrast, 'Spoken Word from the North: Contesting Nation, Politics and Identity', *Wadabagei* 11(2) 21

¹⁵ Valerie Chepp, 'Art as Public Knowledge and Everyday Politics: The Case of African American Spoken Word', *Humanity and Society* 36(3) (2012)

knowledges' a platform, particularly within feminist and/or decolonial circles.¹⁶ Although the racial intersections within spoken word poetry need to be considered, with there often being 'an assumption, with performance poetry, that the person's got to be black, or of colour, or certainly not white English'¹⁷, as well as the racialized discourse which deprecates it as a cultural medium due the perceived 'primitiveness' of oral culture¹⁸, the flexibility of the medium, which performer Karma R. Chavez consciously labels as queer, does give opportunity for voices and experiences which do not fit within a specific and set canon of the Western status quo with regards identity, lived experience, bodies and knowledge to find space¹⁹.

In order to approach my research question, I shall firstly map out the debates with regards critique as a practice and the theoretical journey it takes from oppositional vs. affirmative and academic vs. popular forms of critique, to critique as a performed practice, within *Chapter One: Critique, Performance and Potentiality*. In so doing, I shall theoretically investigate the literature surrounding critique, specifically with regards the nature of performance, and shall also discuss the contradictions and confrontations between the notion of critique, with its rational Enlightenment roots, and the recent 'turn to affect' within (feminist) theory. In *Chapter Two: Spoken Word Poets as Feminist and Decolonial Critical Actors* I shall use the theoretical underpinning established in *Chapter One* to zone in on spoken word performance poets who seek to use their art as a feminist/and or decolonial productive critical intervention. I shall take contemporary case studies largely from the US spoken word scene, although I shall touch on other locales, specifically the decolonial feminist duo of performance poets Denice Frohman and Dominique Christina, *Sister Outsider*. Framing spoken word poetry and its process of conception, from page to stage, within the understanding of performance poetry as practice that opens a space for potential alternatives through the focus on agency, 'the critique of cultural codes, and the production of new cultural ideas' which in turn

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-76* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003) 7

¹⁷ Jean Binta Breeze, Patience Aghabi, Jillian Tipene, Ruth Harrison and Vicki Bertram, 'A Round Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance', *Feminist Review* 62(1999) 42

¹⁸ Julia Novak, *Live Poetry. An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (Amsterdam: Rudopi, 2011) 23

¹⁹ Karma R. Chavez, 'Poetic Polemics: A (Queer Feminist of Color) Reflection on a Gay Slam Poet', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30(4) (2010) 450

develops a sense of ‘critical citizenship’²⁰, I shall place spoken word performance art within the context of that which consciously ‘clashes with the mainstream’ in order to provide a platform for voices and experiences which have traditionally been excluded or negated by discourse or language.²¹ I shall argue that feminist and decolonial spoken word is a political, pedagogic, creative and affirmative form of critique which simultaneously builds new narratives and epistemologies through the use of autobiography, language and the act of poetic storytelling. Finally, in *Chapter Three: Popular Critique in the Public Space of Spoken Word Performance* I shall examine the nature of live spoken word performances as critical episodes in the public space that utilise spectatorship, the reciprocal relationship between audience and performer, and affect as means of intervention. By engaging in spoken word as a performed critical practice which combines the awareness of the material presence of the performer with the ‘discursive connection’ of the audience in an entangled network of critical actors, I wish to discuss how the ‘active space’²² of the performed spoken word event can instigate a new critical opportunity through the recognition that we all ‘share the ongoing project of living in, creating, and sustaining’ the world we find ourselves in.²³ In analysing the affective environment and collective experience of a live performance of spoken word poetry, I wish to investigate the potential the moment has for conceiving, what Weinstein and West term as, a critical ‘counter public’.²⁴

Methodology

In focusing on the potential for feminist and decolonial critical interventions that spoken word poetry within a performed setting, primarily within the West, can elucidate I am not only responding to the current popularity of the genre but aim to bring a different layer of analysis to the academic engagement with the medium.²⁵ As Bernstein

²⁰ Cynthia Biggs-El, ‘Spreading the Indigenous Gospel of Rap Music and Spoken Word Poetry: Critical Pedagogy in the Public Sphere as a Stratagem of Empowerment and Critique’, *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 36(2) (2012) 161

²¹ Chepp, ‘Art as Public Knowledge’ 238

²² Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope At the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 98,49

²³ Kim Solga, *Theatre and Feminism* (London: Palgrave, 2016) 60

²⁴ Susan Weinstein and Anna West, ‘Call and Responsibility: Critical Questions for Youth Spoken Word Poetry’, *Harvard Fictional Review* 82(2) (2012) 287

²⁵ Slater, ‘Verse Goes Viral’

discusses, spoken word as a form of critical performance art is a largely under researched area due to the 'absence of documentation together with the tendency among critics and scholars to value the written word over the performed text'²⁶, whilst Chepp underlines how 'artistic storytelling techniques are a touchy subject for social scientists, as they invite 'unscientific' elements such as beauty, personal experience, emotions or improvisation into the scientific endeavour'.²⁷ Scholarly work dedicated to contemporary spoken word mainly focuses on the cultural politics of the medium, or as a pedagogical youth-outreach enterprise, and although I shall be addressing such aspects within this study, specifically within Chapter Two, I chose to approach these topics through a discourse analysis of media interviews, recorded live performances and talks with a specific feminist and decolonial lens of perspective.²⁸ Norman Fairclough demonstrates that discourse analysis is not only 'detailed textual analysis' but also 'part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process' and therefore I conducted my research with an awareness of the social hegemonies, power structures and intersections that operate within our society and are particularly embedded within the media²⁹. Therefore I was committed to remaining conscious of what sources my data was coming from and whom the intended audience was.

Although I am interested in the use of poetry as a critical medium, I was more concerned with what the act of spoken word performance and the writing process revealed as opposed to close reading of poetry transcripts. As Haronian asserts, the act of storytelling is 'essential for self-consciousness raising (and even self- construction)' of both the teller and the reader/audience³⁰ and thereby I undertook my research not with an eye to identifying critical metaphors and word choice within spoken word poetry but more to 'study narrative sociologically'. As Francesca Polletta suggests: 'study not only stories but stories' performance [...]study the conventions of its use, interpretation, and

²⁶ Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 22

²⁷ Chepp, 'Art as Public Knowledge' 241

²⁸ for examples of cultural political or pedagogical perspectives on the topic see Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* and Biggs-El, 'Spreading the Indigenous Gospel of Rap Music and Spoken Word Poetry: Critical Pedagogy in the Public Sphere'

²⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013) 8, 10

³⁰ Mary-Jo Haronian, 'When the teller ends with the tale: the story as metaphor for feminist agency', *Women and Language* 19(1) (1996) 32

evaluation[...]study not only meaning but also the social organisation of the capacity to mean effectively'.³¹ In order to do this, I analysed spoken word poets' experiences of their craft, the processes of writing and performing in live shows and competitions, as a means of addressing feminist and decolonial aims with regards identity, epistemology and the critical use of language. In doing so, I aim to place my research of spoken word not only within the context of the contemporary debates surrounding critical theory, subsequently bringing these debates themselves into a more material and lived reality, but also to provide a critical understanding of the art form, which has been 'below the radar of most research', and thereby provide a discourse for its interpretation within feminist and decolonial scholarship.³²

Whilst conducting my research I was aware of my position as a white Western woman analysing the experiences of a number of poets of colour, who use their poems to decolonise their lived history and critique a society with a deeply imbedded racial hegemony. Therefore, I was aware that whilst analysing these poets and their processes of critical decolonialism and feminism I had to be cognisant of the background of my analytical framework, the discursive power structures of knowledge, epistemology and research methods I was embedded in, and thereby seek to 'write with it at the forefront of my mind', situating myself within the research at all times. As Somers-Willits is consciously reflexive within her study of race in slam poetry competitions:

[...]although I acknowledge that I do not have access to all of the personal experiences of my diverse subjects, I believe that investigating the interactions between poets of colour and white, middle-class audiences[...]is of great value. The performance of identity across race and class divides poses both possibilities and limitations'³³

Likewise, within my research I wished to remain aware of how the performance of critique, often with a decolonial/and or feminist/and or queer critical voice, needed to

³¹ Francesca Polletta, 'Storytelling in Social Movements' in *Social Movements and Culture*, Hank Johnston ed. (London: Routledge, 2008) read online at University of California Irving, School of Social Sciences website, last accessed May 11 2017, http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~polletta/Articles%20and%20Book%20Chapters_files/Storytelling%20in%20Johnston%20volume-2.pdf 10

³² Rebecca Ingalls, 'Stealing the Air: The Poet-Citizens of Youth Spoken Word', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45(1) (2012) 100

³³ Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 10

be considered with a recognition of intersectional difference found in poets and audiences, both in relation to each other and within each category.

By focusing on the live experience of spoken word poetry as a critical intervention within the public sphere that utilises affect and communal critique, I once again carried out discourse analysis on reviews, and reflections of live performances (both from artists and audience members) to engage with their collective and affective experiences of such events. Reading for affect is a complex process, centred upon 'our capacity to interpret someone else's meaning making' and is an embodied and largely non-vocal experience.³⁴ Understanding the dangers of reading and misinterpreting affective responses, I was conscious to critically read for 'somatic' markers within the reviews and interviews I analysed, and be attuned to looking for reflections on atmosphere, vibes and emotions. I was aware that this is a hard thing to measure, but I was conscious to combine my affective readings with theoretical underpinnings in collective theory and spectator theory, in order to be aware of the different aspects that influence my readings. As O'Sullivan propounds, affect is immediate, personal and 'immanent in experience', and thereby written reflections are merely representations bounded by language and influenced by its signifiers, and yet in order to analyse shared affective experience we must recognise that 'affects are only meaningful within language'.³⁵ Living in the Netherlands with a minimal knowledge of Dutch, I was constrained in carrying out ethnographic research at live spoken word events, and understand that my research is thereby limited in this regard. However despite the limited 'field work' I was still able to observe participants with a view to analysing responses, through their reflections on the live experiences via reviews and reminiscences.

In combining affective politics, spoken word poetry and its decolonial and feminist critical potential and the current debates on the efficacy of critique in approaching the contemporary crises of today's world, I am positioning this thesis within a network of theories, disciplines and practices which shed new light on the genre of Spoken Word Poetry and the role that performance can provide within the fields of gender and postcolonial studies.

³⁴ Janet Newman, 'Beyond the deliberative subject? Problems of theory, method and critique in the turn to emotion and affect', *Critical Policy Studies* 6(4) (2012) 469

³⁵ Simon O'Sullivan, 'The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation', *Angelaki* 6(3) (2001) 126

Chapter One

Theory: Critique, Performance and Potentiality

In order to understand the extent to which spoken word performance poetry can act as a feminist and decolonial critical intervention that is affirmative, popular and provides an opening for potential change, it is first necessary to situate the act of critique within a theoretical framework. By positioning spoken word performances in relation to contemporary debates on both critical theory within the academy and also feminist scholarship on performance, spectatorship and affect, I wish to bring a fresh theoretical lens to spoken word poetry as a medium.

Critique in Crisis

In modernity, critique, as a tool of intellectual inquiry and response, can be simply defined as a practice that consciously unpicks the relationship between knowledge and power, and has roots within an Enlightenment epistemology of reason and logic. Although Goltz represents critique within academia generally as that which ‘works to disrupt and rupture the ways knowledge and discourse become patterned in favour of reproducing a hegemonic system’³⁶, Foucault emphasises that critique has a number of different ‘grammars’ for its understanding - from a ‘High Kantian enterprise’ to ‘little polemical activities that are called critique’ - and therefore is a multidimensional thing that is dependent on its relation to its specific subject and the school of critical thinking, from Kant to Marx to New-Materialism to Deconstruction and beyond, that it operates within.³⁷ Therefore as Butler expands, critique ‘is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice’.³⁸ Thus, although critique may be about

³⁶ Dustin Bradley Goltz, ‘The Critical Norm: the Performativity of Critique and the Potentials of Performance’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33(1) (2013) 30

³⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’ in *Politics of Truth*, Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth eds. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997) 24

³⁸ Judith Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’ originally published in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, David Ingram ed. (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002), accessed online at European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies website, last accessed 17 May 2017, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en/>

‘discerning relationships and making meaning’, there must be a level of specificity within the practice and the recognition of the complex web of engagements, relations and systems of power within which it places itself.³⁹ I find it important therefore to envisage critique as that which is linked to a specific medium of inquiry, in the case of this thesis, spoken word poetry.⁴⁰

As Butler discusses, ‘the practice of critique emerges with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse’⁴¹, which Wendy Brown compliments with her recognition that the practice is perceived largely as ‘the search for a secreted truth within a tissue of mystifications’ and ‘reason’s capacity to unveil error’.⁴² Therefore with the idea of an ‘error’ to be exposed and put to right there would appear to be a suggestion that critique is fundamentally suited to interaction with perceived moments of crisis within society by inhabiting the space that forms around that which needs to be fixed and using it to forward a perspective on how to fix it.⁴³ Crisis is thereby a productive stimulus for critique, providing the platform from which critical theory can be received. Usually, with episodes of crisis comes a certain understanding that points of intervention can be imagined and acted upon, with Hage reiterating that in 19th century and early 20th century Critical Theory, mainly underpinned by Marxism, ‘the function of critical thinking of crisis was to find or clarify the presence of cracks [in the social order] and revolutionary subjects. Such a critique was therefore an intrinsically hopeful one, reflecting the radical belief in the possibility of transformative social ruptures’.⁴⁴

Transformative power and critical traction can therefore be seen as defining characteristics of crisis points within the West, and yet as Hage charts the progression from 19th century Marxist critique to one paralysed today by the capitalisation on ‘crisis’ by neoliberal governments and institutions, using it as a form of governmentality to perpetuate a sense of immobility within the current situation, there seems to be a perpetuation of a feeling of ‘stuckedness’ within the status quo which is reflected in

³⁹ Ann Daly as quoted in Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 9

⁴⁰ Thiele, ‘Affirmation’ 28

⁴¹ Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’

⁴² Wendy Brown, ‘Introduction’ to *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (Berkeley: The Townsend Centre for the Humanities, University of California, 2009) 9

⁴³ Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’

⁴⁴ Hage, *Alter-Politics*

critical practices themselves. This paralysis within critique and the inability to move away from the mantra of 'riding out the storm', provoked for example by modern economic and environmental crises, global tensions, displacement, extremism and disenchantment with political representation, has crafted an attitude of non-responsiveness on the part of critical actors.⁴⁵ According to Jameson, critique has therefore lost its ability to function within a crisis environment, and is in a state of 'stasis'.⁴⁶

The concept of critique as being in a state of stasis and crisis - Latour's diagnosis that it has 'run out of steam' - places the format of critical practice under scrutiny and posits questions on how critical theory can operate in line with a feminist and decolonial approach that is creative, productive and opens up the potential for mass engagement.⁴⁷ As Philips, Harris, Larson and Higgens reflect on their roles as feminist academics:

Something about CT [critical thinking] just bothers me. What about this concept of the *transformative intellectual* and the arrogance that seems embedded in this idea? *Who am I to say my worldview should be imposed on others?* Or that it is *better or more right?* What about empowerment? *Is it really my role to empower others?*

This concern regarding the 'arrogance' of intellectuals thereby places critical thinking within a framework of power, where notions like empowerment and liberation mobilise problematic issues surrounding hierarchies, agency and speaking on behalf of others.

Therefore, in order to approach such perceived 'intellectual arrogance', I find it interesting to consider the debates on affirmationism within critical theory. Positioned as the polar position to an oppositional form of critique, which Latour defines as 'instant revisionism' and 'bifurcation' of thought where the critic establishes a strict counter position with the view to overhaul, an affirmative practice acknowledges the place of entanglement and creativity within critique with its focus on positivity, the shared responsibilities in matters of critical importance and productive agency.⁴⁸ Although Noys is somewhat sceptical about the 'emphasis on novelty, production and the new as the core affirmative values' due to what he sees as an ambiguity in how to define and

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso Books, 1998) 4

⁴⁷ Latour, 'Why has critique run out of steam?'

⁴⁸ *ibid* 228,244

achieve them⁴⁹, in terms of a feminist approach, the notion of affirmativity accepts that feminist critique is creatively 'for something other, a for-ness that does not simply take the shape of what it is against'.⁵⁰ Additionally, with an awareness of endurance and entanglement within an affirmative critical approach which considers 'accountability, situatedness and cartographic accuracy' in proposing that subjects are 'in this together', I find it interesting to consider feminist and decolonial critique as practices that acknowledge the interconnectedness of lives, and therefore take critique out of the specific realm of intellectual individualism. Additionally with a focus on perseverance and passion in critical approaches, critique has the opportunity to move through and beyond the object of critique and crisis points within society rather than just positioning itself in staunch opposition.⁵¹ Thereby with an affirmative and popular approach, it may be possible to bring critique out of its crises of 'intellectual arrogance', stale methodology and the limitations of a teleological focus on an end goal, by considering critical approaches as that which move us together, not against, but through to an alternative.

As Braidotti argues, the focus on 'imagination, dreamlike vision and bonding' within an affirmative critical practice, is about transcending the instinct to react in opposition, and although it does not completely negate tension and conflict, it generates an atmosphere of potentiality and possibility that allows for growth and the opportunity to be 'affected by and through others'. For Braidotti, the importance of this recognition of our affective interrelatedness as subjects, encourages the act of affirmative critique as a 'we' and not an 'I',⁵² and thereby counters Latour's suggestion that critique within the academy has become marred by, and is partly in crisis due to, a 'patrician spite for the popularization' of critical thinking.⁵³ Therefore, with Goltz arguing that 'voices of normativity' within critical academia perpetuate the privileging of oppositional critique and the upholding of hierarchies of thought, I wonder if an affirmative critical approach based on imagination, the strive for change and alternative potentials, and an entangled

⁴⁹ Noys, 'Grey in Grey: Crisis, Critique, Change' 50-51

⁵⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 2014) 178

⁵¹ Braidotti, 'Affirmativity vs Vulnerability' 236/243

⁵² *ibid* 243, 241

⁵³ Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of steam' 230

web of subjects within communal space, is something that can be materialised when the act of critique is taken to the physical field of performance?⁵⁴

The Performance of Critique

In focusing on Braidotti's notion of 'imagination, dreamlike vision and bonding' as the trinity of considerations for an affirmative critique that challenges the notion of critique as an academic and oppositional exercise, the medium of performance is an interesting approach for consideration. Indeed for Dolan, the tools of critical response have been driven to 'disrepair and disrepute by the cynicism of late capitalist globalism' which has removed imagination and creative vision from progressive thought, and therefore with the 'progressive potential of utopian performatives in performance' there can be a reinvigoration and 'reanimation' of the devices of critical vision.⁵⁵ Although Carver recognises that the act of artistic performance, as a conscious critical enterprise, still needs to be considered within a 'complex matrix of power' and remains discursively embedded in a framework of cultural codes and norms⁵⁶, performance has the potential for 'challenging habitualised critical engagement' through its complex relationships with and utilisation of language, bodies, knowledge and communication.⁵⁷

Although neo-Marxists argued in the first half of the 20th century that due to the influence of capitalism and mass media, art practices within society had been reduced to solely entertainment ventures which anaesthetise its spectators and thereby negate critical engagement, contemporary performance theorists, especially within feminist circles and researchers within spoken word, are quick to counter this.⁵⁸ As Bauman says on the 'deviant' potential of performer and performance in critiquing the cracks within society and then occupying the fissure:

The consideration of the power inherent in performance to transform social structures opens the way to a range of additional considerations concerning the

⁵⁴ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm', 27

⁵⁵ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 21

⁵⁶ M. Heather Carver, 'Staging the self: Feminist performance art and autobiographical performance', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18(4) (1998) 394

⁵⁷ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm: The Performativity of Critique and the Potentials of Performance' 25

⁵⁸ Max Horkeimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), transl. J Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1998)

role of the performer in society [...] for in the special emergent quality of performance the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest.⁵⁹ This special quality, which Bauman identifies as the intensity of engagement of an active audience, marks performance with the implicit consideration of power and discursive relationships within both the specific public space of the artistic production and in society in general through the involvement of a diverse network of connected subjects. Therefore when working in combination with the imaginative frame of Braidotti's 'dreamlike vision' in relation to affirmationism, performance can be positioned as a popular opportunity for a critique that spurs change into being.⁶⁰ As Goltz argues with regards the potential of performance to provide an interventionary and iconoclastic means of critique:

The manner by which our stories, our lives and our affinities and commitments cut across the clean and abstract language of the theoretical leaves us all dirty, grounded and soiled in one another, or so we hope. This is the performance of possibilities, the utopian performative and that unique potential of performance that pushes at the margins of discourse and disrupts the limitations of our theories.⁶¹

By grounding audiences and performers together in a state of entanglement through the creative act of storytelling and the representation of alternative subjectivities and realities, I similarly argue that performance opens up a space for a 'critical citizenry'⁶² of both performer and audience within the intellectually active or 'noetic space' of the performance.⁶³ By being an innately interactive practice, 'an activity in which we engage rather than a thing or a collection of things'⁶⁴, performance utilises the creative potential of a shared cultural public space in order to provide an alternative hermeneutics for considering the intersections of knowing, meaning and the production of dialogue. By critically reflecting on human experience through the self-aware practice of investigating communicative processes via observation, writing, and reflecting on how to engage in shared public spaces, performance can therefore 'push, tease out, and

⁵⁹ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977) 305

⁶⁰ Braidotti, 'Affirmativity vs. Vulnerability' 243

⁶¹ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm: The Performativity of Critique and the Potentials of Performance', 23

⁶² *ibid* 31

⁶³ Weinstein and West, 'Call and Responsibility', 289

⁶⁴ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 91

gesture to identities, subjectivities, relational formations and social worlds that extend beyond the confines of contemporary discursive limitations'.⁶⁵ Therefore, although performance can be limited as a critical medium, I remain persuaded of the use of performance as a means of disrupting ways of perceiving, knowing and interpreting the world. This is crucial therefore as a form of feminist and decolonial critique, with its engagement with the discursive dynamic of knowledge and power and its operation within the production of epistemologies, narratives and identities through the identities, histories and symbols that are shared from the stage and distributed and interpreted further throughout the audience.

In order to effectively situate performance within a framework of contemporary critical theory and its 'genealogical' process of change, there must also be a consideration of the influence of the theoretical 'turn to affect' within the social sciences and the humanities in the 1990s, which was regarded as a 'paradigm shift in critical theorizing'.⁶⁶ Papenburg defines affect as 'a palpable intensity, the atmosphere in a room' which 'is transmitted below the threshold of conscious perception, manifesting as bodily tension and relaxation. Affect is involuntary, non-conscious, contagious, and to a certain degree automatic'.⁶⁷ This reflex, transcending the limits of cognition and almost entirely embodied, appears to sit in contradiction with the idea of critique as a considered, active and rational practice, yet the 'turn' to its recognition as a facet that needs to be considered for critical inquiry points to a sense of urgency for critique to move beyond the discursive limits of language in order to be interventionary and effective. Responding to the 'anti-biologism' of critical theory's view of critical thought as purely cognitive; the turn to affect saw the recognition of the body and bodily matter as an important point for analysis. As Fischer describes, quoting Elizabeth Grosz:

Theorists need [...] to recover the body as a topic worthy of scholarly pursuit to "remind" themselves as "social, political and cultural theorists, particularly those interested in feminism, antiracism and questions of the politics of globalization, that they have forgotten a crucial dimension of research" The new affect theorist and feminist neomaterialist can thus be interpreted as part of the

⁶⁵ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm', 31

⁶⁶ Clara Fischer, 'Feminist Philosophy, Pragmatism and the 'Turn to Affect': A Genealogical Critique', *Hypatia* 3(4) (2016) 811

⁶⁷ Bettina Papenburg, 'Affect' in *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele eds. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017) 19

same family or grouping of theorist who find contemporary theoretical approaches unproductive, or at least incomplete.⁶⁸

Therefore in my view, with Goltz's definition of performance as a 'view from the body' which also puts 'bodies on the line', affect and its focus on embodiment and emotive reactions pays cognisance to the presence of individual and shared experiences within performed interactions with power relations, which can be used as moments of critical mobilisation that counteract the stagnancy of critique.⁶⁹ As Bargetz argues, paying attention to distribution of feeling, in the case of this thesis within the context of spoken word performances, places affect as a 'marker of political critique' that recognises the collective experiences of critical responses and collective responsibility for political action, and is thereby, I argue, an example of an affirmative and popular mode of critical interpretation.⁷⁰

Although affect must not be romanticised as the panacea to all ills vis-à-vis critique, its exclusion from 'main and mainstream research', and the history of dichotomising the mind/body, makes affect an important dimension to consider for feminist critical theory.⁷¹ With a space of communal interaction and the accompanying entanglements and reciprocal connections between bodies and feelings of performers and spectators, performance may therefore be a form of political critique which not only reflects the post-9/11 Western socio-political atmosphere, where emotions, bodies and affect have been 'culturalised' and 'politicised' within discourses of Terror, Otherness and Extremism, but points to an alternative position of how to perceive the dynamic of knowledge, power and perception within the framework of critical analysis.⁷² Much like Latour's argument for critical actors needing to do as 'good military officers' updating their weapons and tactics in light of the specific context of the current offensive, these omnipresent discourses in the post-9/11 era call for new approaches to how critique is framed, considered and experienced in today's world.⁷³

Performance, Critique and Spoken Word

⁶⁸ Fischer, 'Feminist Philosophy, Pragmatism and the Turn to Affect', 812

⁶⁹ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm', 30-31

⁷⁰ Brigitte Bargetz, 'The Distribution of Emotions: Affective Politics of Emancipation', *Hypatia* 30(3) (2015) 582-583

⁷¹ *ibid*, 590

⁷² *ibid*, 580

⁷³ Latour, 'Why has Critique ran out of steam?' 231

In order to investigate to what extent spoken word performance poetry may act as a feminist and decolonial critical intervention that is centred on creativity, popular engagement and the productive potential for change, it is therefore necessary to position spoken word within both theoretical frameworks discussed above: namely the contemporary debates on critique and critical performance theory. Taking Braidotti's premise of 'imagination, dreamlike vision and bonding', I aim to place spoken word within a theoretical framework which jumps off from this point; looking at spoken word as an affirmative and popular critical intervention which uses the productive power of creativity ('imagination'), has a clear critical feminist and decolonial aim ('dreamlike vision'), and operates within a space of collective and affective experience ('bonding').⁷⁴

As Wurth outlines, 'creation is speculation. To speculate is to consider, to think through and to guess'.⁷⁵ With both uncertainty and openness inherent in this action, creation is thereby a process that directs us to think, and to think critically. Therefore, in the context of spoken word, the potential for expansive thinking as a result of the medium's natural creativity, establishes a moment of unfixed potentiality for sharing, growth and reciprocal critical thought. With the nature of performance poetry as a medium utilising autobiographical narratives and storytelling as creative tools, the use of personal experience and the engagement with an audience brings critique into a lived and experienced reality that encourages reflection and action through the use of 'imagination'. Additionally, for feminist and decolonial spoken word poets, the 'dreamlike vision' of their critique has specific aims of encouraging thought and change, and thereby is a point of creative engagement with a potential future. Whilst Dolan defines this vision for change as 'utopian performance'⁷⁶, I think in general it can be defined as a sense of envisioning an alternative through an affirmative critical practice, which acknowledges that there is a process of work and action that must be accomplished in order to get to this alternative stage. Encompassing different approaches to pedagogy and meaning making, this 'vision' within feminist and decolonial spoken word consciously performs critique of existing structures of

⁷⁴ Braidotti, 'Affirmativity vs. Vulnerability', 243

⁷⁵ Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, 'Creation' in *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele eds. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017) 37

⁷⁶ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*

knowledge and power, which are translated into the public sphere as moments of collective critical interactions. Finally, Braidotti's concept of affirmative 'bonding' is exemplified within the various venues of spoken word performances, materially and online, where the audience and performers interact and are affected in an entangled web of collective engagement with critique. As Grosz argues 'all cultural production [...] is a collective product' and are the results of 'a thinking and a writing or speaking that are effects of our interaction with others'.⁷⁷ Therefore, spoken word as a performed and culturally understood manner of critique, engages in the formation of alternatives through communal experience and practice.

To conclude, in order to envisage critique and performance as theoretical bedfellows for affirmative and popular practices of alternative meaning making and challenging hegemonic discourses, I propose the consideration of spoken word poetry as a medium which incites involvement and 'getting up close and personal' to critical praxis. As Goltz evocatively puts it in relation to critical theory and performance:

Perhaps our theory needs to be allowed to get messy, clumsy, contextual, relational and embodied. Rather than sitting in the back row, claiming authoritative distance from the back of the house, how can or might theory put its body on the line? How might that dirty up, and open up, further possibilities?⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity' in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, Sneja Gunew ed. (London: Routledge, 1990) 120

⁷⁸ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm' 38-39

Chapter Two

'I Spit Simply for a Sick Society': Spoken Word Poets as Feminist and Decolonial Critical Actors⁷⁹

With the coupling of an imaginative outlook through creative writing processes with a set vision of alternative possibilities inherent in social and politically motivated poetry, contemporary spoken word performance poets engage in a critical process that approaches societal issues, and provokes new knowledges and considerations on how to situate oneself in relation to the objects of critique that they engage with. In the context of spoken word performance poets who identify with a feminist and/or decolonial vision, the practice of storytelling, the conscious use of language and culture as reclamatory tools and critical enterprises and the use of autobiography within their work, act, in my opinion, as devices that demonstrate a form of critique that I argue is affirmative and productive in the construction of new narratives, epistemologies and identities. In order to address this affirmative critique in the context of performance poets and their conscious critical practice, I shall focus largely, though not solely, on contemporary US spoken word performers, as the growth of the medium within the US since the 1990s locates my study within a well-developed and complex network of spoken word artists, whose practice operates within a spoken word culture with significant popular attention both in live venues and online. Although I shall aim to present a broad and comparative discussion on a range of spoken word poets and their critical practices, I will devote significant analysis to *Sister Outsider*, the award-winning, Audre Lorde-inspired duo of New Yorker Denice Frohman and Denver's Dominique Christina. Uniting with each other in the mid-2000s in order to take their spoken word performances on national tours of schools, colleges and conferences, Frohman and Christina consciously use their poetry as a form of decolonial feminist critique that celebrates 'otherness' and calls into account systemic and institutional marginalisation and negation of people of colour, women and LGBTQ communities.⁸⁰ By centering my study on *Sister Outsider*, I aim to delve into how the poetic process can act as a conscious

⁷⁹ Mic Crenshaw, 'Race, Class, Global Hip Hop and Society: Reflections on the African Hip Hop Caravan', Ted X Concordia UPortland, *Youtube, TedXTalks*, May 9 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQNQGPoFyI8> last accessed May 29 2017

⁸⁰ Blurb from 'Sister Outsider Spoken Word' event at Humboldt State University, CA, April 20 2016, *Queer Humboldt*, last accessed 25 May 2017, <http://www.queerhumboldt.org/event/sister-outsider-spoken-word/>

and creative feminist and decolonial intervention that offers an alternative or non-mainstream approach to critical and feminist theorising. By studying the conscious elements of performed spoken word, I aim to demonstrate how the form might operate as effective critique.

*'Each poem is creating a world': Critical Storymaking/telling*⁸¹

As I mentioned in my introduction, I approach the study of spoken word as a feminist and decolonial intervention not through the close reading of poetry, but through the analysis of the practice of performing the medium. In this respect, the act of telling a story is crucial in how spoken word poets harness their critical voice and offer it to others. Although storymaking and telling are practices that live outside and beyond the experience of spoken word poetry, the constant awareness - from the poem's conception on a page through the multiple performances which constantly change and influence its form - of the story being received by a live (and diverse) audience make it an important facet of understanding the medium as a critical venture. For Dominique Christina and Denice Frohman of *Sister Outsider*, on their tours of poetry clubs, college campuses and schools, the use of story telling acts as a vehicle for centering their critique of education, of homophobia, of institutional racism, of the coloniality of power, of misogyny, and directing it towards a productive end goal of inclusive discussion and representation of histories and identities. The story in performance takes on the significance of being their 'road map and compass', guiding them in their process of finding means to actively intervene within societal debates on race, gender and sexuality.⁸² As Denice Frohman of *Sister Outsider* states on writing 'Dear Straight People', her riposte to imbedded and normalised homophobia within American society, 'the poem was me *doing* something about [institutional inequality]'. By allowing her to 'let off steam' in a cathartic process of interrogating systems of power via storymaking, Frohman utilises spoken word as way to create a critical product.⁸³ Although

⁸¹ Taylor Marsh, 'Interview with Denice Frohman', *Taylor Marsh blog spot*, September 23 2013, <http://www.taylormarsh.com/2013/09/interview-denice-frohman-dear-straight-people-video/>

⁸² Tina Lu, 'The Master of Interrupting Space: Dominique Christina interview', *GirlSpire*, June 11 2015, <http://www.projgirlspire.com/the-master-of-interrupting-space-dominique-christina/>

⁸³ Marsh, 'Interview with Denice Frohman'

storytelling as a critical practice has often been denied credibility due to accusations of ambiguity and allusiveness, I would argue that it is precisely this ambiguity, what Polletta labels 'an ellipsis in the centre', which encourages the listener of spoken word performances to fill in the gaps; encouraging a moment of mobilisation for an affirmative and popular critique that makes space for an alternative feminist and decolonial vision.⁸⁴ This moment of the spoken word audience's engagement with the story's elliptic quality can most obviously be determined through the culture of 'call and response', where spectators call back to the performer, but I shall expand on such critical potential for popular engagement in more detail in my following chapter.

This critical potential of storymaking within the spoken word community does have its limits, due to the increasing mainstream media attention now focused on the medium as well as the competitive nature of the form of Slam poetry contests, where 3 minutes of stage time encourages focus on 'hot topics' that will secure audience reaction.⁸⁵ However, spoken word poets with a clear activist edge, such as *Sister Outsider* and decolonial South African collective *Soundz of the South* - who use their hip hop and poetry as an activist tool to spread revolutionary messages that critique neoliberalism and raise social consciousness throughout both inner city and rural communities in the Western Cape⁸⁶ - use their storytelling as a strategic counter stance to the commercialisation of the form. Although Bunz demonstrates that with capitalism now appropriating that which had previously been the site of critical opposition and therefore problematizing the act of positioning oneself critically against it, spoken word artists who consciously use storymaking and telling to speak to these tension between competition, commercialisation and critical art, remain important vehicles for affirmative and productive critique⁸⁷. For example, when *Soundz of the South* address the racialized symbolism of 'bling-bling and bitches' in contemporary mainstream Hip Hop, they shed light on the discursive systems of power that appropriated the medium and aimed to discredit its critical voice when they realised it 'was actually working' in spreading a critique of racism and coloniality. Therefore, by centering their storymaking

⁸⁴ Polletta, 'Storytelling in Social Movements' 8/21

⁸⁵ Chavez, 'Poetic Polemics', 444

⁸⁶ 'About', Soundz of the South, *Facebook*,

https://www.facebook.com/pg/soundzofthesouth/about/?ref=page_internal last accessed June 10 2017

⁸⁷ Mercedes Bunz, 'Capital', *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele eds. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017) 33

on the recognition that commercial Hip Hop, especially that imported from the West, is 'not accommodating to us', *Soundz of the South* use their art as a counterhegemonic tool of popular engagement that showcases stories reflexive of their decentralising, community focused, feminist and decolonial critical vision and thereby actively proposes a form of black South African subjectivity via spoken word and Hip Hop that challenges the pervasive imagery of money-obsessed hypersexualised 'gangsters'.⁸⁸ By combining their 'anarchic' and 'hardcore'⁸⁹ storymaking aiming to 'demystify big issues' in order to make the 'people realise they are in chains'⁹⁰, with, for example, fundraising benefits for dismissed university professors, marches against unemployment and inability accessing public services within the black community and protest gatherings against police brutality, *Soundz of the South* bring their poetic making and telling into a sphere of on-the-ground, material productive action.⁹¹

By functioning as a vehicle for getting close to the object of critique in order to articulate a position of alternative possibility, the process of storymaking and telling in spoken word poetry involves a journey of question and answer which is critical for a feminist and/or decolonial intervention. For example Mick Crenshaw, 'poet and social justice educator', argues that the utilisation of storytelling within spoken word performances acts not only as an opportunity to perform 'cultural activism' in bringing alternative ideas to a mainstream audience, but allows him the space to formulate his critical position 'around the consciousness around those questions [of racial inequality] that I first started asking as a young person'.⁹² As most stories are born from a personal journey of asking questions - about society, identity, power, knowledge, - spoken word encourages a critical engagement with possibility through presenting the poem as a forum-esque space for reflection and challenge, and as poet Sarah Kay testifies 'I write poems to figure things out. Sometimes the only way I know how to work through

⁸⁸ Christine Hogg, 'Smashing patriarchy one hip hop cypher at a time', *Africa is a Country*, April 11 2017, <http://africasacountry.com/2017/04/smashing-patriarchy-one-hip-hop-cypher-at-a-time/> last accessed May 29 2017

⁸⁹ Biko MC, 'Waging War on the Status Quo', A+J, *Youtube*, March 8 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdzptwEGWmA> last accessed June 10 2017

⁹⁰ Christine Hogg, 'South Africa's anarchist hip hop collective', *Africa is a Country*, December 4 2015, <http://africasacountry.com/2015/12/south-africas-anarchist-hip-hop-collective/> last accessed June 10 2017

⁹¹ for examples of SOS activist events see 'Events', *Soundz of the South*, *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/pg/soundzofthesouth/events/?ref=page_internal last accessed June 10 2017

⁹² Mic Crenshaw, 'Race, Class, Global Hip Hop and Society'

something is by writing a poem'.⁹³ This question making process, offered up to live and online audiences for further contemplation, is important for both feminist and decolonial critique. As Maria Lugones explains, the construction of a modern, capitalist, colonial system of gendered power is centred on the need for 'categorical, dichotomous and hierarchical logic', wherein a Eurocentric root of knowledge production based on Enlightenment principles of rationality, logic and the quest for Truth dominates the discourse on what is perceived knowable, profitable and progressive.⁹⁴ Therefore, disruption of the capitalist-colonial-gendered concepts of what is deemed knowable through moments of storymaking and telling and the communal act of sharing questions, encourages the transcending of narratives that seek to define individuals, communities and histories and the framework which sets the limits of what is perceived real, true and appropriate for living in today's world.

For *Sister Outsider*, the act of storymaking and storytelling is about seeking out and identifying the options that can 'put the flesh on your bones' and present a narrative that *gives* something to women of colour rather than taking something *away*⁹⁵, and thereby crafts a sense of agential subjectivity which responds to Grosz's proposal that 'instead of being a metaphor, women [must] affirm the right to make metaphor'.⁹⁶ By utilising poetic storytelling as a means of identifying 'stories which aren't making it into the light' and then actively being the one to 'be sort of pushing those' into the consciousness of their live audiences⁹⁷, *Sister Outsider's* practice of storytelling on the one hand compliments Dolan's notion of feminist performance as 'an act of midwifery',⁹⁸ birthing new narratives, identities and epistemologies. Concurrently on the other hand, they also exemplify Chepp's suggestion that spoken word acts as a productive critique of 'majoritarian stories' by demonstrating a subculture of 'counterstorytelling'.⁹⁹ In the countering of mainstream stories, particularly with regards narratives of black women, *Sister Outsider* make use of storytelling as a means of 'articulating and evidencing a

⁹³ Sarah Kay, 'If I Should Have a Daughter', *Ted 2011*, *Ted.com*, March 2011, https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kay_if_i_should_have_a_daughter#t-1073347, last accessed May 29 2017

⁹⁴ Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia* 25(4) (2010) 742

⁹⁵ Lu, 'The Master of Interrupting Space'

⁹⁶ Grosz, 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity', 103

⁹⁷ Lu, 'The Master of Interrupting Space'

⁹⁸ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 103

⁹⁹ Chepp, 'Activating Politics with Poetry and Spoken Word' 45

specifically gendered form' of critique, which not only aims at social consciousness raising, but intervenes in feminist debates on difference, entanglement and alliances¹⁰⁰.

As Dominique from *Sister Outsider* asserts:

I give you a story and I bring you into things and you might not have grown up the way that I did and your family might not be constructed the way mine is but if you can find yourself in the story that I told you or even if that story calls on you to tell a story back, now we're relative to each other, we know each other and stories facilitate that better than anything.¹⁰¹

By encouraging a sense of relativity in difference, and an acknowledgement of situating oneself in a story, as both performer and audience, the spoken word of *Sister Outsider* produces a critique which encourages a reflection on entanglement and thereby a recognition that although intersections within specific lives must be considered, in order to make an effective and productive feminist and decolonial intervention a belief in the power of 'human foldedness' must be demonstrated.¹⁰²

*'The Skeleton Architecture of Our Lives': The language of spoken word*¹⁰³

As a branch of oral culture, used by feminist and decolonial focused individuals for their critique of knowledge and power, the centrality of language within spoken word is understandably highly significant. With language and power discursively and institutionally bound in a process of framing identity, history and subjectivity,¹⁰⁴ the reclamation of language is fundamental for facilitating the ability to not only 'scrutinize the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it'¹⁰⁵. Therefore, in the consciously performative use of language within contemporary spoken word, poets offer different forms of dialogue, speech and relationships between language and personhood in order to critique and provide an alternative to the lack of representation of marginalised groups in the 'public transcript' of history, culture and

¹⁰⁰ Flynn and Marrast, 'Spoken Word from the North', 17

¹⁰¹ Lu, 'The Master of Interrupting Space'

¹⁰² Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement. Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009) 1

¹⁰³ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007) 38

¹⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 215-37

¹⁰⁵ Lorde, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action', *Sister Outsider* 43

identity. By using language, such as black vernacular, wordplay, rhythmic beats inspired from Hip Hop, evangelistic inspired vocal projection, and indigenous tongues, certain poets, particularly those with decolonial critical focus, such as *Sister Outsider* and *Soundz of the South* reveal a 'hidden transcript' of knowledge and self hood and the 'encoded' beliefs of their culture and peoples through their spoken word performances and pedagogic offshoots.¹⁰⁶ For Dominique of *Sister Outsider*, the realisation that 'words make worlds' serves as the impetus for using her poetry as a step in reclaiming 'the business of identifying myself, for myself' and resisting 'being misnamed further, historically or contemporarily' which for her is essentially predicated on 'having a different kind of relationship with language'.¹⁰⁷ With poets of colour often 'ghettoised' in broader literary and performance circles for using their own language¹⁰⁸, the resilience of *Sister Outsider* in maintaining their right to 'know that I know what I'm saying' through the critique of etymologies – Dominique discusses the power relationship behind being called a descendent of a slave rather than an ascendant¹⁰⁹ – becomes a major facet of their self-proclaimed goal of 'bringing the margins into the centre'¹¹⁰. Thereby, by using language consciously, by identifying discursive misuse and misnaming, *Sister Outsider* combine a critique of existing systems with the reclamation of language and the subsequent 'insistence of myself [...] naming myself and claiming myself and defining myself'¹¹¹, in turn complimenting Grosz's notion that feminist theory must 'know its adversary intimately' in order to work through an alternative.¹¹² For example, in her 2013 Ted Talk at the Metropolitan State University of Denver, Dominique Christina charts the definition of the word 'nice', and its synonyms of polite, pleasant, warm, sweet that are traditionally gendered as female, back to its Latin root 'nascence' – 'As in no science! As in no knowledge! [...] in bold letters: ignorant' – to emphasise how the distance between definition and meaning is hidden behind the

¹⁰⁶ Chepp, 'Art as Public Knowledge', 224/232

¹⁰⁷ Dominique Ashaheed, 'Words Make Worlds', TedXMSUDenver, *TedXTalks Youtube*, November 12 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcy05V2Y1_8 last accessed May 30 2017

¹⁰⁸ Ingalls, 'Stealing the Air' 112

¹⁰⁹ Ashaheed, 'Words Make Worlds'

¹¹⁰ Alejandra Salazar, 'Slam Poets Sister Outsider Fight With Their Words', *Stanford Arts Review*, October 28 2014, <http://stanfordartsreview.com/slam-poets-sister-outsider-fight-with-their-words/> last accessed May 30 2017

¹¹¹ Ashaheed, 'Words Makes Worlds'

¹¹² Grosz, 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity' 59-60

'borrowed' nature of language and the power dynamics behind who 'facilitates' your introduction to its usage. Therefore for Dominique, the first step to 'being whole and being positioned in the world in the way that [she] wanted' as a woman of colour was through educating herself on the etymologic relationships of knowledge and power and rewriting meaning through conscious word choice within her poems.¹¹³

The association of spoken word poetry with the simultaneous critique of language and use of alternative discourses has saw Ingalls identify the medium as a 'counter literacy'¹¹⁴, where the conscious reclamation of a 'mothertongue'¹¹⁵, of a 'language of our lives'¹¹⁶, not only speaks to moments of silence and erasure, but brings this critique into a creative process of life-affirming productivity:

Words in the mouths of these women slam, shoot like alphabet guns, fire fast digit letters and sounds into silence, into the invisible that lives forever visible right in front of us, the invisible that can't be spoken until it's spoken and so these brave chicks speak and speak.¹¹⁷

Although Sini Anderson of *Sister Spit*, the San-Franciscan lesbian-feminist spoken word and performance art collective touring since 1996, defines spoken word as a process of utilising 'other words' and crafting a 'lexis for outsiders', I alternatively feel that it is important to consider how the linguistic usage within the medium performs a conscious act of evidencing entanglement between communities and thereby speaking critically to a society that defines them as outsiders in the first place.¹¹⁸ For *Sister Outsider*, the use of a 'lexis for outsiders' is not about claiming, yet remaining on, the periphery but, as Dominique discusses in reference to her poem 'Birmingham Sunday', is focused on 'reanimating the bones' of history in order to critique a language that frames 'my-historical-before-I-got-here-experience' as one of the Other, the conquered, the 'DEscendent of slave'.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Ashaheed 'Words Make Words'

¹¹⁴ Ingalls, 'Stealing the Air', 100

¹¹⁵ Natalie E. Illum, 'On Mothers and Mothertongue' in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in Spoken Word Revolution*, Alix Olson and Eve Ensler eds. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007) 58

¹¹⁶ Gerald T Reyes 'Finding the Poetic High: Building a Spoken Word Community and Culture of Creative, Caring and Critical Intellectuals', *Multicultural Education* 20(3/4) (2014) 37

¹¹⁷ Eve Ensler, 'The Way Girls Word' in *Word Warriors* ix

¹¹⁸ Sini Anderson, 'In Other Words' in *Word Warriors* 278

¹¹⁹ Ashaheed, 'Word Makes Worlds'

The use of language as a facilitator of both a critique of a present and a vision of the future, points to a (sub)culture within the spoken word community which is consciously crafted in response to the omnipotent presence of 'the master's tools'¹²⁰ and considers the intersections of race and class in its assurance that 'you don't have to be all hooked up to the world', needing only a pen, paper and a voice in order to offer your affirmative critique and vision of decolonial feminist possibilities and 'create a place in the world for you and your people'¹²¹. As Flynn and Marrast discuss in their study of the black North American spoken word community, the variability of the form allows for a borrowing from broader cultures of the black diaspora - including dup, calypso, reggae, blues, rap - and therefore produces a 'hybridized mix' of 'border-crossing' which in turn critiques not only the notion of linguistic purity within the poetic form, but reclaims performance, language and art as areas that can be defined as 'theirs'.¹²² Therefore, when Mic Crenshaw defines the spoken word tour 'African Hip Hop Caravan' as being 'a radical reappropriation of decolonisation' through its interrogation of the commercialisation and westernisation of the Hip Hop genre, I would argue that the linguistic and formulaic reimagination of the medium acts as an active critique of Western dominance of culture and the assumption that both people of colour and women are outside of or borrowers of that culture.¹²³

These critiques, imbedded within the use of language within contemporary spoken word pieces, explain the growing popularity of the art form as a mode of critical pedagogy. By undercutting the 'cleansed speech of the academy'¹²⁴ and by 'enacting emancipatory discourses [...]that honour human differences'¹²⁵, the use of spoken word within schools, workshops and college campuses 'contributes to a reflective ethical self-consciousness'.¹²⁶ Spoken word as a pedagogic tool is thereby not only a conscious force

¹²⁰ Audre Lord, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider*, 110-113

¹²¹ Jessa Crispin, 'Interview with Michelle Tea, Sister Spit: Writings, Rants and Reminiscences for the Road', *Kirkus Reviews*, September 18 2012, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/sister-spit-writings-rants-reminiscence-road/> last accessed May 30 2017

¹²² Flynn and Marrast, 'Spoken Word from the North' 4

¹²³ Crenshaw, 'Race, Class, Global Hip Hop and Society'

¹²⁴ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm', 25

¹²⁵ Norman Denzin 'Emancipatory Discourses and the Ethics and Politics of Interpretation', *Qualitative Research 3rd Edition*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005) 953

¹²⁶ Biggs-El, 'Spreading the Indigenous Gospel', 166

against omission or misrepresentation of both women and people of colour within education systems, but points to a feminist ethics of care and knowledge production which speaks to the discursive power structures within institutions of learning and our responsibility to make these discourses visible. With spoken word poets dubbed by Biggs-El as ‘pop culture pedagogues’,¹²⁷ there is undeniable potential within the art form to act as a form of popular critique which not only gets close to the environment in which it is sited in, but creatively establishes a new position, an alternative of perceiving the world and thereby breathes a sense of agency into the act of learning. For poet Sarah Kay, spoken word as a pedagogic tool which crafts a different relationship with language use opens up space for students to ‘rediscover wonder [...] to actively pursue being engaged with what goes on around them, so that they can reinterpret and create something from it’.¹²⁸

The Personal is Political: Autobiography as a Critical Device

The use of storymaking/telling and the reclamation of language and culture as devices of feminist and decolonial critique within spoken word may be fundamental in crafting new alternatives, but it is arguably the focus on autobiographical narratives within the medium which crystallises these tools into a significant form of interventionary critique. Although not all spoken word is explicitly autobiographical in content, the ‘distillation of experience’¹²⁹ that Lorde marks as an inherent feature of poetry coupled with the physical presence of the performer and author on stage imbues the practice of spoken word with a materiality that using the personal as a ‘critical perspective’ which ‘exhibits a gap with dominant cultural representations’ without falling into abstraction.¹³⁰ With the physicality of the performer complicating the conflation of the poem’s voice with a fictional character, and thereby challenging Barthes’ assertion of the necessity of the ‘death of the author’¹³¹, spoken word performances act as sites for personal ‘testifying’ on the part of the performer, which

¹²⁷ *ibid*, 162

¹²⁸ Kay, ‘If I Should Have A Daughter’

¹²⁹ Lorde, ‘Poetry is not a Luxury’ 36

¹³⁰ Annemie Halsema, ‘Experience’, in *Symptoms* 53

¹³¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977) pp142-148

Chepp links to a 'broader community ritual of affirmation and learning'.¹³² Even when poems do not appear to directly recount a personal story, autobiography is still considered an integral part of the practice, through which performers can gain agency from becoming 'owners of their knowledge capital'¹³³ and claiming a 'space of one's (kn)own'.¹³⁴

The use of autobiography and personal experience within contemporary spoken word culture, which Somers-Willet dubs the 'art of self-proclamation'¹³⁵, is an important tool for an affirmative critique which crafts feminist and decolonial interventions through both the visibility and vulnerability imbedded in this staged display of personal experience. These two aspects of performed autobiography open up the potential for discussions on identity, truth claims and knowledge which theoretically compliment a Marxist theoretical approach and feminist standpoint theory, and in combination with a focus on 'voices from the margins' are intrinsic to an affirmative ethical approach to critique, which Braidotti views as valuable for reinvigorating (feminist) critical theory.¹³⁶ For Michelle Tea of *Sister Spit*, the importance of a 'really unique and personal twist' within spoken word performances, of 'telling your gnarly story of what your experience was in this world', is integral to the prevention of falling back on generalisations and dogmatism that limit critique to the confines of oppositionalism¹³⁷.

For *Sister Outsider*, personal experience made physical by the performer's presence is a double edge sword that both critiques the negation and erasure of certain marginalised identities and experiences in the media, textbooks and society, whilst also producing a space where alternative options are performed and embodied, and thereby metaphorically and literally are moved to the centre (stage). In response to not 'being

¹³² Chepp, 'Activating Politics', 46

¹³³ Biggs-El, 'Spreading the Indigenous Gospel' 164

¹³⁴ Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, 'Editor's Introduction', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20(1) (2000) 8

¹³⁵ Somers-Willet, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 69

¹³⁶ Braidotti, 'Affirmativity vs. Vulnerability', 248

¹³⁷ 'An Interview with City Lights/Sister Spit's Michelle Tea', *Live from CityLights* podcast, November 1 2012, <http://www.citylightspodcast.com/an-interview-with-city-lightssister-spit-editor-michelle-tea/>

exposed to poets that looked or sounded like [us] in school'¹³⁸, Denice Frohman and Dominique Christina use their art form to 'insist on [ourselves] over and over again'¹³⁹, consequently allowing them to not only 'talk back to the thing that has hurt us' but also to 'say we have always been here and that we survive'¹⁴⁰. Therefore, *Sister Outsider* use their personal narratives to not only enact a reclamation of how '[their]history[...] [their] pain, [their]love and [their] future' are framed and presented in contemporary discourses, but affirmatively critique a society that negates the existence of specific intersectional experiences of women of colour simply through being a visible, vulnerable, resilient, unapologetic and agential *individual* on stage.¹⁴¹

Autobiographical narratives within spoken word performances that centre on specific identity politics have been criticised for their limitations in not being inclusive, intersectional, productive and affirmative feminist and decolonial critical interventions, with Chavez arguing against the 'one layer identities' that certain slam poets use to project and reclaim a position of marginalisation. For Chavez, this focus on a singular facet of identity – blackness, queerness, being a woman - reinforces the hierarchical logic of categorisation, whilst also running the risk of speaking for others¹⁴²; although some may argue that such identity politics within spoken word performances is a conscious decision on behalf of the poet, using Spivak's strategic essentialism and purposefully minimising differences and forwarding unity in categorisation, in order to centre a critique on specific erasures of subjectivity and deconstruct systems of power¹⁴³. However, contrary to Chavez, slam poet Eve Ensler argues that her spoken word practice is not an act of 'representing, but presenting. Not claiming we but me'¹⁴⁴, and therefore uses identity, as a queer woman, not as a general signifier for experiences of marginalisation but, as *Sister Spit's* Michelle Tea adds, as a 'living breathing response

¹³⁸ 'National Poetry Month: Denice Frohman Slams Down Oppression with Survival Poetry', *Autostraddle*, April 14 2014, <https://www.autostraddle.com/national-poetry-month-denice-frohman-slams-down-oppression-with-survival-poetry-233592/> last accessed May 30 2017

¹³⁹ Karla Cordero, 'Women of the World: Speak in Resistance Part 1', *Spit Journal*, August 2 2014, <http://www.spitjournal.com/news/women-world-speak-resistance-part-1-2/> last accessed May 30 2017

¹⁴⁰ 'Denice Frohman Slams Down Oppression'

¹⁴¹ *ibid*

¹⁴² Chavez 'Poetic Polemics' 446,448

¹⁴³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993)

¹⁴⁴ Eve Ensler, 'The Way Girls Word' ix

to an overlooked patch of feminist experience'¹⁴⁵ that thereby positions her as a performer as the 'bearer' of an alternative consideration vis-à-vis the multitude of experience.¹⁴⁶ As Goltz argues, the use of personal experience as means of performing critique challenges the limits of critical theory by providing a nuanced theoretical perspective which encourages acts of 'unlearning' in relations to dominant systems of knowledge, language and subjectivity¹⁴⁷.

Therefore, by performing specific autobiographical narratives on stage whilst also playing with a performative approach to racialized and gendered experience, spoken word performance poets encourage a creative, speculative and curious engagement from the audience on experiences of individuals and groups. Storymaking and telling, language reclamation and the politicisation of the personal all position spoken word as a distinct brand of performance that enacts an affirmative engagement with critical approaches to issues of representation and discourses within society. This affirmative engagement is fundamental for introducing the possibility of alternatives for feminism and decolonialism, but only through the understanding of spoken word within its specific environment and rituals as a performed art practice, can we understand how the medium draws force and efficacy from a communal and popular critical experience orchestrated within the public sphere.

¹⁴⁵ Michelle Tea, 'On Sister Spit' in *Word Warriors* 13

¹⁴⁶ 'Sister Spit's New Generation of Queer Poets and Rebels. The Autostraddle Interview', *Autostraddle*, October 15 2009, <https://www.autostraddle.com/sister-spit-with-michelle-tea-ariel-schrag-the-autostraddle-interview-16830/?all=1> last accessed May 31 2017

¹⁴⁷ Goltz, 'The Critical Norm' 30

Chapter Three

'The Critic is the One Who Assembles': Popular Critique in the Public Space of Spoken Word Performance¹⁴⁸

So far within this thesis I have argued that spoken word performance poetry functions as an opportunity for reinvigorating critical practices within feminist and decolonial circles through an affirmative and popular approach to critique that is in part facilitated by the role of the performer poet as a conscious critical actor. However, in order to fully map the critical potential of the medium of spoken word I wish to emphasise the context of the performative space in which the art form is sited for encouraging an alternative form of critique. Although spoken word poetry functions within a public sphere of performance like most forms of performed art practices, and is therefore not distinct in being received in 'present-tenseness'¹⁴⁹, I view the particularities of the sphere of spoken word performances and their audiences – for example the often innately critical and political personal motivations of the audiences and 'the call and response' culture which encourages a vocalisation of spectator reaction to the critical pieces - as key to the production of critical moments of potentiality for feminist and decolonial interventionists. Viewing the public spheres of spoken word performances, both live and online, as 'active spaces'¹⁵⁰ of discursive dialogue between audience and performers offers the potential to craft Weinstein and West's critical 'counterpublic', as I made reference to in my introduction.¹⁵¹ In my opinion, this 'counterpublic', conceived partly through an awareness of the entangled web of critical actors within the space of performance allows spoken word as a form the potential for inciting popular and collective critical practices that act as fundamental moments of productivity which can bring critique out of a position of oppositional stagnancy. By provoking intersubjective critical experiences within an atmosphere of interconnectedness, the public sphere of spoken word acts as an important intervening space for alternative ideas about living in, approaching and creating the world to take root.¹⁵² In order to investigate this potentiality for alternatives within the performed environment of spoken word I shall discuss the decisive role of the audience, as both

¹⁴⁸ Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam' 246

¹⁴⁹ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 17

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, 49

¹⁵¹ Weinstein and West, 'Call and Responsibility' 287

¹⁵² Goltz, 'The Critical Norm' 32

spectators with a preconceived critical interest and as part of a reciprocal communicative critical relationship with the performer, as well as the power of affect, distributed and experienced within the lived spaces of spoken word performances, in creating a collective bond of critical dialogue and communal affirmative critical potentiality.

*'Make a Community and Try to Do Something': Critical Audiences of Spoken Word*¹⁵³

Within performed art forms, the presence of an audience, an audience there to be entertained, to think and to judge, is a feature so inherent that in depth analysis of the audience within performance scholarship is far more implicit than it is explicit. For Langellier the largely unchallenged promise of an audience's presence, means that the study of the significance of spectators is the 'most neglected' aspect of performance studies, with their multi-functional and multi-subjective role remaining overlooked in terms of understanding the critical power of performance.¹⁵⁴ I believe this is true also of theoretical discussions on the practices of critique, where the focus is concentrated on the critical approach of the solo, and detached, critic rather than the rolling effect of critical interventions that are sparked by the initial encounter groups and/or individuals have with the original critical work. As I outlined in Chapter Two, the performed practice of spoken word – with its use of storymaking and telling, language reclamation and autobiographical narratives – has significant potential for an interventionary and affirmative critique for feminists and decolonialists, and yet there is a lack of substantial and specific research on how the critiques offered by poet performers are taken up by the audience for further interrogation and continuation. As poet Kate Ailes notes about the fundamental critical power of a live, or digitally connected, audience in the spoken word community: 'You don't get to ship off a book to a reader and be blissfully unaware of their reaction to your work'¹⁵⁵. Therefore as a performed practice of critique that is situated within a culture of popular experience, critique has the potential within spoken

¹⁵³ 'Sister Spit's New Generation'

¹⁵⁴ Kirstin Langellier, 'Voiceless Bodies, Bodiless Voices: The Future of Personal Narrative Performance' in *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions*, Sheron J. Dailey ed. (Annadale: National Communication Association, 1998) 210

¹⁵⁵ Jess Orr, 'Dare to Be Loud. Interview with Katie Ailes', *Dangerous Women Project*, February 19 2017, <http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2017/02/19/dare-to-be-loud/> last accessed June 5 2017

word to find further steam by operating within a network of communal critical voices, and therefore it is important to understand the intricacies of the audiences' constructions.

Deb Margolin argues that performance is one of the last remaining communal experiences within an increasingly individualistic world, where audience members and performers create a space of potentiality by realising they are no longer alone.¹⁵⁶ Although this statement may seem a tad stretched and idealistic, it does speak to an understanding of the participatory presence of the audience as forwarding a space of 'public forum' which differentiates from activist spaces and centres of public debate due to the creative, storied, imaginative and often fantastic nature of the processes of question, answer and discussion. This space of debate and a focus on communality of experience – although intersectional differences must still be considered - crafts the opportunity for the creation of new publics and counter publics in an act of affirmative 'public dreaming'¹⁵⁷. As both poets Denice Frohman and Sarah Kay discuss on the increasingly viral nature of their recorded spoken word performances¹⁵⁸, shared and viewed on YouTube and other online media platforms, the option of seeing views, comments and shares of others involves each spectator in a web of critical engagements which can provide them with the impetus to use their experience of receiving the spoken word critique as a palpable vehicle to further interrogate the issue, 'embarking on their own journey' with the aim to 'think and do something differently'.¹⁵⁹ I would argue that the contemporary increase of interest in spoken word as a method of critical interaction is concurrent with the boom in online sharing platforms, which marks audiences as 'followers' rather than just witnesses. As I detailed in my opening account of the viral response to Ashley Judd's spoken word critique of the Trump administration at the 2017 Women's March on Washington, this online community of followers, connected through a hashtag culture of communication, ensures a level of cultural and critical communion, which can incite change due to the overlapping of spaces, communities and time¹⁶⁰. Therefore when Latour proposes that the critic be 'the one who assembles [...] the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather', I add

¹⁵⁶ performer Deb Margolin as cited in Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 56

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* 90-92

¹⁵⁸ see 'Denice Frohman Slams Down Oppression' and Kay, 'If I Should Have a Daughter'

¹⁵⁹ Chepp, 'Activating Politics' 46

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.* 47

that the inherent sense of community that thrives within the spectatorship of spoken word events is a demonstration of such affirmative and popular critical practices which create and occupy new positions in relation to moments of crisis both within society and within critical theory itself.¹⁶¹ However, online and live audiences are different entities, although a full comparison is beyond the scope of this thesis, and therefore it is prudent to briefly note the importance of the contemporary culture of online spectatorship versus live. An online audience is not only a major facet for considering the processes of living, experiencing and critiquing within our connected cybercentric world, but when juxtaposed with the influence of ‘being seen’ at an event and the ‘cultural capital’ that could be the driving force behind going to a live performance, the online arena of spectatorship could in some instances arguably provide a greater connection with the performed work and what it stands for critically, rather than being positioned within the live frame of just having something different to do and somewhere interesting to go for the evening.¹⁶²

However, whether online or live, the audience of spoken word events are of crucial consideration when approaching the art form as a form of feminist and decolonial critique. Researchers of the cultural politics of spoken word such as Chepp and Somers-Willett have noted that there is a substantial trend of ‘insider audiences’ within contemporary spoken word events.¹⁶³ These audiences, who come to the event with a social choice to share, create a space of temporary community, and ‘feel charged, challenged and reassured’¹⁶⁴ are brought by an expectation of experiencing critical insights that are specific to a certain ‘civic engagement’ that they aim to have validated by the autobiographical narratives and identities demonstrated by certain poets.¹⁶⁵ For example, when *Sister Outsider*, with their self-conscious feminist and decolonial critical identity, played at Kenyon College in Ohio in 2015 the large audience was predominately made up of members and supporters of the events two sponsors: the Crozier Centre for

¹⁶¹ Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam’ 246

¹⁶² Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 36

¹⁶³ for example Chepp, ‘Art as Public Knowledge’ 226 and Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*

¹⁶⁴ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 5

¹⁶⁵ Chepp, ‘Art as Public Knowledge’ 226

Women and the college union for black students, Unity House.¹⁶⁶ Although I am conscious of not overgeneralising and being essentialist, and am not suggesting that every woman comes to spoken word events in order to hear a feminist critique whilst every person of colour seeks out a decolonial intervention, it is still worth noting that there often appears to be a specificity in the audience makeup of spoken word events in relation to the topics understood to be covered by the poets on the bill. However, it is a fair point to consider the limitations in critical potentiality when an audience is drawn to the performance by a shared passion and similar identity or experience. Could this undermine the potential of provoking change via critique due to the stagnancy of 'preaching to the converted'? Indeed, I understand that there is a danger of critique failing to motivate a seismic shift due to the pre-conceived agreement with, from and through the audience, but I still stand by the argument that the activeness of the space, and the driving force of participation, can challenge this. In my opinion this specificity of audiences within spoken word performances, particularly those that actively position themselves against the commercialised arenas of large competitions, gives the medium potential for an engaged spectator experience which facilitates an awareness of the social and political critiques that the poets provide, motivating an on-going sense of participation. As one audience reviewer noted on the way that *Sister Outsider* gave 'enough words to ruminate and wonder about for the next two months, two years, two decades', the dormant or active attachment of the experience of the spoken word performance creates a durable connection with the object of critique and thereby provides a moment for the constant contemplation on alternatives.¹⁶⁷ Thereby by encouraging such participation, both during and after the performance, spoken word satisfies its purpose as 'both a counterpublic space rooted in critiques of dominant social relations and a noetic space in which a different kind of society can be imagined and enacted'¹⁶⁸.

*'Amen, sister, tell it!': Reciprocal critical power and Audience-Spectator Communication*¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Elana Spivack, 'Poetic duo Sister Outsider gives voice to societal tensions', *The Kenyon Collegian*, October 29 2015, <http://kenyoncollegian.com/2015/10/29/sister-outsider-kenyon/> last accessed June 5 2017

¹⁶⁷ Salazar, 'Sister Outsider Fight With their Words'

¹⁶⁸ Weinstein and West, 'Call and Responsibility' 301

¹⁶⁹ Jean Binta Breeze et. al. 'A Round Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance' 38

Discussing the culture of live spoken word events, Novak characterises the relationship between audience and performer as one of ‘perceptual, direct, live communion’ where the culture of ‘call and response’ – when audience members are encouraged to speak back to the performer during their set - and an active engagement from audience members creates a ‘feedback loop’ of critical transmission between the stage and the House which in turn locates the audience as ‘cocreators’ of the live experience.¹⁷⁰ In terms of spoken word as a form of productive and affirmative critique for feminism and decolonialism, such collective authorship of the performed moment places hierarchies of power, in relation to who makes and who receives knowledge, into a position of potential dissection, which is of significance for the elimination of the distinction between the critic and ‘the gullible masses’.¹⁷¹ For spoken word poet Kate Tempest, being aware that the ‘the poem happens the minute it reaches the audience’ not only speaks in challenge to this ‘intellectual snobbery’ on the part of who creates critical thought, but also places the basis of her art form as that which is conceived as a result of the immediacy of connection within this form of communication.¹⁷² As poet performer Ellyn Maybe suggests, the ‘eternal nurturing effect’ of an attentive and engaged audience enacts a ‘tin can line’ of communication,¹⁷³ which I would argue brings a popular and communal dimension to critiques inherent within the art form, also showing an affirmative awareness of entanglement through this ‘energetic reciprocity’, as Marc Bamuthi Joseph of the pedagogic and activist spoken word group *Youth Speaks* defines it, between spoken word performers and their audiences.¹⁷⁴ Spoken word poet Jean Binta Breeze attributes this reciprocal energy and flow of communication as the reason why she never plans her set, waiting instead ‘to get into the space and for the conversation to see who I am with, who am I talking to?’¹⁷⁵ This awareness of the audience’s power in influencing her critical direction is termed by Breeze as her need to

¹⁷⁰ Novak, *Live Poetry*, 56/195/196

¹⁷¹ Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam’ 230

¹⁷² Michael MacLeod, ‘Kate Tempest slams conventional poets’ disdain for performance’ *The Guardian*, August 19 2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/aug/19/kate-tempest-slams-conventional-poets-disdain-for-performance> last accessed June 7 2017

¹⁷³ Ellyn Maybe, ‘We All Leave Something’ in *Word Warriors* 240

¹⁷⁴ Marc Bamuthi Joseph as quoted in Weinstein and West, ‘Call and Responsibility’ 288

¹⁷⁵ Jean Binta Breeze et. al. ‘A Round Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance’ 35-36

be ‘multi-lingual in terms of people’s experiences’ and is thereby an intersectional consideration of the diverse and complex makeup of each spectator as well as the audience as a singular entity.¹⁷⁶ The commitment to ‘listening to the room’ and being attuned to the vibes of the audience may sound like a highly abstracted notion when discussing spoken word as a potentially critical intervening practice, but I would argue that sensing the embodied and emotional power of spectators is crucial to understanding popular critique as having the capacity to construct an alternative.¹⁷⁷ As Dutch spoken word poet and social activist Quinsy Gario underscores:

[...] looking into someone’s eyes and talking about what we have in common and what we do not have in common, or what they remind me of, this gives you the sense of being together[...]the future is a place we all have to make. For me, the future is more open to discussing opportunities for dialogue and building together, instead of determining in advance where we are going.¹⁷⁸

This dialogic engagement between spoken word performer and audience in the spontaneous present does not only drive the invention of ‘counter-discourses’¹⁷⁹ within a ‘counter-public’¹⁸⁰ that is focused on the possibility of a different future, but is an influential approach for an affirmative and collective critique. This is emphasised by Braidotti’s assertion that critical affirmativity is predicated on the notion that ‘we are all in *this* mess together’¹⁸¹, whilst Bunz, in discussing critiques directed at a neoliberal capitalist world, argues that ‘using a collective force means unlocking capitals of critique that do not reply to capitalism’ and its intrinsic individualism¹⁸². Therefore, throwing off the limitations of individualism within critique, through the exchange of ideas and the ‘active and valuable engagement in public space’¹⁸³ within spoken word performances, provokes an opportunity for what Slam-founder Marc Kelly Smith terms ‘organised chaos’, which I view as a key moment for disrupting stagnancy within critical

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Ragan Fox, ‘Ragan Fox is a Gay Slam Poet: An Autobiographical Exploration of Performance Poetry’s Performative Implications’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30(4) (2010) 424

¹⁷⁸ Clelia Coussonnet ‘BE.BOP 2013: Exclusive Interview with Quinsy Gario’, *Uprising Art* website, July 11 2013 <http://blog.uprising-art.com/en/be-bop-2013-exclusive-interview-with-quinsy-gario/> last accessed June 7 2017

¹⁷⁹ Chepp, ‘Art as Public Knowledge’ 225

¹⁸⁰ Weinstein and West, ‘Call and Responsibility’ 287

¹⁸¹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 141

¹⁸² Bunz, ‘Capital’ 32

¹⁸³ Ingalls, ‘Stealing the Air’ 109

practices.¹⁸⁴ When poet Sarah Kay speaks of her induction into spoken word performing and describes the ‘lightning’ moment when an audience member approached her to say ‘I really felt that thanks’, she demonstrates the promise that the art form holds for forging the ‘impossible connection’:

‘[...] trying to connect in this world, trying to hold onto others while things are blowing up round you, knowing that while you’re speaking they aren’t just waiting for their turn to talk – they hear you’.¹⁸⁵

In this sense, spoken word poetry creates an opening for popular engagement with issues of critique, realised in a distinct time and space, which acts as a material and productive creative force for crafting an alternative.

For Taylor, this interventionary ‘impossible connection’ is premised on the importance of ritual within critical practices, and I would concur that the participatory elements of spoken word performance evidence a similar ritualization, realised partly through the repetition of immersive acts, vis-à-vis critical engagement.¹⁸⁶ For example, the ‘call and response’ feature of most live spoken word events, where audiences are encouraged to speak back to the performer and make noise in reaction to the poem’s critical stance, enacts a levelling moment in the power dynamic between the performer and audience, with critique read, translated and taken on by spectators in a process of ‘knowledge legitimation’¹⁸⁷. When Mic Crenshaw centralises audience participation within his 2014 spoken word Ted Talk on decolonial critique - ‘I’mma say this one thing and I need you to join in with me ...[growing critical engagement] is happening everywhere – every city, every hood, every block everywhere’ – he urges the audience to enact repetitious affirmations of the power of a decolonial critical intervention. This creates a communal voice of critique that demonstrates the centrality of the public space in discussing critical public practices. By bringing the ‘cities, hoods and blocks’ into the specific space of his performance and inciting his audience to vocalise their awareness of having a specific spacial situatedness in relation to them, Crenshaw discursively involves his audience in the wider context of a popular critical consciousness. The

¹⁸⁴ Marc Kelly Smith, ‘About Slam Poetry’ in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop and the Poetry of a New Generation*, Mark Eleveld ed. (Naperville: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2003) 119

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Kay, ‘If I Should Have A Daughter’

¹⁸⁶ Verta Taylor, ‘Watching for Vibes: Bringing Emotions into the Study of Feminist Organisations’ in *Feminist Organisations: Harvest of the New Women’s Movements*, Patricia Yancey Martin, Myra Marx Ferree eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) 229-30

¹⁸⁷ Chepp, ‘Art as Public Knowledge’ 235

performed space of spoken word poetry thereby becomes a place of critical agency and potentiality in a popular manner.¹⁸⁸

Affective Resonance and its Transformative Potential in Spoken Word Spaces

As I referenced in my introduction, the charting of critique from its traditional conception within academia, especially the humanities and social sciences, to one that is centred on performed practices, such as spoken word, that engage a community of voices, must take into consideration the interplay of affect with popular critical experiences. As Braidotti proposes, in relation to Spinoza and Deleuze, understanding one's potentiality, in critical thinking, is predicated on connecting with the importance of passions and desires in decision making, judgement and action, and in doing so reason itself becomes 'affective, embodied, dynamic'. In this sense then, when understanding critique as a practice that is affirmatively based on a 'fundamental positivity', that questions oppositional practices of dismantling and 'implosion', the understanding of spoken word performances as an interconnected and shared experience of 'being affected by and through others' is crucial.¹⁸⁹ Much like the ripples of communal experience when listening to Emmet Kirwan's spoken word piece *Heartbreak* at the Utrecht support gathering for the Irish *Strike 4 Repeal*, as I detailed in the opening to this thesis, the power of affective resonances, or 'feminist wonder' as Ahmed partly identifies it, has the potential for a 'freshness and vitality [...] opening up a collective space, by allowing the surfaces of the world to make an impression'.¹⁹⁰ Although I have already methodologically accounted for the difficulty in perceiving moments of affective resonance, especially through analysing reviews and recorded performances as opposed to being in a live audience, I focused on Papenburg's definition of 'palpable intensity' and a moment of bodily reaction in order to investigate the working of affect within the cultures of spoken word performance that were specifically geared towards crafting new critical ventures for feminism and decolonialism¹⁹¹. Therefore when Jean Binta Breeze speaks of her objective as a spoken word performer as 'seducing the air'¹⁹² she

¹⁸⁸ Crenshaw, 'Race, Class, Global Hip Hop and Society'

¹⁸⁹ Braidotti, 'Affirmativity vs. Vulnerability' 240-241

¹⁹⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 183

¹⁹¹ Papenburg, 'Affect' 19

¹⁹² Breeze et. al. 'A Round Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance' 40

evidences the ‘electric and emboldening’ atmosphere of spoken word performances that have the potential for moving and mobilising audiences and performers alike into a collective space of embodied relationships to the critical object.¹⁹³

When poet performer Thea Hillman discusses the audience’s wish to be ‘viscerally educated’, I would argue that this suggests that in order to be effective, in meeting the audience’s wishes and conveying a critique that will take root and grow, one must be affective.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, in response to Bertolt Brecht’s concept of the V-effekt – the moment of *alienating* an audience in order to *force* a critical engagement – I propose focusing on affect as rather the moment of *entangling* the audience in the experience of performance in order to *forge* a critical engagement.¹⁹⁵ Although I am not suggesting that affect necessarily means a total subconscious absorption in the staged and curated displays of spoken word, the power of a performance to ‘resonate so significantly[...]that [it is] still making my head spin’, as one *Sister Outsider* audience member put it, points to a moment of an affect-induced cognitive realignment in relation to the feminist and decolonial critique within the poems, showing the entangled potential for critical interventions and new alternatives that can reside within these spaces of performance.¹⁹⁶

In a review of *Sister Outsider*’s performance at Stanford University in 2014, one audience member noted the moment when the affective power of the feminist decolonial critique ‘reverberated around the room’ in a moment of ‘elaborate deconstruction’ of the somatic registers of thought and feeling. ‘Stunned silent’ and yet ‘woken up’, ‘made uncomfortable’ but noticing their ‘heart swell’, this moment of affective experience within the audience in Stanford was hoped for by *Sister Outsider*, in their goal to make people ‘feel [...]ask questions[...]think about and remember and understand what [they were] saying even if it would break our hearts in the process’.¹⁹⁷ This sense of deconstruction of the self and breaking with pre-conceived notions as a result of an intense affective experience addresses a sense of loss, pain and a ‘shedding of old skin’ which both Braidotti and Ahmed define as a critical stage in readdressing

¹⁹³ Andrea Beverley, ‘The Feminist Caucus of the League of Canadian Poets’, *Canadian Literature* 223 (2014)

¹⁹⁴ Thea Hillman, ‘My Longest Relationship’ in *Word Warriors* 229

¹⁹⁵ John Willed, ed. and transl., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 91

¹⁹⁶ Salazar ‘Sister Outsider Fight With their Words’

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*

feminist positions on critical practices, and producing alternative openings that can facilitate active interventions.¹⁹⁸ By being ‘unravelling’¹⁹⁹, as another *Sister Outsider* reviewer from Denver recalled, there is a suggestion of losing a sense of self and entering what Slam’s Marc Kelly Smith defines as ‘the transcendent place where the distinction between [...] poet and poem blurs and melds with the audience to become one – a communal merging of art, performer and witness’.²⁰⁰ This transcendental redefining of the poet and the audience compliments Dolan’s notion of apotheosis and epiphany in the affective intensity of performances, moments that are experienced collectively and continually translated on a communal basis.²⁰¹ When *Sister Outsider*’s Dominique Christina speaks of ‘chang[ing] the room [...] chang[ing] the climate of the room [...] chang[ing] the people in the room’²⁰², this concept of a changing and a morphing and the decoding power of affect within the environment of spoken word performances demonstrates the potential that the medium has for moving beyond an experience of critique that is translated through a traditional theoretical approach of set ‘critical patterns’ and ‘limited discourse’²⁰³. Focusing instead on an ‘aesthetic dialogue’ of ‘embodied and aesthetic creation’²⁰⁴ between performer and spectator with regards affective communication gives the opportunity to rework and reinvent approaches to critical norms and practices as part of a ‘necessary, crucial representational counter discourse’ of feminist and decolonial critique.²⁰⁵

Affective moments at spoken word events are not just conducted through a line of connection from the performer to the spectator but are also fundamentally involved in spectator-spectator communication, which provokes communal episodes of knowledge production and meaning making through what Elam terms as the infectious affective effects of stimulation, confirmation and integration. These three principles, of soaking up others affective stimuli, of having these confirm your own experiences, and of therefore feeling integrated into a ‘larger unit’ of spectator response, transforms the

¹⁹⁸ see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Braidotti, ‘Affirmativity vs Vulnerability’ 242-245

¹⁹⁹ Lu, ‘The Master of Interrupting Space’

²⁰⁰ Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak, *Take the Mic: the Art of Performance Poetry. Slam and the Spoken Word* (Illinois: Sourcebooks Inc, 2009) 162

²⁰¹ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 5

²⁰² Lu ‘The Master of Interrupting Space’

²⁰³ Goltz, ‘The Critical Norm’ 33-34

²⁰⁴ *ibid*

²⁰⁵ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 23

audience from passive witnesses to active critical allies, brought together and sharing one experience in an affirmative and popular moment of approaching the object of critique²⁰⁶. For feminist and decolonial poet Anela of the *Rebel Sistah Cypher*, the goal of 'creating a counter culture'²⁰⁷ through spoken word by crafting a unified bond and emphasising commonality within audiences for critical interventionary purposes suggests an element of Dolan's 'utopia' in critical performances.²⁰⁸ I do hesitate to declare however that all audiences are immediately morphed into a homogenous bundle of identical experience of alternative critical potential, and once again I stress that differences must be taken into account and separate audiences must be considered, despite my conscious focus on 'insider' rather than broad spectator groups, if this study was to be more expansive. Briefly, it is too generalising to assume that a feminist-orientated audience will automatically connect and affectively resonate with every critique and experience of the consciously feminist performer or with other members of the audience, especially when considering the intersections of race and how difference operates within this. Additionally, Valerie Chepp discusses in her study of African American spoken word communities of the risk of boredom in the audience, a boredom that the audience is finely attuned to expect, and are intolerant of and which mars the critical performance with lack of meaning and the brand of being 'unworthy of replication'. This boredom must be recognised as a potential feature of 'intergroup diversity', as the audience cannot be expected to share a unified, unyielding homogenous interest and curiosity in the fine details of each piece, as their own experiences and priorities in the world will contribute to how they are innately moved by each individual performance. However despite this limitation, I still argue that in the sense of audiences that gather for specific critical purposes, as I detailed in the previous sections, the embodied affective moment, 'the hollow in the pit of my stomach that drops me into an erotics of connection and commonality' is an intensity of startling possibility for a moment of collective and affirmative approaches to critical practices.²⁰⁹ Therefore by considering the specific public space of spoken word performances, there begins a process of imagining critique as that which lives beyond an academic and abstract realm of critical theory, and by considering the role of spectatorship, participation and affect,

²⁰⁶ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002) 87

²⁰⁷ Hogg, 'Smashing Patriarchy'

²⁰⁸ Dolan, *Utopia in performance*

²⁰⁹ *ibid*, 19-20

critique as an effective practice for feminism and decolonialism can be reimagined in an alternative and interventionary frame of popular engagement.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have aimed to demonstrate the capacity that spoken word performance has for being a critical intervention for feminism and decolonialism that provides an opportunity for envisioning alternative ways of experiencing, living in and sharing the world. I have aimed to show how this form of performed critique is inherently affirmative and is predicated on a creative and popular approach to performance and critical engagement. Such need to frame critique within a sphere of public performance and affirmative practices grew from an awareness of contemporary debates within critical theory regarding the functioning of critique within the humanities and the social sciences, and the concern that the practice was suffering a moment of crisis. In order to frame these theoretical debates I focused on the polar positions of critique as an oppositional practice - with the tendency to 'debunk' and overrule, with a stagnancy in methodological approaches within academia and the falling back into conspiracy theories and intellectual arrogance - and the counter approach of affirmationism²¹⁰. In this stance I focused on the affirmativity of critique as that which recognises positivity, of moving through and beyond rather than against, of acknowledging perseverance and the entanglement of individuals in a network of responsibility for critical practices, which can all contribute to the production of alternatives and creative change.

I began this thesis with two accounts of contemporary engagement with spoken word performances, firstly the viral reaction to Ashley Judd's 'Nasty Woman' performance at the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, which critiqued the right-wing socio-political environment of contemporary America, and the moment of experiencing Emmet Kirwan's 'Heartbreak', a response to Ireland's political prejudices towards women's rights, at the *Strike 4 Repeal* gathering in Utrecht in March 2017. Now, with the arguments I have developed within my thesis, I believe I have demonstrated how and why these two instances stand as important indicators of the potential spoken word has as an affirmative, productive, creative and popular critical intervention for feminism and decolonialism. Both pieces utilise the poet's effective use of storymaking and telling within a conscious creative process in order to challenge 'majoritarian' discourse, and thereby marks the performer as the bearer of alternative possibility in

²¹⁰ Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out Of Steam' 225

how to envisage living and experiencing the world, whilst critiquing the systems of power and knowledge that define how we perceive experiences and identities.²¹¹ Both spoken word performances were conceived with a specific critical purpose to engage an audience, in order to address the systematic misnaming, misrepresenting and misunderstanding of feminist concerns, and thereby occupy the gap between the discursive structures of power and knowledge and the will to resist them, a gap in which 'we rarely work alone'. Thereby by vocalising their critique, of American politics and of Irish reproductive insecurity, 'speaking up' whilst demonstrating the importance of others doing the same, Kirwan and Judd present their craft as a performed critical practice that encourages participation, connection, translation and adoption by a community of engagers.²¹² By providing a material approach to critique that offers the opportunity to reanimate the methodology of critical responses to crisis points within society through creativity, vision and affective and collective resonances, these performances are key examples of an element of this thesis' argument that performed art practices enact a level of transformative critical potential by mobilising 'counterdiscourses'²¹³ within 'counterpublics'²¹⁴. This is no less evident than in the way both Kirwan and Judd, though especially Judd with her million plus online views, projected their work beyond the original moment of performance in appealing to an online culture of spectatorship which continues the process of critical engagement through the viral cultures of shares, likes and comments²¹⁵. By becoming 'followers' of the spoken word performances not just witnesses, audience members, at the Woman's March, at the gathering in Utrecht and online, were thereby inducted into a broader network of critical connection, which in turn counters critique's crisis in being limited as a solo project of 'intellectual arrogance' that is not for 'the gullible masses'.²¹⁶

In my process of engaging with a theoretical approach to spoken word performances that combined debates within critical theory with work in performance studies, I was gratified to discover the degree to which performed art practices can elicit such a shake-up in how we approach theory, theorising, critique and critiquing.

²¹¹ Chepp, 'Activating Politics with Poetry and Spoken Word' 45

²¹² Gingrich-Philbrook, 'Editor's Introduction' 8

²¹³ Chepp, 'Art as Public Knowledge' 225

²¹⁴ Weinstein and West, 'Call and Responsibility' 287

²¹⁵ Robinson, 'Actress Ashley Judd became the breakout star of the Women's March on Washington'

²¹⁶ Latour, 'Why Has Critique Ran Out of Steam' 230

Performance as a lived, experienced, affectively resonant art form not only pulls the audience into a sphere of belonging and involvement, but also forges a connection of possibilities, both in performer-audience and audience-audience relationships. Through researching, in the most part, the contemporary US spoken word scene, and taking *Sister Outsider* as the main case study, I was pleased to emphasise the energy that flowed within the medium of spoken word, with both performers and audience members discussing the reverberations of critique within the public spaces, both on and offline, of the performances. This energy is a critical driving force behind performance, and could provide the potential for reinvigorating critique that had previously been running ‘out of steam’ within the academy.²¹⁷

The focus on the performer as a critical actor in perpetuating an alternative possibility for critique through storymaking, language reclamation and autobiographical narratives are important considerations for understanding critique as a productive, affirmative and creative process. Yet through my focus on the public spaces of spoken word as sites of popular critical engagement, I feel I have added a new perspective to theoretical literature on both critical theory and performance practices. In both instances the understanding of the receiver of critique, in whatever medium, is rarely touched upon, and in terms of a feminist and decolonial approach that is predicated on the notions of the possibilities imbedded in collective action, this attention to the wider arena of critical reception is crucial. In approaching spoken word performance spaces through the lens of spectatorship and affect theory I demonstrated the transformative potential, for both critique as a practice and activist motivation, which a network of engagement has. Whether between performer-spectator or spectator-spectator, my focus on the communication and participation within spoken word as a critical medium gives this thesis a unique and specific perspective into how critique can become a popular and resonant practice that can intersect and overlap with time, space and communities.

This thesis began with a process of re-envisaging critique within feminist and postcolonial theory, but in reflection I feel I have also provided new discourse and analysis on how to approach the understanding of feminism and decolonialism in performed art practices and how feminist and decolonialist audiences can harness critique in order to make active and lasting interventions. As Herbert Marcuse said, ‘art

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

cannot change the world [...] but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world'.²¹⁸ I think this is true of spoken word as an art form. By dismantling language, narratives and history in order to present an opening for newness and alternative vision, spoken word holds the potential for driving critique forward into a culture of creative change for feminist and decolonial theory.

²¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 33

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