

RHETORICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN PERFORMANCE POETRY

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By

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ABSTRACT

RHETORICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN PERFORMANCE POETRY

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This work examines the rhetorical relationships of performance poetry (slam and spoken word) and how they create a truth-sharing environment for all who are involved through a case study of poets from Atlanta and Charlotte. Using rhetorical strategy to connect with as many audience members as possible while maintaining their integrity, these poets become living, breathing examples of rhetoricians. And they use the intricate theories of M.M. Bakhtin, John Locke, Kenneth Burke, and other rhetoricians to accomplish these connections. Performance poetry, which is gaining a larger audience base every year, illustrates the captivating strength of rhetorical theory at play in crafted, theatrical, and nonlinear dialogue between poet and audience.

This study investigates relationships involved with performance poetry – those of society and of the poet –and explores the poetry itself. Within these chapters, the rhetorical prerequisites for truth-sharing at a poetry venue develop as a frame – not an answer – for performance poetry’s success. Finally, this work reflects the ideas of poets balancing personal integrity with public connection by investigating the purpose of truth within a truth-sharing environment. And all of it takes place through relaxed prose in

hopes that my explanation of the rhetorical strategies these poets implement in performance poetry will be as accessible as the poetry itself.

INTRODUCTION

I really like to focus on the human... the human condition, the human story, the every day kind of thing. I like to look at life as it is and as it's happening now and write about that.

Bluz, Personal Interview

As I brainstormed ways to introduce my thesis, which analyzes performance poetry from Atlanta and Charlotte and explores how the poets feel about their poetry, I struggled to develop my own words. And then a light went off: poets write from their own experiences and deliver these messages to a public, and I should be able to do the same. From that moment, I began to realize that my thesis is all about relationships – relationships between the world and poetry, the audience and poetry, and the poets and poetry. To start this exploration, I will look at my own relationship to spoken word poetry – the reason for this thesis' existence – and the process I have taken in writing this thesis.

I have never been an auditory person. When teachers discussed different learning styles, I always tested as a blended visual and kinesthetic learner. Because of this style, I've never felt the connection to music and radio talk shows that others can barely live without. In order to feel the message – to receive it clearly and wholly – I have always needed to read it or see it.

Moreover, I have struggled with the value of words. Crafting words into stories and reports always excites me, but meanings and messages rarely sunk in until two years ago. I felt disconnected somehow, wondering why others could react to communications that I could not. I felt like an observer when I read a story, sang along with a song, or watched a play. Words never engulfed me into a world of feeling and power and rhythm

when others were crafting them. Words were just letters strung together that hung on the page or in the air.

And then, a couple of years ago, everything changed.

I remember seeing a flyer for a spoken word poetry event in the fall of 2007 at Western Carolina University. The idea of poetry on stage intrigued me, and I asked my science-minded husband to attend the event with me. As a visual learner, I wanted to see poetry take shape in front of me. But my husband hemmed and hawed at first, disliking the idea of spending an evening listening to poetry.

Somehow, I cajoled him into being my date. I told him we could sneak out the back door after a few minutes if the scene didn't jive to our liking. I may have agreed to watch endless amounts of basketball and boxing in return. Whatever I told him, I'm sure I employed some old-school persuasive rhetoric that involved ethos, pathos, and logos. Thanks, Aristotle, for helping me introduce my husband and myself to the world of spoken word poetry.

Once we stepped into the dimly lit room, we immediately located a small, round table tucked into the back corner. Neither of us was comfortable committing our time to something unfamiliar, although I was intrigued by the idea of rhythmic words and a hip scene. The host welcomed us all to the first poetry event of the academic year and before the main act took the stage, invited other poets to share their art.

Immediately, Carlos Robson, a poet from Charlotte, hopped on stage. And while he only performed one poem, "Ten Dollars for Sunshine," my husband and I felt hooked. Using well-crafted words, original delivery, and shifting voices for multiple characters, Robson told the story of a heroin addict, who dropped her drug habits when her son was

born but resumed her old lifestyle when her son was killed by a drunk driver. Robson drew us into his poem, his world, his memories, and created a story that we became a part of. I felt the emotions attached to each word; they pulsed into my system and still haunt me to this day. I can still hear Robson singing an altered version of a traditional song: “You are my Sunshine, my only sunshine, and you make me happy, baby, when skies are gra-a-a-y.” Never before had I felt such a connection to words until spoken word poetry.

After Carlos, two poets from Miami shared the stage. One poet, Asia, sticks out in my mind because I don’t remember ever laughing so hard. While he performed serious poems too, his poem “Superman & Peanut Butter,” about an intimate, humorous affair during his teenage years, made me convulse with laughter. Reflecting back, I wonder how the sequence of poems may have affected the audience’s reaction. Mixing somber pieces like “Sweet 16” and “Crash” with those laced with hilarity, Asia crafted a balanced delivery that ran the audience through a swinging multitude of emotions. Much like the age-old notion that beauty is only so beautiful because of darkness and death, Asia made funny poems funnier when performed after a sad poem and vice-versa. Whatever the case, I developed a new fascination with words.

Since that night, I have seen quite a few poets on stage, from New York City’s Carlos Andres Gomez to Los Angeles’ Bridget Grey to Chicago’s Alvin Lau. My husband and I seek out spoken word venues now, asking locals from any city we tour about calendars and upcoming gigs in the area.

During my early relationship with spoken word poetry, I never linked it to my academic life. Spoken word was clearly part of my extracurricular activities and nothing else. Six months into my interest for spoken word, I found myself observing a first-year

composition class. In that class, I realized how useful spoken word poetry could be in other people's lives as well. An English professor, a composition theorist who mentored me, encouraged me to infuse my own interests and enthusiasm into the seminars I led with the students. In a natural progression, I soon turned to poetry.

I remember first bringing this idea to the students. Many of them rolled their eyes and sighed. Students majoring in fields like construction management, biology, business, and nursing had no idea why I was going to "bore them to death" with poetry. Plus, many of them had never heard of spoken word or slam poetry, so their skepticism doubled in size. In response, I received permission from several poets and burned my students a hodgepodge CD with my favorite pieces.

Within a week, I saw a change in the students' attitudes toward poetry. We held discussions about the poets' messages, word choices, intended audiences, and more. I felt excited as a new composition teacher because I was having a dialogue with engaged students. From then on, the connection between the classroom and spoken word poetry became intertwined in my mind and praxis.

During the next academic year, I taught my own composition class. Again, many of the students were majoring in fields in which they thought "words and writing just aren't important." We discussed why they thought this way, and I think many of them struggled the same way I had: they felt a lack of connection with words. Words had never created a reality they realized. And if we always feel like distant, unconnected observers, we can never grow to appreciate or hone our own skills with words, reminding me of my studies of the 18th-century ordained minister and rhetorician George Campbell. Connection to words leading to changes in truth is a concept that blends well with

Campbell's concept of the sublime, which I never fully understood until performance poetry. Listening to and participating in performance poetry, my students and I experienced something that moved us into change; we may not be able to recite lines of poetry, but we know that our reality on the power of words has been altered because of our experiences.

From this new understanding, I began another venture with performance poetry in the classroom where a handful of my students felt so drawn to performance poetry that they began to write and perform their own creations at the open mic nights at the university. They asked me to help them tighten their verses after class and told me when they hoped to perform their words. Their excitement was contagious, and it only compounded my enthusiasm for teaching and my love for spoken word.

As my students began to investigate the world of spoken word poetry on their own, I had to begin thinking about another chapter of my graduate-student life: my thesis. Just as I had fallen in love with spoken word, I also discovered a passion for rhetorical theory. And I realized early in my graduate school ventures that rhetoric touches everything. I now often relate my conversations about politics, teaching, public health, tourism (and more!) to rhetoric. Because this new lens was affecting my every thought, I wasn't sure where to point my focus when choosing my thesis topic. And I had not yet realized how spoken word poetry would overlap into yet another aspect of my life.

I began thinking that I would write my thesis about rhetoric during the week of 9/11, and I would compare the messages of journalists and public officials who discussed the same tragic event so differently. I thought and still think it is a fascinating topic, yet whenever I sat behind a computer, I felt deflated and disconnected from my thesis

proposal. I trudged home one rainy day, distressed over my mindset, and popped in a CD of performance poetry as I attempted to work on my proposal. I caught myself straying from thoughts of 9/11 rhetoric and falling into the lilt of the poets' words. On that evening, a light bulb flickered. But could spoken word poetry be material for a thesis? At that moment, I began to develop my rhetorical thesis on performance poetry.

I met with two WCU professors who ultimately became members of my thesis committee to discuss my drastic shift in topics. They could feel my excitement. Had anyone else discussed the rhetorical impact of spoken word poetry? Not that we could find, although people had studied the use of spoken word in the classroom. I wanted to focus on spoken word poetry as an art form that becomes individualized by the poets themselves. Poets craft their words through the writing and performing processes, implementing rhetorical devices with pen in hand and with feet on stage. I wanted to answer how rhetoric played into their craft. And so the next step was to develop my ideas into a feasible study, which developed into a rhetorical analysis of four poets and their poetry.

From my years working in journalism as a freelance writer, I have always been an advocate of interviews as a solid source of primary data. I had to interview poets to feel like I had a strong connection to the inner workings of the poetry. From there, I decided upon ways to narrow my focus because, although spoken word poetry is a marginalized art form in the society of academia, the scene is too large to interview every poet at the mic. I chose two cities in which I knew a multitude of poets: Charlotte and Atlanta.

Both are cities within the southern United States, and both have dynamic spoken word scenes. I also had an inside peek at both spots. With my thesis committee forming, I

decided to interview three poets from each city, all six of whom are male and from minority populations. I wanted to explore the idea that poets are affected by their surroundings. With Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad in mind, the idea of different scenes impacting poets' words and delivery was too tempting to ignore. With that revelation, my thesis proposal took shape.

Around the same time, I also discovered that the 2008 Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) would take place in Charlotte. Checking our calendar against the event's dates, my husband and I realized we could go – and decided to book a hotel in the area. We couldn't believe that tickets for four nights of poetry were only \$50 a piece.

The event was spectacular, as we expected. I remember participating in hours of performance poetry as an audience member. By the end of each bout, I felt exhausted. That sounds silly, but my strong connection to words and the truth-sharing environment made me feel a relationship I had never felt before discovering performance poetry. I – along with everyone else in the crowd – was so much more than a listener. I did not observe the poetry performances at IWPS. I was a part of the performance; if the poet discussed sadness, I became a part of the tragedy, and if the poet discussed something funny, I became a part of the comedy. At the end of each night, the poets acted as guides for the audience, recreating emotions that pulsed through their words and into us. Each night, I was emotionally spent. After the four-day slam, I felt absolutely sure that I had chosen the correct topic for my thesis.

And I thought about the rhetorical theory I had learned about during my History of Rhetoric class, and my learned appreciation of truth. Truth had seemed an intangible, flippant word before that class, but truth – in regards to rhetoric – packs quite a myriad of

definitions. In fact, when I read about different rhetoricians' understandings of truth, I often felt overwhelmed. Somehow personal knowledge seemed to dictate people's truths, and how could any one person define the idea of truth for the collective whole? I just didn't get it. But when I applied the theories to performance poetry, I realized how the theories interacted together, and it all started to make sense. On the drive back from the international slam, I drew all kinds of schematics that linked the rhetorical theories I wanted to apply to performance poetry, and the theories began to magically uncoil themselves into concepts I understood. I decided to create a canvas for performance poetry that incorporated Kenneth Burke; M.M. Bakhtin; Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; John Locke; and George Campbell. I thought about how the poet and audience shares truth during a poetry bout, and how this new, collective truth develops through a genuine connection between the poet, thoughts and language, and the audience.

I then took certain pieces of theory from each of the above-mentioned theorists to develop my own definition of truth. From Burke, I used the idea of a terministic screen; all people see life through personalized filters that help them internalize information and language. When applied to poetry, I thought about how each audience member comes to the performance with a unique filter that the poet must somehow anticipate in order to create a sequence of poems that will feel well suited for the situation. Burke's dramatic pentad went hand in hand with this application: audience members' terministic screens, while personalized, may interpret each moment of the performance differently because in each moment, one of the pentad elements may change and create an entirely new set of dynamics for the situation to adapt to and overcome.

After applying Burke's pentad to the poetry, I turned to Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, which is like a personal, compressed dictionary that catalogues and cross references each person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences through language and thus creates thoughts with language through that stem from stored heteroglot. With this in mind, heteroglossia plays a key point in performance poetry: the poet must try to match the thoughts and language of his or her heteroglossia with that of the audience, so that well-connected utterances can create a dialogue that weaves the responses of the audience with the ever-adapting style and delivery of the poet. If this role plays out correctly for heteroglossia, poets can find common ground with their audiences and then expand into new subjects that will help redefine everyone's truth.

From other ideas I learned in my History of Rhetoric class, I paired Locke and Campbell together. Locke believed that an experience creates meaning for words and thought, and helps tie the understanding and purpose of communication together. And Campbell believed that if words can create an experience for listeners – allow them to have a feeling of sublime – that the purpose of the message was successful. When I thought of these two rhetoricians in regards to performance poetry, I automatically thought about the experience the poet is recreating for his or her audience. Poets often perform poetry about situations and issues that affect them personally, so they take an experience they had – whether it be from childhood, a newspaper article, or an evening out at a bar – and through a well-crafted delivery and carefully chosen words, and try to create this experience for the audience. If done successful, the audience becomes grounded in the intangible situation (the recreated experience) and feels the power of sublime, which triggers a moment of truth that all parties become a part of.

Finally, we had a class discussion about Gates, and I thought about his ideas for signifyin(g), “a system or rhetoric and interpretation” within the African and African-American cultures (ix) that is “a principle of language use and is not in any way the exclusive province of black people, although blacks named the term and invented its rituals”(90). The orality of performance poetry is marginalized from the academic world because of the performance factor and from the everyday world because of poetry’s stigma as boring, so its subculture seems to create its own version of signifyin(g) that mirrors much of what Gates reveals. Performance poetry uses the eight characteristics of Signification – indirection, metaphorical-imagistic, humorous, rhythmic fluency and sound, teachy but not preachy, directed at person/persons usually present in the situational context, punning, and introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected (94). In performance poetry, each poet creates his or her own pattern using these characteristics in order to build a truth-sharing gateway with the audience. For performance poetry, these characteristics allow poets to relate to their audience in an approachable, accessible way.

From all of these theories, I thought about how the purpose of performance poetry can only happen if poets adapt to changing elements of the pentad and the filter of their listeners to connect with the audience’s heteroglossia of language through oral characteristics to create an environment for experiences that implement new knowledge for shared truths to take place. But perhaps the hardest part of connecting all of these ideas together was maintaining my voice and writing a thesis that reflected the all-accessible, open nature of performance poetry.

Because I had done so much research and discussion already, I felt anxious to start writing my thesis. I began with my first chapter – and I lost my voice. Reviewing my earlier drafts now, I wonder what I must have been thinking. Perhaps the subconscious *I am writing my thesis* thought panicked me. I wanted to sound oh-so-scholarly and informed. I forgot that big words and convoluted sentences are not marks of intelligence. Basically, I lost myself in words that were not my own. I became frustrated with the process, and I actually took a step back from writing my thesis. I had arrived at a roadblock, and it was not until I read a news article about a college student from North Carolina that I realized how I could find my voice.

In June 2009, Joseph Carnevale cut up three traffic barrels “to create a massive sculpture of a roadside monster thumbing for a ride” (Rodriguez, par. 1). From the side of the road in Raleigh, the monster towered above traffic with triangular blue eyes and a gaping mouth filled jagged teeth. Its orange and white striped body indicated the materials used for its creation. According to the Associated Press, Carnevale said, “I had the idea in class that morning, and it kind of grew in my head, until it was something I had to do” (Rodriguez, par. 7). Although police just saw vandalism, I saw something more symbolic in the 10-foot monster. I could identify with Carnevale, looking at the rhetorical side of spoken word poetry was “something I had to do.”

Carnevale took something that creates tangible roadblocks and created something original, personal, and relatable. I wanted to do the same; my ideas for spoken word poetry and rhetoric had been percolating in my head, and I needed to take more initiative. Linking this to my ideas about words needing to connect to people and words’ importance in the past, I realized that I wanted my thesis to be approachable to my

readers. If my thesis is to be about the accessibility of performance poetry, then my thesis should be accessible as well. I bid farewell to clunky academic-ese and decided to craft my own words into something more creative and engaging, something more original, personal, and relatable. I decided to take my roadblock of words and create my own barrel monster, sans the charges from the Department of Transportation.

It was time to gather information from my poets, so I began contacting them in every way possible. I found Facebook to be the most popular method of communication for most of them. I sent each poet a consent form, as well as the framework of questions I would like to ask. Once they reviewed the materials, we set up interviews. This part of my thesis has proven to be invaluable. I learned firsthand about poets' relationships with their words, audiences, and ideas, and at the same time, tightened my own relationship with the poetry. Everything seems more interesting with a back-story, and I feel like I've had an all-access pass into the development of performance poetry by four talented individuals.

Initially, I thought I had to drive to each poet's location to conduct the interviews, so I prepared myself for some long car rides. I had decided that email interviews lose the personal touch of hearing a voice, and I had no idea how I would record a phone conversation for the purpose of records. All I had was a digital camcorder and a car.

My first interview occurred at a coffee shop in Atlanta. I met Jon Goode, who drank lemongrass tea, as I audio visually recorded his answers to my questions. We talked about Atlanta, poetry, language, and more. And although my enthusiasm for my thesis had not declined, my conversation with Goode just stoked my interest for my study. His responses were intriguing, giving me new insights into the world of

performance poetry. Our interview went much like his performances on stage; in both situations, he was honest, candid, and engaging with his subject matter and the audience.

Excitement flooded over me after that first interview. I discussed my project with my family, friends, and coworkers. Lucky for me, I started chatting about my interview with a colleague at WCU's Office of Public Relations. I expressed my desire to continue with the interviews, but I also told her about my concerns about the interview logistics. Multiple drives to Charlotte and Atlanta cost a lot of time and money. At that moment, she pulled a fancy digital recorder out of her desk drawer that would allow me to record interviews that I conducted via my cell phone. I couldn't believe my luck in gaining such an easy interview tool, and to top it off, the technology made me feel a little like James Bond. Oh, if only the phone and recording devices somehow looked like a shoe.

For the next three interviews, I used the phone as a medium. Although I felt like a little bit of connection was lost when I changed to this method, the convenience for both the poets and me proved to be a heavier factor in my decision. I did run into some scheduling conflicts with the poets because our schedules did not align very well. In fact, it took me three months to conduct five interviews. I never did interview one poet who lives in Atlanta, and I never received a consent form from a Charlotte poet, so my study consists of two poets from Charlotte and two from Atlanta instead of three from each city. However, I have gained enough primary data that my study still holds its own in discussing how poets from both cities frame their words with rhetorical theory.

Finally, I turned back to the written word of my thesis. Ready to take on the challenge and create my own roadside monster out of 80 or 90 pages of paper, I had finally taken ownership of my research and my thesis. I had found a way to feel

knowledgeable about my passion for performance poetry and to be a credible source about it without preaching from the top of an ivory tower. I found that I could be myself and have a dialogue on paper with my reader, thanks to my adventure thus far with spoken word poetry and rhetoric.

Although I can only guess where my connections to words will take me from here, I also can guess where the words of this thesis may take its readers. I ask those who read my chapters to mark in the margins, create new ideas and connections, and keep the meaning of spoken word poetry alive. Together, let's create our own barrel monster from a discussion about the authenticity, the approachability, and the power of language in spoken word poetry.

CHAPTER ONE: SOCIETY'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH PERFORMANCE POETRY

The slam venue likes to... learn; they like to be educated. They like it when you bring interesting concepts, and they like the literary aspect of it.

Carlos Robson, Phone Interview

As this three-chapter journey begins, I will make two important notes about the following discussions about performance poetry and the many relationships to which it connects. One, I will refer to slam and spoken word poetry under the umbrella term performance poetry, so I include both within my dialogue. Two, I think of how new, malleable truths come from knowledge learned, and I believe knowledge is learned through shifting someone's terministic screen, adding to his or her heteroglossia, and undergoing new experiences. Performance poetry encapsulates all three of these practices that bring about a feeling of sublime from words and experience that impart new truths within a universal reality, and from this chapter onward, the discussion of poets' capabilities to transform people's truths through poetry and delivery of the poetry will be a primary undercurrent.

Once I formulated this idea about truth and poetry's persuasion over truth in the context of language, I finally understood the complex ideas about poetry's power, such as those of Patricia Smith, who has won four National Poetry Slam individual championship titles: "Poetry, by its very nature, slices away the unnecessary, leaving only the lean and vital. When it also manages elegance and nuance, reveals a moral truth, and chances a tweak or two to our accepted notions of language, it's revelatory" (180). If done well, meanings and messages embedded in finely crafted words allow a poet's audience to see past the page or listen past the voice into the reality that the poem shapes, helping the

audience redefine its own truths toward a collective truth in the same moment. From this perspective, poetry is the language of truth, pushing people's boundaries and pressing them to review their thoughts, their actions, and their opinions. Poetry encourages us to revise our thinking much like composition instructors encourage students to revise papers. But there is a catch: the poetry (like the instructor) must engage its audience, and the audience (much like the students) must be open and receptive.

However, younger people, who also feel unconnected to printed words, have not been receptive to poetry, labeling it as "boring" and stating audiovisual technology as a much more appealing alternative. Let's face it: words on the page have a tough time competing for attention in a world filled with sitcoms, video games, Facebook, and more. And onlookers have acknowledged this downslide as generations come and go: According to Geoffrey Crump in Speaking Poetry, "[poetry] is sometimes said to be the least popular of the arts" (1). But a growing portion of this general population is changing its opinion on poetry: People are taking notice of a form of poetry that imparts new truth and entertains them, uplifting poetry's popularity status from its slump. People are getting excited about performance poetry.

Performance poetry fuses poetry and live performance together in front of an audience. When combined in a poetry slam – a spoken word poetry competition – poets compete in front of a live audience with novice judges, who are randomly selected from the audience. Poets work their words, crafting their delivery to invoke cheers and snaps; this exchange creates a continuous string of utterances that build upon one another, developing a raucous discussion about the knowledge embedded in the poet's words, and deepening listeners' heteroglossia of thought and language. As an avid follower of the

venue, I often hear exclamations, such as “That’s right, baby!” and “Go on and tell it!” rumble from the audience during poignant points in poems. Meanwhile, keys jangle as an outcry during flat spots where audience members disconnect.

This audience interaction, whether embodying positive or negative reflections of the poem, helps sway the amateur judges’ opinions, which the poets recognize and use to their advantage. Therefore, the poets craft a rhetorical structure for truth building by developing an immediate rapport with the audience and developing interconnected relationships within Aristotle’s triangle: the speaker, the audience, and the text. Because of these ever intertwining relationships, poetry performances can become quite the mode of entertainment. Some audience members may even describe a performance as “a festival, a carnival act, an interactive class, a town meeting, a con game, and a poetic boxing match, all rolled into one” (Marc Smith 1). And this atmosphere can move them to a new, collective truth, which George Campbell would say occurs with “the sublime.” A slam creates a place of energy, motion, and encouragement that spikes from a competition of poets, all wishing to stay true to themselves while captivating their audience to impress their judges’ scoreboards. According to Lesley Wheeler in *Voicing American Poetry*, “slam seizes contemporary poetry, redefines its audiences and goals, and sounds and embodies it for public consumption. It manages to offend and delight various listeners, moreover, through its very orality and its insistent populism” (141). Truly, nothing else I have seen compares to the intense set up and unique speaker-audience relationship of performance poetry.

With this communication flow, competitive performance poetry is “the marriage of text and the artful presentation of spoken words onstage to an audience that has

permission to talk back and let the poet performer know whether he or she is communicating effectively” (Marc Smith 8). This relationship between poet, words, and audience brings truth to life for everyone involved. Although the poet is the person who experienced a certain emotion or event that sparked the poem’s inception, the unique words and delivery of performance poetry create an all new, powerful experience that both the poet and audience feel. Essentially, the poet tweaks Locke’s idea that a person has to experience an event to gain knowledge, by recreating something personal into an experience for others to feel, to live, to know. The poet acts as a mediator between knowledge and the audience, weaving connections between the two by creating an experience through the delivery of his or her words. An example of this mediation is the movements (or lack thereof) that accompany a poet’s words, such as standing rigid during a serious, intense poem or flapping limbs during a poem of calamity. By developing a deeper meaning of a word through movements, voice, tempo, and many more delivery devices, the poet stands more of a chance to connect his or her message to the heteroglossia of the audience members. The addition of delivery gives each word – and the entire piece – multiple layers that the audience processes, and the additional layers give more options for the audience to “get” a poem. After all, the poet is pulling language from the hyperlinked experiences and ideas compressed in his or her heteroglossia and trying to match his or her words as many ways as possible to that of the audience. If the poet can match his or her language of the poem with the audience’s word- and experience-filled heteroglossia, the audience members will feel more inclined to connect with the poem, even if the message is something foreign to them.

Performance poetry, like many forms of language, began as a tool of communication for poets to sound their opinions. According to James Fenton, a professor of poetry at Oxford University, poetry “begins in those situations when the voice has to be raised” (7). All performance poetry, then, naturally becomes revolutionary, raising its voice from the people, for the people. Performance poetry becomes words with “special emphasis,” using “heightened speech” to rhyme, to punctuate, to slant, to sing, and to break the rules society has placed on language (7). All of this keeps the audience’s attention aligned with the knowledge of the poet, connecting both parties to a truth shaped by the experience of performance poetry. And yet, when those opposed to “boring” poetry hear of “revolutionary” poetry delivered on stage, they don’t understand; how can something so dull be so grassroots, so impassioned, so oriented for the people? Perhaps they have not yet *experienced* performance poetry, so they think it is flat. And thus, many of the poets try to create entertaining pieces to draw people into the realm of performance poetry.

According to Crump, “Three or four hundred years ago, poetry was written for ordinary people to speak, just as music was composed for ordinary people to play, and both were as popular as dancing” (1). In modern times, this passion for poetry has sputtered, but Crump identifies a reason for this decline: “It seems that the arts can flourish only when there is a healthy tradition of interpretive as well as creative activity” (1). Perhaps this notion is why Marc Smith, founder of slam poetry, began to develop his idea of competitive performance poetry; he no longer wanted people to feel disconnected from the literary art form. Rather, he wanted people to use interpretation and creativity to engage themselves in performance poetry:

When I started, nobody wanted to go to poetry readings. Slam gave it life . . . a community where you didn't have to be a special something, feel bad that you weren't educated a special way, . . . I think when poetry went from the oral tradition to the page, someone should've asked, is that really poetry? I think slam gets poetry back to its roots, breathing life into the words. (Eleveld 2)

After all, how can new artists venture forward if they feel disconnected as readers, listeners, and observers? Performance poetry tries to engage the audience, encourage new voices to the mic, and create an accessible art form. And everyday readers often felt disconnected from conventional poems because although they were potential poets, their gender and race placed them at the “margins of mainstream literary establishments” (Wheeler 151). These aspiring poets felt either unqualified, silenced, or lost within the standard movements of poetry; now, these performance poets feel energized by the possibility and potential of performance poetry, which gets personal, telling truths of the poet and inviting reactions from its audience; it drips of personality and feeling by way of memories, encouragements, and warnings. Words take on a hands-on, kinesthetic kind of feeling for those who felt lost between the pages of standard poetry.

Since the inception of competitive slam, performance poetry has spiraled continuously upward. Marc Smith wanted to create a dynamic atmosphere, where a diverse group of people could gather and celebrate the power of language: “Back in 1984, slam poetry ripped its way out of its artistic womb and resurrected the spoken word literary tradition” (Marc Smith xxiii). Smith, a construction worker and poet, began developing a competition, although the categories of winners and losers were not meant

to be important. Rather, he hoped that the new, competitive nature of poetry would add a hip, sociable edge to inspire others' involvement. Smith wanted to shift perceptions of poetry; he wanted everyone to think they could both write it and listen to it by making poetry fun and accessible to diverse groups. He wanted to change people's perceived truths about poetry by adding a new layer of poetry's definition to their heteroglossia and thus, shift their terministic screens:

One fall night, in [Chicago's Get Me High Jazz Club], poetry did something it hadn't done for decades. It rose off the page and wafted into the lungs of its passionate creators. It jumped up on the bar, right alongside the beer bottles and half-empty glasses. It embodied itself in the very poet-performers who created it. (xxiii)

From that night, performance poetry has grown into a popular genre for many up-and-coming poets, some with formal educations and some without. And people are excited about words and the messages the words create. Slams, held in various locales from bars to laundromats, bring in droves of intrigued listeners, all who want to listen to voiced poetry that create new truths through stimulated knowledge. The competitive form of poetry has brought interest back to a wilting literary art: "If you call a poetry reading a 'reading,' you never know how many will show. If you call a poetry gathering a 'competition,' they will come. And they still do" (Jacobus 89). No doubt, Marc Smith had an ingenious idea.

From that time in 1984, performance poetry has developed into an ever-growing art form for diverse groups of people in the United States and internationally. The inaugural National Poetry Slam in the United States began in 1989 after performance

poetry's warm acceptance into scenes like New York City and San Francisco. The first event was held in San Francisco, and poets from Chicago and New York City also competed. Since then, the national championship has migrated from city to city in the United States, with its second and third stages being set in Chicago and Boston (Marc Smith 18). Performance poetry, since its days in the small jazz club of Chicago, has "changed and continues to change the way the world views poetry" (15). Students who always felt disconnected to language are finding out they are poets with messages to craft and knowledge to impart, and adults in marginalized pockets of society are finding their place to get up, stand up, and speak. We – the speakers and audience of performance poetry – are creating a new label for poetry, and the world is taking notice as new venues pop up internationally.

According to Ted Kooser, U.S. Poet Laureate from 2004 to 2006 and winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, "More people, huge numbers of people, are following poetry today, poems of every kind, because of the energy overflowing from performance poetry, and that's a good thing for all of us, however you shake it" (xix). When people participate in the experience of performance poetry, they are connecting to ideas, learning about new perspectives, and stepping both inside and outside their own thoughts. Poets are discussing issues that the news doesn't cover to jar the audience out of its comfort zone, such as the innocent 80-year old woman in Atlanta gunned down by undercover police in her own home because they were misinformed it was a crack house.

Indeed, audience members feel a connection to the words, to the poet, through oral poetry that can be lost and lifeless in a textbook; my husband, a science-minded man who scoffed at the word "poetry," is a testament to that after our first performance poetry

event. Billy Collins, U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003 and the New York State Poet in 2004, also agrees with this idea: “To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison cell of the page, where silence is enforced, to a freedom dependent only on the ability to open the mouth – that most democratic of instruments – and speak” (3). The poet and the audience face one another, transacting as words move from mouth to ear, which creates a dynamic, two-way relationship (4). The relationship between the two parties, woven together in a realm of sculpted messages that impart a poet’s truth and the audience’s reflection of that truth, can be felt in the hum of energy, of passion, of poetry at the venue that moves everyone to a collective feeling of awe that revises truth for all involved. Again, it creates an experience from which all parties become actors to establish a new line of knowledge. It is a whole different experience from the poetry of written words.

Watching the poet’s performance on stage, the audience must engage with both the words and delivery of the poetry, giving instant feedback to how he or she is portraying ideas for truth. Having experienced the 2008 Individual World Poetry Slam in Charlotte, I can attest to this phenomenon; after listening to performance poetry for three hours, I was exhausted from feeling the emotions rushing through me from the poets, bouncing from happy to sad to angered. And whenever I felt an emotion, I let the poet know with claps, snaps, and cheers depending on the emotion. Collins plays into this idea of audience interaction in his “Poems on the Page, Poems in the Air”:

The immediacy of a live reading extends to the listener a degree of participation. Paying attention approaches being a creative act when we realize that the poem is being enacted beyond our control – the control we

exercise with a text by pausing, rereading, and skipping . . . We submit to the pace of the reader who governs the experience; we relax into a state of acceptance not common to reading – we can even close our eyes. (5)

But while the audience may relax and enjoy the experience, poets now have new layers to think about when crafting their words: “Slam poets learned early on that they had better please the audience if they wanted to have any hopes of surviving, let alone winning, a competition. In the poet-audience relationship, the audience is the standoffish mate that that poet must woo” (Marc Smith 22). Again, reflecting on the Individual World Poetry Slam, I must mention that there was nothing worse than a poet who could not work the audience, whose word of truth left crickets in the seats beyond the stage; the juxtaposition of cheers for one poet and none for the next creates a voluminous tide of feedback for poets. The poet must please the audience by suiting his or her poetry to a diverse listening group, thinking not only about his or her message but also about those listening to the words and how they are delivered. In theoretical terms, the successful poet must always keep the ever-changing elements of Burke’s dramatisic pentad in mind: if the scene changes, the act may need to change as well. A poet must think about his or her venue when performing a poem; what works in one place for content or delivery may not work in another. A standing ovation in Ontario may mean the oh-so-dreaded crickets in Los Angeles. It always depends on multiple factors involved, such as location, audience, and line up, and the poet needs to make active decisions about his or her poetry each moment he or she has the stage. It becomes a balancing act of the pentad’s ratios; the poet needs to speak his or her individual truth while connecting to the audience and sharing a new,

collective form of that truth. As agents, poets must keep their purpose, while adjusting to the ever-changing scenes, acts, and agencies.

Some critics worry that this balancing act topples over more often than not. Because competitive performance poetry uses audience input, and novice, everyday people judge the poets' words and performances, some critics believe much of performance poetry is unsuitable against standard poetry on the written page. Performance poetry's competitiveness creates a concern for more standard poets, who say that competition strangles the poetics. Performance poets sometimes become too caught up with crowd pleasing and winning, working their words to suit the audience and losing sincerity in their art form. Unfortunately, they become caught in the competition, forgetting the underlying purpose of performance poetry, which is to share their knowledge with the unscholarly to develop new truths. However, competition occurs within conventional academic poetry as well, through submissions, editors, fame, and publications. In both arenas, instead of using poetry for certain reasons, "be it to define one's self, to defend one's self, or to describe one's environment with accuracy, communicating a clear understanding of what is going on in the world," poets sometimes lose sight of bringing poetry "back to the people" because they are being too exclusive or too glory hungry (Medina xx). Perhaps poets from neither realm can escape the competitive nature of their fields; rather, all poets should embrace the idea of imparting truth as a primary motive to winning, to popularity, to funding. If we lose sight of poetry's purpose, we lose sight of poetry. Perhaps this is why, in competitive performance poetry, Marc Smith continually reminds all poets that "the points are not the point, the point is poetry." Every time I hear this phrase, I become grounded again,

appreciating the poets' passion and courage to deliver their messages through well-crafted language to an audience of strangers.

Performance poetry “engages all the meanings of poetic voice... its emphasis on the poet’s presence, its relation to song and vernacular speech, its connotations of singularity and originality” (Wheeler 129). Its competitive side does not necessarily damage the quality of poetry written and delivered. Effective communication of a truth should trump many to any issues developed by a competition. In performance poetry, “[the poet] must have the power to observe and to select what is significant, and the power to communicate, through his [or her] art, the significance of what he [or she] has observed” (Crump 4). Bringing together these two components, a performance poet becomes a creator of language and experience, communicating with blue collar and white collar, heterosexual and gay, old and young. A performance poet’s well-crafted poem becomes an instigator for new, collective truths, just as a conventional poem does in the realm of books.

In a sense, then, poets are much like archers, and their words are like arrows. Poets must craft their arrows to be level and balanced, sharp and accurate, to strike truth-sharing arrows clearly with their audiences. Because of the importance of calculating clarity, performance poets spend time and effort on their poetry, focusing on both their words and their performance: “[High] scoring performers like the ones who appear at nationals tend to memorize their pieces, right down to the timing, pitch, and volume of individual syllables” (Wheeler 147). They take their poetry, their crafted work, very seriously, wanting to make strong, emotion-filled impressions on their audiences: “What we do is not a diving competition. It is a competition for the hearts and minds of a live

audience, and the key to their hearts and minds is their attention. In order to hold their attention, we have to make some concessions” (McCarthy, “Degrees” 159). Transforming poetry from its standard medium of written text to an oral tradition creates a change in words, in poet-audience relationship, and in overall craft because of the constant utterances created between parties to build a new truth. Performance poetry has branched from its beginnings, trying an inclusive method of drawing crowds of the average person into its competition, its language, its intrigue. Performance poetry draws people into sociable community where poems are revised based on audience feedback, an anomaly to the conventional style of poetry.

Overall, performance poetry moves towards collective truths that encompass the knowledge of all who participate: “The true goal is to inspire people from all walks of life to listen to poetry, appreciate and respect its power, and ultimately take to the stage to perform their own original works” (Marc Smith 20). In no way does performance poetry want to exclude any group; if it means poets do not fit socially accepted standards, the performance poetry subculture is willing to flex and bend and grow with acceptance. And, more to the point, an onlooker learning about performance poetry must remember “that competition is secondary to poetry and performance, that ‘points are not the point,’ that connecting to the audience is what it’s all about, and that slam has no hierarchal structure designed to lock people out” (20).

With this in mind, performance poetry encourages ideas of freedom and creativity: “There is no one way to write and no right way to write” (Bell 132). After all, how can there be only one way to impart truth or create an experience when each poet and each audience is so different? Really, the subculture only hopes that more people will

induct themselves into the revolutionary movement of performance poetry, learning to love the collective truths that words and experiences bring to themselves and others. This movement has not been lost in the competition of performance poetry, and many audience members feel the rush of emotion reverberating through a poet's words. Since the slam movement of 1984, performance poetry only has grown. The inclusive nature of its movement has created an open invitation for anyone willing to give performance poetry a try. After all, "[the] only license you need to speak is a readiness to listen" (84).

Because of performance poetry's popularity, accounts and opinions written by poets document the rise of performance poetry, discussing how spoken word poetry evolved, why the initial slam took place, and what has made performance poetry rise in popularity; "[performances] are taking place at colleges and libraries, bars and coffee shops, bookstores, galleries, and at least one Laundromat . . ." (Collins 3). Gaining momentum and building a framework from the Beatniks onward, performance poetry commonly asks the age-old question, "What does it mean to be human?" (Eleveld 12). The audience wants to feel questioned by the knowledge and truth of the poet, with each listening member recalculating his or her truth in regards to what has been experienced from the stage. Because all performance poetry roots in changing social problems and evaluating the "realities of existence" (13), the audience is constantly renegotiating ideas of humanity and reality. Therefore, depending on the subject matter and the poet, performance poetry takes on a multitude of styles and forms, carrying messages about subcultures, politics, or childhood stories. A poet's life becomes engrained in his or her poetry, and he or she shares experiences with those who will listen. The poet gives the audience a portal through which to visualize a particular corner store in an Atlanta

neighborhood or a specific park in the heart of Charlotte, which takes finely crafted creativity, language, and delivery.

In chapters two and three, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis of interview responses and poetry from four poets who live in Atlanta and Charlotte. Alongside what poets and educators have already documented about performance poetry in regards to its history and its usefulness in the classroom, this research will help develop and enhance understanding of performance poetry's relationships. Why do I want to accomplish this newfound understanding? Because I, along with others who love words and truth and poetry, believe "the spoken word movement is going to bring about a new Golden Age of American poetry" (McCarthy, "Answering Carol" 125). And in this age, each listener's truth will once again be defined and redefined with every performance poetry bout he or she attends. And that idea of truth sharing and methods of doing so is exactly what the poets discussed when I interviewed them.

CHAPTER TWO: POETS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH PERFORMANCE POETRY

In the course of a poem I will say some things that could make you uneasy, but it is written to make you kind of uneasy.

Jon Goode, Personal Interview

Turning away from general concepts about performance poetry and how it began, I want to investigate how performance poets develop, cultivate, and maintain relationships with their poetry and therefore make meaningful connections with their audiences. When crafting my thesis ideas, I wondered how scene and audience affected poets, but now I also wonder how poets react to these constantly changing elements as they adapt to continuous feedback while performing.

To learn more about the poets and their craft, I interviewed four poets from the Southeast: two from Charlotte and two from Atlanta. I selected the poets based on my previous encounters with them. Before even thinking about the thesis requirement for my master's degree, I had participated in performance poetry events by Bluz and Carlos Robson from Charlotte and Jon Goode and Paul D from Atlanta. Because I had experienced their poetry in person and had already established acquaintances with them, I felt that collecting my primary data from them would be both beneficial and straightforward. However, I will note that this chapter and the next focus solely on these poets, and while a few broad assumptions for the performance poetry realm may rise from this case study, this is just that – a case study that does not encompass every poet out there.

As I think about cities in any region, one of the first ways I define them are through their movement – of people, of thoughts, and of cultures. And with many cities in

the United States, I think about how large yet compact they are with businesses.

However, this same compact grid does not hold true of Southern cities; rather, Southern cities tend to sprawl outward faster than upward, creating a large volume of purposeful movement for residents of cities like Atlanta and Charlotte.

Both of these Southern cities have also dealt with issues of racial divides, as both areas having been known as biracial cities composed of blacks and whites, with whites living in the suburbs and blacks living in the inner city - but these patterns are shifting and blending. More whites are moving to the cities, and more blacks are moving into the suburbs (Cities). This change is creating a more integrated environment in which people live and work. However, Atlanta still is the most segregated city in Georgia and falls second only to Chicago, Illinois, for the nation. And Charlotte is progressing, yet struggling, as well (Cities).

Conducting one face-to-face interview and three phone interviews, I developed an insight into the four poets' conscious uses of rhetorical strategies that they have developed in their respective cities. And although each poet gave information from his own perspective and experiences, I noticed multiple overlaps in their rhetorical strategies, which I will discuss throughout this chapter. Interestingly, all the poets knowingly use rhetorical strategies while crafting and delivering a poem, although they did not necessarily know that they employed theories that would make John Locke, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and other rhetoricians proud. Instead, they learned – and continue to learn – about rhetoric instinctually through continuous feedback from audiences and fellow poets.

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that the poets had a primary mission to share a message with the audience, hoping to develop a new truth with them. This truth takes place when poets connect with the audience members, imparting their knowledge from carefully crafted words. And this new truth happens for both poet and audience when the poet names a topic that seems unnamable, shifts previously conceived truths, and reveals new knowledge that adds to heteroglossia. When these three layers mold together, the poet and the audience become unified in the poetic moment, creating a feeling of sublime due to the connection all parties share through spoken words.

Because of poetry's honest and revealing intentions and the reason for poetry's existence – to communicate – the poets try their best to relate what they know to the audience, and each poet tries to make this connection by use of language. For Robson, performance poetry is “a vehicle to be able to tell stories” because being a storyteller was all he ever wanted. By moving through experiences he once had, Robson can relate them to the audience by telling compact, succinct stories within the poetic form. One example of this practice for Robson happens in his poem “Sam,” which is about his childhood mentor, a black man who taught him about pride and power and love. Robson even recreates Sam's stutter, a speech impediment Sam had developed when beaten by the cops. From this personal touch, he creates the foundation for his story, allowing his audience to attach to his narrative and develop a connection not only to Robson as the speaker but to the stuttering Sam he recreates for listeners to know and respect.

But then a larger question arises: why do Robson and other poets feel this need to take internal thoughts of experiences and transform them into words – a very public message – that others can relate to? Goode, a poet from Atlanta, believes that his

relationship with poetry can help verbalize an issue: “It’s like this viable art form that can be used to express a message, get up on stage to help better articulate the nature of your problem. That’s me and poetry.” And that’s how many poets began their relationship with words, wanting to develop a message that means something to them and may mean something to others as well.

Coupled with the poets’ initial desires to communicate their own ideas, experiences, and reflections with others comes a hope to help others who may be going through similar experiences. Poets hope they can relay messages that may help, inspire, educate or rejuvenate their audiences. And serious poets do not take this task lightly. According to Paul D, “It’s a gift to be able to put words together where another person could understand it, and I think it is the responsibility in my opinion of poets to – if you have this gift – share your gift.” I whole-heartedly agree, and if anyone disagrees, please try to craft a poem chock full of meaning and originality; I tried, and wow, was it difficult.

A good poet, a poet who connects successfully with the audience, must – in the eyes of Paul D – be “an open-minded person to accept that you can do better as a writer, without being spiteful toward another poet.” Having this kind of mindset, poets can build themselves to be prime communicators that create truth with those who listen to them. But it takes time and creativity and a solid sense of rhetorical style, whether or not the poets know academic terms. Bluz noted how Charlotte’s poets push each other to develop stronger skills all the time: “We’ll look at a certain metaphor like love is a chair. How do I make love better than a chair? Maybe love is a La-Z-Boy given on Christmas for back pain... We’re never satisfied with the first way we say things.” Most poets aren’t

satisfied with the regular, the norm, because it will not shock people into learning a new way to view reality and therefore, share a new truth. For instance, if a poet says that love is like a red, red rose, he or she is not only plagiarizing but also replaying a beaten-to-death idea with which people will not connect. Instead, poets need to deliver fresh content to the audience, which can be difficult. Think about it. We all have experienced emotions and relationships since our births, so how can a poet make something original for an audience?

One way they create a new dynamic, along with constant revision to performance practices, is to pull ideas from their communities and as Goode said, serve as the news of the street. All four poets I interviewed mentioned the importance of highlighting issues and disparities of their hometown and of the South. Issues like racism and gentrification came into our discussions, as well as poverty and socioeconomic statuses. Because the poets serve as messengers of the people and to the people, they have taken the torch to discuss issues that others will not touch. Goode told me such a story that was not covered much by media and I cannot do it justice by splintering it into fragmented quotes:

I don't know if it made national news, but... the cops kicked in [an older black woman's] door because they thought that she was running a crack house, like a drug house. And they had what is known as a no-knock warrant; I don't know if you heard of it, but it means that they don't have to knock. They're just kicking your door. And they were undercover cops. They hadn't identified themselves as police. So if you put yourself in her position: you're an older black woman living in not the best neighborhood, these men dressed in regular clothes, kick in your door with guns. So [this] 80-year-old woman, pulled out her gun and started

shooting. So she shoots one of them, and they end up killing her. Come to find out that they had an informant, like a crack head that was just a confidential informant... and he had lied and told them that he had bought crack from this house that he hadn't... [The police] didn't investigate the information, they just pursued it... They killed this woman, and then they went on to say that this was a crack house. That this was a justified shooting. So then... the whole thing becomes unraveled and the truth comes out. But something like that ends up in the work [the poetry]. But that story, I don't think that story goes nationwide, but in Atlanta, that's absorbed in your work.

All four poets mentioned stories like this about their community, their home, and I was left astounded with each story and the unnamable topics that they find to pack into their poems. But then, if poets are to share truths with the people, it seems natural for poets to seek out such stories that become buried into nonexistence. Poets bring them back to life, reviving them into the audience members' heteroglossia and then, if the poem successfully connects, to their reality. This process is what poets connect with in themselves and with their audiences every moment they are on stage. Therefore, poets are reporters within the art and performance worlds, educating people – in everyday language – about the happenings taking place next door, around the corner, down the street, and beyond.

Writing is the first step and practicing is the second, but for each poet, different methods are used to create the strong rhetorical triangle that will connect poet to words to audience. A message does not just appear – the poet diligently works at defining the root of the message within the brief duration of the poem. By trying to find the right balance

of language, not using too many or too few words, these poets are connecting with the audience without losing them in verbose language or isolated images and thoughts. Essentially, by finding a way to harness this concision, poets' few words create an impact that many audience members have never felt before – that's precisely what happened to me during my first experience with performance poetry, which I described in the introduction.

After the first two steps of writing and practicing, poets also must decide how they will learn their poems for a more solid sense of voice inflection, body language, and other on-stage deliverables that feel natural. Paul D believes that a poet can achieve this in-the-moment delivery by using a third step when preparing performance poetry:

To me it's like a three-step process. You have the writing process and then a lot of people stop at what I consider the second process, which would be memorization, and I think it goes to one more level, which is internalization... When you internalize, it actually becomes real to you, becomes emotional to you, so I think that really transcending point is when you can take a poem and memorize it but then take it to the next level and really feel that concept and take it to a spiritual level.

This layer of performance poetry is extremely important because words and moves alone will not allow a poet and his or her message to connect with the audience. Rather, the poet must connect with the experience or mood that he or she experienced when feeling inspired to write the piece, finding this emotion again when delivering the poem on stage. Robson describes this process as solidifying an emotional timeline with the poem because it "really puts things right back to where [he] was when [he] was writing it, or if it is a

true story, where [he] was when [he] experienced it.” If a poet can do this successfully, he or she will recreate a new layer to the experience that will influence what the audience experiences and feels. Only after this experience will the audience members have the opportunity to feel the tidal wave of meaning and purpose for the words and ideas that resonate from the stage, potentially defining a new truth for everyone in the room.

Robson feels that everyday language is a key for success, thinking that if he is performing in front of an audience, he should communicate to the audience. “I don’t need to talk over their heads or write anything that goes over their heads,” said Robson. By using too many murky words, where average people may not know the definition, the poets will lose the attention and the connection that they may have with the audience; therefore, the audience members will not be a part of a recreated experience and feel any changes to their own truths.

During my interviews, all four poets mentioned this concern that poets will get too caught up in the frills of language and delivery when the purpose is to create accessibility to a subject. Because of this concern, poets try to keep themselves in check and keep the poetry on a more simple yet powerful level. Bluz thinks that “poets can get on the soapbox and be way too serious and sometimes that’s a turn off for people because it feels like you’re preaching to them all the time.” Henry Louis Gates would agree with Bluz because to be signifyin’, the poet must be teachy, not preachy, to reach open-minded audiences. Poets need to step off soapboxes and mix up their words and deliveries for troubling content because they want to connect with audiences about a variety of subjects involved in their poetry.

To make a second point about accessibility, people can get too much of a good thing – including somber poetry. In fact, sometimes – as Bluz says – “they want to know that you laugh at stuff that you probably shouldn’t laugh at and that draws them in a little bit more and let’s them know that you’re just like them. And whenever you deliver a story or a poem, it gives them a better sense of your sincerity.” After all, poets are everyday people who use everyday language just like everyone else.

Oftentimes, the poets discuss topics that can be deemed uncomfortable, such as suicide, rape, racism, physical abuse, and molestation. They take topics that people tend to avoid discussing and put these topics out in the open, and by doing this, the poets may be sharing a new truth for someone trying to overcome his or her personal problems. For example, a young woman in the audience may be dealing with the issue of rape but never speaks of it, keeping it locked away as an untruth; if she doesn’t say it, it isn’t true. However, this silence also means that if she does not name the wrongdoing and experience it as a truth, she will never be able to overcome it. A poet can help with that. When people realize that others have gone through similar situations, they may no longer feel alone if they trust and connect with the words and experience of the poet and use the poet’s naming as their own beginning for creating a reality to overcome. A person needs to go through the process of acknowledging, speaking, and naming the issue to turn it into a truth within the person’s reality, and performance poets can help people cope with this process because, as Bakhtin suggests, social experiencing precedes consciousness.

The uncomfortable factor of naming what is sometimes unnamable for audience members also is a primary reason that poets integrate humor into some of their serious material. Paul D says, “I know – generally speaking – that if I can relate to that crowd

and mix in some humor with a fresh perspective, a fresh concept, and with a well-crafted piece, I feel like I will be able to get them emotionally invested in my poem.” Many other poets follow similar trains of thought. By listening to a serious subject in a lighthearted poem, people find it easier to digest the knowledge imparted to them from the stage, and thus, poets attain their goal – connecting to the audience and, hopefully, helping shift someone’s truth about an issue. Perhaps this is why Goode tries to find alternative approaches to heavy poems: “I take the subject matter and then I take, I think about what I’m trying to do with this poem, as far as it could be a very, very heavy matter and because of that, I might write the poem kind of funny. So in everything, no matter how heavy it is, I might find the humor in it and bring that to life.” A poet, then, has many ways through which to deliver a heavy message: with humor, with anger, with sadness, or with frustration.

Goode mentions one specific instance for this humorous practice; he wrote a poem about promiscuity in a nightclub “that’s written funny... because even though it’s a serious subject, there’s a lightness and a humor to be found.” In “Hell Naw,” Goode addresses issues about people randomly hooking up for one-night stands, not knowing the other person’s name and not thinking about potential health hazards. By naming the escalating danger of sexually transmitted infections, Goode creates a poem that hopefully allows the audience to accept the warning about promiscuity while remaining at ease in their seats. He does this by telling a story about an anonymous woman he meets at the club who throws herself at him and the skeptical thoughts that traveled through his mind as she hit on him: he clearly notes that physical intimacy with a drunk, scantily clad woman he doesn’t know is not a chance he wants to take because who knows how many

men she's seduced. And on some level, most people can relate to this situation because most people have been to a bar or club and know the sexualized climate involved in such scenes. Because they can relate through shared experiences that are recreated in that moment of Goode's performance, the audience members may connect the message Goode is positioning before them: clubs can be fun, but promiscuity can be dangerous, so be careful. Goode relays a cautionary tale of a familiar club scene that he simultaneously pokes fun at and warns against.

This connection from poet to audience member becomes an even stronger link when the poet includes other elements, both literary and physical. Because the poem is a performance to entertain those seated in front of the stage as it is naming issues and sharing new truths, the poets try to create a connection that will interest the audience. In a sense, the poet is counteracting the awkwardness of some stark, stinging material on unnamable topics with alliteration, inflection, movement, and other working tools of a poet. Paul D uses "a lot of imagery, a lot of figurative language" in his poetry, "really trying to focus on the impact of the spoken form of the word."

For Goode, the emphasis of the message keeps his poetry from becoming too dense: "When I'm writing a poem, especially when I get an idea, I want to express that idea as distinctly and precisely as I can. So I don't want to overwrite it, like I don't want to use more words than I have to, to say a thing. But then I don't want to underwrite it, I don't want to leave you feeling unfulfilled and not exactly understanding, you know, the full measure of what it is I'm trying to get across." But sometimes, even with clear words and intelligible structure, the heavy topics brought up in poetry can make audience members uncomfortable to a degree that they will disconnect. Audience members

reacting in such a way will cause a breakdown in communication, when they will no longer connect with the message and language of the poet because the poem's purpose feels too uncomfortable, painful, or raw to continue absorbing the content. Because of this possibility, poets must overcome this awkwardness by playing with a variety of deliveries and styles.

In addition to this need to stay emotionally connected to the experiences that inspired the poems, poets also must observe in detail as many diverse audiences as possible. That way, the poets can have a better feel for assessing how they need to adapt from scene to scene because this change in place may affect their act and purpose.

According to Goode,

What you want to do is get in front of as many different crowds as you want to.

You got to get on stage and say what does this do in front of a black room, in front of a white room, in front of an Asian room, in front of a gay room, in front of a straight room, in front of republicans, in front of democrats... You got to get in front of as many rooms as you can... What does this [poetry] do in this room and if it's not getting the effect I want, what can I do either in the performance or in the delivery to pull people further into it?

Without getting into this habit of performing in front of diverse audiences, accepting change of scene, poets face the downfall of not adjusting rhetorically to their audience for a specific evening. Rather, they stay the same – the same poetry, the same delivery – every single time, which can cause a lapse in communication from poet to audience member because the words no longer become a moving vehicle for sharing truths; instead, the words become stagnant syllables that just hang in the air with no place to go

and no person to influence because each audience has different people, different tastes, and different needs for connections.

Basically, a poet cannot achieve a high level of effectiveness without stepping onto the stage with a mic in hand. A fledgling poet will not know how to recreate an experience for others if he or she never performs poetry in front of an audience. Without time on stage, the poet will never know if the message – the words and deliverables – he or she has planned will ever actually connect to an audience. And in the words of Goode,

There's some practicing that's done at home, but a lot of it evolves on stage. So I tell a lot of people, people come to me all the time and they might dig what I do and they are like, "How do I get better at doing this?" and I'm like it all happens on the stage. If you're not on the stage, then you're missing the whole point because anyone that you've seen that's any good did not get that good in the mirror in their room.

A mirror, then, cannot tell the poet what will work and what won't work; a poet cannot decode the reaction of an audience when practicing in front of a mirror. Instead, the poet must be brave and honest and open, baring inner thoughts on stage for the audience to experience and judge in order for truths to be shared. A poet must maintain this sense of integrity for truth to be successfully shared because an audience must place trust in the poet and the poet's message for the relationship to work. Although poetry is art and art has creative license, the conversational, everyday language of performance poetry creates between the poet and the audience a contractual trust that everything stated is factual, unless framed otherwise. Without tailoring to an audience and remaining trustworthy, a poet will not connect with the audience and share truths.

Robson highlights the issue of adaptation with poets he observed in the past, saying that some poets do not like to change their delivery because once they craft it a certain way, that's the way they do it every time. During the interview, he even recounted a specific time such a situation happened:

I was at a slam two days ago and the stuff that was going over well was really sort of slow, thoughtful stuff. And they [the audience members] were reacting to the slow, thoughtful delivery a lot, and they were giving bad scores to sort of preaching, screaming poems, and a poet got up there toward the end of the bout and did a poem that was written sort of thoughtful and emotional, but [he] did it in a sort of a screaming way... [He] didn't get a rich score, and I thought if [he] had only slowed down the delivery or you know, put a little more subtlety in their performance, then [he] would have gotten a better score.

Robson makes an interesting point, discussing how a poet will not relate to an audience if he or she does not change his or her style to adapt to the scene. Poets cannot leap onto stage without thinking about what poems they will perform and how they will perform them. Instead, they must observe the audience, watching for indicators of members connecting or disconnecting with other poets on stage, and decide what strategies will work best. In competitive performance poetry, a "blood poet" who is not an official competitor will take the stage and perform a poem, which allows even the first contender for the bout to gauge his or her audience before competing. By doing this, poets have the opportunity to make the most of their time, working with their words, moves, and other performance tools to deliver a well-received poem to the audience.

Poets, then, must predict how the audience will assess them. From the first moment a poet steps on stage, he or she is making an impression on the audience: dress, hair, posture, and movement become instantaneous characteristics to which the audience reacts. Paul D reflected on some advice his mentor, a professor at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, gave him about the poet's image on stage and how it affects the audience: "[He] was even trying to get me to concentrate on everything from really what outfit you are in. I remember him giving me button-up shirts, you know, and just really, he didn't want me to put a lot of focus on the outfit. I could have a red t-shirt on with a glittery design that could lose somebody's attention." For most poets, every physical aspect of their person is a vital element to connecting with the audience, from general appearance to their facial expressions and move their limbs on stage. The poets want audience members to focus on the words and delivery of the poem – the heart of the poem itself – but not become distracted by fashion, hairstyle, or other physical characteristics. Rather, these elements should be complementary to poets' overall rhetorical strategies for performances.

After deciding on physical appearance and entering the stage, many poets take a moment to find their tone for their poem and create a pause for audience members to clean their palettes of past performances. And most poets agree with Robson that "really the only thing is the audience and the relationship I'm building with the audience." For Robson specifically, he tries to do this by creating poetry as if he's having a dialogue with the audience, which makes sense. All performance poets are performing in front of an audience that is encouraged to visibly and verbally react, so utterances between the performer and audience member happen at every instant. Because of this, Robson wants

his poetry to sound like he's talking to his audience: "I feel like if I'm going to communicate, I should communicate how the everyday man communicates. And that's just in pure conversation." Many of the poets have figured out these kinds of clues for everyday, approachable language in an accessible dialogue from their fellow poets, accepting critiques about their attempted connections with audiences.

However, with this mindset of using accessible language and format, poets also must consider the risk of being cliché, which can hurt them because of the staleness of material. Audience members need something new, something original within the poem in order to shift their ideas about a subject; otherwise, the response is "yeah, yeah, I've heard that before." When Robson first entered the performance poetry scene in Charlotte five years ago, he said that he had the opportunity to be an audience member of poetry before he began writing and performing his own material. And from his experiences as part of the audience, he developed anti-cliché guidelines:

I set up a handful of rules for myself when I first got into this. And I saw a lot of habits that other poets had that I didn't like or that I didn't think I wanted... The first rule is that I always keep my audience in mind... I've always tried to be sort of, you know, speaking in every day conversational, use every day conversational wording and that kind of thing. One of my other rules is I found the 10 or 12 things that were most, the 10 or 12 phrases or sayings that were most commonly used in poetry, and I just sort of threw them out the window. People talk about their soul hurts and pain and this kind of stuff, and I just promised myself I wouldn't go there.

By observing other performances, poets can determine what is used well, used poorly, and over used within performance poetry. And by avoiding clichés or other pitfalls in performing, poets can strengthen their ability to connect the language of their heteroglossia with that of their audience in order to shift terministic screens and share truths.

Ironically, most of the poets did not always know they even liked poetry, let alone that they would one day be recognized as poets – and interviewed for a thesis studying the rhetoric of poetry! Most of the poets began with other academic interests and extracurricular hobbies, stumbling onto poetry during their late teens and early twenties. Goode did not realize his enthusiasm for poetry until cajoled into attending an event by his coworker, assuming all poetry was dull and monotonous. According to Goode,

When I moved to Atlanta [from Richmond, Va.], a friend of mine invited me to go see poetry . . . And I told her I didn't want to hear that. I don't want to do that. I have no desire to go hear a poem. No, not going to do that... I was like, 'If you can catch me before I leave the office at the end of the day, I will go,' and she caught me so I went with her. And it was probably the day that changed my life.

Goode studied business at James Madison University before traveling south to the Atlanta scene, and he never envisioned himself transitioning from working for large businesses to performing poetry. And he's not the only one who traveled a different path before finding poetry. Paul D, who is a middle school teacher by day and performance poet by night, decided to give poetry a go after experiencing it as an audience member. Robson, a Cuban-American poet, went to school in Charlotte in the early to mid-2000s; he attended the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, majoring in psychology, when

he discovered his passion for spoken word. And Bluz graduated with his bachelor's degree in broadcasting from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte before discovering spoken word. Undoubtedly, this blend of backgrounds helps strengthen the poetry scene as poems endure the peer-editing and revision processes, gaining insight from different perspectives that may help broaden the poem's connection when the poet is performing on the stage.

I am glad for those defining days when every poet who has connected with me – has changed my life – turned to poetry as his or her preferred medium of expression. Perhaps it sounds melodramatic, but the power of the spoken word, of a well-delivered poem, can truly alter truth. And every part of this nonlinear connection among poet and words and audience stems from the ideas of Burke's dramatisic pentad: because the scene changes, everything else will shift as well; if the poet remains steadfast in his or her preferred delivery every time in every scene, he or she will have little chance of relating to the audience and creating a new truth in moment with the audience. And that is why rhetorical strategies are so important to the poets – to connect with the audience in hopes of inspiring them to add named utterances to their heteroglossia and develop new, collective truths that will be incorporated into their reality. After all, that is what happened to this audience member; so much so, that I am writing my thesis about it.

CHAPTER THREE: THE POETRY ITSELF

**What those people were able to do with
26 letters and their naked voice was
amazing.**

Jon Goode, Personal Interview

I have felt drawn to poets' materials from Charlotte and Atlanta since I first became infatuated with performance poetry, and during the process of writing this thesis, I have often wondered why. Does the language of their heteroglossia blend with my own, so I identify with them more? Do I connect with the stories they share because I have shared similar experiences? The poets indeed try to create this connection with open-minded audience members in every venue at which they perform; their primary purpose is to deliver a message for audience members to successfully connect with it, so all parties can share a common truth in the poetic moment. Such an occurrence happens to me when I listen to a skilled performance poet: I am not just an observer; I am a participant in an experience that changes my perspectives on poetry, on life, and on truth.

I have listened critically to poetry and will rhetorically analyze the performance poets' poems. Using multiple rhetorical theories and ideas as a multilayered platform for investigating the performance poets' rhetoric, I hope to illustrate the relationship among the poets, their poetry, people, and place.

As the poets mentioned in the last chapter, racial segregation keeps the language and thought for a specific population confined within its neighborhood and culture. Essentially, two people from the same city may have radically different experiences based on their race and socioeconomic status, creating two emphatically separate systems for heteroglossia to develop. So now I have some questions: how can a poet live in such a

divided pattern and not notice, not feel affected, by it in regards to their poetry? How are poets and their poetry affected by such a divide? And how can they connect with audience members who have lived completely different experiences? Poets must make up for this potential disconnect that may exist between themselves and some of their audience members because the audience may not be uniform in tastes or may be a melting pot of characteristics, and the poets must create poems with which people from different scenes can identify. As an audience member who knows this takes place, it can be an interesting process to watch.

Although I enjoy listening to all the poetry written by the four poets, I cannot go through the narrative of each poem of every poet within this thesis. I first thought about choosing the first two poems I heard by each poet, but I then thought of a selection strategy that made me even more excited. I decided to choose two poems by each poet that named issues that others may not have acknowledged or may find unnamable; I chose poems that coax those listeners in silence to feel that instantaneous impact of shared truth, and while some of these poems deal with issues surrounding race, not all do. Granted, my method is a bit biased because I am the only one choosing these named topics, and I want to admit that upfront. However, because this thesis is all about the relationship between poet and audience member, I decided to take my own memories as an audience member sharing truths during these poems and apply them to this research. And so, from here, I would like to move into a discussion about the poems I have chosen, beginning with Atlanta and Goode.

I first met Goode when he performed at Western Carolina University in 2008, and I felt hooked by his language and presence when he performed his poetry on stage.

Perhaps his charismatic personality is why CNN also picked him up, interviewing him for its “Black in America” series. He also has appeared on television for Nike and Nickelodeon. With these major gigs, as well as his performances in Atlanta and around the country, Goode has one important mission: “I try to speak to young people . . . and try to get them to move forward” (Rosenblatt).

“WWW Men” discusses Goode’s knowledge about the difference between guys and men: “Remember when men were men? When they met a woman, married a woman, had a kid, and then stayed to help raise that child, all the while working two jobs to make a living?” He essentially names the issue of men’s shifting role in relationships and in society, and the concerns he has with this shift, which others may silently worry about as well. Goode notes how men have evolved into metrosexuals who care more about their appearance than the average male – waxing their eyebrows, indulging in pedicures, and going Dutch on dates. And in many cities, metrosexuals have been on the rise; however, Goode does not favor this shift in the actions of men, making fun of those men, some of whom may even be in Goode’s audience in urban venues. However, he may be silencing those metrosexuals while giving voice to those who feel the same way as him; if this happens, metrosexuals may disconnect from the point of his poem and feel offended by the named issue. Perhaps, though, this is a chance poets must take to protect themselves from turning into chameleons that never stick to a certain point; poets must face a constant battle of balancing audience members’ connection to their own integrity for ideas of truth. In the following passage, although Goode continues to potentially silence metrosexuals, he gives voice to women by addressing the female audience members, who may know or be dating one of the men called into question. And he unwaveringly holds

true to his opinion about metrosexuals:

Staring in the mirror, wondering if their pants make their butts look as big as yours when they do the Beyonce dance. Men do not do the Beyonce dance. Men change the oil in your car, buy you drinks in the bar, late night on the sofa with one hand unhook or unsnap your bra.

Poking fun at metrosexuals and stereotyping other men, Goode is signifyin(g) through humor as a way to reach his audience of both sexes. By making a reference to Beyonce, a well-known singer and dancer, Goode stokes his humorous fire, allowing his intended audience to attach not only to his point about metrosexuals but also through the celebrity he fits into his poem. By assuming that everyone knows who Beyonce is, Goode allows the audience to connect his language to their own heteroglossia and imagine a metrosexual – who may be different in each audience member’s mind – dancing like the voluptuous celebrity. Goode also acknowledges the point that some metrosexual habits are okay, such as watching for cholesterol or cursing less, but he still comes back to wishing men were still men. Goode then narrows his poem to his own experience, telling the audience about a friend:

I mean just the other day I’m talking to a friend. He’s got a manicure, pedicure, eyebrows waxed and a tan. He’s explaining to me that metro is in, then complaining to me, saying that his woman won’t let him be a man. I told him, ‘I don’t understand, Pa. Why would someone have to let you be something you already are?’

In the passage, Goode is signifyin(g) by directing his poem at a particular person in the poem, although his question seems to refract out to metrosexual men in his audience. He

is making a conversational poem that includes everyday language that everyday people can relate to and feel a part of. In addition, Goode makes an important word choice by referring to his friend as “Pa,” a term used in the South for a male friend. By using a term familiar with many in Goode’s primary audience, which seem to be men who need to take charge of their responsibilities instead of worrying over trivial trends and facades, the unknown friend becomes more familiar and relatable, and many listeners may be able to place themselves or one of their own friends into the faceless character’s role. He creates a potential connection with his audience because of the individualized nature of these specific lines, although by naming a voice for metrosexuals through his friend, he silences the actual voices of metrosexuals within his audience and assigns them the voice within his poem. Perhaps, then, with the delicate balance of sharing truths and possibly silencing voices, Goode assesses his audience before deciding the accessibility of this poem.

However, the fact that Goode uses humorous lines through his poem may cause any disconnect in the audience to narrow; it is hard to disagree with someone when he or she makes you laugh. With Goode’s simple demeanor and honest opinion creating trust within the audience, his humor seems less threatening and more questioning, allowing room for reflection instead of resentment, although some dissent may still form. If nothing else, the audience members’ heteroglossia expands, adding Goode’s views to their own ideas about metrosexuals and how men should act, and therefore, both the poet and the audience are sharing a new, collective truth about the role of men.

“Allegory of the Pot of Gold” describes a situation in the heart of Atlanta; Goode names a social issue that many people ignore with silence, turning their heads from

homeless people asking for help and for change. Speaking about a homeless man on the corner of Rainbow Drive and Candler Road, Goode begins by saying,

And there he was standing there, perfectly imperfect like a fallen angel . . .
 searching for his pot of gold, shaking his cup like a prospector hoping his dreams
 pan out. He was thin as a specter there with his hand held out. He was called a
 man by none, a son by one, a father by two, his name by few, and worthless by
 all. And worst of all is that his rise and fall wasn't as epic as Rome's but equally
 as tragic.

With this opening, Goode sets the rhetorical stage for this man, creating a triangle of attachment between himself, his intended audience (those chasing money), and the man on the street, and Atlantans envision this man standing on a street corner in their hometown, an image they've already probably seen many times before. Already, by using this familiar landmark, Goode creates a connection with his hometown audience, many who feel marginalized on levels of race and income, who immediately recognize the situation he paints from their daily urban lives. In addition, by naming different roles to the homeless individual – man, son, father – audience members become more attached to the poem's homeless man and its purpose because we all have these types of personal roles and relationships. Goode makes this rhetorical move to make a deeper connection with his audience.

And just then, Goode switches it up, broadening this poem to include many men as he links this metaphorical man to most of society: "His dreams for the future rest squarely in his cup, and I wonder how many men are unaware that they are in his exact same position." Switching from the image of the man to the idea that many men are "only

a paycheck away from the same fate,” Goode juxtaposes the moving descriptions of the homeless man with the potential situations of men who are experiencing success for now. Just like the poor man who will dart out into traffic for a quarter rolling away, men of a similar temperament will chase their dreams for success, for the next big break, risking it all for something they may never attain. Neither situation is too far away from the other because they both incorporate the same human desire to succeed and the risk of remaining stagnant, which may relate to the audience’s words and thoughts, and help them develop a new truth with Goode. With this tale, spun in poetry, Goode is signifyin(g) through metaphorical images that are rooted in the “everyday, real world” situations of Atlantans trying to escape poverty and climb the socioeconomic ladder, so the connection of poet and words and audience grow stronger. He connects with his audience’s heteroglossia and expands it, and a new truth develops that may change the way audience members interact with real-life representatives of the metaphorical man; they now have a name for what was once trapped in silence.

Another Atlanta-based poet, Paul D, was born in Ohio, but his family moved to the South when he was a child. Born of a black father and Hebrew mother, he continuously tried to define himself, especially after the move south. Perhaps this is why, when I listen to his poetry, I often reflect on theories from Bakhtin that pertain to identity. Paul D reflects on the power of the I-for-the-other way that people often develop as a sense of identity and encourages us to value the I-for-myself perception of identity. I first heard Paul D perform at Western Carolina University as the headlining poet one evening in 2008, and I can still hear him performing lines from “Lovely.”

The first poem on Paul D's CD, "Lovely," names his issues with identity. Half black and half Hebrew, Paul D often had to field questions of his peers in the schoolyard, and would ask his mother for answers because he wanted to name an identity acceptable to the schoolchildren and therefore, acceptable to himself. Paul D utilizes repetition when each group of children labels him: "But when the white kids see me at the playground, they call me nigger," "When the black kids see me at the playground, they call me cracker," and "When the brothers see me at the playground, they call me Oreo." The similarity among all the different scenarios of name calling allows his intended audience, others who may be marginalized by their appearances, to identify with his experiences in regards to derogatory names and rude sets of categorizing people based on skin color. And since the South is a place with notable race relations, it is not too far fetched to assume that those within his audience can relate to his confused language because they have been labeled with similar derogatory names. It also opens the idea that all races, all people, judge and label those unlike themselves. And although many people experience discrimination, not everyone has experienced labels from two races of people to which they feel like they belong, which may open audience member's ideas to the power that words hold over those in search of a voice, an identity.

By showing us both sides and the confusion he feels, Paul D recreates the difficult experiences he felt as a child, to which everyone involved in the performance can attach; many listeners have felt out of place at some point, whether race is a factor or not, so Paul D's search for an identity develops a truth-building connection between poet and audience. He also explains his mother's answers to his questions about his color, saying his is the color of the wind, the clouds, and love. When Paul D asks about the color of

love, his mother says, “Love don’t need no color, and that’s why you don’t need one either.” The audience begins to think about this – that love has no color. From there, Paul D begins to sing, “Color me lovely, color me lovely,” signifyin(g) through his repetitive rhythmic fluency and sound. He begins and ends with this sing-song phrase, creating a memorable frame for a lasting impression on listeners who are moving toward a new truth with him about concepts of love, color, and equality.

In “Pusher Man,” Paul D names an issue about historical and cultural issues of freedom that still haunt blacks and other marginalized people. In the poem, he uses this idea of freedom to push people to recreate their identities within the context of history, to redefine their pasts and therefore, their futures through the power of words and truth. To frame this issue, he begins talking about his high school experience, which is when many young, impressionable people learn about historical issues like war, slavery, and social justice:

My history book in high school said that the honorable Nelson Mandela died in some mildewed, rat-infested, overcrowded South African prison over 20 years ago. Slavery in that history book in high school was only one chapter long.

Emancipation in that history book in high school was only one paragraph long; there was only one sentence on the great Harriet Tubman and only one word on the Zulu nation and not even three little syllables saying, “I’m sor-ry.”

His intended audience may try to think back to their own high school experiences to remember the biased history books that taught them erroneous facts and to begin questioning the knowledge they have thus far. And by questioning what is considered “written truth,” many in marginalized groups (based on race, culture, ethnicity, sex, and

more) learned about this gap in the textbooks, wondering who will write their version of historical nonfiction. In Paul D's case, he learns that Mandela is not dead, that he actually won the Nobel Prize, and Paul D states our need to learn more and recognize other historical figures and events stifled by textbook writers. These undisclosed figures need to be named accurately to become a part of the general knowledge, so it will affect their language and therefore, their truth. However, this assessment of what we learn in school has us challenge our knowledge – our education; is our heteroglossia of words, of events, and of people accurate when we communicate knowledge learned in school? Can we believe what is bound or preached because it is written or said? At the end of the poem, Paul D tells his intended audience, those who have been trapped in the confines of the society's constructed truths, that people can only achieve freedom if they free themselves from deceiving truths, and that everyone must create their own identities and add new layers to their heteroglossia: "I'm your momma, I'm your daddy, I'm that poet in the alley. I'm your man, whatcha need? Here's some rhymes for your mind." Paul D signifies with his teachy-ness, wanting his listeners to walk away from the poem with inspiration to free themselves from the confinements taught to them by books and teachers and other's words. We should create our own words and participate in our own utterances about these issues choked in silence. Just because people in dominant positions are in authority doesn't mean they know the collective truth or tell the collective truth.

From Charlotte, Robson was the first poet I ever met when he, along with several other poets, attended a poetry event at Western Carolina University in the fall of 2007. Although he was not a scheduled performer for the night, Robson hopped on stage to perform one of his poems during the brief open mic session before the main event. He

has one poetry CD and maintains several social networking pages.

With “Ode to Snap Music,” Robson names an issue of race relations through the lens of music, while making clear statements and delivering each word in distinction, not allowing syllables to run together. Along with a rhythmic fluency, Robson sharpens certain words, stating “lean wit it, rock wit it” to blend with the message of the poem; this flow allows Robson to send messages out to his intended audience, who in turn help him create an experience through utterances with their rumblings of agreement and snapping fingers. Robson is creating a bridge between himself and his intended audience, who may be the black community that feels marginalized in a biracial city. Robson is trying to identify with a crowd that potentially feels marginalized by race, socioeconomic status or other factors along similar lines.

Robson delivers heavy lines, but with his pronunciation and rhythmic pattern, the words flow out with ease, and if a listener is not paying attention to the words, he or she may get caught up in the rhythm alone: “When back in the days, master had all his slaves, rowing boats from coast to coast, screamin’, ‘lean wit it, rock wit it, lean wit it, rock wit it.’” In addition, his pronunciation and pacing allow humor to softly resonate in his lines without creating sharp divides between the heavy material and the lines of laughter. Robson develops a message about how this music, this rhythm, has caught on in mainstream society, even though snap music began as a part of black culture. And because he is not black, Robson cuts off any developing mistrust about being an outsider doing this type of poem by saying “[he knows] most of ya’ll in here think [he’s] a white kid doing a black power poem, but [he is] not a white kid and this is not a black power – maybe it is just a lil bit.” I have listened to this poem as a recording and live, and both

ways, Robson's delivery of this line invites his audience to laugh about his acknowledgement, and many of them do. If anyone began to disconnect because he or she questioned his integrity, Robson's upfront admission threads his credibility back into the minds of his listeners. This choice in words and delivery allows Robson to develop positive utterances with his audience while crafting a heavy poem; by shaping his message around the words of snap music and humor, Robson can bring about a point through the signifyin(g) characteristics of humor and teachy-ness while expanding his audience's heteroglossia about snap music and its historical and cultural context. By acknowledging the purpose of snap music, Robson states

This is an open letter to all them snap boys that do this, and I know gentlemen, I know the masses think you're stupid. And I'm not here to call what you do useless, but I- I understand that you are the new silent revolution and though you may not know it, yet I have truly seen your future cuz ya'll got an all or nothing attitude that would even make Nat Turner proud of you.

Looking at these lines, Robson defends the purpose of snap music, creating a strong undertone of power to the message; he is concerned with defending the past ideas people have had about snap music before shifting gears towards the future ideas people will have about it. Interestingly enough, he even points out that snap music is experiencing a "silent revolution," noting how this music genre and its appreciation are marginalized and by being silenced, do not receive the same identity and freedom as other genres. In a sense, Robson wants to add to the heteroglossia that his audience already has for snap music. Therefore, he crafts a ceremonial undercurrent to this poem, praising those marginalized but vocal artists who create snap music and defy the silence, making money from the beat

and creating their own power to share truth, much like Robson does with performance poetry:

We should be proud, snap music, cuz we don't need nobody's help. And if we plan on changing the world, fuck it, we gonna have to do it all by ourselves. So hip hop is gonna help us stroll right in the master's house, and we gonna get both Bush and Cheney to walk it out. And while nobody's lookin', somebody else gonna take the crown; Obama in '08, bitch, look who's laughin' now.

Robson crafted this poem well before Obama won the primaries, which obviously projects a portion of this poem to the future, about the presidential election that had not happened yet. Robson is prompting people to support Obama, empowering the presidential candidate through Robson's positive construction of snap music. For pre-election listeners, this reference to Obama added another layer of meaning about Obama, the presidential election, and the possibility of our first black president. It may have changed how they named the historical situation and the language with which they created future utterances in regards to it. In the same breath, Robson also snubs the former Republican officiates who many in marginalized society did not and still do not favor, integrating a history and future about snap music and politics and everything he associates with it.

"Pretty Woman," another poem by Robson, names a completely different subject matter; he discusses his feelings for the woman he one day hopes to meet and the vulnerability of potential rejection. Robson begins by singing an altered version of Roy Orbison's hit "Oh, Pretty Woman" to create a connection between himself and his audience members, many of whom probably recognize the song from other contexts and

feel an instant comfort with whatever Robson is about to discuss: “Pretty woman walking down the street. Pretty woman, kind I’d like to meet. Pretty woman, I don’t believe you; you’re not the truth. No one can look as good as you.” Robson then shifts into a speaking voice, and he immediately begins signifyin(g) by directing his words at an anonymous woman “present in the situational context” (Gates 94). Although Robson is performing for the audience, he acts as if his true love is standing before him, and he is addressing her earnestly, allowing the audience to see a more intimate side of his emotions.

Discussing how he has known this pretty woman for centuries, Robson says that she and he have continuously met: “You don’t remember the rest of our lives? Back when you and I were the first two people here on this earth, and we’ve been reincarnated over and over ever since then. Found each other every new lifetime.” He lists, in detail, the famous couples they have been: Adam and Eve, Pocahontas and Jon Smith, Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, and Jonny Cash and June Carter. Robson lists these historical celebrities to allow the audience to understand the chemistry between himself and his woman of interest; because we have examples from our language to relate his love to, we understand his love better. Most of us know the biblical, historical, and musical couple references, so we can find a new connection to his definition of “love.” However, even if the voiceless woman to whom this poem is directed recognizes the other couples listed, she does not recognize Robson in his latest form, so Robson says he will “take the rest of their lives to remind [her].”

He then breaks into song once more: “Pretty woman, stop a while. Pretty woman, talk a while. Pretty woman, just give your smile to me.” By opening and closing his poem with different versions of a well-known song, Robson creates not only a circular pattern

for his poem that provides a smooth closure for his audience (like Paul D did in “Lovely”), but he also develops a reference with which his audience can leave the subject.

Robson uses similar techniques for more serious poems, such as “Ten Dollars for Sunshine,” where he not only uses pieces from the songs “You Are My Sunshine” and “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” but also impersonates an older homeless woman’s voice. Throughout his telling of the woman’s tale about heroin addiction and the loss of her child, Robson invites audience’s empathy; the woman gives up her addiction when her child is born, yet when her son dies 18 years later, she begins her drug use again. And although many audience members may not know a homeless person addicted to heroin, Robson’s tactics to weave well-recognized songs into the tragic tale allows him to build a relationship between his listeners, the poem, and himself because they have listened to the same songs that the woman had. All of a sudden, there is common ground between woman and poet and audience, something audience members may have never guessed: they can all sing along to “You Are My Sunshine.”

The other poet I interviewed from Charlotte, Bluz, is the slam master and coach of SlamCharlotte and has led his team to become national team champions in both 2007 and 2008, making him a well-versed poet on the Charlotte poetry scene. In addition, “Bluz is now hosting a segment on Charlotte’s #1 urban Radio station Power 98fm with the Morning Maddhouse morning show entitled Spoken Word Fridays...every Friday Morning at 7:50am” (Bluz, par. 2). I listened to Bluz during my first trip to The Wine Up in Charlotte, and I distinctly remember his poem “Joseph.”

Bluz names a parenting issue in “Joseph,” a poem dedicated to the man who raised Jesus Christ and other men who raise children who are not their own. Because of this dedication, the poem is directed towards men who may need to take more responsibility in the lives of their children, whether related by blood or by circumstance. Bluz immediately builds a relationship with anyone in or associated with the kind of situation, and they feel more connected to the purpose of the poem and therefore, more receptive to building a new truth. Initially reflecting on the role of Joseph and the challenges Joseph had to overcome, Bluz creates a new light for viewing the family that raised Jesus: Mary “claimed conception was immaculate, no man ever touched her, said the angel Gabriel came to her, but you know how folks are always goin’ to whisper, and said maybe it was a mortal man that came to her, and now she pregnant with a truth she don’t wanna face.” From the first few moments of the poem, Bluz takes recognizable references within Christianity and completely alters them, expanding his listeners’ ability to think about the situation differently. While risking accusations of blasphemy, Bluz plays with most people’s experiences and language surrounding the Christian story of the virgin birth, turning it upside down by redefining it by current-day’s standards.

Perhaps some audience members, and it seems that Bluz intends this audience to have some knowledge of or background in Christianity, had never thought about the truth of Joseph’s role before, but as Bluz continues, it becomes hard to overlook: “You show me a man who stands wholly on the word of his virgin, and I’ll show you a man rock solid with a mountain of love and faith. Cuz as men, our mountainous egos often get crushed when a love one tells us that this baby is not yours.” And many men can probably relate, feeling a need to father their own children instead of raising a stranger’s.

Bluz is signifyin(g) by using the example of men on Maury Povich's show about paternity tests and domestic disputes, creating an image rooted in everyday life that parallels the ideas he's brought up pertaining to Joseph; he mentions how the men on television become angry and accusing, demanding paternity tests and refusing to care for children who are not their own. In the poem, this tangent about a television show becomes important; in case people become too stretched in the reality of what Bluz is proposing about the age-old story, he grounds them in something similar and current to match their language and experience as much as possible to the virgin birth. He continues stretching listeners' realities by making the situation of Joseph more applicable to everyday life:

Joseph was raising Jesus without any questions, without any court-appointed child support or fighting over the right for visitation because this ain't a case of deadbeat dad. Or you are not going to find a picture of god posted up in the post office with a back pay amount printed on the bottom like he just gave up and forgot about him.

Many people know the situation of single mothers and the all-too-often struggle to receive child support from the father, so to place Joseph, Jesus, and God in a shifted form of this current-day light may shock listeners into thinking about child rearing differently. Although Bluz does not portray God as the deadbeat dad, the situation of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and God seems a lot closer to reality than many of us has ever thought about. All of a sudden, their biblical situation becomes relatable to everyday life.

Bluz also portrays many of his strengths in his poem "Caseworker," which tells of a case he imagines a social worker in Charlotte may have to handle. Bluz sets the scene

by telling us of a young man who lives with his mother in a trailer park after his dad abandons them. The mother sexually abuses the son, creating a horrible environment for the teenager. And then, Bluz introduces himself to the poem and the situation: “I, his caseworker, would ask him as habitual as breathing, who is it that you really wish to be? And without pause but lump logged in throat, damn near choking on the splintered answers, he says...” At this point, Bluz switches the sound of his voice, mimicking the voice of the young man for a monologue about the young man’s wishes to get “away from [his] mother’s secondhand affection.” Bluz, through the young man’s voice, says, “I want to be a hero; that way, at least I could save me when I dive face first into this empty destiny and hopefully, my last exhale will be enough to lift me up before I hit rock bottom cuz too often we let ourselves down, Mr. Caseworker.” At this moment, it is important to note the use of voices and structure for the rhetorical strategies of this poem. Bluz maneuvers his words, annunciates his words, in a specific way, creating a spiraling intensity in rhythm that keeps the audience connected. It helps them identify with both parties involved in the fictitious narrative and the respective truths from which they both speak. By giving the young man’s character his own voice, Bluz allows the audience to imagine the words coming from the actual person; it helps the audience connect to the truth that Bluz is sharing through his poem and feel empathy for the abused, misguided young man. The audience helps build this new truth of how youth can be tracked based on their parents, their socioeconomic status, and many other factors; people develop certain traits because of their environment, whether positive or negative.

Before the poem ends, Bluz twists the structure of the poem one last time; he addresses his audience, a group that may be able to easily identify with this story, wanting them to feel included in and empowered by this narrative:

And I remember his face, it was like a dream. He looked like everyone I see before me. You are all dreamers, push past your destiny and reach higher for the stars. I promise you, if I could do anything, I would write you infinity, so you have more time to spend chasing what belongs to you.

By referring to his intended audience, listeners feel a stronger attachment to the young man who wants to chase his own dreams, the poem, and the poet. Instead of merely sitting in the seat, listening to a poet's words and imagining the story, audience members become active participants – important characters – within the poem.

Reflecting on the poems, the messages, and the mission of the poets, I feel like two conclusions to this chapter can be made: Poets anticipate performing for audience members who have open minds and relaxed attitudes, and each poet does so based on his strengths and on the individual poem. Essentially, no matter how much the scene, agency, or act change, poets can almost always assume that audiences are open to the purpose of performance poetry, which is to learn and share with one another. And because of this understanding, poets can carry out this purpose by working their rhetorical strengths through tailoring their delivery to the specific audience in mind. Goode used humor and familiar landmarks as rhetorical rocks to ground his audience in his messages about the role of men as providers, protectors, and ladder climbers, while Paul D and Robson framed poetry with very different types of lyrics. Notably, Paul D incorporated logos by citing from inaccurate textbooks and used lyrical lines to keep his audience's attention

focused on his messages about race, identity and freedom. Robson used familiar songs and musical genres to move through his poetry about two types of vulnerability, that of a silenced population and that of an unrequited lover. And Bluz shifted voices from character to character for a narrative that included perspectives from blacks and whites, as well as biblical references to portray the current social issue of men raising children not born to them. Each poet has rhetorical tools that help them become a success on stage, much like how different tools are needed to build different objects, different rhetorical tools are used for different poems. Always, the poet leans on what he does best – whether that is storytelling, using humor, or singing – but good poets know how to implement an assortment of rhetorical strategies, constantly learning from the previous truths they build and the experiences they have with those who listen to and interact with them.

CONCLUSION

I went and did a show; I was like 30, 40 minutes outside of Atlanta... I missed my turn, ended up in god-only-knows where I'm at. And as I'm making a u-turn, there's a house with a stone wall fence going around it and on the top of it, little figurines of black people with their heads cut off. That ends up in your work.

Jon Goode, Personal Interview

As I sat in Berkeley's Wheeler Auditorium for the 2009 Individual World Poetry Slam, I started to feel nervous. I've heard many times that people who study a hobby or passion too closely may end up killing the initial spark that drove them to conduct research. I worried that had happened to me. Would I constantly try to analyze the poets' inflections, hand movements, pauses, and language? Would I overanalyze the magic of performance poetry? I began to feel uncomfortable, anxious to find out whether I had stifled the realm that had unlocked my understanding for the power of words and communication.

But when the host departed the stage and poets began performing their work, I felt relieved. Once more I grew enamored with the emotions that flowed from the poet to the words to me to the poet to the words... and how the communication – the connection between it all – had no beginning and no end. Although I had studied how poets try to purposely connect with their audiences, I had not disconnected myself from being a part of that audience. I was not outside the triangular relationship, but rather, I was still a part of it. And because of my studies, I appreciated all the more the tidal waves of meaning and words and connection.

At some point during my study when I reviewed my transcriptions with the poets from Charlotte and Atlanta, I worried that I somehow unlocked secrets to the success of performance poetry. By writing this thesis, would I be giving away the key component for why performance poetry can cause an audience to laugh, to cry, to have goose bumps? But I realized just the opposite. Although poets employ their own rhetorical styles in their work, trying to incorporate their observations, gut instincts, and plain old trial-and-error tactics, no one can unlock the key to their power because poets – who craft poetry honestly and sincerely – will be true to themselves, and from my research with poets like this, I realize I cannot develop some all-encompassing method to a “perfect performance poem.”

But I can safely make the observation that many poets do knowingly use rhetoric as a key tool in communicating effectively with an audience. They play with words, timing, shock value, and other factors to make the best impact for the message and purpose of a specific poem. And these are the poets who get audiences clapping, moaning, stomping, cheering, and overall, connecting with the knowledge shared with them from the poem. These are the poets who are helping audience members mold new truths because they are naming what is unnamable to others; these poets are bringing about new dynamics to audience’s realities that audience members were either too scared to acknowledge or did not know about in the first place.

And as I stated earlier, I cannot create a generic formula for performance poetry because no generic formula exists within rhetoric or poetry. No equation could ever stand that says if the poet is this way and the audience is that way, the projected outcome is X. The point of performance poetry is that there is no standby X on which to rely. Rather,

immeasurable blends of talent, practice, guesswork, and luck determine how a poet's rhetorical delivery will affect the audience. As a poet progresses through a poem, he or she must feel malleable in performance to adjust to the audience as needed with timing, tone, and cadence.

In a sense, these poets – these living, breathing examples of rhetoricians in practice – are creating ever-changing rhetorical situations in which they collaboratively define the meaning of truths. If only one factor – whether it be the scene, act, agent, agency, or purpose – changes, then everything else shifts as well. And poets must be on their A-game to adapt to these shifts at every moment. Not only does the purpose change from poem to poem, but the poet on stage also changes as performers take turns performing their work. With these changes come direct changes to the scene because the audience will react differently to different poets based on a multitude of factors, such as the poet's sex, age, skin color, dress, and more. For example, a male poet scheduled to perform a light-hearted poem that complains about women's quirks may want to rethink his initial decision if the female poet before him just performed a poem about rape; after hearing about such a travesty happening to a woman, the audience will more than likely not be appreciative of a poem teasing females. And examples like this are constantly evolving in every venue during every performance poetry event. Because, as in any line of work, audiences are fickle; they are continually re-evaluating what they think and how they feel – almost subconsciously – and successful poets keep this in mind.

And all of this begins with the poet and the poet's experiences. As poets discussed in our interviews, they walk a hard line between a desire to connect with the ever-changing audience and with their own integrity as artists of passion. Audience members

create an unspoken agreement with poets, expecting the words and messages flowing from their lips to the mic to be real. As connected audience members, we believe what they say about rape, race, poverty, and other heavy issues that so many people avoid discussing. But because we believe what poets say – because what they say feels real – we need those tales and truths spun by poets to be real. We have trust in poets not to dupe us because they are collaborators of truth – so intricately, so cleverly, so concisely helping us mold our realities from delivered words.

If an audience found out that something a poet said was fictitious but described as actual fact, the unspoken contract of trust would be shattered between the two parties and words would no longer carry the same weight, no matter the flair of delivery. This is a dangerous game for poets to play because the relationship touching the poet, the audience, and poem can be severed and never quite regained. And I know this may sound strange to some because written poetry and theatre take creative licenses to stretch nonfiction into fiction, but performance poetry – with its unique set of rhetorical relationships – is held to a different bar. Because the language is everyday and the delivery maintains a conversational quality, people expect performance poetry to be nonfiction unless blatantly stated. Otherwise, the audience can feel cheated out of a truth because they feel like someone in an everyday situation has told them a lie. Such an event happened to me about two years ago, and afterwards, my skepticism shot through the roof when it came to poetry.

As our interest in performance poetry grew more and more, we began watching Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam on HBO because we wanted to learn about more than just the poets who Western Carolina University brought to our attention. We watched

DVDs sent to us through Netflix and we searched YouTube for clips, always commenting about the emotion and cause humming in each poet's performance. Then, one day, we found out one man's story about working with deaf children was fictitious. He had performed the poem in sign language as he spoke it, discussing how his encounters with the children had changed his life and made him a better person. My husband and I never thought that he could have been making it up, lying to us. We had assumed that the unspoken contract was impenetrable. But as I began gathering contacts for this thesis, speaking to poets from across the nation about my avid interest as an audience member and student of rhetorical theory, I discovered the truth of the above-mentioned man. He had never worked in a school for the deaf.

Perhaps it seems too drastic to say, but my husband and I felt we had been too gullible because we believed untruths. We had been swindled because of our connection to the man's rhetorical delivery of well-crafted words. After that incident, I felt suspicious of false revolutionary cries. Why? Of course a good fiction story is a good fiction story because we all want to escape the world and its confines sometimes, but performance poetry – delivered real and live and raw on stage – portrays a sense of vulnerability on the side of the poet; thus, the audience lets down its guard – becoming vulnerable as well – to accept the artistic memories, messages, and beliefs of the truth-sharing poet. Trust is a prerequisite for communication, and communication is a vital element for connecting to someone and collaborating on a new, collective truth. So if trust does not exist, truth cannot be shared.

Perhaps the only way a poet can hypothesize or tell a fictitious story and not damage this relationship is by framing the poem and allowing the audience to

acknowledge the fabrication behind the words. By doing so, the poet does not risk damaging his or her integrity to connect with the audience in the moment but potentially lose the audience indeterminately at a later time. Essentially, any poems the poet tried to perform in the future would feel tainted to the informed audience member, and the connection would be difficult – if not impossible – to share a common message because the audience would constantly question what is fiction and what is nonfiction.

Much like Bakhtin discusses how a word or symbol cannot regain its initial meaning once used in multiple avenues, the same is true for trust. Take, for instance, the swastika: Although it was once a symbol of purity, because it was a common symbol used by the Nazis during World War II, it will never be viewed as a symbol of purity again. As a professor of rhetoric once told me, words take on different meanings as time continues on, and like pouring multiple sources of sand into a bowl, no single meaning or source of sand can be extracted once integrated. The same can be said for the audience's trust in a poet; in the beginning it may be pure and unfaltering, but after a poem shakes an audience member's ideas about a poet, the same trust can never be regained. Does a poet really want to risk that?

According to the poets I interviewed, they do not. Rather, they prefer to balance honesty with finesse, never straying from what they believe is the truth. Yes, perhaps their opinions differ from those in the audience, but they project outwards what they believe is true, what they believe is the truth. In their interviews, they acknowledged the pull to coerce their audiences and recognized how poets can sway in their judgment, but they also discussed how being a poet – a speaker of the people, for the people, and by the people – inspires them to bond with the audience before the two parties even meet.

Perhaps, then, communicators in other fields can learn from the poets. Public figureheads, politicians, and celebrities may be able to take some elements from the triangular relationship of poet, words, and audience, and apply them to their own circumstances for sending messages to groups of people. The fine line of integrity and appreciation with which the poets struggle is similar to the ongoing issues within politics and within the media. The balance of ensuring integrity and connecting to other people is a balance that everyone who communicates must struggle with on a consistent basis, and successful performance poets recognize this. Hand-in-hand with poets' adapting styles of rhetorical delivery are frequent assessments of their integrity, creating a ratio of agency and purpose, and this balance is what I have learned from the poets.

I would love to see research that explores the relationships of this ratio even further, interviewing poets and audience members about why and how this bond takes place. How does this specific idea of relatability and trust affect the rhetoric at play in the relationship between poet and audience? And how drastic a plummet does a connection take if the audience doesn't believe in a poet's message? The dynamics between a poet on stage and the audience are infinite and, hopefully, will be explored more as performance poetry gains acknowledgment and respect from more and more people. I hope that my thesis only opens the discussion for rhetorical implications in the realm of performance poetry and the fascinating relationships that take place between words and action, poet and audience members, truth and trust.

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