

Curatorial Analysis:

**Spoken Word Performance through the lens of Narratology,
Narrative-making and Auto-ethnography**

By

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**A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies
in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts**

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

December, 2013

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Abstract

As a major project, this work studies the spoken word genre as a response to, and interpretation of, oppression and examine my own spoken word performance through the lens of narratology, narrative-making and auto-ethnography. This project is composed of two parts: a full-length spoken word performance and a curatorial analysis of this performance. While attempting to re-enact the trauma of oppression, this performance dually recognizes the impossibility within the task. Maurice Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience- it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster describes.” This project aims to perform the places of de-description. In poems detailing experiences of trauma, racism, misogyny, and relationships, this spoken word performance will offer an account of the subject for whom the act of narration is subversive. In this, the performance is self-aware and self-reflective; it communicates experiences for which the language to describe such experiences is either unavailable or nonexistent. The continuous theme of ‘home’ is maintained throughout the performance- how its absence marks the absence of the oppressed subject, how its absence implies the absence of language for the subject, and how spoken word can begin the outlining of a narrative, a foundation, for the subject.

My accompanying curatorial paper will examine similar themes. As spoken word is an art form deeply linked to activism, my paper will begin with an analysis of how this art has taken place, what its role has been in community development, and how it continues to

function as a teaching tool. My paper argues that spoken word is instrumental in tying learning to voice; by offering young people a medium that both gives them a forum to voice the issues directly impacting their lives, while giving them a means of developing skills in language, presentation and communicating ideas effectively, spoken word acts as a unique and important teaching tool.

Acknowledgements

The Artel Artists' Collective, Carla Moore, Shriya Hari, Sherry Huang, Chantal D'Souza

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Spoken word was made for re-invention. An art form born in underground American black communities, it continues to birth new incarnations over the decades. The words of people of colour, from Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' to Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman,' have been instrumental in creating space for the voices of the unheard. This spoken word project aims to carve out places of quiet; it seeks to point to the in-between- it goes into the fog and doesn't come out the other end. Through examining my poetry performance and its themes, this paper will explore and reflect upon its content, investigating the possibilities of speech, of identity, and of voice.

It is a fundamentally self-involved endeavor; as this piece deals with lived experience, it intends to direct the audience towards territory they may be unfamiliar with. Dually, this performance acts as a hand reaching outwards towards those with similar experiences- it intends to both inform a viewership who may be less acquainted with spoken word as an art form and with the narratives of those speaking, and as well as offer itself as a connection to others with comparable lived experiences. In this, spoken word is a vehicle; it both extends stories as re-inscriptions, and networks to others seeking words and structures for these experiences. Spoken word can consequently act as auto-ethnographic work, self-investigatory work- it can act as a project of asserting the history, characteristics, struggles of a self.

This project is also born from the works of several other artists- it is influenced by such spoken word poets as Lady Sin Trayda, a Montreal-based performer whose work expands into burlesque, essays and performance art as well. Lady Sin Trayda's work explores themes of being a racialized queer person, love and relationships with white queer people, and the continuing struggle to negotiate desire and politics. Their work has been instrumental in the formation of my poetry and will be cited within this paper. The work of Ntozake Shange, particularly her pivotal choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf*, deeply influenced my spoken word poetry. Shange's work aims to sift through the experiences of black women and create an artistic voice for these experiences. *For Colored Girls* explores the rage, fear, and love within the lives of black women. It has profoundly informed my writing, in its lyricism and with the delicacy with which it addresses heavy, intense themes.

The first section of this paper will an analysis of how this art has taken place, what its role has been in community development, and how it continues to function as a teaching tool. My paper argues that spoken word is active in tying learning to voice; by offering young people a medium that both gives them a forum to voice the issues directly impacting their lives, while giving them a means of developing skills in language, presentation and communicating ideas effectively, spoken word acts as a unique and important teaching and political tool.

The second part of my paper will explore aspects of my performance which deal with identity, biraciality, and place. By analyzing how identity is constructed in relation

to place, this section will examine how the biracial subject exists unhinged to location, and as such, is speaking from a place with no name. This section uses Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' as a theoretical background. As Spivak writes, "Part of our 'unlearning' project is to articulate our participation in that formation- by *measuring* silences, if necessary- into the object of investigation."¹ In this, we see how speaking becomes central to identity formation- as Spivak indicates, measuring silences becomes the means of distinguishing which subjects speak in normative discourses. This section seeks to point to the absence of the queer biracial subject and explore possibilities in how such speaking could occur.

The final part of the paper will be composed of a theoretical component, following the previous chapter, investigating how queer theory informs the structure and content of my performance. This section aims to explore how queer people are in a continuous state of constructing oral history. Juan Alamilla Loyd and Ramirez Horacio's *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* will be a central text throughout this section. This part will tease out how, as previously dealt with in the second section, being without place or name leaves the subject in a constant status of self-construction; how queerness becomes an exploration of possibility, desire, and narrative formation.

While both this paper and the performance aim to articulate these experiences and offer space for others to do so, both are unfinished, inasmuch as this is a continuing

¹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. P. 32-33.

project. While I hope that this work acts as a motion towards further work, I view it as an introduction- as a movement, as a gesture- and it will lead to more.

Chapter 2 - Words and Resistance

Spoken word poetry has made its way from coffee houses and cafes into classrooms. As a teaching tool, spoken word has become increasingly useful. In *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*, Maisha T. Fisher describes how ‘power writing’ became an important teaching tool in a New York city classroom. As Fisher interacted with the students and the teachers involved, she found that the teaching of expression and giving voice to one’s issues acted as more than a fulfillment of an English school credit- the students were learning lessons on communication, identity and fostering community. Fisher writes, “ y investing in students’ economies of expression, English and language arts teachers have a unique opportunity to help students shape their future lives. ooks, poetry, music, and films have transformed people’s lives and defined movements—and all of these began with writing.”² Here, we see how, as Fisher experienced, by offering student creative control within their learning environment, the students thrived. Spoken word has come to be a means of encouraging learning from one’s own life; as a teaching tool, it offers the power to tell one’s own stories.

Fisher also noted that within the class, sharing of work became an important facet. Fisher pointed to something that has often been seen as one of the most beneficial aspects

² Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2007. P. 90.

of spoken word: spoken word alters traditional academic economies of knowledge in which there are strict divisions between teacher and student. In such a forum, these divisions become void. All participants become both teacher and student. Fisher writes, “To be literate in the art of reading and feeding, students not only had to read their original writing, but they also had to be active listeners and engage each other with detailed feedback. Everyone had to participate in the ‘wheel,’ including teachers and guests.”³ In this, a democratizing of knowledge takes place- by creating a learning space in which language becomes a tool anyone can use. The exchange of ideas becomes broader in this setting- the usual authority of the teacher in a traditional classroom is rendered unfeasible in a spoken word learning setting. The exchange of knowledge then loses an authoritarian context- anyone who speaks becomes a teacher. Indeed, as Fisher writes, the writing community begins to serve a familial function: “It was a job, a sacred space, a home, a functional— or sometimes ‘dysfunctional,’ as one student wrote in a poem—family... ‘In this house, we are trying to dream ourselves a world, and we are trying to record that in the script of the English language. Your job always in here is to tell the truth.’”⁴ As a teaching tool, incorporating spoken word, as Fisher points out, offers a revolutionary attitude towards learning. By allowing students to be their own teachers, the inclusion of spoken word in curricula opens new possibilities for reforming education.

³ Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2007. P. 21.

⁴ Ibid. P. 3

Spoken word poetry has been deeply linked to activism, and this correlation is not a coincidence; within the space of performance poetry, an active usage of language has become the fodder for speaking out politically. Quoting one of the ‘power writers’ in the class, Fisher writes of this, “ ‘In the poetics of struggle and lived experiences, in the utterances of ordinary folks, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born’ ”⁵ Spoken word acts as a forum to move past social conditions or harness them to create change; indeed, writing and speaking become instrumental in action. Within spoken word, the lyricism of counter-action becomes possible. Spoken word acts as an art form unlinked to socio-economic privilege; as the artists often manipulate the English language to communicate their message, spoken word dismantles educational norms related to accuracy and grammar. Indeed, spoken word becomes resistance in that it challenges the very language of the colonizer; as artists use the colonizer’s language to rail back against their conditions. In this, there is a unique power-to use the colonizer’s language perhaps better than the colonizer. Spoken word acts as a distinctly powerful art in this capacity- the artist can be oppressed and still use this mechanism to articulate their condition, while dually challenging the foundations of ‘good’ quality and ‘high’ art by confronting the notions of quality associated with English writing.

⁵ Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2007. P. 5.

While being an active tool in resistance, spoken word also acts as in a much softer capacity, becoming a space to outlet any grief experienced by the writer. As Fisher details, for the students she worked with, spoken word became their means of accessing their own pain and desires: “Student writing was necessary; poetry was a place to release, grieve, and most important, overcome sadness. Student writing was reflective; the students looked back in order to create the world they desired.”⁶ Fisher notes this repeatedly in *Writing in Rhythm*- she describes the students as able to name and challenge their conditions, using spoken word as a mechanism: “witnessing and naming these social conditions was not the sole purpose for this work; the writing was a way to consciously forge pathways around potential pitfalls.”⁷ Through this, we see how spoken word can be a tool to combat one’s personal situation. Additionally, as Fisher observed in the classroom, writing acted as vehicle for the writers to re-invent themselves and their own identities. Writing and speaking became formative in recreating their own ideas of themselves and their histories: “There, the goal is to become a “correct” speaker and writer, not a sophisticated code-switcher, not a player with languages’ varied rhythms and their reverberations of identity and tradition.”⁸ As such, spoken word ultimately becomes a kind of song- a means of singing a story out into the world: “You have to be more singerlike. Your piece is a blues, and the blues is magical. Remember, the function [of

⁶ Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2007. P. 68.

⁷ Ibid. P. 80.

⁸ Ibid. P. x.

the blues] is not to make you sad but to help you overcome sadness.”⁹ In this, the words become an act of their own, a resistance, and the spoken word artist the channel. Spoken word acts as a medium to communicate both political opposition and personal struggle.

Chapter 3 - Biraciality, Place and Diaspora

The spoken word poem ‘Biracial Hair’ exploded onto the internet. Zora Howard, a then thirteen-year-old biracial girl, slammed against those who lambasted her with prejudice due to being of mixed race. “And you call me a mudblood?” she spoke, “My blood does not excrete in black and white.” Howard’s piece advanced an already fevered conversation about mixed race individuals in North America. Howard investigates the space people of mixed race occupy by calling attention to the very absence of representation of mixed race individuals. “A thousand times discredited for my race, discredited for my history,” she cries. “Y’all never get, ‘cause there are no captions about my truth in textbooks.” Howard’s poem points to an inability to properly write or think through biraciality, given its absence from current understandings of race. A poem within my performance piece, ‘Fog,’ explores the same silence and absence. As the poem describes in such lines as,

‘That even ether fades fast and such a girl of so many colours but never there at once can’t stay long in a place where colours carry more weight than paint,’

⁹ Fisher, Maisha T. *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2007. P. 3.

The absence of biraciality is predicated on an inability to be placed, to be pinned to racial categorization. Indeed, biraciality, as indicated by Howard, must become the sight of measuring silence and absence, rather than simply speaking to imply its place. My piece aims to give shape to absence, to, as it reads, give room to a fog. Paradoxically, it seeks to speak to the ineffable; to a reaching of the limits of language, yet still stretching outwards. Much of my own work, as well as that of other poets who will be performing, moves in this direction. While almost swimming within the realization of the linguistic boundaries involved in articulating these experiences, this performance aims to speak anyway; to account for the impossibility in narrating subaltern lived experience, and to attempt to narrate it nonetheless. My work specifically means to be, in that sense, incommunicable. It does not necessarily even view the notion of appealing to a viewership as desirable. However, this clearly becomes a contradictory idea in the context of spoken word- as an art that involves the artist utilizing language to reach out to an audience, it seems strange to denote the audience as outside of the creative format. In this, there is an open contradiction at work- the spoken word artist speaking to the ineffable experience, while this experience remains unattached to language and to the reception of the audience.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Can The Subaltern Speak?*, examines representation and its effects in the extent to which subjects speak or are silenced. Spivak writes, “Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate our participation in that formation-

by *measuring* silences, if necessary- into the object of investigation.”¹⁰ Spivak points to the difficulty in this project of ‘measuring’ - Spivak argues that ‘representation,’ rather than affirming that presence of what she calls the ‘subaltern,’ or the individual without social mobility, obscures the voice of this subject. Similar to the biracial individual, as exemplified in ‘Fog’ and ‘Racial Hair,’ the subaltern lacks speech due to lack of language to articulate its situation. Spivak writes, “Here is a woman who tried to be decisive. In extremis. She ‘spoke,’ but women did not, do not, ‘hear’ her. Thus she can be defined as a subaltern- a person without lines of social mobility.”¹¹ Similar to Spivak’s subaltern, the biracial subject must begin from itself- speaking the subject comes from a place of clumsiness- a grasp at narration at what lacks voice.

The poem ‘Black/White’ in my performance deals with similar issues, though it explores the mixed race subject as not only the site of lack of speech, but also lack of geographic identity.

‘My skin does not exist for your inspection and its colour is not the product of a cosmic mistake or a symptom of the aches of your racialized nation,’

reads a line in the poem. The mixed race subject also becomes a geographic anomaly, an individual moving between places. In this, we could describe this embodiment as a having a diasporic condition. My poem, ‘Using History,’ explores this by calling attention to place, appropriation, and racism. Below is the poem in full:

¹⁰ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. P. 32-33.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 28.

‘He told me at a party that my skin was too dark

He joked that when we’d met at summer’s end he thought the copper blush that bronzed my body was mostly just a tan and where was I from to keep such a complexion even in winter months?

And if he’d stopped there it could have been forgiven, but he rolled onwards, billowing like an untethered tumbleweed, weaving his tales of colonial fame,

Claiming that he had known Africa since he’d been to its heart, but his heart of darkness was nothing more than the rip off, the recycled pages of another xenophobe, trying to play himself off as Joseph Conrad 2.0

I carry my African heart not at the stern of a boat but in the sternum under my throat

My ancestors didn’t bleed blue like you, they bled red through black skin

But for him, history could be bought with a gold card, he saw green in the dirt plots of that continent but not that of the grass

But still asked if he at least lean to the other side, still compared his history to slavery, he believed he could purchase adventure and call it bravery, he wanted his whiteness to be a get out jail free card and he did on so many occasions, then couldn’t grasp why he was blockaded, couldn’t see that the melanin in our bodies can’t be excavated, hard as he tried, you can’t find Malcolm X and King in an archeological dig,

But he wanted to be the king of a mutinous castle, wanted to be the lion of the pride, but couldn’t hide that he was just wolf in sheep’s clothing, just a joker playing prince, just a dwarf dressed as a giant, my foremothers were the mammoths he took as meek

You see, he told me that peace was for women and the weak, he forgot that memory meant survival and a past meant life and that the strife of a people cannot be adopted like a stray cat, cannot be plucked from its mound

but he circled Jerusalem and thought that meant he’d weathered Ezra by the pound, his jet-setting message paper-mached in benjamins and bigotry trimming the tails of his jacket

and maybe I should have lifted the veil, should have heralded him with a thousand lines of anger, shown him the dollar signs on his dirty knees,

Maybe I should have just told him, my skin is just as dark as it fucking should be.’

However, the diasporic condition of the mixed race subject carries nuance as it functions within the context of a racist history. As Zack deals with in “The Fluid Symbol of Mixed Race,” the mixed race individual becomes subject to an erasure that differs from other diasporic people. Zack writes, “Instead, insofar as mixed black and white individuals are considered simply ‘black,’ their racial identity is erased. This erasure of racial identity is odd in a society where everyone is categorized by race, so the task for the critical theorist of mixed race is to examine what the erasure implies about the public imaginary of race. As mixed race is not part of that imaginary as a distinct or stand-alone category, the invisibility of mixed race might reveal something about what is still believed about the presumptively pure races, but no longer explicitly stated.”¹² What Zack addresses is the implicit strandedness of the biracial subject; she points to the mixed race individual as without place both physically, and within the reality of racism. Similarly, ‘lack/White’ points to the expectation of mixed race individuals to embody the tension and violence of racism. However, this notion of the mixed race diasporic subject is problematized by a more direct lack of claim to a home. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam writes, “As a practice, moving about accumulated nothing and did not effect any reversals of power but indefatigably held onto the unrealizable- being free- by temporarily eluding the constraints of order... like stealing away, it was more symbolically redolent than materially transformative.”¹³ For Halberstam, moving about, or a diasporic condition, implies a wandering on the part of the subject; they are without

¹² Zack, Naomi. “The Fluid Symbol of Mixed Race.” *Hypatia* vol. 25, no. 4 (Fall, 2010). P. 879.

¹³ Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. P. 130.

home. The project of finding home, as Spivak indicated, thus involves speaking one's way to home, getting there through an imagining, a growing articulation of what home could be.

In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa examines how women of colour become perpetually unhinged to both geographic setting and their own selves. For Anzaldúa, the woman of colour remains stranded, constantly moving, and reaching for a stable world. She writes, "Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of colour does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits."¹⁴ For Anzaldúa, the diasporic woman of colour exists particularly within a geographic and personal nexus; in this, biraciality becomes deeply decentralized from place. As Anzaldúa outlines, diasporic women of colour embody a lostness- biraciality acts similarly, embodying a bridge between lands, a bodily space of cultural fusion.

In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde makes similar claims as Anzaldúa. Lorde points out that being a woman of colour dually entails being fluent in the language of the oppressor, both metaphorically and literally. She writes, "For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes

¹⁴ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 2012. P. 20.

adopting them for some illusion of protection.”¹⁵ As Lorde describes, the oppressed subject becomes both speaker in the oppressor’s language while still remaining isolated and stranded, as Anzaldua described. In the context of biraciality, this learning of languages becomes especially evident, as the biracial subject acts as not only learner of languages, but translator as well. Lorde points to how writing especially becomes a place where power exemplifies itself, making divides among what is ‘uality’ in terms that are usually related to what is closest to privilege: “Recently a women’s magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less ‘rigorous’ or ‘serious’ art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.”¹⁶ Indeed, art production acts as a distinct indication of positionality; how the artist chooses to convey their message speaks to their circumstances. Howard’s groundbreaking poem speaks to this, in that the medium selected acted as the ideal place to express issues related to biraciality- spoken word as a accessible medium becomes crucial to poems and issues like Howard’s being showcased.

tozake Shange’s choeropoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* *When the Rainbow is Enuf* deals with similar ideas. The piece uses vernacular usages of

¹⁵ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. P. 114.

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 116.

English words, creating a conversational tone to Shange's work. In this, Shange's work embodies what Lorde points to; she subverts traditional usages of English to convey poetry and messages she deems authentic when spoken in vernacular. Additionally, Shange subverts traditional notions of medium by utilizing 'choreopoem' as her medium for this piece. In this, Shange uses language and medium to communicate the experiences of women of colour; she chooses to speak to these experiences by stepping away from artistic norms. Within my performance, I seek to use the influence and method of such writers as Lorde and Shange in my exploration of biraciality, by using artistic forms that challenge notions of quality, language and speech.

Chapter 4 - Writing, Memory and the Queer Subject

A poem in my performance, ‘before you could say my name correctly,’ deals with similar issues in regards to the diasporic condition and moving about- it notes the subject’s disposition to accept their lack of representation, as seen in lines such as,

‘When my sex and my skin and my stories were still lands away from you, I already knew you.’

This poem explores the geographic conditions of the self and identity; it examines the familiarity of the oppressor, the physical closeness, and the totalizing distance. It looks at the effects of close proximity to the oppressor, how internalized oppression manifests itself in the most intimate relations. My writing attempts to knead out how internalized racism and homophobia appear within relationships. The writing of spoken word artist Lady Sin Trayda deals with similar themes. Their writing addresses the condition of loving the oppressor who one has grown to know better than oneself. They wrote,

“My blonde white anarchist lover tells me the revolution will come in New York... honey, when your revolution comes, bodies that are not like yours will be the first to die.”

Lady Sin seeks to point to the place where race and queerness and love collide, and often lead to a splintering of self. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam makes a similar claim: “... a world where the enemy and oppressor is also the lover, the victim is not choosing between action and passivity, freedom and death, but survival and desire.”¹⁷ Both writers emote the difficulty in identifying as both racialized and queer and where

this amounts to struggle within one's life.

Queerness becomes analogous to racialization, as seen in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: "Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a contusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender... but I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and! female. I am the embodiment of the *h.ieros gamoJ*: the coming together of opposite ualities within."¹⁸ Anzaldua points to the similarities in questions of queerness and the questions related to the biracial subject; how identifying as queer, as bending the

¹⁷ Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. P. 137.

¹⁸ Anzaldua, Gloria. *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 2012. P. 19.

possibilities of gender and desire, is mirrored in race, in moving past notions of monoraciality.

However, within queer oral history, speaking to a narrative becomes more complicated. In *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, Nan Alamilla Boyd and Sam rez Horacio N. Roque explore how constructing the narrative of queer history, and of how queer people write themselves, becomes difficult. They write, “Oral historians, influenced in large part by psychoanalysis and literary theory, have argued that what remains unsaid in an interview is often as important as that which is spoken....”¹⁹ In this, we see how exploring queer histories becomes a continuous and arduous task; as Boyd and Roque assert in *Bodies of Evidence*, to write or tell the queer experience means reaching to a history of invisibility. Similar to Spivak’s writing on the subaltern, Boyd and Roque point to measuring silences and absences to trace the queer subject. Spoken word poetry acts as a means of accelerating the oral historical narrative of the queer subject; it offers a forum for the silenced voice to speak.

This act of speaking the queer subject becomes fundamentally a project in narrative-construction and memory. In the act of attempting to create queer histories, questions of authenticity of pasts and how to tell a history arose for Boyd and Roque: “Memory, in this sense, might yield content, but the process of remembering, the telling, illuminates the investments narrators have in specific versions of the past. Far from static

¹⁹ Boyd, Alamilla, and Sam rez Horacio N. Roque. *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2012. P. 28-29.

entities, oral histories... help narrators conceptualize past situations and rationalize past choices.”²⁰ In this, we see the difficulties in using spoken word as a means of articulating the history of the queer subject- while it creates history, it dually recreates and reinscribes events, and in this, the oral history becomes fraught. Additionally, such narration fails to account for nuances and divergences within queer communities and the complexities that arise in multi-narrating situations: “Oral histories can help us understand the complexity of these queer lives that could otherwise be invisible from a static, post-Stonewall perspective. Definitions of lesbian and gay as fixed and known identities fail to capture the ways that men and women in the postwar era often moved in and out of non-heteronormative communities.”²¹ Indeed, reconstructing memory within communities, particularly communities as fluid and changing as the queer community, becomes a task of regularly re-telling the story. It is narrative-making, a coming back, coming out coming to ourselves again and for the first time: “How did residents reconstruct dignity, triumph, or defeat in their acts of remembering? How do their stories illuminate not simply events that took place in the past but relationships between the politics of the past and those of the present?”²² How to tell a queer history becomes troubled in itself- how to tell a history still unfolding.

This struggle of how to tell queer history acts also as a formative place of possibility. As Halberstam outlines in *The Queer Art of Failure*, the difficulty in asserting

²⁰ Ibid. P. 47-48.

²¹ oyd, an Alamilla, and am rez Horacio . Roque. *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2012. P. 70.

²² Ibid. P. 47.

self, asserting time, asserting community can be the fodder for analysis, novel ways of storytelling, and experimentation. She writes, “What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.”²³ Here, we see how queerness becomes deeply tied to failure and to alternative means of narration. In the context of spoken word poetry, this means challenging how a story is told, how roles are oriented, who speaks and what words are used. A queer writing means a writing that may be read as disordered, or ‘incorrect,’ or as, Halberstam would say, a failure: “Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.”²⁴ However, this failure acts as a tool, challenging the epistemic foundations of writing, and eventually, queering narration.

Ultimately, through the process of preparing my performance, the exploration of scholars and artists whose work informs my poetry has been instrumental in the creation of a developed complete work to present. In seeking to construct work that speaks to

²³ Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. P. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.* P. 89.

racialized and queer voices, and utilize spoken word as resistance, this work acts as a device to fuel those goals, speak out, and truly, break past boundaries.

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Appendix

Lady Sin Trayda: <http://sintrayda.tumblr.com/>

LADY SIN TRAYDA, born RYAN KAI CHENG THOM, aka CHINA ROSE is a fiery writer, performer, spoken word artist and drag-dance sensation. A little Chinese grrl with a big, lipsticked mouth, her words pack a revolutionary punch that takes the fight right to the heart of expectation, stereotyping, and all kinds of oppression. Lady Sin and her alter-egos have traveled across Canada to bring poetic performances to pages and stages from her hometown of Vancouver to her current haunts in Montreal. She has featured at such venues as the Vancouver Poetry Slam, the Throw Poetry Collective, Montreal's Radical Queer Semaine, and the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word, competing as a finalist at the Verses International Poetry Festival 2012. She has performed alongside such artists as D'bi Young, Kalmunity Vibe, and the Montreal Slam Team, and is a resident at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts's Spoken Word residency 2013.