‘Iamb A Poet’: An Anthropological Study Of The Art Of Spoken Word

HÖRN ARNARSDÓTTIR,
NICOLE ANDERSON & PERRY NIMTRAKUL

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Introduction

The lights start to dim. The hum of chatter quietens. All eyes rest upon the stage. The time has come for another monthly poetry slam:

> “You’ve put a divider to separate the clean dishes and the dirty ones
> Oh, just kidding [Wagging her finger at the audience]
> That’s the white china and *everything else* [Shouts and cries of agreement]
> You know what would be more effective is if you built a *giant* wall [laughter]
> But I guess prejudices have worked pretty well this far.” (Jess Smith)

Jess Smith, a twenty-something female, organiser of Soapbox and prolific poet, is performing her piece on American politics. The audience is riled. There are shouts, laughter, and murmurs of agreement at each affront. The words are spat with venom, yet ridiculed with a smirk. It is the second round and five poets are battling to enter the final.

From January to March, we conducted fieldwork at ‘open mic’ spoken word and poetry slam events in Edinburgh. Our ethnography was based on investigating the function of spoken word and slam poetry as an art form, focussing on Soapbox – the open mic nights in the Pleasance Cabaret bar. We examined the atmosphere, the art of performance, and how the political is both created through the act of performing as well as inscribed in the space. As the poems are intended for an audience, they have become a platform to express identities and political nuances. Furthermore, the attributes of the performance facilitate the communication of political identities, views, and expressions.

During our fieldwork, we encountered colourful people, emotional stories, passionate performances, and enormous talent. Through interviews, weeks of ‘audience-dwelling’, and even performing on stage, we developed a sentimental attachment to the craft of spoken word poetry and the community that surrounds it. This article reflects on our emotional reactions and experiences, especially in relation to specific monographs and moments.

Interviewing (and Response)

Interviewing in general was something quite unfamiliar to all of us. However, it seemed intrusive and almost rude to pry too much into some aspects of the performers’ poetry – for example, issues such as mental health or the emotional expression involved in writing and performing poetry. We found this to be the case with performances too – introspective pieces in particular – which felt too personal [profound?] to be recorded in scribbles mid-performance. However, these performances *were* being put into the public sphere, available for anyone to consume, and this publicity is often what makes the performance so powerful and therapeutic for the performer and audience alike.

Interviews proved to be very insightful in our fieldwork as they uncovered aspects of performing and writing that we had not considered before, changing the way we viewed the performances later in our research. For example, Jess Smith discussed the way in which audience reaction can change the meaning and therefore the performance of a poem. She shared the example of her own poem which she intended to be frightening, but while performing it, realised that it was funny at its core, drastically changing how she subsequently performed and understood it as the reactions changed.

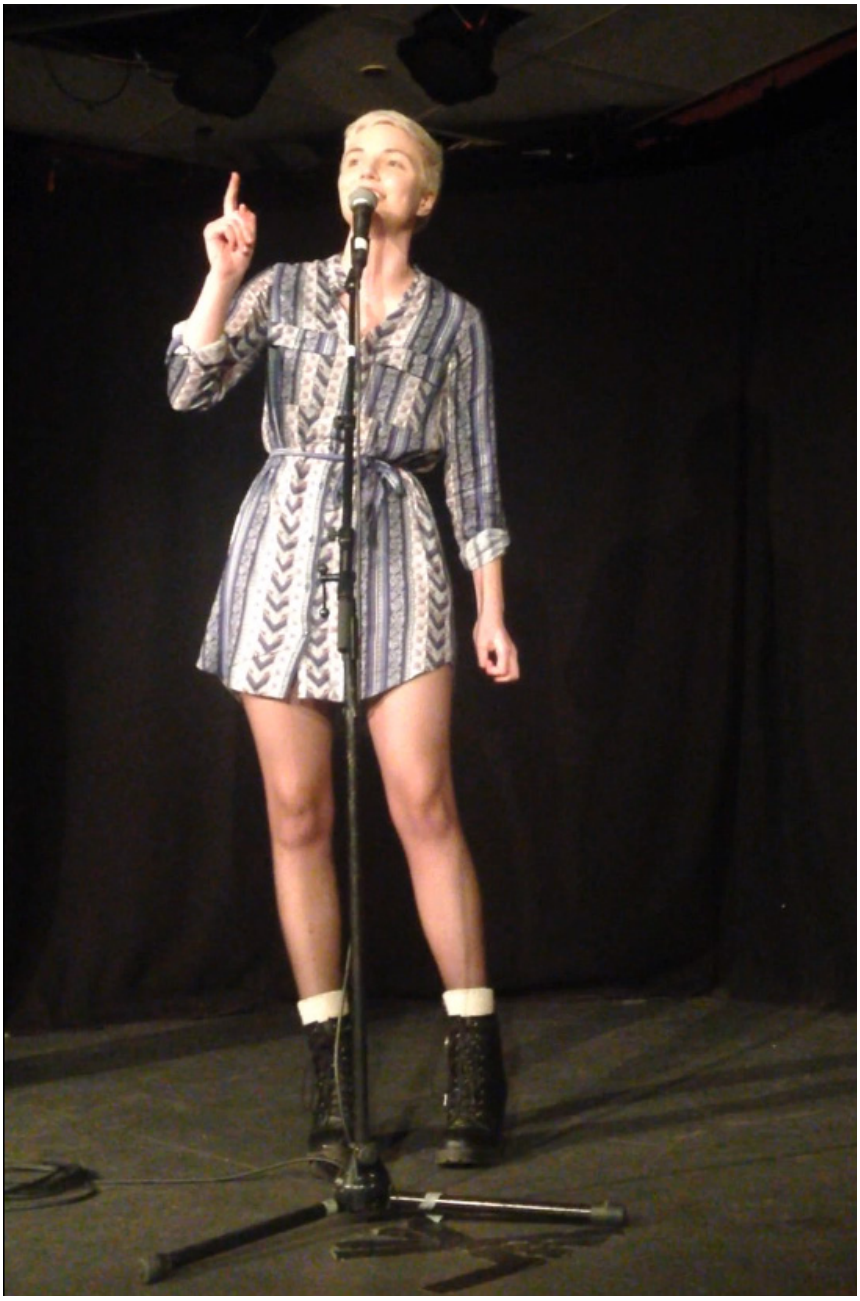

FIG 1: Jess Smith performing her piece on American politics on stage. © Hörn Arnarsdóttir, Nicole Anderson & Perry Nimtrakul

We found that our interviewees were more than happy to discuss their poetry, and difficult topics were often easily brought up by our interviewees themselves. A particular moment that struck us was during an interview with one of the hosts, Chloe[1]. Despite it being one of our first encounters, she was incredibly open in her responses, especially when she spoke about her experience of spoken word and mental health. She revealed how, despite her struggles, being involved in such a close-knit, warm community helped her through her illness.

This was particularly interesting because it illustrated that behind the lights, stage, and performance is a network of people who work to support each other. Looking back, it became very clear that there were many regular poets who joked with each other and complimented each other's work. As the host, Chloe was particularly well-connected, introducing the acts with personal anecdotes and stories of the more well-known performers. The worth of the poetry extends far beyond the performance, having the capacity to empower, strengthen, and bring value to the individuals involved.

This community supports each other not only through their presence at events such as Soapbox, but also through their responses – whoops and shouts of encouragement during the anger-fuelled, politically inclined preaches; clicks of agreement during compelling and relatable ballads of difficult times; hoots of laughter and mocking heckles during pun-filled comedy pieces. Even during poetry slams where the performers were competing with each other, we never witnessed anything but mutual respect and encouragement from the competitors.

In a space where personal and taboo topics become public, it seems unthinkable to respond with anything but respect and encouragement, and we were pleasantly surprised by the level of support. Of course there were times when some responses were inappropriate, but this seemed to be intuitional [intuitive? unintentional?]. During quiet, introspective pieces, it would be rude to interrupt with a loud cheer, and applause and cheers were generally kept for the end, or at appropriate times during a particularly inspiring piece, much like one would display appreciation at a classical music concert or at a comedy show. One response in particular which caught our interest was the clicking of fingers during performances. Initially, it seemed odd, but soon we were clicking our fingers too, displaying our agreement without disrupting the performer and the poem with a cheer or clap.

Performing

We soon realised that in order to be completely immersed in the spoken word scene, we must experience performing too. The stage in itself seemed terrifying. Raised above, basking in a white glare, it physically and metaphorically separates the performers from the audience. The superiority of the performer and their message is inscribed in the separation of the audience from the performer — in the blanket of darkness over the audience in contrast with the illuminated performer.

However, from the performer's perspective, the scene looks very different. You cannot see anything. The audience is invisible, made undetectable by the white glare and the heat of the stage lights. Strangely, it made us feel less exposed, anonymous even. The rush of applause that followed our performances felt warmer than the lights.

Rewarded for our courage with applause, we realised how performers become so passionate. Performing our pieces filled us with adrenalin and the audience reaction made us feel valued, leaving us with a sense of satisfaction that made us all want to perform again. Perhaps it was the initial fear that sparked that relief, but there is definitely something gratifying about being listened to. It felt as if, at that moment, no matter what you said, or how you said it, you would be given attention and intent.

The importance of this positive atmosphere was obvious to us when we considered the creation of a

1. Some names have been changed for discretion. However, Jess Smith asked to be named in our final work.

'safe space' and a supportive network. However, its importance in performance only really struck us when we interviewed poet Jess Smith, and when we performed ourselves. The aim of the poet is, essentially, to change the mood in order to create a response. Between our three performances, we aimed to do just that, but with three vastly different performances. Varying from rude comedy and puns to deeply personal and emotional responses, each of our poems were of very different styles, reflecting the image we were comfortable depicting and responses we were comfortable receiving from the audience.

We noticed immediately that there seemed to be a 'conventional' style or rhythm to the poems — at least to the more politically charged poems. Through our interviews and observations, we gleaned the interest of many of the performers in North American 'Button Poetry' videos, who adopted the styles and rhythms from these videos to create their own poems. We decided to look further into these videos[2] since they influenced our informants so heavily. Soon enough, our own poetry emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon, transformed by the influence of these fast-paced, rhythmic, politically charged and hard-hitting poems.

Political Expression

Heavily reliant on presentation, spoken word is different from written poetry. Its worth, purpose and life is created on stage. Somers-Willet (2005:52) emphasises this, stating that slam poetry "is written with the audience in mind". This became clear to us when we spoke to Jess and while writing our own poems. We found this particularly important on a personal level in making sense of raw emotions in order to perform them for an audience.

The act of introspection involved in spoken word by a subjugated individual becomes an active form of resistance, and a performance of rejection in which they refuse to continue to be a subject of oppressive structures of power. Subjectivity is an innate and imposed performance by the subject in everyday life, done infinitely and repeatedly in a production that carries through generations (Butler, 1993: 95). The political was often discussed in poems at Soapbox, from direct challenges of American politics to personal accounts of sexism and racism. By dredging up these innate performances, and becoming conscious of subjectivity through reflexivity, the poet may be able to counteract this feeling of oppression, however briefly.

This is seen in the use of spoken word by American black inner city youth to create alternative teachings which dispute the negative stereotypes imposed on them by racist institutions (Biggs-El, 2012: 163-164). Furthermore, it can be seen in mainstream spoken word videos, such as those mentioned by our interviewees, where poets often focus on racism and sexism — such as police brutality cases in the US, and university campus rape culture. This creates moments of consciousness that allow the critique and deconstruction of structures of subjugation, by subverting normative representations that are part of oppressive structures of power (Butler, 1993: 3).

We also found that introspection was important in performances at Soapbox. One such performer is Laurence, winner of the March Poetry Slam and an experienced, striking spoken word artist. His final poem at the March Poetry Slam tackled the issue of male suicide, highlighting the underlying shame that contributes to the problem due to the stereotypical image of masculinity. This performance, we found, was the pinnacle of the techniques of tone, voice, and intonation, his words swelling and rising with his anger. Hard-hitting and frightening, the volume carried out the strength of his feelings. Some lines were quick, almost like rap, expressing his frustration towards the stigma of male experiences of mental health. The exertion brought out beads of sweat on his forehead.

The audience clapped as the poem peaked — an unusual practice in spoken word, as discussed

2. "Dear Straight People" - Denice Frohman, Women of the World Poetry Slam 2013
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5frn8TAlew0
"Black Girl Magic" - Shasparay Lighteard, Woman of the World Poetry Slam 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XwhVnBoSVE
"Somewhere in America" - Belissa Escobedo, Rhiannon McGavin, and Zariya Allen, members of the Get Lit organization https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OadZpUJv8Eg

above, where clicking the fingers is used to quietly signify agreement. The style and performance created fear at the intensity of his words and the sheer force of his resentment. This performance, even now, resonates in our minds; Laurence's fists pummelling the air, the jump of his feet as the poem swells, his screams into the microphone. It exemplified, we felt, the true influence of spoken word poetry. Not only does it convey a message and a story, but it allows the listener to relive it and feel it along with the performer.

The realising of experience and ideas into a corporeal form is the transformative power of this art form. It empowers those who are constantly marginalised in everyday life, serving as. a medium for them to challenge stigma and taboos through an introspective exploration of their lived experiences. Consequently, spoken word poetry prompts the listeners to do the same. Its emotional aspect is one of the reasons for its effectiveness in political resistance.

Conclusion

At the end of each performance, as the buzz of chatter builds and the audience begins to leave, we are left, as always, feeling entertained, content, and renewed. After the last poetry slam in particular, we left in awe. This experience has not only made us realise the importance of spoken word and the power of performance poetry, but also how each poem is a work of art that has the ability to transform both its performers and audiences.

The very fact that the poets attribute their work with meaning (whether it is from their personal experiences or not), literary and poetic techniques, and the display of their poetry in this specific space proves that it is intended for artistic consumption. Slam poetry can be seen as an art form entered into a mutual exchange with its space of personal meaning, performative techniques and atmosphere. Each component creates and recreates each other.

A space and a community in which the performers are able to express their opinions, their experiences and themselves is created. This is a space where the political becomes art and where the subjugated can refute the roles created for them by society. This is a space where taboos become not only acceptable, but are even encouraged.

This fieldwork was not only valuable from an academic perspective but also personally to all of us. We have each discovered a new interest in spoken word and Edinburgh's spoken word community. In performing, we have all experienced writing and performing for an audience. In attending the poetry nights, we have seen through the performers' eyes, and glimpsed their plights and emotions through their poetry.

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