

The Effect of Performance on Gender and Identity in Contemporary Poetry





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Abstract

This thesis aims to analyze what effect performance has had on contemporary poetry. This is based on the assumption that performance poetics like slam poetry, have not only changed poetry but also allowed poets to use performance to explore identity, authenticity and gender in new ways. It studies this by using the theories of Judith Butler on gender and subversion of identity, as well as looking at how the role of different performance arts has affected the performance aspect of slam. This does not only affect the genre of poetry, but also the role of the critical assessment of poetry. This is caused by the fact that critical assessment does not include the performance aspect of poetry as an element which can influence the textual poem. These specific fields will be investigated by analyzing Patricia Smith's poem "Skinhead". In short, this thesis tries to analyze how poets use the opening of the genre to explore identity, gender and authenticity in poetry, and how the performance affects contemporary poetry in the US today.

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to undertake an analysis of how performance is affecting gender and identity in contemporary poetry. Contemporary poetry today contains a multitude of subgenres including slam poetry, hip hop, performance poetry, poetry battles, and spoken word. This expansion of the genre has been occurring at the same time as the digital evolution which has had huge implications on contemporary poetry. Because of it the genre of poetry is expanding, and its relationship to the audience has not only gone digital but also granted it the opportunity to reach a whole new audience. This is caused by the fact that social media and recorded performances are giving access to a field that once seemed to solely exist within the academe. This platform enables the audience to experience performance poetry in the form it was intended.

One of the claims this thesis will try to analyze is whether this is caused by the fact that we are able to watch the live performance. Slam poetry is written to be performed, therefore, it can be argued that without the visual interpretation by the author, the poem does not reach its full potential. Another question is how the constant access we have to the visual performances of poetry, is changing the expression of identity in these texts. Performance poetry like slam poetry does not exist in isolation or juxtaposition with literary poetry, or the classic poetry reading. It does in fact use several factors of the poetry reading, as well as performance arts and theatre traditions. As a result, one of the questions this thesis has to answer is whether the textual aspect of the poem is altered because of the performance. This is in stark contrast with the ideas of academia which believes that the textual element is the only true and authentic poem.

Owing to the focus on performance and the significant popularity slam is experiencing, this made it natural to focus this thesis on slam poetry, and research whether it has affected contemporary poetry. Marc Smith argued that the introduction of slam poetry has humanized poetry performances and taken it away from its presumed “former highbrow airs of these events” (Somers-Willet, 4). Instead of being a recital in lecture format, the performance aspect of slam has radically changed the poet’s relationship with the text, opening up authorship to both the poet and the audience. As a result, the effect of the expansion of authorship has changed the ways in which the poems themselves conceive of identity. If the poem belongs to both author and audience, identity is expanded and opened to an entirely new liminal space between the two. This liminal space can only be experienced in performance; thus, it is crucial to look at how the performance might be changing the textual

aspect. This is caused by the fact that there is arguably a great difference in how poems are perceived when reading them in private compared to when they are performed.

This thesis looks at how the performance is changing poetry, how this has affected the public's relationship with literary poetry and whether this is the new path of poetry. It will do this by looking at contemporary and popular poetry and see how these have influenced classic poetry conventions. To do this, the thesis will focus its analysis on Patricia Smith's poem "Skinhead", which combines all of the factors and theories that this thesis needs to explore. By combining these theories in analyzing the performance, the effect of performance on contemporary poetry can be assessed.

In order to provide the necessary context, Chapter 1 will look at what contemporary poetry is and provide a frame for how it has evolved through in the twentieth and twenty-first century. It covers the role of poetry in the literary scene, the significance of orality in poetry, and how poetry is still changing. Chapter 2 provides the history of slam, the format of slam, the effect popular culture has had on slam and how slam is fighting to find its place within contemporary poetry. This chapter will also look at the history of the poetry reading and the role of performance in literary studies, as well as the importance of performance in slam and the future of poetry. Chapter 3 provides a description all the theories relevant to this thesis. Among these are Judith Butler's theories about gender and subversion of identity and the effect of discourse. It also looks at slam's relationship with the theatre in relation with the theories of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. It will also present the role of identity in life and performance, identity and persona poems, the importance of marginalized identities in slam and the need for authenticity in performance. Chapter 4, provides an historical background of the critical assessment of poetry and the issues academia has with regards to slam because of the lack of approved conventions in assessment. Chapter 5 will discuss and analyze Patricia Smith's poem "Skinhead", using the findings from this thesis, discussing these point by point, followed by a summarizing discussion of the findings. This discussion will cover the importance of performance and its effect on identity, authenticity and the text. Finally, chapter 6 will discuss the broader implications of the findings of this thesis.

1. The Genre of Poetry

1.1 When the Performance takes over

This thesis deals with what contemporary poetry is today. In this chapter the idea is to define what contemporary poetry is, what has changed as well as explaining where slam poetry belongs within this genre. Contemporary poetry as a genre that has gone through significant changes in the US from the 1950's, especially when taking into account Joseph Epstein's claims in his article "Who Killed Poetry" (1988), where he claimed that poetry was dying. While slam does define itself as poetry, there are still differing opinions about whether or if it belongs within the academic poetry scene. To be able to discuss poetry, one must first define what poetry is. This thesis will keep to Dana Gioia's definition of poetry from his essay "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture" (2003), dividing them into two categories, literary poetry and popular poetry.

1.2 The highest form of literature

Poetry has always been a big part of the literary scene, in fact, as Jonathan Culler points out in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (2011), "Once upon a time, literature meant above all poetry" (83). In spite of this, since the 1960's novels and short stories have surpassed poetry in popularity both with authors and readers. Today novels and short stories dominate the literary scene and have become the core of literary education (Culler 83). Though the high status of poetry might be surpassed by other genres, Vincent B. Leitch argues in spite of this that "academe continues to value poetry as personal expression, finely crafted artifact, historical document, culturally symptomatic discourse, and national showpiece" (104). This implies that poetry does have a special place at least within academe.

While poetry is still valued within academe, society has had a troubled relationship with poetry for several years. In August 1988, the ideas American society had about the status of poetry were challenged. The catalyst of that was the publication of "Who Killed Poetry" (1988), by Joseph Epstein. In his essay Epstein argued that contemporary poetry in the eighties was flourishing in a vacuum within the academic society. He claimed that the scene of poetry had lost its connection to the regular American audience, consequently, no matter how much poetry might have been honored; it was seldom read outside the very small circle of intellectuals, academics, and students. In fact, he claimed that the poetry community only existed within academia. As a result, the focus on academic poetry corrupted the authenticity of poetry outside the academia, particularly performative poetry and readings. Therefore, the

contemporary poet's role as an artist had shifted, making them only "a poetry professional" (8), with no connection to the audience outside academia.

Dana Gioia agreed with Epstein in his essay "Can Poetry Matter" (1992) and argued that: "American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer a part of the mainstream and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group" (1). Like Epstein, he claimed that poetry only existed as a subculture of poets within the academia. He credited some of this to the fact that numerous poets had been able to obtain work within creative writer programs, creating a society of poets within the academia, though one of the unfortunate results of this was that "a famous poet now means someone famous only to other poets" (1). Another consequence of this concentration of poets within the academic sphere, was that "the energy of American poetry, once directed outwards, had turned to focus inward and only being distributed within the poetry subculture that exists within the academic society" (1). In fact, Epstein even argued that "modern poetry, with the advance of modernism, had become an art for the happy few, and the happy few, it must be said, are rarely happier than when they are even fewer" (2). Which suggests that academe was quite comfortable with keeping poetry where it was. On the other hand, what both Epstein and Gioia argued was that without an audience outside of academia, poetry would not survive and might just become some obscure sort of anomaly only understood by a small privileged part of society, the academe.

In contrast with the claims made first by Epstein and then Gioia, Donald Hall critiqued their claims in his article, "Death to the Death of Poetry" (2001). There he argued that poetry had not died but rather many former readers stop reading contemporary poetry after studying or for various other reasons, and as a result: "They [the audience] left poetry; therefore, they blame poetry for leaving them" (2). Hall argued that more people in the United States read poetry than ever before, using the mere existence of the *American Poetry Review*, as an example that poetry was not only alive but thriving. Furthermore, he argued that the reason most contemporary poetry was often conceived as terrible was simply that most poetry of any moment has a tendency to be deemed terrible at that time (7). The problem then was not poetry itself but the public perception of poetry. This, he argued, could partially be caused by the lack of critical poetry reviews to help the audience understand the work. To resolve this issue, he suggested that this gap could be filled by the classic poetry reading. While this could be a possible solution he also warned that by reviewing the performance aspect of poetry, this could cause the issue of not knowing whether "we cherish the poem or its performance" (9). The result then being that the textual aspect might suffer in favor of the performance. While

this was not the center of Hall's arguments, this raised the question prevalent in this thesis of whether performance has begun to take over the role of interpreting poetry and creating the connection missing between poetry and its audience. If this is the case, coupled with the fact that US contemporary poetry is going through an ongoing transformation into entertainment and becoming marketable product, this means that to be able to define the genre of contemporary poetry today, one must look at what is happening in performance poetry.

1.3 Poetry or poetics, expansion of the genre

American poetry has been going through extensive changes in the twentieth and twenty-first century. According to Vincent B. Leitch in his book *Living with Theory* (2008), some critics have "given up talk of "poetry" all together in favor of "poetics"" (104). He uses poet-critic Mark Wallace's suggestion of five different networks of US poetry production as an example, where Wallace divides them into five different groups defining them as: "(1) formalism; (2) confessionalism; (3) identity-based verse; (4) speech-oriented poetics; and (5) the avant-garde" (104). In other words, the poetic universe today encompasses so many different characteristics, networks and forms, and as a result of this it is difficult to claim that only one them should be considered poetry (105). Leitch argues that this lack of clarity in defining what poetry is can be explained by the disorganization of the cultural field caused by postmodernism. According to him, the postmodern period is characterized by:

The rise of the new social movements, especially women's and ethnic civil rights; the recognition of multiculturalism as social reality; the collapse of the high/low cultural divide; the erosion of autonomous spheres, including aesthetic realms; the emergence of heterogeneous assemblages such as happenings, rock operas and "long poems" (that is sequences of discontinuous pieces); and the deconstruction of the modern Cartesian subject (105).

This tumultuous relationship with so many different social movements happening in society, as well as the commercialization of poetry, seems to reflect how the academe struggles with defining what contemporary poetry is. The last movement in literature was the post-modern, and slam is showing resistance to this, staging a sort of a canon or culture war against what has been. If this is the case, then the unrest in society is in fact affecting the academe.

Leitch further argues that since the American poetry scene is so vast and diverse, it is “virtually unknowable” (105). This seems to be caused by the fact that since the poetry scene is becoming so characterized by pluralism it is difficult to claim one centrality within poetry (105). Another factor to consider is the effect of poetry only existing within academia. Leitch argues that while poetry has been alive and well within the academia, the professional poet does not focus on poetry as art anymore but rather the education of students (109), therefore leaving the rest of society behind. The fact is that poets exist within the countless academic writing programs and creative writing programs where the regular audience is not, therefore the focus shifts from the regular audience to those who are a part of the academic community. Leitch further argues that poetry seems to be “wedded to the university and no longer to urban bohemia, it faces inward not outwards, losing connection and influence on society” (108). This inward focus reflects the ideas of both Gioia and Bernstein, the result is that the feedback and discussion is happening isolated within the academic society, between isolated specialists in their fields. Due to this poetry is only discussed with other poetry specialists (109).

1.4 The significance of orality in poetry

The ideas of how and what contemporary poetry should be defined as, is a difficult issue within the genre of poetry. This is especially an issue within performance poetry since in spite of its popularity it still does not adhere to conventional rules of assessment. This in turn makes it difficult to assess whether it should be considered poetry at all. To try to define what poetry is, this thesis uses the term popular poetry, which is a term coined Gioia in “*Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*” (2003). This aids in the categorization of oral poetry as well as introduce some of the main factors of what it is.

In *Disappearing Ink* (2003), there was a definite change from Gioia’s earlier arguments. As opposed to agreeing with Bernstein that poetry had lost its importance with the general audience, here he argued that “the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry” (24). Gioia defined popular poetry as poetry forms that exist outside the university or the literary establishment, including rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams, and performance poetry. The term literary poetry on the other hand, is used to encompass all written, high-art poetry of whatever school (24 & 27).

While Gioia’s definition of popular poetry is a general term for different types of poetry, the three main or most popular components of popular poetry are rap, cowboy poetry

and slam poetry. Rap was created by urban African-American males, and while it is unsupported by the official literary culture, it is thriving within popular culture (29). Not only is it popular in America it has also influenced artists from around the world becoming a well-known and international musical form. Helen Gregory, argues in her thesis “Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses” (2009), that there are links between styles of U.S. based slam poetry and rap, and that hip-hop has played a notable role in the evolution of U.S. slam. This has been particularly evident with US slam poets who use rapping, beatboxing and other techniques borrowed from hip-hop music in their performances (26). Cowboy poetry, on the other hand, is a revival of a style and represents the survival of verse and songs Western cattle drivers composed and performed to keep themselves entertained whilst working on the range. This form has experienced a huge revival with more than one hundred fifty festivals of cowboy poetry happening in Western America today (*Disappearing Ink* 29).

The third and last component of popular poetry, the poetry slam, is according to Gioia “an urban phenomenon”, originally stemming from Chicago (30). Just as the academic literary tradition struggles with defining what popular poetry is Gioia argues that it is nearly impossible to define slam poetry as a literary form because “the form encompasses the work of anyone in a bar or café with enough nerve (or alcohol) to get up and recite original verse to the crowd” (30). Owing to this, though he defined it as one part of popular poetry, even within that term there is some difficulty defining slam poetry’s place within the genre.

The emergence of popular poetry seemed to be in contradiction with what happened within academia and the distancing from the general audience. In spite of the fact that there are differing opinions of the quality of popular poetry, Gioia argues that what is reassuring about its emergence is that it seems as if it demonstrates “the abiding human need for poetry” (24). Which implies that though the American audience may have been distancing themselves from literary poetry, the mass consumption of popular poetry suggested that poetry was not dead. In addition to this, Gioia argued that the most surprising fact of popular poetry was that it “thrived without the support of the university or the literary establishment” (25). This coupled with its massive exposure in mass media could have enormous implications on the future of poetry. In spite of this, he argued that they are not the best example of new poetry of the period because when “individually considered as works of literary art, most of this work is undistinguished or worse, though some of it is smart and lively” (24). This might imply that the work may not be suitable for close scrutiny from literary critics, because of the lack of quality, no matter its popularity with the general audience.

These three components of popular poetry differ from traditional poetry in four fundamental ways. Popular poetry relies on oral performance, it comes from non-academic traditions, it revives the auditory form, and it has popular appeal (38). Of the four Gioia argues that “the most significant fact about the new popular poetry is that it is predominantly oral” (27). Not only does this mean that it is spoken and mostly performed improvisational, but also that the communication between the audience and the author mostly happens without the mediation of a text (27). This is significant since the poetry reading is traditionally the performance of a written text, but here the improvisational aspect in popular poetry relies more on a connection with the audience as well as improvisation. This highlights what is arguably the most substantial difference between popular poetry and literary poetry, the performance aspect. Popular poetry is unlike the academic poetry reading due to the fact that the performance is not a major aspect of the poetry reading, nor is the performance thought to have any significant effect or impact on the textual poem. In popular poetry like slam on the other hand, the performance is an important aspect. In slam poetry there is an active relationship between the author and the audience. Gioia argues that for the “literary people whose notion of poetry has been shaped by print culture, this oral mode of transmission probably seems both strikingly primitive and alarmingly contemporary” (28). This can be caused by the fact that poetry in preliterate cultures was oral and could imply that academe associates this orality as poetry retrogressing. This may also be caused by the fact that academe still focuses on the textual element, as the true form of poetry. Nevertheless, the mass media culture of today’s society is mainly oral, which might imply that it is leading Americans into a new form of oral culture (28).

The unclear role of the print culture in popular poetry makes it difficult for academic critics to assess it since critical assessment in traditional poetry conventions consist of an assessment based on comparing and evaluating the textual element to a canon of printed texts. However, popular poetry, and especially slam poetry, often exists only in oral form as well as occasionally being improvisatory. As a result, when or if there is a text, it has often been created *post factum*, by transcribing a recorded performance from audio- or videotape (28). This lack of an original textual poem makes a critical assessment nearly impossible since its textual existence seems to be more of an afterthought, rather than the main goal of the author.

The importance of the oral aspect of popular poetry is even further strengthened by Gioia’s argument that popular poetry considered innovative because of their “means of transmission, which almost entirely avoid the apparatus of print culture” (Gioia 28). This is an interesting argument specifically because it is the oral aspect of popular poetry which makes it

difficult for the academic community to accept popular poetry as a true form of poetry. In addition to this, Gioia argues that the shift from written to oral presentations has had vast implications on all contemporary poetry because the orality of popular poetry demonstrates how electronic media has transformed the way literature can be shared (28).

This emergence of electronic media and the possibilities of observing popular poetry and slam poetry anywhere at any time, can be claimed to have not only influenced poetry but most literary traditions. According to Gioia readers are turned into viewers and listeners, because of electronic media. This in turn, implies that the oral aspect of popular poetry may therefore effectively transform the identity of the author from a writer to entertainer, or “to a physical presence performing aloud” (29). This combination of the author and the controversy concerning the lack of significance of the text in slam poetry, can explain the struggle the academe has with defining where oral popular poetry belongs.

While there is no question whether contemporary poetry is generally going through big changes, the switch from the author existing mostly within the textual sphere, to becoming an active physical presence is a monumental change. Gioia goes so far as to claim that this change is as significant as the change European literature went through two and a half millennia ago when it moved from oral to written culture.

Just as European literature changed two and a half millennia ago as it moved from oral to written culture, so has popular poetry transformed itself as it moves from print culture to our audiovisual culture in which writing exists but is no longer the primary means of public discourse (28-29).

This implies that the reemergence of the oral aspect of popular poetry may be mirroring the changes which have happened and are still happening within popular culture, where the audiovisual aspect has taken over. It can therefore be argued that without incorporating the orality as an important aspect of popular poetry, academe will keep on struggling with defining where popular poetry belongs.

1.5 Is poetry evolving?

One of the factors which may have caused the return of the audience is the orality aspect of popular poetry. While the popularity of popular poetry is established in the name itself, the use of formality especially within slam poetry is an issue for the academic community. This

could mainly be due to the fact that that popular poetry uses rhyme and meter, a traditional preliterate form, which may be argued to create a sense of familiarity for the audience. While these traditional forms are not used by high-art contemporary literary poetry they are still respected by the poetry community. Therefore, the fact that slam poets reduce these classic forms to obvious rhymes and overly simple forms in performance may be contributing further to creating distance between the two.

According to Gioia twenty years ago rhyme and meter were viewed as “obsolete poetic techniques, discredited elitist, and European forms that had no place in the democratic future of American literature” (31). Since popular poetry like rap most certainly adheres to the rules of rhyme and meter, this creates issues with how popular poetry shall be defined. On the other hand, the emergence of New Formalism and New Narrative in literary poetry, as well as the immense success of rap and other forms of popular verse, show that contemporary poetry has revived form and narrative (31). Not only can this be one of the reasons for the distance between poets in print culture and poets using the orality of verse, it can imply that the divide may be caused by the earlier dismissive ideas about these forms having any place in American literature.

Gioia argues that by using traditional forms in performance the “metrical speech not only produces some heightened form of attention [...] it also seems to provide innate physical pleasure in both the auditor and orator” (32). This pleasure may derive from the fact that in the preliterate world, using meter and rhyme was the chosen form of oral performance. The effect of this is that there is a certain tranquility in listening to something which is familiar. As a result, it may be argued that one of the defining factors and strengths of oral poetry is that “much of its power comes from the audience understanding exactly the rules the artist follows” (36). Due to the importance of the audience in the performance, the author poet must be aware of the need of the audience to recognize and understand what the performer is conveying. Therefore, by playing with traditional forms which are recognized by the audience, this may aid in fulfilling their expectations of the performance.

In addition to this there is another important difference between literary and popular poetry, the fact that popular poetry attracts “a huge, paying public” (Gioia 36). He argues that “[while] high-art poetry requires state subsidy, private support, and academic subvention to survive, the new popular verse shamelessly thrives in the marketplace” (36). This may refer specifically to rap and hip-hop since its commercial market is worldwide and enormous, nevertheless slam is also becoming an international phenomenon. This popularity might be caused by the use of audiovisual tools and the Internet, which allows slam poetry to be shared

all over the world. This exposure through several different mediums does benefit the genre of popular poetry, on the other hand, there may also be a negative effect as well. This may be caused by the fact that there is a lack of any sort of quality assessment, therefore, anyone can share their work with the public. Owing to this, Gioia argues that “our commercialized, entertainment-oriented television-based culture has cheapened and trivialized all forms of public discourse. [...] the new popular poetry resembles entertainment more than art, [and] more often projects the fantasies of its consumers than it challenges their imagination” (37). While this does seem to discredit the new audience as slaves of entertainment rather than intellectual stimulation, Gioia does concede that one of its winning points is that it does show that the audience is “hungry for what poetry provides” (37). Which implies that poetry has a place in popular culture.

While the performance aspect is a huge part of popular poetry, Gioia does argue that the contemporary American poet also makes use of an oral performance method, the poetry reading. Although he claims that the basic medium for literary poetry is still books, he argues that those authors do rely heavily on attracting a readership by attracting an audience initially through an oral performance (39). This implies that literary poetry might have more in common with popular poetry than first thought.

This focus on the oral performance does contradict the former ideas within poetry and literature in general that the text is the major aspect of poetry. Gioia argues that: “Roland Barthes, a creature of print culture, saw the world as a text and announced, “the death of the author”. Anyone attentive to the new popular poetry sees the antithesis – the death of the text” (29). This death of the text can be argued to be caused by society and the general audience adapting to a new form of relationship to literature in general. Though the academic literary community struggles with accepting popular poetry since their “styles, subjects, and formats contradict many of the assumptions of literary poetry” (30), it has been welcomed by the audience originally thought to be lost. Popular poetry may not have influenced literary poetry to any significant degree yet, but there are changes going on within the literary poetry scene. No matter whether popular poetry is considered by the academic community as literary art or not, it can be argued that popular poetry has the potential to influence what contemporary poetry will be in the future.

2. Slam

The slam experience is marked by the atmosphere of the venues where they are performed. When one hears the word slam, the first thing that comes to mind to those who have experienced it, is perhaps a dimly lit bar, a small stage, a feeling of excitement in the air. One is not reminded of a high-brow affair of intellectuals clad in their distinctive blazers with leather-patches, or the hush of a room when the well-renowned author steps on stage. A feeling of inadequacy in many audience members who do not have the tools known by the inaugurated to understand the language of the author on stage. Slam on the other hand, feels a bit dirty, simple and easy to enjoy, which was the initial idea.

2.1 The Beginning

It can be argued that slam is considered to be controversial within the academic community because it deliberately breaks with traditional ideas of the performance of poetry. According to Susan Somers-Willett in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), slam began in the summer of 1986. Marc Smith, a white Chicago construction worker and poet, decided to create a new venue for the poetry audience “outside of the sanctioned space of the academy” (3). This idea that that slam is not a part of the academe is supported by Gioia. In fact, he argues that a significant factor of popular poetry is that it emerged outside established literary life (*Disappearing Ink* 29). As a result, the discussion of whether slam is a part of contemporary poetry must go beyond traditional academic ideas.

According to Somers-Willett, slam was born as an opposition to the strict format of academic poetry reading when Smith ran out of material to complete a set during an ensemble show at the Green Mill. He held a mock competition in the show’s final set, where he let the audience judge the poems performed onstage, first with boos and applause which later evolved into numeric scores (8). The audience approved of the format, and Smith made the competition a regular attraction on Sunday nights at the Green Mill. The consequence was that “among the clinking tumblers of whiskey and wafts of cigarette smoke, that the Uptown Poetry Slam was born” (4).

Smith had experience with the traditional poetry readings where performances consisted mostly of poets reading to poets: “if you ever wanted to read your poetry anywhere, [it was] almost always an academic who set it up” (3). Thus, there was always some pressure

on the performer to stay within the formal constraints of the format expected by the academic society, which was what Smith was revolting against.

While poetry readings were open for all audiences, Smith claimed that attendance at academic poetry readings were poor and that the audience tended to view the readings with disdain (3). This negativity concerning poetry readings were according to Smith caused by how it was presented, without consideration to the audience or atmosphere. He argued that it was “a lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or the pacing of the event” (3). With Smith’s format he presented the audience with a highly interactive, theatrical, physical, and immediate relationship with the author on stage (3). The idea was to create a setting where the public would again feel a connection with what was happening on stage, instead of the formal set up known from the poetry readings. The idea of the poets wanting their poem to live forever has been substituted by a society which exists in a setting where they need instantaneous reactions. This has also affected the poets and can be argued to be caused by the fact that we have constant access to the world at all times through the digital and global life we lead. Smith created slam in a countercultural atmosphere which revealed in opposing traditional ideas of what poetry performances were supposed to be (4).

This revolt against traditions is according to Gregory (2009), caused in part by the fact that slam feels like “poetry with attitude” (21). Slam is able to give poetry a new edge that traditional poetry lacks. This edge may come from its connection and mixed roots with the other styles within popular poetry, since the focus on style, authenticity, performance and identity, has a lot in common with the idea of realness and attitude craved within the rap and hip-hop culture (Somers-Willett 12). In addition to this, the focus slam puts on pluralism, marginalized identities, and acting as an open forum where anyone can perform, might be some of the reasons why slam has become popular within so many different and marginalized groups. In fact, Gioia argues that slam was “initially developed by individuals marginalized by intellectual and academic society” (*Disappearing Ink* 29). Therefore, the largest influencers of what could be argued to be considered the new path of poetry, did not exist in or belong to the academic sphere.

Slams connection with marginalized identities and opposition to mainstream culture has similarities with hip hop culture. However, it can be argued that hip hop has an expectation of certain racial markers which is caused by the fact that it consists mostly of African-Americans performers, at least within the original American market. Somers-Willett discusses this further in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (2009), where she argues that hip-hop music and culture has funneled a lot of poets and the audience into slam.

Another factor that could account for the popularity of slam is the fact that slam draws on the conventions of theater, live music as well as other performance-based arts, and therefore introduces new ways and fresh ideas of how poetry should be defined and valued. Gregory argues that by doing this slam is able to challenge existing definitions of what poetry is and introduce new ways of how poetry should be defined, due to this it could possibly change the face of poetry (67). This claim is still considered quite controversial within the literary community and might be the cause for the numerous poets and critics within academe who are quite opposed to slam. One of the arguments is that slam, by emphasizing performance and competition, devalues the text which by many is deemed to be the only true literary form. This Gregory claims is a countermeasure to try to diminish the fact that the emergence of slam is challenging conventions and what contemporary poetry is. As a result, by denying slam its place within literary conventions the fight within poetry can be stopped, or at least delayed (67). Whether or not slam belongs in contemporary poetry can be argued to depend on the value put on the textual element of poetry.

2.2 How does slam work – the format?

It can be argued that slam is considered as controversial within the academic community because it deliberately breaks with traditional ideas of the performance of poetry. According to Susan Somers-Willett in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), slam began in the summer of 1986. Marc Smith, a white Chicago construction worker and poet, decided to create a new venue for the poetry audience “outside of the sanctioned space of the academy” (3). This idea that that slam is not a part of the academe is supported by Gioia. In fact, he argues that a significant factor of popular poetry is that it emerged outside established literary life (*Disappearing Ink* 29). As a result, the discussion of whether slam is a part of contemporary poetry must go beyond traditional academic ideas.

According to Somers-Willett, slam was born as an opposition to the strict format of academic poetry reading when Smith ran out of material to complete a set during an ensemble show at the Green Mill. He held a mock competition in the show’s final set, where he let the audience judge the poems performed onstage, first with boos and applause which later evolved into numeric scores (8). The audience approved of the format, and Smith made the competition a regular attraction on Sunday nights at the Green Mill. The consequence was that “among the clinking tumblers of whiskey and wafts of cigarette smoke, that the Uptown

Poetry Slam was born” (4). Smith had experience with the traditional poetry readings where performances consisted mostly of poets reading to poets: “if you ever wanted to read your poetry anywhere, [it was] almost always an academic set it up” (3). Thus, there was always some pressure on the performer to stay within the formal constraints of the format expected by the academic society, which was what Smith was revolting against.

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2.3 What has popular culture done for slam?

Slam has a unique asset over other poetries because of its powerful arena of distribution. While originally it was centered around live performances that had to be seen live at a venue to be experienced, the format was able to cross over to popular culture. This happened through the spoken word poetry television series *Def Poetry Jam*, as well as online video-sharing websites like YouTube. This allowed for a larger audience to be reached and eventually had a part in commercializing slam. Whether this has been a positive thing for slam has differing answers. Slam may not get the credit it wants within the academic literary community, as a result this may hinder its position within the poetry scene, on the other hand because of its commercial value and distribution it has had a large influence on the poetry audience.

According to Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, in her book *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (2008), slam experienced reaching a whole new audience when the spoken word poetry television series *Def Poetry Jam*, aired on HBO between 2002 and 2007. The show was hosted by underground hip-hop

icon Mos Def and featured spoken word artists who performed their work in three-minute slots, similar to the slam poetry format, though without the scoring and judges (261). The show featured many of established poets as well as hip-hop artists, film and TV stars. Aptowicz argues that the effect of *Def Poetry* was felt in several areas, contributing to the “marriage between hip-hop and spoken word” (262). The format introduced slam to an audience sitting at home and contributed to the fact that the audience which chose to join the slam performances were familiar with the format in the slam competitions. This can be argued to have affected not only the popularity but also the atmosphere at the performances.

The performers who joined *Def Poetry* experienced that their path to the collegiate sphere of performance became easier. Before participation on *Def Poetry* was a possibility, the highest accolade a slam poet could hope to achieve was a Nation Slam championship (262). That could be quite a long process without any guarantee that they would even make a team at the end. The emergence of these performers on the college performance scene may have affected and contributed to the acknowledgment of slam within the academic community. Before *Def Poetry* it was mainly performers who had won the top 5 spots of National Poetry that were touring and performing while after *Def Poetry* the college market was flooded with poets having proven their worth by scoring a spot on the show. Aptowicz argues that this may have had a positive effect on the slam poetry scene when it came to public exposure, nevertheless it may also have affected it negatively since the road to becoming famous and acclaimed now more relied on the poets’ possibilities of being on the show and make a name for themselves that way, rather than following the traditional path of partaking in the slam poetry scene (263). Whether participation on the show was correct to use as a level of judging the quality of the poet is questionable. Especially since the show could have anywhere from six to ten performers in each episode as well as the six seasons having anywhere from six episodes to ten episodes a season, therefore compared to the top five NPS winners touring the college sphere each year the market was flooded with slam poets.

This is in stark contrast to the earlier ideas in the slam community regarding the future after slam for slam winners. According to Aptowicz for the poets of the early days of slam, the reality was that to be able to pursue a long-term career in writing and to be taken seriously as poets, they had to leave slam behind (263). However, the slam poets who experienced the popularity of slam in the wake of *Def Poetry* were offered lucrative college performances, spots on the show, voiceover recordings that were used to for commercial purposes and in general made the most of the popularity this exposure made possible (263). This is possibly

due to the combination of the focus slam has on the performance aspect as well as the commercialization of slam. Slam poets seem to be welcome, however, this is a tentative balance. According to Aptowicz

there has always been a certain level of perceived hostility between the poetry slam and academia. Poetry slam, in embracing the populist nature of its existence, can be seen as somewhat anti-academic, while academia, with its emphasis on craft and rewarding lasting, important work, can be seen as anti-slam (316).

While the academic community still struggles with placing slam within the poetry genre, there are former slam competitors who successfully enter academia. In fact, slam does exist within academia already. There are slam competitions being held, there are slam teams in colleges, and teams are being funded by universities. This implies that slam is tentatively finding its place within academia. Somers-Willett argues that the role of slam may not be to create more tension towards academia, but rather to create a bridge between the different audiences of poetry (15). Which could imply that slams influence on contemporary poetry has only just begun. Though, on the other hand, she does argue that the consequence of this recognition may be that slam “like Beat or Black Arts poetry, [may] become assimilated into the academy or dominant cultures” (135).

2.4 Finding its place

Slam seems to have found a way into academia even though academic community struggles with placing slam within the poetry genre. Two of the poets Aptowicz mentions in her book are Jeffrey McDaniel who has been published twice in *Best American Poetry* (1994 & 2010) and is currently teaching poetry at Sarah Lawrence, and Ishle Yi Park who was a touring cast member of *Def Poetry Jam*, as well as the Poet Laureate of Queens from 2004 to 2007. Park has also been published in *Best American Poetry* in 2003 (Aptowicz 298). These examples show that there is a tentative balance going on, while slam is not yet recognized fully as a valid member of academia, there are poets who are able to cross over.

While slam poets are becoming a part of the academic poetry community, there are critical voices that are concerned with the effect this will have on poetry in general. In her book Aptowicz interviews John S. Hall, a poet from within the New York City spoken word scene familiar with the poets and poetry performed in them. Hall is also known for his

skepticism of the role the poetry slam has played and is playing within the American poetry scene (287). When answering the question of whether good poets have been led astray by slam he answered: “slam poetry draws a certain type of person who would never have been an academic page poet, or who would never have been drawn to poetry in the first place” (299). It can therefore be argued that slam functions as an intermediate connecting the general audience with poetry. Hall further argues that the function of slam is to get laypeople involved in poetry, them being the people who would normally not listen or feel inspired to write poetry to do exactly that (290). This could imply that slam poetry has opened up the genre of poetry in general to an audience that might have been hesitant to try to their hand at academic literary poetry.

Though this connection with the laypeople seems to give slam poetry a positive image, he goes on to say that: “the prevalence of slam poetry may have discouraged some people from being poets who may have been great poets because they felt, *I can't compete and this is what poetry is now*” (299). This may be caused by the fact that the performance aspect of slam poetry can seem discouraging to those authors who are not comfortable with the oral format in slam poetry, therefore, keeping them from contributing to contemporary poetry. In fact, Hall argues that because of the limited format in slam, one does not get a sense of the poet's range or whether they actually have one (297). This may be caused by the format which does not leave much room for the poets to share extensive amounts of their work. Since the set-up is based on the competition aspect, there is no room to show extensive examples of what the poet is about.

The academic community has several other issues with slam, from the commercialization, to the competition aspect to the focus on performance. These seem to be some of the major causes to why academic community struggles with acknowledging it as a part of the literary community. While commercializing slam poetry might have opened the world of slam up to a larger audience, there are voices that claim that it has rather hurt the genre of poetry than help it, because slam only promotes one type of poetry, specifically designed to win a competition, not to move the reader. This does seem to give a gloomy picture of what slam has done to contemporary poetry, on the other hand, the reality is that it has opened slam up to a new audience. Lesley Wheeler argues that this is the case in her book *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920's to the Present* (2008), where she claims that

Slam did not emerge suddenly as a novel alternative to the stale commonplaces of academic reading practices: it resembles and is indebted to other counter-culture poetic modes. Further, slam is becoming an institution in its own right, with some of its most well known practitioners pursuing and achieving academic credentials, publication, and employment (129).

The reality is that even though there are differing opinions of what whether or not slam has had a positive effect on the poetry community, there is no question that it has created a new audience for poetry.

2.5 The performance of it all

While performance has not seemed to be at the forefront of literary studies, there are several academics who argue that the performance is an important and vital part of poetry. The classic poetry readings, which are fairly common within academic setting, are often viewed as secondary to the written text. This implies that the performance is considered as only being a method to display the textual poem, and that the performance does not have any effect on the poem itself. This is in stark contrast to what happens in the performance of slam poetry. There the performance aspect is an integral part of how the poem is interpreted. Though the convention of performance of poetry does not seem to be acknowledged as a critical tool in assessing poetry, it is therefore intriguing to argue whether the performance aspect may affect not only slam poetry, but poetry in general.

2.5.1 The Poetry Performance

Epstein states in “Who Killed Poetry?” (1988), that the traditional poetry readings were mostly performed within the academic community and followed a standard format of the poet sharing his text-based work to a hushed audience. The poetry reading then functioned as a somber setting, formal and closely linked to a lecture format where the author focused on performing his or her textual work. The poetry reading is a format recognizable for those familiar with poetry. It does not intend to give the audience an elevated sense of what the poem is about, rather it is instead only intended to be a recital of the textual work.

Lesley Wheeler speculates in her book *Voicing American poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (2008), on the role of the contemporary poetry reading in the US. According to her the contemporary poetry reading has been a part of the

poetry scene in the US from the 1950's, when poets started publicly sounding their own poetry in various venues "including universities, bars, bookstores, and festivals" (128). She argues that the contemporary poetry reading has evolved from existing only within a traditional academic lecture setting, where the author stands in front of an unengaged audience and presents their textual poetry which mostly benefits the insiders of the academic poetry's institutions (128).

One of the questions she poses is why the contemporary poetry reading has not evolved more than it has since the effect of oral publication can have a tremendous impact on the exposure of their work. She argues that performing in slam or academic circuits, in bars or independent bookstores or festivals, may in fact reach far more listeners which could be potential readers, than readers through book sales (128). This can be argued to imply that the reluctance of the academic poetry community to view the poetry performance as an important tool for contemporary poetry might be hurting its exposure and connection with the audience.

The opportunity for exposure is not the only element under discussion when it comes to the poetry performance. Charles Bernstein in his book *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), claims that poetry needs to be sounded to be heard, "whether in a process of active, or interactive, reading of a work or by the poet importance" (7). He further argues that "unsounded poetry remains inert marks on a page, waiting to be called into used by saying, or hearing, the words aloud" (7). This would seem to imply that by performing the poetry, the poem can be elevated in the performance. Bernstein further argues that the poetry reading is a focal point not only because it gives life to the work, it also gives the performer the opportunity to emphasize unscripted aspects of the text which he or she finds important. As a result, it can leave the audience with a feeling of connection with the author, since the author is the one most adept to convey both meaning and language of their work. He explains this by claiming that:

If the poetry reading provides unscripted elements for the performer, it also provides special possibilities for the listener, from direct response to the work, ranging from laughter to derision; to the pleasure of getting lost in language that surges forward, allowing the mind to wander in the presence of words (7).

Therefore, it can be argued that another effect of orality in performance is that it allows the audience to partake in the experience freely, without so much focus on conventional critical methods like close reading. This implies that the poetry reading does not only benefit the

author but also the audience who are free to process the work without the restraints of the textual aspect.

While there may be benefits to the traditional poetry reading, this does not change the fact that the audience is there to see the poet reading or voicing the textual poem rather than performing it. Thus, when poets stay within the established literary academic poetry tradition, these poets are able to produce work that is easily shareable with the audience. This is mainly caused by the fact that the audience is familiar and comfortable with that format, and therefore know how to assess, process and evaluate the work. According to Conventionalist theorists “literary conventions and specific, strategic reading behaviors define poetry and direct the use of the poem’s textual features” (Hanauer 566). Therefore, poetry which meets these conventions is easier to produce and more likely to gain recognition by the audience because they are familiar with how to critically assess them.

This focus on familiar conventions seems to be keeping the poetry reading within the classic conventions of critical assessment. On the other hand, Bernstein argues that the increased use of poetry readings has taught the poetry audience a certain set of acoustic modalities. By doing this, it has created new conventions not only with the poetry reading itself but also amongst the audience. In fact, he argues that these new conventions are internalized and applied to further reading of poetic texts. Therefore, even though these conventions are created through an oral, acoustic setting, these conventions are actually affecting the personal and quiet reading experience as well (7).

In a reading, the poet can both anticipate and control a reader’s relation to the text. The result is that the performance aspect of a textual poem does not diminish the performance of the text, rather the performance may be able to add another dimension to the poem. Ultimately this can mean that if the poet is trying to use the performance as a tool to enhance the poem, one can argue that the poet is able to do this by using the audience as an interactive part of the performance. Middleton (1998), further establishes this argument by claiming that silent reading and performance should not be viewed as exclusive alternatives of experiencing poetry, but rather that they jointly contribute to understanding poems and may even be necessary for unskilled readers to grasp the intent of the author (286). Another important factor may be that the audience has a certain need for there to be an identifiable author for a text performed, since an author may give a particular sense to that text. Wheeler agrees with this and argues that the audience is aware that the performer on stage is able to do something they are not (128).

While Bernstein does claim that there are positive aspects of poetry readings, he also declares that it is not the poet that is in focus in the performance but rather that: “The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work not the one who composed it” (13). In short, he argues that the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem (13). Consequently, though he is adding importance to the performance itself as a tool for poetry, he does so by emphasizing that it is the work or textual poem that is in focus. In fact, it may even be argued that Bernstein is claiming that the performer does not change nor add to the meaning of the poem.

In agreement with this Middleton argues in “The Contemporary Poetry Reading” (1998), that the printed poem is studied as the true and authentic version of the poem. Therefore, the oral presentations of poetry only seek to reflect it as accurately as possible (295). On the other hand, Middleton also argues that it is important to note that the textual sphere of the poem is not its only aspect, since all reading of poetry both silent and public depends on socially and culturally decided interpretations and methods which are acknowledged within that society. If this is the case, with changing social and cultural interpretations the poetry reading may be gaining more importance. Even so, this is dependent on the value that society puts on performance.

Bernstein, agrees with Middleton’s idea and claims that contemporary poetry in the twentieth-century has been practiced as a performance art (3). In other words, he claims that contemporary poetry has not only existed in the textual sphere but rather has evolved into performance. In fact, claiming that performance has had a crucial importance to the practice of the poetry of the twentieth century (3). This might suggest that without performance, poetry would not be where it is today.

While acknowledging the effect performance has on poetry Bernstein also wants to question the perceived relationship the author has with his or her performance and the original text. Even going as far as claiming that he wanted to “overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is the primary and that the recitation of performance of a poem by the poet is secondary, and fundamentally inconsequential to the ‘poem itself’” (8). This shift where the textual element is not the primary part of poetry, but rather that the performance, is a significant argument since one of the major disagreements within the poetry community is whether the performance aspect adds to the experience of the poem and poetry in general or diminishes it. This is especially important since the traditional concept of poetry focused exclusively on analyzing the textual aspect of the poem performed

rather than analyzing the performance of it. Because of this performance has been viewed as just a medium used to share the textual poem.

The reality is that the format of close reading is the basis of studying literary theory. While it may not have been its original intent, the fact that the poetry reading has become so common has contributed to teaching the poetry audience how to appreciate oral poetry. Not only does this affect the expectations the audience has of the poet on stage, it may also affect their own personal reading. The result is that the audiences personal reading of a poem before and after hearing it performed by the author itself may be affected. The poem itself is affected by the voice of the author, his or her pronunciation, breathing pauses, inflections etc. While it may not change the meaning of the poem itself, it does color your experience as a reader. Not only may it give another aspect of the text itself, the audience does get the pleasure just experiencing, instead of scrutinizing a text and looking for hidden meanings. You are free to process the work, what it does to you and just feel.

3. Theoretical Orientation

Chapter 3 provides a description of Judith Butler's theories about gender and subversion of identity and the effect of discourse. It also looks at slam's relationship with the theatre in relation with the theories of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. By using these theories this thesis will look at the role of the audience in performance. These are some key theories which will be used in the analysis of "Skinhead".

3.1 Judith Butler and Gender

Slam has an enormous focus on performance, combining this with the ideas of Judith Butler and her ideas of performativity and identity, creates an interesting discussion of how discourse in slam affects identity and authenticity. If we look at the discourse in slam as needing the approval of the slam audience, this imitates how the discourse which decides your gender is created by society. Therefore, by using the concept of Butler's theory of the performativity of gender on the concept of authenticity of identity in slam, this can help explain how authenticity is created by the use of discourse.

Identity and performance have been major issues in recent scholarship, particularly since Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Her work has had an enormous effect on gender studies. One of the arguments Butler put forward is that trying to assert women as only a group with common characteristics and interests just served to reinforce the binary view of gender relations. She argues that instead of empowering women and opening up the possibility that a person is able to form and choose their own individuality, this rather puts restrictions on identity. Therefore, if one is classified as a woman it is not the only thing one is, because the terms of what a gender is, is constituted differently in different historic and cultural contexts. This is "because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (6). Because these identities are created by language and discourse, as well as being socially and culturally constructed, the consequence is that gender in itself does not exist without the socially and culturally constructed discourse.

As well as not existing without constructed discourse, Butler argues that gender should not be viewed as a set or fixed part of a person. This is caused by the fact that social, historical and anthropological positions understand gender as "a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts" (15). Thus, the gender of a person should not be viewed as something fixed or definite, but rather as a variable that is changeable depending on

different contexts or different times. This is a sensitive subject since our ideas of gender are based on our own personal experience of what gender you define yourself as. It might seem tantalizing to be able to choose who you are, but according to Butler this is not possible. Her argument is that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (43). These repeated acts are already determined by socially and culturally constituted frames within one’s society, and one has only a limited number of acts available that one can choose to show that constrained choice of gender style. What this means is that gender is performative and brings identities into existence through acts and is not an expression of a pre-existing reality.

Within modern day society, there has been a call for broader gender categories since many individuals are in the position where they do not identify with some, or in some cases most aspects of what their perceived biological sex which they are assigned to. Butler challenges the distinctions made between sex and gender by arguing that both sex and gender is performative, the effect of this is that there exists no identity behind the socially constructed acts that expresses them. In other words, that both gender and sex are the results of cultural discourses, discursively constructed because of, and by the social discourses of gender. She argues that “the meaning of gender is inseparable from the cultural and political intersections within which it is produced and maintained” (6), therefore it does not derive naturally from the biological sex of the individual. This means that our idea of being either this or that gender is only an effect of culturally influenced acts.

According to Butler “gender is an act [because of] the effects of subtle and politically enforced performativity” (187). She argues that gender is socially constructed, as a result the nonverbal communication and language that we use are a part of social constructions that define and maintain our identities. Claiming that instead of our identity being the source of our behavior, she turns it on its head and argues that it is our performance or acts that decide our identity. Therefore, there exists no universal gender because the gender itself is performed and is open to interpretation by those viewing the performance. In fact, the performance of gender itself creates gender.

Butler’s ideas about performativity are an adaptation of J.L. Austin’s concept of the performative, “a type of speech that performs and action” (Buchanan 364). Butler combines the concept of Austin’s performative with speech-act theory and applies it to the domain of sexual difference. By doing this she is able to demonstrate that the production of gender is in fact a matter of performativity (Macey 53). This implies that there is no natural gender or body that exists before the socially created cultural inscription. Because society genders

everyone, there is no existence that is not inherently social, gender is therefore not something one is, but rather it is something one does. Thus, by one's actions and by performing the culturally regulated acts decided by society one's gender is established. These acts are regulated by society therefore, one is not free to choose what gender one wants to act. The gendered behavioral performances are in fact not chosen by the performer, but by society. Not only does the performative produce a series of effects, the result is that one acts in certain ways which reinforces one's identity as a man or a woman.

Butler therefore redefines gender as an action humans are compelled to perform by societal and cultural rules, rather than a state of being or bodily function. Using men performing in drag as an example she argues that because gender can be imitated, which reveals the imitative structure of gender itself. This means that gender in itself doesn't have an essence, intrinsic nature or identity. (Preface 1999, xiv- xv) To explain this lack of essence, Butler uses parody as an example and argues that "practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were" (200). She explains this concept with the idea that drag performers are able to perform the gender, using speech acts and non-verbal communication, that are socially and culturally understood, therefore, making it easily recognizable for the audience that they are portraying or performing as the opposite gender of their own. By doing this they are able to parody the notion that there is an original or primary gender. Performing in drag therefore reveals the imitative structure of gender because "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (175).

What Butler is in fact arguing is that instead of identity being something that we convey with speech acts and non-verbal communication from within, someone being a male or female is not an identity from within nor an internal reality or fact, but rather a phenomenon which is produced and reproduced by these set cultural codes all the time. Due to this gender is not a core aspect of our identity but rather a performance, or how we behave at different times. These cultural codes are controlled by our speech acts and non-verbal communication which again are controlled by society. Therefore, claiming that this type of speech, as well as non-verbal communication, is in fact, performing the action of creating gender. As a result, the cultural codes which are controlled by our speech acts and non-verbal communication are actually expressed through discourse expressed performativity. In other words, language in itself is performative, because it does not just transmit information but also performs acts by repeating established discursive practices or certain ways of doing

things. This does not imply that all speech acts are necessarily performative, rather that they may be.

Butler emphasizes that there is a difference between performance and performativity. While performance requires that there is a preexisting subject, performativity on the other hand contests the very notion of there being a subject. As a result, if gender is performed, it means that one has taken on a role, acting in a certain way, and this behavior is crucial to the gender that one is and the gender that one presents to the world. While performativity on the other hand means that it produces a series of effects. As a result, by our actions and behavior we strengthen the impression that we are a certain gender. Since these gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, this means that there is no gender which precedes language. Therefore, one can argue that it is language and discourse that creates gender.

Butler is in fact arguing that the gender categories do not exist outside of the discourse created by societies culturally and socially constructed rules of how that gender is supposed to be, or that the meanings in discourse are not fixed, and discourse is creating the act. Therefore, it can be argued that there is no fixed connection between the discursive oral identity and the body that identity refers to. This strengthens the idea Butler is introducing that gender is fluid rather than fixed. Butler is in fact arguing that gender in itself without performativity is nothing.

Butler further argues that there are actually three contingent dimensions which are of significant corporeality, those being: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. These are crucial to performance because:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender and gender and performance (187).

Therefore, when a male is performing in drag they are consciously taking on the constructed and performative nature of the socially and culturally constructed rules for how a woman shall behave. The consequence of this is that when males take on the act of what society perceives as a female act, they can perform an imitation of the gender so that the audience understands without any further exact verbal explanation that they are female. This is because these socially and culturally created patterns are such an integral part of society and ingrained in us. What this means is that we can choose to decide which aspects of available gender identities

we wish to perform. On the other hand, this does not mean that we can make the choice of not having any gender identity at all. The reason we can't do that is because society with its rules is always imposing some sort of gender upon us. The fact is that gender needs two premises to work, both the deeply embedded cultural constructs made by society as well as the materialization or performance of those cultural constructions by the subjects in question.

3.1.1 Performance, discourse and slam

When applying Butlers theories to slam poetry the importance of the need of the audience to experience a true identity that the audience can believe in is important. In spite of this there are questions regarding who creates these identities. The idea that even the identity the performer conveys onstage without any verbal indication is a constructed identity made by cultural appropriations and culturally influenced acts, makes the Somers-Willett's claim of marginalized identities being revered and celebrated within slam quite compelling.

The slam scene celebrates diversity in both ideas, culture, political ideologies, and the focus seems not to be on the dominant white culture but rather on what is referred to as marginalized identities. These identities can be associated with race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference etc. and are not a part of the general mainstream society. When the slam community focuses on these 'marginalized identities' within the slam community, it seems as if the slam scene specifically celebrates diversity in identities rather than the dominant society. Somers-Willett even argues that without being a marginalized identity the poets lack a certain authenticity for the audience

not all identities are created equally authentic in the eyes of national slam audiences [...] more often than not, marginalized gender, sexual, and racial identities are celebrated at poetry slams, and performances of African American identities are especially rewarded (71).

On the other hand, the slam community itself is not made up exclusively of these subaltern groups as the main audience in the slam community is "predominantly white, liberal and middle class" (Somers-Willett 78). This is especially curious when considering the fact that that the revered identity is actually created by the cultural and social constraints created and sustained by that very same audience.

While the uniqueness of marginalized identities compared to mainstream society is celebrated, especially within slam, it may be argued that these identities are only playing the part expected by the audience, and therefore arguably not the true reality of the author. This means that within the slam community the call the audience has for certain identities to be better than others actually relies on the set of cultural, societal and discourse rules made by that very same audience. This creates and keeps creating a discourse which creates said identity. By this the role of power is effectively diverted away from the performer on stage to the audience. No matter what the cause is, what this does imply is that someone acting outside set gender, or in this case identity roles, created by society is not welcome, therefore so that one can fit in one must conform to these rules.

The effect that performance has on poetry can be even further examined by looking at the importance of performance in slam poetry. Slam has a very dynamic relationship with the audience and relies fully on the audience partaking in the performance itself. The audience is actually an integral part and can affect the performance and Wheeler argues that: “Slam is deliberately conscious of its listeners, because its audience is physically present during a poem’s “publication” by performance” (142). In fact, because the poetry is made with an audience in mind, it can be argued that without the performance it loses power.

In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), Susan Somers-Willett’s argues that the importance of the audience is that “the poetry slam, was founded on the tenets that the audience is not obligated to listen to the poet, [...] the poet should compel the audience to listen to him or her” (6). As a result, the setting and format of slam calls for a very active relation between the audience and the author poet. Instead of the audience engaging relatively passively in reading print or listening to a poetry reading, slam poetry is “facilitated by performance, [which] commands that the poet, poem and audience have an immediate and active critical relationship with one another” (29). Therefore, the role of the audience has gained importance compared to the poetry reading and consequently, in slam the audience is actually a part of the performance. In fact, without the audience it can’t really be defined as slam. What this implies is that slam breaks with established conventions, bringing with it a certain freedom, as slam poets experiment with new ways of performing their work. This has positive effects on the performance aspect, on the other hand March Smith argues that the style of slam poetry today has been “homogenized into a rhetorical style designed to score a “perfect 10” (Somers-Willett 30). Which implies that performing poetry is not what is happening within slam, the focus is rather changing towards only winning points. While this

is a considerable part of slam, the focus on the result rather than the poem does imply that the quality of the poem suffers. This homogenization could also be caused by the limited format of slam, since the poet is restricted to the three-minute slot. This format might even be argued to have created a certain style of poetry, not only in length but also stylized in form. This makes slam a recognizable form, because no matter what the performers themselves claim, there is a certain way that a slam poem should be performed.

Another factor to look at is what is needed is for the slam community to accept a slam poet is that they are able to speak their language fitting the format. This is echoed in the words of John S. Hall when he says that: "Poetry is supposed to be about different types of language, but there just seems to be less and less of that today" (Aptowicz 300). Which seems to be a critique of the homogenization argued by Smith. The sort of instant gratification experienced by the performed caused by the scoring in slam does create an interesting question to what the authors themselves are truly after. Is it the sharing of the work that is more important, the entertainment value or the scoring? Aptowicz argues that "performance success in poetry slam can be seen as a double-edged sword, whether your interests angle towards performing or writing. (322). The fact is that though the performance aspect is an integral part of slam, the quality of the work may suffer because of it. This is caused by the fact that the scoring in slam is affected by the performance, rather than the textual element. In the performance the author may in fact substitute or conceal weaknesses in the textual element which would be visible if the scoring was based on traditional close reading.

Though slam has become a familiar term within the poetry community, according to Dr. Helen Gregory, in her thesis *Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses* (2009), there is a difference between slam poetry and poetry slams. According to her slam poetry relates to a particular style of performance poetry, which is commonly associated with poetry slams, though it is not confined to them. She further argues that it has evolved alongside poetry slams, as poets experiment with different methods to produce slam-winning work. Slam poetry can also be performed at open mic nights, shows or on CD compilations however, and is increasingly published in book form as well. Slam poetry is not recognized as a form by all, especially not the academic community, and many slam participants who do acknowledge its existence are highly critical of using that label (61). Elin Diamond argues in *Performance and Cultural Politics* (1996), that all performances embed features of previous performances. She states that these features can be based on gender conventions, racial histories aesthetic traditions as well as political and cultural pressures which can be consciously as well as unconsciously acknowledged (1). It

may be argued then that those who value the performance may therefore be focusing on how the poet is able to enhance the poem by performing it, incidentally increasing the importance performance has on slam.

On the other hand, Gregory claims that it would be wrong to imply that that performance poetry and slam are interchangeable. This she claims is especially caused by the fact that many performance poets are quite critical of slam and refuse to be restrained by the form that slam poetry imposes on them (61). On the other hand, she argues that slam poets do not mind the interchangeable role between the definition performance poet and slam poet, since many of them do not just limit their performances to the slam stage.

Individuals in use the discourse fitting with what society and cultural codes teach us is appropriate for our role in society. In slam, this becomes a form of created identity that the audience craves to be able to connect to. The slam audience needs to believe what is being performed, no matter what the poem is saying. Therefore, the focus of the slam audience is on the author being able to perform an authentic identity. When applying this definition to slam performers, the need for authenticity and belief from the audience becomes even more intriguing. According to Wheeler in *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920's to the Present* (2008), "Gender and race may be central subjects for slam because spoken word is attractive to many artists at the margins of mainstream literary establishments." She further argues that while these literary establishments are more inclusive than before they still "demonstrate the superior cultural power of white people, heterosexuals and men" (151).

Butler's ideas about performativity utilized metaphors from the theatre according to Elizabeth Bell in *Theories of Performance* (2008). By using the theatre as an example this allowed Butler to explain the concept of how one acts or performs the role of gender. Just as characters do not exist until they are on stage, materialized by presence and discourse, gender is not something you have but rather something you do, a repetitive action that does not exist before it is acted out (179). The result is that just like we are conditioned by societal rules to act according to the rules of gender, actors on stage are performing within a set of historical conventions and director's cues of how the body should "move, gesture and articulate itself onstage" (179). As a result, the actor on stage, just as people in real life, is subject to historically and socially constructed rules that determines their act.

3.2 Slam and theatre

One of the prevailing ideas within the academic community with slam is that it has more in common with performance and the theatre than poetry. This contrasts with March Smith's original idea of opening up poetry to the general audience outside of the stuffy academic poetry reading. According to Julia Novak in her book *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011),

in live poetry a poet's individual performance style can also be related to traditions of performance. These have a historical as well as a cultural dimension and may originate in extra-literary fields such as music. Locating poet-performers in a performance tradition may reveal their attitude towards performance and, by extension, their view of poetry, and will thus broaden the researcher's understanding of their art (184).

This is especially important in slam poetry since their choice of form in performance changes the way they approach the performance. Therefore, it is important to look at the role theatre has within slam and contemplate whether its influence may in fact be distancing slam from its original poetic roots.

Performance, though originally thought to belong to the theatrical sphere, has since the 1960's left that sphere and come to describe an enormous range of cultural activity (Diamond 2). Though Diamond argues that at the same time it is viewed as a slightly less significant cultural practice than others (7). This gap between the theatrical sphere and performance is according to Anthony Howell in his book *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to Its Theory and Practice* (1999), caused by the fact that

Performance artists do not see themselves as actors – they do not necessarily take on roles different to their own. However, even if they think that they are simply “being themselves”, they are each still projecting a self or a persona through posture, through body language and through their clothing. They are acting being themselves, or, to put it another way, constructing a *performance self* (16).

If this is the case, even though performance artists hesitate to refer to themselves as actors, or as constructing a dramatic character performed on stage, it is apparent that the performer does project a constructed personality on stage which can be argued to not be so different from

enacting a character (Novak 366). While the performance artists may disagree, the reality is that this constructed personality does have an obvious connection to the theatrical sphere.

Just as conservative voices within contemporary poetry disagree on the role of performance in contemporary poetry, the general consensus seems to be that slam poets are not real poets because there is more focus on the performance aspect rather than the textual poem itself. In slam the focus of attention is the performance and connection the poet author is able to create with the audience. An interesting consequence of this is that what is traditionally thought to be the strength of a poem, its textual complexity, may seem to be lost in performance, instead strengthening the aspect of the poet author or performer.

3.2.1 Artaud and performance

This connection slam has to theatre can be further connected by viewing them through the ideas of the French poet and dramatist Antonin Artaud presented in his article “The Theatre and Its Double” (2010). This can be done by using his ideas to focus on the connection with the performance aspect of popular poetry. Artaud wanted theatre to break away from its relationship with text and language, essentially arguing that that theatre needed to find its own way of expressing itself. He argued that theatre language should comprise of expression of sounds rather than a set language, since the set language puts limitations on what one can do (7). When applying this to the performance in slam poetry we can see how their intents to create a reaction from the audience with their performance, reflects his ideas of “The Theatre of Cruelty”.

Artaud claimed that the theatre is not only a staged performance before a passive audience, but rather a practice which should compel audience up to wake up. He argued that “after the wear and tear to which our sensibilities have been subjected, it is certain that, before all, we have a need of a theatre that will awaken us: heart and nerves” (75). This implies that Artaud wanted to use theatre to wake up civilization and purge them of the social and cultural limitations forced upon them by assaulting the audience’s senses with performance, in fact, challenging the perception of reality.

To challenge this perception of reality Natasha Tripney argues in her article *Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty* (2017),

The Theatre of Cruelty is both a philosophy and a discipline. Artaud wanted to disrupt the relationship between the audience and performer. The ‘cruelty’ in Artaud’s thesis

was sensory, it exists in the work's capacity to shock and confront the audience, to go beyond words and connect with the emotions: to wake up the nerves and the heart (1). that the theatre of cruelty is both a philosophy and discipline, not only a method of performance (1).

Therefore, the audience experience is in fact a core aspect of the performance itself. She further argues that the theatre of cruelty focused specifically on evoking emotions in the audience using gestures, movement, sound, and symbolism rather than just language. Which was cause by the fact that Artaud believed that gesture and movement was more powerful than the textual element (1).

This becomes interesting when applied to slam poetry because this means that the textual element is not the focus of the performance. Instead the focus is on the performance itself, which is turn is what elicits a reaction from the audience. Artaud's idea was that the cruelty in his theatre could be able to assault the audience's senses and wake the audience up. By doing this he wanted to help the audience purge destructive feelings and enjoy the real joy that social and cultural limitations have forced us to repress. The power of the audience in the slam performance reflects this idea. Instead of being passive bystanders, they are in fact an integral part of the performance. His ideas of gesture and movement being more powerful than text can be transferable onto slam poetry.

3.2.2 Brecht and gestus

The German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht is another of the great theorists within theatre. He is known for his definition of gestus which explains how the actor is able to combine language with physical expression and through that create another level of narrative within the performance. To explain this Deborah R. Geis argues in her article "Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as *Gestus* Maria Irene Fornes's Plays", that gestus breaks the performance and the language in half, as a result, the discourse is able to break away from the performer. This does not mean that gestus is only comprised of body language. Rather it "may occur through language as well as or instead of in the moment of physical enactment" (292). This implies that the performance is rather comprised of two parts, what is being said and what is being shown through body language. Gestus can in fact be the discourse or the body language.

To explain the concept of *gestus* Diamond argues in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (1997), that *gestus* is “the moment in performance when a play’s implied social attitudes become visible to the spectator” (xiv). *Gestus* can thus be used to create a deeper understanding of who the performer on stage is portraying. The result is that if the audience is aware of *gestus* in performance, it becomes a tool for the audience to recognize a pattern of discourse or body language.

Meg Mumford argues in *Bertolt Brecht* (2009), that *gestus* are socially encoded expressions which can also be applied to “[the] subconscious body language of a person from a particular social **class** or workplace” (53). This further strengthens the idea that the audience can by observing expressions and body language recognize where someone belongs in society, because these socially encoded expressions are created by society. *Gestus* can in fact be argued to be a stylization of social attitudes, a form of language which is affected by the political realities of the time. Brecht’s aim was “to present all gestures and contexts as social and ‘man made’ rather than as the mysterious hand of fate” (57). This reflects the ideas of Butler, where the acts available for gender are also socially and historically constructed.

This illusion created by the performer is in stark contrast to reality. Whether or not it is successful depends on the performer’s ability to be able to distance themselves from the reality that they are on stage performing something, and instead take the audience with them into the illusion. Brecht’s ideas of theatre have a strong connection to the audience, especially since the actors use direct address to the audience. If this is applied to the performance in slam which adheres to the classic ideas of monologue performed to an audience, a slam author could use *gestus* in a persona poem in a way that makes the audience believe the act of it being auto biographical.

The result is then that *gestus* can be expressed through both body language and performance, therefore by using *gestus* the performer can convey a relation with certain societal and cultures frames. By doing this *gestus* also becomes a discourse or narrative on its own because it conveys meaning for the audience. This becomes interesting if one argues that the performer with its performance can make their body constitute part of the text, thus decrease the importance of the textual aspect. This gives the performer the opportunity to convey meaning through the performance on a different level which would not be visible without the performance.

3.2.3 The audience and the theatre

The audience is an integral part of both theatre and slam. In slam their role is not just as passive viewers but an integral part of the performance. Therefore, it is important to look at the role of the audience in theatre and connect this with slam.

According to Elin Diamond in *Performance and Cultural Politics* (1996), while in theatre the audience is fully aware that the actors are representing fictional characters, the performance on the other hand has been:

honored with dismantling textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favor of the polymorphous body of the performer. Refusing the conventions of role-playing, the performer presents herself/himself as a sexual, permeable tactile body, scourging audience narrativity along with the barrier between stage and spectator” (“Performance and Cultural Politics” 3).

In theatre the actor is expected to take on a personality that has nothing to do with the actual identity of the performer, but rather a personification of a character created by the author of the play, a character identity. The performance on the other hand gives the performer another sense of freedom because they are not limited to only the theatrical narrative. The distancing which is prevalent in the theatre performance does not happen in slam. This is caused by the fact that the performer takes on an identity in their performance as well as most being the author of the work. The identity performed in slam is actually key to the performance, and without the performance identity the slam audience cannot connect the performance with authenticity. According to Julia Novak in her book *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011), this creates an expectance of an autobiographical experience since the author is performing authorship of the text they are performing. By presenting themselves on stage rather than presenting another character like in theatre, a live presentation of an author’s work not only creates a level of authenticity, the audience is also aware that this is a rendition or repetition of work already created by the author before the performance. It is not an unscripted performance but rather the author sharing their own thoughts and ideas. Novak uses the definition of poet Jane Hirshfield who talks of re-inhabiting a poem in performance (186). This means that they are presenting their poetry in a different context to the one which it was composed (186). What this does is make the audience aware of this

repetition and recognize it, as well as crediting the author with the idea that their performance is a superior rendition of the work, and at the same accrediting their performance with an exclusive kind of authenticity compared to theatre owing to the fact that they are in fact performing their own work.

While the slam performance does rely heavily on many traditions from the theatre, it must not be understood to be only an act. This is because “The role of performance in slam is almost to strip away the theatricality of the stage – the audience must believe what you are saying, must see you as the human being that you are” (Aptowicz 322). Whether the performer is able to do this depends on many factors, such as their skill of portraying the identity in performance as well as their connection with the audience.

3.3 Identity

The freedom of form within slam can be argued to open up the possibilities when it comes to portraying identity, as a result, identity in performance is never fixed or stable but rather created by the performer. This chapter will discuss this using several different theorists such as Judith Butler her theories about gender and identity and Erving Goffman's ideas about performance. To connect the ideas of Butler and Goffman is significant because they share a view that social interaction, and by extension social identity, is a kind of performance. By combining their ideas, it can be argued that "any witnessed 'self' in a social context is inevitably a 'performance self' (Novak 188). Therefore, by connecting their ideas, it is possible to focus on what identity is, how we portray it.

3.3.1 Goffman and portraying identities

Though we portray identities in our everyday life, the reality is that the performance identity portrayed is a part of the performance itself and does not have to be in conformance with our own personal identity. This implies that to understand the performance itself we must look at the performance identity.

Erving Goffman argues in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* 1959, that the mask we portray in everyday life represents the idea we have formed of ourselves, the role we are striving to live up to, an idealized version of us, making this mask our truer self or the self we would like to be (48-49). In fact, we show off the perfect version of ourselves. While this may not always be the case within slam, the reality is that though the performers on stage may be constrained by certain factors such as appearance, race, gender and style, on the other hand, the free format of slam does give the performers the opportunity to convey a chosen performance identity, or Goffman's mask. Not only does the performance of identity matter within slam, according to Somers-Willet in the last years poems concerning identity and politics have increased rapidly. This further emphasizes the importance of the role of authorship in slam poetry as well as the presentation of self or selves (20). She argues that this is and has always been an important aspect of the slam performance. Applying these ideas to the slam stage means that we have to look at the role of identity within slam, because the role of identity in performance can in fact be affecting the textual poem. Consequently, looking at the poem without the performance, or only its textual aspect is inconsequential because without the performance and portrayed identity, the poem loses some of its substance.

3.3.2 Somers-Willett on Identity poems in Slam

According to Susan Somers-Willett in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), one of the tools that the performers use, and an integral part of slam poetry, are identity poems. Identity poems are poems where the author performs certain specific aspects of their identity for the audience. These performed identities can revolve around the poet's gender identity, race, political affiliations or class, and are most often connected to some kind of marginalized identity (Somers-Willett 69). The authors stand on stage proclaiming what their performance identity is, effectively creating a setting where it is not only the poems themselves that are performed but the performance of the identity of the author as well.

Identity poems are mostly written as persona poems and Somers-Willett argues that even when performers are performing a persona poem written in the second or third person, the live performance is still dependent on the "author's body and its visible markers" (69). The result is that because the performer is physically on the stage the performance is influenced by the physical body of the performer, this is caused by the fact that the audience connects the performer with what is performed. As a result, because we do not encounter the commonly known distancing between the performer and the performance, like we do in the theatre, the poet is instinctively being linked with the persona in the poem by the audience. The fact that according to NPS rules the performers may only perform work they have authored in the individual competitions, authorship becomes a self-conscious performance (Somers-Willett 69). This is caused by the format of slam, since the author is on stage performing their authored work, the author must adapt their performance or persona to what they are sharing. In fact, the authors must be aware of what performance identity they are performing on the stage.

This is caused by the fact that "the "I" of the page must also be the "I" of the stage, [...] leading to a hyperawareness of the first-person speaker, manifested most commonly in the performance of the author identity" (Somers-Willett 19-20). The mere physical presence of the author can make it difficult for that audience to distance the author from what they are trying to share in their performance. The result is that the performers themselves and the performance under scrutiny, not just the textual based work they are performing.

Helen Gregory, agrees with Somers-Willett in her thesis "Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses" (2009). She claims that if the poem is not a personal autobiographical piece, for this to be understood, the

author must be able to convey this in their performance. A simple change of how the slam poem is written, like changing it to a second or third person narrative is not enough, it can still be conceived as autobiographical. This is especially true for authors that have strong identity markers, which makes it more difficult for the audience to accept the identity conveyed, especially if it is contradictory to their identity markers. These performers can easily be identified by their gender, race, class, group, or sexual identity, and makes the audience expect a certain performed identity. The audience have therefore certain expectations of the performers, in fact, Somers-Willett argues that “what they come to see, [is] that proclamation of self on the stage and a sense of conviction of self” (Aptowicz 334). The result is that the performance of identity is crucial in slam, even more than in other performances because without it the audience does not get the full effect of the poem. Without being able to convey a sense of authenticity for the audience the slam performers will not win. This focus on winning and on authenticity being a core factor of slam are some of the main reasons why the scholarly world is skeptical towards slam poetry.

Slam participants can be argued to be not just representatives of their chosen marginalized identities but rather individuals who are trying to navigate through multifaceted identities using different aspects of these identities to meet the requirements needed and craved by the audience. Therefore, the mask they portray in performance of the identity poem represents the conception they have formed of themselves as well as what is expected of the audience. As a result of this, the role they are striving to live up to, the mask they convey is their true self or rather the self they would like to be.

3.3.3 The importance of Marginalized identity in slam

The slam scene is a melting pot of different races, genders, nationalities, sexual orientations and identities. This may be a consequence of the initial ideas of slam which celebrated their distancing from academic poetry by breaking barriers of not only the poetry scene but also political agendas, social issues and advocating social change. This also applies to the identities performed within slam because they are occupying multiple subject positions that are collectively configured from what they belong to. What will be addressed in this chapter is the importance of marginalized identities within slam, specifically focusing on the claims introduced by Somers-Willett that marginalized identities have an upper hand in slam. Slam is experiencing a huge awakening all around the world, with slam competitions being held in Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada, as well as several other countries

(Somers-Willett 4-5). What originally started with Marc Smith in, seems to have become an international arena of poetry. Not only has slam become an international phenomenon, it has also become an arena where marginalized identities can revolt against dominant society. Dominant society in this case, being all identities that do not define themselves as marginalized. The idea of bringing a political agenda on stage makes perfect sense when one considers that the slam scene is built on the premises of breaking against traditional, archaic and outdated rules of the poetry scene. This implies that the slam scene has become a rebellious area of poetry where the rules can be bent or broken.

One of the arguments Somers-Willett uses to prove her claims of the popularity of marginalized identities is readings that are specifically used to showcase “Asian American, African American, Native American, Latino, female, and queer poets [are] the best-attended events outside of the competition itself” (71). She uses this popularity to substantiate her claim that the slam community, by focusing on and celebrating these marginalized identities is “confirming (and perhaps advocating) their marginality from dominant culture” (72). Furthermore, she argues that there is a focus on marginalized identities in slam, claiming that the slam scene specifically celebrates diversity rather than dominant society. She focuses especially on the African American identities which she claims are often awarded “the badge of authenticity at poetry slams” (72). To prove this claim, she argues that of the last fifteen individual champions of the National Poetry Slam, only six have not been African American (8). While she focuses specifically on African American identities, she does also claim that: “The National Poetry Slam community itself is overtly concerned with the expression of racial, gender, and sexual differences in its ranks” (71).

This intersectionality of belonging to many different marginalized identities is usually viewed as something negative, since it can make the true identity difficult to grasp for the audience. Despite this, within slam this seems to give these poets an edge over other poets. While it is controversial, she does claim that there is a certain overvaluing of stereotypes within slam, which in turn can affect the credibility of the genre. This is mainly due to the fact that if marginalized identities are celebrated just because of their identity and in spite of the quality of the poetry, it is the performance that is being judged rather than the textual poem.

3.3.4 A need for authenticity

Within slam there is an extreme focus on the connection between the audience and the performer. This is caused by the fact that it is the audience, or the judges chosen from the

audience, that score the poems. Without a feeling of authenticity in performance by the poet, this may affect the score of the judges. The result of this is that the performer must be able to convey an authentic and believable performance of the identity appropriate for the performance. If they are not able to create an authentic connection both with what they are performing as well as their audience, their work is weakened.

Authenticity can be conveyed through Brecht's ideas about *gestus*. Because the slam audience assigns marginalized identities with more authenticity, their use of *gestus* is a substantial part of the performance. On the other hand, slam can in fact systemize the presentation of marginalized identities within a set and decided language which can restrict their performance rather than expand the identity portrayed on stage. The effect of this can be that instead of being a political awakening, the *gestus* used by marginalized identities rather becomes a cliché.

According to Somers-Willett there is "an intimate and important correlation between the performance of identity at poetry slams and the felt effect of authenticity" (71). Therefore, authenticity is subject to the performance of identity. Since the rules of the National Poetry Slam dictate that the "poems must be performed by their authors [therefore] authorship itself becomes a self-conscious performance" (19). The result is that there is a hyperawareness of the speaker both for the performer and the audience. This affects the judging since the judges of said authenticity are the audience. The problem is that there are no set rules for how authenticity should be judged, therefore the concept of authenticity in the performance is difficult to grasp. Somers-Willett argues that:

Rather than engaging in the relatively passive dynamics of reading print or listening to a poetry reading, slam poetry, facilitated by performance, commands that the poet, poem, and the audience have an immediate and active critical relationship with one another. Furthermore, it seals the author's intimate and inseparable role as the embodiment of poem's commonly first-person voice in performance (20).

By doing this, the author is held accountable for the viewpoints that they express in their poems because the audience connects the voice of the poem with the author. Therefore, when the poets write personally empowering poems declaring their identity, how they perform it is just as important as what they are saying. Somers-Willett argues that "the craft and execution of that declaration is just as important as the statement itself" (70). The emphasis is therefore on the fact that within the poetry slam scene, rather than focusing just on physical markers,

skin tone or sex, the focus is on the importance of the ‘how’ of their performed identity, rather than just ‘what’ they say (70). This implies that by creating a performed identity, the poet is not only creating a relationship with the audience, they are fulfilling the need for authenticity of the audience.

She argues that by creating these identities, and because the author is performing live, all the identity markers the authors claim through their performances, are visible if not exaggerated. This can be problematic since the identity they are performing may not have any connection with their bodily markers. This is caused by the fact that when the written poem is not an obvious declaration of identity, the poets still perform their identities through voice, gesture, dress, and physical appearance (Somers-Willett 71). Many authors choose to focus on their subjective experiences and therefore these bodily markers may not be an issue. However, those who choose to create an identity which is in contrast with their bodily markers can have an issue with creating authenticity for the audience. As a result, they have to be acutely aware of how they use *gestus* in the performance because it is socially and historically constructed and recognizable by the audience. On the other hand, they can also use the contrast as a dramatic effect in their performance.

The identities that slam poets express are performative, because they are performed consciously or unconsciously for the audience. The performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, due to this what act they perform with their words is not determined by their intention, but rather by social and linguistic conventions (Cullen 98). Not only do slam poets need to understand that inherent truth, they also need to use discourse fitting with what society and cultural codes teach us is appropriate for our role in society, to be able to create authenticity. In this case they must use discourse fitting to the slam scene. The slam audience needs to believe what is performed, no matter what the poem is saying. Therefore, the focus of the slam audience is on whether the author is able to perform an authentic identity by using what they deem to be the correct discourse.

Since the role of the poet in slam is to create original work for the audience which is also an authentic identity performance, what the audience deems as authentic is of utmost importance. Somers-Willett argues that:

When used in reference to identity, the term *authentic* applied in everyday use is often meant to suggest instances in which subjectivity and identity are generated beyond or without external (i.e., cultural or discursive) constraints. That is, an authentic

expression of self is often treated as original, unique, and reflective of a deeply true internal substance (73).

If this is the case, for the audience to feel that the performed identity in performance is authentic it has to be assumed that there is an original or essential self, which exists outside the performance, that the performer can perfectly emulate in the performance (73). This implies that there has to be a need for some inherent truth in the performer to be able to judge their claim of authenticity in performance. This may be applicable with subjective poems, on the other hand, with an assumed identity which is in contrast with their bodily markers this becomes an issue.

The issue with this is that it means that the authenticity of the performer is in fact dependent on the audience in each performance, rather than the performance itself. Which in turn implies that the performance is more important than the text because of this need of authenticity from the audience. This in turn takes away from the shock value wanted by Artaud because instead of opening up the performance for the audience, the performance has been shackled by the need for a familiar discourse which makes it lose its ability to wake the audience up.

Somers-Willett argues that authenticity in itself is a fallacy, and a result of constructed, culturally sanctioned performances over time (70). Therefore, the authenticity of the performer is controlled by societal rules and regulations. This forces the performers into a system where they need to be part of acceptable marginalized identities. These created stereotypes use a sanctioned *gestus* accepted by the audience and instead of opening up the form, it constrains their performance to a limited discourse. This can affect the performance because these rules and regulations vary according to place and time. It can even be argued that the slam community has created their own norms of what is perceived as an authentic identity by using marginalized identities as a reference for authenticity. Somers-Willett even argues that if they do not belong to a 'marginalized identity' the poets lack a certain authenticity for the audience, claiming that: "not all identities are created equally authentic in the eyes of national slam audiences" (71). On the other hand, the slam community itself is not made up exclusively of these subaltern groups as the main audience in the slam community is "predominantly white, liberal and middle class" (78). The fact that marginalized identities then are assigned with a level of more authenticity is, is curious. This might possibly be due to the fact that marginalized identities seemingly convey more authenticity to the slam audience than dominant culture, because the discourse created by the slam audience is

adapted and befitting marginalized identities. Though this is a controversial statement, it does echo the ideas presented by Somers-Willett. Nevertheless, the fact is that the authenticity of identities in slam is not created by the author poet, but by the audience. This is caused by the intersubjectivity at work in the performance, which allows the audience to be an active part of the performance and define the authenticity of the performer.

4. Assessing Poetry

For slam poetry to be assessed according to its most defining factor, the performance needs to be in focus. This is caused by the fact that slam codifies gesture in a way that makes the marginalized identity a formula of authenticity created by the audience itself. This means that slam has in fact created a dominant identity within slam by using intersubjectivity of the audience and the performer which in turn defines the authenticity of the performer and their gestus.

4.1 What is missing?

Slam poetry seems to be gaining its position within the academic community, though one of the largest issues still prevalent is the fact that there is still no formal assessment which is appropriate for how to analyze slam poetry. This is caused by the fact that the academic community still focuses on the close reading as being the highest form of assessment in poetry.

In his book *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998) Charles Bernstein claims that “while the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry performance has been negligible, despite the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century” (3). The textual element has been the focus point of all academic assessment of poetry, in slam poetry, this is not applicable because of the importance of the performance aspect.

Since poetry is a scene that is changing at a rapid pace, it seems as if literary theory has not been able to develop an assessment method that takes into account the performance aspect. The result is that literary theory does not have the tools to be able to analyze the new forum. Gioia argues in his article “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture” (2004) that this may be caused by the fact that traditional assessment of poetry views poetry as “a series of texts placed in an historical or thematic framework of other printed texts” (24). Therefore, the difficulty for academic critics to assess popular poetry like slam is caused by the fact that it has little in common with the traditional types of poetry they are trained to consider worth of study. This is caused by the fact that popular poetry like slam does not stem from the “high-art traditions of Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, or Postmodernism” (25-26). Gioia further argues that any serious attempt to assess poetry’s current position will need to be done in unorthodox ways because of necessity. In fact, he argues that “orthodox

views of contemporary poetry no longer are either useful or accurate in portraying the rapidly changing shape of the art” (23-24).

Another factor which Gioia argues is that the traditional assessments of poetry can't be applied to popular poetry because they “reflect a culture without radio, talking-films, television, videocassettes, computers, cellphones, satellite dishes, and the Internet” (24). Therefore, the conceptual framework used in traditional assessment is not applicable to discussing contemporary poetry today, because it is affected by forces that come from outside the classic tradition. This in addition to the fact that there are marked differences between the artistic conventions which govern slam and those which characterize literary poetry, makes assessing slam poetry more difficult.

4.2 Why does poetry need critical assessment?

When introducing new conventions like slam there can be generated a certain tension between traditional conventions and the new, caused by the fact that they challenge established and academically approved conventions. According to Howard S. Becker in his book *Art Worlds* (1982), artistic conventions dictate everything from the materials used, to the ways in which ideas and experiences are represented, as well as the relations between artists and their audiences, and most importantly the manner in which an artwork should be appreciated and evaluated (29). One of the most important conventions of slam is its immediate and definite assessment which is based on the scoring aspect of the slam competition, as opposed to the traditional close reading. This might be argued to affect the quality of the poems, since its reception in by the audience is more dependent on the performance. This idea that these conventions have such a large impact on assessments means that the conventions in slam poetry, which are still developing, might be one of the biggest reasons for the difficulty with assessment in slam poetry.

Due to this, one of the most important aspects of the approval of assessment by the academic community would be their willingness to concede that live poetry has an aesthetic value independent of print. This is caused by the fact that though it does often exist in written form as well, its distinguishing characteristic is its orality. Though spoken word poetry does receive some acclaim as an art form in its own right, academia has still not updated nor adapted their concept of poetry. The new conventions, are therefore challenging the traditional conventions by focusing not on the textual aspect and close reading but is rather directed towards the performance and orality.

While the textual element is still in place in most cases, Gregory claims that it is the connection between the audience and author poet performing their work which creates the slam experience. This puts more emphasis on importance of the relationship between the audience and performer which is happening in slam performances. Julia Novak focuses largely on this connection between the audience and the performer in her book *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011). There she claims that: “live poetry is characterized by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of poet-performer and audience. This encounter occurs in a specific spatio-temporal situation, and it is this definite ‘situatedness’ that constitutes the performance’s essence as shared experience” (173). Due to the fact that this is a shared experience, the connection with the audience is therefore an integral and critical element for the assessment of poetry which makes the traditional methods of assessing poetry outdated. In fact, she argues that the poetry performance can’t be studied independently from this spatio-temporal frame in any meaningful way since live poetry is a verbal art form which relies on the connection the performer and the presence of the audience. One of the effects of this is that the audience can participate or intrude upon the performance in various ways which may affect the performance of the poem (173). Hence, the poem can be performed differently depending on the composition of the audience.

Though Novak argues that the audience is important, she does emphasize that even though the audience’s contributions matter, they do not carry the same weight since it is the performer which “is the main shaper and focus of the performance” (177). Which implies that while one should be aware of the effect the audience has, they are not the deciding factor of the performance. As a result, when one is analyzing live poetry it is vital to include information about the venue, audience and type of poetry specifically because the spatio-temporal situation created affects the poem in performance (177). Which means that the performance of a poem may change or adapt to the audience or venue the performer is in.

Because the intersubjectivity of the performer and the audience is such an integral part of what slam poetry is, this is an aspect that needs to be an objective of critical assessment in poetry. Without considering this aspect, the possible complexity of the poem is not recognized.

4.3 Can conventional academic criticism be the answer?

A major part of slam is that it was created in opposition to academic poetry. Therefore, if slam would be assessed according to traditional academic conventions this defies the original

idea of slam. Gregory argues that because slam introduces new conventions, this may be a gamble due to the fact that there might be negative consequences involved amongst both the audience and critics. These may mainly be caused by the fact that it can be more difficult for unconventional work to gain recognition when they resist following traditional conventions. The fact is that conventions are a major part of contemporary poetry as a result, since conventions belong to complex, inter-dependent systems, changing one convention often requires altering a host of others (Gregory 66). This may be one of the reasons why introducing and acknowledging slam as a part of poetry is viewed as possibly affecting poetry negatively instead of further adding depth to it.

An alternative way of assessing performance poetry is presented by Donald Hall in his article, "Death to the Death of Poetry" (2001). There he argued that while there was a lack of poetry reviews to help the general audience understand the work, this gap could be filled by performance, though not as a substitute for reviewing. Consequently, the audience could use the performance and the presence of the author poet to interpret the poem because the poet's use of voice and gesture may imply some larger meaning or add a nuance to the textual poem. This does mirror the classic close reading, with its focus on nuances. However, even though Hall proposed this as a possible solution, he does argue that because of the lack of traditional analysis, when a poet becomes acclaimed "it is hard to know whether we cherish the poem or its performance" (9). This devaluation of the textual element is one of the biggest issues academe has with slam, because the traditional focus is on close reading. This may be one of the major reasons why academe hesitates with giving the performance aspect such value.

In slam it is the untrained ear that is judging the poetry in the competition. This was intentionally done by the first slammers, in fact Gregory argues that: "The use of randomly selected audience members to judge slams, [...] was intended to subvert the notion of the academic critic, trained and qualified to assess a poem's merits" (67). This implies that the original slam has no wish of neither being acknowledged nor assessed by the academia. Despite this slam still chose to call itself slam poetry, which implies that they did crave a connection to academe.

The neglect within the academe of creating a form of critical assessment of slam, may be argued to be caused by the fact that performance poetry is "situated in an undefined, liminal zone, with the result that few people feel competent or responsible for its critical examination" (Novak 10). This is most likely caused by the fact that there are other artistic conventions, specifically the performance, that are at work in slam poetry than in the traditional poetry recitals. Therefore, the critics need to be aware of and take into account

factors that are not familiar to them. Gregory argues that many slam conventions are specifically trying to challenge how poetry should be defined and valued, and by this are intentionally challenging the existing definitions of poetry. She further argues that: “If these competing definitions were established successfully, they could bring with them different criteria by which the quality of poems may be measured, and potentially devalue the cultural capital associated with the dominant literary world” (67). This devaluation of poetry may in fact be one of the reasons why it seems as if academia tries actively to detract the quality of slam poetry, claiming that it’s not poetry and thereby denying it the status of being poetry. This further solidifies the idea that academia and its critical methods perhaps do not belong in the slam poetry scene since they do not understand nor appreciate the idea and concept that is slam.

Another factor to consider is that “the limited commentary of new popular poetry provided in mass media by intellectuals has habitually focused on ideological issues, [...] which has been examined almost entirely for its subject matter or sociological significance” (“Disappearing Ink” 26). Because formal analysis is not considered to be productive to a performative art form, this may explain the fact that critics like Somers-Willett and Gregory are looking at slam through a sociological perspective, using this to look at race, class and gender, rather than a formal analysis of the work. The fact is that most studies of popular poetry focus on ideological and sociological issues of it. This may have had an influence on the fact that the assessment of poetry has been devalued in favor of giving slam poetry a different space within academia. The fact is that if academia would define how slam poetry should be critically assessed, this could solidify the status of slam as something that belongs within the academic community.

According to Aptowicz the prevailing ideas the stereotypical “Poetry Slam Critic” today is an image of a stuffy academic who does not appreciate the boisterousness of poetry slam and believes that rap music is vulgar and noisy. She argues that it is “someone, in short, clearly out of touch with the contemporary spoken word movement” (286). The fact is that academe has not updated their critical assessment of poetry and “while the English-speaking world is experiencing a ‘Live Poetry’ boom, academia has barely responded and not updated or adapted its concept of poetry to meet these recent developments” (Novak 10). Poetry is changing, and academic criticism has still not figured out how to critically approach slam. This is caused by the fact that critics hold on to outdated views on how to critically assess poetry, which are not applicable to critically assess what slam poetry is. If they would develop an additional method of assessing the performance aspect of slam combined with the classic

close reading, the result could be that slam could be assessed on the merits of what it truly is, composed of both the textual element and performance.

4.4 The effect of Slam on Contemporary poetry

Within the poetry community there are differing opinions on what the effect of performance has had on contemporary poetry. Conventions are a large part of traditional poetry readings and follow a standard format of the poet sharing his written work to a hushed audience, which is only there to listen. When it comes to slam poetry, this is not the case. In slam the focus is on the performance aspect, which is influenced by theatrical traditions. To fully understand the poem the audience is therefore required to focus their attention on the performance of the poet on stage. The result of this is that the textual aspect which has traditionally been the focus point of poetry, has shifted to be the performance.

To do this slam has focused on the how rather than the what of the performance, and slam participants have tried to establish new artistic conventions that focus on poetry as a performative. The effect of this is that slam has looked to the theatre, and other performance-based arts to establish new conventions more fitting for the format of slam. (Gregory 66). Moreover, Gregory argues that because of this connection with the theatrical traditions slam should be classified as something very different from the text-based readings traditional of the academic poetry world (66). This means that though the initial idea of slam being constructed alone in opposition to the academic literary world is this is not the case. In fact, Wheeler claims that: “Slam both manifests and encourages a shift in the cultural meaning of poetry [...] (143). Which implies that slam is trying to bridge the gap between poetry and the audience.

Because slam is often considered to be a version or adaptation of traditional poetry recitals by those outside of the community, slam participants often strive to create an identity outside of that dominant perspective of what slam is. Gregory argues that “they have tended to reject ‘academic’ understandings of poetry and, just as with the Beats, punk poets and others before them, anti-academic narratives abound amongst slam poets (68). She further argues that

Slam is depicted by its proponents as an exciting force for change, which will revitalise poetry, dusting off the academic detritus, dragging it off the page and making it relevant and entertaining to those sections of society to whom it has been made foreign and remote (68).

Slam may therefore be the change that contemporary poetry needs to evolve with the changes in society when it comes to the move from the text to the performance. This is caused by the fact that “Poetry on the page and poetry on the stage have influenced each other for centuries and will almost certainly continue to do so” (68). Therefore, the heart of the matter is that slam is not the new way of poetry, but rather a different aspect of what poetry can possibly be.

This split between academic poetry and slam when considering that authors seem to still to want to be a part of and acknowledged by academia, seems to be a contradiction. The initial idea of slam was to wake up poetry, make it more accessible, interesting and fun for its audience. The fact is that slam was not created on the basis of poetry not being good enough. It is more connected to the fact that they wanted and new way of expressing themselves. Within any genre of either literature or art, the reality is that there are some who are the privileged few. Slam became a scene where it was possible for those not associated with this inner circle to shine. The fact that slam poets are and have been evolving into the academic community by hosting writing courses as well as performing within the college circuit suggests that the opposition to the academy is not as real as first thought. This becomes even more baffling, when you consider that it might be argued that slam is becoming mainstream enough to actually be incorporated into academia, the one place they originally thought that poetry should leave.

Though there is seemingly a lot of tension between academia and participants in slam, the reality is that slam has helped with drawing in the general public not only to the slam, but also increased audiences in academic readings as well as increased poetry publication” (Gregory 69). Therefore, Gregory proposes an interesting solution. If slam would be brought into academia, the members of the dominant literary world could in fact not only capitalize on the large following the slam community has, but also have a chance of “reigning in, and subsequently controlling, this rebellious movement” (69). Then instead of ostracizing the movement, it could be made to fit into accepted classical literary forms creating conventions that would both satisfy the academic community and the slam community.

Gregory argues that slam has affected contemporary poetry in a positive way in spite of there still being some hostility between participants of slam and the academy. She argues that “There is growing overlap between the poets, promoters, event and venues of these two worlds and increasing intersection between their respective conventions and discourses” (276). However, it may be argued that this would be in opposition of what the original slam performers were trying to do. Could the rebellious nature of the slam movement, that was

created to oppose against the rigid rules, forms, and highbrow air of academia, be snuffed out?

5. Analysis and Discussion

In this analysis I have chosen to focus on the poem “Skinhead” by Patricia Smith. Smith is the most winning NPS Individual slam competition winner of all time, having won four times in 1990, 1991, 1993 and 1995 (Olson 2007). Through this analysis I will apply the theories of Judith Butler, Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht which have been previously discussed in this thesis. I will also look deeper into the relationship between the performer and the audience, what effect the performance has on the textual aspect of “Skinhead”, as well as different relevant key topics presented throughout this thesis.

5.1 Patricia Smith and “Skinhead”

Smith performed “Skinhead” on HBO’s *Def Jam Poetry* series, episode two in 2003. (Novak 189). The poem was first published in her book *Big Towns, Big Talk* (1992). In this analysis her performance on HBO in 2003 will be compared with her performance in 2013, where she performed at the 2013 College Union Poetry Slam (CUPSI), held at Barnard College.

In the “Skinhead” performance we meet a character identity of a white, aggressive, violent, male on the stage, while the author identity of Patricia Smith is in fact the exact opposite of the character identity she is portraying in the performance. In this analysis I will look at how she is able to portray an identity which is in such opposition with her own identity. This will be done by assessing how the “I” of the performance, or the “performance self” occupies a liminal space between the self of the performer and the character of the poem. To do this I will look at how she uses the ideas of intersubjectivity with the audience, Artaud’s concept of “Theatre of Cruelty” and Brecht’s concept of *gestus* and how this affects the creation of authenticity and identity in the performance. As well as applying Butler’s ideas of gender onto the performed identity in “Skinhead”.

5.2 Performance: The Theatre or Slam?

Slam is a concoction of many different performance arts, and though slam does not want to affiliate themselves too strongly with theatre, the fact is that there are strong ties to the performance aspect in theatre, especially when it comes to the frequently used persona poem. The performer on stage takes on the identity of the “I” of the persona poem, just as an actor on stage acts out his or her character. The difference lies in the fact that within theatre there is a known and expected disconnect between the actor and the character they are portraying. The

audience is fully aware that the performer has a character identity which is not connected to the author's identity. This is not the case in slam, there this disconnect is blurred.

Julia Novak presents in her book *In Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011) an analysis of "Skinhead". There Novak argues that the poet performer is cast in a double role of both an author and presenter of their own work, and that they are therefore "the main shaper and focus of a live poetry performance" (179). Since the author, is most often is the performer of their work, the biggest difference between slam poetry and literary poetry is that the author must be present, otherwise the performance does not relate the meaning of the poem correctly.

"Skinhead" is a persona poem and dramatic monologue, which tries to depict the consciousness of a white supremacist. Smith performs the poem's voice and is able to take on characteristics of a white supremacist by using her body language to further heighten the audience's expectation of authenticity. While a controversial topic to begin with, what is fascinating with "Skinhead" is that Smith as an African-American woman is able to create an unsuspected subversion of the performed identity on the stage by using the extreme contrast between her own identity and the "I" of the poem on stage. Which is reminiscent of Butler's ideas about the subversion of gender identity. The audience have an expectation that poets speak partially in their own voice, which leaves the audience in a state of discomfort and shock by her performance, waiting to discover what the outcome of the performance might be.

According to Smith herself in her article "Persona Poem" in *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (2000), the use of persona poem is deliberate. She argues that:

In a persona poem, the writer eliminates the middle man and actually becomes the subject of his or her poem. The voice is both immediate, and immediately engaging. In the best cases, the poem's audience is drawn into a lyrical narrative by someone they want to know better [...] In fact, they become so attuned to the storyteller's energy that it becomes difficult to believe a poet was ever involved at all (71).

What Smith is saying is that the author, in this case her, is simply a conduit for the character identity. She is in fact trying to see the world through a supremacist's eyes, taking on his identity in the performance. In spite of this it should not be understood like she is speaking for

the supremacist, or that she concedes with his opinions. She is rather being used as a vessel to convey the identity of the supremacist in performance.

Somers-Willett argues that “even when a slam poem does not take identity as its subject matter, the slam poet is always, in performing the poem’s voice, enacting aspects of identity onstage” (35). This is connected with the ideas of slam poetry being written to be performed. She argues further that “by taking on the voice of another person on stage, a slam poet must focus much more consciously on performing a different identity than his or her own” (92). Therefore, consciousness in Smith’s case is a delicate balance caused by the fact that she uses the persona poem as a survival tactic. Smith claims that this is a way for her to process the world of a supremacist, “to make some sense of the madness by stepping directly into it” (72). While this is an interesting approach to process feelings and emotions, Smith says that when she uses the persona poem specifically to challenge herself with something so full of hatred, it is difficult for the author to distance the character identity from their own identity “the more effective the poem, the harder the road back” (73). Which implies that she does immerse herself fully into taking on the full identity of the “I” of the poem. In fact, she claims that: “I forget who I am. I speak as my subject, not for him” (Smith 71).

Because Smith is doing this to herself this inverts the concept of Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty”. His ideas were meant to change and disrupt the relationship between the audience and the performer on stage, the cruelty then existing within the work’s capacity to connect with the audience by shocking and confronting them. Smith on the other hand, is doing the exact opposite by doing this to herself. As a result, she is not only shocking and confronting the audience, she is also challenging her own perception of identity. The performance may therefore be argued to be a medium for her to challenge her own persona to process and convey opinions which are in total opposition to her own reality or identity. Consequently, the performance then becomes a setting where she leaves her socially and historically convention-controlled identity behind in favor of her character identity to create tension in the performance.

Because of this immersion into the identity of the subject, the fact that Smith is an African American woman who performs the poem in the voice of a white male skinhead creates an extremely uncomfortable experience of witnessing antagonistic identities for those watching. Her social identity as an African American woman is visible and obvious to the audience, but the character identity she is portraying is the complete opposite of her physical appearance. As a result, for Smith to be able to convey the character identity to the audience,

there is a need for authenticity. This need for authenticity is a factor in all slam performances but is in this case specifically caused by her obvious racial markers. These contradict the poem being autobiographical, owing to the fact that she is visibly and easily recognizable as a part of what the character identity in the poem is condemning. She is at odds with her narrator as well as cruelly despised by him.

To be able to create this authenticity she has to perfect Brecht's idea of *gestus*. She does this by combining language with physical expression, thus she convincingly conveys a new level of narrative which is put on display through her performance. With her body she can make her body constitute a part of the text, the effect of this is that the performance becomes a part of the poem, not only the performance of the poem. To be able to do this she uses both speech-acts and non-verbal communication which the audience deems authentic for the character identity. Using *gestus* breaks the performance and language in half, therefore by using discourse fitting to the "I" of the poem, the discourse breaks away from the author identity. In her performance she expresses this discourse with a certain disgust in her mannerisms like frowning, baring of teeth, tilting her head aggressively and using a fast-paced rhythm of intonation. Not only is she able to convey *gestus* that is familiar to the audience and therefore able to establish the character identity, she convinces us that she is him in the performance. Consequently, by successfully using *gestus* she transforms the audience from spectators watching an African-American woman, to an audience witnessing the identity of the white supremacist onstage.

An example of this is the sentence "They call me skinhead". This does nothing on its own except giving us an idea of what the "I" of the poem is named by others. In fact, it needs this body language to convey the full impact of what Smith is doing. By distancing her from "them" she is claiming the identity of the "I" of the poem. She uses this tool in several instances, especially in the *Def Jam* performance. In line 6 she says, "slide razors across my hair", conveying the character identity by tracing her own hand over her head, as well as cradle her hand protectively in line 16, "whacking of three fingers at the root". This is not only done to establish the "I" of the poem, she actively uses body language to take on the identity of the skinhead and his experiences. Because her utterings are in such contrast with her identity markers it takes on a different reality from the theatre. She is able to do this because she plays on the contrasts to create a shock factor and authenticity, rather than use similarities with the "I" of the poem to make her more believable.

Most of the poem is performed in a quick paced manner with added intonation, especially in the lines where the "I" of the poem uses possessive personal pronouns. She takes

on his identity thoroughly, and with her body language she shows pride in his actions by holding her head high and standing straight. In fact, she does not once share any sympathy for the victims of his crimes, nor does she condemn the actions he has done. She claims with conviction in line 35 to 42 that:

It's a kick to watch their eyes get big,
round and gleaming like cartoon jungle boys,
right in that second when they know
the pipe's gonna come down, and I got this thing
I like to say, listen to this, I like to say
"Hey, nigger, Abe Lincoln's been dead a long time."

I get hard listening to their skin burst.
I was born to make things right.

In the *Def Jam* performance, in line 39 she even laughs proudly proclaiming her pride in her cleverness, or rather his pride. It's a chilling experience, especially because it is in such contrast to what you would expect her to say. She does it in a childish manner and we get the feeling that the "I" of the poem is looking for recognition of how smart he is.

In contrast lines 41-42 are even more chilling. Instead of the laughter and pride, the character identity takes on a quieter demeanor, proclaiming sexual satisfaction when inflicting pain on his victims. Finishing with personal conviction and pronouncing each word slowly: "I was born to make things right". This use of contrast is even more arresting when we look at line 43 to 60. Here the aggression returns, and the fast-paced intonation pattern in stark contrast with the quieter pride. Here the character identity shows frustration with the fact that the reporter does not appreciate nor understand his sentiments. We feel his urgency, frustration and grievance for being misunderstood.

Smith's use of gestures, sounds and facial expressions are able to reinforce the character identity in a way which would not be possible if the poem had not been performed. The fact is that the poem in its textual form is not able to convey what Smith is able to do in the performance. In fact, I would argue that on the page the effect of the poem has nowhere near the urgency and need of the character identity gives it in performance. Her use of cruelty on herself as a shock factor as well as gestus for the audience creates the authenticity in performance. She is able to assume the identity of the "I" in the poem and transform the

audiences experience as well as elevate the poem. This implausible relationship between the author identity and the character identity is in fact what gives the poem its power. There is a certain shock factor that makes the audience uncomfortable and in turn gives her performance more credibility. It does not feel like a parody of a skinhead's character, but rather a deep and distressing true conveying of his identity. As a result, the dramatic effect of the poem is heightened because she does not visually fulfill the role she is portraying to the audience. The result is that Smith is portraying a truth, though not her own truth.

5.3 Intersubjectivity and Adapting the Performance

One of the issues with only focusing on the textual element of the poem is that if you have seen the performance, you cannot help but read the poem in the rhythm and pronunciation that Smith does, at the same time visualizing her performance and variations of voice and intonation. This is caused by the fact that Smith is able to emphasize unscripted aspects of the text that she finds important in the poem. Smith's performance of "Skinhead" gives one a sense of the madness lurking behind the identity that she is portraying, therefore the words change when read after the performance.

In a close reading, the poet can both anticipate and control the reader's relation to the text. This is caused by the fact that close reading relies on conventions established within the literary academic poetry tradition. The reader knows how to analyze a written poem. In "Skinhead" on the other hand, the letters on the page are written in a controversial tone, but because we are aware of how the character identity is supposed to be conveyed in performance, this causes the textual element to change when we are reading it. This implies that the textual aspect is transformed because of the performance

This transformation of the text is caused in part by the intersubjectivity of the author the audience in performance. According to Middleton "the audience and poet collaborate in the performance of the poem" (291). This implies that the performance enables the author to use the audience as an effect in the performance, playing on their reactions to the poem and using that as a shock factor to heighten the sense of contrast from her author identity to the character identity of the poem. In her *Def Jam* performance, line 65 to 68 the character identity shows extreme aggression towards the audience.

I look in the mirror and hold up my mangled hand,
only the baby finger left, sticking straight up,

I know it's the wrong goddamned finger,
but fuck you all anyway

In both the *Def Jam* performance and CUPSI performance, she leaves out “sticking straight up” and “goddamned”, but she also gives the audience the baby finger, showing clearly through her extremely aggressive body language the frustration of the character. The reaction from the audience is humorous laughter, which might be considered inappropriate, but I would argue she has done this to create some humorous relief because of the brutality of the subject at hand. She is in fact joining the audience, in this part of the poem, as her social identity by ridiculing the character identity. This is the only place in the poem where I would argue that she is close to breaking character. By focusing on the audience she is able to show the absurdity of his obscene gestures and relying on the intersubjectivity with the audience to elevate the meaning of the poem.

Another interesting factor is line 25 to 30:

So I move out into the sun
where my beauty makes them lower their heads,
or into the night
with a lead pipe up my sleeve
a razor tucked in my boot.
I was born to make things right.

These are powerful in print and the reader is fully aware that the character identity wants to hurt “them”. The secret in this is the violence and her use of gesture is a coding of hate and bigotry. Another interesting aspect is that she drops line 27, 28 and 29 in her *Def Jam*, performance. She goes from line 26 straight to 30:

where my beauty makes them lower their heads,
I was born to make things right.

As well as dropping line 23:

walking like their fat black mamas *named* them freedom.

While this may have been caused by time constraints, with dropping them the poem is 3 minutes and 13 seconds, I would argue that this is done to suit the venue it is being performed in. If we look at line 23 it can be argued that the “I” of the poem justifies his actions because they are taking over his space, the arena that used to belong to him. This is caused by that fact that you as a listener or reader, imagine a cocky gait, a swagger, or an attitude which in many cases is connected with some of the negativity affiliated specifically with African-American males by society. She also feeds into the stereotype of the loud fat black African-American women. She is subtly using the theatre of cruelty by forcing the audience to confront their own prejudice against negative stereotypes. While this is controversial, and may not have been her initial intent, it does echo the ideas of racism which are a huge part of American society. Her performance on *Def Jam* was televised at a time where the access to online mediums of slam performances was not as prevalent as today, and she was fully aware that it would reach a larger audience, which may have influenced her choice in where she would be focusing the shock value of her performance.

Why she drops line 27, 28 and 29 which are showing some his brutality, is another question. While she does mention the pipe again in line 34 and 38, she does not mention the razor again. It might have to do with the fact that the lines in question have an ominous feel of a hunter stalking his prey in the night. The hunter then being the strong one and the prey the weak. This has a dark connection to slavery, where those who ran away from their masters were in fact hunted like animals. Though slavery is not referenced in the poem itself, the fact is that the audience is fully aware of this dark past of history. Whether or not this is the case, the fact is that in performance you do also have to take into account who your audience is. The setting, atmosphere and public exposure are factors that the performer must be aware of, and her role as a well-known slam performer and being an African-American woman gives her power but also responsibility towards what she is sharing. The shock factor cannot come at the expense of respect or victimization. This is especially important when the performer, as in this case, is a part of a marginalized identity in front of a slam audience which is traditionally “predominantly white, liberal and middle class” (Somers-Willett 78).

Because the audience is not outside the performance but rather an integral part of it, this intersubjectivity changes the performers relationship with the text, and opens up authorship to both the poet and the audience. This expansion of authorship changes the ways in which the performers conceive of identity as well as creating a setting where the poem in fact belongs to both author and audience. The result of this is that identity is expanded and opened to an entirely new liminal space between the two. While the audience is not able to

affect the textual element of the poem, they are able to affect it in performance. What is meant by this is that the performer feeds on the reactions they get from the audience. In fact, I would argue that they in some part adapt their use of discourse in poems several times depending on the reactions the audience gives them in each performance. This implies that from the first performance the poem may go through changes, not only in the performance but also its textual form.

An example of this is the fact that Smith has either jumbled the order, dropped or changed the words in line 12, 18, 23, 27, 28, 29, 37, 39, 43, 45, 46, 47, 49, 51, 60, 66 and 67, in the performances from the original textual poem. These changes are not monumental and, in some cases, seem only insignificant, but they are still there which implies that the performance aspect has affected the textual element. All these changes are consistent in both performances except for the dropping of line 23, 27, 28 and 29 which only occurs in the *Def Jam* performance. This implies that in her performance on *Def Jam* she has already adapted the poem to suit the audience or performance better. The poem was originally written ten years before the *Def Jam* performance; therefore, it is justifiable to claim that she had performed it several times.

The changes that occur from the textual poem to the performed poem implies that within performance poetry the textual poem needs to be perfected through the performance. The audience seems to have an integral role in adapting the poem through the intersubjectivity of the performance. They are not just passive observers but have an actual role in refining the original textual work of the author. Whether this has more to do with the ease of pronunciation or the feedback from the audience is difficult to assess without intimate knowledge of the authors intentions. Nevertheless, this does have a significant importance in the argument of the importance of performance being part of the critical assessment of performance poetry.

5.4 The Authentic Identity

Another factor to consider is that the textual element itself is not as connected with the author in classic poetry readings, or theatre, as it is in the slam performance. While in theatre there is a certain distancing from the actual identity of the performer, this is not the case in slam. This is caused by the fact that in slam the poet and the poem are closely aligned, and there is an expectancy of an autobiographical experience from the audience because the author is performing authorship of her own work. The fact that Smith is on stage presenting her work

does not only create a level of authenticity, the audience is also fully aware that she is repeating work that was created before the actual performance.

Novak uses the definition of poet Jane Hirshfield, who talks of re-inhabiting a poem in performance (186). By doing this it credits the performer with a sense of authenticity because they are performing their own work therefore their performance is a superior rendition of the written work. In the words of Aptowicz “the role of the performance in slam is to strip away the theatricality of the stage – the audience must believe what you are saying, must see you as the human being that you are” (322). Therefore, this sense of re-inhabiting the poem and stripping away the disconnect between author and authorship of the text is a crucial part of how Smith is able to create authenticity in her performance.

This is caused by the fact that slam is dependent on the performance to convey meaning. The performance is not just used to share the poem, it is used as a tool to create a depth of understanding. Therefore, the author has a significant role not just in performing the work, but also to convey a depth of understanding with the choice of body language used to create authenticity. Smith uses this brilliantly by adopting aggressive body language which is in total opposition with her social identity as a woman. Which makes the audience connect her with the text on a whole different level, in part because of the act she chooses to portray.

While the body language she uses in her performance might not be associated with her social identity, it can be argued that as long as the audience deems this discourse to be authentic, it doesn't matter whether it is authentic. It doesn't really matter if it is her own identity that she is portraying or one she wants to perform. If she is able to convince the audience that her performance embodies her chosen act or character identity, she has created authenticity. It can then be argued that instead of the slam authors actually portraying themselves onstage, their quest is rather to portray an identity that the audience connects with no matter whether that is the author's subjective experience or not.

Smith expresses the Skinhead identity through speech acts, non-verbal communication and discourse expressed performativity. According to Butler gender categories do not exist outside of discourse because it is the discourse that creates gender. This implies that in Smith's performance there is no fixed connection between the discursive oral identity and the body that identity refers to. Therefore, her bodily markers, while still there, become obsolete in the experience of the performance. This is similar to what happens in the theatre, her identity is fluid, in fact, the identity does not exist until it is acted out in performance.

Though Smith may be able to do this, it is dependent on other factors, mainly the audience. If she is not able to convince the audience of the authenticity of her performed

identity, it does not work. This is dependent on whether she is able to take on “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame” (*Gender Trouble* 43). This regulatory frame which is socially and historically contingent is in fact created in part by the audience. Therefore, she has to be able to use an aggressive body language, vocabulary and mannerisms which the audience deems fitting for a white supremacist. In fact, it can be argued that the cultural discourse is created by the slam audience which is in turn what gives Smith the opportunity to take on the identity of the skinhead. As a result, it is the audience which creates the discourse she uses to create the character identity. On the other hand, if she is not able to do this, the effect of the performance is diminished and becomes a parody of the ignorant supremacist, rather than a depiction of his identity.

This idea of the audience creating the discourse is built on the ideas of Butler. She argues that gender is performative; and this can also be applied to Smith’s performance in “Skinhead”. She claims that “gender is an act [because of] the effects of subtle and politically enforced performativity” (187). Therefore, gender is socially constructed, and as a result the nonverbal communication and language that we use are a part of social constructions that define and maintain our identities. Claiming that instead of our identity being the source of our behavior, she turns it on its head and argues that it is our performance or acts that decide our identity. Therefore, there exists no universal gender because the gender itself is performed and is open to interpretation by those viewing the performance. In fact, the performance of gender itself creates gender.

When Smith is performing the poem, she takes on a socially and culturally decided discourse approved by the audience which in turn makes the audience able to recognize the character identity or act she is taking on. According to Butler, Smith as a black woman only has a limited number of acts to choose from when depicting her own identity, whereas the stage in slam gives her the freedom to break away from these rules. In fact, slam specifically opens up a space for her to explore actions that define identity and are off limits to her otherwise. In the performance she is able to show that identity is performative just as Butler argues gender is, because it is not dependent on a pre-existing reality of what or who you are, but rather brought into existence by the act performed. Therefore, by using both discourse and body language appropriated to a racist white man, she is able to break away from her social or author identity and become the character identity. She uses this approved discourse in line 11 to 13, where she says:

The face that moves in the mirror is huge and pockmarked
scraped pink and brilliant, apple-cheeked,
I am filled with my own spit.

As well as in line 52

I'm just a white boy who loves his race,

And line 69-70:

I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,
My face scraped pink and brilliant.

Here she claims the of identity when she describes the face she sees, when she is the character identity. This is in stark contrast with her social identity as an African-American woman, and helps the audience visualize the character identity. She does not only use words to portray his identity, there is an underlying sense of hostility, cockiness and a belligerent attitude in both the way she speaks and carries herself on the stage. By doing this she is using the character identity to challenge her own and our understanding of race, hatred and humanity. The persona poem is in fact the perfect example of how we can use socially and culturally regulated rules about identity, to create drama, authenticity and reactions with the audience. As Butler argues, instead of our identity being the source of our behavior, it is in fact our performance or acts that decide our identity. Therefore, Smith is not only performing as a skinhead, she is a skinhead, because her identity is open to interpretation and validation by the audience and her performance creates the identity. Just like Butlers idea of the drag where she argues that performing in drag reveals the imitative structure of gender because “the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (*Gender Trouble* 175).

What I would in fact argue is that one of the defining factors of her performance is that she is an African-American woman. Therefore, the fact that she uses both tone and non-verbal communication to claim the character identity of a white supremacist, her exact opposite, evokes a response from the audience that implies that the actual lack of easily identifiable identity markers suitable for the character identity, is what enables the poem to

come to life. Meaning that her claim to authenticity is not the ‘what’ she is saying, but rather the ‘how’ she is saying it.

Since Smith is portraying a subaltern group which is revolting to most audiences, especially, for a marginalized audience, she is treading a thin line of the shock value and genius. Not only is she a woman, she is also the focal point of the disgust showed in the poem by her performed identity. Therefore, the real question returns back to authenticity. The reason why Smith’s performance is so powerful is because to portray authenticity, it is easier to stay within the identity markers of your perceived gender, skin color, race or sexuality. What Smith is doing is the exact opposite. Somers-Willett argues that this felt effect is more authentic with marginalized identities, but I would argue that in this case it is not specifically connected with her status as a marginalized identity. I would rather argue that the poem in itself is more powerful because she is taking on a personality that is not her own, in fact, in total opposition to her own her identity. This extreme contrast is what gives her the approval of the audience to assume this identity and be deemed authentic. Rather than it being just connected with her status as a marginalized identity.

As well as her being African American, in the *Def Jam* performance she is a 47-year-old grown woman. These visible bodily markers combined with Butlers ideas of the appropriation of gender we are given by society, implies that she should give us a feeling of motherhood and nurturing, because this is the role society expects and has created for her. The result is that the identity we see compared to the one she conveys, is in even more stark contrast to what she is saying. Using this as a dramatic effect can win over the audience, especially when considering that within the slam community: “the values of dominant culture are suspended and poets in traditionally oppressed groups are encouraged” (Somers-Willett 70). This might also be caused by the fact that there are social and cultural restrictions on who is allowed to claim other identity markers. A white, middle class, male member of the dominant culture claiming identity markers from female marginalized identities would possibly not be as well received. Even though he would be creating the same contrast as Smith, I would argue that it would most likely be considered as a humorous parody of a female of a marginalized identity, rather than the authors subconscious effort to understand that identity better. In fact, if a white, male poet would take on the character identity in “Skinhead”, I would argue that they would most probably be creating a shock value which would not benefit the understanding of the poem itself. In fact, the crowd would more likely be less engaged or even disgusted by the white supremacist rant of a racist poet. In fact, assigning the character identity of the poem to the authors own identity.

5.5 Assessing the poem

There is a dominant trend emerging in American poetry, a poetry which is rooted in narrative and a first person semi-autobiographical speech, just like “Skinhead”. The most glaring difference between classic poetry and their readings, compared to slam poetry is that while the poem itself has power on the page, the fact is that its real power lies in its performance. There is no question that “Skinhead” in its textual form is not as strikingly powerful as it is in performance. As an example, line 1 of the poem can be read in a conversational style:

They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty

In the performance on the other hand, the first four words are pronounced staccato. This gives us from the beginning of the performance a sense of connection with his pride in being labeled as a member of this stigmatized group. She takes on the “I” of the poem by forcefully pronouncing each word with a snarl: “They call me skinhead”. The dramatic effect of this is heightened by the extreme contrast between the her and the identity she is performing, which makes the felt effect authenticity in portrayal difficult to explain. What she is doing here is making use of Artaud’s ideas of using gestures, movement, sound, and symbolism rather than just language, as well as Brecht’s concept of *gestus*. What this does is reveal a specific aspect of a character. As a result, if we look at Smith’s performance, her combination of body language, intonation and aggressive speech, this is her narrative, or how she expresses the identity.

This power in the performance is caused by the fact that the poem is not only performed, she writes the poem the voice and identity in mind, therefore the poem itself is written to be spoken and performed. In fact, it can be argued that the focus on the orality is diluting the level of writing or the textual sphere of the poem. In fact, as mentioned before, she does not perform the original textual element in the same way that it was originally written. This implies that the poem itself is transformed by the performance. I would argue that this change is caused by the intersubjectivity of the audience and the performer on stage. The audience is able to use the conventions in slam of audibly expressing their reactions to the performed piece, as a result this affects how the author performs the work as well as the textual poem. As a result, the poem cannot be assessed only by the traditional aspect of evaluating it from a textual point, because it loses too many of the nuances which she is able to convey only in the performance.

On the stage she is performing her own work, as a result she has a double role of a poet and performer. She is not only reciting her work, she is taking on the identity she has created and presenting it through her performance. Since the audience has expectations of her performing autobiographical work she must be able to break away from the liminal space between the self of the performer and the character of the poem. She does this beautifully by using gestus and creating a character on the stage which is recognizable to the audience. This tension in narrative where she on one hand is performing a persona and taking on the voice of the subject, can't be recreated except in the performance. The significance of this becomes apparent when one considers the importance of the audience to the performance. The fact that Smith in her poem is a part of what the character "I" in the poem is condemning, is what I would argue gives the poem its power.

The incomprehensible relationship between the hated and the hater is connected in the performance. Smith is actually in her identity on stage critiquing his anti-racist critics, which is made more powerful because of her portraying it through his identity. What is interesting in all of this, is that despite all the aggression, hatred and racism, she is also able to make the audience pity the "I" of the poem. Not because his identity is charming or innocent, rather the exact opposite. There is a coherent connectivity throughout the poem, its going somewhere, in fact while portraying the identity of the "I" of the poem, this pity comes through because she is also blaming the spectators for creating this identity. This may seem contradicting when she is also trying to understand someone who hates her, but these are also the most powerful lines of the poem. This is because it shows us how immersed she is in the identity she is portraying. While portraying his identity, she is also able to share with us some what she has become aware of through challenging herself with taking on his identity. In fact, with the lines 71 to 75 she puts the responsibility on us all:

I'm your baby, America, your boy,
Drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful

And I was born

and raised

right here

Through her poem and her identity on stage she takes us on a journey to somewhere, making us reflect of over our own responsibilities of how the world has become what it is. In fact, blaming us all for making him what he is.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has been a study on what effect performance has on gender and identity in contemporary poetry. This study focused on connecting the theories of Judith Butler's subversion of identity, theatrical theorists Antonin Artaud's concept of "The Theatre of Cruelty" and Bertolt Brecht's *gestus*, to the performance aspect of slam poetry. Through my research I have tried to place slam poetry within the genre of contemporary poetry, evaluated the role of authenticity in performance poetry as well as evaluating the effect of performance on the textual element. I have tried to answer these questions by analyzing Patricia Smith's poem "Skinhead".

The concept of this thesis was prompted by the initial idea that performance poetry was able to enhance poetry in a way that the classic poetry reading never could. Consequently, this thesis was supposed to prove that performance poetry and in particular slam poetry, would be the savior of poetry from the certain death declared by Epstein. Slam should and would become the new path of poetry. In the course of this research the results showed a different reality.

While this is still a valid idea and there is no question that slam poetry does influence contemporary poetry, my research has lead me in other directions. This is caused by the fact that even though slam does have some of the characteristics of literary poetry, its connection to theatre, identity, authenticity and most of all performance is much stronger. Looking at "Skinhead" as an example of the influence theatre has on slam, shows that slam should not try to distance itself from its roots. In fact, the theatricality portrayed by Smith in her performance is in fact what creates the authenticity which the slam audience demands.

This is particularly evident in Smith's performance. Because she is a marginalized woman writing a persona poem depicting an antagonistic identity, this aids her claim of authenticity. She is able to portray her character identity as authentic by using her marginality as a tool, and thus create such a stark and dramatic contrast that the audience can't help believing her. Smith is in fact using Artaud's concept of "The Theatre of Cruelty" in a compelling way. Instead of inflicting the cruelty onto the audience, she turns it on its head and directs it towards herself. By trying to understand the identity of her hater, she takes on his identity and is therefore verbally assaulting her own identity in the performance.

She is able to convince the audience of the authenticity of her performance by using Brecht's *gestus* in a way that clarifies her status as that identity, instead of convoluting the author identity and character identity. She does this by using *gestus* to break the discourse

away from her own identity. This discourse is what enables the audience to see her as the white supremacist, and not as an African-American woman. She is in fact using her performance or act to take on the character identity and by this showing Butler's theory in action. This might be difficult to understand when her character identity onstage is so much at odds with the discourse she is using, but the fact is that it is this contrast which makes her performance powerful. By creating this tension, the experience of the audience and their view of the connection between the author and the text itself, reaches a different level.

This complete opposition to her own identity may explain the impact the poem has on its audience. While they are fully aware that she is performing, it is still the audience that chooses whether her identity is authentic or not. By using *gestus* as well as using socially and culturally constructed acts performed by white male skinheads, she takes on the identity of him, as a result her performance is believable. This could imply that identity, especially in slams extensive use of persona poems, dissolves the boundaries of identity in performance. This discourse expressed performativity that Smith uses in her performance is what enables her to take on the identity of the Skinhead. In addition to this, it can be argued that it is the audience which is in fact creating the discourse which enables her to do this. Whether this parody of a white supremacist is done to destabilize her identity as an African-American woman, or just used as a tool to give authenticity of her critique white supremacists is another interesting aspect. This is dependent on an intimate knowledge of the intentions of Smith, which is not available to us as observers of the performance.

In the same way that she has to be aware of her acts and *gestus*, another factor she needs to be aware of is that slam encourages the audience to expect an author identity. Because persona poems are used quite frequently in slam this creates a challenging balance for the audience between believing what the performer is saying and the character identity they are trying to convey. One of the reasons for this tension is the fact that in the slam performance the textual work is most often not known beforehand. Because the audience has no prior knowledge to what is being performed, the poet must be able to grab their attention and convey their character identity only through the three-minute performance. In fact, slam poems are written with the intent of being performed and therefore need the performance to disclose content which may only be possible through body language and orality.

The result is that a critical analysis of the performance in slam is vital in understanding slam poetry, because the performance aspect is the audiences first meeting with the poem. This has caused some trouble as well, since the major issue with assessing performed poetry is that there has been no focus on developing a tradition of critical

examination. Whether this is caused by the academic community's negativity towards view popular poetry or the fact that literary critics don't appreciate the focus on orality instead of text remains to be seen. One can even argue, that in slam, the poem is judged by the performance of the author rather than the performance of the poem, because the focus has shifted from the text-based work to the performance itself.

One of the biggest obstacles I have encountered in this thesis is that while slam poetry fights to be recognized as a part of the poetry genre, the fact is that it rather belongs within a subgenre of poetry. This is based on my argument that slam poetry scene has more in common with performance art and the theatre. Because the poem may be affected in performance by the audience, this means that the poem is not a constant, but rather in a fluid state and dependent on the performance. This is caused by the fact that slam poetry is written with the intent to be performed. Because the author creates tension in narrative by performing a persona and taking on the voice of the subject, the consequence is that the full effect of the poem can't be recreated except in performance. If the author is not aware of the use of gestus or body language, like Smith is in "Skinhead", the authenticity of the identity is lost.

Another interesting aspect this research lead me to was that while the poem itself might in theory exist without the author, because of the effect performance has had on the contemporary poetry, the poem does not fulfill its intended purpose because of the missing connection with the relevance the author puts on his work or choice of words in performance. This can be argued to be a consequence the digitalization we are experiencing today. The contemporary person is so involved in the instant gratification of being able to view performance in real life, that the textual sphere of the poem becomes second grade while the performance is what is the poem.

What this all boils down to is the fact that literary poetry, may benefit from the oral performance while slam poetry does not work without performance. Because slam poetry is written with the intention of it being performed, as well as modified to suit the audience it is performed for, this means that the poem in itself cannot, in my opinion stand on its own. What I mean by this is that its textual form does not have enough depth to be independent of the performance. Slam has a special ability to give the text life, but that is only applicable if one has seen it in performance. Without the performance it falls flat especially because the use of identity and voice is missing. This does not mean that poetry in itself must have some sort of special writing style rather that because of its dependence on the audience and the character or identity created by the performer on stage the poem in its textual form is lacking depth.

I would argue that the most substantial change slam has added to the genre of poetry is the need for authenticity. It is not sufficient for the slam audience to experience a performance of a poem, what they crave is a level of authenticity from the poet author which transcends the textual poem and gives them an elevated understanding of what the performer is trying to convey. This is a major factor of slam which cannot be dismissed. The issue we encounter is how the slam audience assesses this authenticity. Somers-Willett argues in her book that it is dependent on the marginalized identity of the author. That those who belong to a marginalized identity are thought to be more authentic than others. Though this is a valid point, this does not work unless the slam audience has created their own definition of authenticity based on the authenticity felt by marginalized identities, rather than from traditional socially and culturally constructed constraints. This implies that the slam audience is defining authenticity outside of socially and historically decided discourse, in fact creating a special discourse within the slam experience. Thus, this discourse does not exist outside the slam community. This could explain some of the issues with the critical assessment of slam poetry. The fact is that without the authenticity aspect found in slam, the performance is not being judged on the basis of what slam is, a performance which needs to create an aspect of authenticity from the audience. As a result of this the reluctance of creating conventions which could be used to critically assess slam poetry may be caused by the fact that those who are poetry critics today cannot understand neither the authenticity aspect or the discourse needed to create a true slam performance unless they are admitted into the slam community and understand its discourse.

Due to the direction I chose to take with this thesis there are several aspects which influence both slam poetry and contemporary poetry in general that have not been addressed and could have been analyzed further. Both Gregory and Somers-Willett discuss the importance of race in slam, and the fact that of the last fifteen individual champions of the National Poetry Slam only 6 have not been African-American, which implies that the slam scene specifically celebrates diversity and racial minorities. My choice of analyzing Patricia Smith's "Skinhead" is another issue. While it is true that she is the most winning Individual slam competition winner of all time, the fact is that "Skinhead" was the perfect example to show the arguments I found to be most compelling in slam. Had I chosen to analyze more of her poems or some by other authors, this might have affected my conclusions in a different way. Nevertheless, this is caused by both time limits and the scope of this thesis.

In conclusion it is important to note that even though this thesis has focused a lot on the differences between literary poetry and popular poetry, there are several elements that

they have in common. The competitiveness of slam with its scoring aspect and the goal of becoming a “true poet” can be compared to the literary scenes experience with the judging of their readers, publication companies and poetry critics. Though this does not have the same competition aspect that the slam poetry scene has, it does remind us of the competitive aspect that slammers experiences in live performance. Therefore, it can be argued that the genre may not be in such discord as is implied in this thesis. Patricia Smith is in fact a good example of a poet who truly exists in the liminal space between slam poetry and contemporary poetry because she has evolved from slam and back to poetry. I would argue that one of the most powerful effects she has brought over to poetry from slam, is the fact that when reading her poetry, it conveys her strong demeanor, tone of voice, and appearance to mind, this happens even though I have not seen that poem performed or not. This implies that her portrayal of identity and authenticity surpasses the textual element and may be the power that slam can give poetry, to make the author’s own interpretation of their work more meaningful.

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8. Appendices

Skinhead – Patricia Smith, original

They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty.
It is knife-scrawled across my back in sore, jagged letters,
it's in the way my eyes snap away from the obvious.
I sit in my dim matchbox,
on the edge of a bed tousled with my ragged smell,
slide razors across my hair,
count how many ways
I can bring blood closer to the surface of my skin.
These are the duties of the righteous,
the ways of the anointed.

The face that moves in my mirror is huge and pockmarked,
scraped pink and brilliant, apple-cheeked,
I am filled with my own spit.
Two years ago, a machine that slices leather
sucked in my hand and held it,
whacking off three fingers at the root.
I didn't feel nothing till I looked down
and saw one of them on the floor
next to my boot heel,
and I ain't worked since then.

I sit here and watch niggers take over my TV set,
walking like kings up and down the sidewalks in my head,
walking like their fat black mamas *named* them freedom.
My shoulders tell me that ain't right.
So I move out into the sun
where my beauty makes them lower their heads,
or into the night

with a lead pipe up my sleeve,
a razor tucked in my boot.
I was born to make things right.

It's easy now to move my big body into shadows,
to move from a place where there was nothing
into the stark circle of a streetlight,
the pipe raised up high over my head.
It's a kick to watch their eyes get big,
round and gleaming like cartoon jungle boys,
right in that second when they know
the pipe's gonna come down, and I got this thing
I like to say, listen to this, I like to say
"Hey, nigger, Abe Lincoln's been dead a long time."

I get hard listening to their skin burst.
I was born to make things right.

Then this newspaper guy comes around,
seems I was a little sloppy kicking some fag's ass
and he opened his hole and screamed about it.
This reporter finds me curled up in my bed,
those TV flashes licking my face clean.
Same ol' shit.
Ain't got no job, the coloreds and spics got 'em all.
Why ain't I working? Look at my hand, asshole.
No, I ain't part of no organized group,
I'm just a white boy who loves his race,
fighting for a pure country.
Sometimes it's just me. Sometimes three. Sometimes 30.
AIDS will take care of the faggots,
then it's gon' be white on black in the streets.

Then there'll be three million.

I tell him that.

So he writes it up

and I come off looking like some kind of freak,

like I'm Hitler himself. I ain't that lucky,

but I got my own beauty.

It is in my steel-toed boots,

in the hard corners of my shaved head.

I look in the mirror and hold up my mangled hand,

only the baby finger left, sticking straight up,

I know it's the wrong goddamned finger,

but fuck you all anyway.

I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,

my face scraped pink and brilliant.

I'm your baby, America, your boy,

drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful.

And I was born

and raised

right here.

Skinhead – Patricia Smith, in the *Def Jam* performance

They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty.
It is knife-scrawled across my back in sore, jagged letters,
it's in the way my eyes snap away from the obvious.
I sit in my dim matchbox,
on the edge of a bed tousled with my ragged smell,
slide razors across my hair,
count how many ways
I can bring blood closer to the surface of my skin.
These are the duties of the righteous,
the ways of the anointed.

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and he opens up his hole and screams about it.
So this reporter finds at home in bed,
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Why ain't I working? Look at my hand, asshole.
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