

“The safest place”: Anti-oppression in Spoken Word Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Current approaches to anti-oppressive education in Saskatchewan and in Canada are in dire need of re-evaluation. Outdated approaches to “inclusiveness” include multicultural celebrations, ethnic food fairs, and “nonracist,” “non-oppressive” strategies. Spoken word poetry has emerged in recent years as an engaging, powerful, anti-oppressive tool that has demonstrated a currency among youth. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with five spoken word artists from varying backgrounds and experiences of oppression, this thesis attempts to describe what it is like to engage with this art form as an anti-oppressive outlet, and what personal and social benefits may ensue. The author, a spoken word artist and racialized person himself, uses existing anti-oppressive theories and auto-ethnographic reflection as interpretive tools in this phenomenological study, which also includes participants’ poetry. Based on the study results, the author builds a case for the advent of spoken word poetry into Saskatchewan secondary educational programming.

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DEDICATION

For young poets. That you may cure the world.

EPIGRAPH

“Listen, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen, listen...”
(Anne Bishop, on how to become an ally, 1994, p. 97).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context

Spoken word poetry is a movement. Why this exciting literary genre is often ignored or even devalued in mainstream education is perplexing. Perplexing in light of the broad applications that exist therein for anti-oppressive education, even for what Kevin Kumashiro (2000) referred to as “education that is critical of privileging and othering” and, potentially, “education that changes students and society” (p. 25). I wanted to explore how young people’s experiences in creating and listening to spoken word poetry shape their understandings of their realities. In studying spoken word poets from varying oppressed groups, I sought to understand what place spoken word had in their lives, and what role it played in relation to their marginalization.

Spoken word poetry is also known as performance poetry and is coming to greater prominence in public awareness through the advent of poetry slams (spoken word poetry competitions) locally, nationally, and abroad. In spoken word, poets attempt to engage the audience using a combination of literary and oratory aesthetics. Performances can also include physical movement, dramatic performance, music and song. For example, hip hop is widely considered to be a branch of spoken word poetry (Eleveld, 2003). The growing popularity of spoken word is widely attributed to poet Marc Smith (2011), who is credited with bringing the art form to prominence through hosting some of the first modern poetry slam competitions in Chicago, Illinois in the 1980s. In slams, poets face off against each other in audience-adjudicated poetry competitions. In these contests, no props, costumes, or instrumental accompaniments are allowed. The energy-filled slam events often invoke memories of the raucous poetry readings of the Beat era of the 1950s.

In the spirit of Beat poetry, spoken word is often marked by unconventionality and social protest. Possibly for this reason, a large proportion of people representing marginalized identities have taken up spoken word, both as poets and as participatory spectators. In the Canadian poetry slam scene, high numbers of young poets representing various oppressed groups use the genre as a means of expressing their experiences of oppression and disadvantage, and as a means of calling for social change. The positive impacts are multi-layered. The experience of performing can often be described as therapeutic (Lerner, 1997; Camangian, 2008), empowering (Maracle, 1996; Bell, 1999),

and liberatory (Stepakoff, 2009), descriptions which coincide with my experience. One may also describe spoken word spectatorship as similarly freeing, with the added effects of being revelatory, thought-changing, and empathy-provoking (Bell, 1999; Keenan & Miehl, 2007). Many of these effects comprise the framework for my literature review, to follow.

It is worth establishing a working definition of oppression in order to truly understand what “anti-oppression” and all of its derivatives mean within the context of this study. For context, Valencia (2010) defines the term as “the cruel and unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their [subjugated] place” (p. 9). For the purposes of this thesis, oppression will be generally defined as the unjust use of power based on difference, initiated and perpetuated by social structures and systems of privilege that disadvantage the social and material well-being of individuals and groups (Bedard, 2000; Bishop, 1994; Connell, 1993; Ng, 2003; Valencia, 2010). Broad? Yes. All-encompassing? Probably not. Oppression manifests in so many forms and at so many levels that it would be difficult to encapsulate it in a single definition. However, the centring of power and difference at the heart of this definition is key. For all intents and purposes here, terms like “anti-oppression” and “anti-oppressive” are used to communicate the various efforts to challenge and resist multiple forms of oppression.

If the purpose of authentic anti-oppressive education is to resist oppression and, in fact, to change students and society, as Kumashiro (2000) endorses, then the incorporation of activist art forms into the school curricula has certain anti-oppressive potential. In his study on spoken word poetry and social justice education, David Stovall (2006) notes, “Teaching social justice through poetry is a liberatory [sic], conscious-raising, politicized process that challenges young people to develop understandings of their world and begin to engage the world as agents of change” (pp. 63-64). The conscious-raising and agency elements that Stovall references are intriguing from an anti-oppressive standpoint.

In his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2006) discussed this type of self-liberation and conscientization as essential to overcoming oppression. In spoken word, the effect is potentially at least two-fold, benefitting both poet and listener, whereby the oppressed poet herself achieves consciousness, liberation, and

empowerment. Also, a number of studies have well documented the therapeutic nature of writing poetry (Lerner, 1997; Maracle 1996; McMaster, 1998), an initiative element of spoken word. For the listener, a range of possibilities exist. As the poet challenges dominant discourses and notions of the status quo, the listener is invited, at the very least, to examine her own privilege and her own concepts of justice within the context of that status quo, ideas which may very well have hitherto gone entirely unexamined. As one of Stovall's (2006) study participants, Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai put it, "Poetry becomes the process of 'dropping hard questions into the world' and trying to answer them" (p. 69). I would suggest that the high school poetry slam can become a rare place in which these critical hard questions may thrive.

Relevance

The current use of multiculturalism in Canadian public education is problematic as it generally offers a liberal approach to multicultural pedagogy that is informed by notions of pluralism and equality that are not critical of power. As Fraser-Burgess (2009) notes, this approach has existed for many years: "Prominent educational organizations adopted cultural pluralism, in its entirety, as the thesis of their reforms in the early 1970s" (p. 8). Multicultural education in Canada is enacted mainly through what Kumashiro (2000) refers to as education "about" the other, wherein students learn about perceived cultural differences among ethnic groups, and education "for" the other, an approach in which marginalized students are often segregated in order to receive compensatory learning or support (p. 25), sometimes in light of assumed learning deficits. These strategies of multicultural education coincide with pluralism's value for equality and "cultural difference." What is missing here, of course, is a critical framework, an absence which renders these strategies ineffective. Dr. Carol Schick (2010) affirms this critique in her discussion of "approximations of anti-racist education"; that is, "what happens instead of anti-racist education" (p. 52). Speaking from my experience as an anti-oppressive educator, if teacher candidates coming into the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education are any indication, then graduates of Saskatchewan's high schools often lack an awareness of entrenched social systems, along with a critical, analytical eye toward privileging and othering (Kumashiro, 2000), systems which strongly contribute to the various forms of oppression.

Without a critical lens, secondary students, including prospective teachers, are unable to take up the important cause of social justice activism; that is taking action toward raising awareness and creating social equity. A few proposals for practical anti-oppressive pedagogy do exist (Enns & Sinacore, 2005; Wade, 2007), but these examples are few, as are the brave educators who take them up. Perhaps one of the difficulties in implementing successful anti-oppressive school programming is the abstract nature of the subject itself. After all, the realm of anti-oppressive theory is vast, often nebulous, and ever-changing. For example, Meyer (2007) has noted the unstableness of terms like “queer theory” (p. 1). Other authors, like Watson (2005) concur. It is similarly difficult for even seasoned scholars to pin down finite meanings of other known theories like those of the feminist and critical race variety, since these terms usually refer to broad fields of academic thought and not to consensus-based definitions, perhaps an indication of shifting practices, ideologies, and conditions of injustice. Feminist author and filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha (1990) also notes that most socio-political movements are “heterogeneous in [their] origins” (Parmar & Minh-ha, p. 67), which may also contribute to the semantic ambiguity of their labels. Perhaps in light of these troubles, many research studies (Duckworth, 2005; Kumashiro, 2000; North, 2007, 2008; Vibert & Shields, 2003; Weis & Fine, 2001) have called for more research on social justice programming in public schools in order to address the abstract nature of anti-racist anti-oppressive pedagogy, and to generate more knowledge on successful praxis.

The social justice classroom might look different in every school, but scholars have noted integral characteristics of anti-oppressive pedagogy. Dewhurst (2011) highlighted “three key attributes of social justice education: (a) it is rooted in people’s experiences, (b) it is a process of reflection and action together, and (c) it seeks to dismantle systems of inequality to create a more humane society” (p. 365). Notably, spoken word poetry is also rooted in personal experiences, involves reflection and action, and can be an effective means of political and social analysis, often with the aim of creating a more humane society. So social justice and spoken word poetry, then, share key philosophical underpinnings. This is not to say that the genre of spoken word is necessarily anti-oppressive; however, its remarkable flouting of convention and of established literary and social norms does indicate that it is critical of social construction

and even power. The congruence with anti-oppression is compelling, and was a source of inspiration for this study. Further, the combination of reflection and action that both social justice education and poetry offer may represent a manifestation of praxis, in which theory and action come together, and which has been so elusive to social justice educators. Teacher candidates in anti-oppressive education courses at the University of Saskatchewan often ask just what it is that they can do with students once they have a solid understanding of anti-oppressive theory.

Important to all of this as well is the growing need for increased student engagement in English Language Arts. In Willms, Friesen, and Milton's (2009) survey of over 8,000 Canadian secondary students, entitled *What Did You Do In School Today?*, more than 31% of students reported possessing skills that were above the level of challenge experienced in their ELA courses, resulting in high levels of boredom and disengagement (p. 28). Spoken word has a demonstrated currency with youth (Eleveld, 2003), who easily find relevance in its noted accessibility as an expressive skill and art form. The potential exists for spoken word to increase learner engagement in ELA classrooms.

Art and Social Justice

My curiosity for the subject of this study lies in my personal experience with the art of spoken word poetry (presently, I still write and perform regularly), but also in the observable correlation between art and social activism. Dewhurst comments on this connection in his writings about social justice art education:

What all artistic production shares is a commitment to engage in creating art that draws attention to, mobilizes action toward, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice. For purposes of this article, I rely both on the terms "activist art" and "social justice art" to describe the artistic cultural practices through which an artist analyzes structures of oppression and identifies a specific strategy to impact those structures through aesthetic means (2011, p. 366).

I believe that spoken word is apt to be taken up as such an activist art, and that this trend has already begun, as I will later show. Dewhurst goes on to cite John Somers (2001), who writes, "Art questions our actions and motives and their moral contexts. . . . It is the

function of art to disturb, in the productive sense, to provide a counter story to the dominant story, to gnaw away at the foundations of the status quo” (p. 111). It is this effect of the counter story or counter-narrative that I believe most affords spoken word its effective anti-oppressive potential. Most public spaces, and especially schools, are not spaces in which stories of oppression are commonly analyzed. As Stovall (2006) points out, “Poetry allows for issues of race, class, gender and sexuality to be freely questioned and affirmed” (p. 65). To the average Canadian audience, that means hearing about experiences and viewpoints that may challenge their existing ways of thinking. Such may be the purpose of art. Artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena (1994) notes, “The job of the artist is to force open the matrix of reality to admit unsuspected possibilities” (p. 212). Minh-ha (1990) notes that poetry is “the place from which many people of colour voice their struggle” (p. 69) and that, in the United States, poetry is “the major voice of the poor and of people of colour,” holding within itself, the potential for revolution (p. 69).

So, how can spoken word poetry create a “place,” as Minh-ha phrases it above, for people from oppressed groups to voice their struggles in our schools? In unpacking the notion of “place,” I believe that, for the purposes of this study, one must examine all of its many incarnations: literal space, in the spoken word venues; literary space, in the writings of anti-oppressive poets; headspace, in the intellectual stimulation of anti-oppressive thought; and heartspace, in the emotional awakenings made possible with poetry. These are the spaces wherein these voices and these “unsuspected possibilities” may thrive in safety. Through my interviews with poets and through my reflective examination of their poetry, I have hoped to establish this study as one such safe place.

Research Questions

Several underlying questions have informed this inquiry. The study is qualitative in nature and I employ mixed lenses. However, I am largely informed by Van Manen’s (1990) writings on phenomenological methodology as the study is primarily centered around the life-worlds of spoken word poets. I ask, what are the lived experiences of slam poets from non-dominant groups? In particular, how did they come to engage in this practice, what motivates their writing, what is their process of writing, how do they experience writing, and how do they experience their performances?

Main Inquiry Question

- How does the act of creating and performing spoken word poetry influence the experiences of poets with marginalized identities?

Sub-questions

- How does engagement with spoken word poetry relate to the effects of oppression on individuals, as both writers and spectators?
- What discourses and counter-narratives exist in the relevant poetry that may contribute to or constitute anti-oppressive activism?
- What experiences lead people with marginalized identities to take up the act of writing and performing poetry?
- What themes exist across the narratives of spoken word poets that may help to provide insight into the genre's observed anti-oppressive possibilities?
- How do spoken word artists see the genre inhabiting public education systems?

Aim

At the onset of the study, I wanted to know more about the transformative phenomenon of engagement with spoken word and about how these might be introduced or applied in a school setting. As a spoken word artist, a part of the reason why I was so interested in unpacking the anti-oppressive potential through engagement with spoken word poetry is that I have felt the positive, empowering effects of writing and then speaking poetry about my experience of marginalization in Canada, and about the history of oppression of my ancestors and of other oppressed peoples worldwide. I hoped that my own experience could help increase understanding as to why so many people of colour and from other oppressed groups are drawn to the genre. As Boudreau (2009) notes, in slam, “marginalized identities are particularly favored” (p. 3). As an active spectator of spoken word poetry, my experience confirms the trend, and I have felt the mind-changing and revelatory power of the spoken word poetry of “others.”

As a teacher, I am always searching for ways to authentically engage students in the work of anti-oppression that will be both personally and socially meaningful, while being curriculum-relevant and practicable (not just theoretical). I see spoken word poetry as a potential anti-oppressive teaching tool in the English Language Arts classroom. I

want to explore the potential impacts of writing and performing spoken word among individuals who are members of oppressed groups, i.e. those outside the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class norm. Partially, my aim is to investigate whether the formal advent of spoken word in our schools can change the experience of school for marginalized students, and potentially for all students. These are the burning curiosities that inspire this study. In short, this thesis seeks to explore spoken word poetry, through the practice and experiences of spoken word poets, as a pedagogical practice for social justice and anti-oppressive education. Hopefully, the intervention of this exciting approach to social justice education will help to inspire anti-oppressive solidarity among students and teachers from all backgrounds.

Social Action

Because of the inherent potential for change involved with spoken word poetry, I hope that people will see the way in which social action is built into this study. However, more tangible implications for social action exist. As Kirby et al. (2010) state, “If knowledge represents power, and we are committed to developing knowledge that generates social change and actions that improve life for people, it makes sense to involve those people and others who are intimately acquainted with the issues” (p. 30). Whereas spoken word can be a tool for sharing knowledge, and whereas marginalized identities are favoured, the genre may be a powerful site for this sort of social action. I hope that my research findings will affirm spoken word poetry as a force for liberating important social change. I hope that I have identified sufficient positive anti-oppressive effects resulting from personal engagement in spoken word poetry creation and observation. I have also tried to identify curriculum-based entry points for its inclusion in secondary ELA program delivery with the recommendation that it be used as an anti-oppressive teaching tool, one that, as in a feminist pedagogy, “emphasizes the importance of consciousness raising, the existence of an oppressive social structure and the need to change it, and the possibility of social transformation” (Weiler, 2001, p. 68, as cited in Meyer, 2007, p. 10).

Hopefully, large numbers of young people will one day experience the positive impacts attributable to this endeavor before leaving high school. The curricular entry points in English Language Arts that I have identified may allow teachers to maintain and

potentially boost content integrity, process integrity, and product variation and quality with this exciting genre. Spoken word has a proven currency among youth (Eleveld, 2003), and many spoken word poets consider it to be more accessible than traditional incarnations of poetry. This accessibility means that a maximum number of students may be able to make meaning out of it as a crucial aspect of an anti-oppressive and English Language Arts education. As well, I have promised to ensure that my findings have a direct impact on my own teaching practice. I also commit myself to be available to do spoken word poetry workshops in schools whenever feasible, or to aid others in doing so to help make sure that the largest number of students possible have access to this tool.

In sharing the research findings with participants, I hope that they too embrace a deeper sense of conscientization as to the effects of oppression on their lives, and the positive impacts that their poetry creates. After all, we are all on a journey. I have spent much time learning about anti-oppressive education in scholarly forums, and am thankful for the opportunity to also hear what poets have to say on the matter. They bring with them a sense of heart into the highly theoretical realm associated with this important field of study. Hopefully, some or all of the participants will be willing to make themselves available to do spoken word poetry workshops in schools in their areas; I have seen the positive impact that these workshops can have, as demonstrated at the 2012 Student Teachers' Anti-Racism conference at the University of Saskatchewan. If not, I know that the spoken word artists will continue to have an immense positive influence on the world as they continue their rallying cries for a needed end to oppression.

Overview of Thesis

In Chapter One, I provide the context and relevance of this study, introduce the main research questions, and share the main purpose of the inquiry. In the next chapter, I will review the relevant literature regarding poetry, spoken word, and social justice. In Chapter Three, I will provide an overview of the methodological framework of this study, and explain the various methods used in data collection and analysis. In Chapter Four, I will introduce the interview participants and present the interview data. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will present and interpret the participants' poetry. I will also discuss the data in relation to the literature and in relation to my own experience as a spoken word artist, and I will close by making a case for the advent of spoken word poetry in schools.

Please note that I normally use the terms “spoken word poetry” and “spoken word” (often used to refer more broadly to varying speech arts) interchangeably in this thesis to refer to spoken word poetry in particular.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Many scholars note multiple positive effects from engagement with spoken word poetry (Maracle, 1996; Bell, 1999; Richardson, 2000; Sparks & Grochowski, 2002; Fisher & Jocson, 2005; Keenan & Miehl, 2007; Camangian, 2008; Conley, 2008). I have condensed these effects into four categories, which, I believe, can in some cases be considered as chronologically successive. These categories also form the guiding framework for my data analysis and interpretation. The categories, each of which I will examine in detail below are as follows: 1) healing or therapeutic effects; as has long been observed, acts of writing and art-making can help to alleviate and even heal emotional distress. This is poignant where experiences of oppression are concerned, 2) empowering effects; spoken word poetry can facilitate the reclamation of power among members of oppressed groups, and therefore can be a potentially liberatory experience, 3) solidarity-building effects; spoken word poetry has the potential to generate empathy, a key precursor to solidarity, among artists and listeners, including those from the dominant social group, achieved partly through the employ of counter-narratives and 4) change effects; spoken word poetry has the potential to effect intrapersonal, interpersonal, and perhaps even social change.

It is important to acknowledge that I include literature from studies concerning writing and poetic writing, where relevant, as well as those concerning spoken word more specifically. In part, the relative lack of existing literature on spoken word necessitated this decision. Nonetheless, it stands to reason that written poetry is an initiative element of performance poetry or spoken word. All of the poets involved in this study include poetic writing as a part of their creative process, as do most spoken word artists, generally speaking. It is also noteworthy that in spoken word circles, poetry that is intended for sharing in print form, or “page poetry,” to use the spoken word nomenclature, is often thought of as poetry that simply has not yet been performed orally. Therefore, literature concerning poetic writing of any form does have import in the present study, as such writing precedes performance among spoken word artists.

Healing

Anyone who lives, consciously or not, with the experience of being oppressed, has encountered emotional trauma or distress. As a biracial Canadian (Black and

Caucasian), I can attest to the fact that early experiences with overt racism are extremely trying emotionally. Equally distressing is learning about the covert systems of oppression that continue to operate unchecked in modern society, a revelation that often comes much later in life. In both situations, one may feel emotional pain without entirely understanding the causes of the pain, or even the pain itself, and therefore not being able to articulate it. According to Fisher and Jocson (2005) "...research has found that many urban youth find spoken word poetry a viable outlet for articulating the obstacles presented by their social realities" (as cited in Camangian, 2008, p. 36). In this view, urban youth may come to better understand their subjugation through writing about it.

Poetry and healing have long been thought of as complementary. The term "poetry therapy" has been in usage since the 1950s, and the practice has since gained considerable legitimacy, as evidenced by the 1993 establishment of the National Association for Poetry Therapy Foundation (Lerner, 1997, pp. 82-83). Even if therapy is not the intended outcome, poets may experience its effects, especially when performance is added to the equation, as Janice Rice (1986) explains: "Although the goal for performers of literature may be artistic rather than therapeutic, my research on the psychological process of performers shows that a therapeutic experience often occurs..." (p. 249). In this case, the therapeutic potential of spoken word may lie largely in the act of performance.

The introspective act of writing poetry may quell emotional pain by improving the sufferer's understanding of the pain and of herself. Richardson (2000) described writing as a way of knowing, of finding out about oneself. Sylvia Bell (1999) posited that "The ritual of writing engages the body and has a potent effect. In this process, there is the potential for self-imposed and socially constructed restrictions to fall away and a new appreciation of others and self to emerge" (p. 2). Rice (1986) echoes this notion in stating that poetry can have an impact on "psychological awareness" (p. 249).

Penn Kemp succinctly notes the therapeutic effect of writing as a means of reclamation: "Writing is the arabesque back to recover what has been lost" (as cited in McMaster, 1998, p. 20,). Others, like Maracle (1996) concur. Stepakoff (2009) notes that the writing of expressive poetry can have enormous therapeutic effects, such as "psychological repair" for survivors of suicide, through what the author terms "auto-

poetic healing" (p. 105). Even though the recovery process can be long, Stepakoff posits, "It is possible to help survivors move from formless anguish to symbolization, from isolation to connection, from destruction to creation, and from silence to speech" (p. 112). Perhaps it is the move away from silence which affords spoken word poetry with its most potent aspect in each of the four effects noted in this proposal.

I stated that these effects generally represent a succession, and that they comprise a process. While not all poets from oppressed groups may experience these effects as a successive process, it is worth noting. At the end of the discussion of each effect, I will explain the transitional connection to the next effect. In this section, I discussed the healing effect, which, by its very definition is empowering. It restores the ailing body or soul to its original strength and in the case of emotional pain, is often considered to make the sufferer even stronger than she was originally.

Empowerment

Writing is a powerful act because the introspection involved entails better understanding of oneself and one's experience. This new knowledge can be both healing and empowering as it opens the mind to the possibility of improvement and liberation, as with conscientization. Performing poetry, and thereby breaking the silence, only adds to this sense of power. Through sharing, the poetry has the potential to influence others, perhaps to even write their own poetry and tell their own stories, resulting in a snowball effect. Where some groups of people have been and continue to be silenced by dominant groups and power structures, spoken word poetry offers a space and a voice; it enables reclamation (Kemp, 1998; Maracle, 1996).

Some see spoken word engagement among certain cultural groups as a natural reclamation and/or continuance of long-existing oral traditions, as in African, Aboriginal, and other indigenous histories, as well as in European poetic history. For instance, in a study involving indigenous female poets, Bell (1999) observes, "It would seem that many Native women are reclaiming their individual power through writing, thereby empowering the group" (p. 36). Maracle (1996) notes the power that writing affords oppressed groups in confronting systems of oppression: "Native women are going to raise the roof and decry the dirty house which patriarchy and racism have built on our backs" (p. 22). It is when people become empowered as agents of change that the true potential

of spoken word poetry surfaces. As Bell (1999) states, “Poetry is not a static collection of words but may be a moment of revelation or revolution” (p. 39). As the late spoken word artist and black civil rights activist Gil Scott-Heron (2009) once famously proclaimed, “The revolution will not be televised” (“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”). Regarding the meaning behind this often repeated mantra, Scott-Heron (2010) states, “The first change that takes place is in your mind” (“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”). He explains that the beginnings of a revolution cannot be caught on camera because they would be internal, personal, perhaps manifesting in the form of private epiphanies and realizations. I would argue that spoken word poetry has and can spark these realizations.

I believe that spoken word poetry can not only empower people who are othered, but can often move them to speak, to share their stories. Speaking is, after all, the purpose of spoken word. As discussed earlier, the stories that poets from marginalized backgrounds share are often counter-stories to the many dominant narratives that enable and justify oppression in North America. Sharing these stories is the first step toward inspiring empathy in others, and hopefully, toward building intra-group and cross-group solidarity.

Solidarity-Building

Many spoken word poems can be described as gut-wrenching or heart-breaking. It is likely this appeal to the human heart that fosters so much empathy in audience members. I believe that this empathy can often become the first step toward solidarity. As Bell (1999) notes, “The poet does not complain only at the level of sociology, the poet criticizes or complains about the discontent that lies at the heart of the human condition and how that can be redeemed” (p. 2). Where enormous, entrenched systems of oppression are often invisible and therefore difficult for many people to identify with, heartbreak and the human condition are not. In a way, the personal, affective nature of spoken word poetry can make the invisible (oppression) visible by displaying its effects on the individual. Making others see what only a few can see is the beginning of empathy, and, in this case, a form of anti-oppressive education as it seeks to dismantle or resist oppression.

Some, like Sarita Srivastava and Carol Schick, problematize the emotional elements of anti-oppressive education. Srivastava (2005) notes that some members of the dominant group will feel that their self-images as “good” and “nonracist” people are under siege “in the face of anti-racist challenges” (p. 30). She goes on to state that even if empathy is expressed, it is often done so in a way that is meant to self-redeem and to protect moral self-image rather than create change (p. 44). Others agree; Carol Schick (2011) describes emotional displays as potential hindrances to positive personal change in her keynote lecture titled ““Ambivalence and emotion in anti-oppressive classrooms: Encountering “affective economies””:

An “affective economy” is a set of emotional responses familiar to a community of speakers that acts as a type of shorthand or discursive practice that has meaning for those speakers. An affective economy of resentment that is sometimes employed to resist anti-oppressive education on the part of white-settler speakers can be used to preserve the group sense of being “good citizens”. This collective emotional response—an affective economy of resentment—works to absolve resisters from any suggestions that they are implicated in oppressive systems. The use of an affective economy allows white settlers to maintain their assumptions of innocence and morality (October 25, 2011, personal communication).

In Schick’s view, it would seem that emotion may be displayed as a way of preserving one’s moral character in order to avoid admission of one’s implicitness in oppression. I believe that the introduction of the poetic element may provide an avenue to overcoming these counter-productive scenarios in which emotion hinders change.

As observed by Bell (1999), the poet’s way of holding the human heart at the centre of her complaint can be a less threatening way of exposing injustice. People often react adversely to dogma and to implications of their own participation in persecuting others (Srivastava, 2005). Minh-ha (1990) tells us that, in poetry, “meaning is prevented from becoming dogma” but still unsettles the identities of the expressing and receiving parties (p. 69). Spoken word poetry, then, may be one way to avoid perceived dogma, as well as to avoid the self-preserving public displays of moral goodness that Schick and Srivastava caution us about. In the poetry slam context, where no public comment on

participants' poetry by hosts, audience members, or other participants is encouraged, there is even more safeguarding against reactionary emotional outbursts. Audiences are left to ponder each poem mentally, and perhaps to digest it personally, over the passage of time. It is here where empathy can germinate into something active. As Minh-ha puts it, "meaning is prevented...from ending with what is said" (p. 69). Even Srivastava (2005) agrees that "...emotional aspects of solidarity have always been vital to building progressive communities of feminists and other activists..." (p. 29). Schick and St. Denis (2003) both agree that "individual change must occur" alongside institutional change, and that having our students challenge "the assumptions that normalize and naturalize inequality" is a "difficult but necessary process" (p. 11).

After many spoken word performances, spectators can be heard saying things like, "I've never thought of it that way before." Understanding the world through perspectives different from our own, as presented in spoken word poetry, can lead to empathy and solidarity. In my belief, this type of reaction represents the type of positive individual change that Schick and St. Denis champion. Conley (2008) argues that listeners of spoken word poetry may experience what Anzaldù (1999) describes as *nepantla*. This concept is closely tied to social theories of "third space." According to Keenan and Miehl (2007), third space is often instigated by conflict or tension. Third space is a state of being that represents "an openness and exploration of perspectives which can result in the emergence of new points of view" (p. 167). *Nepantla*, then, is a state of imposed emotional discomfort wherein an individual

becomes more apt to experience an alternative way of knowing and understanding that makes it possible to perceive how her/his world connects with another's world. In this way, being absorbed within a *nepantla* state/place, we rely on our emotive, psychic, and imaginal senses to direct us toward a more inclusive, pliable, and caring consciousness (Conley, 2008, p. 9).

Certainly, this new consciousness has the potential to promote meaningful change. From Anzaldù (1999): "In *nepantla* you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to 'see through' them with a mindful, holistic awareness" (p. 544). This assertion

would seem to complement Kumashiro's (2002) statement that "learning is about disruption and opening up to further learning ... education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world" (p. 63, as cited in Meyer, 2007, p. 11). Therein lies the benefit of a communicative genre that values the voices of the oppressed (Boudreau, 2009), as the genre can open a path toward empathy.

All of this potential for empathy is made accessible in spaces where counter-narratives exist. I would suggest that poetry slams and other spaces in which spoken word occurs can create these spaces, these third spaces that are so essential to empathy, solidarity, and personal and social change. Bell (1999) suggests, "...poetry is a voice – a wake-up call – and it can cross great geographical, physical, and psychological spaces. It is easy to see the other as enemy if we cannot hear them or if we choose not to listen" (p. 31). Change, whether revolutionary or personal, is only possible when we can hear the voices of "the other."

Obviously, even healing, the first effect that I discussed, represents a form of intra-personal change. In healing, one is restored from pain to resilience. The psycho-emotional pliability created in spoken word spectatorship, especially where the *nepantla* or third space state is concerned, represents a strong potential for inter-personal change, the last and perhaps most socially important of all the positive effects of spoken word poetry engagement.

Change

In keeping with the notion of "*nepantla* consciousness," it is possible that spoken word poetry can "[provoke] audiences to reside within threshold spaces of awareness and alternative ways of thinking" (Conley, 2008, p. 8). Bourdieu (1977) refers to this type of alternative thinking as "heterodoxy," wherein the "world of opinion opens" and may include "unconventional opinions" and "nonconformity." These opinions arise from the mouths of the dominated classes, who wish to expose the "arbitrariness of the taken for granted" (p. 169, as cited in Valencia, 2010, p. 16). If exposed to such heterodoxy, the audience members themselves may just begin the "untelevised revolution" about which Scott-Heron (2009) mused. And for the poets who instigate these alternative ways of thinking through their rallying calls, the revolution may be in their hands. Bell (1999) refers to poets who write toward social change as revolutionaries, citing Nobel prize

winning Mexican writer Octavio Paz (1990): “We already know that this concept of poetry, as old as political and ideological power, has invariably produced the same results: States fall, churches break apart or petrify, ideologies vanish-but poetry remains” (pp. 62-63, as cited in Bell, p. 20).

In order for states to fall, people must first experience transformation, and spoken word has that transformative potential. “The spoken word from one human being to another is an entity that can create or change a life,” offer Kuykendall & Walker (2005, p. 230). They refer here to the Afrocentric concept of *nommo*, which represents to the inherent power of words. Continuing, they say simply, “The spoken word is a powerful form of communicating” (p. 230). Winterson (1996) agrees “that the writer is an instrument of transformation ... the writer pushes the reader to new boundaries; and, although the writing reflects what already exists, there is another dimension through which the reader is perhaps challenged, pushed to further explorations” (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 22). In her observations about rap music in contemporary black culture, bell hooks (1994) also indicated that poetry could transform audiences, stating, “[It] has become one of the spaces where black vernacular speech is used in a manner that invites dominant mainstream culture to listen, to hear – and to some extent, be transformed” (p. 171). W.B. Pearce’s (2005) concept of the modernistic communication process may have some import here. He explains:

Modernistic communication occurs when people act out of stories that define change as good, the worth of a person as being an agent of change (that is, “making a difference”), and rationality and experimentation as the means of change. These stories give rise to any number of narratives with strong family resemblances: they value replacing superstition, ignorance, impotence or tradition with knowledge and effective action (p. 5).

Pearce explains how during modernistic communication, others are conceived of as “non-natives” and thereby not “[held] accountable to the same interpretive and evaluative criteria that they would apply to [one’s] own behavior” (p. 16). Modernistic communicators are willing to put their resources (preconceptions, beliefs, etc.) at risk (p. 169), and are therefore open to change. As Pearce notes, the result of modernistic communication is “progress” wherein “the old (‘bad’) traditions and practices are

replaced, through the heroic work of experimenters, explorers, and entrepreneurs, with new ('better') traditions and practices, thus replacing ignorance with understanding and equipping us as individuals and as a society to live better" (pp. 5-6). Many social justice spoken word artists would cite this type of personal and social change as an aim for their work, and as Sparks and Grochowski (2002) note, spoken word poetry can "interrupt, appropriate, and *transform* worlds of despair, oppression, and erasure" (p. 14, emphasis added). Could these poets be the "experimenters, explorers, and entrepreneurs" that Pearce (2005) references, and that we need in order to see "progress"?

Bell (1999) agrees that "Poetry is a type of praxis ... it is action and reflection; it is transformative" to the writer and the reader or listener (p. 23). Spoken word poetry is one space in which activism meets action and creates the potential for change. Susan McMaster (1998) observes, "As a poet, I maintain that really noticing something, naming it, is the positive, first, and necessary step towards changing it. It is the essential element in education. The poem may be despairing or even brutal, but as long as it tells the truth, it allows the possibility of transformation" (p. 93). McMaster makes the important point that poets are doing much more than just talking when they protest injustice; they are lighting the way for change.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Methodology

This descriptive, qualitative study is situated in a holistic paradigm insofar as “holists seek the larger meaning or significance of fragments by identifying wholes of which they are coherent parts” (Bredo, 2009, p. 444). The study employs multiple qualitative methods and lenses, but is largely embedded in phenomenological inquiry as it is aimed at understanding the lived experience of slam poets from marginalized identity groups. I use grounded theory techniques to organize the interview data, and I am informed by various anti-oppressive theories in interpretation. In my discussion chapter, I include auto-ethnographic writing to acknowledge myself as the key research instrument, and as an experienced participant in the studied phenomenon.

This study examines the lived experiences of poets from varying oppressed groups in creating, i.e. writing and performing, and in listening to spoken word poetry. To that end, and as stated, the study is largely phenomenological in nature, although this facet is situated in a broader, holistic frame that employs varied methods. Concerning the study’s phenomenological underpinnings, I operate within a methodological framework that is inspired by Max Van Manen’s theories on researching lived experience. Van Manen (1990) states, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, ‘What is this or that kind of experience like?’” (p. 9). I want to know what it is like for people who represent marginalized groups to use spoken word poetry in the pursuit of social justice.

Van Manen (1990) posits that phenomenology involves turning to a phenomenon of interest, investigating it, reflecting on it, writing and rewriting about it, maintaining a pedagogical relation to it, and considering both parts and whole to maintain a balanced research context (pp. 30-31). The idea of considering the “parts and the whole,” as in holism, becomes important in data interpretation, discussed later. As I am closely embedded in the culture of spoken word poetry and am also a member of an oppressed group, I would be remiss in excluding my own experience as a key bearing in this exploration. Therefore, I include an auto-ethnographic approach to the data interpretation and to the writing in this study. That is, I refer occasionally to my own experience where

it may be relevant in illustrating important ideas. My incorporation of varying methods would be supported by Brewer and Hunter (1989), who note that qualitative research is “inherently multi-method in focus” (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Lincoln and Denzin (1994) also note that a multi-method approach can be considered a form of triangulation, aimed at securing a more “in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 2). Morse (1999) also advises using “methodological versatility in research methods” as a way of ensuring the methods suit the often varied aspects of a given study (as cited in Boeiji, 2010, p. 156). There are varying components in this study, even within the data, which include both interview transcripts and participants’ poetry.

I incorporate my experiences in data interpretation to acknowledge the racial, academic, poetic, and other lenses through which I see the world, and, in this case, the data. I mentioned previously that one must consider matters of both the head and the heart in connection to poetry, and I embrace both of my own as key instruments in this inquiry, that is, as influential factors in my interpretation.

In this study, I attempt to be consistently cognizant of just how much influence my experiences have: “autoethnographic accounts...*actively* recall on personal experiences as a means to understanding and therefore making claims on the knowledge of wider social relations” (Ellis, 1999, 2004, as cited in Pearce, 2010, emphasis added). In *Analysis in Qualitative Research*, Hennie Boeiji (2010) refers to the concept of the “subtle-realistic” writing style, in which researchers, when presenting findings, “[make] clear statements on social reality, while at the same time taking responsibility for them” (Seale, 1999, as cited in Boeiji, p. 190). Boeiji posits that, in subtle-realistic writing, the writer’s interpretation and the researcher’s role “is what matters” (p. 190). This view is philosophically congruent with my own aim to situate myself as the primary instrument in this study.

As Shawn Wilson (2008) notes in *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, it is important for the researcher to share his own story before embarking on the research journey. This act helps to establish relationality, which is so important in Indigenous research paradigms, and which I hope to establish here. Before going further, I will share my story. In it, I attempt to reflect on my journey as a writer as well as my

journey toward conscientization (of race and oppression), since both elements are relevant to this study, and represent lenses through which I interpret the data.

Negotiations of Colour

Grey. That is the colour that results when one mixes black and white. The word's sombre connotations don't bode well for someone of black and white ancestry, such as myself. While I refuse to degrade my life by marking it completely with this depressing character, over my twenty-nine years, I have lived through many personal and social negotiations of colour and culture. In this regard, I walk a difficult and complicated line of identity, embodying harmony and juxtaposition at once. My father is white and my mother is black; I am a biracial Canadian.

For me, it is difficult to describe my experience. Having been raised in Canada, the birthplace of my father, and not in the Bahamas, which is my birthplace and that of my mother, I became almost completely assimilated to mainstream white society: the seeming lone black boy in the white, largely homogenous town of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. In my early childhood, my assimilation meant that my skin tone, my hair, and my facial features were some of the only markers of my difference, and at the time I was not conscious of these elements, let alone their significance to politics, power, and access to opportunity. It is hard to pinpoint the moment at which I became conscious of my racial difference, as I believe that unexplained nuances of inferiority began to subtly emerge long before my realization of race. I do recall an instance on the playground in Grade One. Some male schoolmates and I were playing a game in which we pretended to be what were then the most fascinating beings to have ever existed: dinosaurs. Well, of course, every young male wants to be the all-powerful Tyrannosaurus Rex (a result of gender discourses also worth unpacking) and I was no exception. However, I was quickly informed by my classmates that because of my skin tone, I had to be the "chocolate dinosaur" and would therefore have to pick another species so that the rest of the boys, who would be playing the only available T-Rex roles, could eat me. To a young boy in Grade One, the logic was sound. It didn't feel right, but I seemed to have no choice. After all, *them's the rules*. I can now see the playground game in which I was set up to "lose" as a metaphor for so much else in the society in which we all live.

As the boys began to roughhouse me in what amounted to a little more than just fun and games, I knew that something was not right. But why couldn't I name it? Why couldn't I speak out against it? Looking back, the incident is a prime example of the perfect invisibility of racial privilege and disadvantage. I could not understand how I, whose father was white, who had essentially been "raised white," and who shared the same socio-economic status as that of my classmates, could be marked as different. By then my internalized inferiority had already established itself, and showed up in what was misnamed by so many adults as adorable "shyness."

Today, my eyes are open, thanks to my formal anti-racist education both at the University of Regina and at the University of Saskatchewan. I can now see racial discourse working even when it is not named. I can spot a racist structure from a mile away, and I can discern the ways in which the word "chocolate," once used by my schoolmates to describe the "foreign concept" of brown skin, is now used by various media to sexually commodify blacks and blackness. Looking back, I see that the colourblindness that surrounded my childhood was part of a system constructed to deny rather than value my racial identity.

My experience with anti-racist education has changed me, as has my journey as a writer and poet. Interestingly, my literary journey has in many ways both paralleled and aided my journey toward conscientization. I have enjoyed writing ever since I was a young child, and my favourite genre has always been poetry. Knowing virtually nothing about the oral traditions present in my black heritage, my first forays into writing involved mimicry of classic British and American poetry, since those were the only source texts to which I had access in school. My parents, relatives, and teachers would applaud my efforts. As a result, I did feel that I had some literary talent, but often felt almost no attachment to the writing. By the age of twelve or thirteen, I was beginning to feel a detachment from the culture to which I'd been assimilated as well. In hip-hop, which I discovered via television, I managed to find some comfort, both culturally and in my literary pursuits. Listening to young black emcees rap about their experiences of oppression was something that finally spoke to me. I traded in Green Day and Bush cassette tapes for ones by artists like Coolio and Tupac Shakur.

I also found that writing hip-hop, and especially delivering it was more emotionally and culturally satisfying than my earlier attempts at more classically styled poetry. However, it was not easy to give up the habits and stylistic writing traits that I'd accumulated over years of effort. What eventually emerged was a hybridized writing style, different from anything my family, my friends, or my teachers had ever experienced. I combined elements of both hip-hop and classical poetry, with mixed rhythms and rhyme-schemes that gave my teachers grey hairs. As a town, Moose Jaw was not known for having a tendency toward postmodernism, and spoken word poetry was not in the *Moose-Javian* consciousness at the time; I understand that it is slowly emerging now. In short, my writing didn't fit in, its hybrid nature akin to my racial identity – it was not just *in* the margin, but rather *on* the marginal line. Being an outsider in both racial communities was and is my lived paradox as well.

I went through a long period (approximately eight years) of not sharing my poetry; I became somewhat ashamed of it, although I never did stop writing. Finally, in 2010, I got an email about a poetry slam that would be taking place at Lydia's Pub in Saskatoon. I had heard about slams but thought that they only took place in cities like New York and Chicago. My interest was piqued. Shortly thereafter, I wrote a piece about the then-recent earthquake in Haiti, the birthplace of my grandfather. Just writing about my people and what they had endured was cathartic, and I used the opportunity to highlight implications of race as well: "It was days before we celebrate black history;/ Hope Haiti's earth don't quake again to make blacks history." Performing the piece at Lydia's brought a whole new element to the catharsis.

After sharing the poem with an audience, I felt like I understood more about the plight of the people who experienced the earthquake. Connecting with an audience about such an emotional plight affirmed my feelings and my personal connection to the disaster. Since then, I have written and performed numerous poems about race and oppression, each time learning more about my own experiences, deepening my understandings, and feeling a sense of liberation. Somewhere along the line, I began spelling my name "Khodi" Dill on all of my writing and in any circumstances related to my poetry, instead of the legal "Cody" Dill. I'd adopted the alternate spelling in university rather unceremoniously and without much thought, using it in most social

situations in which the legal spelling of my name was not required. In retrospect, it may have been a somewhat subconscious way for me to mark myself as ethnic and not mainstream, in rebellion against my own assimilation; the spelling did arise around the same time that I essentially “realized” that I was black, and has stuck ever since. Because most of my writing is anti-oppressive and indeed comes from a place of being othered, the alternate spelling seems appropriate, and I use it with much pride. The fact that I do employ both this spelling and the legal spelling in different circumstances might stand as a symbol for the duality of mixed race identity.

In my epistemology, knowledge can be constructed/derived through creating art, and in this case, through writing and performing spoken word poetry. I believe that mental liberation through conscientization of oppressive structures is plausible in spoken word poetry engagement as well, and that this conscientization is a key forerunner to anti-oppressive action. This ontology and this epistemology will help inform my research on spoken word poets and their experiences of oppression. It is worth noting that in his eloquent exploration of biracial ambiguity, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001), Lawrence Hill also spoke of creative writing as a means of racial identity formation and meaning-making. That author, who also penned *The Book of Negroes*, is a certain inspiration to me in all of my writing.

My attachment to my research is intimate. As a visible minority, I have experienced oppression. As a spoken word artist, I have experienced the liberation that accompanies writing and performance. Finally, as a secondary school teacher and anti-racist educator, I recognize the need for practicable anti-racist educational tools. Even when teachers understand some of the theory behind anti-racist education, they often have trouble translating it into engaging, curriculum-relevant student learning. Because of my deep desire to promote anti-oppression and affect the conscientization of oppressed youth, I hope to build a convincing argument that a niche for anti-oppression exists in English Language Arts (and other) classrooms, where, using spoken word poetry, educators can help widen the circle of anti-oppressive allies.

Ethical Considerations

As stated above, I study a mixed group of participants, consisting of queer, feminist, and racialized identities. The terminology used to describe each participant’s

specific identity was chosen by each participant. It is important that the participants represent oppressed groups because I am researching the potential liberatory effects of spoken word poetry. The reason the group is heterogeneous is that I want to examine cross-identity themes, reflecting the multiple groups found among Canadian secondary school students. This aim is in keeping with one of my intended outcomes: building solidarity among the network of anti-oppressive allies in Canada. All participants were made aware of their rights before consenting, and consented without coercion. Each participant was given the opportunity to review her or his interview transcript and sign a transcript release form and they were reminded that they could withdraw from participation up until the data analysis phase.

The question of anonymity is important in this study. Because the data include the participants' poetry in text and video format, either of which may be recognizable to others in the spoken word community, any attempts at anonymity would be greatly compromised. It seemed only fair, though, to offer the participants the choice of anonymity with the disclaimer that their poetry may be recognized, and so I did. At the time, I thought of Geunther (2009), who argued that, in some cases, researchers should question the use of anonymity, as with pseudonyms, especially where traditionally disempowered voices are concerned. After all, altering names is "an act of power," as Geunther puts it (p. 413). The risk in using pseudonyms for participants who are members of oppressed groups is that it may restrict the participants from senses of pride, power, or even change-agency that may come out of the study. After I discussed the above implications with the participants, all five consented to their real names being used, and, in one case, a stage moniker accompanies the real name. Participants also consented to share their poetry in print and video format with the knowledge that they would not be anonymous. As a participant in my own study, I concur with Geunther's stance, which is why I believe it is important to acknowledge not only my name, but my racial identity and other relevant social positioning, as I have done earlier.

The use of auto-ethnographic writing brings about important ethical considerations as well. In this study, I have chosen to recount some experiences of my own that complement the data that my participants provide. This type of action can undoubtedly influence one's interpretation of others' stories. For instance, in her (2010)

article exploring “the consequences that can arise as a result of autoethnographic research by detailing the crises involved in researching a topic that the researcher has experienced herself,” (p. 2) Caroline Pearce reflects on her own auto-ethnographic Master’s research on *motherloss*, noting that “The question of whether my personal connection was clouding or assisting my ability to perceive the other women’s stories affected me deeply” (p. 2). In light of this observation, and in order to achieve what Pearce refers to as critical distance, I try to avoid comparing my stories with those of my participants; I only mean to present them as separate but relevant experiences that may indicate trends. To the same end, I try to pay close attention to participants’ own stories as a means of determining what exactly *they* value, as opposed to imposing my own values onto the experiences they share.

Tolich’s (2010) reflection on the ethics of informed consent in auto-ethnographic studies reminds us that even though the auto-ethnographer uses her own “sociological imagination” as a key research source, that her imagination is “likely to involve others” (p. 1600). Do these others, asks the author, have rights? It would seem that if so, they are rarely stated or even acknowledged in published studies (p. 1600), perhaps due to the lack of standardized ethical guidelines in the auto-ethnographic research field (pp. 1600, 1604). Tolich suggests that the use of pseudonyms for those described in recollections may help to alleviate breaches of ethics (p. 1602). Without them, he notes that the reading of an auto-ethnography can begin to feel voyeuristic and uncomfortable (p. 1602). Tolich would argue that it is essential for auto-ethnographers to “anticipate ethical issues or recognize boundaries within their collection of ideas” (p. 1603), an act that was rarely evident in the literature that he studied.

Tolich (2010) also endorses Kristina Medford’s (2006) advice that auto-ethnographers “should not publish anything they would not show to the other persons mentioned in the text” (as cited in Tolich, p. 1605) as a sort of ethical barometer. Under certain circumstances, I would agree with Medford and Tolich. However, in an anti-oppressive study, one must also be careful to avoid silencing oppressive violence. For instance, in a given reflection, I may reference a social experience that I perceived as racist. Asking for consent from those whom I perceive to be racist would almost inevitably result in non-consent, leading only to a re-victimization through silencing.

Tolich's eighth of ten guidelines for auto-ethnographic writing states that "if harm [to a person] is unavoidable, take steps to minimize harm" (p. 1608). To that effect, I use pseudonyms in these circumstances because my aim is not to out any particular person as a racist, only to reflect on my experiences as they might complement those of my study participants. To the same end, I change or omit some of the non-integral details of my recollections, ones that may be used to identify those involved. Again, this ethical move is balanced with the importance of sharing stories of oppression.

Methods

For this study, I used purposeful sampling to identify five participants of varying backgrounds, consisting of queer, feminist, white, and racialized identities, who self-identify as Iraqi Canadian, Nehiyaw (Cree), and Indigenous. I used purposeful sampling in order to gather what Patton (2002) refers to as "information-rich cases," which "are those [cases] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230). Participants here were of varying genders, between the ages of 18 and 30 and all had written and performed anti-oppressive spoken word poetry in public forums, such as poetry slams or spoken word shows. There were two reasons for the mixed sample group. The first was to achieve maximum variation in the source of data for this study. The second reason was to examine the ways, if any, in which the experience of oppression may have been shared across marginalized groups. Secondary but worthwhile effects also occurred, such as the avoidance of hierarchies of oppression, and the hope for solidarity-building across groups.

Data Collection

Van Manen (1990) discusses the role of the interview in phenomenological research, a field that was highly influential to this study: "[The interview] may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 66). My interviews with participants centered around the phenomenon of spoken word poetry. Van Manen goes on to note that the interview may also be used to develop a "conversational relation" with the interviewee about the meaning of a phenomenon. In this way, the interview becomes an important rapport-building tool as well as an investigative one.

Although phenomenological inquiry often calls for three interviews with each participant, I decided that one focused interview with each poet would suffice for the purposes of this study. These interviews were semi-structured, and were generally aimed at determining each poet's lived experiences in creating and listening to spoken word poetry, as well as understanding what the impacts of these experiences were; i.e. the associated meanings of the experiences. Kvale (1996) shares Van Manen's view of the interview as conversational. Kvale also defines the semi-structured life world interview as one "whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 6). Of course, the life world holds primacy in phenomenological studies (p. 54).

For the interviews I conducted, participants came to a small workspace that I shared with other graduate students at the university. Most interviews occurred in the evenings. Before beginning the official dialogue, I chatted informally with each participant. I was already acquainted with my participants through having participated in spoken word events with them in the past, and so had generally already established a sense of rapport with each of them. I believe this pre-existing friendly rapport helped in keeping the interviews informal and comfortable for participants. The tone of the interviews was often conversational, as both Van Manen (1990) and Kvale (1996) would support. Indeed, authors have noted the importance of establishing rapport in qualitative interview settings (Charmaz, 2006).

Each interview was between thirty-five and one-hundred and five minutes. The questions ranged from very broad to very specific, focusing in on the participants' experiences in engaging with spoken word in both expression and reception of the art form, and in engaging with anti-oppressive themes in their work. The semi-structured interview protocol is attached to this document as Appendix A. Spontaneous questions often came about as part of the natural conversational flow, making each one unique. Participants shared rich stories about their experiences, their histories, and their frames of mind and spirit. Since phenomenology is "the attempt at a direct description of experience" as it is lived (Kvale, 1996, p. 53), my aim was to get participants to describe what their engagements with spoken word were like in the moments in which they occurred. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed, verbatim, into a text

format for analysis. The participants provided me with their poetry in text format for publication here, and consented to the sharing of Youtube videos of their poetry in performance.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Interview Data

Once the interview data were transcribed and the transcriptions were approved and released by participants, I used the Qualitative Data Analysis Software *Nvivo* to apply a coding framework, based on the data from my literature review. This coding framework included the following broad categories, noted effects of using poetry as an anti-oppressive tool: healing, empowerment, solidarity-building (empathy), and personal and social change. This interpretive strategy is like that of analytic induction, wherein “a theoretical framework is developed based on the literature,” and then fitted to the research material, where it is continually tested against new findings (Boeiji, 2010, pp. 86-87).

The codes derived from the above framework were attached to the interview data wherever obviously relevant. Where they were not apparently relevant, I used open coding, a grounded theory method defined as the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, p. 61, as cited in Boeije, 2010, p. 96) to apply “elemental” codes (Saldaña, 2009), which are codes that simply describe the data to which they refer, based on content or on underlying notions. After open coding, I had amassed almost forty separate elemental codes, including those derived in advance from my literature review and mentioned above (all codes are included in Appendix B).

Following open coding, I employed a process of axial coding, where I was able to attribute almost all outlying codes to one of the categories in the framework. In axial coding, “data are put back together” in new ways (Boeije, 2010, p. 108). In the case of the present study, I was able to see how data sets which, at first, appeared unique, were thematically linked to other sets in a broader sense. Appendix C shows how I themed outlying codes within the framework derived from my literature review. After axial coding, there were still data sets referring to participants’ experience and thoughts surrounding spoken word poetry in schools, which I maintained as separate from the framework because they did not directly refer to participants’ lived experience in

engaging with the art form. I also presented this data separately in my discussion chapter.

As alluded to earlier, the coding techniques that I applied in this study are common in grounded theory data analysis, put forth by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. In grounded theory, “the data become centre-stage in reaching a theoretical description of a phenomenon and explaining it” (Boeiji, 2010, p. 8). While I do not seek to theorize in the present study, only to describe, I applied this process of reassembling the data in order to examine relationships and categories (pp. 108-109) and used the guiding framework in order to identify emergent themes, including commonalities and differences across participants. These grounded theory methods were helpful in organizing and processing the data in that they allowed me to access themes and broad understandings of a large amount of data without compromising the importance of the participants’ responses, which remained at the centre of the analysis. I believe that combining all of the data was an important step in highlighting the shared nature of struggles against oppression in its many forms, and the ways in which spoken word might have similar positive impacts on each of the participants in spite of their varied experiences and backgrounds. Highlighting these potential areas of cross-identification could help build solidarity, one of the aims of this study. As well, in looking at the data both separately and in the bigger picture, I hope to have managed to live up to Van Manen’s (1990) endorsement of considering both the parts and the whole in phenomenological studies (pp. 30-31), as is also consistent with holism (Bredo, 2009).

It may seem odd to employ any particular scientific or quasi-scientific method to the data analysis of such a holistic qualitative study. However, in my experience with open coding, I have found it to be an intuitive, organic process in which the integrity of the individual narratives is not lost. By breaking down and reassembling, the bigger picture simply becomes clearer, in my view, especially where shared experience is concerned. This situation supports the holistic nature of the present study.

As discussed earlier, my own experiences with spoken word poetry and with racism and anti-oppressive education have helped guide my interpretation of the data. I believe that my closeness with these key elements of the study have not only helped me

to understand the participants' experiences through senses of identification, but also to better relate them to a more broad audience.

Auto-Ethnographic Writing

As Manning (2007) observes, "...to give oneself up to contemplation of the diverse influences of the researcher's self on her research is enlightening and essential for ethical research....indeed self/indulgent" (p. 2). Because I am an "insider," that is "a member of the culture in which my research project exists" (p. 6), Manning would posit that it makes good sense to interpret the data through the lens of my own experience. Van Manen (1990) also notes that "it is the extent to which *my* experiences could be *our* experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings" (p. 57, original emphasis). It is important that I acknowledge, then, that my experiences may be similar to those of my participants, just as well as they may be very different. Mitzall (2003) also stresses the importance of social consciousness: "Creating autoethnographic accounts is a way to reconcile the divide between the individual and the collective by acknowledging that individual 'embodied' remembering is always 'embedded' in a social context (p. 77, as cited in Pearce, 2010, p. 4).

This act of "remembering" is especially relevant in that my auto-ethnographic writing is partially aimed at attempting what Naomi Norquay (1993) refers to as memory work. She states,

...the political aspect of anti-racist work is both informed and shaped by one's sense of the personal. I take up 'the personal' as something that is neither static nor given and I explore how what is 'known' to be 'personal' can shift, as new meanings are acquired through the hard work of remembering (p. 241).

Norquay describes a process of critically deconstructing memories with notions of difference and power in mind, interrogating these memories as a means of "transformation" or moving forward (p. 245). It is important to mention that Norquay's suggested exercise does not necessitate auto-ethnographic note-making and that I have not undertaken such a process, nor do I intend to imply that I have. I want to distinguish that the auto-ethnographic writing to which I refer is based entirely on a remembering of

events. And, as with Norquay, “The intent is to use reconstructions of the past as a resource for better understandings of the present, and thereby creating new possibilities for the future” (p. 245).

Interpretation of Participants’ Poetry

Each participant agreed to provide me with one poem that she or he considered to be anti-oppressive or to represent the experience of oppression in some way. In the present study, the collected poetry, along with the interview transcripts comprise my research data. Informed by various critical theories, outlined in the next section, and by my own experience, I interpret the poetry through personal reflection. I considered asking the poets to help me with the task of interpretation, but decided that the poems should be interpreted in a fashion as close as possible to how they would be experienced by listeners at a spoken word show or slam – without the poets’ commentary, and without a consciously applied literary theory. In most cases, audiences would rarely have the chance to even hear a poem a second time, let alone read it multiple times or converse with the poet about her work. For example, at *Tonight It’s Poetry*, Saskatoon’s local spoken word scene, slam judges are often encouraged to base their assessments of competitors’ poetry on their “gut reactions” alone. Thus, in the spirit of slam, I set about the task of contemplating the texts deeply as I read them, guided by my own “gut reactions,” as well as by a few underlying questions, such as *How does the poem represent a critique of power? Whom or what does the poem speak from/for/about/against? How does the use of language have an impact on this critique?* I refer to anti-oppressive theories where relevant, but I mean to avoid over-theorizing so as not to lose the personal element of these interpretations.

The emphasis that I place on language in my interpretations of the poetry lends itself well to a critique of power. For instance, Minh-ha (1990) notes that, in feminist poetry especially, language itself can become a radical act “in its refusal to take itself for granted.” So “language,” she continues, “is an extremely important site of struggle” (p. 69). For this reason, I cannot overlook participants’ poetry as a key data source in this study.

Van Manen (1990) argues that the study of poetry is conducive to phenomenology because it “allows the expression of the most intense feelings in the most intense form ...

A poet can sometimes give linguistic expression to some aspect of human experience that cannot be paraphrased without losing a sense of the vivid truthfulness that the lines of the poem are somehow able to communicate” (pp. 70-71). Not only does this observation hold weight in explaining the anti-oppressive power of poetry; it also demonstrates the philosophical congruence of method and subject here. Since phenomenology lends itself well to the study of poetry, its methodological underpinnings lend themselves well to the present study. Merleau-Ponty (1973) argues that “...phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (as cited in Van Manen, 1990, p. 13).

Pertinent Theories

Considering that the present study is aimed at investigating anti-oppressive phenomena, I wish to note that, even though the study is primarily descriptive in nature, my interpretation of the data is informed by various critical theories. No one theory may apply to all the data, considering the varied identities and experiences of the participants involved. What will be necessary to a holistic interpretation of the data are critical attention to discourse and personal relation and reflection. Lincoln and Denzin (2000) state that critical theory entails a “radical restructuring [of] society toward the ends of reclaiming historic cultural legacies, social justice, [and] the redistribution of power...” (p. 1056, as cited in Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 437). In my literature review, I discuss how spoken word poetry may represent, for some, a reclaiming of cultural legacies of oratory. Broido and Manning (2002) also posit that critical race theory lends itself well to qualitative research because the use of narrative is considered essential to understanding. Similarly, queer and feminist theory will help in examining the narratives of participants with those particular identities.

Queer theory, like many other theories, is not necessarily a “clearly unified body of work” (Watson, 2005, p. 68), therefore it will be difficult to pinpoint any particular definition of this lens. However, Watson notes that “[queer theory] has been primarily interested in how such categories as ‘heterosexual’, ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ came to be seen as stable identities” and that it is important “to see ‘queer’ as another strand of theorizing ... of interrogating the historical and cultural positioning of the unified ‘self’ ...” (pp. 67-

68). The critique of power which remains essential to an anti-oppressive perspective lies in this interrogation. Kevin Kumashiro (2003) notes that “queer politics are *all about* disrupting what has become ‘normal’ (p. 367, original emphasis). In this way, we can view and apply the process of *queering* more generally, as a means of questioning “hegemonic notions of identity” (D. Miller, November 21, 2012, personal communication), even those which do not concern sexuality specifically. This broader view of queering facilitates the questioning of all oppressive structures, which are often critiqued in spoken word poetry.

Feminist theory may be equally difficult to define, but, again, what is important is its critical nature, its examination of social process and discourses, the material circumstances of men and women, male gender-class advantage, and, ultimately, power. From Smyth (1993): “Rooted in living social processes and always conscious of the political bases of knowledge-making, a feminist perspective continually questions the relationship between power and knowledge, theory and action, knowing and doing” (p. ii). Here we see consciousness and questioning as means of critiquing power. Dianne Miller (2012) notes more specifically that “an important component of feminism is recognition of the historical and on-going subjugation of women, as evidenced in external control and regulation of their bodies, appropriation of their productive and reproductive labour, and the diminishment/regulation of their cognitive and spiritual capacities” (November 21, personal communication). In this study, I do my best to maintain social consciousness, to question power, and to recognize these types of subjugation in a holistic way that guides my interpretation of data.

Limitations

I want to acknowledge that while I include the participants’ poetry as “data,” I do not wish to reduce it to only that; “data” seems such an emotionless concept. Therefore, I do not use the Qualitative Data Analysis Software *NVivo* to analyze the poems. I simply *interpret* them through deep personal reflection and occasional reference to theory. The power, quality, and importance of the poetry will speak for themselves. One limitation in seeing the text versions of the poetry is that the reader will not experience the live spoken word delivery, so, wherever possible, I have included a URL to a performance of each poem by the poet.

Also worth noting is that this qualitative study is meant first and foremost to be descriptive in nature, and is aimed primarily at describing the experiences of certain spoken word poets with marginalized identities in creating and listening to spoken word poetry. To this end, the formal application of anti-oppressive theories is not necessarily a primary focus. However, in the pursuit of social justice, I do engage in an anti-oppressive critique of social power structures and other interlocking systems of oppression, wherever relevant.

I must also state that while this study may draw conclusions about participation in spoken word poetry activism, these conclusions will be specific to the participants involved, and not generalizable. The observations, scenarios, sentiments, and conclusions may be transferrable to similar persons in similar contexts, however, and will hopefully help to reveal several “unsuspected possibilities,” as phrased by Gomez-Peña (1994). Hopefully, performers of anti-oppressive spoken word will find resonance in the participants’ stories. For others, these stories are a glimpse into the life worlds of such poets, and a means of coming to understand their experiences of oppression, consciousness, and performance.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation

In this chapter, I summarize the interviews with the study participants as they occurred, quoting heavily and using present tense to try and recreate the amazing moments of conversation that I experienced with these sage artists. I attempt, as much as possible to reserve interpretive commentary in this chapter. In the next chapter, I present and interpret the participants' poetry, and interpret the interview data. All quotations in this chapter are cited by page number from the separate interview transcriptions.

Zoey

Like all of my participants, Zoey resides in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan – usually. It would be an understatement to say that she travels often, and her travels, we will see are directly related to her activism and her poetry. Most people know her as Zoey, but her stage moniker “Pricelys” is also well known. Zoey uses the name as a symbol, essentially for representing the little guy/girl, the underdogs of life and in the system, telling their stories. Wearing clothes with “Pricelys” embroidered in big block letters helps ensure that neither Zoey, nor those around her, will ever forget this mission.

Zoey is a young and ambitious woman who self-identifies as Indigenous. I've always known Zoey to be an initiator. Her mind is full of creative ideas for fixing the various problems that our social systems present, and where there is work to be done, she is always willing to break first ground. One example of this would be her extremely determined *Rock the Vote* campaign for the 2011 Canadian federal election. Zoey convened a meeting of teachers, agencies, and representatives from the City of Saskatoon to host an all-day event aimed at encouraging democratic participation among core neighbourhood populations. Seeing the event unfold was captivating, from the breakdancers to the delegates to the mock voting booths. Shortly afterward, Zoey was involved with a national version of the campaign, seeing what began as a relatively minor project through to its massive end.

When I ask her to describe herself Zoey says, “I think at this point in my life, I'd recognize myself as a recording hip hop artist, a spoken word poet, an activist...” (p. 1). She goes on to explain her frequent role as coordinator for various social projects. “I'm really passionate about the North” (p. 1), she says. As she continues, I am reminded

of her self-proclaimed mission to represent the disenfranchised. She recounts working with Aboriginal youth in Ottawa:

...I was asking them about suicide, and it was [a young girl's] turn to speak and she was like "I don't wanna speak right now." And then, then we started talking about bullying, and this was like 45 minutes later and this girl kept her head down and I was like, "would you like to say something on bullying?" and she was like "are we still talking about suicide?" and that was like a moment that kinda switched in me, I was like, okay I need to get to know this girl, I need to get to understand the community where she's from and that's when I really became passionate (p. 1).

Suddenly, a broad social issue becomes a deeply personal one, one with a face and a name, and a story. Such is the stuff of poetry. In fact, when I ask Zoey what it is that she likes about spoken word, her first response is "I like that we can share stories in a way that will resonate with people" (p. 1). "People will get something from it," she continues, noting that spoken word amounts to much more than entertainment. "...maybe they can start thinking critically about something that they've never thought about before" (p. 1). She then discusses writing poetry as a means of remembering learning in school.

This focus on learning extends, in a different way, to Zoey's responses about being a listener of spoken word. When I ask her what she likes most about hearing others perform, she talks about being able to better understand concepts that she learned in her English Language Arts classes after seeing them incorporated into a more captivating presentation: "it's no longer like, lame ... and I understand it now" (p. 2). She further explains that it was much easier for her to connect to modern spoken word artists than poets traditionally studied in school because the modern artists "connect to the issues that are going on today" and "grab you emotionally because you kind of know it's happening right outside, right here" (p. 2).

When I ask Zoey what she experiences while listening to spoken word, the first thing she says is "I feel really empowered." Immediately, she goes on to describe a dynamic emotional experience: "I get pissed off, I get really sad, I learn so much" (p. 2). She gives an example:

Chris Tse had this poem about people who are talking shit about immigrants taking all First Nations people's jobs – entry level positions, and he told it from his point of view of the people that he cares about and his family, and it's like, I would guess my people are talking this stuff about, you know, his family, and it's nothing personal but I just seen it from a different perspective and I really appreciated that. So I'm learning a lot about different people's cultures, umm places around the world, current events that you will never hear on the news that are affecting people around the world (p. 2).

She goes on to describe losing trust in the media, which, she says, is often connected to political parties, caught up in agendas, and often presents “one side of the story” – this, in contrast to the “raw” presentation of spoken word (p. 2).

“I've always been a hip hop artist,” Zoey says, as I ask how she came to be involved with spoken word (p. 2). It is as if she was born to do rap, or “rhythmic accentuated poetry” as she calls it (p. 2). She describes her adolescence, spent in and out of jail, and notes that she's accumulated over 100 poems since the age of thirteen. “...the only thing that I had was my paper,” she says in reflection (p. 3). She describes being drawn to spoken word over rap – the latter is considered by many to be a sub-genre of spoken word – because she felt that it was easier to convey meaning through words without the distraction of a musical beat. “I can speak slower and I truly think that more people are hearing me” (p. 3).

“Travelling has influenced me a lot lately” (p. 3). When I ask her to clarify, Zoey describes the unifying power of “talking to strangers” (p. 3), which she has done often in travelling across Canada. “...we should just be open to everyone, and not be afraid to hear other people's stories, and talk to other people” (p. 3). I ask her what she considers a good reason to write a poem. She seems discombobulated and explains simply, “I've met a lot of crazy people this year” (p. 4). Included in these crazy people are several Canadian spoken word artists. Then Zoey turns introspective: “I feel that people are inspired by my story so I don't wanna keep my story to myself” (p. 4). She continues:
...being vulnerable is okay for me and showing my insecurities or mistakes that I've made isn't necessarily a bad thing. So it's really healing for me, because my life isn't always like really good and I think healing for me but

also good for the crowd too. It's reciprocal; it's not all about me and it isn't all for them, like we're unifying, even when I'm reading poetry (p. 4).

When I ask Zoey what writing is like for her, she describes a confessional process of admitting mistakes: "Like I admit a lot to myself when I'm in the process of writing" (p. 4). It's healing, she explains:

... I know healing is a long journey and I don't feel like just because I'm writing now I'm gonna be good to go, because it's always gonna be with me and I'm always gonna be vulnerable. But I feel the process of writing is helping me be honest with myself and be open and welcoming to other people in my life (p. 4).

"It's like counselling," she says and describes the act of writing as an emotionally draining process (p. 4). Zoey also indicates that writing has been educational for her, since, when she's writing, she will often research her topics. It is all a part of her aim to "empower people," as she puts it (p. 4). She goes back to describing the experience of incarceration, and recounts a vivid memory of being in jail with a girl who came in after threatening to stab someone with a needle full of HIV positive blood. "If I didn't write," she says, "I wouldn't have had anything. Absolutely nothing" (p. 5).

Zoey recounts an evolution from participating in oratory competitions as a young student, to writing poetry to rapping. She explains how her raps started out as "hardcore shit," reflecting her negative views toward men as a result of negative experiences, and then became more positive once she started getting involved with youth (p. 5). She shares some of her lyrics from around age thirteen: "I know I'm not a girl and I'm not a woman either/ I think this is the time in my life where I sit down and take a breather" (p. 5). "It's a part of me," she says. "Hip hop chose me" (pp. 5-6).

"A lot of people think that my writing is just not done," Zoey says (p. 6). But for her, writing is more about the process, which she describes as powerful. Sometimes, she tells me, she will mix two poems; an old one with a new one perhaps: "It's kinda like my big sister, or I'm like my younger me's big sister and we can kinda share those thoughts with each other, right?" (p. 6).

When I ask her about performing, Zoey first explains a very physical experience. "My stomach, like my stomach like drops or something," she says. "My heart shakes and

like, I've performed over ... five-hundred times and I still shake like crazy" (p. 6). Then, without prompting, she begins reflecting on the intellectual and the social – on how she's been thinking about why she shares poetry. According to her, she's moved from "I just wanna share this" (p. 6) to wanting to give people insight to how she was feeling in a given moment, to finding true purpose in performance

Zoey continues, "I just think writing and sharing is important, and in my culture I mean having sharing circles, and like the oral tradition – it's always been, in my culture so part of me is like well, maybe it's just natural" (p. 7).

I ask Zoey about the importance of the audience during her performances or sharing, as she often calls it.

I feel really blessed that we have an audience here in Saskatoon. I don't know what it is about this city. You know, part of Saskatoon is so 1950s, but when we have that audience at TIP, I know that we can kind of create change. I think we are creating change just by being there ... it's powerful to me and I know other people are feeling the same way but I think it's a really fuckin' amazing way to end your week, on a Sunday night completely like opening your mind, right? (p. 7).

Zoey then recalls the night before our interview. There was a poetry slam that night at Lydia's pub, the home of the Saskatoon slam scene. She recounts how all of the poets had different messages, and how even if they had a similar message, they had different perspectives; that the reason they were up there may have been that they were inspired by poems they'd heard previously; that it was a "cycle"; that there were "people who didn't perform before [who] feel safe enough to perform now" (p. 7). She implies a ripple effect, wherein the listeners of poetry are inspired to perform their own poetry, or at least to share what they have heard and learned with others in their social circles. "It's like a manifestation of an alternative education – in a way" (p. 7).

"I'm a rebel," Zoey says when I ask her why she writes about social justice (p. 7). She then begins musing about all of the untold stories of Canada, particularly the North. "...nobody teaches us," she said (p. 8). Turning personal, Zoey starts talking about her family, some of whom were ashamed of being Aboriginal. She notes that many in her

family died young, and she wants to explain why these things “aren’t coincidences” (p. 8). “I feel fortunate,” she offers, “because I get to see” (p. 8).

Zoey describes a process of learning and sharing through her art. “...I have a responsibility to listen...” she says (p. 8). For her, spoken word seems to be about “taking the responsibility of being a hip hop artist ... being a poet and taking the talent that I have to share stories in the oral tradition is something that was a part of my culture forever” (p. 8).

Zoey grew up in the military community, and explains that a lot of her writing was borne from childhood anger. She recounts living in one small community, where “pretty much in the same sentence that my principal found out that I was First Nations she asked me if I was hungry” (p. 10). Furious at being stereotyped, she explains that she still learned from the experience, just as she did after being jailed 28 times “for nothing, pretty much” (p. 10). “I felt like I was being victimized but then there was nobody to tell,” she states (p. 10). So instead, she wrote, fulfilling her self-proclaimed rebellion against a wash of low expectations from those around her. But Zoey also understands the ways in which the odds are stacked against Aboriginal people in Canada. She reflects on the inter-generational effects of residential schools among her own family. Coming to understand that history is a process of “discovery” for her, and around the time of the interview, she is writing about that particular topic (p. 12).

When I ask Zoey how spoken word has affected her life, she makes a point of saying “desire” in one word (p. 12). When I ask for clarification, she talks at length about the responsibility of artistry, of listening to other people’s stories, being honest with others and with oneself, being patient even when frustrated or put off. “I’m way more sensitive,” she offers. “I’m way more welcoming to other people’s thoughts” (p. 12).

“What does it mean to you to be a poet?” I ask. “It’s kind of cool that people would call me a poet,” she replies. “...I take it really seriously because I’ve been given the gift to share these stories in a way that will resonate with other people and I guess it’s more, it’s like Zoey, just altogether I just have a purpose” (p. 13).

“I like the idea of competition,” Zoey says of the poetry slam format. “...it makes poets work that much harder. We’re always checking each other” (p. 13). “There’s a

community and it kinda just keeps the flow of things going,” she continues. “It’s almost like concert nowadays; it’s just so alive. And spoken word is one of the biggest literary movements in the world right now” (p. 14). Reflecting on the spoken word community, Zoey states, “I’m new but I feel like I’m part of [it]. I feel like I have a place, because I know that everyone’s thinking critically about what’s going on in the world ... They’re not scared to stand up for what they believe is right; they’re not afraid to argue and everyone’s really unique and open to other people” (p. 14). Zoey describes the community as inspirational.

Zoey’s only qualm is that the usual watering hole for poets in Saskatoon is a licensed establishment, where youth do not have the opportunity to embrace the art form, and those who do are forced to experience it with the advent of alcohol. “...I think we need to create that safe space for young people to share their art before they get introduced to alcohol and the arts, before it’s normalized,” she articulates (p. 14). “[Then] they can also think more critically about what they’re learning in school, and also what they see in the media, on the news, listening when they hear the music that they hear or seeing the clothes that they see on women – you know, stuff like that” (p. 14). Zoey sees schools as the perfect place for spoken word. For her, it is all about fostering critical thought early. She states that until she learned about spoken word at Nutana Collegiate, she would often skip school to write poetry: “I remember writing like the most honest rap songs on the stairwell,” she reflects (p. 15).

“It’s creating change in my life,” Zoey says. “I think it’s an educational tool...I think it can open up minds and help more people think critically about the world and what’s going on and stuff like that” (p. 16). I ask her specifically about whether or not she thinks the art form has the potential to create change. She reflects on the rapid growth of the movement, its status as an underground element, and its attractability among youth: “Fuck yeah, it’s creating change ... I wanna be a part of the change, right? Like I can’t just talk about all of this stuff that I know and then not do anything about it, or not live and I think that’s where activism came from” (p. 16). Zoey sees this responsibility, a concept she’s come back to again and again, as integral to engagement with spoken word. “Be accountable for what you’re saying. Because people are watching. Young people see you and that’s what really makes a difference for me is the

young people around” (p. 16). She closes our interview by outlining a plan to introduce spoken word to the young people of the North. She wants them to dialogue and share their stories with youth from southern Canada “...because spoken word is healing and because poetry itself is healing and it’s something that really changed my life, I think that’s something we can introduce to other young people” (p. 17). She goes back to discussing the importance of critical thinking and then concludes. “...not all of it has to be about competition or poetry slam,” she says, “because the art form is really powerful and I don’t think we have to keep that to ourselves. That’s all I have to say” (p. 17).

Elise

So far, Elise Marcella Godfrey's foray into the spoken word scene in Saskatoon was short-lived, but extremely successful. She made the Saskatoon Slam team in 2010, and was an audience favourite at Lydia's. When I approached her for the interview, she was essentially trying other things with her writing. She told me that this is not to say that she won't go back to spoken word. Everyone who's heard her poetry hopes that she does. The evocative imagery of her poetry, its rich literary nature, and its accessible delivery all make her spoken word stand out from the crowd.

Elise tells me that she has been writing seriously for close to ten years, but much longer than that as a favourite pastime (p. 1). She's experimented with almost every kind of writing, and is still trying to find her place (p. 1), perhaps an indication of why she has moved on from slam, if only temporarily. But there is a common thread to all of her writing, she acknowledges: "I guess in my writing from the beginning, there's always been a focus on emotions and perceptions" (p. 1). Just then, I recall her emotionally charged feminist poem "In the words of my mother," and think, *that's bang on*. The text of that poem is featured in Chapter Five.

When I ask her what she likes about the spoken word genre, Elise says that it seems to allow the writing to become "somehow more immediate or more alive" (p. 1). She concedes that perhaps all poetry is meant to be read aloud, but recalls several traditional or "page" poets reading their work ineffectively: "it's strange; there's sort of this barrier between I think what the poet is really trying to say and then what they're actually saying physically, like the embodiment of the poetry sometimes gets lost, whereas in spoken word that's such an obvious part of it" (p. 1). In spoken word, it is the "performative context" that "invites people to be a little more present or to embody the work rather than just read it" (p. 1). Considering her own "performative streak," Elise enjoys that context (p. 1). It was a curiosity for performance, after all, that led to her down the path to spoken word.

"...the opportunity to just sort of witness a conversation unfolding," Elise answers, when I ask what she likes specifically about listening to spoken word. "...to kind of tap in to that sense of – you know, just what are people talking about? What's on people's minds?" (p. 1). She regards spectating as a means of keeping up on the latest

trends, staying in touch with current affairs and social justice issues. "...and then it's hard to deny just the spectacle or the human element too," she says, adding that the competition element of slam can add an exciting element of uncertainty (p. 2).

I ask her to elaborate on the human element that she referenced. Her response is worth seeing in its entirety:

...you're not just reading somebody's words on a page or even just hearing their voice as it's been recorded; they are actually physically there in the flesh and you know, often they're nervous – there's a lot at stake – you know and what they're trying to say is important to them, they care about how they say it as well and just the fact that people have gathered physically in a space to make time and attention, you know devote attention to the fact that this is happening; that there are individuals who want to get up and say something, because they – they've been thinking about it, feeling things, you know – it's just an interesting phenomenon from the perspective of you know, culture, and what's important to us (p. 2).

She discusses being emotionally involved in some pieces. Sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, alluding to both the "moving" and the "offensive or jarring" (p. 2).

Elise recalls feeling a sense of frustration with her writing before she got into spoken word. Feeling like she had "exhausted the possibilities" of poetry (which she later concedes is likely impossible), and growing tired of many of the standard preoccupations of traditionally published Canadian poetry. She says, "I guess I just felt like I needed to kind of get out of what I'd been doing, completely, and get into a form where there was a greater sense of freedom. I guess because I felt very constrained by what I was trying to do on the page" (p. 2-3). She remembers also feeling detached from her own page poetry: "...like there are shorter lines and you're working in stanzas and you know it's so easy to get completely preoccupied by details to the point where you can lose your voice and lose your momentum" (p. 3). Having finished four years of a fine arts degree in writing at the University of Victoria (she is presently completing an MFA in writing at the University of Saskatchewan), Elise was attracted to the deeply personal character of spoken word, where confessional and sentimental writing were not discouraged, but rather embraced (p. 3). She continues, "...there were different priorities

[in spoken word] and there was just a greater sense of mobility too. Like I felt like I could talk about some of the things that I wanted to talk about more openly” (p. 3). Elise also expresses enjoying the rhetorical aspect that is common in slam: “there’s a place there for argumentation too, you know, spoken word pieces are almost more like essays sometimes, than poems, where there’s always some kind of argument that’s playing out” (p. 3). But the genre is so diverse, she adds, that “sometimes they are just stories” (p. 3). In short, for Elise, spoken word was a new and exciting challenge for a long-time writer and poet.

Elise describes the act of writing spoken word as a “release.” That is, “...the opportunity to take whatever’s happening in the mind and turn it into something. You know, turn it into something at least somewhat tangible” (p. 3). For her, it is about engaging in the act of communication, sharing, “and the opportunity ... to create something that might have transformative power for someone else” (p. 3). Mystery draws Elise into writing: “there’s just always this sense of discovery or this sense of possibility when you sit down and start arranging words,” she offers (p. 3), “...like, I feel like I don’t really know what I’m doing but there’s this sense of power inherent in the act of writing somehow” (p. 3). She also explains enjoying the physical aspect of writing, often catching herself needlessly re-copying poems from one page to the other for the sheer enjoyment of forming words on paper (p. 4).

“...the tension is at its greatest point when you’ve finished a piece and you’ve not yet shared it,” Elise explains, stating that the true release in writing comes after performance. “...there’s that sense of needing to share it,” she elaborates, stating:

It’s like a coiled spring or something, it just- it reaches that crucial point where so much has been invested in it and, and until you’ve let it go, until you’ve let it out in some sort of space where there are other people who can hear it... it’s almost like it doesn’t really fully exist. I mean you’ve created something; I don’t know wha- how else to describe it; I’m trying to think if there’s some other metaphor that’s eluding me right now. Umm, yeah, it’s just sort of, it’s like having pumped something up to the point where you either have to release that air or let it burst, you know? Like there’s just,

there's nowhere else for it to go. And to kind of try to, you know, kill it or put it to the side, I mean it'll haunt you (p. 4).

When it does come, the release is “certainly emotional, psychological, even physical, for me because it's so much about getting up there” (p. 4). Elise often comes back to this physical aspect of writing and performing: “I have to be fully in my body. I have to have some sense of groundedness to be able to get up in front of the microphone ... I feel like I do experience psychological and emotional tension very physically, so, you know, the act of speaking – it's a physical act as well as a psychological act” (pp. 4-5).

I ask Elise why she wrote “In the words of my mother” (included in Chapter Five). She responds, “I think the biggest reason for me is that there is a lot of frustration or tension or anger tied up in the experiences I've had where I have felt somehow victimized or rendered voiceless in the moment” (p. 5). Elise gives the example of being out with friends and being hit on by someone “out of left field.” She describes feeling “somehow pushed up against the wall, even if you know, that's not at all what's actually happening and it's really a much more casual situation” (p. 5). She has been in that situation often, she states, adding that “by the time I wrote that piece, it had reached a crucial point” (p. 5). What she offers next is intriguing. “...since then things have, you know, maybe it's because I haven't been going out much – I don't know – could just be coincidental, but things have kind of petered out for me,” she says, “and I wonder if it's somehow, if speaking that piece just shifted things for me and I- it's as if I carry myself differently now” (p. 5). A few of Elise's reflections on speaking the piece and on what inspired it show that she lives and breathes her own feminist message:

It's not about man-hating at all, it's about trying to acknowledge that, you know, women are equals and that women have a voice and that all these emotions that have somehow been categorized as either typically male or typically female, that it's not that simple. I don't think there are any emotions that are typically male or typically female. I think men can be just as nurturing as women and I think that women can be just as aggressive as men, you know, so much of this has to do with cultural constructions about behaviour, so that piece for me was coming from a place of just really

needing to disregard the limitation that I was feeling knowing that those stereotypes exist (p. 5).

...and feeling just this weight and this burden of, you know, almost needing to take it, you know, or needing to be the victim in those situations where, you know, you don't dare be aggressive because you don't know what you're getting yourself into, whether you'll further victimize yourself by being aggressive in the moment or whether you're somehow doing all women a disservice by just, you know, smiling and walking away or whatever, or you know, responding in a favourable way. So I felt like I just needed to really put that all aside and just be angry for 3 minutes in public (p. 5).

And I started wondering I guess if a lot of the sadness that women feel and sort of the depression that seems to be almost a typically female illness, whether that might have something to do with a lot of suppressed anger – you know? And so that was something that I was wanting to explore and to see how it would feel for me to be angry like I said, for a few minutes in a public place and just what effect that would have for me and it was positive. I definitely felt a lot better after doing that piece... (p. 5).

But Elise didn't always feel good about performing the piece. Depending on the audience and situation, she often felt uncomfortable doing so. Despite the usually positive feedback she received, "...guys [especially] were overwhelmingly silent about it and the only comments I would get would be comments to the effect of 'well you know not all guys are like that, right?'" she explains, "or, you know this sort of need to defend the sex, and it's sort of like, well of course I know not all guys are like that, but I still need to say what I have to say (laughing)" (p. 6). Still, Elise describes a need to forge on with her feminist message, saying "...it's almost like it's been talked about to death, but we can't stop talking about it because it's still not over, you know it's getting better, sure," she acknowledges, "but if we just decide to be silent about these things, we could fall back any number of decades in terms of the progress that has been made..." (p. 6). Elise continues, "I do see a lot of worrying images continuing in the so-called media. You know, music videos or whatever. There's still a lot of objectification and so on so I

guess part of [writing the piece] was just the need to jump in there and be part of this conversation” (p. 6).

I ask Elise if she has experienced any benefits from engaging with spoken word poetry. She says, “I think it did contribute to a sense of empowerment for me” (p. 6). She recalls performing her piece on an outdoor stage at a street festival in Saskatoon, how interesting it was to share her poetry with the unsuspecting masses rather than the usual poetry crowd at Lydia’s Pub: “...it felt good. It was just kind of like yeah, I’m here in the world, and I have a voice and I have opinions,” she remembers. “And these opportunities exist, to, you know, if you seek them out, to actually grab a microphone and have people receive your words whether they want to or not” (p. 7). She continues, “...it was empowering and it did shift something for me, I think, in terms of just sort of understanding what the possibilities are with poetry within its many different forms” (p. 7).

Elise enjoys the “visceral and immediate” way in which spoken word can reach a large amount of people in a short period of time (p. 7), this, in contrast to the more impersonal impact of literary publishing. In spoken word, she states, “...you can actually observe [listeners’] reactions as you’re delivering the words ... there’s just that immediacy too, which is just empowering, because it allows you to understand how your own words affect other people in a very real way” (p. 7). The empowerment seems to come, at least partially from turning the tables, Elise implies, as a woman who “sometimes [feels] victimized or sometimes [feels] voiceless or pushed in a corner, and then *you’re* the one with the microphone and there’s somebody else who’s wandering past and, you’re catching *them* off guard” (p. 8).

Elise hopes that her poetry can help create change, but acknowledges that “...changing people is sort of a tricky business” (p. 8). For her, it seems to be about educating, about “letting everyone know that this isn’t over yet” (p. 8). Lamenting the imbalance of power that still exists between men and women, she explains, “for me, with spoken word and specifically with the feminist piece that I did, it was just the opportunity to invite people in to consider these ideas and to consider that, you know, what are their own attitudes, really?” (p. 9). She adds, “...if it does make even one person think twice about how they approach someone else or you know what their intentions are in

approaching someone else, then yeah I'm happy I did it, happy I bothered to say what I said" (p. 9).

Elise explains that she is often uncomfortable in group settings, and therefore described her experience with the Saskatoon spoken word community as initially "awkward," chalking that feeling up to her somewhat introverted personality type (p. 9). She does fondly remember "the opportunity to have conversations with people like yourself or you know people who were a little less afraid or a little more open and who care about ideas as well as forms of expression. You know those are my kind of people, generally" (p. 10). She says that the community is a very accepting one: "I mean, there's definitely a lot of diversity in it from what I saw, anyway, in Ottawa, in terms of the number of different sub-communities that can participate in it, and safely, and to great effect. That was wonderful to see" (p. 10). In Elise's view, the spoken word community is accepting both of diverse communities and of varying levels of poetry prowess, where crowds will applaud even the "cheesiest, most sentimental 16 year-old-love poem" (p. 10). It seems to speak to the welcoming atmosphere of the slam scene, where no one is "gonna get booted off stage," something Elise considers a "healthy antidote" to the stringent and often cutthroat world of the academic poetry experience, with which she is very familiar (p. 10).

While in high school, Elise was aware of the spoken word group *Tongues of Fire*, based out of Victoria, British Columbia. She remembers hanging out at the café where their shows took place, but only rarely as she lived in a more rural area of the province. At school, she was left hungry for speech arts, having tried to start a debate club that never got off the ground (p. 10). She did engage in some speech competitions, even winning in Grade Nine (p. 10), but these were the only school experiences "obliquely related to slam," as she puts it (p. 11). In fact, she did not begin working in the genre until she moved to the prairies as an adult – odd, since she "grew up on Vancouver Island; there were a lot of poets around there" (p. 11). She was virtually surrounded by poetry as a child, and remembers seeing Lorna Crozier at the local gym (p. 11).

School would be a good place for spoken word to exist, in Elise's view. "There's more happening now that I think is creating a safer environment for people to explore their own identities at a younger age and to express those identities publicly," she

observes, when I ask her about schools, “in a way that they feel safe doing [so], so I think that spoken word will become more and more of a reasonable possibility into the future” (p. 11). “I think that in a high school context, it would be overwhelmingly positive in terms of its possibilities,” she says, reflecting on a time in her life where she may have benefitted from doing spoken word:

...I think at that sort of intermediate age where you’re not really an adolescent anymore; you’re sort of a young adult. In my personal experience anyway, it was – I dunno – it was easy to get lost and I wonder if there had been more opportunities earlier on to just express whether or not it, you know, I may have had a stronger sense of priorities and identity, etc. at a younger age but that’s pure speculation (p. 12).

I ask Elise to expand on the connection between expression and identity. She responds, I mean in indigenous cultures or much more ancient cultures that were arranged very differently than our sort of mix and match culture that we have now – you know that would have been part of who you were, where you fit into the fabric of society. You know were you somebody who had vocal ability, who just was comfortable speaking and spoke well, you know, commanded the attention of others? I mean leaders had to have those abilities naturally, you know leaders or spiritual people – and so much of ceremony, whether it was religious ceremony or other kinds of social ceremonies – involved singing or chanting or, you know some form of vocalization ... there is something very ancient in the human psyche that does connect sort of identity and self-expression (p. 12).

On a personal note, Elise eloquently remarks,

I do think my experience of my sex and my sexuality in contemporary society as I experience it inevitably informs everything that I think and feel and not necessarily in a way where it all needs to be connected overtly back to the fact that I am a woman. I think at some point it becomes paradoxically irrelevant that I’m a woman as well. You know, I think and feel what I think and feel the same as anyone else and, I dunno – I wonder if that’s maybe the point of any piece whether you’re addressing sexuality, race, religion, you

know – it’s almost like we want to get to a point in society where these things aren’t focal points in determining whether or not somebody is worthy or able or anything like that but at the same time, we don’t want to completely erase, we don’t want to become blind to what makes somebody different or what distinguishes someone from someone else (p. 12).

At the end of our interview, Elise shares some more of her own thoughts on spoken word in a youth context. She reflects, “...I think if [slam] were taken out of that [largely competitive] context to some extent and turned into something that was more overtly educational or more overtly about just, self-exploration and self-expression, it could become very, very therapeutic...” (p. 13). She adds, “I think it could lay the foundation for a much more stable and meaningful experience of young adulthood as well” (p. 13), commenting that the digitalization of communication in our current era is frightening: “...so much is happening in a digital form and kids are texting each other non-stop, and you know chatting and doing whatever else online and there’s nothing wrong with any of that. But it terrifies me a little bit,” she goes on, “that we’re losing some of that, you know, that really embodied presence and vocalization in the immediate context and spoken word could be a way to, you know, preserve that” (p. 13). Summarizing her thoughts, Elise sees great potential, beyond the certain anti-oppressive potential, in

...opening it up into this arena where [young people] have to get up physically and vocalize and verbalize in front of each other, collectively, in a room. I mean, that’s part of what being human is about; we’ve been doing this for thousands of years, communally, and I think that that’s something that was always present in, you know, in indigenous cultures and this highly technologized, modernized, industrialized world is, you know, it’s kind of terrifying. And the more we can do to preserve some of what we have been collectively and communally for thousands of years, the better, you know, we’ll safeguard our spiritual nature (p. 14).

Our interview concluded shortly hereafter.

Ahmad

Ahmad, a student of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan, is the Canadian-born son of Iraqi-born parents. When he and I first met, neither one of us was too highly engaged with performing spoken word. Speaking for myself, I do not recall even being aware of the art form at the time. I was a university student, doing my student teaching internship in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. My cooperating teacher had started an all-schools debate club in the town of roughly thirty-five thousand. Ahmad was one of the few high school students who participated in the club meetings, which usually amounted to casual but philosophical discussions about any number of topics at the local coffee shop. When I first saw Ahmad on stage at Lydia's Pub in Saskatoon, I was amazed to find out he was the same young student I'd come to know in the debate club. He had become an extremely determined and passionate poet who could easily challenge any top level competitors.

"Do you remember me?" he asked me one night as I congratulated him on a riveting performance. It took me a minute to clue in. Seeing someone on stage is always interesting because they often appear somehow different than in everyday life – more animated, more intense perhaps. The real question is in determining which persona is the most authentic: the one on stage or the one you see at the coffee shop. For my money, Ahmad's onstage presence is more than authentic. Getting to know him better as we became teammates at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in 2011 and through our interview revealed just how authentic Ahmad's poetry is to his "real life."

Ahmad describes a love of music when I ask him to tell me about himself. Like many other spoken word poets, he is into hip hop, as a performer and a listener. "...the thing about spoken word is that it's just the words," he says, implying that in poetry, the words become solely important, without the accompaniment and sometimes distraction of music (p. 1). "*Def Poetry* was really what got me starting into spoken word," he remembers, referring to the HBO performance poetry series. As a listener, he loved seeing the power that performance could add to poetry, the many different styles featured, and the palpable connection with the audience (p. 1). He explains, "...it's really like an uplifting feeling, you know?" he says, referring to listening to spoken word. "Where, it's almost like if you had an older brother or an older figure that you looked up

to and you know, the things they said was something that you just kind of trusted” (p. 2). He also likes that the artists are “speaking the truth,” with “no guidelines ... they’re kinda just saying whatever is on their mind, whatever topic is taboo or whatever” (p. 2).

Ahmad notes that poetry focusing on the ills of oppression often fills him with hope:

I mean, if there’s one thing that we really need more, it’s humanity and compassion for each other, and [spoken word] is a perfect medium because it’s like, I don’t even know you, I don’t know your story but the fact that your performance was so powerful, I can kind of feel your struggle. But it’s really inspiring almost – there’s hope (p. 2).

He started performing when the opportunity arose in Saskatoon, after high school, cherishing the opportunity to do the same thing that those he looked up to on the Def Poetry series were doing. He experienced success early, indicated by reactions from audience members following his performances: “...you know when people come up to you after and are like ‘wow that was really powerful – like that kind of got to me’ – you know, I’m on the right track. I’m doing what I think is right” (p. 2).

Ahmad then begins reflecting on his upbringing and its influence on his work. “I’m Arab,” he states. “both my parents are from Iraq ... having that perspective to begin with really kind of changes things” (p. 2). Born during the first gulf war, Ahmad remembers his parents being “glued to the news” (p. 2), obviously deeply affected personally by the war. For Grades Five and Six, Ahmad lived in Dubai with his mother and sister; he reflects that that is when he first got to experience his Arabic roots in a rich way. All of this experience gave him a unique perspective, especially upon moving back to Canada. He recalls thinking about societal norms from an early age, about “...stuff that you just consider to be right because you grew up with it being right, and someone else on the other end of the spectrum grew up with thinking *this* is right. So then who’s wrong?” he asks rhetorically (p. 3). Quitting drinking and partying around Grade Ten, he believes, gave him enough pause and perspective to properly reflect on the world around him.

Ahmad uses his poetry as a means of sharing his unique cultural observations. He gives an example:

But I feel like the fact that from that age, I was able to see that perspective and come to this perspective and see how people over there, like treated like, in Palestine and Israel – the first intifada, see firsthand. Like there’s a large portion of Palestinians there, and to see their reaction to it and how it was all seen there firsthand. And then coming back to Canada, [which is] very pro-Israel, and seeing, you know, their reaction. You know, it kind of helps you just see, like okay, you gotta kinda just look past the BS, look past the sides and consider both and when I’m doing poetry that is kind of why I feel like I should be doing it, because I just have seen those ... both sides (p. 3).

He finishes by saying, “Everyone’s talking about each other but we all need to just chill out and see each other as the same ... we all want peace, you know? We all want our children to be happy and stuff and have no threats on their lives or anything ... so that is a big thing when I’m doing poetry” (p. 4).

Ahmad also knows that in order to connect with people, he must somehow convey these socio-political messages in a personal way. He talks about opening himself up to strangers, showing them his “deepest inside thoughts” (p. 4). That is when he experiences the most intense reactions from listeners, some of whom describe feeling “shivers” (p. 4). Ahmad feels good about his performances “as long as I made at least one person switch their perspective on the situation,” he says, referring to 9/11 as an example. He says that if he can get through to “maybe two people, three people, like that’s enough – because that’s a lot and who knows what the chain reaction can do, right?” (p. 4). When I ask Ahmad about his writing process, he describes actively searching for topics that are misunderstood, especially as they pertain to him and his country (p. 4). He reminds me that in our home province, “you still see confederate flags” (associated by some with racist ideologies) on people’s cars (p. 4). I think I saw one the day of our interview, in fact. His implication is that there is much work to be done: “...even like the people who actually influence decisions in politics; those are the same types of people, to me, that don’t care, you know?” (p. 4). He explains that he has, on occasion written love poems and focused on topics that were less political, this to experience “release in every form,” but that the topic of oppression makes up most of his work (pp. 4-5).

When I ask Ahmad what he especially likes about performing his work, he tells me about starting out his university career as an actor. He got into drama in high school, and remembers working very hard at it, until he had a “mental switch” (p. 5), stating, “...if I’m putting my heart and soul into performing whatever role for whatever script writer who wrote it or whatever director, why don’t I just maybe try and put that much passion and that much practice into my own writing, and see what comes out of it?” (p. 5). He says that the exciting feeling of the “acting bug” quadrupled once he made the switch to spoken word: “I’m actually saying what I wanna say and things that I feel are important, you know, and dedicating that same energy into my roles, and it’s so much more fulfilling to get it all off your chest” (p. 5). As much as the poetry is an outlet for Ahmad, it is also an intentional means of raising awareness, he adds (p. 5). He really hopes to change people’s perspective, and acknowledges the real potential of that happening (p. 5). “...words are powerful,” he says. “[Almost] everyone talks,” he muses, referring to the broad appeal of spoken word poetry (p. 6).

When I ask Ahmad why he tends to focus on issues of social justice, he tells me about many of the ways in which his life is different from that of many Canadians. “I don’t have cousins [in North America],” he tells me, referring to a sense of solitude that is amplified around Christmastime (p. 6). It’s hard for Ahmad to hear about his family members abroad passing away, and living in conflict. He recounts the story of a bullet missing an infant cousin’s cradle by only a foot (p. 6). “I really really hurt for them,” he intones sincerely (p. 6). He feels a similar pain when he watches the news and hears the death tolls of numerous conflict situations in Iraq, acknowledging that news like this hurts him more than non-Iraqi Canadians. “Why can’t, just, people dying hurt people everywhere?” he asks, frustrated at the widespread apathy (p. 7). He sees his poetry as an “outlet” for that hurt, one that he hopes can help counteract the apparent indifference of so many (p. 7). Ahmad’s poetry helps him see that some people *are* listening, and do care, and that is what keeps him going (p. 7).

Ahmad notes that he writes a lot about 9/11. Referring back to his unique perspective, he remembers that he was living overseas when the attacks happened, and did not realize the impact that they would have on North American life until he returned here. “...for Halloween you should be a terrorist,” he remembers people telling him in

Canada. His life had flipped: "...they called me Kennedy [in Dubai] because I was Canadian, you know?" (p. 7). It is interesting that, to a certain extent, he retained an outsider's perspective in both countries. As personal as Ahmad's personal story is, he sees it as a part of something much bigger: "...everyone's got a story to tell," he says, and recounts hearing a stirring poem by artist Array-of-Words about the plight of children in Southeast Asia (p. 7). Ahmad wants to be inclusive of others who are struggling, too, a part of his self-stated intention to "help the underdog, whoever the underdog is ... you know," he continues, "maybe it happens to be me now, but it could be you tomorrow and whoever the next day ... so until we can just, you know, help everyone, *then* I'll be done" (p. 8). Despite the fact that Ahmad's poetry often plays out as angry on stage, a part of his notoriously riveting style, he shows a distinct sense of understanding for the individuals forming a part of the oppressor group, saying,

I can't blame someone – I can't blame my friends from Moose Jaw, you know that group that are white that don't really understand – you know, what race is, you know what I mean? They're just kind of – it's just white, like I can't blame them, because I grew up with them. I saw what was surrounding them. They didn't have the chance to know, you know? (p. 9).

Switching our focus to the competitive aspect of slam, Ahmad acknowledges his own competitive spirit. "Like I love sports; I love football, you know?" he says, and muses about the strategizing that goes with slam (p. 9). "The slam kind of raises the stakes," he concludes, adding that "one of the biggest things in slams is it's not about the points, it's about the poetry ... even though this is a competition, I'm still trying to come out and just say what I feel" (p. 9). Still, he believes that the competition can help people improve: "You know you gotta be sharp," he says (p. 9).

Interestingly, all of this fierce competition is tempered by what Ahmad sees as a very supportive community of poets. Ahmad tells me about testing his poems out on his mom before he performs them at Lydia's. "...especially when I'm talking about things like you know, terrorism, 9 11, she freaks out," he says, "she's like 'no, please please, don't do it, please don't do it.' Because she's legitimately scared, right? (p. 10)"

"Scared of what?" I ask (p. 10).

"...of them taking me away," Ahmad answers emphatically. He continues:

...of me being labeled as a suspected terrorist and you know, me being deported, getting sent to you know wherever; that's – they're legitimately scared of that and personally that just adds to my you know, 'why'. That's bad that my parents are scared; I should be able to do this without them being scared. That's why they came to Canada, you know, that's why they're here (p. 10).

Ahmad sees the unfortunate irony as fuel for his fire, and is vindicated by the reactions he gets from the listeners: “when I *do* do the poem and have the support that I have from all the poets and the community and all the audience, basically it's like there is hope” (p. 10). Once again, Ahmad seems to describe living in and seeing two different worlds.

He knows that his topics can often be “heavy,” as he puts it, like when he talks “about the kid blowing himself up” (p. 11), but they are “so important,” he says, because they will “never ever get discussed unless someone brings them up” (p. 11). He seems comfortable, even if somewhat burdened, with that responsibility.

“There were no poetry slams,” Ahmad recounts, describing his experience in high school. He had not really discovered poetry as a medium he, says; “poetry didn't even exist” (p. 11). He experimented with performing covers of hip hop songs at school talent shows, and when he did discover *Def Poetry*, he considered it his “hidden gem,” remembering thinking that “no one here is ever gonna understand it...” (p. 11). Ahmad believes that the presentation of poetry in schools needs to be “revamped” (p. 11). Like other participants in this study, he discovered poetry away from the school, and was disengaged with what he was being asked to learn. “I don't know if I had one person in the class who actually appreciated Shakespeare at the time,” he remembers, continuing, “...Shakespeare's genius, like he's awesome, but at that time, the whole poetry that's being pushed on you, you just can't relate to” (p. 11).

Looking back, Ahmad muses about how much more he could have improved his craft by now, had he been exposed to it at an earlier age, and he explains why the genre might be so attractive to youth: “the topics that are brought up are usually stuff that they don't hear, that's not taught in school – just topics that are you know, like taboo, right? So, for – they'd almost like latch onto that” (p. 12). He acknowledges that anything related to oppression falls under the category of “taboo,” especially in places like Moose

Jaw, he says, where oppression is so commonplace that young people openly share oppressive views “in front of [their] parents” (p. 13). So spoken word, like hip hop, is a place for the taboo. Ahmad fondly remembers hearing Tupac Shakur rap about his struggle and his story (p. 13), and sees spoken word as sort of a “more pure form” of hip hop. “Words, words are powerful,” he reflects (p. 13), and soon after, we close our interview.

Tala

I didn't know Tala very well before I began my research, but I was drawn to the honesty in her poetry. The way she played with stereotypes both old and new so straightforwardly was captivating, as she challenged racism and confronted the current political correctness trend. As we sat down for an interview, she remained true to form, showing wisdom beyond her years in the areas of race, culture, poetry, and spirit.

The 29 year-old spoken word artist and motivational speaker lives in Saskatoon and is the mother of three children: Summerlilly, Soteria, and Kharece. "I live for those babies," she muses (p. 1). At the time of the interview, Tala, who is Nehiyaw (Cree), is in her third year of Indian Social Work at the First Nations University of Canada. Among her family, she is a third generation student of that school. Many people in her family are social workers, she says. "I live my life from a different perspective because I was raised, umm, in Akwesasne. And Akwesasne straddles the border of New York state and Ontario," she continues. "I grew up in longhouses on the weekends and going to sweatlodges with my mom, and learning the Mohawk way about governance and being a woman and traditionalism and being sober..." (p. 1). Tala describes being raised as an activist, as a child with a lot of awareness, as she puts it. To be aware is to be different, she explains, like being someone with cuts that have healed and yet seeing everyone else walking around with fresh cuts. She draws her passion for writing from this unique awareness (p. 1).

When I ask Tala what it is that she generally enjoys about spoken word, she says, "I like that I can talk about what I want" (p. 1), seeming to imply that those opportunities are not abundant elsewhere, although that is speculation. She goes on to describe spoken word as an incredibly meaningful experience:

I like that where I'm gonna go and what I'm gonna say, I'm gonna be supported, and that people are gonna listen with an open mind, and they're gonna wanna hear what I have to say without bashing me down, you know. And that I can say it in a way where it's almost spiritual to me. Like to me, it's like prayer – you know, like I'm sending something up – you know I want people to know this. I think people need to hear this... (p. 1).

In her experience as a motivational speaker, Tala explains that often times she is limited to sharing what adults want her to share with young people, having to sometimes “sugar-coat” her words at their request (p. 1). For her, spoken word is a venue without these restrictions, and a place of solace and solidarity:

It’s almost like going to an AA meeting, and you go and everybody’s fucked up, but the fact that we all understand that we’re fucked up, makes us feel united. And that’s what I like about it, because everybody is like okay, you know what – you’re white, I’m Indian, and this is okay. We both understand what we’re dealing with here (p. 2).

Tala recalls fond childhood memories of watching blues jazz music videos with her mother, seeing the black hats and black glasses, hearing the whispery, jazzy voices and wanting to be there. Her mother brought her up with an appreciation for music and for the English language and for poetry. Tala offers that, like many others involved with spoken word, she likes hip hop, but “love[s] spoken word because it goes deeper” (p. 2). She likes how it can recreate an entire sensory experience for the listener, allowing one to experience that which “was seen from other people’s eyes” (p. 2). She reflects, “...it’s like actually looking at the world, in everybody’s head...” (p. 2).

Tala tells me that a friend got her into the spoken word scene, and encouraged her to write about whatever was making her happy at the time. She says she thought that that was a good plan, but that same weekend she had a frustrating experience with an Indigenous Studies teacher at school, who seemed consistently to only acknowledge Aboriginal people in a historical context: “And it really pissed me off,” she says, “because I’m like sitting right there in class and I’m like, I’m not historical. My grandpa is who you’re talking about. He’s not historical” (p. 3). That night, she wrote the poem featured at the end of this section as a means of venting. When she got to the poetry show, though, she was freaked out, she describes, not wanting to read it because of the high number of white people in attendance: “...this is so bad,” she remembers thinking, “like I’m going to offend them and they’re gonna get mad at me and I’m gonna hurt people’s feelings” (p. 3). She recounts telling her friend, the one who encouraged her to come to the show in the first place, that she was scared. “Well that’s why you have to tell it,” the friend replied (p. 3), and the rest was history. Tala struggled through the

performance with a shaky voice, stating, “I wanted to cry, and I wanted to get angry, because I was feeling the emotions as I was speaking it” (p. 3). Tala was fearful of the crowd’s reaction. Being a newcomer to the scene, she laughs as she recounts thinking that their snapping fingers were “some sort of cue to kick me out” (p. 3) (these snaps represent a decades-old way of showing appreciation or encouragement at poetry readings). When she was finished the reading, she wanted to almost disappear, but her fears were quickly quelled: “I put the paper down and I just wanted to get the fuck out of there I started to get off the stage and they stood up and were clapping and people were crying, I was just like oh, it’s like AA,” she remembers. “No, it was cool, and a bunch of white people came up to me and they were like, I never thought of it that way” (p. 4).

Tala believes that spoken word has allowed her to grow as a woman (p. 4), to be more open with others: “...it became like counselling for me, where I could go on stage and I could speak my truth and it would be accepted, and it would be embraced, and it would be understood, and there would be no questions, it would just be that” (p. 4). Tala sees listening and being listened to as a key part of building understanding between parties, fostering validation for both writer and listener. Tala recounts hearing a white male poet perform a piece in which he acknowledged having white privilege: “I’ve always wanted to hear a white person admit that that’s true,” she emphasizes, “...it was like, you understand” (p. 4). Immediately, Tala tells me about an experience she had with racial profiling when she went to pay off a speeding ticket, where she’d been treated much better at an earlier time, when she’d worn business clothing. At the end of her story, she connects back to the white privilege poem: “...when I heard that [poet] speaking, that was healing for me. That was me hearing what those guys should have said. It was me hearing that and me hearing that gave me a sense of forgiveness for them, knowing someone understood” (p. 5).

Tala describes the writing stage (of spoken word) itself as similarly healing, and as a continuance of a cultural tradition: “So yeah, like my writing, for myself is healing, because I tell my story. And in that sense, for me as an Indigenous person, oral history is, or oral tradition is telling our story. And for me, to tell that story is a part of healing myself, and for my people and for other people to be a part of that process” (p. 5). She remarks that she usually cries while she writes, sometimes from anger. Recounting

another experience with racism from one of her teachers, she outlines a connection between her writing and her daily life. She remembers how performing her poetry at Lydia's allowed her to eventually confront her school admin staff about her feelings: "You know, so like when I'm writing, most of it is empowering myself. I'm thinking about how I'm going to be authentic to myself. How can I be more real to the truth of who I am, what I believe and what I think should happen in this world?" (p. 5).

"...it's a very beautiful thing," she begins, shifting her focus to the act of performing. She talks about how microphones make her nervous, and how it is usually hard to see anyone in the audience while on stage. "...but," she said, "I visualize the people who I wish could see this. That's what happens for me when I'm speaking; I'm thinking of that teacher and that I wish she was here right now and that she's in this crowd and can hear this..." (p. 6). Again, she describes experiencing a level of discomfort when surrounded by white people; she is not familiar with them, feels like "they are not allowed to talk to you or something" (p. 6). For Tala then, performance becomes an escape:

...it's just like, I go somewhere else. I go to this place of like, uh, I do this meditation process; it's a therapy. It's called the journey. And in the middle of it, you come to this place called the campfire. And we bring those people who we want to talk to that come up with this feeling in our bodies, and we tell them what needs to be said here and we just let out what needs to be said, and then from a deeper place, then we have that dialogue, and then from a place of forgiveness, we have that dialogue. So when I'm doing this, this is what I'm doing is I'm having that dialogue in real life but in my mind I'm imagining that those people are here, or that spiritually, those people that I'm doing this in regards to will see that vibration somehow, because that's how the journey does work (p. 6).

When I ask Tala why she chooses to write about issues of oppression, she says that it is because spoken word is "the safest place to talk about it right now" (p. 6). She likes that she can get to her point without interruption because, while on stage, it is her turn to talk and to be heard. She explains confronting issues on stage that are taboo elsewhere. For her, poetry is her "weapon of protection" and "weapon of awareness" (p.

7). And raising an issue at first in her poetry, she believes, removes her fear of raising it elsewhere. She clarifies: “Well, it’s just like when you ask your mom. Mom, are you allowed to do this? Is this cool, is this real? And then your mom confirms it. Hey? Now I’m gonna go out and like okay, I don’t care; my mom said it’s true” (p. 7).

Tala sees spoken word as a new and engaging avenue for addressing important issues, as a way of connecting with the hard-to-reach youth population. She also sees it as a way of dealing with potentially harmful topics in a safe way: “I can describe it, without really opening those wounds. You know, I can talk about sexual abuse. I can talk about residential schools...” (p. 8). She contrasts this effect with what she’s experienced in some of her motivational speaking engagements, where often times, people feel as if she is talking about them. But with spoken word, she says:

...people are listening to the story, you know, and a lot of times you don’t think about that person, you think about their story and how you relate. No matter who it is, whether it’s a guy who’s queer and a transvestite, a transsexual and his story and he’s talking about how, I don’t know, he wasn’t accepted and he didn’t feel like he ever had real love. It’s like, fuck, me too. You know, it’s like, me too, man (p. 8).

When I ask Tala to share some of the topics she’s written about in relation to racism, she offers, “the biggest oppression that I’ve experienced is being contained in the image of the Indian, being the Indian Act Indian. That’s what we like to call it and I’m tired of it” (p. 8). “Tired of not being Indian enough” or “white enough,” she goes on, so “most of my poems are about breaking out of that image” (p. 8). She goes into a rather eloquent speech, the gist of which is *I’m not what they think I am*. She tells me about her mother, who attained two university degrees and a house and a car despite suffering from a health condition that is considered limiting. “...stereotypes, they’re so limiting,” she lamented (p. 9). From her mother, she learned a lot about resilience. “You know that picture of that flower through the concrete?” she asks. “That is why I write, because it’s not true. You know, these things that people think – it’s not true” (p. 9).

Tala compares spoken word to “[doing] Namaste with people,” which she describes as experiencing a “connection to source, to God, to light, to Great Spirit, whatever” (p. 9). She recounts doing Namaste with a white man and feeling a spiritual

connection that transcended race. For her, Namaste and spoken word are about “being truly authentic in that moment” (p. 9).

I ask her how spoken word has affected her life and Tala says that because of it, “I’ve been able to really grasp and to really be aware of my foundation and be aware of what I want in life” (p. 10). She remembers being in what she describes as a very co-dependent relationship with a boyfriend who had “dogmatic” religious views. It wasn’t until Tala started writing that she was able to finally speak her truth (p. 10). “And there was a power and an independence in that,” she reflects. She took that power into other parts of her life as well. It seemed to culminate when she found the bravery to address school authorities about the excessive “generational effects of residential school going on” in the building (p. 10). She describes bringing an entire assembly to tears, having proclaimed, “...you need to find the foundations of decolonization and remind yourself of how that works because obviously you guys forgot” (p. 10).

Tala goes on to describe other personal changes since engaging with spoken word. More personally confident now, she feels much less of a need to wear makeup, for instance, or to dress to impress, so to speak:

...if I’m wearing like a kokum dress, and a long sweater, and I’m in two braids going to a sweat lodge with no makeup, like that’s who I am and whoever ‘he’ is is going to accept that and I don’t even care if the majority doesn’t like it, or isn’t attracted to it, because that’s not what I’m living for anymore. I’m living for that truth, because of how it makes me feel. So like as a person, it’s crazy changed me. A lot (p. 11).

Tala shares that she loves how empowered she feels when listening to spoken word as well, and appreciates the way in which poets often speak on behalf of others whose voices are suppressed: “I was raised with this belief that when one person stands up, they stand up for everyone, and so when spoken word poets are up on stage, and they’re saying their truth, they’re speaking up for a whole bunch of other people who can’t say that” (p. 11). She says she loves when people get angry, too, and recounts one of her favourite *Def Jam* poems, “Knock Knock” by Daniel Beaty. The popular *Def Poetry Jam* series, which aired on HBO, was known for its gut-wrenching spoken word presentations, often critiquing issues of race and poverty. Tala excitedly chants the

refrain of Beaty's poem, which is available on youtube here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eYH0AFx6yI>. Tala appreciates how Beaty told his story, in part, for the benefit of all those who grew up without fathers. She sees the motivational and inspirational power of Beaty, comparing it to what she tries to accomplish in her motivational speaking.

When I ask her if being a spoken word artist is a part of her identity, Tala said, "No, just going with the flow" (p. 12), quickly breaking into a giggle at the thought of being considered a poet by trade. "...it sounds weird saying that about myself because 'I'm a spoken word artist right now'," she laughs, and then muses about the novelty of being a writer, sometimes surprising her friends with poetry on request. But Tala appreciates being a part of the spoken word community in her town: "We're all looking for this something that was taken away from all of us," she offers (p. 12), stating that white people (who make up the majority of the Saskatoon scene) must have been colonized at some point. "Obviously, it's a learned behaviour, right?" she intones (pp. 12-13). "So it's like we're all looking for this thing and we're looking together and there's power in numbers so it's a powerful thing" (p. 13). Despite the sometimes "provocative" and more lewd content that Tala regrets seeing at Saskatoon's poetry slams, she still sees the local poetry group as a "community of awareness" (p. 13).

Tala remembers being inspired by poetry at a young age, particularly by artists like Lindsay Knight, a local First Nations hip hop artist who normally performs under the stage moniker Eekwol. At the time, she was a part of the group Innersoulflow. Tala was a friend with one of the members of the group and can remember playing word games and freestyling (reciting poetry or rap extemporaneously) with him at the age of 17. Her mom is a singer as well, she says, and an activist: "and I'd listen to the songs and how they were written and it was always anti-oppressive," she reminisces (p. 13). Despite the fact that poetry has always been a part of Tala's life, as she puts it, she does not remember ever learning about it in school, although she admits to missing a lot of classes during that time of her life.

Still, she sees spoken word as a viable educational tool, and when I ask her if she'd like to see it in schools, she actually suggests replacing some teachers with spoken

word artists. I get the impression she is using hyperbole; she goes on to decry the extreme disengagement students suffer when forced to take tedious notes:

Wouldn't that be so cool if all our teachers were spoken word poets (laughing)? It'd be like so much easier to hear a poet and it's like you hear a story rather than like, when people say this is what you have to learn today, because of the world that we live in – such a conformed, oppressive world – automatically minds shut off and you auto-pilot those notes. You don't really intake them. But when someone tells you their story, you're involved. You're engaged and you remember. So it's totally different (p. 14).

Tala is also frustrated that, in her experiences, teachers seldom reveal the purpose for learning. When I ask for clarification, she responds:

Well, like in Indigenous Studies class, they tell you that the white people didn't think Indians were human beings. My poem makes you feel that I am a human being. It makes you sad that you call me an Indian. It makes you feel uncomfortable that there's this idea that I'm waiting for some prince. But really, when you hear the rest of it, you go how could she be waiting for a prince when she's dealing with her addictions? How could she? There's no way she's waiting for a guy when she's trying to deal with her addiction, she used to do crack, you know like the reality is stated – then you know why. So it's like oh, so that's why you don't want me to call you an Indian (p. 15).

“They don't like to be called Indians,” she whispers to me, in the same sort of jesting tone that has coloured our entire interview, amid all its profundity.

In closing, I ask Tala if she thinks that poetry could bring about change in people. “Yes, I think so,” she replies (p. 16), and she tells me about several instances in which she has shared her poetry, not at Lydia's Pub (the home of the Saskatoon spoken word scene), but at school, for her classmates and her teachers. In one instance, a teacher reacted by saying “...that needs to be said.” Tala reflects: “...I felt like I empowered him more ... so yeah, I totally think poetry changes people” (p. 16).

Sara

When I first encountered Sara, she was performing at a youth event hosted by *Tonight It's Poetry*, the local spoken word organization in Saskatoon. Seeing her go from those early timid readings to her brilliant spoken word performances at the 2012 Saskatoon Slam finals was a true delight. At the time of our interview, she is presently enrolled as a double honours student at the University of Saskatchewan, in Political Studies and Gender Studies. Sara describes herself as “usually a feminist,” indicating that sometimes it isn't safe to declare (p. 1), and presently represents one of few queer female voices remaining in the Saskatoon slam scene, some of whom formerly helped to launch the spoken word scene in Saskatoon.

I ask Sara what she enjoys about spoken word in general. “...I've always written poetry,” she responds. “I've found that poetry kind of flows out of moments...” (p. 1). She describes often feeling the compulsive need to capture moments in writing, or at the very least, in words; she confesses to having recently bought a voice recorder for this reason. “Need to digest this,” she utters, acting out such a moment. “Need to put it into words” (p. 1). Her progression into spoken word poetry was natural, she says, having always written in “fragments” and “non-sentences” which “became poetry” (p. 1). But Sara has no trouble conveying meaning with these non-sentences: “I wanted to explore [spoken word] and I really liked the idea of expressing with your entire body and kind of like that embodied experience” (p. 1). As she goes on, it is clear that she has thought a lot about every aspect of her work, from inception to content to rehearsal and delivery. She comes across as a very focused artist.

As a listener, she is drawn to the aesthetics of spoken word, saying, “I really enjoy when people put words together really nicely” (p. 2). She muses about her love for language, something she will come back to repeatedly throughout our time together. She enjoys alliteration and metaphor, but especially appreciates honesty in others' poetry: “I really, like when someone's willing to get deep into what they care about and their personal experience and willing to share that with other people – that I appreciate the most,” she intones, “because that's usually how I do poetry, and so because I'm willing to put myself out there personally and, you know, air out really deep parts of myself, I

appreciate when others do” (p. 2). Sara refers to this type of confessional poetry, notably common in spoken word circles, as “an offering” (p. 2).

Speaking as a writer now, Sara tells me again about the “moments” she referenced earlier. Poetry is a means of processing these moments: “[writing] usually comes out of some kind of high emotion situation, like a really good day or a really bad day,” she says (p. 2), adding that the act can be “almost like an archiving or a remembering, you know like I don’t wanna lose this moment” (p. 2). She implies a sense of urgency again, and recalls having to pull her car over to write down her words, especially after an inspirational night of spoken word poetry at Lydia’s. Poetry has helped her in “getting through things,” she reminisces, telling me about canonizing her first real heartbreak in a poetry slam (p. 2-3).

Like other poets, Sara also enjoys the physical act of writing. She states, “I really love paper and I really love ink...” (p. 3) and, when she shows me her poetry journals, adds, “they’re sparkly and like, renewed paper and they feel nice” (p. 3). She enjoys their unique textures, all a part of what she sees as the “tactile” art of writing (p. 3). She also expresses a preference for black pen over other colours, and concludes, “there’s just something really nice to having your experience physically in a way or having your experience come out of you through the pen on the paper” (p. 3).

Once the experience is on the page, Sara sees her poetry as a way of having “dealt with” a given moment, something she often can’t sleep without doing (p. 3). When she has finished dealing with her “intense feelings” in this way, the catharsis often drives her to exhaustion, but, happily, sleep is then possible (p. 3). Writing poetry seems very serendipitous for Sara; she explains not really being in control of her writing, and she rarely edits her poetry, but is uncomfortable with calling any poem “complete.” For her, finishing a poem is largely about “coming to terms with what you’ve made” (p. 4). This process can occur during performance sometimes, or maybe even during a lone private reading of her own work (p. 3).

Sara is rather adamant about not repeating performances of her poetry, especially in slam competitions, where she believes that the material should be kept fresh (p. 4). And when she does have fresh poetry, there is an urgency about sharing it: “Sometimes I feel like I have to get it out there. Like there have been times, where I’ve written a poem

and then within two days, I'm like, I have to share this" (p. 4). She gives me an example, referring to a poem she wrote about having shaven her head: "I needed to write something, or I wrote something about 'I'm shaving for me, I'm shaving because I feel strong as a woman when I am bald, and most feminine,' you know?" she recalls. "And then I needed to put that out there because I was frustrated and so that was some sort of coming to terms with a piece with that, due to that emotion" (p. 4).

"...sometimes you're like, I'm really frustrated with this situation, so I'm gonna respond to it," Sara remarks. She continues:

...especially when I'm in like a relationship or when people see me a certain way, because depending on what I'm wearing like I can be seen as super feminine, I can be seen as super masculine, I can be seen as stereotypically this or stereotypically that. And so like I have one poem where I discuss self-definition terms, and so you know like that was a lot of like processing and a lot of like 'stop calling me a lesbian' or like, 'I prefer this,' and you know like how words sound and like – umm, and that was kind of self-reflecting and also being like, nobody's discussing terminology. Let's discuss terminology (p. 4-5).

The poem Sara references is included at the end of this interview summary. She has other poems dealing with language and terminology as well; it seems a bit of a fascination for her, often paired with material related to gender since, in her words, "terminology is rooted in gender and sexuality" (p. 5). She easily proves this connection in her poetry.

Writing about gender, sexuality, and terminology is first and foremost, a personal exercise for Sara; she states,

Yeah, so it is really personal, like it's a personal journey in a way, like umm, yeah like discussing where I've come labeled and where I'm travelling through right now. Like I'm really taking a lot of queer and feminist theory so umm, how that's funneling into my work right now like referencing Butler, referencing Foucault, like umm, you know and like how theory has changed my mind on things (p. 5).

Sara is excited about her learning, and it inevitably shows up in her poetry, where she both processes it personally and makes it largely more accessible: "...this theory isn't some dry, dense book. This is something that can be applied to everyday gender and sexual experiences or, some random 20 year old" (p. 6).

Aside from the "brain relief" (p. 6) that comes with writing poetry, Sara appreciates the "public affirmation" that comes with performing pieces related to gender and sexuality (p. 6). She comments that although there are still a number of people in Saskatoon who can make queer people feel unsafe, "Lydia's and TIP [*Tonight It's Poetry*], is just very like sexually and gender diverse – it's just very, like surprisingly so ... it's really nice to hear that either people have interacted with similar things ... or to just have a bunch of people clap because you're like 'I'm a big fucking queer!' you know? (laughing)" (p. 6). She and I both agree that such a situation is both rare and cherishable. Of course, even *TIP* has its off nights every now and again: "...like there are nights where it's like you feel super comfortable, and there are nights where you're like (deep breath) and that's very strange..." (p. 7), however, "The backbone of how it started, of who has taken it over, of the people that make sure that it happens, is just like, they are genuinely wonderful people and just so accepting" (p. 7). I think of the people Sara is referring to, many of whom are now good friends of mine; her perceptions of them match my own.

For Sara, writing about gender and sexuality are very important to her, but it is only natural, she says: "Like I write about what happens to me, generally. Like, I've always kinda stuck with the idea like write about what you know" (p. 7). That is not to say that she doesn't recognize the value in contributing to the spoken word community as a unique queer voice, everyone needs something to identify with, after all: "...in some ways when I don't hear [my experience] from other people, I write about it, and I really wish everyone would do that. If you're not hearing your own experience, write it," she says (p. 7).

Sara hopes that her poetry can help other people think more critically about gender, sexuality, and terminology, sharing some of her own views on the subject: "I view gender and sexuality both on spectrums, right?" she begins. "And so like a lot of people would be like gender? Oh, man and woman. And I'm like, well, you know like

most days I would say womyn – I may spell it with a ‘y’. But like that doesn’t always capture the experience, right? And why does it need to?” (p. 8). Sara tells me how fortunate she has been to be in dialogue with people who think about gender and sexuality in non-traditional ways. She thinks it “would be amazing” if she could provide for others what these people have provided for her – that ever important dialogue (p. 8). Changing people isn’t Sara’s primary purpose in writing poetry, but she did have this to say: “I know that there are people in the crowd sometimes when I do poetry that maybe have not thought about things that way. And you know, maybe don’t, you know, and maybe will. Everything is kinda just like a dialogue away” (p. 9). She remembers changing her own stance on gender labels and categories, knowing that the same potential exists for others who are exposed to new ideas: “...like tomorrow if you heard something that like, you know, resonated in your mind, it could change your entire view of things,” she says (p. 9).

Sara is beginning to make a name for herself in the Saskatoon spoken word community, one which she finds supportive and friendly (p. 10). She has become a recognizable voice and face on the *TIP* stage and elsewhere; she reflected fondly on leading a workshop at the queer-positive Avenue Community Centre in Saskatoon during its first ever Judy Garland Festival (p. 9). She seems to be happy with her success, and muses about going farther with her poetry, perhaps publishing a chapbook in the not-so-distant future. But there are things that she enjoys about spoken word would be lost in traditional page publishing. “Umm, it’s more instant,” she offers. “You know, like it’s almost like I can write a poem on Friday and put it out there on Sunday” (p. 12). Sara also likes the fact that spoken word poems are somehow less permanent, because she “might change drastically from that moment” (p. 13). For the same reason, she is somewhat uncomfortable even with having her performances filmed (p. 12). I am reminded of the many ways in which notions of serendipity seem to mark Sara’s poetry.

Although she started performing at a young age, spoken word was not a part of Sara’s high school experience. She chalks its absence up to “a generational thing” among her high school teachers. “...it wouldn’t have been anything that would have kicked in for them, you know, like anything they would have even thought about,” she reflects (p. 13). Not to say that older people are not welcome in the scene; Sara mentions an

“amazing” middle-aged poet who ended up placing in the 2012 Saskatoon Slam championships. But it is a “new movement” (p. 14), one that Sara would love to see applied in high schools, for good reason:

...[one’s high school experience] can be really negative and it’s – anything that’s creative and allows people to express themselves better in a toxic environment, for me is great. And like, I’m sure I started writing because of that. You know? Because like I was in a catholic high school and I was coming out, you know? And I was frustrated by the straight girls getting me down and I was, you know, faced with homophobia ... it’s always, I think, good for people to find their voices (pp. 14-15).

In addition to ensuring that today’s marginalized student populations have a better experience of school than she did, Sara also sees value in students being able to embrace the often feared act of public speaking, part and parcel of spoken word, especially in our current era of highly digitized communication, where “people don’t call” and “people don’t talk” but in which “poetry is a form of voice” (p. 15).

Sometimes, that voice can stir the pot, so to speak. “...there are poems where I’ve enjoyed like seeing how many swear words I can put in, because there are some things that are hilar- not hilarious but like really fun to say through a microphone, right?” Sara says with a grin (p. 17). “...it’s like, will anyone be offended if I say all these things? Umm, how does it sound to say fuck through a microphone? ... I have one with like 7 swears in it, because I think it’s like bitch, fuck, cunt, dyke, cum. So it’s like ... really loaded” (p. 17). Sara knows that this type of content can make people squirm, but offers, “I don’t usually have a problem with making people uncomfortable ... if you make people uncomfortable sometimes they think about things, right? If you can put them on edge, if you can put them out of the zone that they’re used to” (p. 17). Discomfort can cause a process of self-questioning, Sara advocates, stating, “they’re more likely to step back and be like oh, why did I have that thought process originally? Why did I assume that? Why did I set up that box? Why did I want this to be a certain way?” (p. 17). As well, Sara acknowledges that there are ethical considerations to be addressed whenever pushing the envelope, speaking hypothetically about a poem on the subject of rape:

...like, to put someone in a situation where they are potentially reliving a traumatic experience is not something that I would want to do, although it would be like, there are potential advantages to it, right? Because there are, because when you do make people who could potentially rape people think about it when everyone's here, right, so it's like you could re-victimize someone, but you could stop a victimization, right? So like, that's kind of like the line that you draw in the sand ... because there is something to be said for controversy, right? Like it needs to be discussed, it needs to be (p. 18).

As we close, Sara tells me a little bit about a presentation she is preparing on the subject of poetry as theory. I am very intrigued. She tells me about early feminists "like Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich; they produced poetry and they produced theory and often their poetry sounded like theory and they're theory sounded like poetry," she says, elaborating on their use of vivid metaphors in writing theory (p. 19). We talk about how theory and poetry can often be interchangeable, and I am reminded of the valuable educational aspects of Sara's own writing.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, I will begin by presenting and interpreting each of the participants' poems. Then, I will analyze the interview data by discussing each of the four categories derived from my literature review as they apply to the interview transcript data. I will also discuss my own experiences with the phenomenon, wherever pertinent. Finally, I will reflect on participants' views on the role of spoken word in schools, discussing existing North American models and making recommendations for a proposed local secondary school model, with the Saskatchewan Evergreen Curriculum as an entry point.

Personal Reflections on Participants' Poetry

I begin this chapter with the participants' poems and my interpretation of them to partially contextualize the analysis of the interview data. As stated, I passed up the opportunity to chat with the poets about the particular work that they'd submitted for this study. I wanted to make sure that my readings of their work would be kept as close as possible to the poetry slam experience, wherein the listener receives no comments or clues from the poet, and has only her gut reactions and initial thoughts as a barometer of her preference for each piece. Here, I offer my own, subjective, intuitive reactions to the participants' poetry, informed by my experience and by pertinent anti-oppressive theories. I do not profess to be interpreting the poets' intended meanings, only the words as they affected me, the reader/listener, after reading and reflection. I do so in an attempt to capture the poems as one would experience them in spoken word delivery. I will avoid using the poetic interpretation term "the speaker," since, in spoken word, the speaker is most often the poet, except in the case of persona pieces, none of which seem to have been submitted here.

“O Kanata” by Zoey Pricelys Roy

Walking back in time

Oui, Joggins welcomes the brave

On Native land we stand tall and yell

down the Citadel, "Are you hungry?"

to the slaves that have escaped

They relate with the survivors of Cornwallis'

master plan – They share meals in Afrikville

Somehow in these trenches

'rich' has no monetary value.

Let's hold hands; sail down through the St. Lawrence

to Kingston. Too close, unsafe.

Let's build a fort, Henry. Where are our slaves?

Unity is compromised with geo-political borders

We, Stand Tall.

On Native Land, We stand free.

The Indian homeland holds no existence in Cypress' Hills.

Too many, unsafe. Dispersed? It's all geography.

We welcomed the Japanese to the west, Pearl Harbor came

so we made beets the new thing and beat the weaklings

that would be beat by the sun and the Son.... the chosen one?

No one is civilized on this land, we have so much. Let's get more.

We have an empire! Silly me, let's go back.

Who knew we would be at war for an entirety of Seven Years.

That sure took a toll, increased fear. Not enough.

Bring on the blankets, the whiskey and the beer.

The Beothuks, no more, the Acadians - oppressed

So, Canadiens let us celebrate. This is success.

The 49th parallel – Somehow we must stop Joe Howe

From getting that nonsense across the railway now

Lord Durham disagrees so a responsible government we shall be.

On Native Land, We stand tall, On Native Land, We Stand Free.

(A Response:) [also by Zoey Pricelys Roy]

With the anticipation of education, shared in the aboriginal nations makes for a new creation of sisters mass producing a wave of educated natives like the creator dun saved us- They came on a ship to try to play us - they just agitated us now we'll strategically stay astray from economic stagnation cuz – we're getting brothers scholar fitted with ambitions of domination - Refraining from the movements in the act of the assimilation - Dealing with the relocations but we can't have the replications of the residential schools hiatus -tell me - there's some motivation

Link to video of poem (without response):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw0uENpk0Go&fb_source=message

Interpretation of “O Kanata”

Zoey’s first line sets a nostalgic tone for this piece, as if one is to be gently eased into a calm exploration of Canadian history. It is, for me, an effective way of luring the potentially reluctant listener, of setting the audience at ease before some of the poem’s more biting references. The poem is indeed a history lesson, with several allusions to various historical figures, moments, and atrocities in Canada’s racially charged past. In that way, the poem is educational, and performative of both the empowerment that education affords listeners, and the potential for them to experience empathetic actions and reactions, leading to solidarity and change. Because of the prevalence of its counter-narratives, perhaps the poem would more aptly be referred to as a history *unlesson*. Here “fact” meets diction, as shown in Zoey’s use of verbal irony and clever word choices to poke holes through long-held truths. The repeated phrasing of “On Native land we stand tall” turns the Canadian national anthem and major source of pride on its very head.

Zoey’s citing of Edward Cornwallis’s master plan unveils the place of agenda and bias in positions of political power, a theme that resurfaces throughout the piece. I find myself drawn in by the inclusion of black slave and black racism history in Canada as a reference point. Zoey’s image of the slaves sharing meals with the survivors of Cornwallis’s evil gives me goosebumps, especially when juxtaposed with the mere mention of Africville, the black settlement in Nova Scotia that was destroyed by government in the 1960s on the pretext of urban renewal; lest we forget. “O Kanata” is full of these juxtapositions. Meanwhile, it effectively showcases a shared experience of oppression between blacks and Aboriginals in Canada, at the hands of government, religion, and racism. Lamenting the eradication of the Aboriginal Beothuk people of Canada, Zoey exposes the silencing, erasing power of racism while speaking out against it, tongue planted firmly in cheek.

There is nothing tongue-in-cheek about the response portion of Zoey’s piece. Hearing it performed live, one hears Zoey “spitting” a distinct hip hop cadence as she uses heavy assonance and internal rhyme to give her marching vocalizations an air of unstopability. When paired with the earlier portion of the poem, this response fulfills a clear dialogue between opposing forces – the silenced, ignored history of racism and colonialism in Canada and the proudly, loudly proclaimed, future of social change and

betterment. The response features no sarcasm, only the loud voice of Zoey, filled with boldness and hope.

“In the words of my mother” by Elise Marcella (Godfrey)

In the words of my mother, "I am stacked," and no, I don't have it packed thick in the back but I've had to get used to assholes hassling me with crap like "nice rack." Two facts are these: I was exposed to sirens in my infancy as an integral part of the day's soundscape, and though my truest intention is never to injure, I've got a trigger so thin it's ethereal. The outer layers of my energy body carry anger in their chemistry as fuel for self-defense and I want all my reactions to be clear instances of decision but sometimes they happen fast as a casual ass-grab.

Take “No” as my answer the first time I speak it and everything will be OK but what you perceive as my scowl is nothing other than a great blast of yang for all your ill-willed yin making me narrow my vision. The nine-foot radius of my aura is one you enter at your own peril. Mostly I'm gentle and good-natured but say anything in a tone I distrust and risk a neurotoxic quill from my spine.

Be warned: I'm part porcupine and only now learning my own cycles of grief and fury, my eyes blurry, bloodshot and raw as parts of my heart, its inner terrain all heaved skid marks, chambers thick with swamp-lantern vapour, an abscessed railyard riddled with strangers' discarded sharps — but my taste is for peace and privacy and I carry in my marrow respect and protection for myself and those close to me.

Believe this: women of all definitions and identities make up more than half of our collective entity and if even one of us feels unsafe, we all suffer. I once carried a hunting knife at night but never in this city would I even cold-sweat it into my sheet as a fading nightmare. I refuse to accrue the karma its use would level on my soul and all my memory. My feet would grow heavier and heavier, and my stomach more sick.

Gender is not a binary and so before I say anything about rape or castration, let me say this: no matter how clearly formed the organs between our legs are at birth we are all a bit of both sexes and in other languages, violence is classified a feminine word: la violence, la violencia — it emasculates all of us, and it has forged stories in me: my mother and her mother and her mother's mother — all they dealt with for being born child-bearer, now held back like an umbilical whip about to crack.

Even the wrong kind of look can make my nose flare like the throat of a cobra while my shoulders drop and rotate. It's an instinct, one I'm learning to contain. Transitioning from high-kicks and chest pops to a muscled hold, allowing my words into my fists where they dissolve the tightened impulse to hit, punch, open cheeks, now the heel of my hand hard, craving a jaw. I stop. Hold still.

Until I can see myself in you and allow the black hole of your pupil to swallow my ego, I won't move. An act violence will only come back to hurt me but any vibration emitted from your mouth, aimed in my direction, think of it like sinking your tongue into volcanic ash: what lies buried is yours to behold — teeth made of fool's gold that explode at your touch, scattering cold blue flame and acrid dust.

Link to video of poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCyoQrEmpQ8>

Interpretation of “In the words of my mother”

Elise talked about a poem that is written but not yet performed as akin to a tightly coiled spring. Watching her perform “In the words of my mother” shows what the proverbial spring looks and sounds like as it uncoils. As she uses a mix of rhyme schemes combined with free verse, Elise delivers her piece, which is part poem and part warning, with a palpable level of edge. She creates a motif of the spiritual with her references to yin and yang, karma, her aura, and the soul, and does so in a way that is anything but calm, which is the manner in which I’m accustomed to discussing spirituality. She plays with these ideas creatively, building emotive images that convey her stark frustration at male entitlement and sexual harassment.

There is a significant amount of natural imagery as well, mostly dark. Her descriptions of swamp-lantern vapour, hunting knives, and volcanic ash, to name a few, colour the piece most viscerally. When she compares herself to a porcupine wielding neurotoxic quills or an open-mouthed cobra, one understands the threat of retaliation that is budding, pent up from too much of the same disrespectful male behaviour. It is noteworthy that neither of these animals connotes traditional notions of masculinity for me, as might a bear or a wild dog. Neither the porcupine nor the snake possesses the type of brute strength and brawn that one might stereotypically associate with male physicality and aggressiveness. These are quiet but dangerous animals, both traits which Elise seems to be embodying with this piece, defying the traditional silencing of the female voice, and the apparent memory of biting her tongue in the face of harassment in the past.

The poem is a promise that women will no longer be “held back like an umbilical whip about to crack” (here, I think of both the cobra and the coiled spring), and that Elise’s values of peace, privacy, and respect will be protected. That protection may come in part, through the educational aspects of this poem. Beginning at about the fourth stanza, Elise enlightens the listener on linguistics, biology, and even foreign language, all with a focus on exposing gender inequity. She tells us about seeing gender as a continuum, and reminds us through subtle juxtaposition that the warm, nurturing role of the “child-bearer” should result in no punishment at the hands of men and patriarchy. In any scenario, Elise is ready to defend her gender and her views. And when she represses the impulse to fight by letting her words into her fists, the outcome is unclear; those

exploding fool's gold teeth may bite or they may speak, and either scenario can be intimidating.

“A Post 9/11 Plea” by Ahmad Majid

It's bin 9 years since that day,
that point where the world changed
well at least mine did, kinda felt like a coming of age
what's kinda strange is, it felt real deranged
almost as if it was kinda fuckin staged
but besides that point, my reality became
a complication of separations they remain
it felt real lame, to be odd man out
made me go insane, to always live in doubt
not knowin who was judgin, and who didn't care
paranoia was in my head, but i could smell it in the air
it's not real fair, sometimes the remarks would appear
then everything in my head became crystal clear

references to terror, full beards, sand
cause the arab villain in hollywood became popular demand
I was only 11, what did I do wrong
I spoke the same as you, I even liked the same songs
was it real wrong that my family prayed to the same god in a different language
while most of my extended family was dying from US imposed sanctions
the worlds a fucked up place, and I learned that pretty quick
my parents were happy to be here though, a safe place to raise their kids
but on that day, everything seemed to switch
and that safety that we cherish was something we started to miss
Cause Maher Arar was deported back to syria
he pleaded he was canadian, but the US never wants to hear ya
so off he went into solitary confinement
for over a year straight, our government stayed silent
While Mr. Arar was blindfolded and beaten
and all for what? explain to me his treason
oh of course, they never even found a reason,
and 374 days later they released him
An active an productive member to society
never made a ripple, always lived quietly
what was his fault he stuck by sobriety
he was in the wrong place at the wrong time? stop fuckin lying to me
you see, my background they target
as if something was backwards with my people when we started
but it's not even like that, our culture was full of artists
but the gap continues to grow the more make departed
They sift through our names on their racist database
best believe i've seen a kid get held up and he was only 8
his passport set off a flag and they had to check him before he came
oh of course, mohammed was his first name
on this earth mohammed is the most common name are you insane
do you really only see color in that clogged brain
you're not doin your job, thats the same excuse

that that SS German soldiers fuckin used
don't you see how you just torture our existence
the stories i've heard, make me wanna become resistant
but I know inside that'll keep them persistent
so I ask for your help, I need your assistance

A link to this poem was not available. Here is a link to a video of one of Ahmad's other poems:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqacS1b6N_4&list=UUoBMn9lMWkOX0cpRB9Lu-aw&index=7&feature=plcp

Interpretation of “A Post 9/11 Plea”

Unfortunately, there is no video on hand for this poem, but in viewing the link that I did provide, one should be able to see how Ahmad’s unique poetic delivery allows him to use effective end-rhymes and variant metre, all in a consistent rhythmic cadence. Through his performances, his voice can indicate everything from deep sadness to raw anger, as do the words in this poem. When Ahmad qualifies his statement about the world changing with the side-note that *his* did, at least, we see already how life is experienced differently depending on race and religion. His statement that his reality is a “complication of separations” is confusing at first, as it should be. The phrasing performs the unfamiliarity of the experience of the other. After a closer look, the meaning of the rhyming phrase becomes clearer; the events and climate following 9/11 have complicated Ahmad’s life with separations that became more pronounced socially than they were before. Sometimes, these are pronounced subtly, so that one can almost “smell it,” as Ahmad puts it. I’m reminded of the number of times that I’ve perceived racism in my own life but been unsure about calling it out, partly for fear of backlash. Immediately, I can identify with the poem despite the fact that I am not Arab or Muslim. This situation speaks well to the power of poetry to foster relatability and identification.

Ahmad’s poem is educational in several ways. His insightful discussions of the media, religion, world events, and personal anecdotes all shed light on the unique perspective of someone seen as the other, in this case, a young Canadian-born, Iraqi-descended Muslim living in a post 9/11 North America. Like other anti-oppressive poets, Ahmad represents the paradoxical *insider other*; he shares with his listeners what it is like to be inside a social group that is excluded by the dominant one. Ahmad’s poem shows how media can be both divisive, in its improper representation of Muslims; and unifying, in the way he and the antagonistic “you” once enjoyed the same music. Religion, he shows, can be equally paradoxical; Muslims are persecuted for their beliefs yet, they simply pray “to the same god in a different language.” The use of irony appears again when Ahmad reflects that his parents thought Canada would be a safe place to raise their kids, and how, post 9/11, it is these Iraqi Muslims, not white North Americans, who feel unsafe, due to the rise in overt Islamophobia. To my experience, racism is full of these incredible ironies.

The section of the poem focusing on the brutal racism surrounding Maher Arar's unjustified deportation and torture seem to paint him as a martyr, a symbol, and a mere statistic all at once. Ahmad has a way of making each of these labels meaningful in the context of the piece and in a broader social context. Perhaps it is the later mention of the eight-year-old airport detainee that makes one see just how much of a special case Arar was not, as a child possessing the world's most common name is apprehended on suspicion of terrorism. In Ahmad's final rhyming quatrain, his reference to resistance makes us acknowledge that one is never resistant to nothing, that there is something to be resisted. Is it racism? Is it Islamaphobia? Is it us? We may all answer our own questions, but Ahmad also invites us to answer his call for assistance and alliance, his call to action.

“Is It No Surprise That I Am...” by Tala Tootoosis

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, Is it no surprise that I am an Indian?

And when the summertime comes and the powwow begins, will you not see me dancing in my traditional trims,

moccasins, hide, fringes and feathers adorned, face painted like I'm preparing for war.. dancing to the beautiful rhythms of the music coming from the drum, as u watch me as a spectator is it no surprise that you want more?

look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, Is it no surprise that I am an Indian?

Looking at me from where you are now in your mind, do I look like I can ride a horse bareback with my long hair free, sleep in the woods for days on end and never be bothered by the animals or the insects in and throughout the trees?

As I stand here before you long hair braided, shell earrings received from a pair of moccasins I traded, brown skin and eyes, features from a novel that spoke from a time when my people were at the beginning of their demise....

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am an Indian?

Throw your old Mcdonalds bag filled with empty food packages at my feet, like stinking rotten smelly garbage bags, dispose of them as you please on the ground and repeat... and then watch as a single tear falls from my right eye.....and feel sorry for what you have done because from within you feel sad and look at me pitifully and feel your sorrow bring you to a depressing sigh

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am an Indian?

Now take the movies, the magazines and the books that have told you what I am and what I do, what I have experienced and erase everything that has ever given you the idea that what they have said is right and is true...

look at me now with eyes like a newborn baby unaware with a brain empty as if to have never learned anything as if to be recently born with a innocence of knowing nothing being influenced by nothing, practically brand new...

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am a human being?

For you may see something on the outside from what the world has told you to see/ and believe I am the Indian princess, a maiden whose roots are rooted deep in a chiefs blood lineage awaiting my prince to come on his white war pony because I am just a Indian princess who is ready to submit and sacrifice for love like Pocahontas for John Smith. Or is that just an image born from a myth?

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am ahuman being?

Is what You see when you see me, like a memory of knowing what a specific flower smells like when you see it, like an Image that is stained in your brain is what comes to mind when you see me? An observation based on the belief chosen for you at the beginning of time from a person who had a judgmental frame of thinking and an undeveloped mind. What is it that you see?

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am a human being?

Is what you see when you see me, like a lost child who never had a father a woman whose heart yearns for the understanding of WHY? A question in my heart is not what does it mean to be an Indian but what does it mean to be a human being, but what does it mean to be one who is treated with unconditional love by being raised with both parents and because I was not, why didn't they TRY?

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am ahuman being?

Is what you see when you see me, a woman who has struggled with putting down the crack pipe, trying to learn how to act right, understanding my own vision in life my own goals a real balanced understanding of what it means to have intellectual wholistic insight?

Look at me as you will and observe what you please but from what you believe and from what you see, is it no surprise that I am ahuman being?

Is what you see when you see me, a woman who is still learning how to be a human being and be ok in my own skin..... a woman who has tried from the start to understand what it means to get out of my head and start looking deep down for the love that is within...

I think it is time for me to stop worrying about YOU and when you look at me as you have and observed me as you did please, as you looked at me from what you believed and from what you seen, It is no surprise that I did not know how to be a human being... why? Because I was too busy trying to be an Indian....

Link to video of poem:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Cu8gadY6Co&list=UUoWFrIIIOb1j2rErCB2uPFQ&index=1&feature=plcp>

Interpretation of “Is It No Surprise That I Am...”

Tala’s repeated title line plays with preconceptions, cross-cultural social encounters, and language all at once. I am reminded of the first time I ever saw a First Nations man in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. At the time, this was a rare occurrence, and, to a certain extent, still is. I must have been about eight or nine years old and I was in 7-11 getting a beverage when I saw a First Nations man dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a spring jacket. Years of misleading school learnings and media portrayals of “Indians” as nomadic, tribal people who lived off the land had me confused. The unfairness of this type of miseducation is a can of worms that I will leave out of this section, but perhaps the event is why Tala’s poetry hit home so well for me personally. When she gets into talking about powwows and music and face paint that leave the non-Aboriginal wanting more, I think of all the ways in which Aboriginal people are commodified in schools, media, and everyday life and think, this must be what bell hooks meant when she talked about “eating the other” (2000). Tala’s poem gently exposes injustices related to both common stereotypes surrounding First Nations people in Canada and this incessant form of commodification, largely through the use of traditionally romantic images of First Nations warriors and princesses.

This poem is about unlearning. That’s why Tala tells the reader/listener to erase everything she’s learned about First Nations people from movies, magazines, and books. This protest of inaccurate media portrayal is akin to the same in other poems reviewed here. Tala equates racism and unfair judgment to having an “undeveloped mind” – one that can presumably be developed through ongoing learning. Tala requests that people look at her through the eyes of a baby, innocent and unbiased, so that they may see the real her rather than the preconceived image that they may project onto her to fulfill media stereotypes, such as that of the Indian princess who is compliantly submissive to colonial (white) men. She questions these stereotypes with a tone that is feminist, anti-racist, and decolonizing at once, showing the relationality of identity and oppression, as in Ng (2003).

The poem begins as a broad social comment but slowly coalesces into a personal narrative. Distancing herself from the romantic narrative surrounding figures like Pocahontas, Tala references her own experiences with paternal neglect, a troubled youth,

and the ills of crack addiction. This personal narrative is tempered with her shifting question: “Is it no surprise that I ama human being?” The phrase seems to reach out with a determined belief in human relation and empathy, an appeal to the heart. After all, Tala closes with a discussion of being in her skin but getting out of her head. I think of the way that the mind can often overrule the heart when it comes to issues of oppression; where preconceived notions about others block or at least colour one’s social interactions with them. Sometimes, these permeate the others’ perception of themselves, resulting in internalized oppression. In Tala’s poem, I see a fight against this type of oppression also, and I identify with it. I’m grateful for that relation. Personally, I know that in my school years, I was fairly busy “trying to be black.”

“Me” by Sara Waldbillig

You look at me different
because I'm a lesbian but what
is this les-bi-an you speak of
these 3 syllables that don't quite fit
instead I prefer the monosyllabic DYKE
that cums off the tongue rather
satisfactory-dyke I self profess
once derogatory I reclaim like
the feeling of cunt as I spit it out.

I like how these words feel
the way dyke makes them look at you
like you are positively frightening
when you barely pack a punch

People see pink fingernails, hair clips
skirts they say you're no dyke-they mean
you're no butch, but I say- depends on
the ways, depends on the days
I champion femme but I balance
with butch so it depends-
my masculine and feminine are strong inside.

But sometimes when I don't want to
be intimating I am-daisy dyke
a little longer- but a little warmer
and rather spot on

For I smell the flowers,
wear daisies in my hair in
little skirts and ties
with button up shirts
my baggy pants go with
tank tops of the pink variety
and I refuse to deny
my masculine tendencies

I play on gender and strongly
support my womyn background but
somedays I'll meet a guy
at a party we'll click-
dirty jokes and deep connections
as we play gentleman
and the little boy inside me
happily cries bromance.

Guy, girl, people-if we just look
at the way you are then
Why do we need to check the
box? Why do we need to
separate?

Instead group hugs turn into

world loving and a togetherness
that I wish wasn't just
in my four day utopia

Let's bring utopia to the
day to day cuz goddess
knows I could use a
group hug someday

Link to video of poem:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHvcKifs58A&list=UUoBMn9lMWkOX0cpRB9Lu-aw&index=6&feature=plcp&fb_source=message

Interpretation of “Me”

The apostrophe in spoken word is especially effective, because the reader/listener is not only drawn in by a simple pronoun, but by a live pronouncement. When Sara is on stage, she is literally talking to you and there is no ignoring her. Drawn in by this piece, my interest is piqued at the way Sara plays with language from the very beginning, often queering and feminizing it through to the end with her “goddess knows” statement. Her double entendres strike beyond the meanings of words as she combines the perceived crudeness of graphic sexual imagery with the real crudeness of homophobic slurs, meanwhile reclaiming and proclaiming those same words in spite of the “widespread existing unease about women using obscene language” (Cameron, 1999, p. 4). As she “spits” out the terms in the face of social norms, she simultaneously spits out the bad taste that they carry when they are meant to inflict violence.

In stanza two, Sara relates the paradox of feeling powerful inside of her difference because, after all, people are scared of difference. It’s neither here nor there that one often feels terribly weak, as if she could “barely pack a punch.” It is a result of the projections of people from the dominant group that distance the other in this way, as people necessitate her taking a position in one category or another, be it butch, femme, or any other. Sara’s proclamation that she is and does what she wants despite others’ projections reminds me of my own biraciality; some days I feel white, and some days I feel black. Those not in a similar position may find it difficult to understand this special ambivalence. The point is that no matter which group I may identify with at any time, most white people will project onto me that which they perceive - blackness. It’s a bit of a struggle, provided this external pressure, to achieve what Sara refers to as “balance.” When she asserts that her masculinity and femininity are both strong, she once again conveys a double meaning, in my view, as she may be interpreted as attributing the traditionally masculine-associated trait of strength to femininity.

The world of the strong woman seems to be where Daisy Dyke lives. The clever pun sounds oxymoronic due to social constructions, but in life, and dress, it is the simple manifestation of life floating consciously on and across the gender continuum. In stanza five, we get a unique view into life through the eyes of a shifting gender identity, as an encounter that could be perceived as a heterosexual flirtation is constructed as a secret

“bromance” on the part of the speaker. I must admit that I am a little relieved when other people of German ancestry finally accept that I too might be allowed to be German after all, despite my prohibitive looks. But why bother to “check the box” anyway? Why not venture to live in a utopia that lasts longer than seven days and spans a global group hug? The image is rich, warm, and empowering, and smacks of the bravery it takes to speak queer-positive, feminist poetry in a heteronormative, patriarchal language and world. Sara’s love for connecting poetry and theory is clear, as her own poetry, like queer theory, “maintains its critique of identity-focused movements by understanding that even the formation of its own coalitional and negotiated constituencies may well result in exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended” (Jagose, 1996, para. 11). Sara’s poem is an interesting site in which to explore this enigmatic tension between the importance of identity and the problematic nature of labels.

It is easy to see the consistency between the participants’ voices in both their poetry and their interview responses. I stated earlier that I believed a study on spoken word poetry must focus on matters of both the head (intellectual) and the heart (emotional), and I believe that I have done that by including both the interview transcripts and the participants’ poetry as important data sets in the present study. For all participants, the poetry seems to be a place where their intellectual framings of oppression meet the more nebulous and impactful emotional responses to it. The poetry allows the reader/listener to connect with ideas through feeling, and not just thinking. Perhaps this effect is one of the reasons why spoken word is so attractive, and such an impactful venue for theory. It would seem to humanize otherwise impersonal social hypotheses, to personalize them in real time, giving the reader/listener a view into how, through story, the social affects the personal. What is striking to witness during spoken word performance is how the personal affects the social.

Discussion of Interview Data

In data analysis, I apply the framework derived from my literature review to the coding process. This framework includes the broad categories of healing, empowerment, solidarity-building, and change, all noted effects of anti-oppressive spoken word creation. I theme almost all of the data along these lines; therefore I organize the discussion of data using these same categories. Later, I will comment on other broad research observations.

As stated, I include an auto-ethnographic element to my interpretation, that is, a remembering of my own experiences where they may help to focus the discussion. In my conclusion I will discuss the entry points for spoken word in Saskatchewan high school curricula.

Healing

I was able to apply the code “healing” to a plethora of data points. Each participant made multiple references to healing, directly or indirectly. In the literature review, the healing effect of poetry was understood as therapeutic (Lerner, 1997; Rice, 1986; Stepakoff, 2009). Ahmad explained that performing spoken word was a fulfilling way of getting things “off [his] chest” (p. 5). I was reminded of Fisher and Jocson’s (2005) assertion that spoken word is “a viable outlet for articulating the obstacles presented by [young people’s] social realities” (as cited in Camangian, 2008, p. 36), as participants used words like “release” to describe the feelings associated with creating and performing. Ahmad explained how he feels when he hears the news about the death toll in Iraq, and the dangers faced by the members of his family who live there: “I really really hurt for them,” he said, later offering that spoken word was indeed an outlet for that sense of hurt (p. 6). For Ahmad, those for whom he hurts are suffering brutally from both racism and the ills of war.

Elise discussed the release that comes with performance as akin to that of a coiled spring, and described it as “certainly emotional, psychological, even physical,” explaining that she experiences “psychological and emotional tension very physically” (pp. 4-5). She also seemed to describe a feeling of representing the pain of other women when performing her piece “In the words of my mother,” enclosed after her interview summary in the previous chapter. She pondered why it seemed that depression was “almost a typically female illness,” stating that she wanted to see “how it would feel for me to be angry, like I said, for a few minutes in a public place and just what effect that would have for me and it was positive. I definitely felt a lot better after...” (pp. 5-6).

An abundance of other codes that I applied in analysis do represent items that are pertinent to the healing effect of spoken word. The codes are descriptive so rather than naming them each time, I will simply state that to which they refer. The concept of identity seemed closely connected to the participants’ discussions of healing. In some

cases, writers explained that writing spoken word poetry helped to affirm or restore unstable identities. Sara explained writing a piece shortly after shaving her head:

I feel like I have shaved mostly for me, too ... and so I needed to write something, or I, I wrote something about – I’m shaving for me, I’m shaving because I feel strong as a woman when I am bald and most feminine, you know, and then I needed to put that out there because I was frustrated and so that was some sort of coming to terms with a piece with that due to that emotion (p. 4).

Here, Sara reminds me of Sylvia Bell (1999), who said that, in writing, “there is the potential for self-imposed and socially constructed restrictions to fall away and a new appreciation of others and *self* to emerge” (p. 2, emphasis added). At the same time as her poetry is a means of coming to terms with her emotions, it seems to also be a means of affirming self-identity. Richardson (2000) would support this interpretation.

Tala’s performance of “Is It No Surprise That I Am,” enclosed with her interview summary, was also heavily inspired by identity:

And when I got on stage, as I started telling it my hands started to shake, and I was holding that paper and my voice started to shake and I wanted to cry, and I wanted to get angry, because I was feeling the emotions as I was speaking it, because this is an experience for me, right and as I was speaking it, I was telling it, and when I got to the point where ‘hair is braided’, then I was holding my braids and I was talking some more and as I got halfway through I started taking my braids out while I was reading it, and then at the end I just kind of like let it go, and I took my- I can’t remember if I took my shell earrings off or not. But I just wanted to kind of strip that identity off of what I’m seen as (p. 3).

Her recounting of the performance speaks well to the embodied element of spoken word, i.e. the sense of a physically experienced catharsis, which Elise, Sara, and Zoey also noted in their interviews.

Shifting to a broader consideration of healing, I stated in my literature review that poetry has long been considered a therapeutic art, since at least the 1950s. It has gained considerable public legitimacy through professional practice ever since that time (Lerner,

1997, pp. 82-83). Rice (1986) noted that therapy may even be an unintended outcome of poetry when the poet's goal was aimed at something else entirely, especially when performance is added to the equation. This assertion positions the public witnessing of pain as particularly important (p. 249). Zoey explained that writing poetry became a way for her to admit her own mistakes to herself and move forward (p. 4). "It's like counseling, for sure," she said (p. 4). That statement means more once you know that Zoey's experience with a real counselor only made her feel trapped and as if "there was nobody [she] could trust" (p. 11), so she wrote because she felt like it was all that she had (p. 3).

Tala also likened spoken word to a therapeutic meditation process that she referred to as "the journey" (p. 6) and also described performance as "healing" (p. 5). She often talked about spirituality when she referred to the healing power of spoken word. Elise also referenced spirituality when she said that the more we continue to speak to each other through forms like poetry, the better "we'll safeguard our spiritual nature" (p. 14). Participants also seemed to construct their poetic social critiques and poetic responses to oppression, which were both common items, as a part of the healing process. Three participants also referenced senses of freedom as important aspects, translating to a lack of constraints in writing in the genre, or a freedom to express, a freedom to speak unopposed, and to a freedom to defy stereotypes and labels (no doubt another means of identity affirmation).

There was also an emphasis, at least among three participants on speaking the truth, something which requires freedom in itself. Truth-speaking is an element of healing as it counter-acts the damaging power of both silence and oppressive discourse. Ahmad recounted that he was attracted to the idea of being able to speak the truth, to share "whatever topic is taboo" (p. 2), later explaining that once a person crosses the taboo barrier, it may be possible to change people's entrenched perspectives. Here, I am reminded of the counter narrative. Where spoken word poetry represents the truth of the oppressed, it more than likely stands in contrast to or in critique of existing dominant discourses. The spoken word poets help us to imagine truths that lie beyond the *whitestream*, *malestream* and other narratives that dominate widespread public

consciousness. They help us to, in the words of Cultural Studies scholar Allison Anders (2011), “imagine better” (p. 544).

I remember having a very healing experience in writing my poem “Ghost of Billie Holiday” (2011, see Appendix D) in which I lament the history of black slavery and racism in my own family history. Writing “Ghost of Billie Holiday” was one of the most cathartic and healing experiences that I have ever had with writing. I wrote it almost immediately after taking in an anti-racism conference held at the University of Saskatchewan, hosted by the Saskatchewan Special Subject Council SAFE (the Social Justice and Anti-Racist Anti-Oppressive Forum on Education). The day of lectures and seminars on systemic oppression had my mind and my heart reeling. The poem became a way of processing both mentally and emotionally. I can identify especially with the sense of feeling pain for someone else. For me spoken word poetry has been a way of connecting emotionally to the pain of my long-deceased ancestors and to a lesser extent, of all blacks still suffering the ills of racism. By situating my own pain in a greater historical context, I feel that I can restore my sense of identity somewhat. The hopeful side effect of sharing my pain through poetry is that listeners might take up the invitation to imagine a more just society.

I remember writing a piece titled “Grey” (2010), which may be helpful in illustrating participants’ use of poetry to affirm identity. Here is an excerpt:

I am made from black and white so my essence is grey – how flattering
Though all things considered there is at least a smattering
Of blond hair and blue eyes, though by a look you’d never guess
‘Cause I am brown-skinned and therefore my essence is “less”

I go on to discuss biracial identity from a personal and social perspective. In retrospect, the piece was as much a public complaint about racism as it was a way for me to gain an understanding of myself and my experience. Perhaps this self-understanding, or identity formation, is one of the reasons why I write poetry.

Empowerment

As discussed in the literature review, empowerment from spoken word poetry seems to come from the conscientization of oppression, the reclamation of voice and oral tradition, and the mental empowerment that comes with the educative elements of anti-

oppressive spoken word. Among the oppressed, the introspective act of writing, of acknowledging one's own truth can be inherently critical. After all, the oppressed experience life on "the other side of difference" (Norquay, 1993). Fostering this type of critical, reflective act is an act of social justice, one which may help lead to what Freire (2000) referred to as conscientization, a process in which the oppressed become aware of their own oppression. This process is a key element to self-liberation, another of Freire's conceptions. In short, in order to achieve liberation, the oppressed must first be empowered with the knowledge of their own oppression, something that may be attainable through spoken word poetry engagement, as evidenced in Tala's interview: "...when I'm writing, most of it is empowering myself. I'm thinking about how I'm going to be authentic to myself. How can I be more real to the truth of who I am, what I believe and what I think should happen in this world?" (p. 5).

Tala later explained that after sharing her story in poetry on stage, she felt empowered by a boost in confidence to share it elsewhere and in different formats, likening that feeling to the affirmation that a child gets from a parent: "...it's just like when you ask your mom. Mom, are you allowed to do this? Is this cool, is this real? And then your mom confirms it" (p. 7). I am reminded somewhat of the sense of affirmation and empowerment that Sara felt after performing a piece about shaving her head, something I wrote about in the previous section. Sara later referred to community affirmation as fulfilling the "need to legitimize the self" (p. 10). It would seem that, with performance, spectators are invited to understand their own and others' context differently.

Elise, among all other participants, also talked about feeling empowered through writing and performing spoken word. She reflected on performing her feminist poetry for the general public, saying "...it felt good – it was just kind of like yeah, I'm here in the world, and I have a voice and I have opinions" (p. 7). Elise noted that she wrote the poem in question out of the frustration she experienced at being harassed by men while out with friends in Saskatoon, offering that after performing it, she experienced that type of victimization less frequently. She stated:

...I wonder if it's somehow, if speaking that piece just shifted things for me and I, it's as if I carry myself differently now. It's a bit of a mystery for me,

but yeah – that piece came out of a lot of anger, I guess and other emotions that I feel are still to some extent a little bit taboo for women to express, at least publicly, and I knew that I was treading in dangerous territory by getting up there and expressing them, and that was maybe part of what threw me into wanting to do it in the first place (p. 5).

Bell (1999) might offer that in creating her art, Elise was “reclaiming [her] individual power through writing” (p. 36), and speaking, the crucial element of spoken word.

For those poets who represent Indigenous cultures, spoken word can become a means of reclaiming oral tradition. For myself, like many other black, Afrocentric poets and hip hop artists, I identify with the West African djeli, a traditional tribal knowledge keeper, “the voice of the ancestors, a medium of expression through which the wisdom of the past is conveyed to the present” (Magel, 1981, p. 183). Tala discussed spoken word as a means of both healing as well as a way of connecting to her own heritage: “...my writing, for myself is healing, because I tell my story. And in that sense, for me as an Indigenous person, oral history is, or oral tradition is telling our story” (p. 5). Zoey shared similar thoughts on the matter, saying, “I just think writing and sharing is important, and in my culture I mean having sharing circles, and like the oral tradition – it’s always been in my culture” (p. 7) and adding that “taking the responsibility of being a hip hop artist and being a poet and taking the talent that I have to share stories in the oral tradition is something that was a part of my culture forever” (p. 8). Even Elise, a white poet, acknowledged the connection to Indigenous traditions, noting that spoken word has essentially existed for thousands of years and must be continued (p. 14). Scholars agree that poetry can indeed be a means of reclaiming cultural traditions, and that there is a certain anti-oppressive power in such an act (Bell, 1999; Maracle, 1996).

All participants seem to derive empowerment from the educational aspect of poetry, both as listeners and performers. When listening to an anti-oppressive poet, Ahmad describes feeling an uplifting sense of hope because the “artist chose to display it ... in such a way where I, it really got to me, I really felt it allowed me to understand” (p. 2). He went on to say, “...all I’m trying to do is spread awareness on the topic ... because it’s important to me, but not just important to me, it’s important to like humanity, world peace if you wana even go that far” (p. 6). For Elise, educating is not an overt

focus of her feminist writing. However, she does acknowledge it as a positive element of performance, stating:

even if there was one guy in the audience who went – ‘woa, you know, I didn’t realize it could piss a girl off so much to be hit on when she’s not out to be hit on,’ that – you know if it does make even one person think twice about how they approach someone else or you know what their intentions are in approaching someone else, then yeah I’m happy I did it, happy I bothered to say what I said (p. 9).

Tala discussed the links between poetry and education in a much more overt way. She outlined a plan to use hip hop (music and dance) and spoken word as a way of engaging youth on important topics at powwows and other cultural events, noting that many First Nations youth are currently disengaged from the educational aspects of such events, which she believed were too often conducted in outdated ways (p. 7). She also suggested, only partly in jest, that spoken word artists would make better educators than a lot of teachers, because of the engaging and memorable way in which they deliver their messages (p. 14).

Sara also recognizes a certain interplay between her formal education in political and gender studies and her use of spoken word. “I’m really taking a lot of queer and feminist theory,” she said, continuing, “...that’s funneling into my work right now” (p. 5). She considers some of her writing as a response to feminist authors like Butler, Lorde, and Rich. She later explained how much of their theoretical writing was akin to poetry through its use of metaphors and aesthetic language, referring to the concept of “poetry as theory.” She explained, “often their poetry sounded like theory and their theory sounded like poetry” (p. 19), a trend that Sara seems to channel in her own queer-positive work. Sara offered that in poetry, theory can become more accessible (p. 19), something with which I certainly identify, as I demonstrated in discussing my own piece, “Ghost of Billie Holiday.”

Zoey explained that when she writes poetry, she often researches the topics extensively (p. 4). In that respect, the act of writing becomes educational and empowering for her. Through performing her poetry, she educates and empowers others, stating, “I feel like I need- I want to empower people” (p. 4), referring especially to

incarcerated youth, to whom she personally relates. For all of the participants in this study, poetry can be for the self and others “a moment of revelation,” as Bell (1999) phrased it (p. 39). Bell also noted that poetry could become a moment of “revolution” (p. 39). For me, there can be no revolution without revelation (i.e. education). Based on the contents of Scott-Heron’s (2010) poem, that poet would agree, and once stated that “The first change that takes place [before revolution] is in your mind” (“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”). With anti-oppressive spoken word poetry, these changes of mind are made possible.

I know what my participants are referring to when they talk about walking the line of taboo with their poetry, as well as how self-empowerment flirts with that sense of risk. When performing my own anti-oppressive poetry, the reception has varied greatly depending on audience, seemingly based on factors such as race, age, socio-economic status, and, of course, political leanings. For instance, there are some poems that I am very hesitant to perform for certain crowds, based on past experiences. On one occasion, a white male approached me after a performance and actually challenged me on the existence of racism.

I remember also performing my poem “The Genocide Will Not Be Televised,” which contains a biting critique of non-Aboriginal Canadians’ treatment of Aboriginal Canadians historically and through to the present. I performed it at a street festival in Saskatoon in 2011, where the audience was made up of mostly middle-aged to advanced age white people. The reception was cold, to say the least. I felt extremely uncomfortable on stage, as if all of the onlookers were biting their tongues. Almost no one approached me afterward, which is rare, but one man went out of his way to say he really enjoyed my *first* poem, one that I had performed earlier about the decline of the public library. Months later, I was asked to perform at an awards banquet at the University of Saskatchewan for Aboriginal Achievement Week. This time, I was performing for a largely Aboriginal audience. I received a standing ovation. The affirmation was rewarding and motivating. As Stovall (2006) stated, “Poetry allows for issues of race, class, gender and sexuality to be freely questioned and affirmed” which may not be the case in other forums (p. 65).

I have had similar experiences in performing “Ghost of Billie Holiday” (Appendix D) for separate primarily white and primarily black audiences. In my experience, the poem’s reception among black audiences has been much warmer, perhaps in light of the audience members’ ability to identify with the poem’s content and with my voice. In other scenarios, I have often felt uncomfortable, out of place, and even hated, but I knew that I was speaking my truth and the truth of others like me. I knew that what I was sharing was taboo, and also knew that to acquiesce to the crowd at the expense of remaining silent would be to submit to the silencing powers of racism. As Donna Marriott (2003) put it, that silencing is one of the “most fearsome” forms of racism, and one that can speak loudly (p. 496). It is important to note that, for me and many others, the conscious use of poetry as a speaking format is integral to breaking the silence. In my view, to break that “most fearsome” silence, to shatter it with taboo truth is to truly find one’s power.

Solidarity-Building

In terms of poetry performance, educating people seems a worthwhile end, intended or not, but surely it is not “the end” in the sense associated with finality. In many instances education is, in fact, a means. In the case of anti-oppressive education, such as that created by the poets in this study, it may be a means of garnering support from community, thereby generating solidarity (again, this may not always be an intended outcome, but seems a welcome one for all of the study participants). Dictionary.com (2012) defines solidarity as “union or fellowship arising from common responsibilities and interests.” In the literature review, solidarity seemed to result when poetry pushed listeners out of their comfort zones, as with “taboo” content, and into third space (Conley, 2008; Keenan & Miehl, 2007). In third space, wherein listeners experience tension or discomfort, they are more apt to reframe thinking, and perhaps to develop empathetic views. This change in consciousness is the first step in building a supportive, affirming community.

To begin with, it seems that the community formed by Saskatoon’s *Tonight It’s Poetry (TIP)* series has some pre-existing level of solidarity with its social justice oriented members. In describing that community, the study participants used words like “amazing,” “support,” “less afraid,” “more open,” “diversity,” “safer environment,”

“accepting,” “sexually and gender diverse,” “rewarding,” “wonderful,” “motivating,” “reassuring,” “embraced,” “understood,” “humbling,” “thinking critically,” and “community of awareness.” The list goes on. I think Sara essentially summed up the sense of group solidarity at *TIP* when she said, “...it’s really nice to hear that either people have interacted with similar things like that or to just have a bunch of people clap because you’re like ‘I’m a big fucking queer” (p. 6).

Obviously, since the Saskatoon poetry slams take place at an establishment that is open to the public, one is bound to encounter audience members who are not so supportive, but it is the core community of poets and poetry fans who maintain a status quo of socially just operation. As Sara stated, “the general sediment that I think it’s been built on is just really accepting of people. The backbone of how it started, of who has taken it over, of the people that, that make sure that it happens, is just like, they are genuinely wonderful people and just so accepting” (p. 7). The *TIP* audience and organizers seem largely concerned with maintaining the slam as a safe space for all voices, as evidenced by *TIP* events like the *Social Justice Showcase* and the *Female Voices of the Prairies* slam, both held in 2012. The general atmosphere suggests that the community is not merely accepting of marginalized voices, but protective of them. The audience normally uses its responses to live poetry as a means of affirming or, in the event of injustice, condemning the performed content. This dialogical system of performance and response helps to uphold social justice as a part of that which is valued by the poetry community. As a natural safeguarding element, it may help to divert people whose poetry promotes oppressive messages away from the *TIP* stage.

So, the *TIP* community seems to represent belonging, and is already a source of solidarity for poets from oppressed groups. Perhaps it is the newcomers to the audience and to the stage who represent the potential to build even more of that solidarity, not to mention all of those who view the numerous spoken word poems that are posted on Youtube and shared via social networking websites. After all, it is those with little exposure to counter-narratives who will benefit the most from a poet like Zoey “Giving people insight to maybe thoughts that [she] was having or observations that [she has] made and then sharing that” (p. 6). Zoey recalled having “an epiphany on stage” (p.6):

I felt like the crowd and me were all one. And I was here for a purpose and this is what I'm here to do. I have a place here, right? And then last night I performed again and because my heart's in the right place and because I'm here for the right reasons, people can understand that. People can feel that and I'm no longer the underdog. We're all here together and we're all sharing and the crowd is equally as important if not more important than me being on stage and sharing these thoughts with them. So spoken word, poetry and performing is changing so much for me, right now (p. 6).

Zoey's story clearly shows the link between solidarity-building and personal and social empowerment, where giving insights into life on the other side of difference is a form of educating, which can lead to the formation of "common responsibilities and interests" (Dictionary.com, 2012). Zoey even referred to spoken word as "a manifestation of an alternative education" (p. 7).

It is important to point out here the way in which spoken word differs from page poetry (again, *page* poetry refers to that which is intended to be published in text, and not in performance) in its inherent way of reaching a wide audience in a short time span. The sharing of videos via the Internet has no doubt helped this situation, but even at a slam or spoken word show, the spoken word poet may feel as if she is reaching more people more quickly than she may have through publication in text. Elise shared her thoughts on the matter:

...there is this sense of just being alone in your darkened room when you're composing poems as page poems and trying to get them published in literary journals or what have you; a lot of the pieces start to feel dead or they start to feel like you know they will never be known, whereas with spoken word there's often- I was just amazed at how many opportunities there were in such a short period of time to reach a larger number of people, and in a very visceral and immediate sort of way (p. 7).

Three of the other participants discussed the concept of immediacy in spoken word as well, and all participants discussed the feeling of dialoguing or otherwise interacting with the audience, during or after performance. Zoey indicated that in her view, the dialogue does not end after a slam either, but continues throughout the week as listeners share

what they heard with their friends and family, creating a perpetual dialogue (p. 7). Perhaps this ripple effect could garner even more solidarity for the oppressed. As Sara phrased it, everything is just “a dialogue away” (p. 8).

Such a dialogue may lead to empathy among listeners, even if that empathy is prefaced by some conflict. After all, the participants have likened their poetry to a sharing of insights into their worldviews. While empathy may represent the potential for a change in perception, and bring to light those populations formerly “erased from view” (Butler, 1992, p. 13, as cited in Schick, 2000, p. 87), it certainly must not be the end goal of a true anti-racist education. Schick (2000, 2011) and Srivastava (2005) warn us about the potentially detrimental impacts of emotional displays in anti-racism. In some instances, displays of indignation at perceived racism may be more about protecting self-image and white dominance than they are about creating real change. In her study among white pre-service teachers in cross-cultural education, Schick (2000) discovered that “Participants are interested in affirming their subject positions as qualified teachers whose liberal goodness includes being nonprejudiced” (p. 95). Sometimes, this trend was displayed through emotional displays, such as those resulting from an annoyance at feeling white guilt, in which the participants attempted to retreat into a “neutral, blameless corner” of whiteness and entitlement (p. 92). Even still, Schick notes that participants expressed a desire to “become a source of something positive” and, in light of their shifting identities, were indeed able to change (98). She cites Belsey (1980), who notes that the subject is “perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation. (p. 50, as cited in Schick, 2000, p. 99).

Some, like Conley (2008), have argued that spoken word poetry can provoke listeners into third space, or what Anzaldúa (1999) described as a *nepantla* state. A crucial element of this state is the experience of emotional discomfort, and that element can indicate the emergence of new perspectives. Could the tension that the participants and I have encountered in performing for largely privileged groups have represented the possibility of change? When faced with seemingly angry audience reactions, this optimism may slip easily out of the anti-oppressive poet’s mind. But it is worthwhile to

consider Paul Orlowski's (2011) observation that "White defensiveness can be viewed as a reaction to what is for White people the novel experience of having to argue for one's beliefs rather than simply assuming their acceptance" (p. 20), a feeling with which the marginalized are all too familiar. Barb Thomas (1994) reminds us of how important it is to "distinguish between, on the one hand, hurt feelings that a person with privilege might feel at being excluded, and on the other, the sustained, systemic, and pervasive damage inflicted on all parts of the self, by the big wounds," referring to the many forms of oppression. One can only hope that those who experience it will, as the author suggests, "use discomfort to pose new questions to [themselves] and seek new insights" (p. 172).

Ahmad talked about his mother begging him not to perform certain poems in public. She was scared of "them taking me away," he said sincerely (p. 10). Obviously, his mother can predict the tension and controversy that his poetry will create. But Ahmad considers that controversy a motivating factor. "...it makes me feel like, I should probably do this," he continued, adding that he is normally vindicated by positive support from audiences after performing. Elise has also experienced discomfort on stage, herself seeing that the outcome usually makes the discomfort worthwhile. "I started getting really uncomfortable about [performing the feminist poem]," she started. "...you know there's a danger sometimes in words, too, where they're very powerful and they can provide that release that can be hugely beneficial not only to the individual speaking the words but any number of individuals in the audience" (p. 5). Sara shared a similar view:

sometimes poetry is really like- it has an effect if you make people uncomfortable, or if you make people uncomfortable sometimes they think about things, right? If you can put them on edge, if you can put them out of the zone that they're used to, like if you're telling them something they know, then they're like okay, I got that or whatever, and whereas if you can make them uncomfortable, on edge, you know like that kind of thing, then they're more likely to step back and be like oh, why did I have that thought process originally? Why did I assume that? Why did I set up that box? Why did I want this to be a certain way? (p. 17).

Being "on edge" sounds uncannily similar to being in third space, where "we rely on our emotive, psychic, and imaginal senses to direct us toward a more inclusive, pliable, and

caring consciousness” (Conley, 2008, p. 9), perhaps opening the door to questioning “taken for granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender and sexual orientation” (Meyer, 2007, p. 1).

Tala recounted an experience with listener discomfort: “I’m going to offend them,” she worried, before taking the stage, “and they’re gonna get mad at me and I’m gonna hurt people’s feelings and I just told Zoey I said, ‘I’m scared,’ and she says, ‘well that’s why you have to tell it’ (p. 3). She then remembered taking the stage that night:

I was just like reading it and people were so quiet and it freaked me out and I was like they’re gonna have an uproar, they’re gonna yell at me and kick me out of here ... I was freaking out, and then after I was done my last line is uh, umm, “I didn’t know how to be a human being. Why? ‘Cause I was too busy trying to be an Indian.” And then I put the paper down and I just wanted to get the fuck out of there. I started to get off the stage and they stood up and were clapping and people were crying, I was just like oh, it’s like AA.

(Laughing). No, it was cool, and a bunch of white people came up to me and they were like, I never thought of it that way (pp. 3-4).

Most of the participants referenced listener discomfort during their performances as potentially leading to something positive. Their accounts would support the idea that anti-oppressive poetry provokes third space, and has the potential, simply put, to change minds: “The poem may be despairing or even brutal, but as long as it tells the truth, it allows the possibility of transformation” (McMaster, 1998, p. 93). Zoey told me about the discomfort she experiences as a listener of anti-oppressive spoken word poetry, and about the positive outcome that she experiences from it. She sums it up nicely, stating, “I get pissed off, I get really sad, I learn so much” (p. 2). Zoey’s offering demonstrates how conflict can be a precursor to change, as in third space.

There is an important irony regarding third space and solidarity. Pushing people outside of their comfort zones may cause listener discomfort, tension, and even anger as Zoey references, but it is these same apparently alienating outcomes that pave the way toward alliance. What an anti-oppressive poet undertakes is a dangerous, lonely mission that may lead to safety in numbers through the expansion of solidarity. Before performing in a situation that I find to be daunting, I often try and remember that it may

be hard to change an oppressive mind gently, but that the outcome is often worth the risk. Before people can adopt a point of view, they must first be exposed to it. Poetry facilitates this process in an invitational context, creating an avenue for change.

It is worth discussing the role of competition in the poetry slam context, as, intuitively, one might believe that the presence of competitiveness among poets is counter-active to building solidarity within that group. However, in my experience, the opposite is true. An oft-repeated mantra in the slam community is: “It’s not about the points; the poetry *is* the point.” The adage exists in many incarnations. Those who have been competing in the slam scene for some time begin to see the way in which competition in this context is largely aimed at (a) fostering continuous improvement, and (b) drawing an audience to hear spoken word. I know of very few seasoned poets who put any real weight into the numerical scores they receive on slam nights. In my case, I value the qualitative feedback I get through crowd reactions, and through conversations following performance much more than I value the quantitative feedback of the judges’ number scores. In fact, many slam insiders view the competitive aspect of slam as a sort of “inside joke,” aimed again at generating interest in the genre. The consistently random selection of slam judges even at the national and world levels of competition can be interpreted as evidence that the scores are not meant to hold much credence (another interpretation is that this act deliberately devalues any overly academic assessment of poetry). To illustrate, in my experience performing social justice poetry, I have become aware that even the content of my poetry may put me at risk of receiving low scores in some audiences. With random judge selection, it is entirely possible that I may be performing anti-racist poetry for a stone cold racist.

In my view, if competition is to be held in any regard, it is insofar as it facilitates continuous improvement among poets, some of whom have very competitive tendencies. Indeed, some participants in this study have referenced such a competitive spirit, and have even used weapon imagery in describing their experiences in performing anti-oppressive spoken word. However, the anti-oppressive poet’s weapon seems to be pointed solely at the oppressor, wherever the oppressor may be, and not at her competitor. People have often conflated poetry slams with the also popular freestyle rap battle, in which competitors insult each other extemporaneously in verse, perhaps

because of the connotations of the word “slam” (to mean “insult”). While rap is widely considered a sub-genre of spoken word, the poetry slam has never been a place for insulting competitors, only a place to show love and appreciation for like-minded performers, all sharing the will to improve. In my view, as social justice artists, the only thing we are competing against is oppression.

Change

In my literature review, I discussed the change effect as both personal and interpersonal (social), attributed to the heterodoxy (Bourdieu, 1977) prevalent in anti-oppressive spoken word, the inherent power of the word through *nommo* (Kuykendall & Walker, 2005), and its educational potential as a form of “modernistic communication” (Pearce, 2005). In order to support change, such as the personal change that comes from having a renewed perspective after hearing a poem, it is clear that issues of oppression must be talked about. These conversations will be uncomfortable, sad, and sometimes angry, but are nonetheless necessary conversations in order for change to occur.

Bell (1999), Winterson (1996), and Paz (1990) have all stated that the writer of poetry could indeed be an instrument of change, and bell hooks (1994) stated that black American poetry “invites dominant mainstream culture to listen, to hear – and to some extent, be transformed” (p. 171). I have already discussed the influence of ancient African oral tradition on spoken word, as well as the prevalence of hip hop as a spoken word form. After all, “African culture and African American culture are oral cultures and rely heavily on the spoken word to create and maintain tradition within their culture” (Kuykendall & Walker, 2005, p. 230). In their Afrocentric rhetorical analysis of Def Poetry, the Afrocentric spoken word television series discussed in an earlier chapter, Kuykendall and Walker apply the concept of *nommo*, referring to the “generative power of the word” in African and African American orality (p. 229). “The spoken word is a powerful form of communicating,” they explain. “The spoken word from one human being to another is an entity that can create or change a life” (p. 230). The authors attest that the popularity of spoken word across racial lines “gives way to those who are not biologically African but seemingly demonstrate communication characteristics from an Afrocentric culture. The presence of *nommo* gives life to the word...” (p. 232). So according to the authors, all spoken word poets, regardless of race, have access to

nommo, this inherent power that the word has to create change. I have already shared Elise's acknowledgement that words "are very powerful" (p. 5).

Tala seemed to especially appreciate the power of the poetic narrative to have an impact on people. "They're telling this story for someone and it's so awesome because I was a motivational speaker," she said, "and when I go and tell my story sometimes they come up to me and say that was me, that's me right now, that's me – in this time of your life – that's me right now, and I'm so glad that you came and showed us that you made it out" (p. 12). Here, she demonstrates the power of language to inspire people. She said also:

...people are listening to the story, you know, and a lot of times you don't think about that person, you think about their story and how you relate. No matter who it is, whether it's a guy who's queer and a transvestite, a transsexual and his story and he's talking about how, I dunno, he wasn't accepted and he didn't feel like he ever had real love. It's like fuck, me too. You know, it's like me too, man (p. 8).

Here, she demonstrates the power of language to connect people.

For Sara, the power of language seems to surface directly from terminology. She rather enjoys playing with words in her poetry, noting "terminology is rooted in ... gender and sexuality" (p. 5). She explains this interplay further, reflecting that some of her recent poetry has been about

how my destiny's changed here, how my terminology is changing, and even recently, it's been a move to how terminology is not reliable and so like how I once was like I am this, this, this, and this, which I can still say, but I'm getting to the point where I'm like – I can say all these things, but I may tell you all of these things and then be like, but they're fluid and they may change tomorrow. And so a lot of that is queer theory in some ways, like that identity is moveable, changeable, and performance... (p. 5).

In her (1996) reflection on Queer Theory, Jagose noted that, indeed, even the term "queer" "is unaligned with any specific identity category" (para. 1). Sara shared that she experienced a personal change when she realized that she did not need "any identity terminology" (p. 5). Perhaps her poetry can free others from similar constraints.

When Sara said that everything is just a “dialogue away” (p. 8), it made me think about all of the conversations about oppression that I’ve had with people following my own performances. Here again is the ever important dialogue to which all of the participants in this study alluded. The beauty of this dialogue is that each party has the opportunity to learn, especially if each party is open-minded and willing to risk their preconceptions, as in W.B. Pearce’s (2005) view of “modernistic communication” in which communicators are willing to consider new ideas and possibilities (p. 169).

For the transformative power of the word to have a social impact, and for all of these examples of personal and inter-personal change to mean something in the broader social climate, spoken word must cast a wide net. I have already discussed the participants’ views that spoken word poetry does have the potential to reach a large number of people in a short span of time. This fact begs the question of whether that trend is actually occurring often enough and in enough accessible venues to effect change. Currently, spoken word in Saskatoon is limited mostly to Lydia’s Pub, obviously a licensed establishment that allows no minors. The Pub has become an excellent venue for the *Tonight It’s Poetry* series. Its atmosphere, staff, and clientele seem to generally support the artistic endeavours that unfold there. But my participants and I all support the expansion of spoken word into venues that welcome minors, such as schools. The art form can be a powerful vehicle for learning; there have been a number of times where I have learned a lot from listening to others’ poetry, and from the dialogue that ensues after one of my own performances.

To illustrate, I was at a national poetry festival in 2011, a year after my first performance at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word. In 2010, I performed a poem titled “Holes,” aimed at raising awareness about government apathy toward abysmal living conditions on some First Nations reserves. Métis spoken word poet and performer Moe Clark approached me one year after that performance and challenged me on a line in which I stated that those affected by the problem were without a voice. Looking back, I hate to admit that I even implied such a thing, but I did, even going farther to imply that I would speak on their behalf. Later, listening to Moe’s poetry and that of other Aboriginal spoken word artists, I learned that my words were not only misguided and stupid, but somewhat ironic. I could have heard the voice of Aboriginal Canadians all along, had I

only listened to them, and perhaps to the sage advice of Anne Bishop (1994) regarding becoming an ally. I have heard Verna St. Denis (2011), who is my supervisor in this study, reiterate the lesson many times; just because people aren't listening does not mean that Aboriginal people don't have a voice (personal communication). Indeed, the suppression of the Aboriginal voice is mainly linked to "censorship and discreditation" (Larocque, 1991, p. 75). Moe's challenge and Dr. St. Denis's lessons helped me grow and helped me change. I had clearly been blinded by my own non-Aboriginal privilege and entitlement, and allowed it to compromise the authenticity and validity of the solidarity that I proclaimed in "Holes." I hope that I can stand as an example of the transformative power of the spoken word and the dialogue that it can create.

I remember the frustration I felt at the liberal multiculturalism approach to race relations in my youth when I wrote at the end of a poem: "Now that I'm finally proud to be black, the world is colourblind." In a colourblind, coloursilent society, I am not encouraged to be publicly sad, angry, *or* proud about my own racial condition or that of the broader social world. For me, poetry has been a way, finally, to begin the forbidden dialogue. Breaking that oppressive silence in the way that poets do must certainly, in itself, represent a change in the ideological climate around issues of oppression. And that situation is just the beginning. Where there was only silence in some places, there is now speech, protest, poetry. It inspires me to imagine what these seeds may grow into.

Conclusion: The Case for School Slams

I want to conclude with comments on public education. From its onset, this study was aimed partially at examining the viability of the school slam in Saskatchewan; that is, to see how the participants saw spoken word unfolding in a school context, and to examine local curricular entry points. While all of my participants expressed an interest in spoken word from a very young age, only Zoey was exposed to it in a direct way by her schoolteachers; under the current model, schools do not seem to be supporting the genre in an impactful way. All of the participants noted that spoken word has a demonstrated currency among youth populations, just as it does among many other disenfranchised groups. Zoey remembered disliking traditional poetry in school, and told me why she thought spoken word was much more relevant to youth: "Often spoken word artists connect to the issues that are going on today, that are present and that will still like

grab you emotionally because you kind of know it's happening right outside, right here" (p. 2). Ahmad was also frustrated with the poetry he experienced in school, saying, "that's something I personally think that needs to be revamped because stuff like that, not even just me – no one – no one in the class could relate to" (p. 11). He even went on to say that the poetry he was forced to study in school may have blocked his access to and interest in spoken word: "that's why I didn't even really think much about performing spoken word, 'cause it's like that's kind of what it is here, you know? You gotta go to New York to really take it to the next level. This is all that people wanna hear about poetry is just that standard textbook stuff" (p. 12).

Key to understanding the need for the school slam is the fact that education is not neutral, and that "the organisation of knowledge that we are familiar with in school curricula was created by particular social processes, by particular people with particular points of view" (Connell, 1993, p. 30). Education is "a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions (Mohanty, 1990, p. 184, as cited in Ng, 2003, p. 214). Goodman (2001) argues that "White (Christian), middle-class, heterosexual norms pervade our culture. Schools are one place where this is evident" (p. 17). What these scholars suggest is that schools uphold a certain type of learning that, in turn, upholds a certain type of truth, one that often does not testify to the experience of the marginalized.

As stated earlier, some participants connected the idea of speaking their poetry to that of speaking the truth, their own truth. Tala stated, "I started realizing that kids want to hear that truth" (p. 8), a view which might explain her championing of spoken word as an educational tool in both schools and powwows. Elise echoed that support, stating, "...I think that in a high school context, it would be overwhelmingly positive in terms of its possibilities, you know. Outside of ... the bar environment" (p. 11). That bar environment is not only exclusive of minors, but brings with it the advent of alcohol, something that inspired Zoey to start her own chem-free open mic:

The reason why I started the open mic, though, was because I wanted to disassociate the alcohol from the arts and so that's why I created this open mic, and I'm so happy that we made it, right? So now it's just a matter of getting these young people to the open mic and that's a really big deal to me,

just because like art is pure, and I think we need to create that safe space for young people to share their art before they get introduced to alcohol and the arts, before it's normalized (p. 14).

Sara recounted the difficult time she had in her largely homophobic high school, stating that she likely started writing because of those tough times, and would love to see spoken word in schools as it might help young people find their voices (p. 14).

"...anything that's creative and allows people to express themselves better in a toxic environment, for me is great," she said (p. 14). Sara's experience with homophobia in school is not unique. Friend (1993) discussed the process of systematic exclusion, "whereby positive role models, messages, and images about lesbian, gay and bisexual people are publicly silenced in schools" (p. 125, as cited in Meyer, 2007, p. 7).

Racialized voices are similarly silenced in schools, where, most often, "we witness their cultural celebrations only, negating their struggles against racism," a way of "[masking] discomfoting racist practices" (Bedard, 2000, pp. 43-52). Such a view agrees with my experience.

When I was in school, my own poetry (and therefore my voice) was repressed. My teachers did not validate my preferred writing style, nor was I ever encouraged to foster it. I did well enough writing in a style that I did not identify with, but I did it only to please my teachers and succeed academically, getting little personal benefit from it at all. I love the way that spoken word seems to transcend restrictions and limitations in both style and content, and can only imagine how much more liberated I would feel now if I had come to encounter it in my school years. The existing renewed English Language Arts curricula would certainly support the implementation of spoken word as a key area of study.

In looking at the pertinent renewed ELA curricula (from Grades 9-11), all feature Broad Areas of Learning, reflecting "Saskatchewan's goals of education" (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, p. 2). The first of these areas is "Building Lifelong Learners" (p. 2), and maintains as its goal the authentic engagement of students in learning. Whereas students have been shown to be especially disengaged in their ELA classes nationwide (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009, p. 28), why not try introducing spoken word, a form of literacy with currency among young people? For examples of this currency, refer to the

next section, titled “Existing Models.” The second Broad Area of Learning is “Building a Sense of Self and Community.” In this area, students are to “learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. They use language to define who they are and to explore who they might become” (p. 2). I have already discussed how spoken word is a) an introspective tool for self-learning, b) an educational tool for learning about others and about “the other,” and c) how spoken word has had a positive impact on identity formation among participants. The final Broad Area of Learning refers to “Building Engaged Citizens,” wherein “students learn how language can empower them to make a difference in their personal, peer, family, and community lives. Language gives them a sense of agency and an ability to make a difference in their community and the world in which they live” (p. 2). This area seems largely about agency and personal and social change, which were examined in a previous section of this study. Without even getting into specific learning outcomes, one can see how spoken word poetry is philosophically congruent with some of the foundational elements of the Saskatchewan ELA curricula.

The Grade 10 ELA curriculum document (2011) states that an effective ELA program should be “purposeful, dynamic, fulfilling, and authentic” (p. 7), all descriptors that would seem to apply to spoken word. One of the suggested course units in that document is themed around “Equity and Ethics (Who and What is Right?; Empowerment; Degrees of Responsibility; Rights and Responsibilities; Justice and Fairness)” (p. 10), which seems a perfect fit for the social justice component of spoken word. Each of the renewed curricula maintain the same core goals for students. They are to 1) Comprehend and Respond, 2) Compose and Create, and 3) Assess and Reflect (Government of Saskatchewan, p. 14). In the ELA 20 document (2012), the first specific learning outcome under Comprehend and Respond is as follows:

- CR 20.1** View, listen to, read, comprehend, and respond to a variety of grade-appropriate First Nations, Métis, Saskatchewan, Canadian, and international texts that address:
- identity (e.g., Relationships with Family and Others);
 - social responsibility (e.g., Evolving Roles and Responsibilities); and

- social action (agency) (e.g., *The Past and the Present*) (Government of Saskatchewan, p. 14).

Again, spoken word seems an appropriate vehicle through which students may achieve the outcome. The first learning outcome listed under the second goal, Compose and Create, is for to students to “Create a range of visual, multimedia, oral, and written texts to explore” the same three bulleted points listed for the outcome above (p. 14). Under the third goal, the first outcome listed requires students to “Assess [their] own ability[ies] to view, listen, read, speak, write, and use other forms of representing effectively” (p. 14). All of the skills listed in this outcome are achievable through students engaging meaningfully with spoken word, from the writers’ workshop to the slam or performance. Finally, the curricula do explicitly note that reading poetry orally is a suitable activity for ELA learners to employ in their achievement of outcomes (p. 15). With anti-oppressive spoken word ventures, these learners can help to “challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools” and allow students to “question, explore, and seek alternative explanations” (Meyer, 2007, p. 12). Such a situation would represent a richer and more equitable learning model than that which is currently available to many students, and could help to provide them with an education that is at once critical and creative.

Existing Models

Spoken word is only slowly creeping into the high schools in Saskatchewan. In Saskatoon, I know of one formal spoken word club in a public high school. I have been involved in facilitating some discussion around the genre among teachers, and many of my spoken word colleagues, some who participated in this study have offered workshops and performances at local collegiates. Charles Hamilton, lead organizer of *Tonight It’s Poetry*, has been a sure catalyst for this type of work, himself a spoken word pioneer in Saskatchewan. Isaac Bond is another friend and poet who has made a commitment to exposing students to the genre and helping them to build spoken word skills through a collaborative initiative called *Write Out Loud*. But while Saskatchewan seems to be just getting started in its roll-out of spoken word among youth, and hopefully doesn’t get stopped, there are successful examples of effective youth and school-related spoken word

programs, nationally and elsewhere. For instance, the San Francisco Bay area non-profit organization *Youth Speaks*, founded in 1996, was responsible for organizing the first ever teen poetry slam in the US in 1997. Their project, *Brave New Voices*, which started as the first ever national youth slam, has been nationally broadcast on television and draws more than 500 competitors every year. *Youth Speaks* has been a catalyst for spoken word among youth and in schools, and proclaims a mission to empower youth toward social change. From that organization's website:

With ongoing, comprehensive programs in the San Francisco Bay Area serving 45,000 youth locally and national programs that serve over 250,000, Youth Speaks facilitates safe spaces within and outside of public institutions where youth can critically analyze, write and voice their own experiences through this powerful artistic medium [spoken word] to thousands of their peers (2012, "FAQ's," para. 2).

The program's conscious incorporation of critical analysis through spoken word is applicable to an anti-oppressive approach. The film *Louder than a Bomb*, released in 2011 by Siskel/Jacobs Productions, also shows the impact of spoken word in a youth context, chronicling a Chicago area poetry slam in which teams from sixty high schools compete. From the website of that film:

Rather than emphasize individual poets and performances, the structure of *Louder Than a Bomb* demands that kids work collaboratively with their peers, presenting, critiquing, and rewriting their pieces. To succeed, teams have to create an environment of mutual trust and support. For many kids, being a part of such an environment—in an academic context—is life-changing (Siskel/Jacobs Productions, 2011, "The Film," para. 3).

The webpage also notes that the film, "chronicles the stereotype-confounding stories of four teams as they prepare for and compete in the 2008 event ... This is not 'high school poetry' as we often think of it," it goes on, "...This is language as a joyful release, irrepressibly talented teenagers obsessed with making words dance" (2011, para. 4). A viewing of this powerful film is a convincing additive to the case for spoken word in schools. The film clearly shows how engagement with the genre boosts students' oral communication skills, creative skills, and, perhaps most importantly, confidence. In the

case of both *Brave New Voices* and *Louder than a Bomb*, we see racialized and otherwise oppressed youth finding their power through spoken word.

In Canada, youth in Victoria, BC are fortunate to experience *Victorious Voices*, the Victoria Secondary School Slam program, culminating in a yearly slam championship competition. Jeremy Loveday, an established Canadian spoken word artist, is the director of the three year-old program. “I was interested in spoken word in high school and never had an outlet for that so I thought it was important to give the students access,” he said in an interview with Monday Magazine’s Mary Green (2012, para. 7). Green also interviewed a student and *Victorious Voices* competitor, Kanika Jackson, whose poetry challenges the sexual identities of Adam and Eve, to demonstrate the type of critical discourse that the genre can facilitate. “I’m so much happier since I started with poetry,” she told the magazine. “I feel like everyone needs an outlet, whether it’s creative or a sport. Writing of any kind is a great way to get things out of your system” (para. 18).

Youth in Vancouver, BC are also lucky to have both the Vancouver Youth Poetry Slam, which runs monthly at Café Deux Soleils in that city and is organized by veteran spoken word artist RC Weslowski, as well as the Hullabaloo BC Youth Spoken Word Festival, also co-founded by RC Weslowski. In 2012, that festival hosted more than a dozen BC high school slam teams in a spoken word face-off (Werb, 2012). Hopefully, high school organizers in Saskatchewan will be able to learn from the existing successful Canadian models and begin offering Saskatchewan students the same life-changing opportunities that BC youth are embracing. This would be a major step toward increasing the presence of anti-oppressive education, albeit in an alternative way, in our schools. As well, it would certainly help in building cross-group solidarity among students, one of the intended outcomes of this study.

I have tried my best in this thesis to essentially share my knowledge of spoken poetry and my ever-growing love for it. In this final chapter, I cross-referenced all reported data with the existing, relevant literature around spoken word poetry, art and social justice, and anti-oppressive education, including the work of social theorists, feminist, anti-racist, and queer-positive scholars. I have reviewed the anti-oppressive aspects of the participants’ poetry, and I have done my best to make a case for the school

slam, one which is grounded in curriculum and based in evidence of successful precedent.

The main inquiry question in this study was: How does the act of creating and performing spoken word poetry influence the experiences of poets with marginalized identities? Through examining the interview data and the participants' poetry, as well as the existing literature, I have seen how anti-oppressive spoken word engagement has a positive impact on the participants personally, through its potential for healing, empowerment, and personal and interpersonal change. Participants also shared that listening to anti-oppressive spoken word can have a similar effect, showing the poetry's potential for interpersonal and social change, and especially for solidarity.

In order to build solidarity across privileged and disadvantaged groups, we must come to understand each other's experiences of life. One way to achieve this understanding is by listening to each other's stories, each other's poetry, if you will. But first, we need to facilitate this process by providing a means, by making the time, and by creating the space. These opportunities must be ongoing and they must be supported by the school system. When I think about my spoken word career, and my career as a high school English teacher, when I think about my students, past and present, many of whom face the struggles associated with life on the "other side of difference" (Norquay, 1993), I am hopeful. I am hopeful that spoken word will be a venue in which they may speak loudly and often, and that it will be a place in which others are invited to listen. This act of listening is important, as it amounts to community affirmation, which the participants' in this study referred to as a contributor to healing, empowerment, and solidarity. One of the participants of David Stovall's 2006 study on poetry, social justice and critical pedagogy in education demonstrates frustration at the lack of this type of affirmation in the absence of poetry:

Poetry (for teens) is a way to allow them to be heard...because when your [sic] 14 or 17, nobody's thinking about what the hell you got to say. People pay attention to what a little kid has to say...(but) when that little baby becomes 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, (it's) you either do what I do or now you get suspended, or get on punishment, or get kicked out the house...your music is crazy, I don't understand your music, I can't understand what those rappers

are saying...so you don't discuss it...you don't even try to understand it...you don't try to sit down and listen to it (p. 73).

Hopefully, the advent of the school slam, for which I have argued, will facilitate this important anti-oppressive exercise, in a way that engages youth and community alike.

There is, perhaps, no telling just how much I have learned from listening to the words of the remarkable poets who participated in this study, and from having undertaken such an extensive and exhilarating research endeavor, under such wonderful, intelligent direction. There may be no telling of this, at least, in the usual academic format. That is why I have chosen to end with an original poem, which is, for me, a way of processing, of sharing, of knowing. The poem, "A Forklift for Fortunes" (overleaf) is dedicated to Ahmad, Elise, Zoey, Tala, and Sara. You have shown how spoken word can help move us from the oblivion of Islamaphobia, sexism, racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and other oppressive structures into a world of knowledge, understanding, and justice. You are a wonder.

“A Forklift for Fortunes” by Khodi Dill

On the Sunday stage
A chameleon of porcupine straws
is spitting spastic spontaneous rage
onto bus stops and billboards, making bruises and cheekblush
in the centre
of the olde towne square.

A newsy for naysayers
A flyer for those grounded
in the saccharine trenches of ignorance there

With a forklift for fortunes and a tongue to queer Jesus
She seems to have forgotten her apology.
Calling only his god by some foreign name
feminine, fearing, striking, freed.

“Where are you? Without me.”

“Where are you without me?”

A roll call rant for the roles we play.

So that nothing marks a question but a questioning gaze
And a voice that rises
Like dust from the drum

Disobeying that ghastly grip of gravity's mitt
To take us all

up.

quieting never
and regenerating only
as it speaks.

Feminine, fearing, striking, feared

Reminding our daemons
that even a straw
can break the backs of beasts

And remains
the only hope of
men

who are drowning.

Link to video of poem:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb0qEA7pUV8&feature=youtu.be>

“It’s like this weapon of protection for me, and weapon of awareness ... I am no longer afraid to share this with you” (Tala, p. 7).

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you like about spoken word poetry in general?
3. What do you like about listening to spoken word poetry?
4. What else do you experience while listening to spoken word poetry?
5. How did you come to be involved with spoken word poetry?
6. What do you like about writing poetry? What else do you experience/how do you feel while writing? After writing?
7. What do you like about performing spoken word poetry? What else do you experience/how do you feel while performing? After performing?
8. Why do you choose to write about oppression and social justice issues?
9. How important is it to you to write about oppression and social justice? Why?
10. What benefits have you experienced from writing about your own experiences with oppression?
11. Would you like to share some of the experiences that you have chosen to write about? Why did you choose these experiences, in particular?
12. How has writing and performing spoken word poetry affected your life, generally?
13. How has listening to spoken word poetry affected your life, generally?
14. What role does spoken word poetry have as a part of your identity? Why?
15. What is it about the poetry slam format that you enjoy or dislike? Why?
16. What are your thoughts on belonging to a community of poets?
17. What was your experience with poetry like in school? With spoken word poetry in school?
18. Do you think that spoken word poetry should be more accessible in schools? Why or why not?
19. How would your life be different if you'd found out about spoken word poetry sooner?

Appendix B: List of Initial Codes

The numbers listed after each code represent the number of sources in which the code was used, and number of occurrences, respectively.

<input checked="" type="radio"/> Change	3	4
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Interpersonal Change	5	22
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Personal Change	4	24
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Social Change	3	13
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Def Poetry	1	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Dialogue or Interaction	5	34
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Diversity	1	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Educating	5	52
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Emotion	4	47
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Empowerment	5	62
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Entertainment	3	5
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Freedom	3	16
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Healing	5	46
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Hip hop	1	8
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Identity Formation	5	42
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Immediate	4	20
<input checked="" type="radio"/> In School	1	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Listener Discomfort	5	20
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Not in School	5	11
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Perceptions	4	11
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Physical Embodiment	4	21
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Purpose	2	5
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Reclaiming	3	5
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Responding to Oppression	5	33
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Risk	5	13
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Social Critique	2	6
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Solidarity	5	19
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Across Groups	3	9
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Among Group	2	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> From Allies	2	4
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Speaking the truth.	3	30
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Spiritual	2	5
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Support for School Slam	5	18
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Supportive Community	5	29
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Taboo	5	29
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Voice and Story	5	42
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Why isn't everyone doing this~	2	2
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Youth Attraction	5	15

Appendix C: List of Axial Codes

List represents categories created after axial coding, wherein only significantly trending codes were grouped, based on the framework developed in the literature review.

- **Healing**, Identity, Responding to Oppression/Social Critique, Speaking the Truth, Freedom, Physical Embodiment, Spiritual
- **Solidarity**, Supportive Community, Youth Attraction (School Slam), Perceptions
- **Change**, Educating, Dialogue/Interaction, Voice/Story, Speaking the Truth, Listener Discomfort, Risk
- **Empowerment**, Educating, Change, Speaking the Truth, Taboo, Voice/Story, Freedom, Physical Embodiment, Immediate (power of the moment), Reclaiming, Purpose, Hip hop

Appendix D: “Ghost of Billie Holiday” by Khodi Dill

This lady once told me that I was lucky, because black people don't age
And it's true that my grandmother bore the beauty of youth

But I wonder...

Do our faces not wrinkle because we bear the facelift of too much pulled hair?
Or because our expressions have been frozen with the shock of rape?
See at times at the altar
I fall and I wonder
How our bodies have been altered
By the passing of ships over bodies of water
By the lashing of whips over bodies of brothers

How our lips are enlarged from too many hits
Till they say we look like monkeys
Till they say we talk funny
But it's really because right here, education comes from money
So I diss the disproportionate spread of wealth
So I'm diabetic from the disproportionate spread of health
So the way I get rich is fist-over-hand
Clinging to ancestral ideals of wealth in distant lands
And it is true we must deal with the dealing of hands

Hands with white palms worn from all that Christian clapping
That once ran from Christians who were chasing and trapping
That once clung to a palm like life clings to a sapling
Hoping not to get taken
By the brand new colonial exploitation exploration, domination-subjugation – the
commodifying, uninspiring anti-integration
Call me African-Canadian

See, my story lies in too many tombs
Where I have searched for my sons and daughters
My story lies in too many moonrises
Spent wading these cracked feet in water

Water, despite an old fear seated in muscles that recall a fall and a futile thrashing about
A fear seated in lungs that recall a last breath taken in terror and wet salt

My story lies in the brands blazed and the scars raised on my skin like a relief map
See they labeled me black and then they labeled my back
So everywhere I lie I leave a legacy of lines like a
fingerprint

That's where my story resides
It's in those forty lines like forty acres I'm owed
Where forty trees might grow from the seeds that were sowed
My story is in hope
My story is a ghost of Kunte Kinte
My story is in the ghost of Billie Holiday

See my ancestors

hang

from my family tree.

“Like strange fruit for the crows to pluck”
If black people don't age, I wouldn't call it luck.

Appendix E: Research Ethics Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB)

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Verna St. Denis

DEPARTMENT
Educational Foundations

BEH#
11-293

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED
University of Saskatchewan

STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)
Cody Dill

FUNDER(S)
INTERNALLY FUNDED

TITLE
An Inquiry into the Anti-Oppressive Applications of Spoken Word Poetry

ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE
29-Oct-2011

APPROVAL ON
24-Nov-2011

APPROVAL OF:
Ethics Application
Consent Protocol

EXPIRY DATE
23-Nov-2012

Full Board Meeting

Date of Full Board Meeting:

Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics_review/



John Rigby, Chair
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Behavioural Research Ethics Board

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