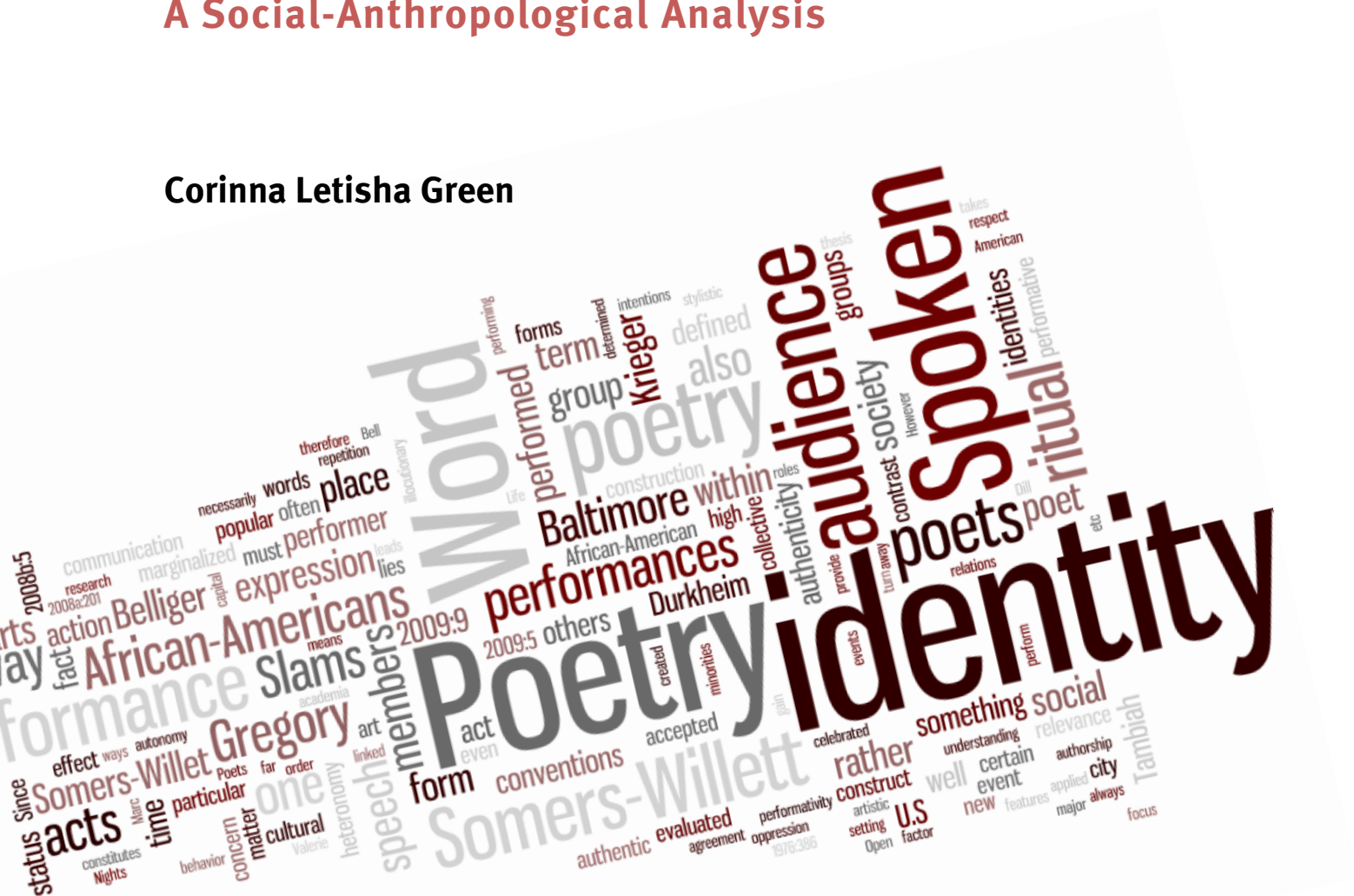


## A Social-Anthropological Analysis

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„Spoken Word Poetry“ among African-Americans in Baltimore. A Social-  
Anthropological Analysis

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# Introduction

When one encounters the term Spoken Word in a record shop, for example, it can indicate a plethora of materials, such as audio recordings of speeches, comedy routines or even sermons (Gregory, 2008a:201). However, when the term is applied in poetry settings, it refers to the performance of prose, poetry or stories and stands in contrast to the Written Word (Gregory, 2008a:201). This interpretation of Spoken Word has established itself in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> and nowadays the term is commonly associated with performance poetry. In fact, Spoken Word Poetry has grown to be a very popular form of performing arts in the U.S., both as a means of expression for artists as well as for the enjoyment of the spectator. Poets perform their pieces – combinations of literary and oratory aesthetics (Dill, 2013:1) – on popular television shows, receive thousands of views on their internet videos, or gain recognition by competing in Poetry Slams or by taking the stage at Open Mic Nights.<sup>2</sup> It is said that Marc Smith, a Chicago based construction worker turned poet, founded Poetry Slams, Spoken Word Poetry competitions, in the 1980s (Somers-Willett, 2009:5). His intentions were to bring poetry to the people and out of the exclusivity of academia. Spoken Word Poetry soon established itself as a sort of counterculture to “the literary canon” (Somers-Willett, 2009:5).

The consumption and production of classic poetry is closely linked to sets of conventions determined by academia (Gregory, 2008b:5). Conventions are “generally accepted and shared, habitual, taken-for-granted ways of understanding, communicating, cooperating and doing” (Hall, 1987:13). Embodied in these conventions is what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) referred to as cultural capital, which in turn is linked to groups of high status in society (Gregory, 2008b:4f). A high cultural capital is equated with the engagement in the dominant culture (Gregory, 2008b:5). With respect to the arts, some genres or art forms are viewed as ‘legitimate’ (in contrast to popular arts) and are consumed by high status individuals (Gregory, 2008b:5). Interest in and knowledge of said arts provides them with power over lower status members of society.

*“Academic’ poetry, then, is governed by a complex set of conventions, which not only determine the nature of poetry within the genre, but also influence the ways in which new forms of poetry are created, distributed and consumed” (Gregory, 2008b:6)*

Marc Smith sought to establish new conventions, closer to those of other forms of performance arts such as theater or live music (Somers-Willett, 2009:5). Consequently, there are certain defining features of the art form that are applicable to Poetry Slams as well as to non-competitive performances. They do not necessarily concern stylistic rules, but rather possibilities, intentions, and relations.

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<sup>1</sup> United States of America

<sup>2</sup> Open Mic Nights are events where the microphone is open to all, therefore a variety of artistic acts may take the stage.

## INTRODUCTION

For one, due to the fact that accessibility is a major concern for Spoken Word Poetry,<sup>3</sup> it welcomes and fosters diversity among the poets and the audience, thus attracting many performers who identify as members of marginalized groups in American society. Spoken Word is often described as a place where the subaltern have a voice and are free to express issues of inequality, disadvantage, and oppression. Moreover, not only are these marginalized identities accepted, but they are celebrated and deemed as particularly authentic.

The second defining characteristic of Spoken Word Poetry pertains to authorship. In Poetry Slams the performer of a piece must also be its author.<sup>4</sup> This leads to a “hyperawareness of self and identity”, because “authorship itself becomes a self-conscious performance” (Somers-Willett, 2009:9). Every performer therefore proclaims an aspect of self and performs it on stage (Somers-Willett, 2009:35). The intended effect of this in Spoken Word Poetry is to create an intimate, authentic relationship with the audience (Somers-Willett, 2009:9).

Thirdly, the relationship between performer and audience is striking. The audience does not inhabit the role of quiet listeners, as would be the case in traditional poetry readings, but is in direct interaction with the poet during his or her performance. In Poetry Slams, some audience members (usually around six) are even chosen to be the judges during the event, scoring the performances on a scale from zero to ten. The remaining audience members participate in a call-response manner, as also frequently seen in churches between pastor and choir. They may boo, holler, snap their fingers, or nod their heads in agreement and appreciation. The poem is then evaluated in the discursive space between the poet and the audience (Somers-Willett, 2014:4). In that, it is exclusively the audience who ranks the poets’ authenticity, which is not only evaluated by the expression of a particular identity, but especially through the way in which it is performed, positioning them as participants, rather than recipients, of the performance.

This authenticity certainly is a very vague concept. If one chooses to follow Erving Goffmann’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), then the root of authenticity of these performed identities lies not in truth or realness, but rather in the repetition of characteristics and behaviors. “The individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him” (Goffmann, 1959:136). Authenticity then, Somers-Willett adds, is “tried identity behavior” (Somers-Willett, 2009:7). In other words, when assessing authenticity the audience members compare the performed identity to a model of norms they have in mind in respect to that identity (Somers-Willett, 2009:76). However, “acknowledging that what passes as authentic behavior is a symptom of larger systems of meaning and power does not mean that identities performed at slams are doomed to confirm the status quo” (Somers-Willett, 2009:9). Rather, Poetry Slams may be viewed as places of identity confirmation and provide the opportunity to develop understanding and build a connection (Somers-Willett,

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<sup>3</sup> Also called Spoken Word in the following

<sup>4</sup> In non-competitive settings one may perform another author’s piece but is expected to declare this in advance.

2009:9). Somers-Willett even goes as far as calling Spoken Word performances “laboratories for identity expression and performance” (Somers-Willett, 2009:7).

In essence, engaging in Spoken Word Poetry seems to be quite beneficial to poets. When asked, poets mention enjoying the feeling of connecting with others and sharing their story, as well as a sense of emotional development they gain through the process of writing and performing poetry (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014:265ff). My hypothesis, however, is that the performance of Spoken Word Poetry is in fact ritualized action that leads to social reproduction. Ritual can be identified by certain features (Tambiah, 1979: 116). In general terms, it will have an ordering that structures the event and is constituted by a purposive sense of collective (Tambiah, 1979: 116). The awareness of the participants that the ritual event is different from ordinary happenings is a third characteristic (Tambiah, 1979:116). Additionally, ritual exhibits spatio-temporal properties and takes a form that is culturally determined and is made up of elements of repetition and alternation (Tambiah, 1979:117). Catherine Bell, a major scholar of ritual studies, moved away from ritual as a category and toward ritual as a created social form within a society, which is why she suggests the term ritualization to be used instead of ritual and defines it as “a strategic way of acting” that differs from other practices (Bell, 1992:7). Ritualization thereby constitutes roles that step out of the mundane in order to fulfill [...] extraordinary acts (Belliger & Krieger, 2008:30). Its function lies in the construction of a social reality in such a way that roles and positions are reproduced.

Poets and audience constitute an ad hoc community within a ceremonial context. These events of ritual significance entail action that only takes place within a defined period of time and does not happen the same way outside of this context. Since this study is dealing with poetry performance, a performative approach to ritual will be applied. The term performativity is rooted in speech act theory and was coined by John L. Austin (1963). He differentiates locutionary and illocutionary speech acts.<sup>5</sup> The former describes statements that can be true or false, in contrast to the latter, which effect something simply through the act of speaking (Belliger & Krieger, 2008:20). In other words, an act is performed by something being said. These illocutionary speech acts aim not to describe the world, but to establish social relations (Belliger & Krieger, 2008:20). According to Roy A. Rappaport, performative speech acts take place under particular circumstances and at a specific time and place (Belliger & Krieger, 2008:20f). At Open Mic Nights and Poetry Slams the poets are assigned a time slot, within which they perform their speech acts. Usually, although not exclusively, they use microphones and apply stylistic methods of enunciation, volume of speech, intensity, etc., that would not be found in ordinary communication. The audience on the other hand often expresses agreement, appreciation, and relevance of a statement given by the performer by snapping their fingers or interacting through the phonetic sound ‘Mh’. This form of communication is only appropriate in this particular setting and must be learned in order for the poets to do things with words.

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<sup>5</sup> As well as perlocutionary acts, such as the obligation to keep promises

## INTRODUCTION

Alluding to Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), and especially his writings on cult, the group does not necessarily have to know the actual effects of their gathering (Durkheim, 1976:386). Hence, it is secondary if the poets and the audience believe that they are solely presenting and consuming art. Yet, it is essential that the group comes together and that feelings and opinions are shared and expressed together (Durkheim, 1976:386).

*"Thus, the apparent efficacy will seem to change while the real efficacy remains invariable, and the rite will seem to fulfill various functions, though in fact it has only one, which is always the same", Durkheim states, "before all, rites are means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically" (Durkheim, 1976:386f).*

Ritual communication is the discovery, recovery, and expression of Selbstwissen, and therefore equals identity construction (Belliger & Krieger, 2008:27). It does not only construct individual identity, but also collective identity. Collective identity is not simply a matter of who am I (to which the answer could be a daughter, a son, a wife, a teacher, or a senior citizen), but rather a matter of who are we (as a group predefined by an attribute that all members must, at least to a certain extent, have in common). This shared identity is then evaluated and reaffirmed. Although Spoken Word Poetry appears to be a hyper-individualized medium, I intend to examine if there is something more, something that exceeds the focus on individuality and acts as a unifying factor. Therefore, I will apply Valerio Valerie's concepts of autonomy and heteronomy (Valerie, 1969). Both terms regard action and self-representation. Autonomy is defined as independence and self-determination of action and conceptual representation. The dependence on and determination by others in the way one acts and/or represents oneself is defined as heteronomy (Valerie, 1990:59f).

In this thesis the group identity in question is that of African-Americans in Baltimore, Maryland. African-Americans, as the largest ethnic minority in the U.S., have, as have other minorities, been confronted with discrimination and oppression. Nonetheless, their experience differs significantly from that of other minorities. While all other ethnic groups in the United States, no matter where they originate from, have had their rights guaranteed by the Constitution, African-Americans were forcefully brought to the country, legally defined as property, and stripped of all of their traditions, languages, etc. (Sellers & et.al., 1998:18). Even decades after slavery was abolished, African-Americans were, if at all, considered to be second class citizens, not only socially, but also legally through the Jim Crow Laws.<sup>6</sup> Since they were deprived of everything connecting them to their place of origin, and also were not accepted as Americans, one could say that they lingered in a diasporic state and were confronted with the need to construct a new own identity. The formation of an identity is always accompanied by the process of negotiating the self-attributed identity and the ascribed identity (as well as clearing away any conflicts at the intersection). Based on the unique history and the racialization of the African-American identity in American society, and following a definition of a non-static

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<sup>6</sup> Laws determining racial segregation in the United States from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## INTRODUCTION

identity, the negotiation of the African-American identity is still a topic of great interest and relevance.

In addition to the challenges inherent to the racialized identity, African-Americans living in Baltimore encounter challenging obstacles of their own. Stereotypes concerning the black identity often concern an urban underclass population. Baltimore is a city on the U.S. East Coast notorious for violence, drugs, and poverty that have taken their toll on the city and its inhabitants. Most notably, however, is that African-Americans make up 63% of Baltimore's population, which is one of the highest percentages in the country (city-data.com, 2013). Since artistic expression, such as poetry, is believed to have an empowering, therapeutic, and liberating effect on the artist (Dill, 2013:1), the Spoken Word Poetry scene in Baltimore is rather extensive, making Baltimore an ideal setting for research into Spoken Word Poetry among African-Americans.

The data analyzed in the following chapters was gathered during a six-month research stay from November 2013 until April 2016 in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. As I very regularly attended Spoken Word Poetry events, the number of performances that have been recorded on video during this time would by far exceed the capacity of this thesis; accordingly I have chosen to present some of those that struck me as the most fitting and that were highly celebrated by the audiences.

As a first step of analysis, I will focus on what makes the poet and his or her performance stand out from others – what makes them a good poet in the eyes of the audience. The choices the poets have made to emphasize their originality will be highlighted and classified according to linguistic and performative categories. After focusing on the uniqueness of the poets and their performances, I will examine what unites them, in spite of their differences. The analyses of the performances will provide answers concerning how and why this possibly uniting factor is valued and incorporated. Where do the concepts of an African-American identity and blackness come in? Is a transition from autonomy to heteronomy or from personal identity to a collective identity observable?

The anthropological relevance lies in the ritual performativity of Spoken Word Poetry performances. It constitutes an examination of the way in which groups construct and reproduce themselves. Poetry Performances are not “just artistic renderings of one's identity in culture; they are cultural stages where marginalized identities are constructed, negotiated, judged, and affirmed or re-figured” (Somers-Willet, 2014:7).

# 1. Individuality in Spoken Word Poetry

Based on Geert Hofstede's culture dimension theory (1980) the United States can be described as an individualist society, where the ties between individuals are rather slack and everyone is focused on looking after themselves first<sup>7</sup> (Hofstede & Hofstede). This is closely related to V. Valerie's concept of autonomy, which will be applied to the following analysis of Spoken Word Performances. The meaning of autonomy is 'independence', "that is, a condition of self-determination (with regard to both action and conceptual representation)" (Valerie, 1990:59).

In Spoken Word, all poems, on some level, are identity performances, based on the author's presence on stage (Somers-Willett, 2009:18). The poet's outer appearance, body language, and speech will reflect on the poem, consciously or unconsciously influencing the audience's understanding of the poem. (Somers-Willett, 2009:18). Added to this underlying emphasis on individuality, the poets are expected to present original pieces, with a distinct message and distinctiveness in content and style (Somers-Willett, 2009:104). The indigenous may describe someone as a good poet, who takes on a distinguishing perspective on his or her narrative, apply extraordinary performative strategies (within the set of rules concerning length and the use of props in Slams) and/or will combine linguistic features in a way that will make the performance stand out. This indicates claims of autonomy, as the poet will act and speak of him- or herself as if they were fundamentally independent (Valeri, 1990:59). This independence may allude to economic, political, or even emotional matters. To be independent, especially in the U.S., means to write one's own life story, be self-sufficient, and to practically be able to say or do whatever one feels like saying or doing. It is not solely the lyrical abilities to keep a rhythm that establishes the value of an individual's performance, but more so authenticity, proclaiming truth, and sharing something that is felt to be original. The virtue here is uniqueness, pertaining to the entirety of the poet's self. "In performance the body can become a vehicle [...] to add another layer of meaning, of symbolism, paradox, and irony, to the poem" (Ellis, Gere, & Lamberton, 2003:46). Although the exchange between audience and performing poet is an essential characteristic of Spoken Word Poetry, at its core it is a hyper-individualized medium. Even when the poem is not written in the first person, it is first and foremost always a performance of self (Somers-Willett, 2009:20). It is a place for individual expression (McCormick, 2000:194).

## *Analysis*

The notion of Spoken Word creating and providing a place is quite common and can be examined as the literal space (the venue), literary space (in writings), headspace (intellectual stimulation) or heartspace (emotional development) (Dill, 2013:6). Here, it is considered as ritual space, marked by a frame in which the ritual action will be

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<sup>7</sup> Individualist countries constitute the opposite of collectivistic nations.

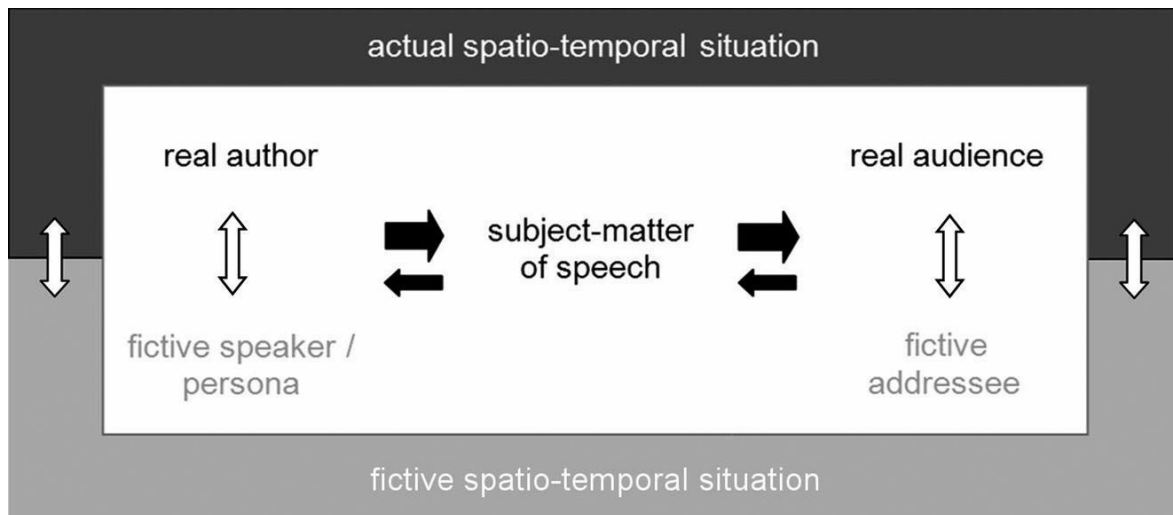
observed. “As the concept of performance has been developed in linguistic anthropology, performance is seen as a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretative frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood” (Baumann & Briggs, 1990:73). Consequently, the context of a performance is an important part of analysis, including participation structure and interaction between performer and spectator (Baumann & Briggs, 1990:63). Due to variations in these frames, performances cannot happen the same way twice. However, there are several problems to the concept of context. C.L. Briggs identified inclusiveness and false objectivity as the two main issues (Briggs, 1988). The former describes the difficulty of defining a context that encloses all necessary contextual factors, while the latter describes the issue of not being able to include every aspect of a context, compelling the researcher prioritize certain aspects.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the focus shall not lie on defining a context, but rather on “contextual cues”, signaling which features of the setting are valued by those attending to create interpretative frameworks (Baumann & Briggs, 1990:68). Communicative contexts are created in the correspondence between the participants (Baumann & Briggs, 1990:68).

Some of the included poets have chosen to extend the space of the performance by including paratext (Novak, 2012:376). The poet surrounds, extends, or simply presents his or her performance with additional information provided to the audience (Novak, 2012:376f). These may concern the poet’s life history, the title of the poem, or its genesis (Novak, 2012:376f). It is, however, not always clear if the paratext is, in fact, part of the performed text or not (Novak, 2012:377). It lacks “any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)” (Genette, 1997:2). It can, nonetheless, have substantial effects on the audience’s perception of the poem (and the poet), and therefore will be regarded in the analysis (Novak, 2012:378).

Further, communication in live performance may be layered, as the poet may take on the role of a fictional speaker, just as he or she might address a fictional or non-present audience. This type of communication is depicted in a model by Julia Novak (Figure 1).

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<sup>8</sup> Further reading in Baumann & Briggs, 1990:68



**Figure 1: Communication Model for live poetry (Novak, 2012:362)**

This model fittingly visualizes the exchange between poet and audience, where the poet shapes the communication, as indicated by the size of the upper arrows. Additionally, the connectedness of the actual spatio-temporal space, author, and audience, and the fictive space, speaker, and addressee is described as well. Although the two may overlap, the fictive space is created through words, while the actual situation is constituted by the cognizable setting of the performance (Novak, 2012:363).

Based on all of the above, selected performances attended during the research stay in Baltimore will now be analyzed using a linguistic and performative catalogue to provide a structured model of analysis in order to avoid slipping into statements of personal taste (McAuley, 1998: 3). This approach consists of eight elements that shall be examined. Firstly, the physical presence of the performer shall be described, including race, gender, posture, etc. Furthermore, the sound quality of the performance (volume, clarity, and so on) as well as the performer's voice (tone, language) shall be highlighted. Then, the style of the piece will be examined, i.e., rhyme patterns and such, and the point of view of the author is displayed. Finally, the focus lies on performativity, i.e., pacing, gestures, memorization, and eye contact, along with applied imagery and the theme of the poem.

## INDIVIDUALITY IN SPOKEN WORD POETRY

<b>Physical Presence</b>	<b>Gender, Race, Posture</b>	<b>Which physical features stood out?</b>
<b>Sound Quality</b>	<b>Volume, Clarity</b>	<b>Was the poet loud enough/too loud? Were there changes in volume?</b>
<b>Voice</b>	<b>Tone, Language</b>	<b>Did the poet speak in Standard English or apply vernacular speech? Which attitude did the tone of his or her voice convey?</b>
<b>Style</b>	<b>Rhyme Patterns</b>	<b>Does the poem have a clear rhyme pattern? Was it performed in an extraordinary rhythmic manner, e.g., like rap?</b>
<b>Point of View</b>	<b>Monologue, Dialogue, or Persona Poem</b>	<b>Was the piece written in first person? Who did the poet address?</b>
<b>Performativity</b>	<b>Pacing, Gesture, Eye Contact, Memorization</b>	<b>Which performative choices of the poet stood out for the audience?</b>
<b>Imagery</b>	<b>Metaphors, Similes</b>	<b>Which pictures did the poet evoke in the listener's mind?</b>
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>What did the poet speak on?</b>

Although there is no mandatory way of performing Spoken Word Poetry, there are certain aspects of artistry that are usually found in performances. The poet generally will perform in front of a live audience and apply dynamics of tone, gesture, slang, and/or rhyme.

Nonetheless, poets make several individual choices to give their performances a unique twist and use their bodies to embody their pieces, because “performance poems are presented to an audience with the whole body: in word, in voice, and in gesture” (Ellis, Gere, & Lamberton, 2003:45). For reasons of comprehensibility, transcripts of the poems are included.<sup>9</sup>

All but one of the five presented poems were performed at Open Mic Nights by adults, for adults. The poem by Najah James was performed at a Youth Poetry Slam.

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<sup>9</sup> The poems were provided to me by the poets. I have compared the pieces to the performances and have, if necessary, added or excluded lines, according to how it was actually performed on stage. The linebreaks are made according to the poet's performance. Linebreaks are stylistic devices to create rhythm, rhyme or emphasize meaning.

However, all performances took place in Baltimore City. Striking performative choices by the poet will be highlighted in the following pages.

## Duke the Rude

*(BUILD Thursdays, March 27th, 2014)*

*“In the black community they’ll see my sexuality first, but for the rest of the world, it’s like you are black first” (Duke the Rude, March 27th, 2014)*

Terrance Porter, stage name Duke the Rude, is a young<sup>10</sup> African-American male. While performing in front of a bright yellow background on the stage of BUILD Thursdays in Baltimore, he wore a red muscle shirt tucked into his blue jeans, with a gray vest on top and a gold necklace around his neck. Being the featured artist of the Open Mic Night, he was provided with a bigger slot to perform several of his pieces. I have chosen his fourth piece for this analysis.

Duke the Rude chose to give a quick contextualization to his piece *Afraid? Silent Alarms*, explaining that it is a poem he wrote about being gay and black and the difficulties at the intersection of the two. By providing the intent behind the piece and offering an interpretation, Terrance provided the audience with an informational paratext. He requested crowd participation, asking the audience to respond with “Bullets are made of steel”, when he says “And it seems like every bullet has been made for me”.

Before starting the poem, he engaged the audience in this exchange twice. In doing this, the poet has taken steps to emphasize his originality and his sense of self and has engaged the audience before the performance of the actual poem has even begun.

Duke took a step back, lowered his head and swung his arms back and forth and began:

1. Gay! So I have many reasons to be afraid, especially in the black community eyes are
2. always watching. I
3. was never good at math, but that didn’t stop me from learning to count my interactions
4. at the age of six with boys as opposed to girls, no one can know
5. what I don’t know about being me.
6. At 14, things became clear, not so much about who I wanted but the fact that I wasn’t
7. wanted. I grew to be afraid of hand gestures “keep your hands to your side. Be straight
8. while straight.
9. Ignore the colors. Don’t wear purple. Doesn’t matter if that’s the color of royalty, you

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<sup>10</sup> 23 year old (\*21.6.1992)

10. are better than that. Wear black, blend in and fade to - black.”
11. But 2013 has given me old reasons to be afraid. For instance, the spilling of  
tee,
12. while carrying rainbows and wearing hoodies. Is it truth or coincidence that  
the world
13. I live in is afraid of colors?
14. Like too many or just black.
15. If you grew up where I did, or perhaps a time before mine, all you would see is  
white
16. before you die, I’ve
17. been rotten. Like steel that’s been around too long, I’ve rusted... mahogany  
brown.
18. I’m unaccepted. Like Kanye Wests music video for Bound, my character is  
childish.
19. Like the devil in powerpuff girls, other times I can be your tar baby. As a black  
man
20. I am still afraid of hands, just as “keep your hands to your side!” I was  
informed
21. that black skullies and hoodies make me look criminal. Walking with my  
hands in
22. my pocket convinces you of such. So God, I’ll be back after winter. It’s cold.
23. Meanwhile, I am black and this skin is accustomed to being shed, I assure you  
I reek
24. of the smell of blood and there are white sharks out here, so
25. teach me how to swim.
26. While shackled, thrown overboard, anchored. Am I being PACIFIC enough for  
you?
27. I was once whole. But in my death, they decided to split me 50 ways, they call  
it
28. America. My history is common.
29. I mean in comics. Is it truth or coincidence that the greatest villains of all time
30. participate in white face? I call them the red hood – the way they blush  
whenever
31. you call them a racist. Prolonged dialogue. And they will paint the Joker before  
your
32. very eyes and ask you, in the coldest of tones, “why so serious?”, my response:
33. “So you wanna know how I got these scars? I was sawed. And I saw you once in  
the
34. corner of the room, you want to play a game? How much culture can be  
removed
35. before I am your puppet on strings? My brothers and sisters are victims of  
Jigsaw.
36. Because before I was 17, I was approached five times by men who keep their  
hands

37. by their side. Black parents have been raising their children for the Hunger Games,
38. “may the odds be ever in your favor”, just, just tell me that you don’t believe in a
39. white savior. They will tell you that Jesus is often seen dressed in all white, oK-K-K?
40. Is it truth or coincidence that the greatest villains of all time participate in white face?
41. Hitler. ‘Cause I’m black and I’m gay and I’m afraid of setting off silent alarms of
42. quiet mouths and loud guns, I’m black
43. and I’m gay and it seems that every bullet has been made for me – “Bullets are made
44. of steel”. I’ve rusted mahogany brown.

(Duke the Rude)

While performing he stood beside the microphone, taking on a tall, confident posture. The same confidence was found in his voice. He spoke very clearly, in an appropriate volume. Even though at times his speech tempo increased, which is rather typical in Spoken Word Poetry performances, he often prolonged the beginning and/or end of the sentences. In addition, when quoting what has been said to him (7f,20) he raised his voice slightly but noticeably. The poem is recited predominantly in Standard English, only on two occasions the poet slipped into a non-standard dialect, namely when pronouncing “carrying” (12) as currying as well as saying perrents instead of “parents” (line 38). When proclaiming “I’ve/ been rotten” (16f) or “I’m black/ and I’m gay” (42f) he stressed the I by increasing the volume of his voice and/or vocalizing the word slower. Furthermore, it is also striking how he said “why so serious” in line 32, as he directly imitated how the Joker of Batman utters this, his signature phrase.<sup>11</sup> The Joker in the movies is a malicious man, appearing as some sort of clown. The Joker’s face is painted white, his hair is green, and his lips, in an alarming red, are shaped into a devilish smile. He acts as Batman’s nemesis, and while bringing mayhem and violence to the people of the fictional city of Gotham, he will ask the infamous question ‘why so serious?’<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Duke the Rude asking the audience if they would like to know how he got his scars is also a reference to the Joker. In fact, in the poem Duke makes several references to pop culture, which shall be elaborated later.

The poem is much more a narrative than a classic piece of poetry with a recognizable rhyme pattern (albeit rhymes exists). Although it was performed as a monologue, he directly engages the audience through their participation in the performance. However, within the poem he also seems to be speaking to various sets of people. He appears to be speaking to someone in the first part of the poem, and someone else in

<sup>11</sup> See, for example the films ‘The Dark Knight’ from 2008 (Warner Bros.) or ‘Batman’ from 1989

<sup>12</sup> Find a short clip of the Joker explaining what the phrase means to him in ‘The Dark Knight’ here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F\\_5dP\\_83O7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_5dP_83O7o)

the latter. For example, when relating to the listener by saying “if you grew up where I did” in line 15, he is speaking to someone else than in line 34f, where he declares: “I saw you once in the/ corner of the room, you want to play a game?”. On a second level, Terrance then seems to extend the addressees. He speaks to the present audience as well as an audience beyond the people physically at the event, as if it is for the whole world to hear, e.g., in lines 15 and 26. In this, Duke exemplifies Novak’s Model of Communication.<sup>13</sup>

He also asks rhetorical questions throughout the piece as a method to keep the spectators engaged, which is one of his performative choices (26, 33f). While Duke the Rude did not utilize the space of the stage by walking or pacing, he made extensive use of his body. Terrance applied heavy hand movements, striking several outstanding moves during his performance.

He skillfully demonstrated what he meant by the recurring phrase “keep your hands by your side” at different points of the poem. In line seven, he used a gesture raising his right arm, with his wrist bent, and vehemently pushing it down to the side to be straight, in every sense of the word. At this point he hinted at his gay identity, the bent wrist being a stereotype often linked to homosexuals. The second time he used the phrase (20) he tucked his hands into the pockets of his pants and quickly pulled them back out. In doing so he referred to the incident of Trayvon Martin, a young African-American male, who was shot in 2013 by a member of the local neighborhood watch for looking suspicious due to him wearing a hoodie and having his hands tucked into his pockets.<sup>14</sup> Finally, when he depicted being approached by others, who had their hands to their side (36f), he formed a fist with his hands to his hip, slightly pulled toward his back, only extending his thumb and index finger, forming the common sign for a gun, reenacting the gun being drawn. He first physically pointed to himself when stating he had been rotten (16f), to then slide his fingers over and up the skin of his right arm, signifying he had rusted mahogany brown (17), while swiftly nodding his head. The action of pointing his finger to himself is repeated during his declaration of being black, this time more rigorous and vehement (23).

In reciting line 22, when he says “it’s cold” (22), he lifted his hands to his mouth, cupped them, and released a breath as if trying to warm them. To depict his body reeking of blood (23f) he quickly rubbed his arms with his hands, as if he was trying to get something off of them, to suddenly stop the movement at “and there are white sharks out there” (24).

Measured by the audience’s reaction, one of the two most noteworthy gestures Duke implemented was when he lifted his arms to his sides, his body forming a cross at the moment he was referring to the KKK (39) (Figure 2), a Christian white supremacist group responsible for terrorizing and lynching hundreds of African-Americans in the

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<sup>13</sup> See page 11.

<sup>14</sup> In the U.S. several incidents have occurred of unarmed people being shot while having their hands in the pockets of their pants, since the police (or whoever was involved in the particular incident) feared that the suspect might have a gun. Trayvon Martin was 17 years old (Gambino & Laughland, 2015)

U.S. throughout the late nineteenth century up to the 1960s, dressed in white clothes and concealing their faces with hoods.



Figure 2: KKK



Figure 3: Duke the Rude

Directly afterwards, Duke the Rude dropped his arms only to lift his right arm up again, portraying the Hitlergruß,<sup>15</sup> when asking “Is it truth or coincidence that the greatest villains of all time participate in white face?” (40). He then slapped his outstretched arm with his left hand and simply said “Hitler” (41), as if there were no additional information needed. Finally, he mimicked a puppet on strings, as if his arms were strategically being pulled up by an invisible puppet master (35). Throughout the performance his eyes were narrowed, his gaze intense, and ever so slightly he presented a smirk.

Applying imagery properly is essential to a good poem, for it makes it possible for the spectator to “see, smell and taste what you are telling them” (North, 2008:1). Consequently, it is a commonly applied stylistic device in Spoken Word Poetry, and is also found in *Afraid? Silent Alarms*. The image Duke the Rude used twice was that of rusting to mahogany brown (17,44), so significant that he even ends the poem emphasizing this image. The fact that he used repetition, yet another method often applied in order to burn the image into the listener’s mind, stresses the importance of the image in Terrance’s piece. Taking the context and his gestures into consideration, he seemed to refer to the idea that people of black skin are of lesser worth – a core thought of the racist body of thought used to, e.g., justify the enslavement of Blacks in

<sup>15</sup> A posture popular in Nazi Germany to show allegiance to the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler.

the U.S. The process of rusting is one, that one would try to prevent by taking good care of a steel object. A rusted object is imperfect and not worth as much as an untarnished one would be. Since in the U.S. the idea of a nugatory black body is a residue of the time of slavery and the Jim Crow Laws, Duke continues this illustration in line 26 by referring to him being “shackled, thrown overboard, anchored”. Again, by reviewing the context it is safe to say that Duke the Rude here hints at the shipment of Africans to the U.S. as slaves, and the struggles they encountered before, during, and after this journey. This is an experience or a memory Duke the Rude couldn’t possibly have made immediately, but is often shared as an element of the shared African-American experience and the sense of prosecution, oppression, and not being accepted is manifested in his fear of “setting off silent alarms of/ quiet mouths and loud guns” (41f), apparently, also a crucial segment of the poem, since this is where the title of the poem reoccurs. Hence, he feels as if every bullet has been made for him, reconfirming the torment of marginalization and maltreatment, to then state: “Bullets are made/ of steel” (43f), signifying that these very bullets are the cause of his rusting. The trials and tribulations that come with being gay and black are once more mentioned in line 12, where gayness is pictured as the carrying of rainbows, and the Trayvon Martin incident is alluded to by the comment on hoodies.

As mentioned before, Terrance makes several references to pop-cultural elements, which require brief explanations. First, he draws a comparison to the villain in the children’s TV series *Powerpuff Girls*. In the cartoon, three little girls with superpowers protect their hometown from monsters and villains. The devil, simply called HIM, is their biggest enemy. Later in the poem (34,35) the SAW movies are alluded to, especially through the reference of wanting to play a game. The first film was released in 2004 and can be assigned to the horror genre. In essence, it is about a game the character Jigsaw plays with people in order to test their will to survive. He tortures them brutally to find out how much they are willing to take before choosing death over life. If the victim loses the game, he cuts out a piece of their skin, shaped like a puzzle piece. Once again, referencing the struggle unique to African-Americans of losing their culture through enslavement and the constant battle to stay alive – or for that matter, the temptation to simply give up – he said: “How much culture can be removed/ before I am your puppet on strings? My brothers and sisters are victims of Jigsaw” (34f).” This theme is also recurring in the *Hunger Games* (38), a book and movie series about a fictional nation consisting of several boroughs, all of which have to provide two tributes to fight in the Hunger Games in the capitol of the nation. The Games are won when one tribute has killed all the others. Therefore, it is a game of primal instincts to kill in order to survive. When the tributes have been randomly drawn, a representative of the capitol proclaims “May the odds be ever in your favor”.

The themes at hand in *Afraid? Silent Alarms* are struggles and fears that accompany marginalized identities. Firstly, the gay identity (within a black community) is evaluated, then transitioning to matters of black identity (12-14) via the question: “Is it truth or coincidence that the world/ I live in is afraid of colors? Like too many or just black” (12f). The phrase “too many” hints at the rainbow flag, a symbol of the

LGBT<sup>16</sup> community, “and just black” points to race. Starting at line 15, Duke the Rude speaks on recent cases of violence against blacks as well as historic events. He speaks of the conflicts in black lives, such as being confronted with ignorance, racism, and violence or the struggle to survive.

## Najah James

*(2nd annual Youth Poetry Slam, January 27th, 2014)*

“I rewrote my prophecy poetically” (Najah James, January 27th, 2014)

Najah James participated in the 2nd annual Youth Poetry Slam, held in the City Hall in downtown Baltimore in January of 2014. At the time, Najah was 17 years old, competing with other teenagers (ages 13-19). The City Hall did not provide a stage, so the performers presented their pieces in a designated area at the front of the room. Najah was wearing a gray T-shirt with yellow print reading “Tubman City Poet”<sup>17</sup> and a black, red, yellow, and green beanie, letting strands of her bronze hair fall slightly onto her forehead. If at all, she wore very little make-up, but accessorized her outfit with a blue ring, a yellow bracelet, and long earrings in similar colors. After being announced and stepping in front of the audience, she took a step back, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped to the microphone. Najah did not give any information prior to her performance, as this is against the rules at Slams.

1. How long does it take for your life to 360?
2. For me it took a day.
3. A day when lights won't turn on after the sounds of flickers,
4. And eviction notices hold the same weight as death sentences.
5. To be homeless is like dying,
6. Or dining with mice except even they look a lot more satisfied.
7. I'm confused.
8. Searching for a way to run away from this trip like childhood fears but,
9. you can't escape lifestyles that are prophesied to appear.
10. The rough, cold touch of poverty sliding down my spine was too frigid to ignore, and
11. starvation seemed to feed the chill until my heart was frostbitten.
12. How deep am I destined to fall exactly?
13. Better yet, who am I questioning exactly?
14. The God I once thanked for homemade meals is looking pretty sketchy after my third
15. week of wandering streets.
16. You would think that your family will telepathically sense your struggle and have

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<sup>16</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Community

<sup>17</sup> A Baltimore City Youth Poetry Initiative. It refers to Harriet Tubman, an abolitionist and activist in the underground network for freeing slaves and bringing them to the North. Baltimore was a crucial location in this network, the Underground Railroad.

17. their doors wide open with big embraces and sympathetic souls who can't  
stand the
18. sight of hardship within their own kin.
19. Can you imagine seeing the opposite?
20. Summer seemed to be the season of selfishness.
21. To this day my head is still pounding from all the knocking,
22. Where was the help when I needed it?!
23. My little sister asked me why our own aunt wouldn't open the door so that we  
could
24. finally have a night of sleep and I had to tell her that the stars were just too  
beautiful
25. for us to rest inside.
26. Despite the sticky air, and my mother's silent tears as she held my sleeping  
brother,
27. my sister still managed to smile in innocence.
28. I wonder if she could sense my aunt's broken soul consume her decision  
making,
29. preventing her from loving us just enough to unlock her door.
30. I've never hated anything in my entire life, but with their journey came a new
31. emotion; A darker side I could never face until I saw all the backs of my closest
32. family members. I hated them.
33. My bubbling blood matched the heat in the air.
34. Crying caused my face to sting until my own tears became insignificant to even  
me,
35. I hid them,
36. Keeping the joy in my sister's eyes so that she too wouldn't die internally.
37. These moments weren't about poverty anymore.
38. This was a test;
39. How many people does it take to break one person?
40. How long could I go without a way to release my deepest emotions?
41. My questions were answered as soon as I picked up a pen...black ink blotches
42. tattooing my palms, while I rewrote my prophecy poetically but this time,  
crying
43. didn't hurt me. It was a way to release every demon I carried once my dreams  
were
44. molested and stolen by the wealthy.
45. It was then, while stanzas flooded my mind, that I realized I found a better  
home on
46. an illuminated stage with the brightest lights that I had ever seen.
47. This was destiny.
48. The microphone became my home, and the poetry team sounded me like four  
walls
49. of family.
50. Diamonds may be forever, but lyricism is for light-years.

51. When my mother finally found a home, the announcement was as loud as wedding
52. bells, almost as if God himself told me that I could finally rest knowing tomorrow as
53. a gift than an enemy.
54. But I swear as long as a mic is beside me
55. I'll never be without a home.

(Najah James)

During her performance Najah kept a straight posture, her gaze aiming at the audience. As she was using the provided microphone the listener was able to hear her clearly. She enunciated the words audibly and without any particular dialect.<sup>18</sup> She varied the volume of her speech during her performance, which, however, did not seem accidental. At Poetry Slams the poets are required to have their poem memorized, as did Najah. Her general tone was rather calm and quiet, until she increased her volume of speech in line 20. With the change in loudness, her attitude changed as well. She seemed almost sassy, like an angry teenager, wearing a smirk on her lips. Her speed of speech matched the volume of her voice and was accompanied by her pointing her finger to herself in a fast pace, declaring: "To this day my head is still pounding from all the knocking" (21). Najah then lowered her voice, although keeping the attitude, when mentioning her aunt (23). She narrowed her eyes to a squint and restlessly shifted her feet from side to side, then rolled her eyes, seemingly in frustration about having to make up an excuse for her little sister to explain why they had to spend another night outside (24f). Her voice turns soft when describing how her little sister still managed to keep a smile (27), afterwards returning to her frustration anew, peaking in her expression of the inability of her aunt to love them enough to open her door for them. When speaking the words "just enough" in line 29, she almost presses out the words, her body stiffens, her eyes narrow, and her arm lifted with her index finger and thumb barely apart, signifying how much love was missing to be "just enough". She continued to perform calmly until figuratively awakening (43f). Najah's eyes opened wide, her chest lifted, her voice clear and loud, climaxing when affirming that this, i.e, Spoken Word Poetry, was her destiny (47). She stepped to the left of the microphone as she pointed out that the illuminated stage was now her home (45), and remained there only to end the performance with a gaze to the side announcing "but I swear as long as a mic is beside me/ I'll never be without a home" (54f).

As mentioned in the Introduction, using the metaphor of a place to refer to Spoken Word Poetry and its performance is quite common. For instance, Trinh H. Minh-ha describes poetry as "the place from which many people of colour voice their struggle" (Minh-ha & H., 1992:154). Love the Poet, a performing artist based in Baltimore and

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<sup>18</sup> Trudgill defines dialect as "differences between kinds of language which are differences of vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation" (Trudgill, 2000:5). Whereas accent only refers to differences in pronunciation (Trudgill, 2000:5). African-American Vernacular Speech would be considered a dialect of the English language.

host of several Spoken Word Poetry Events (BefreeFridays; WarmWednesdays), repeatedly encouraged performing poets at her events to open up by describing ‘this’ (which could be all the notions of space mentioned before) as a safe place, a home. Najah also spoke on the therapeutic effects writing (Spoken Word) Poetry can have (41f). As a process of giving meaning, writing can help a person to cope with traumatic events (Pennebaker, 2004). “Forming a narrative allows one to disclose a traumatic event and recode it into language” (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006 in Alvarez & Mearns, 2014:264). And indeed, expressing her narrative seems freeing to Najah. Her poem has a clear development. First, she described the situation of being homeless and how she felt (up to line 19), leading her to rock bottom (up to line 39), then to slowly arise (up to line 46), and finally to summit in the revelation of having found Spoken Word Poetry to claim her way out of the feeling of helplessness (up to line 54). This process can be identified in the poem’s content, as well as in Najah’s performance. Each new phase is initiated by a change in tone and/or attitude. This shift in tone and attitude is described as a turn in Spoken Word (Somers-Willett, 2009:85). It is applied to convey a revelation and/or a sense of truth (Somers-Willett, 2009:85).

The audience responded to the performer’s frustration, anger, and helplessness as she described her lows (28-38). She also gained recognition for professing Spoken Word Poetry as her resource (41-54). Painting the image of the poetry team<sup>19</sup> as “four walls of family” (48), Najah gestures towards the audience, gaining plenty of vocally expressed appreciation. Many of the audience members were poets themselves, and therefore could probably relate. Nonetheless, she cleverly engaged the audience and established a bond of appreciation that essentially was returned as her poem was met with approval. The slight slip-up she had when she had to repeat the words “crying caused my” (34) did not negatively affect her or the appreciation of the audience.

The underlying theme of the poem is poverty and its aftermath; being homeless (5), the hunger (11), having to rely on others (16f), and the general frustration she felt (37f). To support these themes Najah applied powerful imagery, such as “To be homeless is like dying/ or dining with mice except even they look more satisfied” (5f) or “my bubbling blood matched the heat of the air” (33). The poem finishes with a happy ending, in her mother finally announcing to have found a home and Najah finding her very own – in poetry.

## Love the Poet

*(Verbatimondays, March 10th, 2014)*

“I write, when I feel” (Love the Poet, March 10th, 2014)

Michelle Antoinette, stage name Love the Poet, is a full-time artist based in Baltimore. She had a one-woman play and is a professional photographer. Taking the stage by greeting everybody, she immediately engaged the audience in a conversation.

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<sup>19</sup> Slam poets are often part of poetry teams, which represent schools, clubs, or even cities in competitions.

Following that, Michelle mentions an event that she hosts (WarmWednesdays) taking place at the same venue, explaining that it is the longest-running Open Mic Event in the country. In doing so, her paratext has a promotional function, stressing her involvement in the Baltimore Spoken Word Poetry scene. By referring to a theme another poet had addressed in a previous performance, she extends the function of her paratext to be informational. She stated to have been inspired by love and by the human capacity to feel. Slowly easing in to the theme of her poem, she suggested that it is alright to feel when people make one feel – and to write about it. By offering this type of information, Love the Poet leads the audience to expect a piece that is raw, confrontational, honest – and real. Explaining that she had just written the poem that morning, she did not mention a title.

1. They always try to play you at first
2. Good thing I've got an eye for the diverse.
3. Good thing putting all my eggs in one basket looks much like me in a hearse.
4. Black-out to the first moment I stepped onto a stage
5. The taste of hungry still lingers
6. and praise the Lord I remember the thirst. I had sand in my mouth,
7. heat in my stance, spit with the fury of God and thus new poets were cut from what
8. I've said.
9. Watch out for the glass, baby.
10. No need to get sliced, if you heal too fast, baby.
11. Bleed for me, poet,
12. continuously and don't die.
13. Show me the wounds that won't ever heal and don't cry.
14. No. Cry.
15. But only on stages.
16. Suck that shit up on a daily basis.
17. Too many are contrived... Baseless.
18. You know there is a whole type of people on these scenes that I don't like and sure
19. don't need.
20. The pseudo-intellectual, hyper-heterosexual, who give all praises to you, God and
21. you, Queen.
22. But behind closed doors want to text me on some LOVE come over please.
23. Yo nigga, I mean God, I mean nigga! Get your bitch, I mean Queen, I mean bitch!
24. Leave me be.
25. Secret down low for ladies parties.
26. I've seen pictures on IG. They not even discrete
27. Your wives are fucking each other, sirs,
28. while you are out being a God and fucking another her into quasi submission
29. or a him until you're convinced he's your mistress.
30. Mister this is why this city has the number two AIDS rate in the nation

31. Because you frontin' like you are the crux of the Nation  
32. Call you Brother?  
33. Call you Brother?  
34. But it's blatant you are more Cane then Abel.  
35. Less Muslim,  
36. less Christian,  
37. five percenter of what? Being gay?  
38. You stay out of my community.  
39. We want to keep you far away.  
40. Stay off of my stage with overtones of black power and how the family should  
41. sustain, while quietly blasting the people who are your sideline thangs. BANG.  
42. I remember the first moment I stepped on stage.  
43. Good thing I have an eye for the diverse or I would curse this scene with every  
    ounce  
44. of brimstone and fire.  
45. I would scorch your frankincense and myrrh.  
46. I would start a war and break up homes.  
47. I would fry anyone, who dares to step foot in this dome.  
48. Don't come here with your hate!  
49. Don't come here with your hate!  
50. Leave my community alone. Leave that space on the list open for someone who  
51. needs a church home.  
52. Build your own shit on shaky foundations.  
53. Build your own shit on shaky foundations.  
54. Mine's made of stone.  
55. Don't come here with your hate.  
56. Don't come here with your hate.  
57. This is my life,  
58. this is my art,  
59. this is my Ohm, my Ashe, my Bible, my Koran, my Metu Neter, my Holy Grail,  
60. my 60 sacred Heaven!  
61. How dare you bring me your hell?  
62. How dare you bring me your hell?  
63. Thank God, I have an eye for the diverse.  
64. Another outlet has been birthed.  
65. Getting too old to let this disturb.  
66. We've been here before,  
67. you've been here before  
68. at year one, year five, and now ten. You will go away,  
69. but you will come again in a different skin.  
70. Dear God, please grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change  
71. the courage to change the things that I can  
72. and the wisdom to know the difference  
73. Amen.

(Love the Poet)

Love the Poet is a rather petite woman. She wore her hair in a Mohawk, the sides shaved. She had applied little to no make-up, dressed in a black T-shirt with red writing, above that a soft-shell jacket and a white and black checkered scarf. While pulling up the poem from her phone, she slightly stepped back while following the movement with her upper body by bending her back. She furrowed her eyebrows and threw her head towards her left shoulder, as if wanting to loosen the tension. She began reading the poem, her cell phone in her right hand. The poet did not have the poem memorized; therefore her gaze was directed toward the screen of her phone the majority of the time. Thus, her performance was predominantly carried by her voice and her facial expressions.

The contracting of her eyebrows was a recurring expression, combined with laying her forehead in wrinkles and/or looking to her left, sharp sighted but simultaneously not looking at anything or anyone in particular. Yet, when stating, “Yo Nigga, I mean God, I mean Nigga./ Get your bitch, I mean queen, I mean bitch!” (23), she shifted her body from left to right, in tune with the rhythm of her words, ending with the gaze to her left as described. She seemed to apply the stare to her left whenever she wanted to emphasize her point, usually accompanied by a few seconds of silence (e.g., 23,28,30,37). Michelle hardly varied the volume of her voice, but rather stressed certain words by pronouncing them sharply and/or particularly clearly, as well as playing with tempo. Although not exclusively, Michelle applied a good amount of vernacular speech and profanity. For example, in line 27 she says: “Your wives are fucking each other”, or “frontin”<sup>20</sup> and “shit” in lines 31 and 52.<sup>21</sup> Starting with her proclamation “Don’t come here with your hate” (48), she pointed to the ground to her left repeatedly and vigorously until calming and pausing after demanding that the space on the lists be left open for someone who needs a church home (51).

The stylistic device of repetition can be found several times in Love the Poet’s poem as well. At times it seemed planned, as part of the written poem (e.g. 48f), but at other times it appeared to be performative improvisation (52f). “Repetition is a simple but powerful poetic device. Sometimes just the repetition of a key phrase or image, with extensions of image and thought for each repetition, can help a writer generate exciting poems” (North, 2008).

During her monologue, she addressed a “whole type of people on these scenes” (18) that she is not very fond of. She described them as hypocrites (20f), as reckless and destructive (30), and as intruders in her community (38). Love the Poet is, as mentioned above, a full-time artist; therefore she could be referring to the Spoken Word community.

The piece also presents rhymes, but not consistently throughout the poem. The first five lines present a pattern of a-a-b-c-b, which is by no means consistently applied.

Michelle spoke of the Spoken Word scene in Baltimore and professed what it means to her to be a poet. Additionally, she stated her position in the scene as an established

<sup>20</sup> Fronting means to put up a front, to fool others (mostly in order to impress).

<sup>21</sup> For comprehension, IG (26) stands for *Instagram*, a social-media medium for sharing photographs.

poet and performer, as exemplified in line 57f: “This is my life!/ My art!” At the same time she criticized how other poets violate the sacredness of the stage by being unauthentic, meaning that their proclamations on stage do not match their behavior offstage (19ff). For one, she spoke on the idea of realness in Spoken Word Poetry that was mentioned in previous chapters. The performing poet must also be the author of the poem, and therefore should be the personification of what he or she presents in the poem. If that is not the case, the poet can lose his or her credibility and jeopardize his or her reputation in the scene. The sacredness of the stage and performing on it is underlined when she compares the “space on the list”, which refers to the list on which poets sign up to perform, to a “church home” (51). This religious imagery is then found again in line 59. In contrast, a lack of authenticity and commitment to the values of Spoken Word Poetry is what Michelle describes as hell (61f). The poem concludes with a prayer, which evokes the impression that she not only discusses her authenticity as a poet on the stage, but also as a believer in God, while others might use his name in vain (6;20f).

She has defined the others quite explicitly as the black male, highlighted in the terms Nigga, Brother, and Mister (23,32,30). The first two can be used in an affectionate manner, especially in the black community, but particularly the term nigga may also be charged with negativity. By using the word, she subtly makes it clear that she sees herself as a member of the African-American community, for a member of a different race probably would not have used it in the same manner, but simultaneously utters a criticism and warning, e.g., “this is the reason why this city has the number two AIDS rate in the nation” (30), and “you be frontin’ like you be the crux of the nation” (31). Ultimately, she almost resigns, seemingly trying to accept that there will always be evil to match good, as they opposing an us. “We’ve been here before./ You’ve been here before” (66f), she continues. “You will go away, but you will come again in a different skin” (42f).

## **Rasheed Copeland**

*(Verbatimondays, March 10th, 2014)*

“I ain’t have to do nothing, but stay black and die” (Rasheed Copeland, March 10th, 2014)

Rasheed performed this poem at the weekly Open Mic Night Verbatimondays in Baltimore in March 2014. He took the stage, wearing a jeans jacket, a graphic white T-shirt, and blue jeans. The poet, in his late twenties, had a thick black beard, a bald head, and a big smile on his face as he introduced himself. Rasheed gave recognition to the poet who had performed before him and jokingly apologized to his spouse for not being able to write poems for her as the previous poet did for her loved one. After the laughter of the audience declined, he lowered his eyes, still smiling while positioning himself in front of the microphone.

The performance was initiated with his gaze rising and a moment of silence, before he began:

1. When the gavel bangs and the red handed brush off their shoulders, leaving  
black and
2. cold blood on their sleeves
3. when they are slapped on the wrists and told to walk free
4. I can't help but to remember who I am.
5. as if I ever needed a reminder
6. that I ain't shit
7. I'm just a black man
8. twice removed from God
9. reincarnated through blue eyes narrow as gun barrels. This nation is my  
mother
10. but only through surrogacy.
11. Things ain't been the same since they unchained the last shackle of my  
umbilical cord.
12. She has long been a peril to me and I have long taken heed to her backhanded  
lessons.
13. Shut up! I am not living in a post-racial society I am living in the backlash of  
her
14. postpartum depression.
15. This place I call home
16. known for killing in the same way that it prays in Jesus' name
17. Amen and a man, I am not.
18. I am sin. I am started as a routine traffic stop.
19. I end, as a memory pulled from my mother's chest like a draw from the  
morgue.
20. When I was younger the mantra fluid in my blood had me assured that I ain't  
have to
21. do nothing but stay black and die
22. but stay black - and die.
23. We are dying.
24. In every shade that the melanin can provide they have found ways of proving  
us as
25. worthless. This nation is my mother, but only through surrogacy
26. 'tis why I am treated as her demon seed, her cursed and deserving son of Ham  
turned
27. son of Sam by the media whenever the officer's alibi don't stick. To quail the  
foul
28. play, I am painted across it as a lunatic.
29. My eulogy will read like a smear campaign, my funeral will be a trial.
30. And I will be found guilty of this unshakable otherness,
31. this blackness, which gets more jails than Yales
32. erected on behalf of its third grade test scores.

33. The school-to-prison pipeline starts so young you'd swear it were a sliding board,  
34. swear it were a ploy or a form of dehumanization aged old it is making mug shots out  
35. of my baby photos. It is growing me into a spirit as if it were a cage so that no one so  
36. much as flinches when I am killed  
37. and it is blamed on my rage, blamed on a bullet that shouldn't have had my name on  
38. it, instead of blamed on a bigotry that has long had my name on it.  
39. And I have died this death a million times you can find me in the bladder of Alabama  
40. or Sanford  
41. or wherever they swallow black souls whole and leave the cadavers as town flags  
42. blowing in the breeze half-mast on the oak trees,  
43. wherever the peace feels like confederacy smiling,  
44. wherever the boot meets my teeth like a love tale.  
45. To what do I owe this everlasting rapture of bullet shells?  
46. This mass choir song of machine gun on its umpteenth encore sung  
47. in a twisted tongue of Garvey  
48. sending us Niggas back to where we came from  
49. past Africa and back to God.  
50. My God, what is it about my hands that makes your trigger fingers so itchy?  
51. What is it about my body that sends you leaping in suspicion?  
52. Searching me harder than you've ever searched history  
53. this skin ain't never been valid I.D.  
54. Please don't mind little ol' humongous me.  
55. I'm just a black man surviving the APB since my abc's  
56. but one of these glad mournings  
57. I'll fly away.

(Rasheed Copeland)

From the first moment on, Rasheed Copeland spoke with a clear, strong voice. In fact, it was striking how his demeanor and way of speaking changed when he performed. During his introduction he seemed soft, almost shy, but upon beginning his performance he exuded confidence.

At first, he had his arms crossed in front of his hips, releasing them to embody his words by guiding his left hand to his right shoulder (1). His bearing was open as his hands moved around in front of his upper body, the palms of his hands mostly held towards the ceiling or the audience. Sporadically he would throw his outstretched arms to his sides, shrugging his shoulders.

The poet expressed himself eloquently, merely using obvious vernacular language when using "ain't" repeatedly (e.g. 6,11,20). It is striking that he utilized the term as a

link to blackness. He applied it declaring: “I aint shit/ I’m just a black man” (6f) and “I ain’t have to/ do nothing but stay black and die” (20f), the latter being a popular expression among African-Americans. Although the origins of this phrase are not clear, it has been used by famous poets such as Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes, and has been adopted by many black Americans as a response when being told they ‘have to do something’. It shows the ubiquity and fixity of the concept of blackness in the U.S., as if there is no growing out of it, no escaping it. One will always be seen as a black person, regardless of social status, education, or other achievements. There seems to be a feeling of confinement in relation to black skin. Rasheed mentions this topic again later in the poem: “I will be found guilty of this unshakable otherness/ this blackness, which gets more jails than Yales/ erected” (30ff). It is almost the obvious choice to use ain’t over the Standard English version (I am not), since the term is believed to have its origin in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Ebonics. AAVE has been (and still is by many) viewed as inferior when compared to Standard English. “Since differences in black speech had formerly been regarded as a sign of inferiority, it remained difficult to acknowledge that black speech actually was different without the view appearing to be racist” (Trudgill, 2000:51). Linguists agree, however, that the ethnic varieties of the English language spoken by Blacks and Whites in the U.S. are equally valid (Trudgill, 2000:51f). Nonetheless, it seems that the general public believes that those who speak AAVE are simply not capable of speaking ‘proper English’. It is important to state that any differences in speech are learned behavior (Trudgill, 2000:43). Therefore, “people do not speak as they do because they are white or black” (Trudgill, 2000:43). Consequently, when pointing out the use of AAVE in the poems, it is not to make judgement pertaining quality or poetic skill, but rather to identify a cultural signifier.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, presenting this poem on racialized identity in the first person awards his statements a performative function. Therefore, he is not only describing the I, but also creates it. On paper, the poem has no apparent rhyming pattern. However, while performing Rasheed stressed and/or prolonged certain words in a way that revealed rhymes, e.g., in line 12 “She has long been a peril to me and I have long taken heed to her backhanded lessons”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, his accentuation was distinct, as he stretched out words without making them sound alien. The poet also offered a variety in tone, especially obvious when he asked: “To what do I owe this everlasting rapture of bullet shells?” (45), his voice saddened and there was a sense of desperation, which carried on until peaking in frustration (50). He almost cried out to God and seemed to genuinely be puzzled as to why his body is seen as fair game (50f). After emanating pain and sorrow, a sense of hope took over at the end of the poem when he embraced the famous Gospel song I’ll fly away by Albert Brumley (1929). It is a song about finding salvation in death and returning to God.<sup>24</sup> Having memorized the poem, he was able to hold eye contact with the audience.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on AAVE grammar and its origins see: Trudgill, 2000, 42-59.

<sup>23</sup> The underlined words were emphasized by the poet.

<sup>24</sup> For lyrics, see Appendix A.

However, he started to stutter several times, which appeared to be a consequence of his commitment to the conveyed emotions, as well as a stylistic device to emphasize his desperation. His eyes wandered from one corner of the room to the other, not focusing on one spot, thereby implying to be speaking to the entire audience. In order to utilize the microphone, which was attached to a stand, Rasheed did not pace or roam the stage, but he moved his body, changing angles and repeatedly shifting his weight onto his toes.

Copeland applied several strong images in his poem. For example, starting in line seven, he said: "I'm just a black man/ twice removed from God/ reincarnated through blue eyes and gun barrels. This nation is my mother/ but only through surrogacy" (7ff). Therein he depicts the position of the black man as a less holy, less godly, less worthy human being, whereas the blue eyed are reincarnations of the Almighty, equipped with guns to fulfill their sacred deeds and hold their positions. Following this, Rasheed spoke of the diasporic state that African-Americans are lingering in. They are born on American soil, are legal citizens, but still, somehow, not equal Americans, just as they are not Africans – and yet in a sense are both. This two-ness has been the subject of thought of many famous African-American intellectuals, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois.

*"One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1903 in: Gilroy, 1993:126).*

Africa constitutes, as is typical for a diaspora, a place with symbolic meaning that is not attainable. The thought of actually returning to the Homeland always arose (and arises) when the social, political, and/or economic situation of African-Americans worsened. "The struggle against racial oppression helped turn African Americans toward Africa, where the possibility of a proud past might offset a humiliating present" (Painter, 2006:4). Marcus Garvey, one of the most famous pan-African activists, who had his mind set on returning African-Americans (and eventually all oppressed people of African descent living abroad) to Africa, is also mentioned in the poem (47). Pan-Africanism is a movement that believes that all people of African descent should unite in the pride of their common heritage. In the U.S., the goal was to re-connect with what was lost through slavery, such as languages, culture, etc. Instead of accepting the racist body of thought on the inferior Negro, an effort was made to find pride in a glorious, diverse, and rich African history as the original people. "The 'race' was no more mere victim [...], because of a shared African past, it was the bearer of a potential greatness" (Eyerma, 2001:63). The pan-African attempt to return African-Americans to the Homeland was mirrored by racist thoughts of sending them back to where they came from, picked up and even exaggerated by Rasheed when he said: "This mass choir song of machine gun on its umpteenth encore sung in a twisted tongue of Garvey/ sending us Niggas back to where we came from/ past Africa and back to God" (46ff), essentially pointing out the feeling of not only being unwanted in your country of birth but even having death wished upon you.

The mother–child imagery is a recurring one in the poem, and the relationship is certainly a troubled one, as he speaks of “postpartum depression” (13f) and all that has changed after being released from the umbilical cord (11). These images stand for the abolishment of slavery, the quasi-freedom they have gained and the wave of violence, segregation, and discrimination African-Americans have encountered. Just because they were no longer enslaved does not mean that they were accepted by white America. The situation was particularly difficult in the South of the U.S., where the Jim Crow Laws were used as a means of oppressing black Americans. “‘Separate but equal’ gave Southern states and localities permission to humiliate black people and exclude them from civic life” (Painter, 2006:142). Even today, African-Americans are institutionally disadvantaged and encounter struggles unique to them, thus the poet’s reaction: “Shut up!/ I am not living in a post racial society” (13f). In fact, he created a bridge between past and present by pointing out Alabama and Sanford, Florida (39f), and their significance to African-Americans. Alabama was a hub of violence in African-American history and also played a major role during the uprising in the Civil Rights Movement under Martin Luther King Jr., whereas Sanford gained notoriety through the killing of Trayvon Martin. This case is also part of Duke the Rude’s poem. Additionally, Copeland possibly hints to the case of Mike Brown, a young African-American male who was killed by police and left on the scene uncovered for several hours (41), and simultaneously includes the many lynchings of the past (41f). African-Americans were hanged from trees, predominantly in the southern States. These acts were often public spectacles and the topic of a plethora of African-American Art, such as the song ‘Strange Fruit’ by Billie Holiday (1939)<sup>25</sup> or paintings such as Winfred Rembert’s “The Lynching” (1999) (Figure 3).



Figure 4: "The Lynching" (Rembert)

<sup>25</sup> For lyrics, see Appendix B.

Furthermore, Rasheed illustrated the current social struggles many African-Americans encounter. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics under the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2010 the likelihood of an African-American male being incarcerated was six times greater than that of a white male (Glaze, 2011),<sup>26</sup> which is reflected in the poem in lines 31 and 33. By many, this is seen as evidence for the social, economic, political, and ultimately legal prosecution of African-Americans. This stance is supported by Rasheed's mentioning of the APB (55), the All Points Bulletin, a broadcast for members of Law Enforcement to be on the lookout for a wanted suspect. However, among African-Americans it is commonly joked that wanted suspect almost always equals black male. This is also hinted at in the poem, as the poet states: "I'm just a black man surviving the APB since my abc's" (55), adding that this label of the dangerous and angry black man or woman is something African-Americans are born with and have to deal with from an early age, as "abc's" alludes to elementary school age.

During the performance of this poem at Verbatimondays the audience reacted heavily. For example, when Copeland reiterated: "But stay black. And die" (22), some of the audience members answered while the poet paused between "Stay black." and "And die". The poet had never asked for crowd participation, therefore it was something that the audience members felt encouraged them to speak and participate. His subsequent proclamation "We are dying" (23) earned him further approval, as many responded with Yes! or the typical Spoken Word Mh! The latter part of the poem evoked a similar reaction in the audience, especially during lines 50-52. Altogether, there were several scattered reactions by the audience, the previously mentioned being the strongest, leading to the conclusion that I'll fly away was accepted as a valuable poem and that the author and performer was recognized as a good poet.

## Aquil Mizan

*(Verbatimondays, March 10th, 2014)*

"De-Nial is more than a river in Africa" (Aquil Mizan, March 10th, 2014)

Aquil Mizan is well established in the Baltimore poetry scene. He not only performs but also works at the entrance of many venues. The Baltimore native is a rapper, but found Spoken Word Poetry as a means of expressions in the 1990s.

*"The thing that appealed to me about it, was that by there not being music and by you not necessarily having a specific pace or meter to adhere to, I felt it would be easier for people to literally hear and to digest the scope of different things that I was trying to say" (Mizan, 2014).<sup>27</sup>*

<sup>26</sup> This data is based on the number of incarcerations under local, state, and federal jurisdiction. One might add that black women too are more likely to be incarcerated, but the gap between the number of black and white females arrested is significantly smaller. Hispanic American males were almost three times more likely to be incarcerated than white men in 2010 (PEW Research Center, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> For the complete statement, see Appendix C.

As a matter of fact, this intention is apparent in the performance of his piece. After greeting the audience and clarifying that he had memorized the poem, but had brought his notebook for support, he explained that Scorpio, also known as Aaron Carter, a fellow poet, had asked him to write on the topic ‘paranoia’ for a collaboration on Carter’s CD – this is Mizan’s contribution: Paranoia.

1. I heard E-the Poet Emcee<sup>28</sup> say: “conspiracy is not a theory, it’s a fact.”
2. And what's the devil's greatest wicked act?
3. Many say it is that
4. he got the people to believe that he don't exist
5. Go to your dictionary and open it
6. Look up devil and know this
7. A number of definitions of devil refer to people
8. don't forget
9. that beginning with the trans-Atlantic slave trade
10. during our ongoing holocaust
11. I've heard conservative estimates that a hundred million lives were lost
12. Then from slavery, Jim Crow, police brutality, through the Civil Rights Era
13. and right now during the so called Era of Post-Racial America
14. People of color in Africa and the Diaspora are victims of terror.
15. De-Nial is more than a river in Africa
16. Does the U.S. spell us?
17. I'm asking ya.
18. Duties. Are you accepting yours or denying yours?
19. It's battle rhymes the times of war.
20. How many more must be killed, setup or beat up
21. by police that's corrupt before we'll speak up?
22. Must it be viewed on the news for us to believe it's true?
23. Will we discuss terrorism by the boys in blue?
24. Racial profiling on how Abner Louima got screwed?
25. By the New York police officers who
26. literally sodomized a brother with a broken broomstick
27. How long will we let those terrorists do this?
28. Will we be freedom-writers or bow down like a whore?
29. It's battle rhymes. We're in that time, warriors
30. Our subject for tonight is paranoia.
31. Which the dictionary defines as a mental disorder
32. caused by delusions of persecution
33. Delusions of persecution? Really?!
34. See the sad, somber sidewalk mural in Miami
35. stained in burgundy with a backdrop of iced tea and skittles
36. painted with the blood of Trayvon Martin
37. Delusions of persecution? For real ish.
38. Picture the pretty fiancé of a member of the New York Police department
39. full of exuberance brimming with anticipation of life as his wife
40. She joyously gave her finger
41. to bear the sign of engagement to Sean Bell,
42. to whom she just knew soon
43. she'd be wedded to in a matrimony that's holy

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<sup>28</sup> A fellow poet, based in Philadelphia but well known in the Baltimore Poetry scene.

44. now she and we give the finger
45. to the NYPD
46. guilty of grand larceny
47. being that they robbed her of the blessing of marriage
48. when they made Sean Bell holy
49. like Swiss Cheese.
50. Riddled with bullets. It hurts.
51. The would be bride and groom's family still met up in church
52. but instead of a marriage limousine
53. they rode in a hearse
54. And the only thing Sean Bell was quote unquote guilty of was driving while black
55. And while his case like Trayvon's receives significant media attention
56. You and I know damn well
57. many, many, many of our people have and are dying just like that
58. so I ask you again:
59. delusions of persecution? For real ish?
60. You already know
61. NFL receivers who ask to run their route
62. in the middle of the field, against the Baltimore Ravens defense
63. and history says they might get knocked tf out
64. and black men with nice cars should be noticed
65. that at any given time, even in our own neighborhood
66. on our own parking lot
67. that history says we might get pulled over
68. by police who may disrespectfully talk to us
69. conduct illegal searches
70. beat us down, kill us
71. and even if it's caught on film and clearly audibly recorded
72. wherein anybody can see and hear the injustice, without any questions asked
73. and that audio and video is permissible as evidence in court
74. the history says the judge and the jury of white peers, might give the police a pass
75. Then if black leaders, athletes and artists
76. who repeatedly witness these and other acts of terror
77. against our people, speak up
78. because we're justifiably aggravated
79. the history says that through the devil's media
80. we might be character assassinated
81. and if we continue to teach, enlighten and unite the masses
82. the history says there is a real chance that we may be physically assassinated
83. wrongfully killed.
84. But we say Allah O Akbar
85. meaning God is the greatest
86. the one to whom Believers of all Faiths pray
87. But that does not change the wicked predatory nature of our open enemies
88. and the fact that we are prey
89. being stalked by a beast on many levels of existence.
90. In scripture is written
91. that he beginning of wisdom is fear
92. So shouldn't we be aware of opposition, if we wanna be winning?

93. Most fighters say the knockout blow was the one they didn't see coming
94. so for us to be oblivious
95. to the ways and actions of the wicked is
96. not beneficial, it's problematic
97. I know we say ignorance is bliss but
98. what we don't know can not only hurt us, it can kill us. Is
99. the harsh reality not a fallacy
100.       so my thinking is
101.       that as vampires know the light destroys ya
102.       the miseducator of the so called Negro
103.       fears truth and those with the heart to tell it
104.       So anyone who has or might grow a pair annoys ya
105.       and those who can't handle the truth, call it paranoia
106.       But as a man, as a believer, as an artist
107.       I see truth and I pray I'm blessed so the way I tell is clear
108.       Much of so called paranoia is actually justifiable, rational, intelligent,  
          healthy fear.

(Aquil Mizan)

Aquil's performance was definitely one of the more low-key ones. His tone and speed were steady. Nothing about his appearance was flashy, as he wore a gray shirt and jeans. Although he is a stately man, there was a calmness to him that remained while he was on stage. Being the oldest poet of the selection, as well as the most experienced, his appearance may be a matter of maturity, but it in any case supported his intention to lay emphasis on the content of the poem. In fact, too much movement and gestures can distract the spectator (North, 2008). Aquil only utilized gestures twice to support the imagery of his poem. Firstly, when referring to the Sean Bell case, he imitates a ring being guided onto his ring finger, when he says: "She joyously gave her finger" (40), to then explain through movement that the next reference to "the finger" (44) connotes to the middle finger. Secondly, to clarify the wordplay Mizan used in describing Bell as holy, he stretched out his left arm, his thumb pointing up and index finger directed toward the audience, mimicking a gun, and thus addressing how Bell was killed. In November 2006 the 23-year-old was shot down by New York Police in Queens, NYC, on his wedding day. The officers fired 50 shots at Bell. He was unarmed.<sup>29</sup>

Other than that the poet moved naturally, moving his hands to the rhythm of his voice. In comparison to other poets, Aquil placed much more emphasis on rhyme patterns. Although not consistent, he wrote and performed the poem in a way that the end of the lines exhibit rhymes. Up to line 74 Aquil kept eye contact with the audience, though not focusing on anyone or anything in particular. Subsequently he got stuck, having a mental block or blackout of some sort, and made use of the notebook he carried in his right hand. He then read the rest of the poem and broke eye contact with the audience completely. The audience, however, did not react

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<sup>29</sup> The testimonies given by the police officers and the eye witnesses present at the scene differed greatly. The case gained immense public attention. Further information may be found readily.

negatively. Comforting the poet at the moment of his blockade, some began snapping their fingers and others assured him, “It’s okay. You got this”.

Furthermore, the audience had a strong reaction to several statements made in *Paranoia*. In particular, statements on recent cases of police brutality against African-Americans caused these reactions. For example, when Aquil asks: “Must it be viewed in the news for us to believe it’s true?/ Will we discuss terrorism by the boys in blue?” (22f), many audience members engaged, agreeing with a humming Mh. Also, the following reference to the Abner Louima case evoked the same reaction in some of the listeners. The case had gained public attention as a horrific incident of police brutality. In 1997 the 30-year-old Haitian immigrant Abner Louima was falsely accused of punching a police officer during a brawl in front of a New York City nightclub. Following his arrest, he was severely beaten and sodomized with a broken broomstick by one of the officers. Louima had to have several surgeries and remained hospitalized for two months. The public was outraged, so much so that some protestors stormed the Precinct, marching against police brutality. The victim survived and received 8.75 million dollars through a settlement in his civil suit in 2011, while the officer responsible was sentenced to 30 years in prison.<sup>30</sup> The second case the poet refers to that gained the audience’s reaction was that of Trayvon Martin, which has been referenced by other poets in this selection as well. Thirdly, the incident of the shooting of Sean Bell also grabbed the spectator’s attention, especially the lines “but instead of a marriage limousine/ they rode in a hearse” (52f). Finally, the audience appreciated Mizan’s point that it is unfathomable that the misbehavior of police officers against African-Americans may be caught on film or audibly recorded and the perpetrator will still walk free, presumably because they are white (71f).

Even though Mizan’s poem takes an offensive, forward, and almost aggressive stance, he steers away from using profanity and switches to the common abbreviation of the fuck – tf – in line 63, which causes some audience members as well as the poet to break out in laughter. He also avoids using the curse word shit and abbreviates it by simply saying ish (37,59). Otherwise, he utilized the stylistic device of imagery and wordplay rather than profanity to make his point. “De-Nial is more than a river in Africa” (15), is a striking line, more impressive in the performance than it is on paper, which gets the audience thinking. Obviously, the Nile river and denial are pronounced similarly enough to cause brief confusion in the listener, followed by an a-ha moment.

Altogether, the general theme that the poet spoke on is the way African-Americans (especially males) have been and are to this day (mis-)treated. Aquil Mizan included historic dimensions as well as very current matters; one of them being police brutality. Since the topic is paranoia, he proclaimed how it really feels to be black, what they have endured, and who they are fighting against very straightforwardly to show that the struggles are real and not “delusions of persecution” (33). He was determined to spread the truth and “as a man, a believer, as an artist” (106) sees it as

<sup>30</sup> For further information see: (Dwyer, 2002), (BBC, 2001), (Brenner, 1997)

his duty to illuminate that “much of so called paranoia is actually justifiable, rational, intelligent, healthy fear” (108).

## 2. Interim Conclusion

In a context where being original and unusual is celebrated, it seems safe to say that autonomy, in the Valerian sense, is also valued. Independence of the mainstream opinion, independence in how one carries oneself, and so on, is something that is deemed authentic in Spoken Word. Conviction, sentiment, and passion portrayed in performances are highly appreciated and celebrated as particularly real (Somers-Willett, 2009:23). Therefore, audiences often reward angry or confrontational performances (Somers-Willett, 2009:23). Due to the nature of Spoken Word these emotions are directly attributed to the performer, seemingly giving him or her depth and personality – something they stand for.

*“In its emphasis on the first person in composition – on the performance self and identity – and with the requirement that authors must perform their own work, the genre goes beyond mere confessionalism. Slam Poetry entails not only an admission of authorial self but an outright proclamation of authorial self through performance” (Somers-Willett, 2009:35)*

All of the poets considered here have in one way or another expressed such strong feelings. Duke the Rude in coping with two marginalized identities, Najah when describing homelessness and its effects on her and her loved ones, Love the Poet in portraying her values and her commitment to the art of Spoken Word, as well as Rasheed and Aquil in illuminating the troubles inherent to their racialized identities. This is not to say that all Spoken Word poems must be straightforward or provocative. Many poems give attention to sensuality or comedy (Somers-Willett, 2009:23). In all cases the authors affirm “an aspect of self” in their pieces and perform this self on stage (Somers-Willett, 2009:35). Although especially the male poets have broached the issue of a marginalized racial identity, the poets have all applied their distinct perspectives on what they felt needed to be said. The poet’s originality is guaranteed by their authorship, but was emphasized by their performances of self. An unusual haircut, as Love the Poet wore, or an understated attire, as seen on Aquil, as well as choices pertaining to the paratext and, of course, the attitude and sentiments conveyed in their poems, led the audience to view their performance – and essentially them – in a certain way.

After focusing on what made the poets distinct from each other, their commonalities shall be reviewed. The poets belonged to different age groups and different genders, but what they all share is reflected in three aspects. For one, they are all Spoken Word Poets. Secondly, they reside in Baltimore City. And finally, as African-Americans, they share group membership. In order to detect on which grounds the transition from autonomy to heteronomy takes place during a performance, the audience also has to be taken into consideration, as they verify what is shared. Although many audience members were artists, not all were. While many may have lived in Baltimore

City, surely not all did. What the vast majority of the attendees, however, did have in common was their blackness.<sup>31</sup>

With that, and due to the characteristics of Spoken Word Poetry (especially pertaining authorship), every poem performed by an African-American becomes a black narrative. As elaborated before, the physical appearance of a poet, among other things, will influence the audience's perception of the poem, due to the conflation of the author–performer's identity with the topic of the poem (Somers-Willett, 2009:83). Likewise, the theme of a poem can work as a signifier for identity (Somers-Willett, 2009:83). Accordingly, the male poets, who have overtly spoken on an African-American or black collective, emphasize their blackness as their embodiment of the theme affirms their authenticity.

With regards to content, Terrance, Aquil, and Rasheed have made references to an African-American collective. For example, Terrance states: “Meanwhile I am black” (23) and “black parents have been raising their children for the Hunger Games” (37), and Aquil clearly constructed African-Americans as his addressees by firstly referring to slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade and then asking: “Does the U.S. spell us?” (16). Rasheed also shifts from seemingly personal statements, such as: “I’m just a black man”(7), to remarks about the collective “We are dying” (23). The female poets were not so overt with sharing their African-American identity in their poems; however, certain hints can be found in these poems as well. Love the Poet, who does not make proclamations concerning her black identity, nevertheless makes it clear that her fictional audience is the black male (20,23,32). Najah does none of the above, but shares a story that resonates with the social reality of many residents of Baltimore, 63% of which are considered African-American. In 2013, nearly a quarter of the residents of Baltimore lived in poverty<sup>32</sup> (city-data.com, 2013), and a staggering 33% of children are considered poor (city-data.com, 2013). Nearly 2200 people were considered homeless in Baltimore in 2008, and this number only encompasses those who had been assigned emergency or residential shelter. The number of homeless without shelter is presumably much higher (Department of Housing and Community Development, 2007/8). Additionally, as mentioned before, her appearance, her attire (the Tubman shirt), and the author–performer–poet role she inhabits immediately makes her story a black narrative, even if her theme is not blackness. That is not to say that every black person or their statements shall be reduced to this aspect of their identity. However, considering the relevance that is put on race in the U.S., this can also not be disregarded. Interestingly, many of the statements may seem individual at first, but are, in fact, individual statements of group membership. Saying I am a black man is a performative speech act that expresses both individual identity as well as

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<sup>31</sup> The events were not aimed exclusively at African-Americans, however, for the entire duration of my research stay the number of performers and/or audience members who were not black was minimal. Notably, in the youth Slams the number of non-black contestants was much higher. I speak here of blackness, i.e., the identification initially solely based on the phenotype of dark skin. Taking into consideration the *One Drop Rule*, as for example applied in the U.S. Census, one drop of black blood assigns a person to that racial category. If they consider themselves accordingly is a different matter.

<sup>32</sup> 22.9% of the residents in Baltimore live below the poverty line, which lies at an income of \$20,090 a year for a family of three (Malter, 2015).

## INTERIM CONCLUSION

group belonging, as black in the U.S. does not merely describe a physical attribute. Especially in Rasheed's poem, the lyrical I exceeds his individuality and acts as a representation of the collective.

As a socially constructed racial category, blackness works as a means to distinguish a group through a physical characteristic, inherited through a specific biological ancestry (Shelby, 2005:207). However, among black Americans it is defined in two ways:

*"One emphasizes the fact that black Americans are descendants of certain sub-Saharan African peoples and it maintains that they share a culture that is traceable to the culture of those ancestors. The other stresses both, the experience of blacks with oppression in the New World and the rich culture they have created in the context of that oppression since being moved from Africa." (Shelby, 2005:210)*

The experience of blackness as well as the meaning and significance assigned to it are heterogeneous among African-Americans. This could be a possible explanation as to why some of the poets communicated blackness more overtly than others. Furthermore, the reactions of the audience to certain statements support the hypothesis that it is indeed the African-American identity that is shared and valued. The spectators certainly appreciated strong imagery or skilled wordplay, but the angry and confrontational declarations of injustice, oppression, and hardship of African-Americans in the U.S. were recognized most by the audience. "Audiences, on the whole, expect slam poets to deliver a more authentic brand of expression than traditional verse, one that promises a special sense of connection, conviction, or personal power" (Somers-Willett, 2009:37). The hypothesis of this thesis is that it is this special sense of connection that unites them, despite the ostensible focus on individuality in Spoken Word.

After identifying the uniting factor, in the following chapter the construction of the ritual community among African-Americans in Baltimore shall be illuminated. Therefore, the outstanding elements of this unity will be examined, as well as how they are communicated and valued.

### 3. Ritual Community

Not every group of people that comes together will create a community. According to Tambiah (1979), it is ritual action that brings about union (Tambiah, 1979:118). Something has to be shared and valued among the members of the community, and therefore, social communication (of which ritual is a special kind) and interaction form social communities (Tambiah, 1979:132) (Wulf, 2010:ix). Correspondingly, Durkheim suggests that, above all, it is the idea that they form of themselves that constitutes a community (Durkheim, 1976:422). This idea, however, is never complete, and the community has to come together periodically to evaluate and reaffirm it (Durkheim, 1976:422).

Being black is an idea, closely tied to the African-American identity and thus shall briefly be highlighted. Shelby's concept of thick and thin blackness proved helpful in grasping the meaning behind it in the U.S. Thin blackness is "a vague and socially imposed category of 'racial' difference that serves to distinguish groups on the basis of their members having certain visible, inherit physical characteristics and a particular biological ancestry" (Shelby, 2005:207). This concept of blackness constitutes a constraint on African-Americans and was described by Rasheed Copeland as "I ain't have to/ do nothing but stay black and die" (21f), its truth being reaffirmed by the audience.

*"If, say, one were to assimilate completely to so-called white culture, one's thin blackness would nevertheless remain intact, for cultural conversion provides no escape. No amount of wealth, income, social status, or education can erase one's thin blackness" (Shelby, 2005:208).*

Conversely, thick blackness can be adopted, altered, or lost (Shelby, 2005:209). It includes thin blackness, but exceeds physical appearance and ancestry. It entails the aspect of acting black, in contrast to simply being black. In this sense, one cannot shed blackness, but one can decide how much meaning and significance one wants to ascribe to this identity (Shelby, 2005:214). However, Shelby argues, it is not an attachment to their thin blackness that constitutes group membership, as much as it is their shared suffering of anti-black racism and their collective commitment to end it (Shelby, 2005:237). In other words, African-American group membership is externally attributed through race, but internally it is much more a shared history and sentiment that connects them. By sharing their blackness as part of the African-American identity, the poet and the audience members constitute a collective, a *Gemeinschaft*.<sup>33</sup> This generates a transition from autonomy to heteronomy, as members of a *Gemeinschaft* view themselves as inseparable pieces of a whole in their action and thought (Gläser, 2007:82). This conclusion is based on several observations. When analyzing the poems, a transition from the lyrical I to We was observed. Since "individuals are much more likely to be aware of the fact that they are

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<sup>33</sup> A sociological term coined by Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) that describes a group of people that is characterized through shared values, an emotional bond, and frequent contact (Gläser, 2007:82f).

‘Jewish’ or to consider themselves Black than they are to recognize that they are, say, ‘lower middle class’” (Trudgill, 2000:46), the obvious conclusion is to presume that We in this context refers to the African-American identity. Additionally, it is the only attribute they have in common at first glance, besides the shared interest in Spoken Word. Moreover, the content of the poems points in the same direction.

Therefore, the intent of Spoken Word to create a connection between the poet and the audience with conviction and sentiment, is, anthropologically speaking, the establishment of an ad hoc community in a ceremonial context with the purpose of attaching the individual to the group by eliciting certain thoughts and feelings (Durkheim, 1976:378).

*“Even when the cult aims at producing no physical effects, but limits itself to acting on the mind, its action is in quite a different way from that of a pure work of art. The representations which it seeks to awaken and maintain in our minds are not vain images which correspond to nothing in reality, and which we call up aimlessly for the mere satisfaction of seeing them appear and combine before our eyes. They are as necessary for the well working of our moral life as our food is for the maintenance of our physical life, for it is through them that the group affirms and maintains itself, and we know the point to which this is indispensable for the individual” (Durkheim, 1976:382)*

It is crucial that the community comes together periodically and that something is felt and shared during the ceremony. In the following, the means by which African-American identity is shared and valued will be discussed and the outstanding elements will be presented.

### ***Reaffirming African-American Identity***

The medium by which the African-American identity is reaffirmed is Spoken Word – Language. Language translates systems of concepts, thus expressing how society represents facts of experience (Durkheim, 1976:434). Concepts are not general ideas, but collective representations, which “add to that which we can learn by our own personal experience all that wisdom and science which the group has accumulated in the course of centuries” (Durkheim, 1976:435). Words therefore can carry so much more than simple information. A word may express something one has never personally seen or felt, “thus there is a great deal of knowledge condensed in the word which [...] is not individual” (Durkheim, 1976:434f). Particularly social communication does not intend to convey information, but is rather meant to establish relations, continuity, and social integration (Tambiah, 1979:132). Nevertheless, collective representations must be exposed to repeated verification, conducted by means of one’s own experience (Durkheim, 1976:438). This process can be examined during the ceremonial context of a Spoken Word performance. The audience deeming a performing poet as authentic represents exactly the verification described by Durkheim. Once the poets are deemed authentic, their words (or rather the sentiments and ideas they convey and the relations they establish) are accepted as true.

The poet inhabits a role comparable to a preacher in church, and the reaction of the audience is close to that of the worshippers when the truth is proclaimed. Therefore, the poet can be identified as a ritual leader, initiating the ritual action and ending it by leaving the stage, just as the preacher begins and ends the ceremony in a church. The comparison of Spoken Word Poetry performances to a church service can, in fact, be extended. Meiffren even describes performance poetry as sacred:

*“I do not hesitate to call sacred those meetings at the edge of the unknown when human beings, because they are seen through or because they want to overcome their suffering, let go of all their disguises and express their experience of the human condition straight from the heart, reaching out to those present, touching their hearts, and allowing them to discard their superficiality” (Meiffren, 1993:29).*

In fact, all of the poets have included religious elements in their pieces, even if it was simply the mentioning of God. Additionally, Najah described the stage as a home and Love the Poet even went as far as describing it as a church home (51).

Traditionally, churches have always been a place for African-Americans to come together, feel safe, and share their pain. W.E.B. Du Bois described the preacher as one of the essential hallmarks of black spirituality (Du Bois, 1994: 116). “The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist” (Du Bois, 1994: 116). Interestingly, the poet can also take on all of these roles for the duration of their performance. Next to the preacher, Du Bois explains that music and the frenzy are further special features of African-American spirituality. The frenzy, also called the shout, is coded with immediate or remembered pain, which leads to the first element of African American identity that stood out in the performances (Walker King, 2008:127).

## **Black Pain**

The pain felt, shared, or remembered by African-Americans is what Debrah King describes as Black Pain.

*“Contemporary black people, existing on the margins of society, become conflated in images of black pain with the stereotypical black body, which is assumed to be pained, terrible, and unsafe. Black pain, then, is a symbolic and intrusive abstraction of black people as living beings. As such, it is essential to the mythic logic of a pain-free American identity. Black people cannot be both Americans and pained. They are, therefore, the outsiders who can never be ‘let in’, the ones who do not belong, but who, by virtue of their pain are failed Americans – socially dead ‘bodies’ whose existence justifies the normal and stable logic of the pain-free, nonblack American” (Walker King, 2008:16-17).*

Hypothetically, the angry and/or confrontational poem could be seen as equivalent to the shout in black churches. The audiences typically react by literally shouting words or sounds of agreement. Pain mostly is an excluding experience. In order for it to be shared, it has to become “of, for, or like” something (Walker King, 2008:125). Only then can pain be shared with others. “To obtain this status, however, it must achieve recognition through strategies and signs that provide it with an oral or visual

symbolic form” (Walker King, 2008:125). Then, the expression of pain and sharing it with others can have therapeutic and cathartic effects on individuals and the community (Walker King, 2008:127). In an interview on the benefits of writing and performing Spoken Word Poetry by Nadia Alvarez, all of the poets reported an experience of release or therapy while writing and performing Spoken Word (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014:266). Furthermore, the poets described poetry as an outlet for emotional expressions that would not have been possible otherwise (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014:267). Therein, even the benefits of Spoken Word resemble those of the participation in religious services.

Notably, “ritual’s ability to assuage pain is linked to the ways in which it draws pain into the process of reconstructing memory” (Cole, 2004:87). As noted earlier, the pain can be immediate or remembered and in the poems, the poets seemed to address both dimensions. Many references to slavery, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the Civil Rights Movement have been made, just as contemporary cases of (institutionalized) racism or injustice against African-Americans were elucidated. Pain, then, can be read as a “kind of archive of historical memories” (Cole, 2004:87). As the experience and expression of pain are social and historical in nature, memory works as a mechanism to link individuals with social narratives and “commits people to a particular narrative by rooting it within their subjective senses of self” (Cole, 2004:88).

*“In cases of social violence and healing, the ability of ritual to assuage pain lies in its ability to draw pain into the process of producing - which as many scholars have argued is always a process of reconstructing - people’s memories” (Cole, 2004:88).*

Yet, “a common identity based on nothing more than the shared experience of racism cannot provide such an identity, for this would, perversely, treat victimhood as something to be proud of” (Shelby, 2005:239). To include positive dimensions in the African-American identity, the virtue of enduring and overcoming oppression is also a significant aspect of the African-American identity in assuaging pain, as it is something to be proud of.

*“However, the positive dimension of this kind of blackness is surely derived, not from the oppression itself, but from the virtue associated with the steadfast pursuit of truth and justice despite being oppressed and/or from the promise that, through faith and collective struggle, blacks will ultimately be delivered from that oppression” (Shelby, 2005:239)*

This pursuit of reimagining the idea African-Americans have of themselves is an attempt to achieve equality and justice. In that, it is also a sort of homage to the common ancestry, as it continues the fight against oppression that those before they have begun (Shelby, 2005:218). Another element that may also reaffirm one’s blackness positively is the celebration of a common cultural legacy as part of the collective memory. If one takes on the perspective that the black body is a result of “black racial pedigree”, one might resolve some of the negative images attached to it (Shelby, 2005:218). Much of this process would be observable in the collective remembering of a shared African-American past.

Writing and performing poetry is believed to make pain tangible and easier to remember (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014:264). However, as ritualized action, “what begins as an attempt to heal an individual of pain and suffering ends up, by the time the [...] ritual is actually performed, as a much wider attempt to renarrate a series of painful events” (Cole, 2004:96). The focus then shifts from the individual to the collective, therefore, the nature of collective memory shall be explained as a second dimension to reaffirming African-American identity through Spoken Word Poetry.

## Collective Memory

The notion of memory is much discussed. Some scholars believe that remembering is something inherently individualistic, while others believe that remembering is a collective act,<sup>34</sup> because a community can only reflect upon and reaffirm itself through a shared past (Eyerman, 2001:6). As a matter of fact, memories can be “considered screens on which a culture projects its anxieties about repetition, change, representation, authenticity and identity” (Roth, 1989:51).

Social interactions, namely collective acts and/or experiences and communication, lie at the basis of the ability to remember collectively. Through narrative, those who have not experienced what has happened before their time can still partake in the memory (Erll, 2005:16). The ability of a group to remember collectively will have major effects on the idea they have of themselves, which, as mentioned above, is, in return, essential for social reproduction. However, memory is selective and hierarchical (in the sense that some recollections are valued more highly than others). Consequently, Eyerman equates collective memory with myth (Eyerman, 2001:7). By definition, a myth is a narrative connection of events or an ideologizing story (Haller, 2005:247). In other words, it is the circulation of ideas that reflect the beliefs and interest of a group (Haller, 2005:247). The ceremony among African-Americans in Baltimore then is significant in representing African-American myth and in the recollection of the past, which is made present through performance. In this sense, Spoken Word Poetry is what Durkheim calls a representative or commemorative ritual (Durkheim, 1976:370). Such rites “serve only to sustain the vitality of these beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness” (Durkheim, 1976:375). Further, Durkheim emphasizes the importance of collective consciousness as the consciousness of consciousness and the highest form of the psychic life (Durkheim, 1976:444).

As a whole the African-American experience is essentially what is communicated through collective memories.

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<sup>34</sup> Most notably, Maurice Halbwachs examined memory as a collective act in his study on “*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*”, in which social frames of reference, such as families, are indispensable for every individual memory (Erll, 2005:16).

## The African-American experience

African-American group membership is determined by race. Their thin blackness lies at the heart of the African-American experience.

*“As a result of their experiences with oppression in this society, the concept of race has historically played a major role in the lives of African-Americans. Although race has dubious value as a scientific classification system, it has had real consequences for the life experiences and life opportunities of African-Americans in the United States” (Sellers & et.al., 1998:18).*

However, the significance and meaning African-Americans attribute to race in defining themselves may vary, due to heterogeneous individual experiences (Sellers & et.al., 1998:19). The degree to which significance and meaning are, in fact, attributed to race in defining themselves is called racial identity<sup>35</sup> (Sellers & et.al., 1998:19). In a country where racism was first overt and now is institutionalized, for example through residential segregation or mass incarceration, shared struggles inevitably come with this group membership. Therefore, the effects of racism, segregation, and inequality on African-Americans and their wellbeing is structural, not individual (Massey & Denton, 2006:105).

Howard McGary argues that African-Americans are estranged from becoming a self that is not defined in the hostile terms of the dominant group. In other words, when constructing a collective identity, African-Americans encounter obstacles through an ascribed identity laden with negativity (McGary, 2006:260). As Walker King skillfully clarified with her concept of Black Pain, it has been – and remains – difficult for African-Americans to define themselves and create an idea or an image of themselves removed from those already established by a racist society. The struggle inherent to the self-definition, as mentioned before, is exactly what DuBois described in his writings on double-consciousness. As a rite, Spoken Word Poetry can help to repair this torn African-American collective consciousness.

McGary introduced the term of alienation to describe the difficulty of self-definition. “Alienation primarily concentrates on the fragility and insecurity of the self caused by the way people who are victims view and define themselves” (McGary, 2006:261). In other words, the gaze is directed toward the internal rather than the external forces that prevent the group from defining itself. Spoken Word Poetry tackles both forces. It is a medium for African-Americans to speak their minds and have their voices recognized and celebrated. By constituting a ceremonial community that periodically comes together, African-Americans in Baltimore also define and redefine themselves from within. Alienation cannot be overcome individually, because the ideas of who we are are heteronomous. The external constraints do not refer to the lack of legal freedom, but rather to the lack of freedom in how African-Americans can define themselves when they have already been defined in stereotypical terms by popular culture (McGary, 2006:264). In addition, psychological factors such as self-doubt or even self-hate can place a strain on the alienated group. Rasheed Copeland captured

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<sup>35</sup> Some scholars suggest the use of ethnic identity rather than racial identity in order to describe African-American group membership (Sellers & et.al., 1998:19)

the struggle fittingly in his poem I'll fly away: "I ain't shit/ I'm just a black man" (6f). However, it is very important to realize that although African-Americans have to work with an ascribed identity that is based on stereotypes and negative imagery, their self-perception does not automatically have to be of the same nature.

*"Even though African Americans have experienced hostility, racial discrimination, and poverty, they still have been able to construct and draw upon institutions like the family, church, and community to foster and maintain a healthy sense of self in spite of obstacles that they have faced" (McGary, 2006:270)*

Their coming together, being together, and remembering together allows the group to define itself independently of external constraints. Furthermore, coming together, communicating and sharing sentiments, can also foster a sense of solidarity towards each other. According to Valerie, the transition from autonomy to heteronomy takes place as "an idealized form of everyday life, where the tendency towards autonomy of individuals or groups is countered by the heteronomy implied by alliance" (Valeri, 1990:70). This is clearly exemplified in Aquil's poem Paranoia, as he asks: "How many more must be killed, setup or beat up/ by police that's corrupt before we'll speak up?"(2off), or "She joyously gave her finger/ to bear the sign of engagement to Sean Bell/ to whom she just knew/ she'd be wedded to in a matrimony that's holy/ now she and we give the finger"(4off).

### **African-American Solidarity**

Tommie Shelby has written on the topic and presented different approaches to the concept of solidarity among African-Americans. Solidarity can be a strategy to achieve greater freedom and equality or may be viewed as a means to achieve collective autonomy and self-organization (Shelby, 2005:202). The latter entails the belief that black interests are best achieved by voluntary separation under circumstances of equality and self-determination (Shelby, 2005:201f). Shelby views this stance as classic nationalism. On the other hand, pragmatic nationalism is based on the notion that black people should unite as they face shared issues of oppression (Shelby, 2005:202). The bottom line is, however, that black solidarity is meant to aid in overcoming racism and oppression by unifying African-Americans and encouraging them to work together in achieving said goals. With regard to collective identity theory, solidarity among African-Americans could lead to identification even across class lines, thereby including African-Americans who are better off in the endeavor to end oppression (Shelby, 2005:203). In that, solidarity can function as a motivation to engage in and contribute to social change (Shelby, 2005:4).

*"Viewing one another as black brothers and sisters with a shared social identity in blackness may, like the familiar motivation force of kinship relations make blacks more inclined to help each other in a movement to eradicate racial injustice and its negative consequences" (Shelby, 2005:204)*

The link between racial identity and solidarity has also been made by early African-American theorists, such as formerly mentioned W.E.B. Du Bois. He described the concept of race as a

“vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (DuBois, 1897 in: Shelby, 2005:205)

The demand for black solidarity usually recurs when the political and/or economic situation worsens for African-Americans. In the past few years, media reporting on police brutality, especially towards young African-American males, has significantly increased. In many cases the victims were unarmed when they encountered the police and lost their lives. Consequently, questions arose as to why they had to die. As the incidents occurred repeatedly many Americans became outraged. The poets incorporated the most pivotal incident, the killing of Trayvon Martin, into their work. In Baltimore, the uproar peaked with the death of Freddie Gray.<sup>36</sup> Gray was beaten so severely that his spine broke, and he did not receive medical attention. The officers involved in this case are now on trial for murder. As Aquil highlighted in *Paranoia*, the issue with these cases was not only the violence, but also the fact that in most cases the behavior and violence of the officers had no, or few, repercussions. The initiative #blacklivesmatter spread on social media and has since become a movement to end the unequal treatment of black Americans.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, there are many elements and dimensions of the African-American identity that can be shared and reaffirmed within the ritual action of a Spoken Word performance. Whether they are the collective outrage over a case of police brutality, a collective celebration of an event or collectively remembering a shared past, the nature of these experienced and shared emotions is not paramount. Rather, the group becoming conscious of itself in shared thought is fundamental. In order to achieve this consciousness, no specific acts have to be performed, and thus Spoken Word performances do not have to proceed in a particular way for them to achieve heteronomy among the ritual community (Durkheim, 1976:386f). A member of a community will then feel a profound sense of belonging (Meiffren, 1993:40).

Thus, the importance of this action is evident; every collective feels the need to reaffirm and uphold itself through coming together regularly (Durkheim, 1976:427). Collective sentiments, ideas, memories, and experiences create their unity.

By periodically coming together, the sense of an African-American community is strengthened. Therein, what seems to dissolve after the event is actually still highly valued outside of the ritual context. The other roles, such as that of the poet or an audience member, cease to be relevant outside of the context of the performance. However, when the attendees leave the venue, they still constitute an African-American community, reproduced through Spoken Word Poetry performances. The hyper-individualized poetry performances transcend to something more, something that is still valued outside of the ritual context. Although there is diversity in being black, there are certain sentiments and ideas that are verified and shared by those

<sup>36</sup> For further information see: <http://data.baltimoresun.com/news/freddie-gray/>

<sup>37</sup> Further information may be found on social media, such as *Twitter*.

attending that essentially lead from a shift from autonomy to heteronomy. Essentially, heteronomy is desirable because no individual and no group can reproduce autonomously, although this transition is never final, and it is reversible (Valeri, 1990:71).

## 4. Conclusion

The initial hypothesis was that, in spite of the strong emphasis on individuality in Spoken Word Poetry, there is a unifying factor that makes African-Americans in Baltimore come together and is essentially valued even more highly than individuality. Among African-Americans, the shared African-American identity has been identified as the essence of this valued element. Sentiment, values, memories, and experiences are shared, evaluated, and affirmed through Spoken Word Poetry. The transcendence from autonomy to heteronomy is not guaranteed and never final. It can only take place when language is used, not only to convey information, but to establish social relations. The performing poet and the audience members then constitute an ad hoc community.

John L. Austin's concept of how to do things with words has been utilized to examine how the act of speaking can constitute a community. These speech acts are performative, as they take place in specific spatio-temporal settings and encompass extraordinary ways of speaking. The space is fleeting and can never be reconstructed in the same way twice (Walsdorf, 2013:87).

*“Auch Räumlichkeit ist flüchtig und transitorisch. Sie existiert nicht vor, jenseits oder nach der Aufführung, sondern wird – ebenso wie Körperlichkeit und Lautlichkeit – immer erst in der und durch die Aufführung hervorgebracht” (Fischer-Lichte & et.al., 2004:187)*

It is striking how Spoken Word Poetry is on the one hand hyper-individualized, and on the other hand can constitute heteronomy. The reason for this can be found in its fundamental features. The poet, as author and performer, constitutes an overly emphasized sense of self. Every performance is always a performance of one's own identity. Spoken Word Performances have much in common with theatrical performances. Just as in theatre, where, when a piece about pain is presented, no one will actually offer help, because the words function in a different frame (Novak, 2012:364). However, a distinguishing factor is that the audiences of performance poetry cannot make a clear distinction between the person on stage and the character played, as would be possible in theatre (Novak, 2012:364). In other words, the performing poet represents herself/himself rather than representing a character (Novak, 2012:364). The performance of authorship makes Spoken Word Poetry a medium of communication that, by its nature, is individualized. The author–poet–performer dimension attributed to the individual may add value to a performance, as the audience believes the pieces to be especially real or authentic due to the personal connection of the poet to his or her poem (Novak, 2012:365). This then leads to a strong interest in the poet's personality (Novak, 2012:365). Accordingly, the poet who lets the audience in on who he or she is, in depth, will be deemed a good poet. This refers to the performance of opinions, values, feelings, experiences, etc., anything that piques the listener's interest and builds a connection. This individuality, which the audience demands, can be expressed by language, but also by gesture, clothing, or posture (Novak, 2012:366). The five selected poetry performances presented in this

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thesis have illustrated which linguistic and performative choices poets make in order to convey their message and stay real. There certainly are stylistic methods that are commonly applied to Spoken Word Performances, and none of the poets have wandered off too far from these unofficial rules. In addition to differences in content, the poets have mostly utilized imagery, wordplay, specific gestures, tones, and attitudes to distinguish themselves from the others.

Then again, the significant role that the audience plays during a performance constitutes them as participants rather than recipients, and lays the foundation for community formation. Nonetheless, as pointed to above, a community can only be constituted when the members share something in common that is highly valued, which leads to the third fundamental feature of Spoken Word – the celebration of diversity. Particularly the African-American identity is often rewarded highly. However, on a broader scale, Spoken Word Poetry audiences usually consist of white, middle-class members. The authentication process of performed (marginalized, racial) poetry is often based on what is deemed different (Somers-Willett, 2009:78ff).

*“This sense of authentic racial expression has proven popular among white, middle class audiences. Such audiences may be equating performances of marginalized racial identity with what is authentic on the basis that something so distinctly different from or ‘other’ than white, middle- class experience is cool, desirable, and more real or genuine” (Somers-Willett, 2009:79)*

White, middle-class audiences therein consume the performance of racial identity. It gives them an opportunity to support marginalized voices and construct an identity for themselves. This identity construction is, however, based on difference (Somers-Willett, 2009:79). In that lies the contribution of this thesis.

There could be several reasons as to why the audiences in Baltimore predominantly consisted of African-Americans. Answers may be found in the demographics of the city, the location of the venues, or alike, but the causes are secondary. To my knowledge, so far researchers have failed to examine the changes in dynamics that occur when identity poems are no longer performed for an audience that acknowledges performances based on differences, but rather for audiences who share an important part of that identity.

Whereas performances of the black identity for white audiences have often stressed certain aspects, not uncommonly those based on stereotypes,<sup>38</sup> the performance of said identity for those who share aspects of that same identity is truly a different matter. In sharing an identity that is overtly observed in American society, the attendees instantly have something in common – something that has defined them individually as well as collectively in their everyday lives. Next to gender, race is one of the defining characteristics of group membership in the U.S. More meaning and significance are attributed to race than to, for example, social class or educational achievements. One can be a poet, but will always be seen as a black poet. One could be a teacher, but will always be seen as a black teacher. One cannot escape race as one

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, minstrel shows.

## CONCLUSION

could change professions. In addition to the racial categorization, African-Americans poets in Baltimore shared several other elements of the African-American identity in their poems. The notion of a common history of oppression was introduced. By definition, all African-Americans are descendants of enslaved Africans who have been brought to the U.S. through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Certainly, there are other people who are categorized as black and may have migrated to the U.S. from the African continent; they are, however not necessarily African-Americans. This is then closely related to the idea of a shared experience, unique to African-Americans. This pain can be either remembered or immediate, which leads to the next element of the African-American identity, namely collective memory. Remembering collectively, sharing narratives or alike, essentially constitutes community and collective consciousness. Therein, the idea a group has of itself can be assessed and affirmed. The group socially reproduced itself. And finally, the notion of African-American solidarity was examined. At its basis lies the idea that through unity, freedom and equality may be achieved. Solidarity acts as a unifying factor, creating a bond across class lines, age groups, etc. After the incidents of police brutality against African-Americans, exemplifying the unequal and unjust treatment of many African-Americans, they cry for such a bond among African-Americans has gotten louder.

By periodically coming together to share sentiments, ideas, and values, this bond is tightened and reaffirmed. The attending may not be aware that this is what they are doing, but unconsciously “people engage in ritual in order to transmit collective messages to themselves” (Leach, 1976:45). Through Spoken Word Poetry, the African-Americans in Baltimore can reconstitute a sense of community. The essence of this highly valued identity lies in a shared history, collective memory, and a shared experience. Within these elements of the African-American identity, the poets shared values of solidarity, community, and resistance. These sentiments and values are essentially what is shared and affirmed through ritual. The focus then no longer lies on individuality and originality, but rather on group membership. This transcendence can only happen when the poets share something that is believed to be authentic and the audience members feel a connection. Or, in the words of Goffman (1959), the poets have to express themselves in way that the audience is impressed. Then, the attendees of the event see themselves as a community and can verify who they are. The role the poet inhabits during the performance or the role of a judge at Slams ceases to be important after the event. However, the reproduced group membership is something that is still valued afterwards.

*“After we have acquitted ourselves of our ritual duties, we enter into the profane life with increased courage and ardour, not only because our forces have been reinvigorated by living, for a few moments, in a life that is less strained, and freer and easier” (Durkheim, 1976:382)*

## **Limitations and further research**

The data have certain limitations that may be relevant for further research. Firstly, due to the relatively short duration of the research stay, only a limited amount of data could be gathered. By extending the database, one could examine if the

## CONCLUSION

findings of this thesis apply to other Spoken Word Events as well. For example, extending the area of research to Washington D.C., Philadelphia, or even Virginia could help examine, if different elements of the African-American identity are shared in different settings, due to varying life experiences.

Another point of interest would be to examine, if performances in competition are, in fact, less likely to create community among its attendees. Based on the fact that Slam Poets perform in order to score highly in the competition, they may opt to adhere to what is expected of them, e.g., as a gay male. At Open Mic Nights, the poet is much freer in making performance choices. Additionally, a focus on youth poetry events could be a topic for further research in order to analyze on which bases, if at all, community is established among young African-Americans.

Lastly, the beneficial effect that Spoken Word Poetry has on African-Americans in Baltimore could be an interesting topic for further research. Although the benefits of writing and performing Spoken Word Poetry have been examined, the focus usually lies on the individual. However, literature suggests that the ritual community leaves with a renewed sense of belonging, and a feeling of comfort, gaining strength and security in an otherwise hostile environment (Durkheim, 1976:382).

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## 6. Appendix

### *Appendix A*

“I’ll fly away”, by Albert Brumley

Some glad morning when this life is o’er,  
I’ll fly away;  
To a home on God’s celestial shore,  
I’ll fly away

I’ll fly away, oh Glory  
I’ll fly away;  
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
I’ll fly away

When the shadows of this life have gone,  
I’ll fly away;  
Like a bird from prison bars has flown;  
I’ll fly away

I’ll fly away, oh Glory  
I’ll fly away;  
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
I’ll fly away

Just a few more weary days and then,  
I’ll fly away  
To a land where joy shall never end,  
I’ll fly away

### *Appendix B*

“Strange Fruit”, by Billie Holiday

Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck

For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

## ***Appendix C***

Interview with Aquil Mizan (excerpt)

How did you get into Spoken Word?

Aquil: I was actually, and I still do, I was and am you know, an MC first. I've been rapping for a long time and so I didn't start off rapping that way. In the late 80's, and you can ask for more details if you want, but in the late 80's a number of things happened that inspired me to evolve into an entertainer, so to speak. So, as an MC, you know from the late 80's, especially the 90's, on it was a lot of positive energy; you know vocal stuff, in my lyrics. But you know, a lot of times, though I tended to get good responses from people, sometimes, whether it was the music or just, you know, the flow, sometimes people would hear the music and/or get caught up in the flow, well you know the rhythm that comes with the rhyme, so to speak and miss some of the lyrics, some of the lyrical content. So, but then, when I, actually in the mid- to late 90's, when I saw the movie Love Zone, that's really what sparked my interest and I, you know, in Spoken Word, because I knew the things that really appealed to me about it, was that, by there not being music and by you not necessarily having a specific pace or meter to adhere to, I felt it would be easier for people to literally hear and to digest the scope of different things that I was trying to say. So, then in '99 I was finally introduced, you know, to the Poetry Scene in Baltimore. And since then I've been on the scene.