

Where My Girls At? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender, Race, Sexuality,
Voice and Activism in Ottawa's Capital Slam Poetry Scene

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Abstract

Ottawa's Capital Slam poetry scene has transformed over the past decade, marking a shift in the identities, discourses and performance styles of local poets. This thesis investigates these changes and trends within the time periods of 2008-2010 and 2012-2014. This thesis demonstrates the shift from male poets of colour in 2008-2010 to female voices in 2012-2014 at Capital Slam, through an examination of Ottawa's history and a multimodal critical discourse analysis of online performances. In particular, the creation of local alternative poetry shows over the past five years has increased the representation of female poets and transformed the racial dynamics of the scene. During the period 2008-2010 and 2012-2014, poets used key historical elements of slam poetry such as storytelling and speaking through personal experiences to effectively demonstrate how marginalized individuals can speak counter-narratives to dominant culture. The use of storytelling allowed these poets to engage, connect and dialogue with the audience, as well as demonstrate their different identities, discourses and performance styles.

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In the Name of Positionality: An Introduction

I am a poet, a slam poet. My interest over the years has grown not only to perform slam poetry, but for this thesis, to investigate the slam poetry scene as a cultural space where the politics of gender, race, sexuality, class and other markers of social difference make themselves manifest. In fact, there was a particular moment when my thesis topic crystalized and became clear. Before I started performing slam poetry, a friend and poet in the Ottawa spoken word community began prepping me for what was to come in the scene. He described some of the politics and dynamics at Capital Slam (as well as slam in general) and encouraged me to perform. As we watched slam videos from well-known poets, Sarah Kay and Saul Williams, to local poets, “Truth Is” and Ikenna “Open Secret” Onyegbula, he summed up slam in three words: Black, White and gay. This friend told me my voice was missing from the scene and I needed to slam: “Jenna, you’re not Black, White or gay, so you’ll do really well in the slam scene.” At the time, I was conflicted because I did not like the idea of being scored for my poetry – a defining feature of slam – but I also knew it was important for a unique voice like mine to be present in this space. After reflecting on his comment, I was troubled to hear how slam poetry could be reduced to three essentialized identities. I wondered what kind of politics existed in slam for my friend to make this reductionist comment. What were the dynamics that existed in Ottawa’s slam poetry scene? How would the role of identity shape my outcome? These questions, thoughts and personal experiences would encourage me to explore the politics and dynamics in Ottawa’s spoken word scene.

Overview of Project

This is the first research project to study Ottawa's spoken word poetry scene. Ottawa has a vibrant spoken word community with three different slam poetry shows (including one youth slam), as well as a variety of non-competitive spaces where poets can perform. Only Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal have more than one slam series in Canada (not including youth slams). Capital Slam, the second-longest-running poetry slam series in Canada, is home to two back-to-back national championship teams in 2009 and 2010. Despite the national and international success of poets in Ottawa's spoken word scene, one area of noticeable issue has been the lack of female representation in Ottawa's competitive and male-dominated arena (Garrison, 2009; Priske, 2011; Tomovcik, 2010). Between 2007 and 2011, there were no female poets on the Capital Slam poetry team. In 2012, there was one female poet on the team. From 2005 to 2012, only five women have filled the 40 spots in the Capital Slam finals.

My thesis will examine Capital Slam from the time periods of 2008-2010 and 2012-2014. The 2009 Capital Slam team was comprised of five male poets, and male poets of colour dominated Ottawa's slam poetry arena, as four out of the five team members were Black poets. Out of the 54 competitors that year, only nine identified as female (17 per cent), which was the lowest percentage of female involvement in Capital Slam history (R. Priske, personal communication, September 7, 2013; Appendix A). There were also no female poets in the Capital Slam finals. The 2010 Capital Slam team was made up of five male poets of colour and there was only one female poet who made it to the finals. In order to raise the profile of female poets, Voices of Venus, an all-female poetry show, was created in 2009 (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). Rusty Priske, Capital Slam's slammaster, noted

the impact *Voices of Venus* in his breakdown of Ottawa's slam history from 2006-2011 in *Local Tourist Ottawa* (2011). *Voices of Venus* recreated Ottawa's spoken word culture in which everyone could feel comfortable sharing their work: "While it is not a slam, the change in culture has certainly been felt on the slam scene as now nearly half of the poets that take the slam stages in Ottawa are female" (Priske, 2011). This percentage was only for the 2010-2011 season, and there are no available statistics from 2009-2011 (R. Priske, personal communication, November 27, 2012). Four seasons later in 2013, 21 women (30 per cent) stepped up to the mic, which was one of the highest representations of female poets at Capital Slam (R. Priske, personal communication, September 10, 2013; Appendix C).¹ The 2013 finals were the first time female and male poets were represented equally in the Capital Slam finals (Capital Slam, 2013d). Furthermore, the 2013 Capital Slam team was made up of three male poets and two female poets – the most on any team since 2006. One of those female poets did not compete with the team at nationals, which changed team dynamics to four male poets and one female poet (Capital Slam, 2013e). As more female poets stepped up to the stage and Ottawa had its first all-female youth slam team in 2013, *Voices of Venus*, the all-female poetry show, came to an end after four years.

I am interested in exploring the changes and trends from 2008-2010 and 2012-2014 in Ottawa's spoken word poetry scene, including the visibility of female voices and the racial dynamics of the environment.² I am also interested in examining the types of identities,

¹ The statistics on the gender and race of poets are from R. Priske's memory. The percentages may not be entirely accurate, but provide insight into the trends and dynamics of the scene.

² There are no available statistics by Canadian city or at the national level, so I am unable to compare slam poetry scenes: "As for male vs female [on a national level], it would probably skew male, but I don't have those figures. Attempts to gather that data (team membership over the years) has been futile. There are some very female-centric scenes and teams over the years that even that somewhat" (R. Priske, personal communication, September 6, 2013).

discourses and performance styles of Ottawa poets through a critical discourse analysis of online performances.

History of Slam Poetry

Spoken word poetry is poetry that is performed aloud in front of an audience, and ranges from rap to performance poetry to slam poetry. Slam poetry blends original poetry, performance and competition, and has been influenced by a variety of art forms including beat poetry, hip-hop, coffeehouse reflections and avant-garde performance literature (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 99). The roots of slam go back to Chicago in 1984 when a White, American poet and construction worker, Marc Smith, wanted something more for poetry. He found that most poetry readings were very academic and exclusive, comprised of poets reading to poets and often set up by academics (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Smith also saw that the poetry readings were poorly attended and monotonous, and he wanted to broaden poetry's appeal to the masses by moving it out of the academic world (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Susan Somers-Willett (2009) in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, a slam poet and one of the leading poetry slam scholars, Smith brought an art form that was often seen as elitist and exclusive to the bars of Chicago's White, working-class neighbourhoods (p. 3). Smith collaborated with other artists to create a variety show of musical experimentation, performance art and Dadist poetry in blue-collar venues, such as the Déjà Vu and Green Mill bars (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 3-4). These alternative venues, formats and a mishap would create what is now known as slam poetry.

In 1986, a mishap and lack of material moved Smith to hold a mock competition in which he encouraged the audience to judge the poets with boos and applause, and later with

numeric scores (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 4). The audience and poets thrived on the competitive and entertaining format. The competition became a regular attraction on Sunday nights where the Uptown Poetry Slam was created (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 4). The slam soon expanded out of Chicago to New York and San Francisco, and the first National Poetry Slam began in 1990 (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Smith took “slam” from the baseball term, “grand slam,” because he argued that competition could draw out the best in poets and engage an audience who was disinterested in poetry (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 36). According to Smith (2009), the creator of slam, in *Take The Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam and The Spoken Word*, slam poetry is “performance poetry, the marriage of a text to the artful presentation of poetic, words onstage to an audience that has permission to talk back and let the performer know whether he or she is communicating effectively” (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, p. 5). Five characteristics of slam poetry include poetry, performance, competition, audience interaction and a sense of community (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, p. 5). Smith wanted to dissolve the barriers between poets and the crowd, and for poets to recognize their role as servants to the audience (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, p. 12). Slam is performed in front of a live audience and often in a competitive arena, encouraging poets to address and deal with personal, political, spiritual and social issues. Poets perform original work and five pre-selected audience members judge the performances based on a numeric scale from zero to 10 (with the highest and lowest scores dropped). Poets have approximately three minutes to share their poem, and they are limited by time, space and a lack of props.

The nontraditional and competitive format created a rowdy and countercultural atmosphere at slams, an environment that can be found at many shows today (Aptowicz,

2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Since audience members play a large role in slam, there can be an immediate connection between the poet and the audience in a highly interactive and physical environment (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). This immediacy is unlike other poetry environments because slam encourages audience feedback (i.e. snapping, clapping, cheering, booing) and the crowd plays a crucial role in rewarding poets through scoring (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz (2008), a slam poet and founder of the NYC-Urbana Poetry slam series, Smith’s vision created a communal experience for individuals to be heard and audience members to respond, giving poetry back to regular people (p. 37). The atmosphere of slams created an open door policy for anyone to sign up to perform and anyone is qualified to judge (Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). In particular, slam was a place for marginalized voices to speak their stories and also challenge the lack of diversity in the academy, canon and dominant culture (Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Smith (2004) argues that slam has broken down colour lines and collar barriers:

At these events, men and women of all ages, all races and nationalities, all socio-economic brackets, and a wide range of occupations gather to share their poetry, their performances, and the joy of creating and being part of the slam community (Smith & Kraynak, p. 24).

Slam increased accessibility to poets and fans outside of academia to participate, enjoy, engage, judge and feel part of a community. Although slam created a space for diverse voices and a communal experience, a number of scholars have recognized the sexism and homophobia that still persists in these communities (Escoto, 2013; Fox, 2010; Halberstam, 2003; Johnson 2010; McKibbens, 2012; Olson, 2007). My thesis attempts to complicate this

seemingly inclusive space and explore the ways that some voices remain underrepresented in Ottawa.

History of Hip-Hop

Slam poetry has been heavily influenced by hip-hop culture and has faced a number of similar issues, including the commodification of Black poets and slam's ongoing obsession with authenticity in performance (Somers-Willett, 2010, p. 103). Hip-hop grew out of poverty and marginalization in the mid-1970s, and was created for and by Black and Latino youth in the South Bronx of New York (Pough, 2004, p. 26). At the time, there were housing shortages, a lack of working-class job opportunities and racial, class and gender inequalities (Low, 2011, p. 6). Youth employment was also at 60 per cent, which created the conditions for a movement like hip-hop to flourish in the Bronx and later throughout the U.S. (J. Chang, 2005, p. 13). According to hip-hop feminist scholar Gwendolyn Pough (2004), rap music and hip-hop culture gave Black youth a voice in the public sphere (p. 26). Pough argues that it was important for historically marginalized groups, including Black and Latino youth, to make use of representational techniques of spectacle that have been historically violent and exclusionary towards them (2004, p. 29). DJ Kool Herc, one of the founding fathers of hip-hop, laid the roots of hip-hop when he spun records on a sound system and then rapped over ska or reggae beats (Thompson, 1996; Toop, 1991). Herc argues that hip-hop bridges many cultures and generations, regardless of their background:

To me, hip-hop says, "Come as you are." We are a family... It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or whatever (J. Chang, 2005, p. xi).

The universal appeal of hip-hop created connections and community. Hip-hop is traditionally comprised of deejaying, rap music, break dancing, graffiti writing and

knowledge. However, Jeff Chang (2007) documents the emergence of the hip-hop arts, which includes literature, film, photography and hip-hop theatre (p. xiii). Through hip-hop culture, Black youth and many other marginalized voices have been able to give voices to their experiences and communities.

Key Themes in Slam Poetry and Hip-Hop Literature

There is a relatively small, yet growing body of literature on slam poetry with very minimal work done in Canada (see Cowan, 2009; Low, 2011). A number of slam poetry scholars have examined the role of identity, and the connection between the performance of identity and authenticity in slam (Aptowicz, 2008; Fox, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2009). Slam poetry is most often written in a first-person narrative, and many poets use the stage as a “political soapbox” to share passionate and protestive pieces (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 52). According to Somers-Willett, many slam poets write about personal and political themes, and the most common is marginalized racial, gender and sexual identities due to slam’s emphasis on plurality and diversity (2009, p. 7). Similar to hip-hop, slam has created a place for oppressed individuals to speak in public spaces (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Fox, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Low, 2011; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). There is disagreement between scholars as to the real inclusivity of slam; many slam poetry scholars note that social hierarchies can and do exist within slam communities (Fox, 2005; Johnson, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2009). Individuals possess social power, prestige and privilege by belonging to a socially constructed group in group-based social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 32). In slam, some scholars argue that racial identity is more rewarded by audiences (Fox, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2009), and there is potential for marginalized identities to be taken up and consumed (Somers-Willett, 2005, pp.

53-54). For example, nine out of the 15 individual champions of the National Poetry Slam in the U.S. have been African American (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 78). However, the validation of certain stories and identities can minimize the experiences of others. Ragan Fox, a slam poet and scholar, says marginalized racial identity is valued more than the performance of other oppressed identities: “Audiences are almost expected to affirm race but gender and sexuality are different balls of wax. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard racial identity poems that score well bashing women and queers” (2005). Poets may elevate their own marginalized identity, while also putting down the experiences of other oppressed individuals. In “The Race to Innocence,” Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998) explore social hierarchies between competing marginalities, which cause women to focus solely on their own oppression. The slam stage can also be a “race to innocence” in which poets promote their own marginalized identity above others.

The performance of identity and authenticity is also important for poets to engage with the audience personally, immediately and authentically (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Maria Damon (1998), a poet’s success in slam depends on convincing the audience of an authentic performance of identity: “the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of ‘realness’ – authenticity... that effects a ‘felt change of consciousness’ on the part of the listener” (as cited in Somers-Willett, 2009). The emphasis on performance can also become problematic when authenticity and marginalized identity are conflated, while forgetting the performative dynamics of authenticity (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 8-9). As a result, performing an authentic marginalized identity is crucial and complex; poets are not only rewarded for what they say about their identity, but also how they perform it onstage (Fox, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2009). Poets use techniques from Black

popular music like repetition, call-and-response, rapping, beat boxing and rhyme in their performances to gain authenticity and legitimacy (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 88). These devices allow poets to engage and influence the audience. Slam poets even adapt their performances (i.e. language, tone, speed and energy) to various contexts, audiences and venues (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 25). Identity can be performed through more than words, including physical appearance, dress, gestures and voice (Fox, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Fox discusses the tie between performers' bodies and communicating truth in his own autobiographical exploration of his performances. As a gay man, Fox puts his body on display in which his mannerisms and speech are paraded and celebrated (2010, p. 422). For example, he elongates "S" sounds to show his distinct lisp in "Faggot," and uses his high-pitched voice to aurally confirm lines of homophobia in "Be Mine": "I know the blows thrown at face when voices creep two octaves too high" (Fox, 2010, p. 421). Fox says he uses his poetry and performances to create various discourses about gay identity (2010, p. 423). The performance of identity and being seen as authentic remains a key feature of slam – and is a central part of the connection established between poets and the audience.

Although poets can use performances to connect with the audience, a number of poets and scholars have criticized the role of performance. Maggie Estep, one of the most well-known slam poets, says performance has taken prevalence over writing: "It just seems like it's a different thing. It's not about writing; it's about theatre and acting" (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 73). In an interview with Aptowicz in *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York Poetry Slam*, Estep talks about the impact of HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* (which she has appeared on), a series featuring well-known and up-and-

coming spoken word poets. Although the series has brought slam to a larger audience, Estep says it is not focused enough on the writing and “most of it’s just like fucking bad rap” (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 73). The performance component in slam can be just as important as the written text (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Some slam poets feel they are valued more for their performances than their actual poetry due to the impact of *Def Poetry Jam*, especially if they are trying to build a poetry career than “breaking down the cultural barriers found within academic poetry” (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 88). Consequently, poets and audience members may focus more on performances than writing at slam competitions.

The importance of being seen as authentic in slam and hip-hop has also led to the commodification of Black artists. Similar to hip-hop, marginalized poets are often consumed and commodified by a predominately White, middle-class audience in slam (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 58). Somers-Willett argues that the success and visibility of poets of colour may be connected to these audiences who equate authenticity with marginalized racial identity “on the basis that something so distinctly different from or ‘other’ than White, middle-class existence is cool, desirable, and more real or genuine” (2009, p. 79). The dichotomy of a White audience and marginalized poets can create fetishization in which poets are rewarded based on their differences. David Samuels (1991) says the consumption of poets of colour by White audiences can become a site of racial voyeurism instead of a racial exchange (2004, p. 175). In particular, the Black spoken word poet’s connection to the rapper’s image is highly apparent, despite poets’ desires to distance themselves from the rapper’s image and lifestyle (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 103). Commodification and racial voyeurism in slam has a long history, having already taken place in hip-hop and rock and roll music among many other art forms. The commercialization of rap music has shifted the art form from

consciousness-raising to consumption through clothing lines, movies, television shows and magazines (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 121). Furthermore, companies and radio executives have chosen pop rap over more socially conscious music, which dilutes the urban realities many rap artists face and sells a certain image for mainstream audiences (Dyson, 2004, p. 71). In slam, certain stories are also valued in this environment. The creation of *Def Poetry Jam* brought slam to the mainstream, but produced a very narrow representation of slam poets (Aptowicz, 2008; Somers-Willett, 2009). *Def Poetry Jam* made such waves throughout mainstream society that many people believe slam's roots come out of African American hip-hop culture instead of White, working-class beginnings (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 12).

Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion in slam, but some scholars and poets have noted the sexism and homophobia that can occur in these spaces (Escoto, 2013; Fox, 2010; Halberstam, 2003; Johnson 2010; McKibbens, 2012; Olson, 2007). Javon Johnson (2010), a slam poet and academic, argues that many scholars and popular press romanticize slam's diversity, expression and political potential without recognizing the "behind-the-scenes racial, gender, class, and sexual dynamics between and among various performers, whereby the notion of community is always a contested concept" (p. 397). This thesis aims to make the "back of the stage" politics of ongoing exclusion visible. Johnson compares Black masculine performances in two Los Angeles slam and spoken word communities, Hollywood's Da Poetry Lounge (DPL) and Leimert Park. In these spaces, Johnson notes the issues of oppression and exclusion, including the sexism, homophobia and absence of queer bodies that go undercritiqued and unchecked (2010, p. 396). Both poetry communities are male-centred and predominately Black in which male

poets need to display a “‘real’ manliness to and for one another” (Johnson, 2010, p. 405).

The parallels in Los Angeles’ spoken word communities can be seen in hip-hop, which has a strong focus on being authentically Black (Neal, 2004, p. 65). This “authentic hip-hop” is based off of stereotypes of young Black men who exhibit Blackness, the “streets” and “hard” heterosexual masculinity (Low, 2011; McLeod, 1999; Neal, 2004; Samuels, 2004).

Hip-hop is a male-dominated space in which women’s contributions and voices have historically and continue to be erased (Neal, 2004; Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004; Rose, 2004). Black feminists and scholars have challenged hip-hop’s history through hip-hop feminism; this is a movement that bridges the maleness of hip-hop culture and the Whiteness of the feminist movement, so young Black women can create their own space and explore who they are as women (Morgan, 1999; Peoples, 2008). Pough explores the relationship between hip-hop, Black women and the public sphere to find spaces where political change is possible for women in hip-hop, especially when they have been constantly denied voice (2004, p. 11). Similarly, scholars have noted how female voices have been underrepresented or erased in some slam communities, including Los Angeles and San Diego’s slam poetry scenes (Escoto, 2013; Johnson, 2010).

The Los Angeles and San Diego poetry communities provide case studies to compare some of the dynamics that can go unchecked in slam spaces, such as the lack of female poets in Ottawa’s spoken word scene. In order to counter the sexism and “boys club image” in the Los Angeles’ spoken word community, DPL hosts an annual women’s night where women host, perform poetry and are celebrated (Johnson, 2010, pp. 404-405). Many of these female poets rarely come to DPL and it is the one time of the year where the visibility of female

poets is not questioned (Johnson, 2010, p. 405).³ However, women in the scene note that more female representation is necessary: “There needs to be something where the Lounge’s story is told, including the women who, at times, kept it running” (Johnson, 2010, p. 405). Despite the lack of women in the DPL community, many men do not acknowledge that it has become a “boys club,” let alone the idea they have made it an unsafe place for women (Johnson, 2010, p. 405). In San Diego’s slam community, Jerrica Escoto (2013) explores the male-dominated scene and the importance of female voices through interviews with San Diego slam poets. In one interview, a male poet notes the valuable perspective of women’s voices and experiences, as well as their relation to the underrepresentation of queer bodies: “I don’t believe we have a powerful queer population, a strong population outside of the heteronormative binaries but women serve to open up that space” (Escoto, 2013, p. 48). Women play an important role in bringing in different viewpoints and opening up spaces for a variety of voices.

Similar issues in Los Angeles and San Diego’s communities have occurred in Ottawa’s slam poetry scene, such as the underrepresentation of women and queer perspectives, and the creation of an all-women’s show to raise the profile of female voices. The viewpoints of female poets and organizers are also missing from Capital Slam’s history in the media and online posts. Moreover, Alix Olson (2007), a slam poet and editor of *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, notes the issue of male domination in slam: “I noted not only the misogyny in too many of the poems, but also the heavy male domination onstage, even with the progressive poetic lexicon, the ‘artistic democracy’ known as slam” (2007, p. xiii). The anthology she put together was the first

³ Johnson does not mention if the organizers of the women’s night are men or women, or if and how women are involved in creating a solution for the lack of female poets in the scene.

spoken word collection with more than 50 per cent female contributors, which speaks to the overrepresentation of male voices in slam (Olson, 2007, p. xvi).

Homophobia is also an issue that is undercritiqued in slam (Fox, 2010; Johnson 2010). In the Los Angeles' DPL poetry community, male poets have tried to create a safe venue for all artists; however, Johnson says there is only one open lesbian and there are no openly gay male poets (2010, p. 414). The one male poet who is suspected of being gay was questioned and treated inappropriately in regards to his sexuality, which speaks to the hostility and lack of safety for queer poets (2010, p. 414). Similarly, poets in San Diego's slam scene have noted the lack of queer voices in the community (Escoto, 2013, p. 48). These cities provide a comparison to Ottawa in order to examine the lack of female representation and any potential sexism or homophobia that exists in the scene. Although there was a strong queer and feminist presence at Voices of Venus, there are few openly queer poets in Ottawa's slam poetry scene or those who are discussing issues related to sexuality. This homophobia and lack of queer voices in poetry communities conflict with slam's call to inclusivity, as well as the commodification of otherness that can happen in these spaces. The commodification of marginalized voices does not adequately address deeper structural issues of homophobia and oppression. Despite the "progressive politics" that seem to flourish in slam, Johnson notes how queer poets can be pushed to the margins, which he has seen in New York, Chicago and other cities around the U.S. (2010, p. 415). Both Fox and Johnson have noted that pursuing and promoting racial identity can come at the expense of women and queer people, which has occurred in the Los Angeles' slam poetry community and in hip-hop.

There have also been tensions in the academic world with slam and hip-hop. Many critics of slam have challenged slam's emphasis on performance and competition over writing (Gregory, 2008, p. 67). Harold Bloom famously called slam, "the death of poetry," while David Wojahn (1985) said slam is made up of "methods of delivery and gimmickry that owe more to show-biz than to literature" (as cited in Gregory, 2008). Although these critiques are about slam, this art form has brought poetry to mainstream audiences, and has provided access and the space for some marginalized voices to counter dominant culture (Aptowicz, 2008; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Somers-Willett notes that many researchers in academia are former poets, and slam attracts more poets of colour than academic poetry communities; poets of colour are more likely to find success and recognition in these spaces (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 78).

Although slam poetry has many similarities with hip-hop, there are also a number of differences. Poets do not use musical accompaniment like rap in their slam performances. Even though slam is heavily influenced by hip-hop and has a similar aesthetic due to its urban origins and the prevalence of Black and Latino poets, Bronwen Low (2011) says slam is less marked as Black than rap music (p. 14). She notes that there seems to be a wider range of styles and slam is not bound by the tropes of authenticity and hardness found in hip-hop (Low, 2011, p. 14). Furthermore, since there is not much literature on slam, there has not been wide discussion on the sexism, homophobia and racism in these communities. Rather, there is more of a focus on the diversity and inclusion in slam (Johnson, 2010, p. 397). This focus on openness and acceptance may be detrimental in slam spaces because several of these issues can go unchecked or undercritiqued.

Background of Ottawa's Scene

Since the creation of Capital Slam in 2004, Ottawa is now home to three competitive slam series, including Capital Slam, Urban Legends and the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam. There have also been a number of non-competitive spaces for people to perform, including the Oneness Poetry Showcase (ended in 2010), an all-female poetry series, Voices of Venus (ended in 2013), Words to Live By and the Artistic Showcase. The role of space, competition, performance and poetry style have impacted the success of poets and the types of stories told in these various environments. Capital Slam was created in 2004 by local poets, Greg Frankson and Elissa Molino, after the Step Up Slam ended a few years earlier (Tomovcik, 2009). It is Canada's second-longest-running poetry slam series in Canada, occurring twice a month at the Mercury Lounge. This series is home to two back-to-back national championship teams in 2009 and 2010. In 2009, two new poetry shows, Urban Legends and Voices of Venus, were created to offer a different space for poets to perform. Urban Legends is Ottawa's second-longest-running poetry series and is a poetry slam that happens every other week at Carleton University. According to Suhaib Agial, co-creator of the series with Ian Keteku, the slam was initially created to provide another space for Muslim poets to perform in a non-alcoholic venue (Gowrie, 2010a). Voices of Venus was Ottawa's only female poetry series created by women for women. This non-competitive show provided a space to show the depth of female talent in Ottawa's male-dominated scene (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). Each month, there was an all-women open mic and a featured performance by a female Canadian poet or storyteller at Umi Café, a coffee shop, and later Venus Envy, a sex store. The series recently ended in 2013 after four years of providing an alternative space for female poets.

In 2011, local poets, Danielle Grégoire and Frankson, created the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam for youth aged 12 to 19. Its intention was to give youth an opportunity to participate in a workshop with an experienced poet and the chance to perform publicly (Atkinson, 2011). In 2011, the Ottawa youth won the nationals in Toronto and in 2013, the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam made history with Ottawa's first all-female poetry slam team (Capital Slam, 2013c). In the summer of 2012, I created Words to Live By to provide an alternative space for people to perform at Pressed, a local sandwich bar and coffee shop. There were a number of competitive shows and an all-female show, but there were not any non-competitive spoken word series in the city for everyone to perform. There has not been a show like this in Ottawa since the Oneness Poetry Showcase ended in 2013. Other poetry shows include the Artistic Showcase created by Brandon Wint, and ones that have ended are the Step Up Slam, Golden Star Lounge and Bill Brown's 1-2-3 Slam.

Women in Ottawa

Similar to other slam communities, there has been a relative lack of female representation in Ottawa's spoken word community. Since 2004, only male poets have won Capital Slam (Priske, 2014). Organizers in Ottawa's community have taken a number of steps to combat this trend. In 2009, Voices of Venus was created to raise female visibility in Ottawa's spoken word community. At the time of its creation, Ottawa had become very male-dominated and female poets were not getting much exposure (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). The show began as a one-time event in the spring of 2009 at Umi Café to provide a non-competitive space and stage for women to share their work (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). Poets and organizers of the show, Allison Armstrong and Lukayo "Festrell" Estrella, explain that Voices of Venus was created to empower women and raise

the profile of local female artists: “It’s a male-dominated scene, slam poetry. Female spoken word artists are rare, unlike in other literary scenes, and it’s hard for emerging performance poets to get the confidence to get their voice heard” (Tomovcik, 2010). Voices of Venus changed Ottawa’s spoken word scene in which more female poets started to perform and shifted the male-dominated culture (Lyon, 2011; Priske, 2011). Armstrong adds that Voices of Venus created a space for women from a variety of backgrounds to share their stories with Ottawa’s spoken word community (Davis, 2012).

Furthermore, VERSe Ottawa, the creators of VERSeFest (Ottawa’s poetry festival), hosted the city’s first Women’s Slam Championship in January 2012 to combat the male-dominated presence in slam. Rod Pederson, the creator of the show, wanted to develop a higher profile for women in slam and spoken word around the city and asked Priske to organize the event (Priske, 2012). Its intent was to showcase the depth of talent among female voices and encourage more women to get involved in slam poetry (Ha, 2012). The 12 poets were chosen as some of the movers and shakers from throughout the history of the spoken word scene in Ottawa (Priske, 2011). The first championship was sold out, but had less support in the following year. Instead of choosing 12 poets, there were three qualifying slams leading up to the finals in January 2013. After the second qualifying slam, Priske wrote a post about his disappointment towards the lack of support for female poets on his personal blog:

What I am talking about is the spoken word community in Ottawa who have claimed that they support women in slam and spoken word... and then don’t come to the show. Lip service is not support. Do you want female poets to NOT think that they are considered second-class citizens in our community? Then how about you show and not give them a ¾ empty room for them to perform in? (2012).

Although steps have been taken to support female poets, such as Voices of Venus, the Women's Slam Championship and Words to Live By, there still seems to be a gap in acknowledging the underrepresentation of female poets and actually supporting the shows and women in the scene.

Despite these issues in Ottawa's spoken word scene, 2012 was a breakthrough year for female poets in the city. Vanessa "V" Rotondo, a rookie female poet, became the first woman to be on a Capital Slam team since 2007 (Armstrong, 2012; Capital Slam, 2012). She was also the only female poet of eight poets to compete in the finals, a recurring trend at Capital Slam since 2010 (there were eight men in the 2009 finals). Kim "King Kimbit" Nguyen won the Urban Legends Poetry Slam that same year. She became the second female poet to win an Ottawa slam series out of 12 combined champions from Capital Slam, Urban Legends and the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam (Capital Slam, 2013b). In 2013, the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam team made history when it became the first Ottawa slam team to be comprised of all female poets. The 2013 Capital Slam team also had two female poets, which had not happened since 2006. However, no female poet has ever won Capital Slam.

Capital Slam: A Rich Place of Exploration

I have chosen to analyze Capital Slam because it is Ottawa's longest-running poetry slam series and has left a mark on the national and international slam scene. According to Priske, this movement of talented poets seemed to start in 2007 with Komi "Poetic Speed" Olafimihan, who he saw perform at the Dusty Owl Reading Series during the open mic (2011). Priske told Olafimihan he would do well at Capital Slam with his powerful words and delivery style (2011). Olafimihan came and slammed in the fall of 2007 and was followed by Onyegbula and Agial. It was also in 2007 when organizers booked the Mercury

Lounge in the Market, which would be an integral place that would help define Capital Slam (Priske, 2011). Slam poetry grew in popularity and Capital Slam moved from a show that struggled to fill the stage to a place where poets fought to perform at sold out shows (Priske, 2011). The legacy of poets like Olafimihan, Onyegbula, Agial and Keteku would impact Ottawa's spoken word scene for years to come in the types of performance styles and themes explored on stage. All of these male poets have performed internationally, and Keteku, Olafimihan and Onyegbula won the nationals in 2009 on the Capital Slam team. Keteku and Agial also started Urban Legends in 2009, the other slam poetry series in Ottawa; with Onyegbula, all three male poets have won Capital Slam in 2008, 2009 and 2011.

In 2008, Toronto poet, L.E.V.I.A.T.H.A.N., coined the term "Ottawater," saying there must be something in the "Ottawater" to create so many talented poets after he saw the third-place finish of the 2008 Capital Slam team at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word (members included Agial, Olafimihan, Onyegbula, Priske and Nathanaël Larochette) (Priske, 2011). Capital Slam continued to grow and Ottawa's spoken word poetry scene was solidified on the map in 2009. The Capital Slam team, led by Keteku with Olafimihan, Onyegbula, Priske and Brandon Wint, won the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in Victoria. The team was only the third team to win a national slam championship as Vancouver and Halifax had dominated the scene in the previous years (Priske, 2011). With Capital Slam's win, Keteku went on to represent Canada at the 2010 World Poetry Slam and finished in first place. The Capital Slam team of Keteku, Olafimihan, Onyegbula and Wint, morphed into the poetry troupe, The Recipe, where they broadened Ottawa's reputation with workshops and tours across Canada and abroad.

In 2010, Ottawa hosted the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word for the second time. The first festival in 2004 (then known as the Canadian Spoken Wordlympics) had eight teams compete in the competition (CBC, 2010). Six years later, there were 18 teams competing, including Capital Slam and the newly formed, Urban Legends team (CBC, 2010). Leading up to the nationals, the festival was covered by major and local news outlets, including *CBC* and the *Ottawa Citizen* (CBC, 2010; Simpson, 2010a). Peter Simpson, the arts reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen*, described the Ottawa poetry teams as very political: “Their poetry is often political, and hits hard at major issues of the day – war and violence, economic disparity, immigration and racial tension” (2010b). As hosts of the national festival, Ottawa solidified its dominance in slam poetry by finishing in first and second place. The Capital Slam team led by Chris Tse with John Akpata, Onyegbula, PrufRock and Wint, won its second-consecutive national slam title in front of a sold out crowd of 600 people at Dominion-Chalmers Church (Simpson, 2010b). According to Jessica Ruano, local poet and publicist for the festival, Ottawa’s performance demonstrated the diversity, growth and success of Ottawa’s poetry community: “One team cannot possibly contain all the poetic talent that we have here in Ottawa” (Gowrie, 2010a). Due to Capital Slam’s win at nationals, Tse went on to compete at the 2011 World Poetry Slam and came in second place. Due to the national and international success of Ottawa poets, Ruano says Ottawa started being recognized as a central place for spoken word in Canada and all over the world (Gowrie, 2010a). I chose to examine Ottawa because of its significance and centrality to Canada’s spoken word scene.

Although Capital Slam has raised the profile of talented Ottawa poets, it is also the series where the lack of female poets is most visible. There have been a number of major

shifts in Ottawa's spoken word scene since Capital Slam won back-to-back national championships in 2009 and 2010 with male-only teams. Two new poetry shows were created in 2009 to provide alternative places to perform, including Voices of Venus, an all-female poetry show, which was created to raise the profile of female voices (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). The Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam was formed in 2011, and was followed by the Artistic Showcase, Words to Live By and Ottawa's first Women's Slam Championship in 2012. In 2013, a variety of dynamics were happening in Ottawa's spoken word scene. The youth team became Ottawa's first all-female poetry slam team and two female poets made the Capital Slam team, which was the highest number of women in its history. At the same time, Voices of Venus ended after four years. As a result, Capital Slam is a rich place to examine the types of identities, discourses and performance styles that are validated in this space, as well as those bodies and stories that are absent.

Major Research Questions

In this thesis, the major research questions I explore are:

1. What is happening in the time periods, 2008-2010 and 2012-2014, in Capital Slam? Has there been a shift in creating spaces to raise the profile and representation of female poets?
2. What kinds of identities, discourses and performance styles are prevalent in these time periods?
3. How do male and female poets challenge dominant culture through slam poetry?

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

There are many identities, discourses, politics and dynamics that fill the slam arena. As a result, identity and marginality circulate in complex ways, as poets, audience members and judges are participants in this space. Poets play an especially important role as actors whose narratives intersect with gender, race, sexuality and class. In this chapter, I will situate my work within the fields of critical race feminist studies, hip-hop feminist studies, queer theory and performance studies to explore identity, marginality and the ways poets challenge dominant culture in slam. Using critical race feminist studies, I will examine the transformative possibilities of storytelling as an important method for oppressed individuals to speak counter-narratives to established knowledge. Storytelling can question the knowledge of both the speaker and listener, moving experiences out of the abstract into political action. I will also explore hierarchies of oppression in marginalized groups in which certain voices can be deemed more authentic, while others are underrepresented or erased. Critical race feminist scholars have also explored the power of coming to voice and the ways that marginalized voices talk back to systems of oppression. Using hip-hop feminist studies, I will explore how women can speak back to dominant culture, as well as the ways they use autobiographies and personal narratives for social change. I will also draw on work from queer theory and performance studies to explore the complexities of identity and the ways individuals can remake identity from the margins through performance.

Critical Race Feminist Studies: Storytelling of Oppressed Voices for Social Change

Critical race feminist studies explores how society is organized along the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class and other forms of social hierarchies. Critical race feminism originates from critical legal studies, critical race theory and various forms of

feminism (Wing, 2003). This framework distinguishes the experiences of women of colour from men of colour and White women (Crenshaw, 1989; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003), and focuses on the intersectionality and multiple voices of women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2002). Women of colour are placed at the centre of critical race feminism instead of the margins. Critical race feminism uses storytelling and counter-narratives as a method to legitimize the voices of women of colour in talking about oppression (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Razack, 1998; Verjee, 2012). According to Richard Delgado (1989), stories are an essential tool for the survival and freedom of marginalized groups (p. 2436). The counter-story is a method taken up by oppressed individuals to speak their stories and share experiences that are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002) argue that a narrative becomes a counter-story when it incorporates the five elements of critical race theory: 1) Race and racism are central as it intersects with other forms of subordination; 2) Challenges dominant ideology; 3) A social justice commitment to eliminate racism and other forms of marginalization, while also empowering oppressed groups; 4) The lived experiences and knowledge of people of colour; 5) The transdisciplinary perspective of multiple disciplines and research approaches (pp. 25-27). Counter-stories can be personal experiences or speaking other people's narratives, which can build community among marginalized groups and create a culture of shared understandings and experiences (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414). These narratives can also challenge dominant ideology and demonstrate alternative and transformational possibilities (Delgado, 1989). As a result, storytelling and counter-narratives are a powerful means of survival, freedom and resistance for oppressed individuals to expose and challenge dominant

discourses (Bell & Roberts, 2010; Delgado, 1989; Razack, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Verjee, 2012).

In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Sherene Razack (1998) explores the role of storytelling in courtrooms and classrooms as an important method for social change, which gives suppressed individuals a voice to provide a counter-narrative to established knowledge (p. 36). Razack discusses how courts translate information into one “objective” truth of whose stories are believed and seen as factual (1998, p. 37). According to Razack, stories bring feeling into the courtroom and work from experiential understanding, which is not often valued due to the court’s focus on reason and devaluation of emotion (1998, p. 38). The untold stories from subordinate groups are crucial because they can challenge the status quo and provide new perspectives; this can create a conversation and overcome the difference in position between the speaker and listener (Delgado, 1989; Razack, 1998). Razack challenges people to move storytelling out of the abstract into political action and to question the knowledge of both the speaker and listener (1998, p. 53). These narratives are important because individuals need to fight against pre-given differences by exploring the histories, conditions and social relations that create unequal power relations and shape what is known, thought and said (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Razack, 1998).

The Storytelling Project builds on counter-storytelling in critical race theory to engage people to critically examine race and racism in storytelling through the arts. Lee Anne Bell and Rosemarie Roberts (2010) propose three different types of narratives for participants to create alternative stories towards social justice: concealed, resistance and emerging/transforming stories. Marginalized voices can take up concealed stories to speak back to dominant culture, while also demonstrating strengths within these communities that

are often devalued or ignored (Delgado, 1989; Yosso, 2006). In the Storytelling Project, resistance stories show how people have resisted racism, challenged the status quo and fought for equality (Bell & Roberts, 2010, p. 2311). Emerging/transforming stories are new narratives that challenge and disrupt the status quo for change, and build on concealed and resistance stories. These counter-stories imagine new and alternative possibilities of racial equality, as well as propose strategies to work towards inclusion, equity and justice (Bell & Roberts, 2010, p. 2312).

Critical Race Feminist Studies: Social Hierarchies

Social hierarchies do not only operate between dominant and oppressed groups, but can also occur among marginalized groups who are fighting because they want to become part of dominant culture (Collins, 1998; Fellows & Razack, 1998; Moraga, 1983; Razack, 1998). According to Razack, everyone is implicated in systems of oppressions and people come to know and perform themselves in ways that replicate social hierarchies (1998, p. 10). She argues that individuals cannot work through the challenges of power relations when they see themselves as innocent, and fail to see how social hierarchies function among subordinate groups (Razack, 1998, p. 49). In “The Race to Innocence,” Fellows and Razack discuss how competing marginalities cause women to focus solely on their own oppression. By doing so, women do not acknowledge how they may be complicit in subordinating other women, and how they can be both oppressor and oppressed (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Lorde, 2007a; Moraga, 1983). For example, White women have contributed to oppressing women of colour, while also being in subordination to men (Collins, 1996; Lorde, 2007a; Moraga, 1983). Fellows and Razack argue that women do not acknowledge how they are part of the dominant group because they want to secure their own place on the margin as a first step

toward liberation (1998, p. 339). Consequently, some women's liberation subordinates other women and they do not recognize how the power of the dominant group can create and maintain their feelings of innocence (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 336).

Slam poetry scholars note that social hierarchies can and do exist within slam communities (Fox, 2005; Johnson, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2009). The slam stage can be a "race to innocence" in which marginalized individuals focus solely on their own oppression and some stories are validated more than others, such as racial identity; this occurs if the subordination is seen as greater than other forms of oppression (Fox, 2005; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Ragan Fox, a slam poet and scholar, he has seen racial identity poems score well, while at the same time putting down women and queer people (2005). Slam poetry literature has also noted how women and queer voices have been marginalized in various slam communities (Escoto, 2012; Fox, 2005; Halberstam, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Olson, 2007). Although the margin is an important place to talk back and come to voice, the call for diversity and inclusion has created complex power dynamics in the slam scene. Certain voices are marginalized and erased within this arena, and oppressed groups have marginalized those in dominant culture. Susan Somers-Willett, a slam poet and scholar, notes the complexities of diverse and essentialized identities being used to critique existing systems of power in slam (2009, p. 72). While these identities are validated and celebrated, she argues it confirms their differences from dominant culture (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 72). Slam creates a hierarchy of oppressed voices as the norm, but their dissimilarities also suggest how these voices still remain outside of dominant culture.

Another way social hierarchies operate in slam is the ways that oppressed groups hold the power and can marginalize dominant norms. Slam is a diverse and liberal sociopolitical space in which audiences celebrate poets in traditionally oppressed groups

through applause and scores, while the values of dominant culture are devalued (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 70). Marginalized voices hold power through discourses, experiences and identities, and often do not leave space for viewpoints that counter liberal political ideas. As a result, slam's emphasis on creating plural and inclusive spaces can exclude certain stories and voices. Fellows and Razack ask how justice can be transformative if it creates an "us" versus "them" divide and labels some people as degenerate (1998, p. 350). Razack calls for accountability in which everyone recognizes their involvement in systems of oppression that construct their understanding of the other (1998, p. 10). Since many individuals in slam have been pushed to the fringes, they do not see themselves as replicating these hierarchical power relations against dominant culture or others in traditionally oppressed groups.

Critical Race Feminist Studies: Coming to Voice and Talking Back from the Margins

The feminist focus of coming to voice and breaking silences have been important acts of resistance to dominant culture, especially for women of colour who have never had a public voice (Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007a). As a result, speaking allows women to move from object to subject in which they are no longer voiceless or defined by others (hooks, 1989, p. 12). Women must name and speak for themselves, which can transform silence into language, action and change (Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007c). One way in which women of colour have come to voice is through poetry. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde (1984) says poetry is not a luxury for women, but a vital necessity for their existence: "It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been seen before" (2007b, p. 38). For Lorde, finding one's voice and speaking the unspeakable are crucial for a woman's survival and change (2007b, p. 36). Poetry is a place of self-transformation, political consciousness

and a vehicle that women can use to bring ideas to life that are nameless and formless (Anzaldúa, 1999; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007b). In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa (1987) discusses the importance of language and naming all her identities, especially those parts that are conflicting and clashing. Anzaldúa uses poetry to explore the difficulties of identity and recognizes her need to speak and reclaim those names for herself (1999, p. 66).

Through coming to voice and speaking, hooks argues that women can “talk back” to dominant culture as an act of resistance and change:

In the world of the southern black community, “back talk” and “talking back” meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion... To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring (1988, p. 5).

Women can move towards freedom when they talk back to a status quo that often leaves them nameless and voiceless (hooks, 1989, p. 8). Marginalized individuals have a unique viewpoint and voice from the margins. In hooks’ essay, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” she sees the margin as a place of radical openness and a central location to create counter-hegemonic discourse (1990, p. 206). For hooks, the margin is a site of possibility and resistance that is crucial for people who are marginalized (1990, p. 206). The margins give oppressed individuals a unique perspective in which they can see and create, and imagine new and alternative worlds (hooks, 1990, p. 207). In slam, poets from oppressed groups often speak back to dominant systems of oppression. Consequently, poets can challenge the status quo and create new worlds of possibility, insight and connection: “[Poetry slams] are places where the possibilities of identity are explored, and their study contributes understandings about the complex interactions and desires between poets and

their audiences” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 9). Poets can explore identity in complex ways as they talk back, and connect and interact with the audience from the margins.

Hip-Hop Feminist Studies: Talking Back to Dominant Culture

Joan Morgan (1999) coined the term, hip-hop feminism, in her groundbreaking book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*. Hip-hop feminism bridges the maleness of hip-hop culture and the Whiteness of the feminist movement for young Black women to create their own space and explore who they are as women (Morgan, 1999; Peoples, 2008). According to Whitney Peoples (2008) in “Under Construction,” young Black women can challenge assumptions of hip-hop culture and the feminist movement, and borrow core themes for the development of their own identity (p. 26). Morgan advocates for a feminism “brave enough that would fuck with the grays,” and layered with many voices and experiences (1999, p. 59). Hip-hop feminist scholar, Aisha Durham (2007), defines hip-hop feminism as:

[A] cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post–civil rights or hip-hop generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation (as cited in Durham, Cooper, & Morris, 2013).

Hip-hop is an important place of resistance and freedom for Black women to talk back to dominant systems of oppression (Isoke, 2012; Keyes, 2000; Morgan, 1999; Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004; Rose, 1994; Rose, 2004). Hip-hop culture and rap create a space for Black women to critique misogyny in hip-hop, as well as challenge racism, sexuality, heterosexuality and express their racialized and sexualized identities (Peoples, 2008; Pough, 2004; Rose, 2004). Like hooks, hip-hop feminists desire to make women in hip-hop the subjects of the movement instead of only critiquing the misogyny of Black male rappers

(Morgan, 1999; Peoples, 2008; Pough, 2004). This shift focuses on uplifting the consumers of the culture, specifically Black women and girls, through political education and institution-building (Peoples, 2008, p. 28). Newer studies in hip-hop feminism are not only criticizing texts, but are focusing on performative, ethnographic narratives of hip-hop as embodied, lived culture (Durham et al., 2013, p. 727). Other research is also exploring how representations structure social identity and gender relations, and how these norms shape the ways women of colour are understood (Durham et al., 2013, p. 727).

Despite the potential of talking back to dominant ideologies, hip-hop feminism has faced a number of challenges. A number of Black women and female rappers are ambivalent to the term, feminism, and the negative connotations associated with it (Durham, 2007; Morgan, 1999; Rose, 2004). For many Black women, the legacy of feminism's racist, classist and homophobic beginnings prevents them from exploring its potential benefits (Peoples, 2008, p. 27). Others believe the feminist movement was specifically for White women and require an anti-male position (Rose, 2004). Some further challenges in hip-hop feminism are the tensions between second-wave Black feminists and hip-hop feminists (jamila, 2002; Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2004). For example, second-wave feminists focus on hip-hop's blatant misogyny can be at the expense of hip-hop's potential (Peoples, 2008; Pough, 2002). Gwendolyn Pough, a hip-hop scholar, discusses the possibilities in hip-hop to examine Black male and female relationships: "Rap music provides a new direction for Black feminist criticism. It is not just about counting the bitches and hoes in each rap song. It is about exploring the nature of Black male and female relationships" (2002, p. 94). Hip-hop scholar, Tricia Rose, also explores the dialogue that can occur between men and women. She says that Black female rappers have a strong voice to speak to their large male audience

and performance of pro-woman material: “They are able to sustain dialogue with and consequently encourage dialogue between young men and women that supports black women and challenges some sexist male behaviour” (Rose, 2004, p. 350). This may not lead to a “Black feminist male/female alliance,” but Rose argues that this dialogue may lay the foundation for these conversations. Moreover, women need to explore images and representations that can be both problematic and empowering (jamila, 2002, p. 392). For example, female rappers can be both complicit with and interrupt racism and sexism, and have a dialogue with male rappers instead of being in opposition to them (Rose, 1994, p. 147).

Other challenges raised in the field of hip-hop feminism include an engagement with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s (1993) “politics of respectability.” Black women implemented these strategies of reform and respect, such as temperance, politeness and sexual purity, to encourage racial uplift and gain wider access to the public sphere (Durham et al., 2013; Harris, 2003). The legacy of respectability politics has created tensions in hip-hop feminism for a pro-sex framework to discuss the pain and pleasure of sex and sexuality outside a narrow heteropatriarchal perspective (Durham et al., 2013, p. 724). Women of colour need to find a place to express their sexual agency and desire without being repressed or controlled (Durham et al., 2013, pp. 724-725). Hip-hop feminism also seeks to challenge heteronormativity in hip-hop culture, but homophobia and transphobia are still rampant in these spaces (Durham et al., 2013). According to Durham *et al.*, female rappers like Queen Latifah and Nicki Minaj are questioned and policed around their sexuality, which suggests the inhospitable culture to “queer-presenting black women” (2013, p. 725). Sexual scripts and stereotypes that define Black women’s sexual behaviours and experiences, like “dyke”

and “bitch,” also reiterate heteronormativity’s strong presence in hip-hop culture (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

Hip-Hop Feminist Studies: Autobiographies and Personal Narratives

The act of writing autobiography is closely tied to claiming a place in society for Black women (Braxton, 1989). As a result, autobiographies and personal narratives are important ways for Black women in hip-hop to share their stories, challenge stereotypes and connect with audiences in the public sphere (Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2004). In *Check It While I Wreck It*, Pough (2004) argues that autobiographies give women a chance to tell their stories and to make social commentary on the world around them (p. 111). There is also the potential to heal through narratives as listeners can connect and see themselves reflected and represented in the artist’s life (Pough, 2004, p. 107). According to Pough, rappers like Sister Souljah and Queen Latifah, confront old and new stereotypes in hip-hop for themselves and to help other Black women fight these issues in their own lives (2004, p. 112). Sister Souljah has taken up that challenge in her music, which she shares in her autobiography: “No matter how backward and negative the mainstream view and image of Black people, I feel compelled to reshape that image and to explore our many positive angles because I love my own people” (1994, p. x). In hip-hop feminism, Black women are in control of their histories and storytelling gives them a voice to assert themselves in a society that often stereotypes and leaves them invisible. Storytelling gives women a voice and the ability to challenge dominant culture, as well as construct and remake alternative perspectives of their identities through personal narratives (Keyes, 2000; Pough, 2004).

Qualitative Research Method: Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method to research and writing that examines personal experiences in relation to culture (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). This research approach describes and analyzes personal experiences to help individuals understand themselves and culture (for discussion, see Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Researchers use aspects of autobiography and ethnography in order to challenge traditional ways of doing research and representing others (Ellis et al., 2011, History of Autoethnography section, para. 1). One crucial reason to this method, according to Ellis *et al.*, is to create research grounded in personal experience that would expose readers to the complexities of identity; these experiences are often hidden in silence and deepen people's ability to empathize with those who are different from them (2011, History of Autoethnography section, para. 3). The self is the starting point for autoethnography (H. Chang, 2008, p. 23) and this method allows researchers to navigate the "busy intersections" of race, gender, sexuality and class (Alexander, 2005, p. 423).

In performance, Norman Denzin (2003) argues that performance autoethnography plays an important role as cultural criticism; since autoethnography is not simply an individual's life story, it is a diagnosis of one's self and a phase of history of more universal experiences (p. 268). There is power and potential in bringing personal stories to the centre stage of investigation and framing them in the context of a bigger story, what Heewon Chang calls "a story of the society" (2008, p. 49). In autoethnography, the performer uses his or her lived experience and personal history as a cultural site to come to terms with questions of self and culture (Alexander, 2005, p. 422). Autoethnographers examine epiphanies, which are remembered moments that seemed to have impacted a person's life, existential crises that

caused self-reflection or events where life was not the same (Ellis et al., 2011, Doing Autoethnography: The Process section, para. 2). These epiphanies are made possible by having a particular cultural identity or being part of a certain culture (Ellis et al., 2011, Doing Autoethnography: The Process section, para. 4). A crucial piece that distinguishes autoethnography from autobiography is the importance of analyzing these epiphanies and experiences, rather than just sharing them (Ellis et al., 2011, Doing Autoethnography: The Process section, para. 4). Autoethnographers must broaden their experiences to think about ways others may also experience similar epiphanies (Ellis et al., 2011, Doing Autoethnography: The Process section, para. 5). As a result, autoethnographers must focus on a number of levels: “a critique of self and society, self in society, and self as resistant and transformative force of society” (Alexander, 2005, p. 423). For autoethnographers, research and writing are political and socially-just acts, and the goal is to create critical and accessible texts that change individuals and the world (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

Queer Theory and Performance Studies: Remaking Identity from the Margins

Many feminists of colour have discussed the importance of expanding and radicalizing differences in identity (Anzaldúa, 1999; Lorde, 2007a; Moraga, 1983). Minorities often have to choose one aspect of their identity to represent the whole, instead of embracing all their fragments and complexities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Lorde, 2007a; Moraga, 1983; Muñoz, 1999). In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (1987) addresses how minorities negotiate identity through the *mestiza*, a hybrid group on the margins who must navigate their multiple identities to find their place (1999, p. 1). According to Anzaldúa, *mestizas* are in constant transition and undergo “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war,” which causes a cultural collision (1999, p. 100). She attempts to break down the dualities that imprison

women and rejects the stasis of the borderlands, which can be physical, sexual, spiritual and psychological places where identities clash (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 5). This hybrid space can be a hostile place of contradictions for minorities, such as physical and cultural borderlands where two or more cultures meet (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 19). The borderlands house those who do not easily fit into normative culture and are in constant transition and uncertainty, negotiating their multiple and often opposing identities. Anzaldúa shares her struggles as a “border woman,” growing up between two cultures on the Texas-Mexican border and how she has been able to come to terms with her identity as a Chicana, lesbian and feminist (1999, p. 5). She attempts to hold onto all the pieces of her identity, even those conflicting parts and avoids an essentialized understanding of the self (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 5). For Anzaldúa, the future depends on breaking down paradigms and spanning multiple cultures, which changes people’s perceptions of reality and their own lives (1999, p. 102). Her work on borderlands has been crucial to feminist, queer and antiracist work because it invites marginalized groups to envision themselves and to engage in bridge-building work (McRuer, 2006, p. 39).

José Esteban Muñoz (1999) builds on the works of Anzaldúa, Moraga and other women of colour in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, on differences in identity and the possibility of a queer world (p. 25). In *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz discusses the potential and possibilities of marginalized individuals through disidentification theory, which is a queer theory of identity performance. He explores how minorities perform identity politics through disidentification in order to bridge, transform and build new worlds (Muñoz, 1999, p. xiv). Muñoz argues that minorities must work on, with and against dominant ideology through performance (1999, p. 6). He discusses the struggle of minorities – in particular racial and

sexual minorities – to fully identify with the norms versus counteridentifying against dominant ideology; he sees both of these options as problematic (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Instead, Muñoz sees disidentification as the third way of dealing with dominant ideology: “[It is] one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (1999, p. 11). Identity politics is not a simple binary of choosing to identify or counteridentify with the norms, but about disrupting, challenging and transforming identities through performance.

The performance of identity is a crucial component of slam poetry, and there is the potential to complicate and remake identities. In slam, poets are not only rewarded for what they say, but how they communicate those stories and issues (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 52). The slam stage can be a ripe place “where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed and refigured” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 9). As a result, poets can dialogue with the audience and challenge them on how they see oppressed identities. Through telling one’s story, the slam stage can bring out the difficulties of negotiating identity as poets discuss complex aspects of their lives, which is an important process of disidentification – the performance of identity politics in public. In particular, Muñoz advocates for performing and theatricalizing queerness in public to challenge dominant ideology and to transform the world (1999; 2009). Many queer poets have been successful in slam and have used the stage to challenge stereotypes and dialogue about taboo social issues (Aptowicz, 2008; Fox, 2010). For example, Denise Frohman, a queer spoken word poet who won the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam, wrote a poem highlighting the ways heteronormativity attempts to control the lives and relationships of queer people (Nichols, 2013). Her poem, “Dear Straight People,” went viral and challenges

heteronormative culture and queer lives. According to Frohman, her work explores the “in-betweeness” in each person and the power she has to wear multiple identities proudly as a queer, racialized woman (2013). Slam takes up Muñoz’s challenge to perform and theatricalize queerness in a public space. These public performances have the potential to invite audiences to imagine the complexities of queer lives, politics and possibilities, as well as stories where meaning does not seem to line up (Muñoz, 1999, p. 78). Poets can flip the script on identity stereotypes and use the stage to challenge, transform and create new identities through performance for activism, survival and to effect change.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis

In this thesis, I use a critical discourse analytic approach in order to address representations by slam poets in Ottawa’s Capital Slam, and the way power relationships are expressed through performance and language in this arena. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows for an examination of the constructions of identity, marginality, authenticity and voice in slam. This method can also explore how poets can speak against dominant culture from the margins and the techniques used to gain power through performance. CDA is a methodological approach that analyzes structures of power, dominance, discrimination and control in language and how these structures relate to one another (Wodak, 1995, p. 204). For key authors such as Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, the primary focus of CDA is to examine how power relations are exercised, produced and negotiated through discourse (1997, p. 258). In CDA, discourses are the broader ideas and values communicated by a text (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2000; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Discourse analysis thus captures how language is played out in different social, political and cultural arenas

(Simpson & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). CDA explores how speaking and writing construct and shape reality, and how they encourage readers to question conventions as opposed to being passive actors (Clark, 2007). In particular, language can be used to create meaning, influence and even manipulate individuals to think about events and issues in a particular way, while also hiding their intentions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 1). According to Jan Blommaert and Chris Blucaen (2000), discourse is an opaque power object and CDA attempts to make these discourses more transparent and visible (p. 448). CDA advocates for change and empowerment through exposing abuses of power, giving voice to the voiceless and moving individuals to correct social wrongs (Blommaert & Blucaen, 2000, p. 449).

Since power is at the core of CDA, much of it is inspired by a Foucauldian analysis of power. In “Two Lectures,” Michel Foucault (1980) discusses the link between power and knowledge. According to Foucault, power is not simply top down, but there are many individuals and institutions who participate in the movement of power: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization” (1980, p. 98). In slam, this “net-like organization” can include poets, judges and the audience in which individuals are the vehicles of power, not the point of application (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). A Foucauldian-influenced discourse analysis allows the researcher to examine the effects of power from various points within a given context (Cheek, 2008, p. 356). These discourses can include or be made up of various participants, behaviours, goals, values and locations (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). As a result, it is important to examine the numerous discourses and performance styles in slam, and how each individual participates in the transmission and exchange of power.

Foucault further argues that people, groups and institutions exercise power through the production of discourses, truth and meanings, that are legitimized by communities who decide what is considered knowledge, meaning and truth (1980, p. 93). As a result, certain discourses are produced, accumulate, circulate and operate to establish various power relations (Foucault, 1980; Machin & Mayr, 2012). These power relations show how discourses are used to represent various political interests and seek status or power (Weedon, 1987, p. 41). By examining what is considered legitimized truths and who holds that power, CDA can reveal how certain discourses are silenced, marginalized and given less authority. Foucault discusses subjugated knowledges, which are located low on the hierarchy as “local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges” and “beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (1980, p. 83). In slam, certain discourses and knowledges are undervalued, while others circulate and establish various power relations. For example, the repetition and reception of certain behaviours, characteristics and identities help a poet to be seen as authentic and receive high scores (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). The various actors take part in determining what discourses are valued and validated through applause and numerical scores, as well as which voices can communicate these stories.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) examines how language, image and other methods of communication (i.e. sounds, films, toys, etc.) come together to make meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 1). This analysis gives researchers a more holistic approach as the focus is not simply on the text, but examining other semiotic modes for how discourse is created in language (Lazar, 2005, p. 12). Like language, visual communications play a role in shaping a society’s ideologies, and can also produce, maintain and legitimize

certain types of social practices (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 19). MCDA explores what kinds of ideas, values, identities and sequences are being represented or implied (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 26). In slam, it is important to examine language with visual features, such as spaces, sounds, gestures and movements, to see how various social practices and discourses can be legitimized. Since power is at the core of CDA, this method aims to reveal the social relations of power in texts that are explicit and implicit (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). A multimodal approach can reveal the ideas, absences and assumptions in images and texts, which uncover power interests that are buried (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 10). MCDA sees language as a set of resources and it aims to describe what they are, as well as what meaning potentials they have and how they are used (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 11). This method uses a number of tools to examine language, image and other modes of communication to see how people are represented through language and identity, and why certain images and words are chosen. Like CDA, there is no set way to carry out MCDA and the focus should not be on the visuals themselves, but the power relations and meaning they create (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 10). A multimodal approach will be helpful to examine the explicit and more subtle ways poets can communicate identities and discourses through language and performance.

Analytic Method

My research methodology uses a Foucauldian and multimodal approach to CDA, as well as conversational discourse analysis in order to explore the work of slam poets from 2008-2010 and 2012-2014. This approach to CDA will allow me to examine how discourses can be created through language and visual communications relating to themes of identity and oppression in slam performances. A Foucauldian approach to CDA will provide a

framework to explore various techniques and forms of communication that poets use to be legitimized in the slam arena. Following David Machin and Andrea Mayr's (2012) example, I will adopt a multimodal approach and study the language, visual features (i.e. behaviours, gestures, gaze) and sound of slam performances. Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) explores how language, image and other types of communication come together to make meaning. This method allows researchers to place meanings found in visuals next to those found in texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 9). A multimodal approach is crucial to explore what poets say through their words and how they can also communicate certain messages through their performances. The various texts and visuals keep their unique qualities, but also complement and support one another as they come together as one discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, pp. 93-94).

I will also use aspects of conversational discourse to explore ways that poets use repetition and dialogue to communicate their message and connect with the audience. Slam theorists have discussed the important role the audience plays in slam, and how there can be an immediate connection and dialogue between the poet and audience in an interactive and physical environment (Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). This immediate connection encourages audience feedback of snapping, clapping, cheering and booing, as well as the fact the audience plays a role in rewarding poets (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). I will extend Deborah Tannen's (1989) groundbreaking work on conversational discourse in *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, to examine how slam dialogue and repetition can create meaning and interpersonal relationships with an audience. This approach, along with Somers-Willett and Smith and Kraynak, will also allow me to examine

different rhetorical and discursive strategies used in slam, such as rhyme, rhythm and repetition, and the ways bodies can operate within this space.

Eight poets were chosen for analysis based on their performances at Capital Slam from 2008-2010 and 2012-2014, and their likelihood to touch on themes of identity, marginalization and challenging dominant culture. These years were chosen because a large shift has taken place in the types of identities, discourses and performance styles that are performed and rewarded at Capital Slam. From 2008-2010, male poets of colour dominated the slam stage and there were a number of similarities among the top performers. These poets had a strong focus on political issues and had a similar style of communication filled with rhyme, repetition and wordplay. From 2008-2009, there was only one online video of a female poet at Capital Slam and she did not want her poem included in my analysis.

Although male poets still dominated the scene in the 2009-2010 season, there was an increase in female and genderqueer performers to choose from, as well as online content by women. There seems to be a correlation between the growth of female poets on the slam stage in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons and the creation of alternative poetry spaces. In 2012-2013, female voices made up 30 per cent of poets in Capital Slam, a 13 per cent increase from the 2008-2009 season (Appendix C). In 2013-2014, female and genderqueer poets made up 32 per cent of poets in Capital Slam, a 15 per cent rise from 2009 (Appendix D). This shift will provide a rich analysis to explore how identities, discourses and behaviours have transformed at Capital Slam.

The main section of my thesis will combine a multimodal and Foucauldian approach to CDA, as well as conversational discourse to examine various themes in the poetry: storytelling of oppressed voices, speaking back from the margins, remaking identity, talking

back through personal experiences, the politics of slam poetry and how poets dialogue with the audience. The performances were publically available on YouTube, and the poets gave me their transcribed poems and permission to analyze their pieces. I did not change any grammar, punctuation or structure of the poems, but I did make a few edits⁴ based on their online performances. In my first reading of the performances, I will follow Machin and Mayr's multimodal framework and Tannen's conversational discourse to examine the written text and visual features of the performance. I will watch the video and take notes on the transcribed poems (what is said), visual features (how it is said), sound and see how these come together (effects of performance). I will ask the following questions to explore the various techniques poets use to engage the audience:

1. How do poets speak through images and actions?
2. How are social actors represented through language and identity?
3. How is action represented?
4. In what ways can poets dialogue with the audience and use sound?

According to Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (2009), a broad range of linguistic devices are not included in any single analysis and the researcher can decide which are crucial to their CDA approach. As such, I will use the devices that are most appropriate for this type of analysis. Since I will be organizing my analysis thematically, I will use italics as a visual clue to indicate when I am exploring a different technique that poets use to engage the audience. The key words will be highlighted in the descriptions below.

How Do Poets Speak Through Images and Actions?

I will explore elements of performance methods including gestures, behaviours and the use of the gaze. Performance is a crucial element in slam poetry and poets use these

⁴ Submitted transcribed poems were adjusted to reflect the online performances.

performance techniques to engage the audience and communicate their message (Aptowicz, 2008; Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). The gaze and poses can be signifiers of various attitudes, moods and identity (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 70). According to Machin and Mayr, the gaze is an important cue of representing speakers' attitudes visually (2012, p. 70). When a poet looks at the audience and refers to them, the viewer is acknowledged and a response is required (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 71). In this way, slam is a very interactive space for poets and the audience to connect and be impacted. According to Smith and Kraynak, it is important for poets to look the audiences in the eye and invite them to "witness the inner workings of your soul" (2004, p. 86). Gunther Kress, a leading theorist on multimodal work, also describes how gestures can be used to make a point clearly and strongly, illustrating what is supposed to be said (2010, p. 166). Certain poses can take up space or not, suggesting openness or closedness and indicating intimacy or distance (Machin & Mayr, 2012, 75). In slam, how a poet moves, appears, sounds and physically embodies the piece are crucial components to a poet's success (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 17). A poet's performance can be just as important as their words and poets need to train their bodies to be in sync with their words (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 84). As a result, the intersection of textual and visual communications is crucial, as poets need impeccable timing of each movement to accompany what they are saying. The key words related to this technique are *gaze, poses* and *gestures*.

How Are Social Actors Represented Through Language and Identity?

I will examine how poets can represent individuals and groups of people, and how they can align themselves and the audience through performances. In CDA, these representational strategies are referred to as "social actors" or "participants" (Fairclough,

2003; Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1993). Following Theo van Leeuwen's (1996) work on classifying people and the ideological effects of those classifications, I will explore how poets address various social actors individually or collectively. The audience can become closer to the social actors when they are named and individualized, which can have a humanizing effect (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 80). I will also explore pronouns like "us," "we" and "them," which can be used to align the audience for or against certain ideas and create an "us" versus "them" division (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 84). These choices allow poets to highlight specific aspects of identity, while omitting other parts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 77). Language and visual resources can be used to evaluate social actors, which can signify broader discourses, ideas and values that are not overtly articulated (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 57). I will highlight the phrase, *social actors*, when discussing the various participants in the poems.

How Is Action Represented?

A multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis also calls researchers to analyze the text and visual features through transitivity. Transitivity deals with action and studies what people are represented as doing and in a broad sense, refers "to who does what to whom, and how" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 104). I will examine how action is communicated in the texts and how different verb processes point to agency and lack of agency of different participants, which may not be overtly stated (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 112). I will also explore how poets perform this action in their pieces and the use of their bodies in communicating agency or lack thereof. The key word to indicate the representation of action is *action*.

In What Ways Can Poets Dialogue with the Audience and Use Sound?

I will extend Tannen's work on conversational discourse in order to demonstrate how slam poetry is a dialogue between the poet and audience. In slam poetry, the audience is part of the conversation and actively participates in the poetry environment through their responses and feedback, such as snapping, clapping, cheering and booing (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Tannen, a conversation is a joint production in which speaker and listener are co-participants, and listeners play an active role in interpreting and shaping a speaker's discourse (2007, pp. 27-28). I will extend this framework to slam poetry in which the audience is a co-participant with the poet and how they can become part of creating meaning in conversation. Tannen explores repetition and dialogue in conversational discourse, and how verbal and nonverbal strategies create interpersonal involvement with the audience (2007, p. 25). Discourse can be created through repetition, which is musical in its effect, repeating forms and establishing rhythmic patterns (Tannen, 2007, p. 2). Sound patterns, like rhythm and intonation, involve the audience with the speaker and the discourse by "sweeping them along, much as music sweeps listeners along, luring them to move in its rhythm" (Tannen, 1998, p. 633).

According to Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman (1976), call-and-response is a communicative strategy used in Black North American culture where the audience is part of a unified group experience: "the audience's linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker's rap or call" (p. 39). This can be seen in hip-hop discourse, which expands on Black American oral tradition (Alim, 2006; Kebede, 1995; Stone, 1999). Call-and-response can occur on a number of levels from the audience responding to the performer's call, as well as reactions of snapping and clapping from the audience (Alim, 2006, p. 81). Similar to conversational discourse, sound is a crucial

component to slam and the way poets use rhythm, repetition, rhyme, singing, tone and volume in their work are key: “Devices such as repetition and rhyme, which may seem redundant on the page, similarly help guide the live audience through the poem in performance” (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 25). In hip-hop, rappers have used repetition, alliterative word play and rhyme to move people; this demonstrates the importance of how words are spoken and what is said (Alim, 2006, p. 84). According to Ruth Finnegan (1977) in her analysis of oral poetry, repetition is the most marked feature of poetry, which creates how forms and genres are recognized (p. 90). Repetition can be used to communicate certain ideas and move audiences in oratorical discourse through production, comprehension, connection and interaction (Tannen, 2007, p. 90). Repetition is an effective communicative strategy in hip-hop where rappers use this method to drive important themes, tell cautionary narratives, elicit laughter and display their lyrical talent (Alim, 2006, p. 84). These strategies have also been used in slam poetry. For example, the repetition of parallel constructions is one of the most common and strongest rhythmic constructions in slam where stressed and unstressed syllables happen at approximately the same place and time from line to line (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 52). This rhythm can be created through pause, breath and articulation, and this repetitive phrase can help the poet build suspense and increase the dramatic tone of the poem (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 52). These poetic elements can drive conversational and literary discourse through patterns of sound and sense (Tannen, 1998, p. 633). The use of these sound techniques from Black popular music like repetition, call-and-response, rapping, beat boxing and rhyme can also be used to gain authenticity and legitimacy (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 88). I will highlight the key words, *dialogue* and *repetition*, when discussing how poets connect with the audience and use sound.

I will repeat this process numerous times for each performance. On my second reading of the text, I will put the devices under the appropriate themes and highlight the techniques by italicizing key words. The thematic analysis will allow me to explore how poets are challenging dominant culture and what types of discourses, identities and performance styles are prevalent during the time period.

Chapter 2: The Glory Years of Capital Slam

The 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 seasons were a significant time period for slam poetry in Ottawa. Capital Slam won its first Canadian Festival of Spoken Word nationals in 2009 and repeated this feat in 2010, putting Ottawa on the national and international map. Ian Keteku, the captain of the Capital Slam team in 2009, went on to win the World Poetry Slam in 2010 and started the poetry troupe, The Recipe. The group has performed internationally and was comprised of four out of the five members of the championship team, including Komi “Poetic Speed” Olafimihan, Ikenna “Open Secret” Onyegbula and Brandon Wint. Chris Tse, the captain of the team in 2010, came second at the World Poetry Slam in 2010. Despite the explosion of Ottawa poets on the national and international map, it was also a time in which a number of voices seemed to be lacking in Ottawa’s spoken word scene: the voices of women and those of queer people. This scarcity of female representation has been noted in Ottawa’s scene (Davis, 2012; Lyon, 2011; Mosurinjohn-English, 2010; Priske, 2012; Tenn-Yuk, 2013). As a result, the 2008-2010 Capital Slam years represent an opportunity to explore the types of identities, discourses and performances styles that were prevalent during those years.

By analyzing the poetry of some of the top performers and discussing the dynamics during those years, it is possible to examine the various themes poets were exploring on the slam stage. In this chapter, I will argue that poets used the slam stage to challenge dominant culture and the audience with political pieces that touch on themes of oppression, racial identity and the importance of narratives for social change. In their politically- and emotionally-charged poems, I will discuss how many poets spoke against the status quo from the margins. I will also argue there was a similar performance style during this time period in which repetition, rhythm and rhyme were heavily used and valued.

Where My Girls At?

Despite the national and international success of Capital Slam poets from 2008-2010, voices of female and queer poets were lacking. The 2008-2009 season was Capital Slam's worst period for female participation as women only made up 17 per cent of slammers (R. Priske, personal communication, September 7, 2013; Appendix A). There was only one female poet out of the 12 in the 2009 semi-finals and she did not make it to the finals (Appendix A). In 2010, there were two female participants out of the 12 competitors and only one made it to the finals (Snowdon, 2010). Capital Slam did not have any female poets on its team from 2007-2012 (Capital Slam, 2012). This absence speaks to the lack of female voices in the slam scene, which led organizers to create various shows and events to address the gender imbalance (Priske, 2011; Tomovcik, 2010). Some of these initiatives include Voices of Venus, an all-women's poetry show, in 2009 and the first Women's Slam Championship in 2012. The changes in Capital Slam over the next few years and increased participation of female poets from 2012-2014 will be discussed in the following chapter.

In interviews with poets in independent media, former Capital Slam slammaster and team member, Danielle Grégoire, noted how the numbers of female performers have decreased: "It seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy. The less we see ourselves represented on stage, the less likely women are to get up there." (Mosurinjohn-English, 2010). The lowest representation of female poets was in the 2008-2009 season, which could be related to the lack of representation on the stage and the fact that many of the top female poets left Ottawa around 2007 (Lyon, 2011). These dynamics would lead to the creation of Voices of Venus in 2009. Josie Frank, the only female poet to compete in the 2009 Capital Slam semi-finals, noted the lack of female role models when she entered the Ottawa scene in 2009 (Mosurinjohn-English, 2010). Frank believes the lack of female role models could be

attributed to the different styles of poetry that male and female poets write, with women focusing more on confessional work: “In my experience, the political poetry tends to receive higher scores, and not many female poets perform political pieces” (Mosurinjohn-English, 2010). Women may be less rewarded for their style of poetry, which may impact female representation and role models in Ottawa’s scene.

In my analysis of the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 seasons in this chapter, the top poets were men and much of their work focused on political issues. The political themes of war and violence, immigration and racial tension of Ottawa’s spoken word scene is well documented (Gowrie, 2010b; Simpson, 2010a). The 2009 Capital Slam team was made up of five male poets, four of them being poets of colour. This trend would occur the following year in which the team was made up of five male poets of colour. Political poems are highly effective in their impact and have been rewarded through scoring and applause in many slam poetry communities (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). According to Marc Smith, the creator of slam poetry, most performance poets have written political poems because they are effective and can create a similar passion that evangelistic preachers use to “supercharge their flock with emotional hyperbole” (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 55). Consequently, political poetry does well because they have an atmosphere of importance and often do better than more trivial pieces (Smith & Kraynak, p. 60). Like hip-hop, which is a male-dominated space in which women’s contributions and voices have often been erased (Neal, 2004; Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004; Rose, 2004), slam reflects a trend in which male voices are validated and taken more seriously. Several theorists and slam poets have written about the dominance of male poets in slam (Escoto, 2013; Halberstam, 2003; Johnson, 2010; McKibbens, 2012; Olson, 2007).

Political poems are not only powerful in their content, but also the emotions they create in audience members. According to Rachel McKibbens, a well-known slam poet in the U.S. who wrote about the female versus male slam experience, judges often score serious or political poems higher when it comes from male poets (2012). When women write political pieces, McKibbens says they have to include themselves as the subject, whereas men can share poems without having to include their own personal experiences or relationship to the work (2012). As a result, McKibbens argues that the audience and judges see a male poet's story as authentic without the need for self-inclusion (2012). This authenticity is a crucial component to scoring well at poetry slams: "what is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain behaviours and characteristics over time" (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 8). During the 2008-2009 season, certain stories and behaviours seemed to be deemed the most legitimate, such as the use of rhyme, repetition and wordplay. There was also an increase in poets of colour performing. The 2009 and 2010 Capital Slam teams were made up solely of male poets of colour, except one White male poet. These dynamics demonstrate interesting gender and racial dynamics occurring in Capital Slam, which has changed in the 2012-2014 seasons; there has been an increase in female voices and the scene has become less racialized.

Leaving A Legacy: Poets from 2008-2010

In this chapter, I will be analyzing poems performed by three male poets and one genderqueer poet: Keteku, Olafimihan, Tse (2009) and Lukayo "Festrell" Estrella (2010). I chose these male poets of colour because they have been on Capital Slam teams that have won the slam poetry nationals in 2009 (Keteku, Olafimihan) and 2010 (Tse). As previously

mentioned in this chapter, Keteku won the World Poetry Championship in 2009 and Tse came in second in 2010. Rusty Priske cited Olafimihaan as the person who seemed to start the movement of talented poets when he performed at Capital Slam in 2007 (2011). As a result, these poets have made a large impact on Capital Slam's community in the various themes they have explored, such as oppression and racism. They also have a similar performance style and use of rhyme, rhythm, repetition and wordplay. These poets also demonstrate the dominance of male poets of colour at Capital Slam during this time period. For example, the 2009 and 2010 Capital Slam teams were made up solely of male poets of colour and only one poet was White on the 2009 team. I chose to include Estrella, who has been a veteran of Ottawa's spoken word scene and used to be one of the hosts of Voices of Venus. They were one of the only genderqueer poets performing in the 2009-2010 season and one of the few poets discussing gender and sexuality in their poetry.⁵ In their poem, I argue that they challenged dominant culture's views on race, gender and sexuality with a performance filled with rhyme, rhythm and repetition.

In Tse's piece on racial identity, "Railroad" (Appendix E), he touches on themes of oppression and identity. Tse uses the margins as a place to speak back from and to remake his own identity, coming to terms with who he is as a Chinese Canadian despite the marginalization his ancestors have faced. In his poem, Tse exposes the oppression, racism and exploitation Chinese men faced while building the Canadian Pacific Railway: "They say this country was built on the back of an iron skeleton / But in truth this country was built on the skeletons of my countrymen." He challenges the notion of Canadian freedom given that

⁵ Estrella identifies as genderqueer, a term that refers to individuals who challenge the normative gender binary that people must be either male or female (Corwin, 2009; Negrete, 2007; Nestle, Wilchins, & Howell, 2006). I will refer to Estrella as "they" throughout this thesis.

Chinese men were exploited and killed in the railroad construction. Tse also struggles to come to terms with his own sense of identity and place as a Canadian based on that history. In an interview with the *Charlatan*, the student newspaper at Carleton University, Tse says the history of his family and the Chinese Canadian diaspora are sources of inspiration as his work explores themes of racism, multiculturalism and minority issues (Godfrey, 2013).

Keteku and Olafimihaan use the stage to discuss the politics of slam poetry, and the importance of being a voice for the voiceless and storytelling for social change. In Keteku's poem, "Pick Me" (Appendix F), he explores the challenges in slam of speaking up for marginalized voices or receiving high scores: "Poets – god has given us his gift. Nothing has come into existence without it being spoken first. But yet we write poems for judges with scoreboards who mark our souls out of 10." Keteku discusses the "gift" poets have been given, yet the potential for poets to write poems in order to gain high scores from the judges. He fights against this notion and calls on poets to be a voice for those who are oppressed and marginalized. Olafimihaan also discusses some of the dynamics in the slam scene in his political piece, "If the Shoe Fits" (Appendix G):

I'm Not a bandwagon jumping on wagon wagging tail poet
tryina milk props and poetry points off of political pornography.
But there is only so much
that a brother can take

Olafimihaan quickly distances himself from "bandwagon jumping" poets who write "political pornography." He says he does not want to write a political piece for high scores, but still needs to discuss the political injustices he sees around the world. Olafimihaan goes on to share narratives of marginalized people, including those in Iraq and Somalia.

Many of the themes of oppression and racism through a political lens continued in the 2009-2010 season. Although male poets of colour still dominated Capital Slam, there were

more female poets performing, including myself. Unfortunately, statistics from the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons are missing, so I cannot give the exact figures to the number of female or genderqueer poets who performed that year. In my recollection, as well as communication with other poets and organizers in the slam scene, there was an increase in female performers from 2008-2009. This increase was in response to the creation of new poetry shows including, *Voices of Venus*, and Ottawa's second slam poetry series, *Urban Legends*, in 2009. These two shows created more spaces for women to participate and *Voices of Venus* changed Ottawa's spoken word scene by encouraging more female poets to perform (Priske, 2011).

I chose to include a poem by Estrella because they were one of the poets who discussed and complicated gender and sexuality in their poetry, which were not prevalent themes in Capital Slam during the 2008-2010 seasons. Their piece, "QPOCalypse" (Appendix H), challenges heteronormative culture and the stereotypes of queer and racialized people: "The end of rampant paranoia and distrust of / The public visual appearance and / The private sexual practice." Estrella calls for an end to this ignorance and alienation, and calls people to embrace the QPOCalypse. The QPOCalypse is the beginning of a time where queer people of colour share their knowledge and culture with those around them. They remake identity from the margins and demonstrate what queer people of colour have to contribute to society.

I also chose to include this piece because Estrella was one of the only poets in Capital Slam who openly identified as queer and discussed issues of sexuality in their poetry. This is not an issue unique to Ottawa. Slam poets in scenes around the U.S. have also noted the lack of female and queer voices (Escoto, 2013; Fox, 2010; Johnson, 2010; McKibbens, 2012; Olson, 2007). In some communities, such as the Los Angeles slam environment,

homophobia has been an issue, contradicting slam's call to inclusivity (Johnson, 2010). The emergence of women and queer poets, however, has changed the nature of slam and brought in new perspectives (Aptowicz, 2008; Escoto, 2013; Fox, 2010; Halberstam, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Olson, 2007). According to Jack Halberstam (2003), well-known lesbian poets, such as Alix Olson and StaceyAnn Chin, have taken lesbian feminism and women of colour feminism to a new audience and stage, making "poetry into the language of riot and change" (p. 169). Although there were not many openly queer voices performing at Capital Slam, there were many queer and feminist voices performing at Voices of Venus. One of the show's co-ordinators, Allison Armstrong, says the show has always been queer-, trans- and sex-positive (Davis, 2012). Many of these voices chose to go to Voices of Venus instead of Capital Slam.

Analysis

My analysis of the slam poetry performances consisted of numerous readings of the performance texts, which led to various key themes. In my first reading of the performances, I watched a poet's video and noted three areas of interest to explore: language, visual features (behaviours, gestures, gaze) and sound. I used a combination of Machin and Mayr's multimodal framework, as well as Tannen's work on conversational discourse and sound to ask the following questions:

1. How do poets speak through images and actions? (*gaze, poses, gestures*)
2. How are social actors represented through language and identity? (*social actors*)
3. How is action represented? (*action*)
4. In what ways can poets dialogue with the audience and use sound? (*dialogue, repetition*)

I noted the various techniques poets used through language, action and sound. I also italicized key words to highlight each question, which is noted above. On a second reading

of each performance, I connected these techniques to five key themes: storytelling of oppressed voices, speaking back from the margins, remaking identity, the politics of slam poetry and how poets dialogue with the audience. Since many poets in the 2008-2010 season touched on themes of oppression, racism and using narratives through a political lens for social change, these themes were connected to Sherene Razack, José Esteban Muñoz and bell hooks' work. I extended Razack's call for marginalized groups to share their stories and provide new perspectives for social change. Muñoz's work was important to see how queer and racialized identities could use disidentifications to remake identity from the margins, creating a space where meaning does not properly "line up" and challenge dominant culture (1999, p. 78). I extended hooks' exploration of the margin to see how this space could be a site of possibility and resistance to counter dominant discourse. These reasons led me to organize my analysis by key themes.

Storytelling of Oppressed Voices

From 2008-2010, the Capital Slam stage was a place in which many poets shared narratives for and by oppressed identities. Many poets shared their own stories of marginalization, as well as oppression and racism faced by others around the world. In Keteku's piece, he uses the slam stage to discuss the important role poets play of being a voice for the voiceless and speaking against oppression: "I could have been a doctor a lawyer or a shoe salesman, no! Instead, I chose to be a poet/journalist – acting as a voice for the voiceless." Here, Keteku elevates the role of the poets in comparison to professions and decides this is where he is needed. He discusses the types of marginalized people who are calling him to tell their stories, such as the kid from Darfur and the forgotten:

I have failed! Because I see them, I hear them all. The kid from Darfur, the black female, the forgotten, the poor, the fallen. Those in the middle of crisis wondering

where Christ is... This is my chance and so I pick and I pick and I pick. But I pick wrong.

Keteku senses that they are calling him to “pick” them and speak their stories of oppression, but he does not end up telling their stories. The main *action* that takes place in this poem is who Keteku does or does not pick (“I pick” versus “pick me”). Despite these oppressed voices calling Keteku to choose their stories, he says he has not always used the slam stage to discuss the right stories:

They have their hands up saying pick me. Pick me. Pick me.

Their bodies are dead, their hope has perished but their need for their soul and their song and their spirit to live on. This is my chance and I pick and I pick and I pick.

But I pick wrong: I write a poem about my laptop – a poem about my ex-girlfriend – a poem about my name and a fucking dragon slayer.

He says he has picked wrong, writing poems about his laptop and an ex-girlfriend instead of the forgotten and poor who have called him. In this piece, Keteku is both a passive and active agent. He is passive when he has ignored these marginalized stories and chose to tell stories about his laptop or ex-girlfriend. However, he becomes an active agent when he admits how he has failed and does not want to get caught up in the competitive aspects of slam. He calls out other poets to follow share the right types of stories of marginalized voices.

While discussing the oppressed people who are calling him to choose their stories, Keteku also imitates them through his actions and *gestures*: “I sense the scent through my nose of a homeless man who knows the thin line between genius and madness – his pungent incense scent of innocence says – pick me!” When he mimics the oppressed people calling him, Keteku points his finger upright and looks around as if he is lost, innocent and in need of help. At the same time, he uses a quiet and haunting voice when he whispers, “pick me,”

linking the desperation and silence of these voices. Throughout his poem, “pick me” becomes more desperate as Keteku builds his own volume and emotional intensity in acknowledging how he has picked wrong: “This is my chance and so I pick and I pick and I pick. But I pick wrong.” He points around when he discusses who he picks and indicates his remorse of choosing wrong. Keteku stirs up an emotional response from the audience where he has failed, but he also wants to choose the right topics and encourages the audience to do the same as well: “But if we pick wrong – you and I, you and I will all be haunted by that eerie, ever pervading sound of the souls of the deaf saying / Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!” By including the poets and audience in sharing stories of oppressed voices, the audience is also an agent in this piece. They can choose if they want to be passive or an agent of change when Keteku refers to them. He is loud and confident in his tone until he eerily repeats, “pick me,” and the whispers of Keteku mimicking the marginalized voices can be heard no more. Keteku’s poem adds to our understanding of marginalized voices and the role slam poets have in speaking back against dominant culture (Aptowicz, 2008; Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). He emphasizes the role poets have in being agents of change, calling them out to choose these stories of oppression and not ignoring the voices that may be speaking to them. Keteku demonstrates Razack’s call on the importance for marginalized voices to share their stories, as well as challenging poets to rethink the stories they are telling.

Tse also gives oppressed individuals a voice as he speaks against the oppression Chinese men experienced in building the Canadian Pacific Railway. The main *action* in Tse’s piece is what the government has done to his Chinese ancestors, his connection to that history and his internal dialogue of where he belongs. In his opening stanza, he discusses who held the power and how his people were oppressed:

The oppressed get exploited and oppressors will always win
I guess it don't matter what I read in the Constitution
Because that was paper was written by the hands of white, pale skin.
Whose delicate fingers were more suited for directing,
So they brought over my people to do all the constructing.

The Chinese men did not have any agency or options, but were exploited by the Canadian government to build the railroad (Library and Archives Canada). Tse adds to the discourse of racism in Canada, calling out those in power (i.e. White men), as well as the oppression of his own people. He challenges the status quo, and demonstrates the importance of different perspectives as a counter-narrative to the established knowledge of Canada's history: "It's ironic this country is known with its freedom ring / When that freedom is only for those who are worth something." The goal of the Canadian Pacific Railway was to unite Canada from coast to coast and build the Canadian nation. However, Chinese men were given the most dangerous construction jobs and lived in poor conditions (Library and Archives Canada). As a result, they were treated as less than human and were not free agents or given the same freedom that Canada was supposedly built on.

Tse also connects his personal story to the oppression of Chinese men through his own body: "So they brought over my people to do all the constructing / 100 years later, I can still feel that biting sting, / Of the whips on my back and fists on my frail chin." He points to himself every time he says "my," and mimics sting, whips and fists to his own body. The performative action brings this poem alive and connects the marginalization his ancestry faced to the burdens he carries today. His tone of anger builds as he explains the oppression of Chinese men culminates near the end of the poem as he references the railroad song, "I've Been Working On the Railroad": "So who the fuck is Dinah and why is she blowing her horn? There is nothing to celebrate about the way this country was born." His body language and emotional intensity in his voice demonstrates the common narratives of

marginalized identity in slam, and criticisms of discrimination in a “formulaic rage” that audiences have come to expect and appreciate (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 72). As a result, his language and performance work together to show the importance of storytelling for and by oppressed voices. Tse does this through sharing narratives of marginalized voices and physically embodying their oppression through his actions, language and tone.

Olafimihan also uses the slam stage to tell stories of oppression in order to challenge dominant culture. He shares experiences of those who are marginalized in Somalia, Iraq and Palestine, and gives them a voice. Despite their lack of agency due to the oppression they’re experiencing, Olafimihan shares stories of those who are fighting back. The main *action* that weaves through his piece is the story of Iraqi journalist, Muntadhar al-Zaidi, who threw his shoes at U.S. President George Bush in 2008. In the middle of a news conference in Iraq, al-Zaidi shouted, “this is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, dog,” before throwing his shoe at Bush (BBC, 2008). With his second shoe, al-Zaidi yelled, “This is for the widows and orphans and all those killed in Iraq” (BBC, 2008). In Arab culture, showing the soles of your shoes is an insult (BBC, 2008). Olafimihan alludes to this act of defiance and the image of the shoe throwing is the main visual weaved throughout his piece:

As his...
Left shoe
left his left five finger tips
of his left hand
It left blood stains on his palm

Olafimihan repeats and creatively plays on the word “left” as a homonym, to grab the audience’s attention: al-Zaidi first threw his left shoe, which left his left hand, leaving blood stains on his palm. While speaking this, Olafimihan also opens his hands as he says, “hand” and “palm,” perhaps indicating the “blood stains” left on al-Zaidi’s hands of wounded Iraqi

people. He demonstrates the possibility of oppressed individuals fighting back, saying that al-Zaidi's act was not harmless and the shoe represents so much more:

They said it was a harmless harmless size ten
But it was a metaphorical representation
of U.S. transgressions
Against Arab kids armless
Begging for alms

In this stanza, Olafimihaan is explicit in what the shoe represents and the wrongdoings of the U.S. in Iraq. al-Zaidi's act become widely admired and embraced around the Arab world as a symbol of rage to the war in Iraq (Synovit, 2013; Williams & Mohammed, 2008).

Olafimihaan's poem builds to hurling more metaphorical shoes about the injustices in Iraq before he ends with his repetitive stanza about al-Zaidi:

So take THAT...
For the tears for the mother who bears the burden of burying her only child
TAKE THAT...
For the torture of innocent Muslims and religious prejudice that was never filed
TAKE THAT...
For the bodies returning in bundles wrapped up in the Somali flag
TAKE THAT...
For the bodies returning bundles wrapped up in the Canadian flag

By repeating "take that," I would argue that he draws attention to the injustices of the Iraq War and highlights the numerous people who have been impacted and devastated by the war, such as the mother who has to bury her only child. In this way, Olafimihaan's performance demonstrates the importance of storytelling for social change and creating a space for suppressed voices to speak against the dominant systems of oppression. The slam environment encourages this countercultural atmosphere of diversity, inclusion and democracy in which poets can speak against those in power (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009).

Estrella also uses the slam stage to discuss the oppression that marginalized groups, such as queer people and immigrants, have experienced. Estrella speaks against the ignorance, prejudices and stereotypes of dominant culture and flips the script of who has power and should be valued:

Not the end of days
But the end of the daze
The stupor of ignorance and alienation
The end of being judged
By stereotypes and crudely fashioned representations
Founded from an edifice of fear-encrusted western mythos
And the beginning of true understanding
From a people's own stories, legends, writings and songs

They call for an end to the daze of oppressing people based on ignorant stereotypes, representations and fear. Rather, they want to foster true understanding where people can share their own writings and stories. As a result, Estrella takes up Razack's call for the importance of marginalized voices speaking their own truths instead of being reduced to stereotypes and false representations. These stories can provide new perspectives in dominant culture for social change. Following the end of the daze, Estrella calls dominant culture to stop their gaze, distrust and paranoia of sexual minorities and people of colour.

This is not the end of days
But the end of the gaze
The end of rampant paranoia and distrust of
The public visual appearance and
The private sexual experience
And the beginning of a look that finds
Boys kissing in parks and
Brown kids travelling in packs
It's commonplace and shrug-inducing as
Sunshine and advertising

While saying "gaze," they move their finger mimicking how people stare at them. As they discuss "public visual appearance" and "private sexual practice," they use their hands to show their body and mimic sexual movements. Estrella uses their own body to show the

types of stories that have been marginalized. They are a participant in the poem as a queer person of colour, which ensures that certain aspects of their “identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body” (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 69-70). Estrella also desires to create a space in which “boys kissing in parks” is not a frightening or disturbing sight, but is part of the quotidian.

In their last stanza, they call for the end of a phase in which only one group of people matter, while others, such as nannies, cab drivers and factory workers, are treated as less than human. For Estrella, the new world should value wisdom and hope as opposed to violence, which is a tool of power in dominant culture. In these three stanzas, Estrella uses a similar sentence structure: “This is not the end of days / But the end” of the daze, gaze and a phase. After sharing what they want an end to, they repeat what they want “the beginning” to look like. This rhyme and repetition are effective because this repeating form establishes rhythmic patterns and themes that give poetry its musical quality (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Tannen, 2007). The repetition also communicates a distinction of what is wrong in dominant culture and provides a solution to what should be valued. Estrella’s response to the unequal power dynamics in dominant culture is the QPOCalypse, a revealing where queer people of colour (QPOC) share their culture, knowledge and sexuality with those around them. Estrella calls out the audience to open their perspective to new ways of thinking, seeing and experiencing: “Embrace the end of the daze, the gaze, and that phase, / Because the QPOCALYPSE is here!” This poem was one of the only poems at Capital Slam discussing sexuality that I found online, which adds a unique and different discourse to the poetry scene. Estrella creates a space in which new identities, histories and stories could be told and valued. They are thus opening the dialogue and Capital Slam community to new ways of thinking and embracing differences.

Speaking Back from the Margins

Another common thread throughout the 2008-2010 seasons was poets speaking back from the margins, which is a site of possibility and resistance. In Tse's poem, the *social actors* (Chinese men, Canadian government, Tse), demonstrate the importance of challenging dominant culture from the margins. Tse describes the Canadian government as oppressors who directed, oppressed and abused Chinese men to construct the railroad: "It's not like they didn't have a choice: work, or be shot and left to rot in a country that was as foreign to them as they were to the country." These men were used to build a nation in which they were simply foreigners. Tse never names the Chinese men (i.e. "Just thin, stupid chinamen"), which could demonstrate how they were never humanized by the government – grouped into a collective "other" than being individualized. He groups them into nameless categories, sharing how they were reduced to the status of animals where there were signs in some cities reading, "No Chinese or dogs allowed." Tse's piece also creates an "us" versus "them" discourse of who's included or excluded from Canada's history. This legacy of exclusion and marginalization has left an impact on him. He connects their story of marginalization, oppression and racism to his own story ("my countrymen," "my people," "my unknown ancestors"). This connection to marginalization is an important element of slam success – to be seen as authentic in the eyes of the audience (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 70). He is also able to demonstrate his racialized identity through his body and connects his story to Canada's past: "The author's physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body, particularly race and gender but extending to class, sexuality, and even regionality" (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 69-70). As a result, his physical presence allows him to connect his story to Canada's history, demonstrating ways he can also speak back from the margins.

Olafimihan also speaks back from the margins through the various participants in his poem. There are a number of *social actors* in Olafimihan's poem, including those who have been marginalized (i.e. Somali pirates, innocent Muslims, a mother burying her child), those who have power (i.e. U.S. and President George W. Bush, teenagers from wealthy U.S. neighbourhoods like Beverly Hills) and Olafimihan himself. Olafimihan makes a clear distinction between the oppressed and those with power. For example, he says he must speak up when he sees the media depict Somali pirates as "second Class / second rate / world citizen." In this way, he challenges the dominant discourse of Somali pirates in the media as terrorists and provides a more nuanced perspective in the slam arena (Ali & Murad, 2009). When he references the oppressed groups, these people are nameless. He does not even specifically reference al-Zaidi's name in his piece. The effect of these generalizations could be that many of these oppressed voices remain voiceless. One of the only specific names he calls is Bush: "But I'm getting distracted like Bush did after he sent / Taxpayers' kids to die while looking for weapons of mass destruction." By naming Bush, Olafimihan could be distinguishing who has power and can be named, unlike the "mother who bears the burden of burying her own child" or the "innocent Muslims" who were tortured.

Remaking Identity

The slam stage is also a place in which poets can discuss the complexities of identity and remake marginalized identity. Tse's political piece demonstrates the difficulties of negotiating identity and his difficulties of coming to terms with being Chinese Canadian, based on Canada's railroad history. He builds on Muñoz's work on remaking oppressed identities from the margins, and recreates his own sense of self: "The postcolonial hybrid is a subject whose identity practices are structured around ambivalent relationship to the signs

of empire and the signs of the 'native,' a subject who occupies a space between the West and the rest" (1999, p. 78). He wrestles with his own sense of identity and belonging, especially at the end of his poem:

Do you know what CP railway stands for?
Chinese-prohibited

And I just made that up
But it's a testament to how a people could overcome circumstance
And forge their own identity in a country that desperately wanted them to have none
And yet, we have one
CP
Chinese pride?
No no.
The thought makes me twisted inside, because to be proud of that history
Would be like spitting on my ancestry.
But instead I'll do the math
And in this circumstance
I have found a far better internal equation
CP? No, CC
I am Chinese-Canadian.

In Tse's last stanza, he raises questions on what CP Railway could stand for as it relates to who constructed the railroad and discovering his own identity in Canada's oppressive past. Tse demonstrates different strategies of viewing and locating himself as he moves from Chinese prohibited and Chinese pride (CP) to Chinese Canadian (CC). It is this last identity in which he can reclaim his own sense of self. Through Tse's questions, he lives out the process of disidentification where minorities expand and problematize identity instead of leaving any socially-prescribed part of one's identity (Muñoz, 1999, p. 29). Tse demonstrates how poets can explore the structures that shape historical and social inequalities through counter-narratives, reinventing marginalized identities (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 9).

Estrella also uses the margins to create counter-hegemonic discourse to those who

have power and remake marginalized identity. In their QPOCalypse, they bring forward the positive aspects that queer people of colour have to offer dominant culture of new ways of thinking, being and seeing. Estrella notes the *social actors* and hierarchies in their poem, including dominant culture, queer people of colour and their own story. For example, they discuss dominant culture who controls the gaze of “rampant paranoia and distrust” of the appearance and sexual practices of queer and racialized people. Estrella counters this with creating a world where these public displays of “boys kissing in parks” are “commonplace and shrug-inducing as / Sunshine and advertising.” In this way, Estrella takes up disidentifications in which queer and racialized people intervene in the public sphere to confront phobic ideology (Muñoz, 1999, p. 143) and create a productive space where “identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 79). The participants in this piece are addressed as a collective instead of individualized, which may be Estrella’s attempt at creating an inclusive group for all people to take part.

They call on people to repent for their hatred and prejudices, and open themselves up to the QPOCalypse: “Yes, the time has come to repent! / Thrown down your ignorance and your prejudices!” When describing the QPOCalypse, Estrella repeats the phrase, “We are here,” and lists the various forms of knowledge and diversity that queer people of colour can bring to the world. The repetition of this phrase also conveys that queer people of colour are not leaving and desire to be equal:

We are here to share the air with you
We are here to contribute and teach
We are here to be fabulous, funny, and fundamentally equal
And we are here to seduce your sons and daughters... AT THE SAME TIME!

Estrella says queer people of colour want to be in the same space and contribute their culture, stories and be equal. Their actions at certain moments also mimic those of queer men, such

as snapping their fingers and flowingly moving their hands while saying “fabulous, funny, and fundamentally equal.” They remap and produce a space for marginalized voices to speak against the status quo (Muñoz, 1999, p. 148). According to Halberstam, queer slam poets can “carve out new territory for consideration of the overlap of gender, generation, class, race, community, and sexuality in relation to minority cultural production” (2003, p. 155). As a result, Estrella carves out new territory in the slam community and challenges the complexities of gender, sexuality and race. By reinventing these marginalized identities and placing value on their role in society, Estrella can speak against dominant norms and stereotypes and move audience towards connection, understanding and social change to join their “new world.”

The Politics of Slam

There are many politics that occur in slam, including the types of identities, discourses and performance styles that are rewarded (Aptowicz, 2008; Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). Both Keteku and Olafimihan discuss various politics that occur in the slam environment. There are a number of *social actors* in Keteku’s poem, including himself, oppressed people and the poetry community (poets, judges, audience). Keteku identifies as a “poet/journalist” instead of being a doctor and lawyer, and his role of being a voice for the voiceless. His distinction emphasizes the important role poets and journalists play in speaking up for those who are marginalized. In this poem, he also interacts with oppressed voices who call him: “And I taste, I taste the succulent sustenance of suspense. I spit out tenses and ten sentences for the man on death row with ten sentences – he is saying pick me.” There is urgency in Keteku’s voice as he recites these lines,

imitating the man on death row and demonstrating how this man's stories is overwhelming his body and senses. He is in a position to speak for this voiceless man.

In this piece, Keteku's use of pronouns is key as pronouns can be used to align people with or against certain ideas and can create a collective "other" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 84). Keteku creates a collective "we"/"us"/"our" of telling stories for silences voices, as opposed to being like "those" poets who only write for scores. This is evident as he calls out poets towards the end of his piece:

Poets – god has given us a gift. Nothing has come into existence without it being spoken first. But yet we write poems for judges with scoreboards who mark our souls out of 10. John Akpata would say that we remember the comedy but forget the content. But if you pick right, if you pick right, a ten, a five, a one can mean that those people without a voice are given one for at least a few moments.

But if we pick wrong – you and I, you and I will all be haunted by that eerie, ever pervading sound of the souls of the deaf saying

Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!

Keteku addresses the crowd and says God has given poets ("us") a gift, but many of them get caught up in the competitive aspects of slam. He points to the audience and says "you and I," including them in the discussion on the politics of slam and what can happen in this arena. Keteku says they will be haunted by these oppressed voices unless they perform the right poems, creating a hierarchy of power in the slam arena. In a sense, Keteku shames poets for writing pieces to receive high scores from judges instead of giving people without a voice a place to be heard. He creates a hierarchy of "us" versus "them," as well as levels of what is deemed worthy or unworthy poetry and calls out poets not to write for scores. For Keteku, it is more important to tell these stories than get caught up in the politics of slam and he challenges the audiences to focus more on stories of oppression.

The discussion of competition and the politics of slam poetry is not a new topic in the slam arena. According to Somers-Willett, many slam poets have written critical pieces against slam poetry itself due to the various politics at play: “Most slam poets acknowledge the homogeneity in rhetorical style – the ‘formulaic rage’ of loud, self-righteous declaration – while at the same time fiercely disavowing such homogeneity in their own work” (2009, p. 30). One of those poets includes well-known Jamaican-born poet, StaceyAnn Chin. In her poem, “I Don’t Want to Slam,” she critiques slam and compares “real poets” versus those who write for slam (Halberstam, 2003; Somers-Willett, 2009). Chin challenges the rhetorical techniques in slam, such as revolution, rhyme and the use of superlatives and hyperbole (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 32). However, being aware of the rhetorical strategies in slam does not make poets free of them, as demonstrated through Chin and Keteku’s poetry (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 32).

Although slam encourages poets to focus on the poetry instead of the poets, a number of poets disagree with that mantra (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 29). One of those people is Jeremy Richards, a Seattle slam poet:

If the points were truly “not the point,” then they wouldn’t lead to anything, wouldn’t determine who gets the money, who makes it on a team, who gets on a plane and flies to Nationals to plaudits and opportunities reserved for the new slam elite” (as cited in Somers-Willett, 2009).

Through competition and succeeding in slam, poets can gain access to other opportunities outside of their immediate slam environments. However, Keteku says poetry is more than the scores and competition, and questions why poets try to please judges despite their crucial role as poets to challenge hegemonic discourses.

Olafimihan also discusses the politics of slam at the beginning of his poem by discussing what he is not: “I’m Not a bandwagon jumping on wagon wagging tail poet /

tryina milk props and poetry points off of political pornography.” He makes it clear upfront that he is not someone who writes poetry because it is trendy or to receive points for what he calls, “political pornography.” Olafimihan wants to distance himself from these negative stereotypes that can exist in the slam poetry arena, such as poets performing pieces to get high scores (Aptowicz, 2008; Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). This separation from “bandwagon” poets legitimizes his role as a poet. Although he says he is not interested in performing political poems for points, he cannot remain silent when injustices are happening around him: “But there is only so much / that a brother can take.” As a Black poet, he can refer to himself as a “brother” and gains authenticity through his body and his fluency in the hip-hop style (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 103). Many audiences see poetry slams as political events and many poets write about identity and politics, which highlights the role of authorship in slam (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 20). According to Somers-Willett, many slam poets are rewarded for their political pieces: “The political ‘rant’ common to many poetry slams is not denied by slam practitioners” (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 21). Although Olafimihan is upfront about his poem being a political piece, and though he aims to differentiate himself from those poets who simply share these poems for scores, he still benefits from the traditional types of discourses and stories that succeed in slam.

Dialogue with the Audience

The audience plays an important role in slam, and having a *dialogue* and connection with the crowd is crucial to a poet’s success. This can be achieved through the use of the *gaze, poses, repetition* and direct interaction with the audience. Keteku has a conversation with the audience through directly addressing them, as well as his use of the gaze and poses. He begins with a loud, aggressive and confident tone and stance. Following Machin and

Mayr's questions on poses, Keteku takes up space and actively engages them through his movements, questions, emotions and open stance. He uses his gaze to recognize the audience's presence and initiates that a response is required from them (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 71). This is combined with his word choice: "Poets – god has given us a gift. Nothing has come into existence without it being spoken first." He pauses after addressing the poets, which requires a response from them to take up his call to use their "gift" of speaking for oppressed voices. Since Keteku was the top-slamming poet of the season, he also has the credibility to challenge poets and to acknowledge the ways he has failed. By recognizing his failures and desiring to speak about change instead of getting high scores, Keteku gains credibility and authenticity as a performer.

Keteku also uses *repetition*, rhyme and varying levels of volume to engage the audience, and communicate his message. He uses parallel constructions when he talks about the oppressed and voiceless people who are calling him to choose them, which produce a distinct rhythm when performed out loud:

I have a sixth sense
But I do not see dead people
I hear deaf people
Depressed, dejected and oppressed people.
People without a breath people.
They're all saying pick me...

Instead, I chose to be a poet/journalist – acting as a voice for the voiceless
A mouth for the mouthless
A lung for the breathless
The soul for the soulless

By repeating the word "people" and choosing words that end in "–less" at the end of each line, he indicates the types of individuals he hears and the people who have "less" that he needs to speak up for. The use of repetition in slam can be an effective way to grab the audience's attention and gain legitimacy as a poet (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett,

2009). This repetition is also an effective way to “communicate ideas and move audiences in oratorical discourse” (Tannen, 2007, p. 90). Keteku’s repetition of “I pick” and “pick me” really emphasizes his internal conflict and the types of stories he should choose. In his performance, he gets quieter when he mimics the voiceless people who are calling him to tell their stories: “They have their hands up saying pick me. Pick me. Pick me.” This is an example of shadowing in repetition where the phrase is repeated with a split-second delay (Tannen, 2007, p. 93). The phrase repetition builds suspense and increases the dramatic tone of the poem (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 52). This repetition is effective because the build-up of drama and suspense can provoke an emotional response from audience members, which can be heard through snapping and clapping at certain parts of his poem.

Tse also uses a number of techniques, such as singing, *repetition* and *gestures*, to connect with the audience. He begins his poem with a song, “I’ve Been Working On the Railroad,” which is a powerful way to engage and entertain the audience (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 96). He initiates audience participation and his openness invites them to sing, clap and connect with the poem. Tse looks cheery and upbeat when he starts the piece, and his *gaze* is effective as he calls the crowd to respond to his poem (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 71). However, his *pose* and gaze soon becomes less open when the song ends as he uses his hands to stop the audience from singing. When he repeats the song later in the poem, Tse is a lot more somber and the audience is less excited or loud as they were at the beginning. According to Smith and Kraynak, performers have to accomplish three goals of entertaining, engaging and affecting the audience, which can include changing their perspective and shifting their emotions (2004, p. 77). Tse seems to have accomplished all three of these goals in his performance. For example, the audience’s reduced participation and excitement of the railroad song demonstrates how he caused many of them to rethink how Canada’s

railroad was built, as well as the meaning of the song. Tse thus provides a counter-narrative to acceptable and cultural norms, and affects what was known, thought and said (Razack, 1998).

Tse uses repetition throughout his piece by using parallel constructions, a technique where stressed and unstressed syllables happen at approximately the same place and time from line to line (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 52). He also repeats the railroad song and weaves various metaphors throughout his poem. This repetition allows him to communicate certain ideas, connect with his audience, demonstrate his lyrical skills and move the poem along. For example, his use of wordplay, repetition and rhyme of “country” and “skeleton” leaves images and metaphors of the skeletal remains of the Chinese men who built the railroad. He continually asks how this country was built, for who and who was left out:

They say this country was built on the back of an iron skeleton
But in truth this country was built on the skeletons of my countrymen
Those skeletons who build that skeleton to forge this country then,
Our nation’s creators are now seen as country’s sin.

In his first stanza, every word of each sentence ends with a similar sound (i.e. –on, –en, –in, –ing). Tse emphasizes these endings heavily throughout this section in his performance, which strengthens his piece when it is heard out loud (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 53). The sounds sweep the audience along with a distinct flow and luring them to move in its rhythm (Tannen, 1998, p. 633).

Near the end of the poem, Tse alludes to the railroad song and how Canadians cannot celebrate how this country was created and questions the discourse of Canada as a great nation: “So who the fuck is Dinah and why is she blowing her horn? / There is nothing to celebrate about the way this country was born.” Tse says he cannot be proud of a country that is built on the backs of his ancestors and he wrestles in searching for a sense of pride in

his own identity. His voice gets louder, stronger and angrier at this point in the poem, emphasizing the word “fuck” to get his point across. This shift in tone is a common technique in slam performance as the “let me break it down for you” moment, which often reveals a truth or an epiphany (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 85). Tse’s shift in tone leads to a discussion of his own story and where he belongs. He no longer focuses on the oppression of his Chinese ancestors and how they were treated as foreigners, but the difficulties of associating with Canada’s history. He reveals his truth with the audience as he comes to terms with his Chinese-Canadian roots: “CP? No, CC / I am Chinese-Canadian.”

Similarly, Olafimihan uses a number of literary and performative techniques to connect with the audience. Olafimihan acknowledges the crowd through his *gaze*, which is accompanied by his welcoming posture of open arms. He also uses the pronoun, “you” (i.e. “You see” and “do you hear?”), to include them in his performance to elicit their attention and a potential response. By referring to the audience, he indicates he has something important for them to hear and cannot remain silent when there are injustices that must be exposed. This creates an immediate and active relationship with the poet and audience, which can be heard through snaps, claps and audience reaction to Olafimihan’s poem (Alim, 2006; Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). He also has an open stance and uses his hands to emphasize certain points, such as opening his hands as he repeats his stanza about al-Zaidi:

As his...
Left shoe
left his left five finger tips
of his left hand
It left blood stains on his palm

He repeats the same movement each time he says this stanza. Towards the end of the poem, he repeats, “Take that,” and he pushes his hand to the audience as if throwing something.

Olafimihaan could be metaphorically throwing “shoes” of injustices at those in power, like al-Zaidi’s shoe-throwing incident at Bush. His use of *repetition* throughout the poem and weaving in the image of the shoe furthers his message of the injustices occurring around the world. In this way, repetition is used to drive home important themes and display his lyrical talent (Alim, 2006; Tannen, 1998). Slam poetry aims to achieve an immediate, personal and authentic engagement with the audience, and Olafimihaan does not want them to remain stagnant about these inequalities.

From the outset of Estrella’s poem, they directly address the audience with their words, *gestures* and themes. With an open posture and putting out their hands as they speak, Estrella opens up the space by inviting the audience to be part of the experience:

Brothers and sisters,
bredrin and sistren,
gender-neutral comrades
and fluid-freewheeling friends
The time has come
To Repent!

Estrella does not create a closed gender or sexual binary, but attempts to create an inclusive space for “gender-neutral” and “fluid-freewheeling” people as well. They take up slam’s call for plurality and diversity (Smith & Kraynak, 2004; Somers-Willett, 2009). Estrella continues to address the audience when they let the crowd know the time has come to repent. When they say repent, they throw their hands in the air like an evangelical preacher. Estrella’s political piece is emotionally charged and creates a similar passion, tone, fear and urgency to evangelical preachers (Smith & Kraynak, 2004, p. 55). Estrella has a similar fire and rhetoric to these preachers through their actions and word choice, such as “repent” and discussing the “end of days.” They constantly call people to repent through their poem and

use of repetition, directly addressing the crowd. However, they flip the script by saying that it is not the end times, but the end of the daze, gaze and a phase.

Yes, the time has come to repent!
Throw down your ignorance and your prejudices!
Give up your willful ignorance and ineffective guilt!
Embrace the end of the daze, the gaze, and that phase,
Because the QPOCALYPSE is here!

When many evangelical preachers would be calling people to repent for their sins and be ready for Christ's second coming, Estrella calls the audience to embrace queerness and new culture and stories: "...the QPOCALYPSE is here! / And together, let's give birth to the new world." They call the audience to embrace this "new world," and be part of the movement of acceptance and openness together. As a result, their politically- and emotionally-charged piece engages and calls out the audience to be part of the experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 years were crucial years for slam poetry in Ottawa. Capital Slam won back-to-back national championships and put Ottawa on the map as a hub for talented, powerful and thought-provoking poetry. As examined through Keteku, Tse, Olafimihan and Estrella, many poets in Capital Slam touched on themes of oppression, racial identity and the importance of narratives for social change through a political lens. These poets spoke against dominant culture from the margins, and used the slam stage to remake and complicate identity. There was a similar performance style during this time period in which repetition, rhythm and rhyme were heavily used and valued. Despite this explosion of talent, a number of voices seemed to be missing in Ottawa's spoken word scene: the voices of women and queer people. A number of steps were taken to

address the gender imbalance at Capital Slam, which will be analyzed in the following chapter of the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons.

Chapter 3: U.N.I.T.Y. Women Talk Back Through Personal Narratives

In my analysis of the 2008-2010 Capital Slam season in the last chapter, I illustrated how many poets used the slam stage to challenge dominant culture and the audience with political pieces that touched on themes of oppression, racial identity and the importance of narratives for social change. These male and genderqueer poets remade and complicated identity from the margins through a similar performance style in which repetition, rhythm and rhyme were heavily used and valued. In this chapter, I will continue to investigate the changes and trends from 2008-2010 to 2012-2014, including the visibility of women and shift in racial dynamics. The creation of alternative poetry shows opened up spaces for new voices, discourses and performance styles by women at Capital Slam. Since 2009, Ottawa's spoken word community grew with five alternative poetry shows: Urban Legends and Voices of Venus in 2009, Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam in 2011, and Words to Live By and the Artistic Showcase in 2012. The number of poets increased from 54 in 2008-2009 to 70 in 2012-2013 and 66 in 2013-2014 (see Appendix A, C, D). As a result, there were more competitive and non-competitive poetry spaces for people to perform, including female and queer voices. These alternative poetry spaces have transformed Ottawa's spoken word scene and Capital Slam has seen many changes due to these shows. In 2012, Rotondo became the first woman to be on a Capital Slam team since 2007 (Armstrong, 2012; Capital Slam, 2012). Nguyen was also the second female poet to win a slam series, Urban Legends, out of 12 combined slam champions in Ottawa (Capital Slam, 2013b). In 2012-2013, female voices made up 30 per cent of poets in Capital Slam, a 13 per cent increase from the 2008-2009 season (Appendix C). In 2013-2014, female and genderqueer poets made up 32 per cent of poets in Capital Slam, a 15 per cent rise from 2008-2009 (Appendix D). As a result, 2012

was a turning point in Ottawa's spoken word scene. The 2012-2014 seasons represent an opportunity to explore some changes and trends in Capital Slam and Ottawa's spoken word scene since 2010.

By analyzing the poetry of some of the top female and genderqueer performers in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons, it is possible to examine the various themes women explored on the slam stage. In this chapter, I will argue that female and genderqueer poets demonstrate the changes in Capital Slam, such as the increase in female visibility and the different perspectives, discourses and performance styles of women. The creation of alternative poetry spaces have also impacted the racial dynamics of Capital Slam with a decrease of racialized poets on the slam stage. This connects to my overall thesis that explores the shifts that have occurred in Capital Slam from 2008 to 2014 in gender and race. In their poems, I will discuss how these women used the slam stage to talk back to sexism, misogyny and racism through their personal experiences. I will also argue that the creation of alternative poetry spaces created opportunities for different performance styles during this time period. The diverse voices of women and genderqueer performers did not heavily focus on repetition, rhyme and wordplay compared to many of the male poets from 2008-2010.

A Huge Shift at Capital Slam

Capital Slam has seen a huge shift in the types of poets and performance styles from 2012-2014. This time period had one of the highest representations of women and the most female poets who qualified for the semi-finals and finals during these seasons. While there was only one female poet out of the 12 competitors in the 2008-2009 semi finals (8 per cent), seven out of the 16 poets in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons were women (44 per cent). In 2013, Capital Slam changed its semi-final structure by splitting it into two shows,

increasing spots from 12 to 16 poets who could participate in the semi-finals. The 2013 finals was also the first time in Capital Slam history that female and male poets were represented equally in the finals (Capital Slam, 2013d). Two of those female poets made the Capital Slam team, Vanessa “V” Rotondo and Magdala “Light” Joseph. According to the Capital Slam blog, there was a team change and one of those female poets did not compete with the team at the nationals (2013). As a result, the 2012-2013 Capital Slam team was made up of four male poets and one female poet. The team was also comprised of five White poets, which is another change from my first case study of analyzing the 2008-2010 teams of predominately male poets of colour. Although there were many more female poets performing at the semi-finals, a number of them only qualified because some male poets dropped out or decided to participate on the Urban Legends slam poetry team (Capital Slam, 2013a). The 2013-2014 semi-finals were comprised of eight men, seven women and one genderqueer poet. The gender split was almost the same as 2012-2013 with seven female poets participating in the semi-finals. However, the racial dynamics of Capital Slam has also seen large changes. In 2012-2013, half of the semi-finalists were White, while the other half were poets of colour. In the 2013-2014 semi-finals, 13 of those poets were White. These numbers demonstrate a trend from 2008-2009 in which nine out of the 12 poets in the semi-finals were racialized. I will discuss some of those dynamics in the concluding chapter.

Since 2009, a number of non-competitive and competitive initiatives were generated to address the lack of female poets in Ottawa’s spoken word poetry scene (Garrison, 2009; Priske, 2011; Tomovcik, 2010). The creation of Voices of Venus, an all-women’s poetry show, in 2009 played an important role in providing a non-competitive space for female poets to try out and share their work (Garrison, 2009; Tomovcik, 2010). The creators did not

want to have a women-only venue because they wanted female poets to be supported by everyone in the scene, and for people to know the kind of talent and passion by women (Tomovcik, 2010).⁶ Although many top female poets left Ottawa around 2007 for various reasons, Rusty Priske said shows like Voices of Venus brought female voices back to the stage (Lyon, 2011). After four years, however, Voices of Venus' monthly showcases came to an end in April 2013 (Armstrong, 2013). Allison Armstrong, the organizer of the show, said she could no longer financially support the showcase on the Voices of Venus blog (2013). As the only all-female poetry show ended, Ottawa also had its first all-female poetry slam team at the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam finals (Capital Slam, 2013c).

Another initiative to combat the male-dominated slam scene was the creation of the first Women's Slam Championship in 2012. The creators wanted to develop a higher profile for women in slam and spoken word around the city. Its intent was to showcase the depth of talent among female voices and to encourage more women to get involved in slam poetry to address the shortage of women performing and a lack of role models (Ha, 2012). Although there was much support at the championships in 2012 and 2013, there was not much backing leading up to the 2013 finals (Priske, 2012). One of the organizers, Priske, called out poets for the lack of support on his personal blog: "What I am talking about is the spoken word community in Ottawa who have claimed that they support women in slam and spoken word... and then don't come to the show. Lip service is not support" (2012). The turnout for the 2014 finals was even more disappointing. I went to the show at Pressed and there were only five women who signed up to compete, which is seven less than the usual 12

⁶ My first featured performance was at Voices of Venus in 2010 at Umi Café, a local coffee shop. When I first starting performing in Ottawa's spoken word scene, I was immediately approached by other female poets who told me about this show and how they were always looking for new female voices and talent.

participants. The small crowd was also comprised of predominantly women, a stark contrast from the sold out show at Arts Court in 2012 and the full house at the Mercury Lounge in 2013.

I also started the show, Words to Live By, in 2012 to create an alternative space for people to perform. At the time, there were three slams and an all-women's poetry show, which predominately opened spaces for women or those who were interested in competition. The Oneness Poetry Showcase, which ended in 2010, was the last spoken word show that was a non-competitive place with an open mic portion of the program. I wanted to create an open and non-competitive space that encouraged first-time performers to share their work – especially women – and to give up-and-coming poets an opportunity to feature at a show.

There is a higher turnover of female poets than male poets, despite the growth of women performing on the slam stage from 2012-2014. Out of all the female competitors in the 2008-2009 season, none of those poets continued to perform at Capital Slam in 2012-2014. However, many of the male poets have continued to slam. For example, eight male poets who performed in 2008-2009 still competed in the 2012-2013 season. Out of those eight performers, six out of the 16 poets who qualified for the semi-finals (some of these male poets declined and did not compete) also performed at the semis in 2009 (ArRay-of Words, Brad Morden, Loh El, Priske, PrufRock and Sense-Say). Rachel McKibbens discusses a number of reasons for the lack of women in the poetry slam scene: “Since women do not stay in slam as long as the average male slammer, newer female slammers have no long-term slam aspirations and have fewer opportunities for a female coach/mentor/role model” (2012). Ottawa poets have also commented on the connection between female role models and the longevity in slam (Ha, 2012; Mosurinjohn-English,

2010). In interviews with poets in local media, Danielle Grégoire noted how the numbers of female performers in Ottawa have decreased: “It seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy. The less we see ourselves represented on stage, the less likely women are to get up there” (Mosurinjohn-English, 2010). Ottawa’s spoken word scene remains plagued by a high turnover and lack of female poets over the past several years.

Female Voices at Capital Slam from 2012-2014

In this chapter, I will be analyzing poems performed by three female poets and one poet who does not fit the gender binary: Joseph, Nguyen and Rotondo (2013) and Kay Kassirer (2014).⁷ I chose these female and genderqueer poets because they have been on various Ottawa slam teams or represent the new voices at Capital Slam. I argue that these poets demonstrate the changes in Capital Slam from 2008-2010, such as the increase in female voices and different perspectives, discourses and performance styles of women. Joseph was on the Urban Legends slam team in 2010 and was one of only two women to compete in the Capital Slam semi-finals in 2010. She also tied for first place at the inaugural Women’s Slam Championship in 2012 and made the Capital Slam team in 2013, but did not participate at the nationals. Joseph is also one of the only women who have continued to perform since the 2009-2010 season. Rotondo was on the Capital Slam team in 2012 and 2013, and was the first woman to be on the team in five years (Armstrong, 2012; Capital Slam, 2012). She also won the Women’s Slam Championship in 2013. Nguyen was the first female poet to win a major slam series, Urban Legends, in 2012. These female poets used the stage to speak on themes of oppression, sexism, racism and relationships through their

⁷ Kassirer did not identify as genderqueer when this piece was performed, so I will examine it from their perspective as a woman. However, I will refer to Kassirer as “genderqueer” and “they” throughout this thesis.

personal experiences as women in their poetry. I chose to include Kassirer because they were the only open genderqueer poet performing in the 2013-2014 season, and one of the few poets discussing sexuality and complicating gender in their poetry. They finished in third place during the Capital Slam regular season and also represent the increase of youth voices in the slam scene (Capital Slam, 2014). They also challenged dominant culture's views on sexism and misogyny through their personal poetry narratives.

Many of the Ottawa poets from 2012-2014 continued to speak on themes of marginalized identity and challenging dominant culture, but the formation of ulterior shows created more openings for women, queer people and a variety of performance styles. Women and queer people have brought different voices, perspectives and issues to various slam communities (Aptowicz, 2008; Escoto, 2013; Halberstam, 2003; Fox, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Olson, 2007). This movement has been seen in hip-hop communities in which female rappers have spoken back and challenged sexism and misogyny through their personal narratives (Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004). Female poets can also connect with other women in the audience through their experiences. In interviews with poets from San Diego's slam scene, poets commented on the positive impact of women's participation in slam:

Different bodies give us different ways of understanding life, existence, identities. I will argue that women have a different way of understanding the world than men... and so women participating in slam and spoken word poetry, for other women, it gives them a way of relating (Escoto, 2013, 48).

As a result, women's identities, experiences and understanding of the world add important discourses to slam.

Joseph and Kassirer touch on themes of oppression, sexism, misogyny and their fears of being women in their poetry. They take their personal narratives of oppression and make a larger commentary on society, speaking back to dominant culture's oppressive structures of

racism, sexism and misogyny. In Joseph's piece, "A Black Girl, Nighttime and A Pickup Truck" (Appendix I), she discusses the racism and sexism she has experienced as a Black woman: "I remember the look on their face when they realized I was coloured / And how could this be! That black girls held good jobs?" Joseph challenges these oppressive structures that have made her skeptical of those around her. Due to her experiences and stories of oppression around her, she says she has seen too much and her "innocence is gone." Kassirer also explores the sexism and misogyny they experienced as a woman in their poem, "Life Before Pretty Underwear" (Appendix J). They share numerous stories of being objectified by men and how that has impacted them: "Well everything changed when I grew these mounds of fat called breasts / And suddenly I was seen as an object for sex / My childhood was over at the ripe young age of twelve." These experiences negatively affect Kassirer's self-esteem and they also discuss a loss of innocence. However, they choose to fight back to "end this harassment that is the norm in our community," challenging dominant culture's acceptance of misogyny and slut shaming.

In Rotondo's piece, "Top Ten Ways to Get Over Your Ex" (Appendix K), she challenges traditional notions of female sexuality and femininity through her advice and use of language. She shares various techniques to get over an ex through her humorous poem: "2 – Wish you were a baller? Stop wishing! Be a baller. Be a slut." Rotondo talks back to dominant culture's view on slut shaming in which women are seen as "sluts" for sleeping around, while men who sleep around gain status (Friedman, 2011; Tanenbaum, 2000). She additionally challenges the cultural double standard that women want love and men want sex, and encourages women to sleep around if they so desire (Filipovic, 2008; Friedman, 2011). Rotondo has an assertive and aggressive female voice and does not shy away from speaking

her mind or using vulgar language. In Nguyen's poem, "Still Here" (Appendix L), she discusses the Vietnam War and the oppression Vietnamese people experienced in order to escape the aftermath of the war. Nguyen exposes the suffering of the Vietnamese people, as well as their resilience and desire to fight back: "Get free or die trying mentality / So we had to get free / But only half of us succeeded." She speaks back from this marginalized space and says the history of her ancestors will be continued through the future generations, including herself.

Analysis

My analysis of the slam poetry performances consisted of numerous readings of the performance texts, which led to various key themes. In my first reading of the performances, I watched a poet's video and noted three areas of interest to explore: language, visual features (behaviours, gestures, gaze) and sound. I used a combination of Machin and Mayr's multimodal framework, as well as Tannen's work on conversational discourse and sound to ask the following questions:

1. How do poets speak through images and actions? (*gaze, poses, gestures*)
2. How are social actors represented through language and identity? (*social actors*)
3. How is action represented? (*action*)
4. In what ways can poets dialogue with the audience and use sound? (*dialogue, repetition*)

I noted the various techniques poets used through language, action and sound. I also italicized key words to highlight each question, which is noted above. On a second reading of each performance, I then connected these techniques to three key themes: how women speak back through personal experiences, storytelling of oppressed voices and how poets dialogue with the audience. Since many female poets from the 2012-2014 seasons touched on themes of oppression, sexism, racism and speaking back through their own personal

experiences, these themes were connected to Sherene Razack, bell hooks and Gwendolyn Pough's work. I extended Razack's call for marginalized groups to share their stories and provide counter-narratives to cultural norms for social change. Pough's work on Black women in hip-hop was important to see how women's autobiographies can challenge stereotypes and dominant culture. There is potential for women to uplift and heal through sharing their stories and making social commentary in the public sphere (Pough, 2004, p. 111). I also extended hooks' exploration of talking back in which oppressed and exploited voices can challenge dominant culture that often leaves them nameless and voiceless; this act of defiance opens up possibilities for transformation, freedom and healing (1988, pp. 8-9). In particular, women's personal stories are connected to larger issues of oppression, racism and sexism. Women can define their own stories by talking back to dominant culture. These reasons led me to organize my analysis by key themes, which to recap are how women speak back through personal experiences, storytelling of oppressed voices and how poets dialogue with the audience.

Talking Back Through Personal Experiences

The growth of female representation at Capital Slam from 2012-2014 increased the discourses and experiences of women. This development provided a public space for female and genderqueer poets to share their own stories on the slam stage. In this way, they could speak back to various systems of oppression that have often left them nameless and voiceless. These narratives were important because of the connection and personalization of a woman speaking to a woman's experience (Escoto, 2013; Pough, 2004). Joseph speaks against racism and sexism through her personal stories, as well as the experiences around her. There are a number of *social actors* in her poem, including those who have been

marginalized (i.e. Black women), those who are racist and Joseph herself. Joseph goes in and out of character, so the audience does not always know which experiences are Joseph's and which ones she adopts to strengthen her piece. Joseph highlights the racist and sexist comments she has experienced as a Black woman:

I remember the look on their face when they realized I was coloured
And how could this be! That black girls held good jobs?
From Secretary of State to Governor General
They still thought they'd find me at the strip club

She speaks against the shock of people when they find out she has a good job as a Black woman. Joseph broadens her commentary by mentioning other high-profile Black women in politics, including former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice of the U.S. and former Governor General Michaëlle Jean of Canada. Consequently, Joseph experiences a “double discrimination” based on her race and sex (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). These racist and sexist attitudes demonstrate the interlocking systems of oppression that many racialized women experience in which race, gender, sexuality and class, work together to mutually reinforce one another (Collins, 2000). When Joseph raises the question that Black women could have good jobs, she imitates White people who are racist. She puts her hands on her hips and changes the tone and sound of her voice, mimicking those who are surprised of her position. Joseph refers to White people as “they,” and her use of pronouns creates a divide between who has the power and who is marginalized.

Joseph also discusses how White people told her that racism was over, yet stigmatized and called her derogatory terms for the colour of her skin:

They tried to convince me that racism was over
They told me to move on, and stereotyping was wrong
But then they called me a nigger
A fucking monkey, a pig
They even called me a thief

Because of employment equity initiatives they created to protect me against people
who used to steal from me
Take away my opportunities based on the skin I'm in

Joseph lists the pejorative words she is called on her hands, while also raising her voice and getting angrier in tone. This highlights the hypocrisy she has experienced from White people, as well as her anger due to the numerous incidents of racism. Joseph talks back to these terms, especially being called a thief because of employment equity initiatives. The *Employment Equity Act* was created in 1995 to create equal access to employment, as well as redressing inequalities in the workplace for women, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities and other visible minorities (Government of Canada, 2012). However, some opponents have criticized the initiatives because of the grouping, visible minorities (Hum & Simpson, 1999; Mentzer, 2002). The category of visible minorities includes a large spectrum of wealth; as a result, the classification may leave out groups that have experienced discrimination (i.e. Jewish Canadians), while also including those who have incomes above the Canadian average (Hum & Simpson, 1999; Mentzer, 2002). There are also challenges to the grouping on whether the focus should be on current economic disadvantage or a history of organized discrimination, such as the experiences of Japanese and Chinese Canadians (Mentzer, 2002, p. 39). As a participant in this poem, Joseph emphasizes “me” when she discusses the employment equity initiatives that were meant to protect her as a Black woman and then points to her skin. Her physical presence as a racialized woman is made visible through her performance and pointing to her skin (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 69-70).

This oppression and racism has caused Joseph to be critical of the world as she walks in fear as a Black woman:

They used to do black girls, at nighttime in their pickup trucks
Way back when Black meant being subject to the animosity of hatred

And I was never raped during nighttime in a pickup truck but my nightmares follow me into the nighttime.

Joseph accompanies her words with her hands to indicate she was not raped during night in a pickup truck. However, the systemic oppression of racism and misogyny make her fearful of the world as she discusses a loss of innocence that she's "seen too much by now" and her "innocence is gone." Coming to voice and breaking silences are important acts of resistance for women of colour who have never had a public voice (Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007a). Joseph speaks back through her personal experiences, and challenges the prevalence of racism and sexism in the public sphere.

Kassirer also shares their personal experiences of oppression and misogyny on the slam stage and speaks back to dominant culture. The *social actors* in Kassirer's piece are Kassirer and men who have objectified them. Kassirer takes the audience from their childhood experiences to the difficulties of growing up. Like Joseph, they also experience a loss of innocence through their sexual objectification and oppression. This realization causes them to go through conflicting feelings on how they should react to comments by men:

I was thirteen when I first got catcalled
I was walking down the street and a guy drove by and yelled out his window at me
"NICE ASS"
I felt proud, I was taught that that meant I was hot

As a young teenager, Kassirer says they "felt proud" by these advances and were told they "needed to learn to accept compliments," a myth that many women accept (Friedman, 2011, p. 53). They imitate the man when they say, "nice ass," in a nonchalant and offensive way, indicating that Kassirer was simply an object for that person. Despite how easy it was for these men to objectify them, Kassirer explains how these comments negatively impacted them through covering up their body: "When I was fifteen I started getting called a slut / So

I started to wear baggy clothes so that my figure wouldn't show / Because people were making assumptions about me because I was showing off my body." Kassirer covers up their body with their baggy shirt on stage and physically shows how being called a "slut" caused them to hide. According to Jaclyn Friedman (2011) in *What You Really Really Want*, many women experience shame, blame and fear due to their sexuality. Society projects moral values onto women in which they are blamed for their sexuality, including being raped and street harassed (Friedman, 2011, pp. 50-51). Women have to negotiate the dichotomy between being labelled a "slut" or "prude," and are constantly patrolled for their appearance and behaviours (Friedman, 2011, pp. 47-48). In their poem, Kassirer is labeled a "slut" based on their appearance, despite how these labels rarely have anything to do with how much sex women are or are not having (Friedman, 2011, 63). These comments are an example of slut shaming in which women who are labeled "sluts" seem defiant or threatening to dominant culture in relation to their opinions, behaviour or appearance (Friedman, 2011, p. 63). Since Kassirer was "defiant" through their clothing, those around them projected assumptions about Kassirer and made them feel shameful and fearful.

These experiences of sexual objectification and dominant culture's standard for women cause Kassirer to speak back on the stage. They share their exhaustion of being screamed at and respond to men, even if "they'd just laugh when I yelled back at them to fuck off." Kassirer connects their personal narratives of oppression to issues many other women live through every day:

Excuse me for trying to gain back the self-esteem that you ruthlessly tore away from me
Recently I realized, I should not have to hide my body
Wearing skimpy clothing is not an invitation to be yelled at by strangers or picked on by friends.

When Kassirer realizes they should not have to hide or accept these advances, they become an active agent in their responses to men and friends. Rather than accepting these “compliments” or criticisms from friends, they speak back to the status quo. During their performance, they put up their middle fingers when they yelled back at the men to “fuck off” and demonstrate how they are no longer willing to put up with these comments. Kassirer also learns that they do not have to hide their body and a person’s clothing does not warrant these advances. In order to strengthen their point, they open their shirt when they say, “I should not have to hide.” This active response is a stark contrast to hiding behind their baggy shirt earlier in the poem when they were called a “slut.” Kassirer goes from a passive actor who is taught to accept these compliments based on dominant culture’s acceptance of sexism and slut shaming to an active participant. They want to share their personal experiences in the public sphere to speak against the misogyny and sexism that women daily face. Kassirer takes up Pough and hooks’ call for women and marginalized voices to speak back to dominant culture. Their personal experiences give them a chance to tell their story and make a social commentary on culture (Pough, 2004, p. 11). Kassirer gives women a voice and connects with the audience through a representation of women’s narratives.

In Rotondo’s poem, there is a possible transgressive meaning in which she speaks back to dominant culture by challenging traditional beliefs of female sexuality and femininity. The main *action* in her piece is giving the audience tips on how to get over an ex, including sleeping around, binge drinking and focusing on themselves. One discursive reading of the text could be her challenge to women to be in charge of their own sexuality through sharing her own experiences. Rotondo encourages women to own their bodies by challenging slut shaming and the sexual double standard for women: “2 – Wish you were a

baller? Stop wishing! Be a baller. Be a slut.” She invites the audience to be a “slut” and challenges dominant culture’s view on slut shaming in which men are rewarded for sleeping around, while women are seen as “sluts” or damaged for their behaviour (Friedman, 2011; Tanenbaum, 2000). She talks back to the notion that women want love and men want sex, and encourages women to sleep around if they desire: “Know the difference between love and sex. / And learn to assess them appropriately. / If they were the head and tail of a coin, forget love and call sex.” In this way, Rotondo encourages women to be active in their sexuality, and confronts the notion that women are passive and men are aggressive (Filipovic, 2008, p. 18). She does not assume that women would choose love over sex, and challenges the fear tactic used to control women’s sexuality that casual sex will prevent women from emotionally bonding with a future partner (Friedman, 2011, p. 58). Rotondo also encourages binge drinking (five drinks in a two-hour session for men, four drinks in a two-hour session for women), which has different cultural norms for men and women. Masculinity is tied to drinking behaviour with men (Campbell, 2000), while women are taught to abstain from alcohol or limit their intake (Nicolaidis, 1996). Rotondo encourages women to binge drink and adds a new discourse of what is socially acceptable behaviour for women: “No one said anything about class. / And sometimes being trashy is just socially acceptable.” In this way, she reclaims “being trashy” could dismantle the masculine culture of binge drinking.

The main *action* in Nguyen’s piece is sharing stories of people leaving Vietnam and the difficulties they experienced. In migration narratives, gender plays an influential role in a person’s decision to migrate. In many incidents, men make independent choices, while women migrate for familial reasons (i.e. create and reunite family) in which they are not entirely in control (Boyd, 1989; Pedraza, 1991). The feminization of migration has been

recognized at the global level (Castles & Miller, 2003), a trend where more women are migrating for labour and marriage (Carling, 2005). In this piece, she connects her story as a Vietnamese woman to the experiences of people leaving Vietnam, including her parents. Nguyen begins her poem with the phrase, “Not all that glitters is gold,” and talks about the gold from the sea she dreams of. However, the gold she actually sees is much different:

But the gold I see glisten
Is that of the blood and bones of my sisters and brothers;
Those who were not so much blessed with the same fortunes met by mother and
father
Whom had gotten up and left in the same haphazard manner
Fleeing for freedom by leaving their motherland
In attempts to escape the aftermath
Of the war

She discusses how many Vietnamese people died in their search for freedom to escape the aftermath of the Vietnamese War. The Vietnam War was a civil war between the communist north and the south, who were supported by the Americans. Nguyen connects her own personal story to the oppression of the Vietnamese people and the past through her own body as a Vietnamese woman. Each time she says “my,” she points to herself, referring to the deceased Vietnamese people as her “sisters and brothers.” The Vietnam War is also very personal to her because her parents escaped while many Vietnamese people were not “blessed with the same fortunes” of survival. While discussing her unlucky brothers and sisters who “left in the same haphazard manner,” Nguyen raises her hands and points behind her to indicate the motherland they left behind. She repeats this motion throughout the poem when she talks about leaving. One discursive reading of the text could be that she is referring to the past and what was left behind. The performative action brings this poem alive and connects the marginalization her people faced to her desire to continue telling these stories of oppression and difficulties.

At the end of the poem, Nguyen talks about the importance of future generations speaking back and sharing these stories to continue these histories:

Our flags will keep on
Being raised

Much like our children.
And it will be through them that our stories
And our spirits
Keep on living.

Nguyen connects the stories of the Vietnamese people and her parents to her own experiences. Their stories of resiliency and search for freedom will live on through Nguyen's poetry and the future generations sharing these stories. Although the Vietnamese people lost their land and people, they will not lose their stories. Her act of defiance is important for oppressed and exploited voices to challenge dominant culture that often leaves them nameless and voiceless; consequently, there are possibilities for transformation, freedom and healing (hooks, 1989, pp. 8-9). This demonstrates the importance of sharing personal experiences in the public sphere.

Storytelling of Oppressed Voices

Since slam opens up a space for poets to examine the structures that shape historical and social inequalities through counter narratives (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 9), the 2012-2014 Capital Slam seasons continued to be a place for poets to share stories for and by oppressed identities. Many women connected their own experiences of marginalization and those around them, to make a social commentary on larger issues of oppression, racism and sexism. As autoethnographers, these poets analyzed their experiences as a cultural site to come to terms with questions of self and culture (Alexander, 2005, p. 422). Their poems are political and socially-just acts to resist and transform individuals and the world (Alexander,

2005; Holman Jones, 2005). In Joseph's piece, the main *action* is the oppression she has gone through, as well as those who have experienced racism. She opens with an anecdote of a Black woman being raped at night:

A black girl, nighttime and a pickup truck
Rape
They used to do black girls, at nighttime in their pickup trucks
Way back when Black meant being subject to the animosity of hatred.

These Black women were raped due to the colour of their skin, and the racist and sexist attitudes towards them. Women of colour, especially Black women, are often viewed as being sexually available and less valued than "pure" White women (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981; Friedman, 2011; McGuire, 2010; Mukhopadhyay, 2008; Valenti, 2008). In *Ain't I A Woman*, hooks (1981) argues that Black women have always been seen as sexually permissive and available for sexual assault by White and Black men (p. 52). The stereotypes of Black women as "sexually depraved, immoral, and loose" from slavery (hooks, 1981, p. 52) gave White men access and permission to Black women's bodies (Collins, 2004, p. 101; hooks, 1981, p. 62). The hypersexualization of Black women also places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy; the rape of one White woman by a Black man is seen as more important than the rape of many Black women by one White man (hooks, 1981, p. 53). Black women are seen as "bad women" who cannot be raped in cultural narratives (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1271).

Joseph further highlights other stories of oppression in her communities and around the world, which causes her to be skeptical of the world:

And as for racism, the truth speaks for itself
When every other day, a new swastika sign shows up on yet another wall
And every other day, I hear of yet another war
And warrants after warrants based on racial profiling

She shares examples of the prevalence of racism from swastikas to wars and racial profiling. Her language and actions indicate the urgency and pervasiveness of racism. She says, “every other day” and “warrants after warrants” to emphasize these stories of oppression. As Joseph performs “warrants after warrants,” she motions her hand in a circle to demonstrate how often people of colour are racially profiled. Joseph bookends her poem with her opening anecdote in which Black girls were raped at night in pickup trucks. She moves from the collective to the individual and embodies the experiences of other Black women, even though she indicates at the beginning of the piece that she was never raped at night in a pickup truck. This embodiment adds to the complexities of this piece as she connects her story to other women’s experiences and larger systems of oppression:

We live too little, yet too much as black girls
And my nightmares, they follow me into the nighttime
So as I pass by the pickup truck
I remembered how they raped me, stripped me naked, used and abused me, lied to
me, made me think it was my fault
Because I was a black girl, nighttime, and a pickup truck

She creates a collective “we” of the oppression faced by Black women and emphasizes, “me,” personalizing these experiences. Joseph discusses that “she” felt it was her fault for being “raped” and “abused.” This is an example of victim blaming in rape culture where women get blamed for being raped; societal standards place the responsibility on women not to get raped (i.e. making “bad” choices, walking home at night, clothing, drinking, etc.), as opposed to rapists not assaulting women (Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Valenti, 2008; Jervis, 2008). Black women are passive actors here in which they are dehumanized and are made to believe it is their fault for being raped. Joseph’s racialized and gendered identity brings these experiences of racism, misogyny and sexism alive as she connects her experiences to other narratives of oppression.

In Kassirer's poem, they share their own story of subordination and relate it to larger systems of oppression. In this way, they analyze their experiences to think about ways others may have gone through similar incidents (Ellis et al., 2011, Doing Autoethnography: The Process section, para. 5). The main *action* in their piece relates to the sexism and misogyny that Kassirer and other women experience at the hands of men and even their friends:

But by the time I was fourteen I was getting a little tired of constantly getting
screamed at
But they'd just laugh when I yelled back at them to fuck off
I was told that I needed to learn to accept compliments
Because these men were just trying to erm "inform" me
Of how attractive I am

Kassirer was taught to accept these comments positively. Many women believe the myth that male attention should be received as a compliment and it is somehow their fault for receiving this treatment (Friedman, 2011, p. 53). Even though they yelled back, they were met with laughter. These men responded in laughter and did not take Kassirer seriously, which demonstrates dominant culture's acceptance of sexism and misogyny.

Experiences of shame, blame and fear cause Kassirer to challenge the status quo and various systems of oppression. The action in this piece shifts from Kassirer accepting these advances by men to Kassirer speaking back for other marginalized voices:

I want to end this harassment that is the norm in our community
This slut shaming fad that folks follow mindlessly
This insane double standard society has set upon women
This misogynistic bullshit that we've been forced to put up with

Due to their own experiences, they need to tell these stories of sexism and misogyny that are the "norm" in dominant culture. Kassirer shifts the dialogue from being an object to subject in which they are no longer voiceless or defined by others (hooks, 1989, p. 12). They name and speak for themselves, which can transform silence into language, action and change

(Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007c). They challenge the perspective that women are taught to put up with sexual harassment, slut shaming and a narrow perspective of acceptable sexual behaviour (Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Valenti, 2008). Kassirer's personal story is a microcosm of larger stories of oppression that many women live through and experience. In this way, Kassirer delivers a counter-story to acceptable and cultural norms. Their counter story challenges the status quo and provides a new perspective to shape what is known thought and said; this can create a conversation and overcome the difference in position between the speaker and listener (Delgado, 1989; Razack, 1998).

There are a number of participants in Nguyen's poem, including Vietnamese people from the south, northern communists, the U.S. and Nguyen. A number of these *social actors* demonstrate the importance of storytelling of oppressed voices, as well as the social hierarchies of power. In Nguyen's poem, she challenges the notion of the Vietnam War being against the Americans:

Which, contrary to ignorant beliefs,
Was not us against the Americans.
Viet Nam was a civil war,
Or more like a military conflict
Between the South and the North.
Fearing the expansion of the northern communists,
America sent soldiers down south
To help us win
...but then the U.S. left and so Sai Gon fell to Ho Chi Minh
On the 30th of April
1975

UNITY wasn't quite the right word to describe the cusp of the divide between the North and the South because our people were devoured by the hunger for this power

In this poem, Nguyen discusses the military conflict between the north and south, and how the south fell to the north when the Americans left. Nguyen's use of pronouns is key as they are with or against certain ideas and creates a collective "other" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.

84). She aligns herself with South Vietnam and Americans, and against the communist north through her use of “us,” “we” and “our” throughout the poem. As she uses these pronouns to distinguish between the north and south, she points to herself as a person of the south. Her use pronouns create an “us” versus “them” discourse and differentiate herself from those of the north.

By trying to escape Vietnam, the people of the south lost their homeland and a piece of their identity: “So for countless nights upon nights, it was / Run to the boats before they see you. / Forget everything you were; you are now Vietnamese Boat People.” The term, “Vietnamese Boat People,” was used to describe refugees who escaped Vietnam after the Vietnam War, often in small and overcrowded boats (DeMichele, 2012). In these lines, Nguyen’s voice becomes more urgent and she uses her hands to point towards the boats and shakes her hands to indicate they had to forget their sense of identity. She also does not name specific people, which could demonstrate how many of these “Vietnamese Boat People” were never humanized. Instead, they were grouped into a collective “other” than being individualized: “And making it to land was still not yet victory; / Some places we landed would pack us back into our boats like sardines and / Force us back out to sea.” Many of these refugees were nameless and packed tightly into boats or sent back to sea. Although many Vietnamese people were dehumanized, Nguyen’s storytelling for change also indicates their agency and resiliency for a better life:

Leaving the country at that time was considered illegal,
But despite those consequences,
To stay there
Was lethal

Since the communist north occupied Vietnam, many people of South Vietnam did not have the option of remaining. They could either suffer at the hands of the communist north if they

stayed, or leave the country illegally and be met with uncertainty (DeMichele, 2012). Many Vietnamese people chose to leave and escape through boat, experiencing many difficulties along the way, such as disease, hunger and even being sent back. As a result, her language, narratives and performance work together to show the importance of storytelling for and by oppressed voices.

Dialogue with the Audience

In slam poetry, the audience is part of the conversation and actively participates through their responses and feedback. As a result, having a *dialogue* and connecting with the crowd is crucial, which can be achieved through the use of *poses, gaze, repetition* and *direction* interaction with the audience. In particular, many female poets from 2012-2014 were able to connect with the audience through their personal stories of being women. Joseph has a conversation with the audience through her use of the gaze and poses. Following Machin and Mayr's questions on poses, she takes up space and actively engages them through her movements, emotions and stance. Joseph uses her gaze to recognize the audience's presence and initiates that a response is required from them to be critical of the world. She addresses the crowd through pronouns (i.e. you) after discussing her experiences of racism and sexism, and what she sees around her:

You can never be too careful
So I watch my back
Tell me that I'm the racist one
Call it whatever you want

Joseph's varying levels of volume and tone indicate certain moments she wants to emphasize. Her voice becomes louder and angrier as she speaks these lines, suggesting that she would rather be vigilant than worry about being called racist. She extends her personal experiences and thoughts to include the audience by speaking directly to them. Joseph

further involves them when she talks about how negative experiences can influence a person's perspective: "The more we see from this world / The more we understand / People who call themselves friends while simply setting traps and wiretaps to find out when is the best moment to take you down." The pronoun, "we," includes the audience to reflect on their own experiences of mistreatment and being more critical of the world. The crowd is a co-participant with Joseph and actively produces meaning with her (Tannen, 2007, p. 28).

Joseph also uses *repetition* and rhyme to effectively communicate her message. She bookends her poem with the image of a Black girl being raped at night: "I remembered how they raped me, stripped me naked, used and abused me, lied to me, made me think it was my fault / Because I was a black girl, nighttime, and a pickup truck." Although she says she was never raped at nighttime in a pickup truck at the beginning of the poem, this anecdote speaks to her fears of being a Black woman as she connects her experiences with other women. Similar to repetitive strategies in hip-hop, Joseph uses the communicative approach of repetition to tell cautionary tales and drive important themes of racism and misogyny (Alim, 2006, p. 84). She creates an important intervention and *dialogue* to connect with audience members, especially the experiences of women. The impact of women's voices has been documented in other slam poetry environments, including San Diego. In interviews with poets from San Diego's slam scene, poets commented on the positive impact of women's participation in slam: "[W]hen a woman gets up there, then you have more relatability to women's issues. I feel like a male could do it but it's just much more personal to hear a woman tell a woman's story" (Escoto, 2013, pp. 46-47). Women have different perspectives and experiences than men; in particular, they are able to connect with other woman in the audience who see themselves represented onstage. There is potential to heal as listeners

connect and can see themselves reflected and represented in the artist's life (Pough, 2004, p. 107).

Another way Joseph drives home certain themes is through her use of parallel constructions, which produce a distinct rhythm and sound:

A brother rapes his own brother
A mother kills her own daughter
And psychopaths walk by schools and destroy the lives of families who were never
the reason why they were torn in the first place
So please don't blame me for being too careful

Joseph shares reasons as to why she is skeptical and careful, sharing stories of rape and murder. By putting the offender at the same place from line to line, she can communicate certain ideas and emphasize why she is cynical of her surroundings. This construction allows her to demonstrate her lyrical skills, move the poem along and provide reasons as to why she is careful of the world around her. Joseph thus includes the audience in her dialogue through her use of the gaze, pronouns and sound.

Kassirer also has a conversation with the audience through their *gaze, poses* and directly addressing the crowd at the beginning of the poem with a question: "Do you remember the good old days / Back when underwear came in a six pack from Walmart / And covered your whole butt and had an ugly floral-ish pattern on it." They begin the piece with an open and welcoming stance. Their question engages and invites the audience to reflect on the "good old days" of childhood when children had fewer worries, such as the appearance of their underwear. They share an anecdote of another child seeing their underwear on the playground:

And if by the off chance some kid happened to catch a glance while playing on the
playground
They would be too busy shouting
I SEE LONDON I SEE FRANCE
I SEE ABBY'S UNDERPANTS

To care about the way they looked

These childhood memories are in contrast to growing up and being objectified by men, which are similar issues raised in Joseph's poem.

Kassirer also uses *repetition* throughout their piece to focus on key themes. They repeat their opening stanza, "Do you remember the good old days..." towards the end of the poem to bookend their piece of childhood innocence lost. At the end of the poem, they repeat, "good old days" and the underwear metaphor numerous times:

The good old days when I was only afraid of the monsters under my bed
And I regret not holding onto them
I was in such a rush to grow up now all I want is to be a kid again...
The good old days
Before I had to decide what pair of underwear I want to wear.

Kassirer is very animated with their hands, and uses them to show a bed where they feared monsters and also *gestures* holding onto the "good old days." Their actions indicate a sense of longing for those days where life was less complicated and choosing a pair of underwear was not a big deal. Kassirer also repeats, "Excuse me," at two points in their poem to engage the audience: "Excuse me if I don't think strangers yelling crude obscenities at me is a compliment... Excuse me for trying to gain back the self-esteem that you ruthless tore away from me." They leave a pause after their remark and indicate they are sharing something important. This leaves space for the crowd to reflect on their words and the audience's response can be heard through snapping. In their first reference, they place their hand out and indicate a stopping motion that they do not appreciate strangers yelling crude comments at them. This repetition allows them to communicate certain ideas, connect with the audience and move the poem along.

Rotondo uses the slam stage to have a conversation with the audience about getting over an ex. She directly addresses audience members through her use of pronouns (i.e. you,

your) as she counts down the “top 10 ways to get over your ex.” Rotondo begins her poem with an open stance and puts her arms and hands out, signaling a 10 as she counts down her tips. She invites the audience to take part in the *dialogue* with her conversational and informal tone. Rotondo uses *repetition* and parallel constructions throughout her piece as she discusses techniques to get over an ex. By having stressed and unstressed syllables at approximately the same place and time from line to line, she is able to further certain points when they are spoken out loud:

Stop idealizing him.
Stop admiring, glorifying or romanticizing him
He wasn’t that good in bed anyway
He never paid rent.

She uses her hand to tell the audience to stop idealizing their partner; she lists admiring, glorifying and romanticizing on her fingers, to further her message of not putting their exes on a pedestal. Rotondo then shares examples of why he was not an idealistic partner, such as never paying rent. She repeats the parallel constructions throughout her poem as she continues to share what not to do: “Fuck nostalgia; / Fuck being civil... Don’t call, text, e-mail or BBM him.” Again, Rotondo lists her tips on her fingers, which furthers her points of ways to get over an ex. She invites them to reflect on their personal experiences and not to make the same mistakes. At the end of her poem, Rotondo tells the audience to focus on themselves:

Cause you’re number 1 man – Stop giving a fuck
Because you can.
Do what you wanna do.
Be who you wanna be.
Be the change you wanna see in: your world.

She *gestures* to the audience as she tells them they are number one and points to them with her fingers. The audience is a *social actor* in this piece and can choose if they want to be a

passive or active agent when Rotondo shares her advice. They have the opportunity to take up her call to be “do what you wanna do” and “be who you wanna be” in “your world.” Rotondo’s conversation with the audience is a “joint production” in which they are co-participants of creating meaning during her piece (Tannen, 2007, pp. 27-28). Consequently, the crowd plays an active role in interpreting Rotondo’s discourse and being part of the conversation.

After Rotondo shares her last point, there’s a shift in tone in which she shares what she has learned through her relationships. This shift in tone is a common technique in slam performance as the “let me break it down for you” moment, which often reveals a truth or an epiphany (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 85). Rotondo’s epiphany is recognizing her freedom:

But be open and honest: like this, yo:
I may be single and broke;
But at least I provoke thought in this world.
At least I awoke enlightened today;
One less number in my phone;
One less STD;
With the epiphany of “it’s his loss, not mine.”
A blessing in disguise that has now become the most fucking liberating feeling in the
entire universe
I AM FREE
I AM FUCKABLE
HOMY, I FUCKED YOUR FRIENDS!
Can I get an amen?

As she tells the audience to be “open and honest like this,” she puts her hands out and reveals her truth. Despite being “single and broke,” she uses her hands to show how she “awoke enlightened” by raising her hand to her head. She shares her insight and the positive outcomes of being out of a terrible relationship, such as having “one less STD” and recognizing that it was his loss and not hers. Rotondo’s energy builds to her “liberating feeling,” and she accompanies her words by moving her hands and raising her voice. These actions further her excitement and connection with the audience. Poetry is thus a place of

self-transformation, freedom and a vehicle that women can use to bring ideas to life that are nameless (Anzaldúa, 1999; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007b). When she speaks her last line, “Can I get an amen?”, she extends her arms and calls the audience to respond to her. The audience responds with a roaring “amen,” cheers and laughter, which are heard throughout the entire poem. Rotondo’s call-and-response is an effective communicative strategy to create a unified group experience with the audience (Alim 2006; Daniel & Smitherman, 1976). The audience is part of the dialogue and actively participates in Rotondo’s poem through their responses and feedback (Aptowicz, 2008; Blitefield, 2004; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). In this way, Rotondo connects with the crowd through her personal experiences and mistakes, and invites them to join the conversation of getting over an ex-partner with her.

Nguyen also has a *dialogue* with the audience through directly addressing them, and her use of the *gaze* and *poses*. Her stance and actions are open as she looks out to the audience and addresses them at the end of her poem.

But you can count on this:

Though we may have lost our land
And half our people,
Our flags will keep on
Being raised
All over the world

Much like our children.
And it will be through them that our stories
And our spirits
Keep on living.

She pauses after saying, “this,” and the tone of her poem shifts as she directly speaks to the audience. Like Rotondo, Nguyen shares her “let me break it down for you” moment, revealing her truth. Nguyen’s shift in tone and promise lead to a discussion on who will

continue the stories of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese people. Despite the hardships Vietnamese people experienced after the Vietnam War, Nguyen says their flags and children will continue to be raised around the world. As she says, “raised,” she lifts her hands up in the air and keeps them held under she recites “children.” Her actions indicate that Vietnam’s difficult past will not prevent the children of these refugees from standing up and speaking these stories. These future generations, including herself, also represent the resiliency and desire for freedom of many Vietnamese people following the aftermath of the war. While she recites her last lines and finishes the poem, Nguyen opens her arms as if she is a messenger for this history and how she is connected to the past. For Nguyen, the future generations will carry these experiences forward in order to keep the narratives and spirits of Vietnamese people alive. They will not lose their stories and she keeps their stories alive through her dialogue with the audience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons demonstrated a large shift in Capital Slam, including the representation of women and change in racial dynamics. There was a significant increase of women speaking back to the status quo on the slam stage. As examined through Joseph, Kassirer, Rotondo and Nguyen, these women and genderqueer performers talked back to dominant culture’s view of sexism, misogyny, racism and other forms of oppression through their experiences. In particular, women used their personal narratives to connect with the audience – especially female audience members – in which new identities, discourses and performance styles were added to Capital Slam. Female poets continued to use repetition and rhyme throughout their poems, but their performance styles were not heavily focused on these devices like the poets from 2008-2010. These voices and

discourses were a large shift from 2008-2010 in which male poets of colour dominated Capital Slam.

This trend could be attributed to the creation of alternative poetry spaces, such as Urban Legends and Voices of Venus, which increased female visibility and representation onstage. There was a growth of female poets by 15 per cent from 2009 to 2014.

Furthermore, there was also at least one female poet on the Capital Slam team in 2012, 2013 and 2014, a feat that had not occurred since 2007. In 2014, there are three female poets on the team. The Capital Slam scene has also shifted in racial dynamics from 2008 in which male poets of colour made up nine out of the 10 poets on the 2009 and 2010 teams. This trend contrasts with the 2013 and 2014 teams comprised of five White poets. Despite the trend and growth of female performers, male poets predominately make up Capital Slam teams and no female poet has won the slam series.

Conclusion

Capital Slam has seen many changes over the past decade and this thesis set out to investigate the trends and shifts of Ottawa's longest-running slam poetry series within the time periods of 2008-2010 and 2012-2014. With the creation of alternative poetry shows over the past five years, this thesis explores the shift in identities, discourses and performance styles of poets at Capital Slam. In particular, there was a visible change in the representation of female poets and the racial dynamics of the scene. Through an examination of Ottawa's history and a critical discourse analysis of online performances from 2008-2010 and 2012-2014, this thesis demonstrates the changes in Capital Slam's poetry scene. From 2008-2010, Ottawa had a vibrant and flourishing spoken word community with two back-to-back national championships in 2009 and 2010. As examined through some of Capital Slam's most influential voices, Ian Keteku, Chris Tse, Komi "Poetic Speed" Olafimihan and Lukayo "Festrell" Estrella, these male and genderqueer poets explored themes of oppression, racial identity and the importance of narratives for social change. Through examining the politics of slam poetry, Keteku shares stories of marginalized voices and calls on poets to be a voice for those who are oppressed instead of writing for high scores. Olafimihan also discusses some of the politics of slam poetry and focuses on the political injustices he sees around the world by sharing narratives of marginalized communities. These poets also used the slam stage to remake and complicate identity, and speak against dominant culture from the margins. Tse's piece on racial identity exposes the oppression and exploitation Chinese men faced while building the Canadian Pacific Railway. He challenges the dominant discourse of Canadian freedom, and he remakes his own identity from the margins as he comes to terms with being Chinese Canadian. Similarly, Estrella recreates their identity from the margins as they complicate gender, race and sexuality in their poem. They

challenge heteronormative culture and the stereotypes of queer and racialized people. As one of the only openly queer poets challenging gender and sexuality in their poetry, Estrella adds a new discourse to Capital Slam in the 2008-2010 seasons. The poets had a similar performance style during this time period in which repetition, rhythm and rhyme were heavily used and valued. Despite this critical time of growth and recognition on the local and international stage, a number of voices were underrepresented in Ottawa's spoken word scene: the voices of women and queer people. Between 2007 and 2011, there were no female poets on the Capital Slam poetry teams. From 2005-2012, only five women filled the 40 spots in the Capital Slam finals. Male poets of colour dominated Capital Slam's poetry scene during these years.

The creation of five new poetry shows since 2009 has shifted the dynamics of Capital Slam and Ottawa's spoken word scene from 2012-2014. Some of these trends include the representation of women and change in racial dynamics. These new spaces increased the opportunities for female poets to perform and speak back to the status quo on the slam stage. As examined through Magdala "Light" Joseph, Kay Kassirer, Vanessa "V" Rotondo and Kim "King Kimbit" Nguyen, these women and genderqueer performers talked back to dominant culture's view of sexism, misogyny, racism and other forms of oppression through their experiences for social change. Specifically, these poets used their personal stories to connect with the audience in which new identities, discourses and performance styles were added to Capital Slam. Joseph's poem explores the racism and sexism she has experienced as a Black woman, and challenges these oppressive structures that have made her skeptical of the world. Kassirer also explores the sexism and misogyny they experienced as a woman by sharing their personal stories of being objectified by men. They challenge dominant culture's acceptance of slut shaming and misogyny, and connect their experiences to wider

systems of oppression; in this way, they analyze their experiences to think about ways other women may have gone through similar incidents. Rotondo adds a different perspective and discourse by challenging traditional notions of female sexuality and femininity through her poem. She has an assertive and aggressive female voice, which she delivers through her advice and use of vulgar language in getting over an ex. She talks back to dominant culture's view on slut shaming by challenging the double standard that women want love and men want sex, and encourages women to sleep around if they desire. Nguyen uses the slam stage to discuss the oppression Vietnamese people experienced after the Vietnam War. She shares their story of suffering and marginalization, as well as their desires for change. Nguyen speaks from the margins and says the history of her ancestors will be continued through the future generations, including her own voice. Consequently, the 2012-2014 seasons were important years in which female poets were recognized, and there were more spaces for women to speak back to various systems of oppression through their own experiences.

The increase of alternative poetry shows opened up spaces for more voices from 2012-2014. In particular, female poets broadened the performance styles and discourses at Capital Slam. Although they continued to use repetition and rhyme throughout their poems, their performances and use of sound were not as heavily emphasized like the poets from 2008-2010. These voices and discourses were a shift from 2008-2010 in which male poets of colour dominated Capital Slam. The representation of female and genderqueer performers can be seen through the increase of female poets by 15 per cent from 2009-2014. Furthermore, there was at least one female poet on the Capital Slam team in 2012 and 2013, a feat that had not occurred since 2007. In 2013, Ottawa had its first all-female slam poetry team at the Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam. At the same time, Voices of Venus, Ottawa's only

all-female poetry show, came to an end after four years. Voices of Venus created a niche for queer, feminist and trans voices; many of these voices are underrepresented and the majority of performers at Voices of Venus did not perform at Capital Slam. Why were these poets not performing at Capital Slam (i.e. competition, lack of safety)? Where will they speak their stories and experiences without this showcase? There has also been a noticeable decrease of support and participation for the Women's Slam Championship. Why does there seem to be a lack of support for this initiative? With more female representation onstage, has this show lost its relevance in the community?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of online performances allowed for an examination of the constructions of identity and marginality, and the ways poets challenge dominant culture in slam. Poets from 2008-2010 and 2012-2014 effectively demonstrated the transformative possibilities of storytelling as an important method for oppressed individuals to speak counter-narratives to dominant culture. The use of storytelling allowed poets to engage, connect and dialogue with the audience. This was done by addressing the audience through the gaze, poses and behaviours, as well as directly addressing them through pronouns. The crowd's responses could be heard through snapping, clapping and cheering in the videos. Since performance is just as important as language in slam, a multimodal approach to CDA was crucial to examine how language, actions, sound and other methods of communication come together to make meaning. This method allowed for an exploration of how poets create certain discourses and identities through language and performance, which demonstrates how various social practices and discourses can be legitimized in slam. This legitimacy is most visible with the similar performances styles and themes explored in the politically- and emotionally-charged poems by the poets from 2008-2010.

The 2014 Capital Slam season continues to exhibit the trend of less racialized poets and more female performers, showing a correlation between visibility and representation. The popularity and presence of male poets of colour from 2008-2010 increased the representation of racialized poets on the slam stage. According to Keteku and Priske, the increase of poets of colour performing also grew the diversity of the scene with more racialized audience members (I. Keteku, personal communication, October 21, 2013; R. Priske, personal communication, November 1, 2013). The Capital Slam scene has shifted in racial dynamics from 2009 in which male poets of colour made up nine out of the 10 poets on the 2009 and 2010 teams. This trend contrasts with the 2013 and 2014 teams comprised of five White poets. Out of the 16 competitors in the 2014 semi-finals, 13 of those poets are White and there was only one poet of colour in the finals. There seems to be an opposite shift occurring at Capital Slam in which more White poets are performing and succeeding, which has changed the audience dynamics as well (I. Keteku, personal communication, October 21, 2013; R. Priske, personal communication, November 1, 2013). This contrast has set up interesting dynamics with Urban Legends, the other slam series in Ottawa.⁸ What is the impact of having less racialized poets represented and performing at Capital Slam? What voices and discourses are absent onstage and in the audience?

For the first time in Capital Slam's history, more than half of the 2014 team and finalists are female poets. This is in contrast with the 2009 team and finalists of all-male poets. Despite the trend and growth of female performers, male poets predominately make

⁸ "I think it is the youth movement. For whatever reason, lots of the youth have been white females. They are now 'graduating' to CapSlam and changing our demographics. We are also starting to really see the CapSlam/UL shift that I was worried about when they first started as they become the 'black' slam to our 'white' slam. It happened in Toronto with TPS and Up From The Roots. It is not a strict split, but you can just see it." (R. Priske, personal communication, March 16, 2014).

up Capital Slam teams and have the strongest voice; no female poet has ever won the slam series. The three male finalists were in Capital Slam's top 10 during the regular season; there was only one female poet in the top 10 who made it to the finals. Two of the male poets who made the 2014 team were the only finalists to have been on a previous Capital Slam team. Furthermore, there is a high turnover of female poets and for the most part, women have not been part of the organizing and structure of Ottawa's spoken word scene.⁹ Previous female organizers have gone out of their way to seek out new female poets (including myself), and I have done the same to nurture, grow and provide a space for women within the city. How does the increase of female organizers impact the representation of women onstage? Does more female mentorship give newer and younger female poets reason to invest and give back to the community? Does visibility matter if women do not feel as if they have a stake at the table? There are these and many questions to explore as Capital Slam moves forward in creating spaces for a variety of identities, discourses and performance styles.

⁹ Some key female and genderqueer organizers include: Elissa Molino (co-founder of Capital Poetry Collective and Capital Slam, 2004), Danielle Grégoire (director of Capital Poetry Collective, 2006-2008; co-founder of Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam, 2011), Allison Armstrong and Lukayo "Festrell" Estrella (organizers of Voices of Venus, 2009-2013), Jenna Tenn-Yuk (founder of Words to Live By, 2012-present).

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Appendix A: Capital Slam Standings 2008-2009

	SEMIS-RD 1	SEMIS-RD 2	FINALS- RD 1	FINALS- RD 2	FINALS- RD 3
A Seed					
Akpata, John					
Appleseed, Jonathan					
Balsam, Adam					
Beahan, Shannon					
Breezy					
Charles, Martine					
Charlie					
Deschenes, Gilles					
Eastwood					
Faith					
FDF					
Ferguson, Alan					
Festrell					
Folger, Mosha					
Free Will					
Hamdad, Mehdi					
Heavens, Horace					
Jameel, Marcus					
Joe the Rat					
Kamayah, Aurelie					
Keteku, Ian	29.6	29.8	28.4	29.7	29.9
Kwissa, Emily					
Lankton, Ron					
Laurence, Stephane					
Loco					
O'Farrell, Graeme (Loh El)	26.8	27.5			
MacDonald-Zytveld, Cathy					
Mage					
Matthews, Kevin					
McKinley, Thomas					
McKinney, Josie	27.2	28.1			
Monro, Andrew					
Morden, Brad	28.1	28.6	28.2	28.0	
O'Gorman, Sean					
Open Secret	28.4	29.3	28.9	29.3	29.7
O'Reilly, Jill					
Peake, Matt					
Perez, David					
Poetic Speed	28.1	29.0	29.0	29.5	29.7
Priske, Rusty	27.1	29.2	29.6	29.6	
Product					
Prufrock	28.5	28.5	27.5	25.5	
Ray	26.3	28.1			
Ritallin	26.9	29.7	27.6	29.6	
Ruano, Jessica					
S-Dizzy					

Sense-Say	27.3	28.0			
Smurfette					
Tse, Chris					
Vierula, Henrik					
Wint, Brandon	28.0	28.3	29.9	29.5	29.2
Yanis					
Zytveld, Steve					

Appendix B: Capital Slam Standings 2011-2012

	NAME	TOTAL SCORE	Placement Rank	Score Rank	Final Score
1	Loh El	88.6	1	1	2
2	Switch	87.8	2	3	5
3	Rusty Priske	87.1	3	4	7
4	Just Jamaal	88.5	6	2	8
5	ArRay-of-WoRds	85.9	4	7	11
6	PrufRock	86.5	6	6	12
7T	V	86.8	9	5	14
7T	Mia Morgan	84.8	4	10	14
9	Sean O'Gorman	85.8	8	8	16
10	Colleen Leafloor	85.8	9	8	17
11	Brad Morden	84.7	9	11	20
12	Bruce Narbaitz	83.4	12	12	24
13	Kimbit	83.2	12	14	26
14	CauseMo	83.3	14	13	27
15	Blue	80.7	15	15	30
16	Jeanette Elizabeth	78.0	16	16	32
17	Robin LeWilliam-North	76.9	17	17	34
18	Mirth	76.6	18	18	36
19	OpenSecret	59.2	19	19	38
20T	Sir Realist	59.2	21	19	40
20T	Ronsense	58.4	19	21	40
22	Hyfidelik	57.2	22	22	44
23	Sepideh	56.5	23	23	46
24	Gavin Russell	56.0	24	24	48
25T	Jessica Ruano	54.4	26	25	51
25T	Jean-Marc Nsengiyumva	53.7	25	26	51
27	Vince Kang	53.3	27	28	55
28T	Rastabula	53.2	29	29	58
28T	D-Zaster	52.5	27	31	58
30T	Vanessa Baker	53.5	32	27	59
30T	Candice Bruchhaeuser	52.9	29	30	59
32	N is for Nubian	52.2	29	33	62
33	Elliott Brierley	52.2	32	33	65
34	Stargazer	52.5	35	31	66
35	Dini	51.4	34	35	69
36	Loose Change	50.8	36	36	72
37	DJ Aunt Heather	50.4	37	37	74
38	Synonymous	29.7	38	38	76
39	Ibn Najeeb	29.5	38	39	77
40	Khadija	29.5	41	39	80
41	Jenna Tenn-Yuk	29.0	40	41	81
42	Chris Tse	28.9	42	42	84
43T	Raffaella	27.9	42	43	85
43T	Johhny Macrae	27.9	42	43	85
45	Festrell	27.5	45	45	90
46	Sarah Musa	27.3	45	47	92
47	John Sobol	27.2	45	48	93

48	Zorah Bryant	26.8	45	51	96
49	Michelle Wardman	27.0	50	49	99
50	A.J. Comeau	26.9	50	50	100
51	Gabriel Tran	26.3	45	56	101
52	Craig Kamba	27.4	58	46	104
53T	Emily Barrie	26.7	54	52	106
53T	Madii	26.7	54	52	106
53T	Rolling Zen	26.7	54	52	106
56	Oliver Croteau	26.1	50	58	108
57	DMP	26.6	54	55	109
58	Joseph Hadish	25.8	50	63	113
59T	Adrian Southin	26.0	58	59	117
59T	Tammy Mackenzie	26.0	58	59	117
61T	Vessel	25.9	58	61	119
61T	Allister Morrison	25.9	58	61	119
63	Asha Kayd	26.2	64	57	121
64	Keisar	25.7	58	64	122
65	Matthew Mackenzie	25.5	64	66	130
66	D-Lightfull	25.7	67	64	131
67	Kassandra	25.0	64	68	132
68	Jullianne Morin	25.2	67	67	134
69T	Helena Devins	25.0	70	68	138
69T	Kaz	24.3	67	71	138
71	Jens Walker	24.7	70	70	140
72	Arly Marv	24.1	70	72	142

Appendix C: Capital Slam Standings 2012-2013

	NAME	Placement Score	TOTAL SCORE	Placement Rank	Score Rank	Final Score
1	Gavin Russell	3	87.4	1	1	2
2T	D-Lightfull	5	86.7	3	3	6
2T	Candice Bruchhaeuser	6	86.9	4	2	6
4T	PrufRock	4	86.1	2	7	9
4T	Bruce Narbaitz	7	86.7	6	3	9
6	DMP	6	85.8	4	9	13
7	Loh El	9	86.2	9	6	15
8	Sean O'Gorman	8	85.8	7	9	16
9	ArRay-of-WoRds	8	85.3	7	11	18
10	Kay'la Fraser	10	85.9	11	8	19
11	Shaun Sullivan	9	85.0	9	13	22
12	Sense-Say	10	85.2	11	12	23
13	V	15	86.6	20	5	25
14	Ali Islam	10	84.3	11	16	27
15	Rusty Priske	11	84.5	14	15	29
16	Brad Morden	12	84.6	16	14	30
17	Missaralee	11	84.0	14	18	32
18T	Vince Kang	12	83.8	16	20	36
18T	Mia Morgan	14	84.2	19	17	36
20	Kimbit	13	83.9	18	19	37
21	Dovi	30	77.5	21	21	42
22	Tyrin Kelly	32	75.0	22	22	44
23	Rock Howell	34	68.5	23	23	46
24	Just Jamaal	108	57.8	24	24	48
25T	CauseMo	109	55.2	25	26	51
25T	Sir Realist	110	55.7	26	25	51
27	Hyfidelik	110	54.8	26	27	53
28	Roots & Rhythm	113	54.2	28	28	56
29	Vessel	113	54.1	28	29	57
30	Chris Prokofiew	113	53.6	28	30	58
31	Sarah Ruzala	116	53.2	31	31	62
32	Billie the Kid	116	53.1	31	32	63
33	Kashkin	117	52.0	33	33	66
34	D-Zaster	121	50.6	35	34	69
35T	Shahdin	120	46.6	34	37	71
35T	Jesse Huffman	122	48.1	36	35	71
37	Loose Change	122	47.2	36	36	72
38	OpenSecret	199	29.7	38	38	76
39	Cathy Petch	201	28.1	39	40	79
40	Zorah	202	28.4	41	39	80
41	Emilie Jaquez	201	27.8	39	43	82
42	Erica Howes	202	27.9	41	42	83
43	Julie Vallon	203	28.1	44	40	84
44	Anto	202	27.5	41	45	86
45	I.D.	203	27.4	44	46	90
46	Dan Carroll	203	27.1	44	48	92
47	Kym Dominique-Ferguson	204	27.4	47	46	93

48T	Blue	204	27.1	47	48	95
48T	Rhianna	204	27.1	47	48	95
48T	Pero	205	27.6	51	44	95
51	Mage	204	26.9	47	52	99
52	Joesph Sic	205	27.0	51	51	102
53	Brandon Wint	205	26.8	51	53	104
54	Cannon2x	207	26.8	55	53	108
55	Nadia Pohran	206	26.4	54	55	109
56T	Sam Downs	207	26.1	55	58	113
56T	Ivan Rose	208	26.4	58	55	113
58T	MD	207	25.3	55	62	117
58T	Ali Alikhani	209	26.4	62	55	117
60	Ian Walters	208	25.6	58	60	118
61T	Joey Stafford-Abbot	208	25.1	58	63	121
61T	Josianne Anthony	209	25.8	62	59	121
63	James Payette	208	24.6	58	64	122
64	Alex McDonnell	209	25.5	62	61	123
65	Robin LeWilliam-North	209	23.4	62	66	128
66	Adam Pike	209	22.5	62	68	130
67	Tiolu	209	21.9	62	69	131
68	Panos the Chemist	210	23.8	68	65	133
69	Omar Saghir	210	22.9	68	67	135
70	Dan Marciano	210	19.7	68	70	138

Appendix D: Capital Slam Standings 2013-2014

	NAME	Placement Score	TOTAL SCORE	Placement Rank	Score Rank	Final Score
1	PrufRock	3	88.0	1	1	2
2	Rusty Priske	3	86.8	1	3	4
3	Kay Kassirer	5	87.4	3	2	5
4	Kay'la Fraser	5	85.9	3	4	7
5	Sarah Ruzsala	8	85.9	6	4	10
6	Gavin Russell	7	85.6	5	6	11
7	Billie the Kid	9	85.1	7	7	14
8	Brad Morden	11	85.0	9	8	17
9	P-Rime	10	83.2	8	11	19
10	D-Zaster	16	85.0	12	8	20
11	Candice Bruchhaeuser	17	84.7	15	10	25
12	Erica Howes	14	81.4	11	15	26
13	Marz	17	82.0	15	13	28
14	Shaun Sullivan	12	80.8	10	18	28
15T	Lana K	21	82.0	19	13	32
15T	Artemysia	19	81.4	17	15	32
17T	Covered in Wednesday	16	79.2	12	21	33
17T	Brainstorm	16	79.2	12	21	33
19	Ceilidhe	19	81.3	17	17	34
20T	Joesph Sic	28	83.0	26	12	38
20T	Playto	21	80.1	19	19	38
22	Mia Morgan	25	80.0	22	20	42
23	Avonlea	24	77.8	21	23	44
24	Obnoxious	26	76.3	23	25	48
25	Nicolai Gregory	27	77.1	25	24	49
26	ArRay-of-WoRds	26	74.1	23	26	49
27	Loose Change	33	70.7	27	27	54
28	Ali Bumaye	105	57.4	28	29	57
29	Bruce Narbaitz	105	56.7	28	31	59
30T	Sir Realist	108	57.7	32	28	60
30T	DMP	107	57.1	30	30	60
32	Alex McDonnell	107	55.2	30	32	62
33	Nina Strange	116	50.2	33	33	66
34T	Kimbit	200	29.6	35	34	69
34T	Dan AKA Dan Murray AKA Dan	199	29.1	34	35	69
36	Philosofly	201	29.1	36	35	71
37	V	201	28.7	36	37	73
38T	Made Wade	202	28.5	39	38	77
38T	Just Jamaal	201	28.1	36	41	77
40	Alexander Way	202	28.2	39	39	78
41	Scribe	202	27.7	39	43	82
42T	Chuck	203	28.2	44	39	83
42T	Basaam	202	27.6	39	44	83

44	Missaralee	202	27.1	39	48	87
45	Emily Renaud	203	27.3	44	47	91
46	Benoit Christie	206	28.0	50	42	92
47	Blank Marlo	206	27.5	50	46	96
48	Paco	207	27.6	53	44	97
49T	Paapa Abekah	205	26.7	48	51	99
49T	Kevin Matthews	204	26.1	46	53	99
51	Ivan Rose	204	25.5	46	54	100
52	MC the Poet	207	27.1	53	48	101
53	Amal El-Mohtar	205	25.5	48	54	102
54	Rock Howell	208	27.1	57	48	105
55	Zachary McNeil	206	25.0	50	57	107
56	Elliott Bryerly	207	25.4	53	56	109
57	Rafay	207	24.5	53	60	113
58	Blaze	210	26.7	63	51	114
59T	Tailored Words	208	24.6	57	58	115
59T	Michelle Duquette	208	24.6	57	58	115
61	Tom Marcantonio	208	22.9	57	63	120
62	Dovi	208	22.8	57	64	121
63	Tyrin Kelly	209	24.4	62	61	123
64	Mayhem	210	23.5	63	62	125
65	Jennifer E-M	210	20.1	63	65	128
66	Dan Marciano	210	14.9	63	66	129

Appendix E: “Railroad” by Chris Tse

*I've been working on the railroad, all the live-long day
I've been working on the railroad, just to pass the time away,
Don't you hear the whistle blowing,
Rise up so early in the morn,
Don't you hear the captain shouting,
“Dinah, blow your horn!”*

They say this country was built on the back of an iron skeleton
But in truth this country was built on the skeletons of my countrymen
Those skeletons who built that skeleton to forge this country then,
Our nation's creators are now seen as country's sin.
/But of course that's the way this country has always been,
The oppressed get exploited and oppressors always win,
I guess it don't matter what I read in the Constitution,
Because that paper was written by the hands of white, pale skin.
/Whose delicate fingers were more suited for directing,
So they brought over my people to do all the constructing,
100 years later, I can still feel that biting sting,
Of the whips on my back and fists on my frail chin.
/It's ironic this country is known for its freedom ring,
When that freedom is only for those who are worth something,
And the leftovers fall to the side and are called nothing,
Working hard just to see all the others live like kings.
And so I sing...

*I've been working on the railroad, all the live-long day
I've been working on the railroad, just to pass the time away,*

It was gold that brought them over
Though they clearly couldn't read
Because see
It was *fool's* gold that brought them over
And in reality there was no gold or fool's gold but they were fools for believing there was
gold and the gold made fools out of them so hence, fool's gold.
They were put to work in the mountains where the gold was,
Only to discover that the only place in the mountains that the gold was,
Was in the pockets of the politicians who held them captive.
It's not like they didn't have a choice: work, or be shot and left to rot in a country that was as
foreign to them as they were to the country.

If only it had been so easy,
Just like style and ease combine to make steezy,
But these immigrants were anything but steezy,
Just thin, stupid chinamen, broken and wheezy
And the country was built from their frostbitten hands,

A country to rival all other such lands,
And to this day that steel monument stands,
As a train, and a tribute to frostbitten hands.

And what became of these workers, my unknown ancestors?
Well, some lie tucked away in rockfall deposits
Their skeletons the skeletons in democracy's closet
While the rest were sent down to the coast
Where signs reading "No Chinese or dogs allowed"
Were fairly self-explanatory.

So who the fuck is Dinah and why is she blowing her horn?
There is nothing to celebrate about the way this country was born.
From the minds of crooked politicians spawned a giant steel snake
That I'm sure still eats this country's Chinese alive.

Do you know what CP railway stands for?
Chinese-prohibited

And I just made that up
But it's a testament to how a people could overcome circumstance
And forge their own identity in a country that desperately wanted them to have none
And yet, we have one
CP
Chinese pride?
No no.
The thought makes me twisted inside, because to be proud of that history
Would be like spitting on my ancestry.
But instead I'll do the math
And in this circumstance
I have found a far better internal equation
CP? No, CC
I am Chinese-Canadian.

Appendix F: “Pick Me” by Ian Keteku

I have a sixth sense
But I do not see dead people
I hear deaf people
Depressed, dejected and oppressed people.
People without a breath people.
They’re all saying pick me, pick me, pick me, pick me.

I could have been a doctor a lawyer or a shoe salesman, no!
I chose to be a poet/journalist – acting as a voice for the voiceless
A mouth for the mouthless
A lung for the breathless
The soul for the soulless
Pick me

And so this sick sixth sense – touches all of my senses.
I sense the scent through my nose of a homeless man who knows the thin line between
genius and madness – his pungent incense scent of innocence says – pick me!

When I touch the belly of battered baby – I get tense when her muscles tense, her intense
tense tendons say pick me

My pupils see through peep holes the pupils of people who make no sense, who don’t make
no cents – its nonsense to think that common sense is common to common people so come
on people – this sense is immense.

They’re all saying pick me.

And I taste, I taste the succulent sustenance of suspense. I spit out tenses and ten sentences
for the man on death row with ten sentences – he is saying pick me.

I have failed! Because I see them, I hear them all. The kid from Darfur, the black female, the
thug, the poor, the fallen. Those in the middle of crisis wondering where Christ is. The
monks in Thailand fed up saying Phuket. The victim g’s – us – They have their hands up
saying pick me.

Their bodies are dead, their hope has perished but their need for their soul and their song and
their spirit to live on. This is my chance and I pick and I pick and I pick.

But I pick wrong: I write a poem about my laptop – a poem about my ex-girlfriend – a poem
about my name and a fucking dragon slayer.

I have murdered their soul. I have destroyed their tongue. I guess I should have been a shoe
salesmen after all.

Poets – god has given us a gift. Nothing has come into existence without it being spoken first. But yet we write poems for judges with scoreboards who mark our souls out of 10. John Akpata would say that we remember the comedy but forget the content. But if you pick right, if you pick right, a ten, a five, a one can mean that those people without a voice are given one for at least a few moments.

But if we pick wrong – you and I, you and I will all be haunted by that eerie, ever pervading sound of the souls of the deaf saying

Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!

Appendix G: “If the Shoe Fits” by Komi “Poetic Speed” Olafimihan

I can't even begin to carve the words I feel Upon these pages
You see
I'm Not a bandwagon jumping on wagon wagging tail poet
tryina milk props and poetry points off of political pornography
But there is only so much that a brother can take
As i continue to watch the media depict the Somali pirates
as some kind of
second Class
second rate
world citizen
sitting across the judge in an American courtroom
is a 17year old should have been school scholar subconsciously scratching his scalp
Steadily trying to figure out how they're gonna sentence him to life
When the FISH that gives him LIFE
is swimming in the belly of this BEAST thats about to sentence him to LIFE
and then I understand
why
In Iraq....

As his...
Left shoe
left his
left five finger tips
of his left hand
It left blood stains on his palm

They said it was a harmless harmless size ten
But it was metaphorical representation
of U.S transgressions
Against Arab kids armless
Begging for alms

Now as Beverly hill Billy kids turn sweet sixteen
and order Gucci and Versace from strip malls
we pump our gas tanks with premium gas while
gas tanks bomb the Gaza strip
destroying more

There's no more palm trees or coconuts
or peaceful poets sing psalms
just tears from years of aggression just
compounded and layered in layers of anger all
catapulted in that shoe

that brown leather brown flying size ten shoe
whisking through the air
faster than Massa painting his face black in a minstrel show
do you hear?

As his...

Left shoe

left his

left five finger tips

of his left hand

It left blood stains on his palm

There were no Pom Pom cheer leaders
cheering the brother on
Just body guards on his arm
He wasn't a... suicidal shoe bomber terrorist
Terrorizing press conferences

He wasn't a ...suicidal shoe bomber
Lacing his shoe laces with laces of bomb explosives
He was an...unprecedented critically acclaimed
Political journalist using journalism as a tool

Microphones, cameras and tripods
All trapped in the screen of my iPod as I seat in zayphds
And watch him throw that shoe with such a curve...
It was like Angelina Jolie in wanted

But I'm getting distracted like Bush did after he sent
Taxpayers' kids to die while looking for weapons of mass destruction
Like sticks and stones may break your bones
And words may not hurt you

But nothing insults and cuts the virtue of a man deeper than
A flying size ten shoe

So take THAT...

For the tears for the mother who bears the burden of burying her only child

TAKE THAT...

For the torture of innocent Muslims and religious prejudice that was never filed

TAKE THAT...

For the bodies returning in bundles wrapped up in the Somali flag

TAKE THAT...

For the bodies returning in bundles wrapped up in the Canadian flag

That's why

As his...

Left shoe

left his

left five finger tips

of his left hand

It left blood stains on his palm

Appendix H: “QPOCalypse” by Lukayo “Festrell” Estrella

Brothers and sisters,
bredrin and sistren,
gender-neutral comrades
and fluid-freewheeling friends

The time has come

To Repent!

I hear the sounds of their hooves and the cries of their great jaws
Not horsemen, nor horse nor man
But unicorns striped like zebras that charge through savannahs
Water buffalos still smelling of rice paddies
Coconut-cracking, banana-plucking monkeys
Golden llamas with haughty eyes
Bengal tigers and proud, plump beavers
An orgy of dolphins--

YES! These are the heralds of the end

Not the end of days
But the end of the daze
The stupor of ignorance and alienation
The end of being judged
By stereotypes and crudely fashioned representations
Founded from an edifice of fear-encrusted western mythos
And the beginning of true understanding
From a people's own stories, legends, writings and songs

This is not the end of days
But the end of the gaze
The end of rampant paranoia and distrust of
The public visual appearance and
The private sexual experience
And the beginning of a look that finds
Boys kissing in parks and
Brown kids travelling in packs
It's commonplace and shrug-inducing as
Sunshine and advertising

This is not the end of days
But the end of a phase
The end of devouring resources as if only one group of people mattered
The end of a reign of toy-grabbing, oil-stealing, food-squabbling children dressed as nations
and empires

And the beginning of a world where wisdom is true power, where there are still things left to believe in, and violence makes you look weak and stupid

Yes, the time has come to repent!
Throw down your ignorance and your prejudices!
Give up your wilful ignorance and ineffective guilt!
Embrace the end of the daze, the gaze, and that phase,
Because the QPOCALYPSE is here!

That's right!
We Queer People of Color, the QPOC, are here, and it's only just begun!

We are here to introduce you to new and exciting foods
Frogs legs and chicken fetus eggs
Fried bananas, goat roti
Freshly scented jasmine rice and
Curry hot enough to rip the hair from your pubic mound

We are here to open your mental horizons
Show you a world where everything, from your computer to IPOD to rocks and seeds
Has a spirit or an essence or a truth
Where you light incense to your dead to watch over you
The land speaks to you
History is passed down from heart and mouth
And a jolly fat man does not bring presents
But instead brings nirvana

We are here to widen your fashion sense
Show you the shimmering folds of saris
And the practicality of dread locks
Proud of our piercings with bones and stones
And love the flow of a good kimono
Make your jeans and t-shirts look
Drab to our burkas
And dwarf your baseball caps with
Turbans that block out the sun

We are here to share the air with you
We are here to contribute and teach
We are here to be fabulous, funny, and fundamentally equal
And we are here to seduce your sons and daughters... AT THE SAME TIME!

So repent! Repent and sing and dance and eat and fuck! Fuck like an orgy of dolphins!

The QPOCALPYSE is here!

And together, let's give birth to the new world.

Appendix I: “A Black Girl, Nighttime and A Pickup Truck” by Magdala “Light” Joseph

A black girl, nighttime and a pickup truck
Rape
They used to do black girls, at nighttime in their pickup trucks
Way back when Black meant being subject to the animosity of hatred
And I was never raped in a pickup truck but my nightmares follow me into the nighttime

I used to be fearless
Until the world showed its true colors

Lack of experience can create ignorance
Bliss
So I used to believe
That wrong intentions should not be perceived as dangerous

Until they materialized into evil actions and I realized
Negligence and protection do offset each other
People are wreckless, they'll hurt you regardless
So maybe they instill the fear in me but experience is bound to create changes
They tried to convince me that racism was over
They told me to move on, and stereotyping is wrong
But then, they called me a nigger
A fucking monkey, a pig
They even called me a thief
Because of employment equity initiatives they created to protect me against people who used to steal from me
Take away my opportunities based on the skin I'm in
I tried to forget
Forgave but I remember
I remember the look on their face when they realized I was colored
And how could this be! That black girls held good jobs?
From Secretary of State to Governor General
They still thought they'd find me at the strip club

So I try to stay vigilant
You can never be too careful
I watch my back...
Tell me that I'm the racist one
Call it whatever you want
But ain't nobody got time for that
Ain't nobody got time for the aftermath of a shattered soul that is torn just because she preferred believing in the goodness of mankind rather than being diligent
How would I forgive myself?
So I say forget that

I'd rather watch my back
And fear, just like love, can make you do some crazy things
But call me crazy, if it'll keep me away from being broken
They try to sell me this twisted vision they call reality
We are not united
Oh Canada! To the United States of America
A brother rapes his own brother
A mother kills her own daughter
And psychopaths walk by schools and destroy the lives of families who were never the
reason why they were torn in the first place
So please don't blame me for being too careful
I still believe in goodness
I just take it with a grain of salt
And as for racism, the truth speaks for itself
When every other day, a new swastika sign shows up on yet another wall
And every other day, I hear of yet another war
And warrants after warrants based on racial profiling

Oh how innocent
I couldn't understand why my parents worried so much about me
Until I started worrying about myself
The more we see from this world
The more we understand
People who call themselves friends while simply setting traps and wiretaps to find out when
is the best next moment to take you down
Evil is all around
I've seen too much by now
My innocence is gone now
No more childhood left in me

We live too little, yet too much as black girls
And my nightmares, they follow me into the nighttime
So when I pass by the pickup truck
I remembered how they raped me, stripped me naked, used and abused me, lied to me, made
me think it was my fault
Because I was a black girl, nighttime, and a pickup truck

Appendix J: “Life Before Pretty Underwear” by Kay Kassirer

Do you remember the good old days
Back when underwear came in a six pack from walmart
And covered your whole butt and had an ugly floral-ish pattern on it
But that didn't matter because the only people that saw them were your parents who had
bought them, or your sister, who wears the exact same ones
And if by the off chance some kid happened to catch a glance while playing on the
playground
They would be too busy shouting
I SEE LONDON I SEE FRANCE
I SEE ABBYS UNDERPANTS
To care about the way they looked
To look a little longer than I would be comfortable with
But nowadays it seems everyone tries to sneak a peek
I need to wear shorts under my skirt and a tank top under my shirt
Whatever happened to the days of running around naked in the sprinkler
Well everything changed when I grew these mounds of fat called breasts
And suddenly I was seen as an object for sex
My childhood was over at the ripe young age of twelve
I was thirteen when I first got catcalled
I was walking down the street and a guy drove by and yelled out his window at me
“NICE ASS”
I felt proud, I was taught that that meant I was hot
But by the time I was fourteen I was getting a little tired of constantly getting screamed at
But they'd just laugh when I yelled back at them to fuck off
I was told that I needed to learn to accept compliments
Because these men were just trying to erm “inform” me
Of how attractive I am
Excuse me if I don't think strangers yelling crude obscenities at me is a compliment
When I was fifteen I started getting called a slut
So I started to wear baggy clothes so that my figure wouldn't show
Because people were making assumptions about me because I was showing off my body
Excuse me for trying to gain back the self esteem that you ruthlessly tore away from me
Recently I realized, I should not have to hide my body
Wearing skimpy clothing is not an invitation to be yelled at by strangers or picked on by
friends
I want to end this harassment that is the norm in our community
This slut shaming fad that folks follow mindlessly
This insane double standard society has set upon women
This misogynistic bullshit that we've been forced to put up with
Do you remember the good old days
Back when underwear came in a six pack from walmart
And covered your whole butt and had an ugly floral-ish pattern on it but that didn't matter
The good old days back when I was only afraid of the monsters under my bed
And I regret not holding on to them

I was in such a rush to grow up now all I want is to be a kid again
That childhood innocence
That wisdom that only comes before the years of brainwashing
The good old days
Before I had to decide what pair of underwear I want to wear
Depending on where I'm going and who I'm seeing and it's such a stupid little thing
But I really truly miss life before pretty underwear

Appendix K: “Top Ten Ways to Get Over Your Ex” by Vanessa “V” Rotondo

These are the top ten ways to getting over your ex.

10 – Get fucked up.

Go on a bender:

Cry and drink your face off: these things go together.

It’s just that crying at the bar is a one time deal only.

Anything after that makes you a bitch...

When you get home,

Find that bottle of gin you stashed underneath the sink –

And drink!

and let the tears flood your eyes like torrential downpour dawg;

perpetual precipitation –

As if God himself reached out from the Book of Genesis and bitched slapped you in the mouth for eating the forbidden fruit after he specifically told you not to.

Cry yourself the biggest fucking river ever...

Then picture your ex drowning in it.

9 – Stop idealizing him.

Stop admiring, glorifying or romanticizing him

He wasn’t that good in bed anyway.

He never paid rent;

Consistently put a dent in your bank account; and

His idea of romance consisted of cuddling on the couch

Cutting cocaine drips with a carton of cigarettes:

Trust me, your ex was a twisted mess you should have never have dealt with.

8 – Forget that you’ll ever be friends: you won’t.

Fuck nostalgia;

Fuck being civil;

Shrivel that dead beat backstabbing bitch into a baseball of bad experience

And homerun it into orbit.

People who fuck you are not your friends.

If you want a friend that’ll fuck you, then go get yourself a fuck-friend.

7 – Delete him.

Treat him as if he died;

Refer to him, only if you must, in the third person, past participle.

Don’t call him, text him, e-mail or bbm him.

Ditch your old crew and familiar venues,

Bid that shit adieu and replace them with better things;

Oh, and start buying meat again: my friend, you are not a vegetarian!

6 – Accept that you’ll never get your shit back.

5 – Know the difference between love and sex.
And learn to assess them appropriately.
If they were the head and tail of a coin,
forget love and call sex:
Because both head and tail will work for you.

4 – Get ripped. Get fuck-able.
Combine alcohol and exercise if you must.
drunken planks work wonders.
Do them off you car, off the table;
off the toilet while you're puking into it.
No one said anything about class.
And sometimes being trashy is just socially acceptable.

3 – Get tested.
Nothing says "I cheated on you" like a case of the clap.
Zap it away with a single dose of azithromycin –
Embrace the shame that comes with it;
And let the games begin.

2 – Wish you were a baller?
Stop wishing!
Be a Baller. Be a slut.
Call up past hookups, and be like –
"Hey baby, wanna ...
Also, launch something I like to call the Special Ops Navy Seal Fuck.
Strategically fuck your exes friends.
Then sit back
And suck deep on the sweet taste of revenge
And leave the odds and ends for them to tie. Why?

Cause you're number 1 man – Stop giving a fuck.
Because you can.
Do what you wanna do.
Be who you wanna be.
Be the change you wanna see in: your world.
But be open and honest: like this, yo:
I may be single and broke;
But at least I provoke thought in this world.
At least I awoke enlightened today;
One less number in my phone;
One less STD;
With the epiphany of "it's his loss, not mine".
A blessing in disguise that has now become the most liberating feeling in the
entire universe.
I AM FREE.

I AM FUCKABLE.
HOMEY, I FUCKED YOUR FRIENDS!
Can I get an amen?

Appendix L: “Still Here” by Kim “King Kimbit” Nguyen

Not all that glitters is gold
I know
But whenever I dream of Viet Nam,
I see the sea that surrounds it and the glistening on its surface
From what appears to be
Rays of lights' reflection
And here, my logic plays deceptive because the glittering golden beams I see
Is really GOLD that's being reflected.

Whatever treasures lay at the bottom, I may never get to discover...
But the gold I see glisten
Is that of the blood and bones of my sisters and brothers;
Those who were not so much blessed with the same fortunes met by my mother and father
Whom had gotten up and left in the same haphazard manner
Fleeing for freedom by leaving their motherland
In attempts to escape the aftermath
Of the war

Which, contrary to ignorant beliefs,
Was not us against the Americans.
Viet Nam was a civil war,
Or more like a military conflict
Between the South and the North.
Fearing the expansion of the northern communists,
America sent soldiers down south
To help us win
...but then the U.S. left and so Sai Gon fell to Ho Chi Minh
On the 30th of April
1975

UNITY wasn't quite the right word to describe the cusp of the divide between the
North and the South because our people were devoured by the hunger for this power

Leaving the country at that time was considered illegal,
But despite those consequences,
To stay there
Was lethal

So for countless nights upon nights, it was
Run to the boats before they see you.
Forget everything you were; you are now Vietnamese Boat People
Take along nothing with you except the amount of gold that you can hold in your anatomy
So you can sell it when you land
But don't fret or fear if you end up empty handed

Just appreciate getting past the oceans because that alone was
Not a fate that a lot of us had the privilege of holding.

The feeble little fishing boats we were armed with often faced hardships
Whether we were fighting off
Disease
Pirates
Or being blown to bits by harsh winds
Our headspaces hoodwinked by our hunger and exhaustion;
Though we know blood's thicker than water, there's not much difference when you're
starving...

And making it to land was still not yet victory;
Some places we landed would pack us back into our boats like sardines and
Force us back out to sea

So

Many times, we had to break our boats upon arrival
We could no longer afford to sink and had no energy left to swim...

With an escape plan so shady, we knew our chances of survival would be slim

Still, we had that
Get free or die trying mentality
So we had to get free
But only half of us succeeded
(Although no specific amount of countless casualties can be accounted for since no one
knows for sure how many had left)

But you can count on this:

Though we may have lost our land
And half our people,
Our flags will keep on
Being raised

Much like our children.
And it will be through them that our stories
And our spirits
Keep on living.

Appendix M: Slam Poetry Terms

Featured poet: A poet who is invited to perform a 15 to 30 minute set at a show.

Open mic: Non-competitive performance.

Slam poetry: A competition in which poets perform in front of a live audience, often addressing personal, political, spiritual and social issues. Poets have approximately three minutes to perform original work and five pre-selected audience members judge the performances based on a scale from zero to 10 (with the highest and lowest scores dropped). Poets are limited by time, space and a lack of props.

Slamming: Performing in a poetry slam.

Slammaster: Organizer of the poetry slam.

Adapted from:

Aptowicz, C. (2008). The vocabulary of the poetry slam. *Words in your face: A guided tour through twenty years of the New York City poetry slam* (p. 34). New York: Soft Skull Press.

Somers-Willett, S.B.A. (2009). *The cultural politics of slam poetry: Race, identity, and the performance of popular verse in America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Appendix N: Key Spoken Word Moments in Ottawa

2004: Creation of Capital Slam

2009: Capital Slam wins the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in Victoria
Creation of Urban Legends
Creation of Voices of Venus

2010: Capital Slam wins the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in Ottawa
Ian Keteku wins the World Poetry Slam in Paris

2011: Creation of Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam

2012: Creation of Women's Slam Championship
Vanessa "V" Rotondo becomes first female poet on Capital Slam team since 2007
Kim "King Kimbit" Nguyen wins Urban Legends
Creation of Words to Live By
Creation of Artistic Showcase

2013: Ottawa Youth Poetry Slam becomes Ottawa's first all-female team
Voices of Venus ends

2014: Three female poets make the Capital Slam team