

Border Disputes: Spoken Word and Its Humble Critics

Corey Frost

More than two decades after “spoken word” was first used in relation to certain kinds of poetry performance, the term remains notoriously hard to define. For some it is synonymous with performance poetry; for others it is a stylistic sub-genre best exemplified by slam poetry; for still others it is a hip-hop-inflected sub-sub-genre. It might loosely be described as a popular form of oral literature, performed in an animated or theatrical style, often with a rhetorical intent. Or, it might be described as Toronto poet Paul Vermeersch does in this snippet from a blog post that typifies a view of spoken word commonly held, though less commonly expressed:

Someone is spouting a string of tired clichés and bargain basement poeticisms into a microphone. But that’s okay; he’s “performing.” His speech isn’t just exaggerated, it’s over-exaggerated; the metre is a contrived hodgepodge of forced iambics and something that is trying desperately to resemble hip-hop, but isn’t. The idea, I suppose, is that the flailing, stylized vocals will be interesting enough on their own that no one will notice how bad the actual writing is.

It’s not unusual, of course, that a poet whose tastes run one way might express contempt for a form that runs a different way, has different standards, or emphasizes different aspects of the experience of poetry. But the rhetoric employed against spoken word is often inexplicably vehement, providing an unmistakable demonstration of how poetry communities, like other sorts of communities, define themselves in part by opposing what they’re not. Aggressive exclusion can be an efficient way of delineating and protecting identities, and the less clear the lines or the less fortified the borders, the more aggressive the exclusion must be. This essay draws attention to the rhetoric of a few specific skirmishes in the long-running border dispute between spoken word poets and their critics, and it examines the social and aesthetic assumptions behind the idea

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that “poetry” must be protected by attacking “spoken word.” This is a study of spoken word and community, but rather than describing the cultural parameters and practices of those who identify with spoken word, it focuses on the role of those who actively disavow it—the skeptics, critics, and antagonists. How does it change our understanding of spoken word, and of literary community more generally, if we think of the spoken word poetry community as including even those who insist that “spoken word poetry” does not exist? And what if we take what these critics say about spoken word as a serious contribution to the form’s ongoing evolution? If they say, for example, that spoken word exhibits an appalling lack of aesthetic standards, perhaps we should consider: is that a vindictive and unfounded attack, or have they unintentionally identified one of spoken word’s greatest innovations?



One might not think that the definitional instability of a somewhat marginal form like spoken word would raise much ire, but within certain poetry worlds the question of whether spoken word should be considered poetry seems to be a hot-button issue with surprising longevity. At the poles of this debate are two conflicting notions of how poetry should be defined, although there is room for a lot of nuance between these positions. At one end, poetry is almost a state of mind, with most formal or aesthetic criteria discarded in favor of social criteria. As Maria Damon and Ira Livingston have put it, poetry can thus be defined to include “*all that is claimed as poetry at any given time*” (*Poetry* 3). The other pole insists on much stricter criteria for what is and is not poetry, tied to formal characteristics such as line breaks and prosody but also to aesthetic evaluation: one needs expertise to write real poetry, and one needs even more expertise to recognize and validate it. Unsurprisingly, by these standards spoken word performers are often judged to be lacking, and spoken word is judged to have failed as poetry. The very idea of a “spoken word poet,” in this view, is a vulgar contradiction. The explanation usually given is that spoken word is “bad”: that it is all flash and no substance, that it is pandering or shallow or derivative, devoid of actual poetry. Here is a more recent example, from an opinion piece in *The Australian* that takes a stab at Melbourne performance poet Emily Zoe Baker:

Poets such as Baker who want to give us wham and slam need to face this reality. Their poetry depends on personality pyrotechnics, but as poetry it does not scan. Good poetry takes time to understand. It takes emotional and intellectual investment. The buy-in is something more enduring than a bright flare of words. (Bantick)

In many ways this is simply a reiteration of the recurring tension between popular and elitist aesthetics. But one of the most interesting aspects of spoken word is the degree of mockery, suspicion, and discomfort that it seems to

provoke. Despite spoken word's widespread grassroots popularity and its occasional modest pop-cultural cachet, in the mass-culture imagination the "spoken word artist," perhaps even more than the "poet," remains an object of scorn and derision, lumped together with bongo-playing beatniks and the unique performance style of William Shatner's recording career. Among literary scholars there has been, so far, a general neglect of spoken word which may range from simple ignorance to disinterest to active vilification. But among some critics and poets, spoken word is greeted with a snobbishness that borders on disdain.

No doubt the most infamous example of this attitude is Harold Bloom's comment in the *Paris Review* in 2000 that caused so much indignation in poetry slam circles. In answering a question about what makes a good poem, he rather flippantly remarks:

I can't bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter, which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art. ("The Man" 379)

It's ironic that in the paragraph immediately before this one he says that good poetry, for him, is defined as that which can be easily memorized. After all, who are the poets today who write poetry intended to be memorized, if not spoken word poets? A similar kerfuffle arose in Canada when then-Poet Laureate George Bowering was quoted in an article in *The Globe and Mail* saying that spoken word performance and slams were "abominations," and that "To treat poetry as performance is crude and extremely revolting" (Gill). Bowering may have been simply trying to stir up a debate, but in clarifying his comments he said that what he really has a problem with is not poets at microphones, but poets with an insufficiently humble mien, who use poetry for self-glorification. Even Amiri Baraka, who has an important place in the history of spoken word, is apparently no fan of spoken word artists: "I don't have much use for them because they make the poetry a carnival," he says. "They will do to the poetry movement what they did to rap: give it a quick shot in the butt, elevate it to commercial showiness, emphasizing the most backward elements" (qtd. in Gates 40). It would not be hard to go on with further examples, both high- and low-profile, of poets and critics denouncing spoken word for being irreverent, crass, unrefined, or crowd-pleasing (as if popularity itself were to be despised). The argument is long-standing, ubiquitous, and filled with vitriol; here, for example, are the unguarded feelings of one Connecticut poet, from a newspaper column on slams: "The work that gets read, recited or performed at these events tends to be trite, self indulgent, boring, narcissistic, embarrassing, obscene, boorish, coarse, uncultured, unintelligent, uncouth, or all of the above" (Maulucci).

What is the origin of this antipathy? Why is it that some people find the term “spoken word” or the practice itself so irksome? For literary critics there are some obvious reasons to exclude spoken word from the purview of the field: as something *spoken*, after all, it is not, technically speaking, *literature*. This is a terminological quibble, because few critics would deny that literature can be manifested in spoken language.¹ Still, the spoken presents certain disadvantages for critics compared to the written, or at least it does for critics of a formalist bent, especially those whose theoretical framework resembles that of New Criticism, with its emphasis on the text in isolation from its social context. Unlike print, an oral performance must be interpreted as an activity that is inextricably connected to the messy details of a given moment. One effect of that is to complicate the formation of canons: it becomes problematic to single out one poem or poet over another if there is no lasting record of the performance, no definitive version of the text, and no clear delineation, even, of where the poem ends and the music, gesture, and audience interaction begins; understanding a poem as an event undermines, to some extent, the romantic ideal of the individual talent. Harold Bloom couches his critique of spoken word in terms of aesthetics, but I don’t think it is purely a question of aesthetic standards, since the same complaints are generally not leveled at the vast number of poets who publish on the page but are equally amateurish. Perhaps his more deep-rooted reservation has to do with the fact that spoken word is as much a social and political event as it is a poetry event.



The suspicion that literary critics may feel toward spoken word is not unilateral, of course; it is matched by the suspicion that spoken word performers feel toward literary criticism, which I want to illustrate with a brief anecdote. In 2008 at the Banff Centre for the Arts I was a panelist in a public discussion with Bob Holman and Sheri-D Wilson about the academic study and theorization of spoken word, during which I felt I was inhabiting a somewhat bifurcated identity: a member, on the one hand, of the community of performance poets assembled in Banff, and on the other hand an outsider, a member of the dubious critical class. We were attempting to talk about how spoken word was being theorized, or would be theorized, by institutional and independent scholars, and what the ramifications would be, if any, for spoken word practitioners. The conversation was slow to begin, but quickly transformed from a three-way panel

¹ The field of study dealing with the relationship between oral and written literature — including seminal work by Albert Lord, Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong, for example — is tangential to my discussion, but the distaste or phobia of the oral that I’m interested in here no doubt has roots in the historical processes that produced our predominantly literate culture.

into a chaotic free-for-all involving all the participants in the room. Eventually our attention focused on a then-recently published edition of *Canadian Theatre Review* that had been guest edited by spoken word performer/scholar T. L. Cowan with Rick Knowles, entitled “Spoken Word Performance.” There was a general enthusiasm among the participants for the journal issue and what it represented: a serious effort by “academia” to understand spoken word and the initiation of a dialog between theorists from various corners of the academy, the arts, and the continent who may have been previously unacquainted—several of whom were at that moment in the room. It also quickly became clear that maintaining a distinction between artists and theorists was not only misleading and pointless, but also potentially inflammatory: artists theorize their work in their own way, whether they are part of academia or not.

As is often the case, though, those who are not a part of academia are wary of perceived attempts by academics to define or to colonize the field, while, as participant Catherine Kidd pointed out, academics have their own insecurities having to do with the “authenticity” of their knowledge of the field. Despite general approval of the idea that spoken word should be studied academically, a residual nervousness about “academia” was palpable in the conversation, as evidenced by recurring references to how “academics,” or more commonly “the academics,” have treated performance poetry. This story from Sheri-D Wilson was a salient example:

I had a meeting with some academics who had reviewed one of my books, and I just gathered them all together for a little educational session. I said, I’ll supply the coffee, the drinks, whatever is needed, but you come for your education. And they were, I think, intrigued. They couldn’t believe the gall. And I came with notes, and I explained to them how complex a spoken word poem might be. And how complex it is to read work that is written to orate. And they were stunned. They were like, “We had no idea.” They had never been taught to read this form.

I’m not sure whether Wilson was telling this story partly tongue-in-cheek, but the suggestion is that these unnamed poetry critics were completely oblivious to the category of oral poetry as recorded in print.² It’s true that critics often evaluate published spoken word texts by the same criteria as poetry not intended for performance, which is a bit like reviewing a play based on the script alone. But Wilson’s story obviously exaggerates the critics’ misapprehension, in a way that perpetuates an imagined antagonism between spoken word poets and

² Wilson’s remarks were more conciliatory than Allen Ginsberg’s in “Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*,” 1959: “A word on the Academies: poetry has been attacked by an ignorant and frightened bunch of bores who don’t understand how it’s made, and the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn’t know poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight” (*Deliberate* 232).

scholars and the distrust it generates. On the other hand, Wilson and Bob Holman were both very supportive of the idea that a spoken word performer could, in a sense, infiltrate academia and properly represent spoken word. Bob Holman gave this endorsement of my own efforts: “It’s the first time I’ve ever been in a room where there is that person, the theoretical person—the person who is writing theory, the theoretical person we’ve been talking about: ‘Where is he? When are we gonna get these people?’ Well, here he is, he’s doing it, so....” At that point the roomful of spoken word performers began to applaud good-naturedly. The final half-joking comment, though, was Holman shouting over the applause: “Don’t fuck us over!”

Theorists of spoken word, then, may feel particular pressures from the spoken word community, and my informal discussions with other spoken word theorist-practitioners have confirmed this. T. L. Cowan has said that she has become very aware, through the process of researching spoken word, that “taking a grassroots populist art form and bringing it into the academy is not necessarily a good thing.”³ When I have explained my research to spoken word artists, I have occasionally seen negative reactions, but most are interested, and some seem to feel grateful for the validation; it makes a big difference whether I present myself as a spoken word performer who decided to pursue a scholarly career, or as an academic who is dabbling in spoken word. The issue is, in part: who will benefit from the theorization (and institutionalization) of spoken word? Cowan says, “I’m not necessarily doing this for spoken word and giving it an academic legitimacy. What I am interested in is what we as academics do and what our responses to spoken word mean and seeing spoken word as a problem in the academy.” This parallels my own interests, though it is difficult to say whether her attitude and mine have been fostered by academia, or whether the two of us are academics because we have that attitude. In any case, academia and spoken word are not mutually exclusive cultures; on the contrary, despite certain resentments it seems there is a sort of mutual attraction, not to mention some intermingling. Furthermore, spoken word has proven for the most part resistant to attempts to codify it or define what it is, and I’m not sure I could confidently predict what benefits or detriments might result from its theorization, or in which direction.



Much more than critics and scholars, it is other poets who fulminate most strenuously against spoken word, especially when it is referred to as spoken word *poetry*. One argument is that the writing of spoken word performers does

³ These comments occurred in a 2005 interview conducted by Amy Fung with Cowan and me, before a performance in which we were both taking part.

not “work” on the page. This is a one-way litmus test: performers earn the honorific “poet” only if their work can stand alone on the page, whereas there is no obligation for “page poets” to prove themselves on the stage. This idea, that poetry is primarily a written form, meant to be read silently and privately, certainly reflects the current predominant scholarly view of poetry, but it depends on a definition that is extremely narrow in terms of genre and history. Poet David Groff, writing on the Academy of American Poets website Poets.org, critiques not just spoken word but the practice of reading poetry in public at all:

Attending a poetry reading has as much in common with reading a poem on the page as reading a screenplay has to do with seeing a movie. Only when we acknowledge that a poem performed is no substitute for a poem read in private will we truly advance the cause of the poetic word.

Groff’s analogy is particularly interesting, because at first glance he seems to have it backwards: isn’t a movie the performance of a screenplay, just as a reading is the performance of a written text? But that’s not quite accurate either, and it’s not quite what is wrong with this analogy. A screenplay, first of all, is made of language: it uses words to describe what will happen in the movie, which is made of image and sound. The movie may feature dialogue of course, but its substance can also be perceived directly, without the mediation of language at all. A printed poem and a spoken poem, on the other hand, are both made of language; both of them use systems of abstract symbols (letters or phonemes) to represent images and concepts. A misconception exists in arguments such as Groff’s, whereby a dichotomy is presumed between the poem, which is primary and immutable, and the performance, which is incidental and therefore essentially irrelevant. These two concepts should not be in opposition at all, because both the spoken piece and the written text can exist in any number of different performances or instantiations. Although the word “performance” is usually used to refer to poetry manifested in sound and time, and I mostly use it that way, it could apply equally well to poetry manifested in type and space, as in a book. A performance using oral language interprets the poem in terms of variant readings, voice, volume, rhythm, tone, and so on, while a performance using written language interprets the poem in terms of textual variants, spelling, spacing, line length, and even font choice. Most languages have two common manifestations and poetry can exist in either of them, or in any other use of language. Sign language could be considered a third manifestation, one that relies on time but not sound, and ASL has its own poetry performance movement. Among literate poets, writing is most often used as the initial composition tool, but this is by no means mandatory, and oral language is by far the older method.

It’s not contentious to say that sound is an element of poetry; the disagreement is rather about its relative importance, and also about how public

that sound should be—spoken aloud, or heard only in one’s head? In some critiques of spoken word, it almost seems this last question is an issue of decorum, that performing a poem aloud, with feeling and energy, is somehow less *classy*. In other words, the disagreement is also about class. To illustrate this further, I want to examine a particular battle in this poetic civil war that took place online in 2008, on the blog of the Toronto poet Paul Vermeersch. It began with a post entitled “Rant: Why I hate ‘Spoken Word’ poetry,” which I quoted at the beginning of this essay, and which I will do my best to briefly summarize: spoken word performers, in Vermeersch’s view, are often, if not always, poor writers who hide the ineptness of their compositions (Vermeersch refuses to label them poems) with exaggerated, stylized vocal performances and hand gestures; the only appreciative audience members for these performances are the performers’ friends. Spoken word, he says, “does a disservice to actual poetry by calling itself poetry.” Furthermore, he advises that “if you want to read your poem to an audience, read your poem the way it is written.” He asserts, in short, that poetry is a written art form first and foremost, and that spoken word therefore is not poetry: “The word ‘poetry’ means something, and that ain’t it,” he remarks.

At first this “Rant,” and the subsequent pages-long debate in the commentary, appears to be a conflict without any real consequence: it is possible for “poetry” to mean and be many different and contradictory things at the same time, and Vermeersch’s conception of poetry is irrelevant to others’ decisions about what to call their own writing/performing practices. As such, Vermeersch’s chicanery is pretty obvious: he declares that his definition of poetry is objective and universal, and that—guess what—your poetry doesn’t make the grade. This unsupported declaration is not entirely inconsequential, however; it has the intent and the effect of classifying not only poems but also people. Most importantly, this sort of distinction is intended to demonstrate the superior cultural capital of the person making it. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out:

The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. (*Distinction* 57)

Vermeersch’s declaration may have a range of artistic or political motivations, but like most such attempts to define poetry in exclusive terms, it also serves, whether consciously or not, to reinforce a hierarchy of privilege, and in this sense it is a fundamentally conservative gesture. In the comments added to the post, including Vermeersch’s responses, it gradually becomes clear that what motivates the strong feelings on both sides of the debate is anxiety about the prestige of the brand “poetry”—among those who would like to seize it for

themselves, and those who worry that it may be diluted by newcomers. Several participants in the debate demonstrate this anxiety, which is manifested most often in the assertion that the term “poet” must be reserved for those who have paid their dues: “People should not call themselves poets if they haven’t devoted themselves to studying the craft”; “people confuse spoken word–slam–Chuck Barris–style–Gong Show ravings with the long humble apprenticeship and sharp longing to make true art that is poetry”; “there is a history and tradition, and skilled techniques and a studied craftsmanship that today’s spoken word ignores.” Ultimately the question of what is a poem is less controversial than the question of who is a poet.

The backdrop, of course, is the lament among the page poets that the general public, and in particular spoken word audiences, “don’t really read or buy poetry books,” which is also repeated almost as a taunt by some of the pro-spoken word respondents: “It just so happens that [spoken word] is a form that is more accessible and interesting to more people than page poetry is”; “In Toronto there are 3 monthly series averaging audiences of 50-150 bodies ... does that sound like any of the ‘literary’ reading series?” This is a struggle over audience share, in other words, in an audience that is small enough to begin with: much of the enmity arises because spoken word is perceived as an amateur movement in a field where even the professionals do not get much recognition. Or, as the previously quoted Connecticut poet puts it: “the appreciation of serious poetry suffers when it is forced to compete for public attention with this kind of vulgar display of second- or third-rate work” (Maulucci). Cultural capital and social capital are what is at stake, but occasionally they are directly tied to economic capital as well: for example, for several years there was a pitched battle at the gates of the League of Canadian Poets over whether spoken word poets who had not published books could be admitted to the organization, and allowed access to the same funding opportunities as page poets.

Anxiety about labels, and the privilege or disenfranchisement they often represent, is one source of the discomfort I’m examining here. Go ahead and do what you like, say the critics, but just don’t call it poetry, because if that word is applied to what you do, then it will have less meaning when it is applied to what I do. (“The word ‘poetry’ means something, and that ain’t it.”) Social status only has value to the extent that it is exclusive; calling spoken word “poetry” doesn’t prevent anyone from enjoying other kinds of poetry, but to those for whom poetry is their main signifier of status, it is very frustrating.



While I think that Paul Vermeersch’s rant is problematic on a number of levels, I do think that it creates an interesting platform on which to explore the relationship between spoken word and poetry, and he makes some points with

which I agree. First of all, he is right when he says that spoken word is not poetry. What I mean is that the two are not coterminous: poetry is not always spoken word, and spoken word is not always poetry. There is, of course, a large area of overlap between them. Spoken word is often interpreted as a sub-genre of poetry, and many spoken word performers would prefer that their work be seen as poetry and nothing else. In many other cases, however, the influences, techniques, and priorities of spoken word situate it to a great extent outside the tradition of poetry and closer to theatre or storytelling or music or stand-up comedy.

The second and more significant point that he does not have completely wrong, and that I'd like to unpack a little, is the idea that the only appreciative audience members at a spoken word performance are the performers' friends. This is a fairly standard disparagement of poetry readings and art of all kinds: there is something pathetic, it is implied, about an art that can only be appreciated by those who have been coerced into it by their social relationship to the artist. First of all, this is a rather commercial preoccupation, in that it judges the value of a work of art by the numbers of paying customers. More importantly, this critique relies for its sting on the odd assumption that legitimate audiences are outsiders who are drawn to a specific artist or artwork for no other reason than its intrinsic merit. In its extreme form, this assumption postulates a completely objective observer with a cultural blank slate—the ideal “true critic” imagined by Hume—when in fact artists produce their work knowing fully and intuitively that no such observer exists. Bourdieu, again, offers a succinct formulation of this intuition: “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (2). Poets write works designed to appeal not just to readers of poetry but to specific readers of specific kinds of poetry, and the more familiar the poet is with the intended audience, in nearly all cases, the more successful the poem will be. This does not preclude the real potential for a poem to speak to people who know nothing about it, who were not the intended audience, and who may not even really understand it. But those who respond to the poem on an almost intuitive level do so based on something in their own *habitus*—to use Bourdieu's terminology—that creates the preconditions for such a response. Even the random spectator who walks into a poetry reading off the street will already be in possession of some sort of contextual framework that he or she will use to evaluate the experience. This may be knowledge of the context and conventions of poetry—and therefore a degree of familiarity with the work—or it may be, in extreme cases, a framework that is completely alien to the work. In any case, it is absurd to assume that art can only be legitimately judged by a dispassionate outsider. The implication of Vermeersch's slight against spoken word performance is that its audiences come to it predisposed to approve. I would say this is true, but I do not think it is an insult; the same can

not be said of all members of all audiences, of course, but I think it is a standard description of most.

“In my experience, the audience members (at least the enthusiastic ones) are largely the performer’s friends,” Vermeersch writes. The statement implies that these enthusiastic auditors are only in the audience because they are friends of the performer. There is another valid reading however: they are the friends of the performer because they are in the audience. An audience is a community that revolves around the performer, and what they share is not strictly an aesthetic affinity (or dis-affinity); it is also a social connection, an identification, or in some cases a counter-identification. Just as the sizes of audiences vary, so does the degree of intimacy of the social connection between audience and performer, with less accessible forms requiring greater intimacy. As Vermeersch himself says in a later post, “Poetry is reflective, dense, wily, and sometimes difficult. It often requires some effort, and patience, on the part of the audience. We have to trust that our audience is at least willing to wade through the depths with us.” Conversely, the audience must trust the poet as they “wade” through those “depths.” What is that trust, if not a form of identity, affiliation, even friendship?

Poetry readings of all kinds—and all kinds of poems, for that matter—are the products of communities and serve a function within their community; to suggest that a poetry performance cannot be legitimated by auditors who have a pre-existing social relationship to the poet is to discount the social function of poetry. In much recent criticism, exemplified by this collection, new attention is paid to the social aspects of poetry, but in reality, this is a bit like studying the social aspects of parties. Poetry *is* sociality, to a much greater extent than fiction, for example, and especially now during the age of digital media (on one hand, because of the potential for online community-building, but on the other, because poetry provides something that defies pixelation). It is a commonplace to say that “poetry thrives on community,” as though poetry is an abstract entity that could exist independently of people and their relationships; it is more accurate to say, “a poetry community thrives on poetry.” In the former, the aesthetic judgment of poetry—which is presumed to be natural, as though poetry were a natural phenomenon—is mistaken for an individual pleasure, when aesthetic judgment itself is a social event. Liking a poem is a socially constituted experience.



One of the issues, then, with the critique put forward by Vermeersch and other spoken-word skeptics, is that it fails to acknowledge the social nature of poetry appreciation—even as it fanatically insists on definitions of poetry that serve to institute and protect social distinctions. Vermeersch’s rhetorical jabs at the

audience at spoken word events (“largely the performer’s friends”) are especially telling, in that they try to paint spoken word as a form that is merely social, while implying that proper poetry, on the other hand, is more Byronic, that it is about an individual’s “sharp longing to make true art” (as one of the blog post commenters put it). Do Vermeersch’s friends never attend his poetry readings? Or read his poetry? Would he find it embarrassing if they did? I’m sure they do, and I’m sure he doesn’t, but perhaps he doesn’t think of them as friends but as fellow poets and poetry-lovers—as members of the same community. Although superficially dismissive of the social, Vermeersch’s argument actually over-emphasizes its importance, through its strenuous efforts to delineate the borders of the poetry community.

“Community” is an exceedingly vague term that can denote a group of any size, joined by any combination of identity traits, and perhaps it’s time to complicate my use of that concept somewhat. As Miranda Joseph has pointed out in *Against the Romance of Community*, the word “community” is often deployed as a kind of thought-terminating cliché, representing a vague ideal seen as an almost universal good, when in fact it may be invoked to support a range of oppressions. Joseph bases her argument on the observation that “communities seem inevitably to be constructed in relation to internal and external enemies and that these defining others are then elided, excluded, or actively repressed” (xix). Poetry communities are notoriously factional in ways that illustrate this process: fearing that the greater society has no love for poets, they tend to become territorial, and they tend to mark their territories according to various protocols of style, politics, or lineage. In other words, they generate identities, and there is always a certain exclusionary violence involved in that project. When poets complain to one another of the strife between and among poetry communities, it is often a cue to invoke a broader community, the society of poets, and to call for a kind of poetic nationalist unity, through which traditionalists will read experimentalists, lyric poets will read language poets, performance poets will read page poets, and so on. Such a move, however, only re-inscribes identity on a larger scale, and entails its own exclusions.

Although it happens to be very popular in spoken word circles to do so, there are several conceptual dangers in using the term “community” to describe the participants at a spoken word event, and they are the same misconceptions that allow someone like Vermeersch to draw glib caricatures of spoken word. In both cases, the suggestion is that people go to spoken word events because they belong to the community in some sense already, and therefore understand the “code” of the community, and therefore are able to enjoy the experience in a way that other people do not or would not. This train of logic is based on several unexamined assumptions: the first is that an affinity for spoken word can be an element of identity, natural and *a priori*. What seems more likely is that the affinity is a product of induction into the community, which is a social process

like entry into any group. This does not mean, however, that it is open to anyone. People do not necessarily have the same baseline potential for engaging with one experience or another—they do not have the same *habitus*. A second assumption is that participants go to spoken word events *because* of their community allegiance and not for some other reason—some identification with the event that is unrelated to spoken word, perhaps. Third, there is the assumption of a common “code” or language within the community; there may instead be multiple idiolects or personal interpretations of the performance. Finally, there is the assumption that people who go to the event are enjoying themselves. Words such as “enjoy,” “like,” or “appreciate” are hopelessly imprecise in this context: they do not necessarily describe straightforward states of being. A participant may be clapping, smiling, listening intently, but their reasons for being there should not and can not be reduced to “enjoyment”; there may be many other factors, not all of them conscious. All of these nuances of identification and motivation are overlooked, or remain unimagined, by the typical spoken word skeptic’s take on the form.

In short, a spoken word event—or any poetry reading—is not just a performance but a performative activity, and the superficial narratives of performer and audience interaction—the rules of participation—do not always tell the whole story. Spoken word provides, in one sense, the experience of belonging to a collectivity, but it also emphasizes the experience of not belonging. What makes spoken word a vibrant form for young writers? There is obviously self-reflection—that is a common observation about the form, that people find their identities by aligning themselves with communities that mirror the image they have of themselves—but there is also difference, and the audience is not just a mirror but a funhouse hall of mirrors. The typical spoken word artist doesn’t claim the mic to say, “I am such and such and so are we all; we’re in this together;” she claims it to say, “this is who I am, look at how different I am from you.” There are drawbacks, of course, to such a position—the most obvious being the risk that one’s peers may not be able or willing to engage with you and you may end up on the outside, an observer. And yet, observing provides insights that participating and belonging do not.

One possible exit from the loop of community-building, identity-construction, exclusion, and oppression is proposed by Giorgio Agamben, who in *The Coming Community* advocates the abandonment of community-building projects based on identity in favor of a quality Agamben calls “whateverness,” which is not apathy or indifference but a kind of existentialist refusal to submit to essentialist categorization, a means of creating community that is “mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions ... but by belonging itself?” (84) Spoken word has often been criticized as being too intent on expression of identity as a political stance, which would be an impediment to the formation of a non-

identitary community if the multitudinous identities expressed by spoken word poets had any coherence or authority. On the contrary, I think spoken word scenes demonstrate precisely that quality of whateverness: the conditions of membership are indefinable except as simple belonging. Maddeningly indefinable to some: whateverness is at the heart of the discomfort caused by spoken word.



I've already made the argument that, contrary to the perception of Harold Bloom or Paul Vermeersch or others, spoken word is no more or less social than other poetic forms. However, there are some qualitative differences in the sociality of spoken word, and it's because of those differences that spoken word's antagonists have as much a place in its community as do its performers.

Although literature and performance are always produced by communities, I would like to suggest that spoken word communities are remarkable in two closely-related ways. First, much more than most other forms of writing or public performance, spoken word breaks down hierarchical distinctions within the community, both on the level of the individual performance (there is often direct interaction between the audience and the performer), and on the structural level (it is very easy for an audience member to become a performer, for example). This means that the newest community members are relatively close in status to the most established community members. There are some well-known and respected figures within spoken word—often recognized as much for community-building activities as for their writing or performance.⁴ For the most part, however, the popularity of spoken word spreads not by the reproduction and transmission of individual talents and particular texts, but through the contagion of the spoken word meme. As open mics and poetry slams proliferate in towns across the country and around the world, spoken word remains an intensely local phenomenon and few artists attain any sort of widespread recognition. Spoken word's orientation towards the local community is both the condition that allows its production and the condition that allows its self-perpetuation and growth.

⁴ In the US, poetry slam organizers—Marc Smith, Bob Holman, Patricia Smith, or Gary Glazner, for example, all of whom are also performers—often have more notoriety than artists who focus more exclusively on their own work. Other spoken word performers well known in the US have usually won fame at the National Poetry Slam (Lisa Buscani, Mayda del Valle, Shane Koyczan), through music-industry recordings (Henry Rollins, John S. Hall, Maggie Estep), theatre (Sarah Jones, Reg E. Gaines, Tracie Morris), or TV (HBO's *Def Poetry*: Suheir Hammad, Taylor Mali, Jessica Care Moore), or some combination of these channels.

The other way that spoken word communities stand out is that their borders are much less controlled than the borders of other artistic communities, because spoken word aesthetics are so loosely defined in terms of style and level of refinement. On the surface, it would seem that poetry slams, for example, are the most strictly evaluative kind of poetry practice, in that individual performances are judged and ranked. In most other communities of writers, however, evaluation is a pre-condition of entry; if one's work is not judged to meet the standards of the scene, one is not considered a member of that scene. Poetry slams, by comparison, generally invite anyone to slam who cares to. Qualitative evaluation occurs on the stage, as a part of the performance, but it does not (in most cases, at least) determine one's status as a member of the community. "Applaud the poet, not the score," is one of the universal mantras of poetry slams, underlining that while the audience is encouraged to be ruthless in evaluating the performance, their support of the performer should be unconditional. Spoken word may actually be more radically accessible and egalitarian than even its practitioners realize or are willing to admit, in that it encourages a de-prioritization of aesthetic distinction. Other scenes espouse a "tolerant," segregationist model of aesthetics that says, "This is the kind of work we create; if you don't like it, you can make your own scene": separate but equal. Spoken word, on the other hand, says, "This is the kind of work I create; it's different from yours—maybe better, maybe worse—but we both get the same three minutes on the mic." It encourages diversity and it eschews discrimination (based on race, sex, age, or even degree of expertise or talent). This, of course, is exactly why many people find spoken word events horrifying—especially poets and critics who lament the perceived loss of aesthetic standards. By making this critique, by setting up an antagonistic force outside spoken word, those disdainful poets and critics help solidify a sense of community within spoken word—which in turn is what makes that diversity and inclusion possible.



As I noted at the beginning of this essay, many people at all cultural, educational, and economic levels react to spoken word events (and poetry readings in general, but particularly spoken word) with distaste. If such anti-fans are asked to explain their dislike of spoken word, they may use words such as boring, predictable, formulaic, cliché, clique-y, pretentious, self-indulgent, self-righteous, unrefined, juvenile, hokey. Forced to attend a spoken word event, they roll their eyes, they fidget, they grit their teeth. I'm particularly fascinated by the intensity of this reaction. Is it really so painful to listen to spoken words? There is something peculiar about it, especially considering that in our daily lives we manage to put up with a constant barrage of spoken noise in the form of

advertisements, announcements, sidewalk solicitations, sermons, speeches, and spiels.

It seems almost that the disgust—for the more tolerant, it may be closer to embarrassment—produced by hearing a bad performance outweighs the joy produced by a good performance. “Tastes,” Bourdieu writes, “are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgusts provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others” (56). The real revelation of Bourdieu’s theory of aesthetic discrimination, of course, was that tastes are not simply dictated by social status; they are also vital tools in our efforts to gain, maintain, and enhance social status. Rather than simply expressing natural preferences, our aesthetic judgments serve to identify us as belonging to certain status groups and not others. As he puts it, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (6).

The vehemence of negative aesthetic judgments rendered on spoken word cannot be explained simply in terms of individual preference (since no one is being forced to attend spoken word events, why the indignation?), but they can be explained as an attempt to identify with a certain cultural class through counter-identification with another. This is not to say that spoken word, for example, represents an inherently lesser status; the value of cultural capital is determined relative to the field in which it will be accumulated and spent. For a young, urban, working class college student, involvement in spoken word may represent an opportunity to gain considerable cultural capital, whereas for an upper-middle-class professional, or a poet who wants a more traditional sort of professional recognition, it might put some cultural capital at risk.

A poetry performance event is capable of producing a great deal of social anxiety, and this is particularly true of spoken word because its cultural status is so undefined. The participant becomes interpellated into a social structure where the lines of cultural capital are indistinct and shifting, and the result may be resentment and fear – fear that one’s status might be jeopardized, or that one’s identity might be dismantled or commandeered. Of course, this anxiety is also based on the idea that attending a particular event or listening to certain kinds of texts can be taken to signify approval. It is assumed, in other words, that a participant’s primary relationship to an aesthetic experience is evaluative judgment. People worry, on some level, that if they attend a spoken word event, others will assume that they are there because it’s their “thing”—they like it, and therefore it somehow defines them. However, part of the argument I’m making about spoken word is that it tends to undermine the assumption that evaluative judgment is the natural primary relationship to the performance: as I have said, spoken word de-prioritizes aesthetic judgment in favor of accessibility and diversity.

It is no doubt tragic to some writers and critics to contemplate the idea of a literary community that does not make aesthetic evaluation its highest priority. Doesn’t everything get reduced to a kind of lowest-common-denominator slush

pile? Won't the work always remain amateurish, jejune, unrefined? A couple of answers to this: first of all, a de-prioritization of aesthetic judgment does not mean that there are no standards—it just means that the standards are relational and contingent, with no pretense of universality, and it means that our engagement with the work does not have to revolve around evaluative approbation or disapprobation, but can occur on other levels, recognizing the social, political, communicative, and ceremonial functions of art, for example. Second, a lapse in aesthetic discrimination does not necessarily imply a lapse in aesthetic development. An individual writer-performer may improve his or her own work without narrowing the range of work they surround themselves with. The assumption that an artist only improves by exposure to more advanced like-minded artists implies that influence is always positive and emulative. It is just as commonly positive and non-emulative, or negative and non-emulative, or even negative and emulative.

At a spoken word event, with its teeming aesthetic diversity, poets are more likely to hear other poets read something that makes them cringe. Yet they may hear something in that utterly unappealing poem that they want to keep, something that may, in a different context, be the key to an entirely new aesthetic. In this rain-forest-like aesthetic climate, the abilities of individual poets do evolve but may end up evolving in remarkably disparate ways. This, I think, is one of the most significant things that spoken word has to offer: by juxtaposing the work of artists at different levels of ability, spoken word helps to disabuse us of the notion that the only way to interact with a poem or artwork is by classifying it according to taste. Bourdieu's work accurately describes the function of taste within a socially, culturally, and economically stratified society, and it is true that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (7). But every spoken word event I attend reminds me that art has other powerful effects besides social classification, and that our relationships to it can be rich, multifarious, and sometimes contradictory. I think, for example, that there is something uniquely valuable in exposure to forms that lie outside one's usual aesthetic criteria. It is worthwhile, in other words, to hear "bad" poetry—or to hear poetry read "badly." Is spoken word sometimes boring, cliché, pretentious, painful, absurd? Yes, it is, and the same can be said of most if not all poetry readings, because what we find to be "good" or "bad" poetry is dependent on context, on our level of engagement, and on the communities we belong to.



Earlier I took issue with David Groff for saying that “a poem performed is no substitute for a poem read,” but in the same article he says something that I can understand and agree with:

There is undeniable power in simply having to listen to words that are measured out at a specific pace, don't always make marketable sense, require you to sit still, summon only your ear and not your eye, and unfold, fleetingly, in the company of others. (Groff)

When I listen to a voice addressing me as part of a crowd, my mind begins to look for and draw connections, to wander in tangential directions, to churn productively. As Groff points out, this can happen at any literary reading, and perhaps it has something to do with how readings differ from movies, plays, operas, or concerts: there is no effort to immerse the audience in the spectacle, to make us forget that we are there. Spoken word performances have a Brechtian alienation effect built in: the lights remain on, and the performer speaks directly to the audience, acknowledging, even emphasizing, that we are there. Most interestingly though, the intensity of my productive listening does not necessarily depend on my judgment of what the voice is saying. It happens when listening to texts that are brilliant and fascinating, but it also happens when listening to texts that I might otherwise find banal, obtuse, confusing, boring or objectionable. In fact, while I prefer listening to performances of texts that I find appealing, I find there are also benefits in listening to performances of unappealing texts. There is value in listening to what you do not understand, what you do not enjoy, and most importantly, what cannot be easily laundered in the markets of cultural capital.

The ability to listen productively to both appealing and unappealing texts requires a certain kind of humility, a suspension of disbelief in other people's versions of aesthetic reality. It is interesting to me, then, that many critics of spoken word have accused its practitioners of lacking humility. Earlier I mentioned George Bowering's condemnation of those who use poetry for personal glorification, and in the debate around Paul Vermeersch's essay it was suggested that entry into the world of poetry required a “humble apprenticeship” that spoken word artists seemed to want to bypass. I, too, am arguing in favor of humility, on the part of all participants in the project of poetry, but I think that these two versions of humility are markedly different. Both points of view emphasize community: it is commonly suggested and widely accepted that there is much to gain from knowing and understanding the context—the historical conditions—in which a given poetry is produced. The discrepancy lies in which poets are recognized as a part of that context: to which poets do we owe our humility? The phrase “humble apprenticeship” suggests that the poets we study and emulate should be those predecessors who have superior cultural legitimacy; it does not require the same humility towards poets of lower status. The phrase implies an expectation of reverence on the part of

the apprentice toward the master, and it validates a system of heredity for the maintenance and distribution of cultural capital. There is a certain religious overtone to the use of the word humility in this context: Poetry itself is held up as a kind of idol, to which we can not gain access unless we have spent a certain time as novices and followed the rules. Spoken word, on the other hand, represents a kind of poetic Reformation: the institutional hierarchy and the spiritual mediation of the clergy are done away with, in favor of a personal relationship to Poetry. Spoken word says, in essence, "Poetry is in all of us."

All aesthetic appreciation is driven by a tension between two somewhat contradictory expectations for the aesthetic experience: first, that it conform to certain standards, making it recognizable and giving it legitimacy within its field; second, that it transcend those standards, making it unfamiliar and exciting. Ideally, the exercise of listening with humility teaches us to invert these expectations: to grant legitimacy to the unconventional and to find excitement in the familiar and cliché, thereby clearing the way for other approaches to knowing and understanding poetry.



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