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A Matter of Life and Def:  
Poetic Knowledge and the Organic Intellectuals in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*

By  
Anthony Blacksher

Claremont Graduate University  
2019



## **Approval of the Dissertation Committee**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Anthony Blacksher as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of doctorate of philosophy in Cultural Studies with a certificate in Africana Studies.

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## Abstract

A Matter of Life and Def:

Poetic Knowledge and the Organic Intellectuals in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*

By

Anthony S. Blacksher

Claremont Graduate University: 2019

In December of 2001, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry (Def Poetry Jam)* turned HBO viewers into audience members of a televised poetry reading, featuring spoken word and performance poetry. Over six seasons, actors, rappers, comedians, and the host, Mos Def, joined poets in a unique representation of counter-public open mic poetry readings and poetry slams. This dissertation unpacks the poetry, performances, and the production of *Def Poetry Jam* to explore how a performative art embodied and confronted racial discourses, including stereotypes and also, addressed the racism, patriotism, and imperialist discourses that circulated after 9/11. *Def Poetry Jam* contributes to the intellectual capacity of spoken word and performance poetry, and poets as intellectuals, where poets produce and disseminate knowledge, ideas, and data, in the form of narratives, that contribute to critical consciousness. The effectiveness of the series lay in the consistent blurring of entertainment, knowledge, anti-capitalism, and capitalism. This research demonstrates how *Def Poetry Jam* provided organic intellectuals, through poetry, a space to name the pain of history, demonstrate pleasure amid structural inequality, and to imagine themselves in liberatory ways.

The following questions guided this exploration of *Def Poetry Jam*: from which poetic traditions did *Def Poetry Jam* originate and thus represent to television audiences; how did the on-screen representation of performers and poetry contribute to the production of cultural

consciousnesses; and finally, how did *Def Poetry Jam* offer an archive of knowledge about the United States, particularly those experiences of African-Americans and people of color, in the early twenty-first century? Following a content analysis of the three hundred ninety-four performances on the series, supplemented by interviews with talent coordinators Shihan Van Clief and Walter Mudu, as well as poets Mayda del Valle, Abyss, Willie Perdomo, Javon Johnson, and Bob Holman who appeared on the show, this research found *Def Poetry Jam*, as a commercial project, negotiated cultural resistance within the controlling images of Black bodies and people of color on television. Their poetry extended the Black radical poetic tradition, that, in-large part began with the Harlem Renaissance, and continued through jazz poetry, the Black Arts Movement, hip-hop, and poetry slams.

Building on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, poets on *Def Poetry Jam* served as organic intellectuals, engaging in the cultural and political struggle for hegemony and the dominant ways of understanding social processes. Whereas poets are typically considered traditional intellectuals who participate in the struggle for hegemony through narration and observation, Def Poets were presented as participants who use spoken word and performance poetry to build critical consciousness among Black communities and communities of color. In performing this intellectual work on television, poets represented themselves and were represented by the television series as easily recognizable members of racial and ethnic groups by invoking the controlling images and stereotypes that their poetry confronted. This research, therefore, builds on Mark Anthony Neal's work on illegibility, where subjugated bodies challenge the very representation they seem to embody. Neal's introduction of the ThugNiggaIntellectual, especially captures the representation of *Def Poetry Jam*, as poets subverted the stereotypes and

controlling images to link the imperialism and systemic racism of the United States to the interpersonal relationships, community building, and daily life in the 21st century.

As a television series, *Def Poetry Jam*'s collection of performances serves as an archive of knowledge confronting the ideology of American patriotism and neoliberalism in a post 9/11 United States. In presenting *Def Poetry Jam* as an archive of knowledge, this research introduces sociopoetix as a method of critical analysis for spoken word and performance poetry. Grounded in Aimé Césaire's valuing of poetic knowledge and Michel Foucault's method of problematization, sociopoetix further depicts the poets of *Def Poetry Jam* as organic intellectuals in the struggle for hegemony. However, like much of Russell Simmons' "Def" projects, this research finds *Def Poetry Jam* to be a television show that negotiated political and cultural radicalism with a commercial viability grounded in the multiculturalism of hip-hop. The series' negotiation of critical consciousness and reproduction of neoliberal ideals, especially where cultural and political radicalism became the commodity, illustrates what Regina Bradley describes as messy intellectualism.

As *Def Poetry Jam* allowed performances, particularly by Black poets, to speak candidly about systemic oppression and to make meaning of their own experiences, identities, and humanity on television, this research explores the series' role in the context of Black television. Building on Manthia Diawara's outline of new Black realism in film, this research offers *Def Poetry Jam* as a televised successor of that genre, pioneering a narrative technique defined as matter-based narration. While much of this research foregrounds the relationship between performances of poetry and the social contexts to which these poems responded, the mise-en-scene and representation of Black bodies, particularly Black women's bodies, made *Def Poetry Jam* a significant, if understated, television series in history of Black television.

*Dedicated to the poets of Def Poetry Jam  
and to my father, Anthony Blacksher,  
the most organic intellectual.*



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## Chapter 1: Analyzing *Def Poetry Jam*

“I wanna hear a poem

I wanna learn something I didn’t know” — Steve Coleman

HBO’s signature static opening fade in and quickly fades to black. The same static which brought audiences into the prison of *Oz*, the posh New York of Carrie Bradshaw, the oddities of Larry David, the perpetual drug crisis in *The Wire*, the family of Fisher & Sons Funeral Home, and the mob enterprise of Tony Soprano. The static fades, bringing viewers into a world where literature meets hip-hop. With a black screen, a single cello plays a staccato note followed by a short melody. The screen fades into a close-up of the rapper Mos Def. Looking directly into the camera, he recites the beginning of Langston Hughes’ poem, “Harlem Sweeties” (s1e1).<sup>1</sup> “Have you dug the spill/Of Sugar Hill?/Cast your gems/ON this sepia Thrill/Brown sugar lassie,/Caramel treat,/Honey-gold baby/Sweet enough to eat” (Hughes 245). The melody builds in volume and intensity, silencing just before Mos Def finishes the poem. He adds, “Langston Hughes, Def Poet...now let’s go.” Mos Def grins, pausing for viewers to note this new title bestowed to Langston Hughes.

Within the first minute, the central figure of the Harlem Renaissance marshals in a new presentation of poetry rooted in politics, performance, identity, culture, and hip-hop. The title sequence begins with excerpts of poetry flashing across a series of mosaics depicting the landscapes of a metropolis. Different voices read each line, while the cello settles into a bass groove. Strings fill out the melody over a simple *boom-bap* beat. These voices continue, until the

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<sup>1</sup> Poems which appear on *Def Poetry Jam* are noted with the season number and episode numbers. Thus, “Harlem Sweeties” (s1e1) indicates that the poem appears in the first season and in the first episode.

title sequence fades into an establishing shot of the New York City Supper Club. A live audience applauds and the off-camera DJ announces “Your host, Mos Def.” As he walks to the catwalk in front of the stage, the audience settles into their seats. *Def Poetry Jam* begins.

### *About Def Poetry Jam*

Officially titled *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry (Def Poetry Jam or simply Def Poetry)*, the series was a weekly thirty-minute television show on the HBO network. Following its December 15, 2001 premier, *Def Poetry Jam* brought poetry into the homes of HBO viewers for six seasons, until its final episode on March 24, 2007. It was a late-night show, intended to entertain audiences while providing thoughtful and provocative ideas (Lathan). *Def Poetry* reimagined the mystique of the New York poetry readings in the 1990s, where poetry, performance, hip-hop, and poetry slams collided into the growing phenomena of spoken word and poetry slams. The New York Supper Club, now known as the Edison Ballroom, became a nationally televised poetry reading, where the audience was in the Supper Club and on their couches across the country. *Def Poetry Jam* brings HBO viewers a total of three hundred and ninety-four performances by two hundred and fifty-seven performers. In each episode, around ten poets shared their musings on any number of subjects ranging from love, politics, history, sex, the war on terror, life in the ghetto, identity, ethnicity, stereotypes, discrimination, and of course, hip-hop.

Except for the final season, each episode began with Mos Def reciting poets and playwrights of the past. These recitations crossed history, genre, and stylings, branding poets like Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Rumi, Audre Lorde, and Ezra Pound as Def Poets. Following the opening credits, Mos Def walks to the front of the stage and welcomes the Supper Club audience

to *Def Poetry*. His welcomes include reflections around the significance of poetry, NYC borough roll-calls, or entire verses from his upcoming album, *The New Danger* (2004). On more than one occasion, Mos Def ends the introduction with a phrase emblematic of the entire series, “Are you ready for some poetry, muthafuckas?” Mos’ introduces each poet, either in a voiceover as the poet’s name appears across darkened motion graphics of a New York City landscape, or directly to the audience, where he greeted poets coming on the stage in view of the camera.

In addition to the canonical authors in the introduction, *Def Poetry Jam* features well-respected poets and writers on its stage. Most of these performers are poets that came from the Black Arts Movement or directly followed in the poetic tradition of the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Felipe Luciano, Haki Madhubuti, Oscar Brown Jr., the Last Poets, Kent Foreman, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Louis Reyes Rivera, Martín Espada, Miguel Algarin, Quincy Troupe, Joy Harjo, Nikky Finney, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Mutabaruka, and Yusef Komunyakaa are among the legendary poets of these eras who appear on the series. Eve Ensler of *The Vagina Monologues*, noted author and journalist Asha Bandele, acclaimed sociologists Michael Eric Dyson, and Pulitzer Prize-winning poets Rita Dove and Sharon Olds also appear on *Def Poetry Jam*.<sup>2</sup>

Complimenting these poets are actors, musicians, comedians, and rappers, who, for the most part, try their hand at spoken word poetry. Among the actors and comedians who appear are Cedric the Entertainer, Dave Chappelle, Adele Givens, Jaime Foxx, Mike Epps, Phylicia Rashad, Tracy Morgan, Benjamin Bratt and Wood Harris. Actors Malcolm Jamal Warner and Kim Fields, who built reputations as poets in the spoken word poetry scenes of Los Angeles and Atlanta, appear on the series as well. Rappers and musicians who appear on *Def Poetry Jam*

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<sup>2</sup> Martín Espada is a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2007.

include Smokey Robinson, Common, Floetry, Jewel, DMX, MC Lyte, Lauryn Hill, Michael Franti of Rage Against the Machine, Black Thought of the Roots, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, John Legend, Buju Banton, Bounty Killer, Carole King, Matisyahu, Musiq Soulchild, Salt of Salt n' Peppa, Alicia Keys, and a pre-*Graduation* Kanye West who appeared in three episodes. While the esteemed literary figures demonstrate *Def Poetry*'s commitment to the art of poetry, the celebrities demonstrate the show's commitment to drawing audiences and subsequently ratings.

The host, Mos Def, plays a significant part in accomplishing these separate objectives. When *Def Poetry Jam* premiered, Mos Def was not only considered an elite lyricist, but his gold album, *Black on Both Sides* (1999), brought Mos Def as far from the underground scene as possible before the stigmas such as commercial rapper, pop artists, or selling-out apply. Even though a video for his single "Umi Says" (2002) became a commercial for Nike and the Jordan brand, his criticisms of structural inequality, institutional racism, and the racial representations in music and media, placed *Black on Both Sides* amongst a collection of "conscious hip-hop albums" that emerged at the turn of the century. Along with his success in music, Mos Def emerged as an actor just before *Def Poetry Jam* was set for production, starring in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), the MTV hip-hop musical reimagining of the opera *Carmen* (2001), and in the film *Monster's Ball* (2001) which was released less than one month before *Def Poetry Jam* premiered. As the series progressed, Mos Def released two more albums, *The New Danger* and *True Magic* (2006), while starring in a range of films such as *Brown Sugar* (2002), *16 Blocks* (2006), and the HBO produced *Something the Lord Made* (2004), where his portrayal of heart surgeon, Vivien Thomas, earned him Emmy, Golden Globe, and NAACP Image Awards nominations. Despite his increasing celebrity, Mos Def showed the same enthusiasm for *Def Poetry* as when the series first begins, with a particular excitement for those performances he



enjoyed and also when he introduced his favorite poets. Off-screen, he affirmed his commitment to *Def Poetry Jam* when he became an executive producer of the show in the later seasons.

More so than the celebrities, the literary legends, and Mos Def, *Def Poetry Jam* is about the oral and performative art of poetry and the more than one hundred and seventy-five poets defining the art of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams in the 1990s and 2000s. One by one, each poet stands in front of the stage with no props, save for the occasional podium. Poets shout these poems from the depths of their diaphragm, whisper them in a calm voice, and share them as conversational stories. Poems are profanity-laced, humorous, fearful, regretful, written in righteous indignation, written in complex slant-rhyme, in-line rhyme, cleverly disguised rhyming couplets, not rhyming at all, and not holding themselves accountable to conventional notions of poetry. These poems leap off the stage, across the Supper Club audience, and into the homes of HBO viewers. *Def Poetry* manufactures the energy of poetry slams, without the competition and scoring elements. Each episode is a highly curated open mic. It is a bricolage of the nation's largest poetry readings at the time, notably the Nuyorican Poets Café's Friday night slam and open mic on the Lower Eastside of Manhattan along with the Da Poetry Lounge's Tuesday night open mic in Hollywood (Johnson 32). While poets represent cities across the country, *Def Poetry* prominently features poets from the leading poetry scenes, including Chicago, Atlanta, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and NYC.

To conclude each episode, Russell Simmons joins Mos Def in front of the audience, usually with a playful exchange between the two. Simmons ends each episode with some variation of the same sign-off that he concluded each episode of *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1997) with, "Thanks for coming out. God bless you. Good night." As quickly as Simmons appears and receives applause from the audience, he and Mos Def walk off the stage, out of the view of the

Supper Club and television audience, leaving the credits to roll over the same cello, bass, and percussion trio heard in the intro. Simmons' lack of stage time fits his decades-long tradition of serving as a behind-the-scenes person in some of hip-hop's watershed moments.

For all of Russell Simmons' production and branding of the series, he appears earnest in his reasons for supporting spoken word and performance poetry. In promoting the Broadway version of *Def Poetry Jam* (2002-2003), Simmons explained his interest in the emerging poetry movement:

I've watched this art form evolve over the years. It has really come to a space where it's a very important form of expression for young people around America. I think that it's time to give them an opportunity to speak to a much broader world. People don't really understand hip-hop. The people laugh, they cry, and they are inspired. (Lathan)

Depending on one's relationship to spoken word poetry, performance poetry, and their opinion of Russell Simmons concerning the commercialization of hip-hop, the eponymous title of the series has distinct connotations. *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* helps to popularize the art of spoken word and performance poetry, the series characterizes spoken word and performance poetry as an urban-hip-hop thing, or, the series' signals the transition of spoken word poetry and performance poetry from cultural resistance to commodification. While this project certainly sets out to unpack these possible meanings, it is prescient at this moment to suggest that Russell Simmons and the success of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, is directly responsible for giving spoken word and performance poetry its largest audience before the growth of poetry on YouTube.

Russell Simmons is the name attached to *Def Poetry*; however, it is the man behind the camera that gives *Def Poetry Jam* its polish. Stan Lathan, a television and film director since the 1960s, was Simmons' business partner in the Lathan-Simmons Media Group. Lathan has been at the helm of numerous television programs ranging from sitcoms to live specials. When it comes to Black television programming, Lathan's resumé reads like an encyclopedia entry of Black television. As a director or producer, Lathan's filmography includes *Soul!* (1968), *Say Brother* (1970), *That's My Mama* (1975), *Sanford and Son* (1974-1975), *The Apollo Presents* (1976), *Fame* (1982), *Miami Vice* (1982), *Falcon Crest* (1982-1987), *Hill Street Blues* (1985-1987), *The Redd Foxx Show* (1986), *Amen* (1986), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1987), *Frank's Place* (1987), *A Man Called Hawk* (1989), *It's Gary Shandling's Show* (1990), *True Colors* (1990), *Martin* (1992), *Roc* (1991-1994), *South Central* (1994), *The Jeff Foxworthy Show*, (1995) *Def Comedy Jam* (1994), *Cleghorne!* (1995), *Moesha* (1996-1999), *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996-2002), *Dave Chappelle: Killin' Them Softly* (2000), and *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001).<sup>3</sup> One cannot understate Lathan's imprint on *Def Poetry Jam* as a director. *Def Poetry* has a multi-camera set-up, allowing Lathan to frame poets on stage so that a viewer watching at home feels as if they are a member of the Supper Club audience. This includes the use of low angles when the poets face the audience, high angles above the poets shoulders to help the viewer orient themselves to the space of the Supper Club, avoiding prolonged use of close-ups, minimal yet deliberately slow use of zooming, panning, and tracking, and close-ups of audience members reacting to the poetry. The audience sits well below the stage, except for a couple of rows on either side of the catwalk that sits raised, thereby keeping audience members in the background of long and medium quarter-angle shots. Even more so than Russell Simmons, Stan Lathan avoids the spotlight. His most

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<sup>3</sup> This list includes shows before *Def Poetry*

insightful and lengthy reflection about *Def Poetry Jam* is a one-minute acceptance speech in 2002 when *Def Poetry* won a Peabody Award, of which nearly thirty-seconds was spent thanking the other producers in the category and the HBO Network.

The impact of *Def Poetry Jam* on the growth of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams is a research question all unto itself and what I hope is a topic for future research. There was an unquestionable growth in spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams occurring during the run of *Def Poetry*, but to what degree was the growth a product of poetry on television and to what degree was this growth a continuation of the popularity that began in the 1990s? With the National Endowment for the Arts reporting for 2017 an increase in adults who read poetry, nearly or more than double for adults of color and all adults under the age of fifty-four, it is difficult to discount the impact of a nationally televised poetry series which lasted for six years (Iyengar).

I approach this question cautiously, careful not to overstate the impact of *Def Poetry* and also careful not to undervalue the legacy of the show. On the one hand, folks like Bob Holman, Gary Mex Glazner, and others evangelized spoken word, poetry slams, and performance poetry through television programs, grassroots bus tours, and eventually DVDs of poetry slams. Furthermore, films like *Love Jones* (1997), *SlamNation* (1997), and *Slam* (1998) created on-screen representations of spoken word poetry for audiences who did not live near poetry communities or were otherwise unaware of the local poetry scenes. These films, poetry tours, DVDs, and the poets who visited college campuses, created an appetite for spoken word and performance poetry years before *Def Poetry Jam* and for those who did not have access to HBO. On the other hand, when Rudy Francisco became the first spoken word poet in the history of *The Tonight Show* to perform, it is prescient to acknowledge how *Def Poetry* motivated him to pursue

the writing and performance of poetry as a full-time career (Blacksher; J. Johnson “Killing Poetry” 107).<sup>4</sup>

### *Research Questions*

Before asking questions about the impact of *Def Poetry Jam* and the growth of spoken word poetry, it is essential to explore the series critically through a historical and cultural context. Thus, the question guiding this research is as follows: how does *Def Poetry Jam* function as representational-space for a performative art grounded in the production of critical-consciousness, particularly around issues of racism, identity, and what bell hooks describes as “imperialist white supremacist patriarchy capitalism” (Jhally). This research will demonstrate that *Def Poetry Jam*’s consistent blurring of entertainment, knowledge, admonishment of capitalism, and meritocratic success within capitalism, afforded organic intellectuals, through poetry, the space to name the pain of history, demonstrate pleasure amid structural inequality, and to imagine themselves in liberatory ways. More than a television show, *Russell Simmons’ Presents Def Poetry Jam* contributed to the intellectual capacity of spoken word and performance poetry, and poets as intellectuals, where poets produced and disseminated knowledge, ideas, and data, in the form of narratives, that contributed to critical consciousness about the United States after 9/11.

Embedded in this larger guiding question are the following questions: from what poetic traditions does *Def Poetry Jam* originate; what function does spoken word and performance poets serve and how might *Def Poetry Jam* bolster or compromise those roles; how might the on-

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<sup>4</sup> Actor, James Stewart performs the poem Beau, an elegy for his beloved golden retriever. Actor, Riz Ahmad recites a spoken word poem titled “Sour Times” yet lacks the style and polish of more seasoned spoken word and performance poetry. Host Jimmy Fallon often uses spoken word poetry 1980s sitcoms.

screen representation of the poets and poetry contribute to the production cultural-consciousness and politically radical content in spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams; and finally, how might *Def Poetry Jam* offer an archive of knowledge?

### **Performance Poetry, Slam, and Spoken Word**

Already, I have used the terms “spoken word,” “poetry slam,” and “performance poetry,” and it is crucial to understand the relationship and distinctions between these interrelated terms. Beginning with the least ambiguous term to define, a poetry slam, or slam for short, refers to a competition where poets perform their work on stage for audience members to judge. At the end of the competition, the poet, or poets if it is a team slam, with the highest score wins. While a poetry slam in its most general definition is *any* competition where poetry is performed and judged in front of an audience, most poetry slams follow the general rules and standardization set for the National Poetry Slam. This standardization is discussed more in chapter 2, as it shapes the craft and performance of poetry that appears on *Def Poetry Jam*. For example, one might ask, “Are you going to the slam tonight?” The word “slam” also operates as a verb describing the performance of a poem in the competition. Thus, it is acceptable to answer that question with, “Yea, I have a new poem I’m going to slam.”

The term “slam poetry” on the other hand, is a misnomer. While often employed to describe a particular style or sets of performative techniques designed to elicit audience reactions, and in turn points from the judges, the use of the term “slam poetry” falsely presumes that these styles and techniques are necessary or even present in the poems performed at slams.<sup>5</sup> Like the poets who compete in poetry slams, researchers rebuff the use of this term. Katie Ailes

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Jacobus suggests that “slam poetry” becomes a way to describe a new incarnation of “beat poetry.”

offers a great analogy, “using the event name [poetry slam] to describe the type of work performed at the event is massively generalizing, considering that a wide range of styles are invited to be performed at slams. This would be akin to labeling all music performed at open mics ‘open mic music,’ ignoring the vast range of music which can be performed” (Ailes). Most poets who slam agree to the point that “there is no such thing as slam poetry,” but instead there are poems better suited to be *slammed*.

Where the term “slam poetry” is appropriate, perhaps, is when discussing an archive of poems performed at a slam, and in the context of *that* slam (Gilpin; Gioia). Thus “slam poetry” is accurate in its reference to *slammed* poetry. Similarly, “slam poetry” might serve as an accurate term in its reference to the artistic movement where people gather to witness and participate in poetry slams. For example, Marc Smith, who introduced an early incarnation of the poetry slam as it exists today, writes, “Slam poetry is different from many poetry movements because it is performance, and community, and audience” (116). In this regard, “slam poetry” refers to an artistic movement and a social and literary for(u)m rather than a specific set of styles and performative techniques (Gregory).<sup>6</sup>

The next term that frequently appears in this project is “performance poetry.” In its most general application, this refers to a performance where the delivery of the poem necessarily involves the use of the body. As world-renowned poet Dana Gioia explains, “Performance poetry represents the merger of certain poetic techniques with forms of drama and live entertainment, especially stand-up comedy and improvisatory theater...Performance poetry is rooted not only in language. Instead, it recognizes and exploits the physical presence of the performer, the audience, and the performance space. The text is only one element in its artistic totality” (23).

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<sup>6</sup> For(u)m is used to connote the both the “form” of poetry in poetry slams, namely the time limits, lack of props, etc. and also the “forum” of poetry slams as a counter-public space of expression.

The emphasis on the body, especially the voice, serves as a crucial site for conveying the poem's meaning. Thus, the act of reading a poem is likely not considered to be performance poetry.

However, the thoughtful and intentional use of the body and the voice as a vehicle for communicating the sounds, ideas, context, rhythm, and other elements of the poem would fit in the general definition of performance poetry.

The clearest example of performance poetry on *Def Poetry Jam* is a performance by Marc Bamuthi Joseph titled "For Pop" (s3e3). In a poem that incorporates dance as a performance of cultural resistance through his relationship with his father, Marc Bamuthi Joseph tap dances while speaking and in the spaces between the text. At some moments, dancing illustrated what is happening in the poem. At other moments, the changing rhythm from the tap dancing adds sound and drama to the text. A more subtle example is Big Poppa E's "Wussy Boy" (s2e4). Big Poppa E's comedic poem shunning conventional masculinity blends stand-up comedy with a dramatic monologue. The constant scowl on his face, forcible grip on the microphone, prowling across the stage, and provoking gestures delivered in a fiery tone offer a hilarious complement to lines such as, "i'm not the average every day/run-of-the-mill wussy boy you/beat up in high school, punk,/i am wuss core!" (Ott). As the ability to engage both the live and the television audiences was an essential component in the selection of poets, most of the performances on *Def Poetry Jam* can be described as performance poetry. However, it is my suggestion that future discussion around what constitutes performance poetry considers the choreography and intentionality associated with the movement.

The final term, "spoken word," is the most elusive and contested of the three terms. Generally, spoken word poetry can refer to any poem that is read aloud, thus making it synonymous with oral poetry. It is not uncommon to find passages describing spoken word



poetry as ancient, pre-historic, and a practice rooted in the performance of history, storytelling, and communication. For example, in *The Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry* (2004), Marc Smith lists Homer's recitation of *The Iliad*, the West African griots use of poetry in delivering news across villages, and the Irish history captured in ballads as examples of "spoken word poetry's long tradition" (4). To this end, I find acceptable the use of the terms "spoken word" and "spoken word poetry" to refer to any such poem written to be performed orally and before an audience. By extension, a spoken word poet refers to a poet who regularly performs their poems orally and writes poems with the intention of reading them aloud and in front of an audience. Spoken word is in stark contrast to poems written for page publication and other visual mediums by poets who infrequently read their poems aloud.

However, this definition of spoken word poetry obscures what Javon Johnson describes as "the troubling racial politics" in poetry slam and spoken word poetry communities (*Killing Poetry* 28). As Tony Medina observes, "Serious poets who also happen to perform well on stage are constantly being called spoken word artists and are not taken seriously as writers. Poets (especially those of color) who use the word (use language) to effect change are therefore ghettoized by those in the academy and those at the gates as solely (or 'simply') oral, urban, or street poets" (Medina and Reyes xix). How the term "spoken word" becomes race-ed, and by extension class-ed, is itself a point of inquiry worth a separate study. This race-ing of spoken word poetry simultaneously rearticulates poets in the past, namely poets in the Black Arts Movement and the early Nuyorican Poets in the 1960s and 1970s. It is also a framing of poets who identify or otherwise engage with hip-hop, through language, rhythm, and rhyme as influenced by rap music. While I find this use of "spoken word" useful, insofar as it highlights the radical Black oral traditions of the Harlem Renaissance, jazz poetry, the Black Arts

Movement, and hip-hop, this race-ing of “spoken word” obscures the collaborative and competing impact of the modernist, avant-garde, beat, and performance poets that influenced and appropriated Black oral poetry and Nuyorican poetry.

For those critical of the term “spoken word,” they often describe “spoken word” as effective marketing language for poets seeking to capitalize on the anti-academic and anti-elitism that contrasts with traditional mediums of poetry and publications (Jones 185). For example, in the first scholarly book entirely engaging the poetry slam movement, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), Susan Somers-Willett writes:

Enterprising poet-performers, however, are starting to skate between competitive (slam) and commercial (spoken word) arenas, and the market continues to broaden for versifiers billing themselves as spoken word poets. Although the term *spoken word poetry* can be used to designate many different types of verse, in this book I use it to connote performance poetry through which one can witness competing commercial and artistic interests, especially as they play out in contemporary media and through associations with hip-hop culture. (12)

While Somers-Willett’s book is a truly insightful look into the psychology, history, and leveraging of racial politics in the for(u)rm of poetry slams, her conflation of “spoken word” with commercialization and with hip-hop is troubling. Especially given her project’s focus on Black poets in the exchange of identity performances for slam scores, her use of the term “spoken word” reads like a marketing strategy for poets trying to capitalize on the growing economy of the hip-hop industry.

As such, Somers-Willett doubly marginalizes “spoken word” poetry as first, out of the traditional literary and academic poetry spheres and second, as outside of the poetry slam community whose competition with poetry is itself a counter-public act of defiance against traditional literary and academic poetry spheres. Furthermore, Somers-Willett’s definition of “spoken word” punishes these doubly marginalized poets for entering commercial markets catering to hip-hop culture, while failing to mention how other poets use their cache in poetry slams to enter into other commercial and economic markets, such as theater, education, non-profit programs, and even activism.

Based on these explanations, the frequent grouping of the terms “spoken word,” “performance poetry,” and “poetry slam” highlights the ambiguity that exists between these performative and poetic elements. It also reminds readers that poetry, like all art, is a continually evolving terrain that is determined culturally, historically, and politically. Where *Def Poetry Jam* is concerned, the television series featured poets that fit in the center of performance poetry, it featured many winners and competitors at the National Poetry Slam, and poets who spoke from and to the conditions relevant to hip-hop culture. As such, I am careful not to use these terms interchangeably.

### *Theory*

This analysis is guided by an assumption made by the cultural studies pioneer, Stuart Hall, in his 1993 essay, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” He writes, “By definition, Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of static contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out... There are always positions to be won in popular culture, but no

struggle can capture popular culture itself for our side or theirs” (Hall “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” 469-470). Where Hall explores “the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms” of the signifier “Black” in “Black popular culture,” he makes a point to refuse the essentialist distinctions associated with “or” and instead advocates for “the potentiality or the possibility of an ‘and’” (472). Borrowing from the work and evolution of his student, Paul Gilroy, who is guided by the refusing essentialist and binary categories of being Black *or* British, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s work in Black popular culture operate from the position of being Black *and* British. This analysis of *Def Poetry Jam* follows their lead into the terrain of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slam communities and more precisely, into the emerging scholarship around these communities and art form. This research is, therefore, a practice in the potentiality and the possibility of “and” rather than “or.” I consider how *Def Poetry Jam* was of commercial interests to a number of parties, including HBO, Lathan-Simmons Media Group, and poets trying to capitalize from their appearance on the series; *and*, how *Def Poetry Jam* broadcasted representations of Black bodies, the narratives of young working class people and people of color, and scathing political critiques when most media in the United States foregrounded patriotism after the events of 9/11.

Remembering that hegemony reflects ideological and political struggles, Def Poets entered the terrain of these struggles as organic intellectuals articulating the historical, economic, cultural, and political moments. Based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s (2014) definition of articulation as “the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. Every social practice is therefore—in one of its dimensions—articulatory” (113). To this end, this

research views the poets on *Def Poetry Jam* as an engagement in the discursive practice of attaching meaning to events in the past, the social processes of the present, and the relationship people have to the social structure.

For a majority of poets, those articulations critiqued the hegemonic ideologies and arrangement of institutions that constitute what Black feminist and media scholar bell hooks describes as “imperialist white supremacist patriarchy capitalism.” Their performances critiqued the place of Black, Latinx, Asian, Native American, queer, impoverished and women’s bodies, as well as the legitimization of their identities as marginal. Furthermore, the poetry presented on *Def Poetry Jam* negotiate the production and performance of critical consciousness within the medium of entertainment. My frequent use of the term critical consciousness relies heavily on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), where critical consciousness involves 1) the acquiring of knowledge about social structures and systems that produce and maintain inequality, 2) developing within oneself a sense of power and capability to challenge those structures and systems, and 3) the commitment to take action against those structures and systems (El-Amin et al.). This critical consciousness was produced on *Def Poetry Jam* through performances which articulated histories, structures, and cultures that called into question the legitimacy and normalization of imperialist white supremacist patriarchy capitalism. While this may not seem to be a revolutionary or even a radical act of cultural politics, especially given the compromises necessary to appear on television, these on-screen narratives were unique given a pre-YouTube media landscape.

Like Stuart Hall, who at the time of “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” is informed by a broad range of disciplines and scholarly traditions, this research operates across and at the intersections of various academic traditions. Readers may find that this project at times

braids these fields effortlessly. Other times, readers may find this project jumps clumsily from one subject to another. Like Hall, like the performances on *Def Poetry Jam*, and like the production of the entire series, this research reflects a negotiation of the positions to be won within the academy, especially between the fields of cultural studies, historical sociology, and hip-hop studies.

Foremost, the field of cultural studies guides the underlying research questions, theoretical foundation, and the fundamental assumptions embedded in this research. First, the examination of the performances and the production of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* is inherently an examination of power and the relations of power these performers, performances, and the production of *Def Poetry* had within the social structure. Second, popular culture is “the site of a dynamic process — a zone of interaction, where relationships are made and unmade to produce anything from meaning to pleasure, from the trite to the powerful” (Guins and Zaragoza Cruz 11). Third, post-colonial studies, as interpreted through cultural studies, explains the underlying assumption that the neoliberal world in which *Def Poetry Jam* existed and responded to reflect the stalemate between the “liberal faith in progress, modernization, and the bureaucratic state” and “the conservative faith in free trade, deregulation, and the ‘free market’” (Lipsitz 508-509).

While cultural studies guides the assumptions of this research, the methodological approach and pedagogical approach reflects the field historical sociology. As historical sociology explains society-wide transformations in large-scale social processes, the method of content analysis, particularly in the coding, offers the art spoken word and performance poetry as a tool for generating and capturing qualitative data about the transformation of the United States in the years up to and following the events of 9/11. In addition to cultural studies and historical

sociology, readers will note the influence of hip-hop studies and hip-hop culture. On the one hand, any project centered around a subsidiary of the Def Jam brand must express fluency in the history, language, and culture of hip-hop. On the other hand, this research stems from a scholarly voice discovered and nurtured in hip-hop communities. Therefore, this research is not so much about hip-hop aesthetics, cultures, and communities, but rather this research *is* hip-hop practicing cultural studies through an approach of historical sociology.

### *Method*

Content analysis was employed to analyze the television series *Russell Presents Def Poetry*. There were forty-four episodes over six seasons. Each episode was twenty-eight minutes. This analysis consisted of the three hundred ninety-four performances by two hundred fifty-seven unique poets. Seventy-two poets appeared in more than one episode.<sup>7</sup> Not analyzed were the introductory poems, but they have been noted to help map the genealogy of *Def Poetry*. In the final season, the introduction poems were performed on location by poets who appeared in the episode, rather than the host, Mos Def.

I viewed the entire series three times. In the first viewing, each episode was viewed in chronological order. In this viewing, a spreadsheet was created noting the poets' names, the titles of the poems, their hometown as identified in their introduction, and where their performance occurred in the episode.<sup>8</sup> Also noted was whether the poet appeared in multiple episodes, whether

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<sup>7</sup> Not included in this analysis are the raps between poets by Mos Def.

<sup>8</sup> Episodes in the latter seasons list the poem's title in the lower corner of the screen. *Def Poetry Jam's* Wikipedia page lists titles for each poem. However, that entry is uncredited, thus requiring verification during the research process.

the poet performed in the Broadway production of *Def Poetry Jam*, whether the poet might be considered a celebrity guest, and whether the poet could be considered “old school.”<sup>9</sup>

Following this viewing, I generated a preliminary list of categories related to the following: (a) representation of gender and sexuality (man; woman; queer); (b) race/ethnicity (Black; White; Latinx; Asian; Arab; Jewish; Caribbean); (c) style (rap; rhyme; performance; traditional; rant; comedy); and (d) social issue (class; race; gender; LGBTQ; family; education; govt; work; health; drugs; crime; urbanization; war; social change; love). Categories were not exclusive, thus a performance may have multiple tags within a category. This was especially the case with (d) social issues.

The second viewing of the series was the most comprehensive. I generated a database with an entry for each poem. This database kept a record of the previously listed categories as well as the following: (e) summary of the poem; (f) the text of the poem; and (g) significant biographical information and accomplishments by the poet. After watching each poem, I wrote a one to two sentence summary. Internet searches located the poem’s text and the poet’s biographical information and accomplishments. When internet searches did not yield the text of a poem, I entered the lines that I anticipated might be of significance to this research. When biographical information was unavailable, that section was left blank. For each entry, I also kept a record of (h) reflections, which I used to record reactions and significant connections to this research. In addition to these categories, I tagged each poem with (i) subtopics that might otherwise suggest common elements and subject matter. Examples of these subtopics included,

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<sup>9</sup> Celebrities are those performers more recognizable for acting, singing, rapping, comedy, or another medium than they are in the performance or publishing of poetry. Even though Malcolm Jamal-Warner and Kim Fields regularly perform spoken word and performance poetry, they are listed as celebrities as their notoriety comes from their work on television. “Old school” notes those poets whose recognition comes before the spoken word and poetry slam movement.



but were not limited to the following: aging, nerd, animals, nature, spiritual, infidelity, music, beauty, death, violence, sex, technology, rural, rape, single parent, abuse, language, history, food, colonize, discrimination, poetry, beauty, disability, consumer, and youth. The final complete viewing of the series served as a quality-control check. As noted earlier, the experience of poetry relies on subjective interpretations by the audience. Thus, the interpretation of a poem might differ as time passed. In this viewing, revisions of all tags took place.

It is worth noting here the limitations of this coding process. Because poetry inherently relies on the play between literal and figurative language, these tags for social issues and subtopics reflect a subjective understanding of a poem as much as, or perhaps even more so than an objective identification of what the poem is meant to convey. While the use of multiple tags helped tremendously, this research made evaluations as to what tags were pertinent to the understanding of each poem in the context of this research. For example, the issues of race, class, and sports appear in Alvin Lau's "What Tiger Said" (s6e5). Lau connects these issues to his own family, saying, "proud/that my mother/even after the battery, divorce, death threats, estrangement, heartbreak decade could still make values blossom out of the garden of Chicago's concrete." In coding, I determined whether the tags of "family" "abuse" and "divorce" are pertinent to this poem and in the analysis of this poem towards the research questions. In this poem, "abuse" and "divorce" are not as significant to the poem as are the (d) topics of "race" and "class" and the (i) subtopics of "sports," "media," and "multiculturalism."

Another limitation of the coding process concerns the categorization of gender and race. In the category of gender and sexuality, I refer to both gendered representation and sexual orientation. I included the tag of "queer" to identify performances by poets of LGBTQ+ communities. For example, the poem "Queer Eye" (s4e8) by Buttaflysoul, was tagged "man" and

“queer.” As this performance offers a humorous take on bisexuality, this poem was also tagged “LGBTQ” as it addresses a (d) social issue related to LGBTQ communities. My identification of gender was foremost based on a poet’s on-screen presentation of gender. Thus, I was more so identifying the on-screen representation of a poet’s gender than I was actually identifying the poet’s gender. In contrast, sexual orientation was foremost determined by their identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual within the content of their poetry.<sup>10</sup> For example, Alix Olsen, in her poem “Women Before” (s3e4) says, “And sometimes I see myself cheerfully and fun of quips/and then I feel my queer spirit jetting out from my hips.” In other cases, the poet’s biography reveals a lesbian, gay, or queer identity, in which case that poem was tagged “queer” in the database. A non-tag of sexual identity, which is to say the absence of a “queer” tag, did not necessarily connote a heterosexual identity. Instead, it left room for the possibility that a poet who appeared on *Def Poetry* may not have wished to have their sexual orientation known.

Categorization of race similarly followed the slipperiness of the categorization of gender and sexual orientation. To this end, I followed a similar approach. Foremost, I relied on the on-screen presentation of racial and ethnic identity as well as the content of their poetry. Where poets’ racial identity was not easily recognizable by their performance, their biography often contained that information. Most biographies that did not describe the racial or ethnic identity of the poet, could be recognized as white on-screen. When biographies did not identify a racial or ethnic identity and those performers were racially and ethnically ambiguous, that category was left blank. As noted earlier, poets who identified as multi-racial, in their poem or in their biography, were tagged with all appropriate labels. Like gender and sexual orientation, the racial

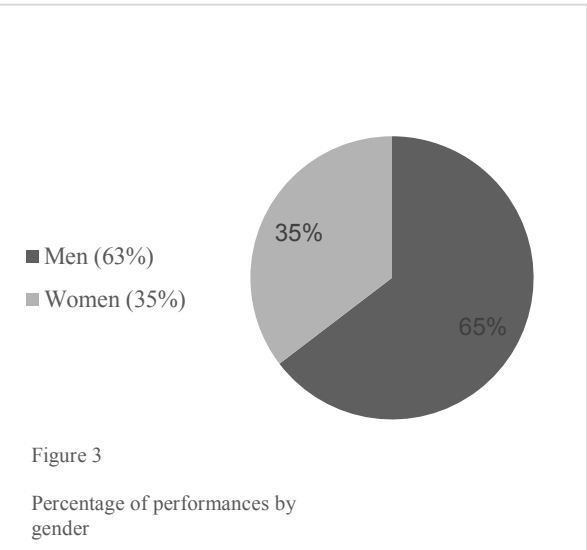
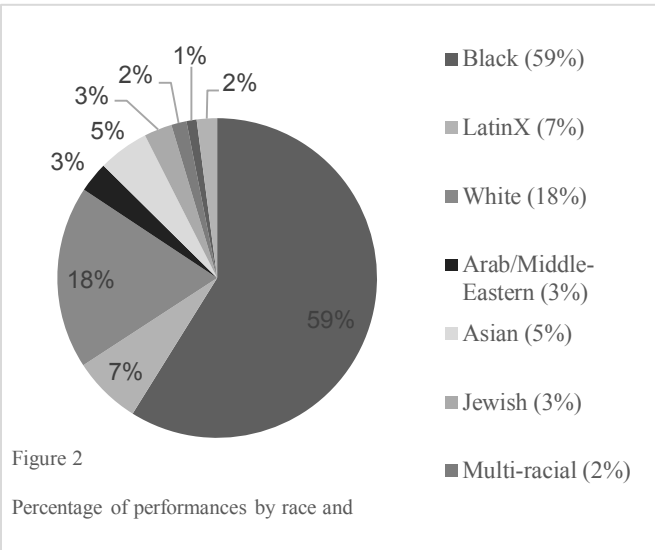
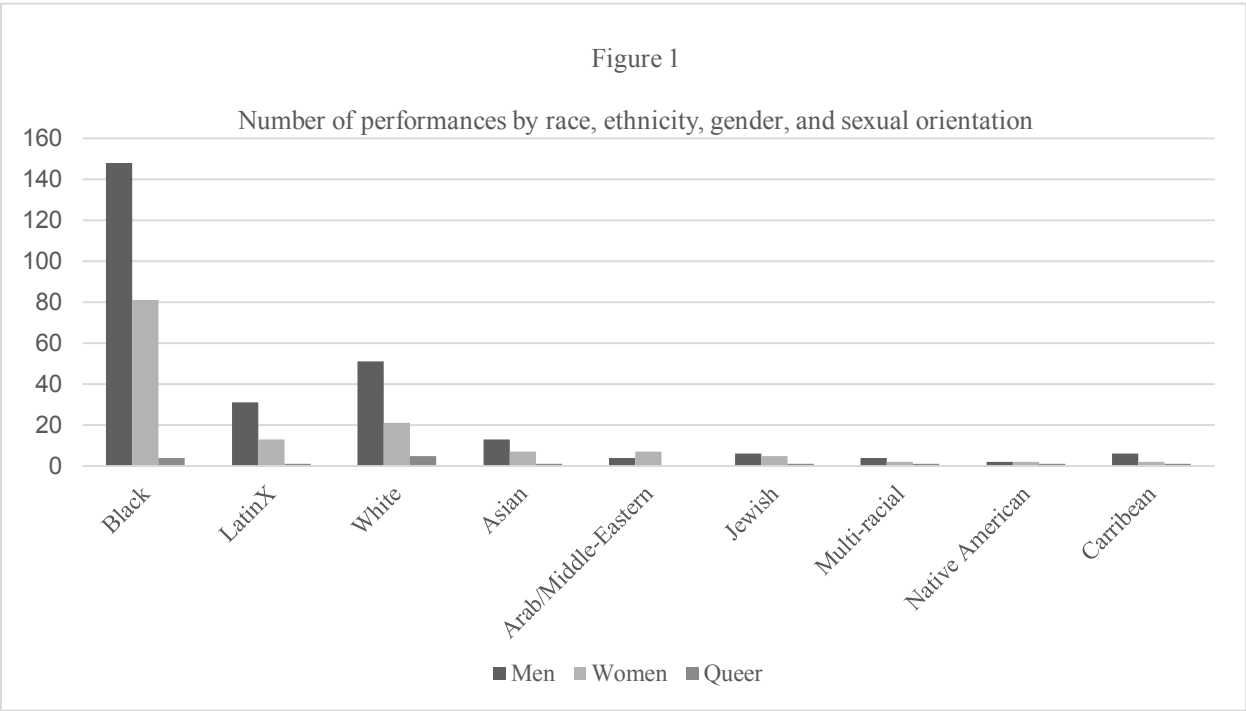
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<sup>10</sup> Trans poets are absent in this series, as are poems about the experiences of members of transgender and transsexual communities.

and ethnic categories identified the representation of the poet more so than an attempt to objectively identify the poets' *actual* race and ethnicity.

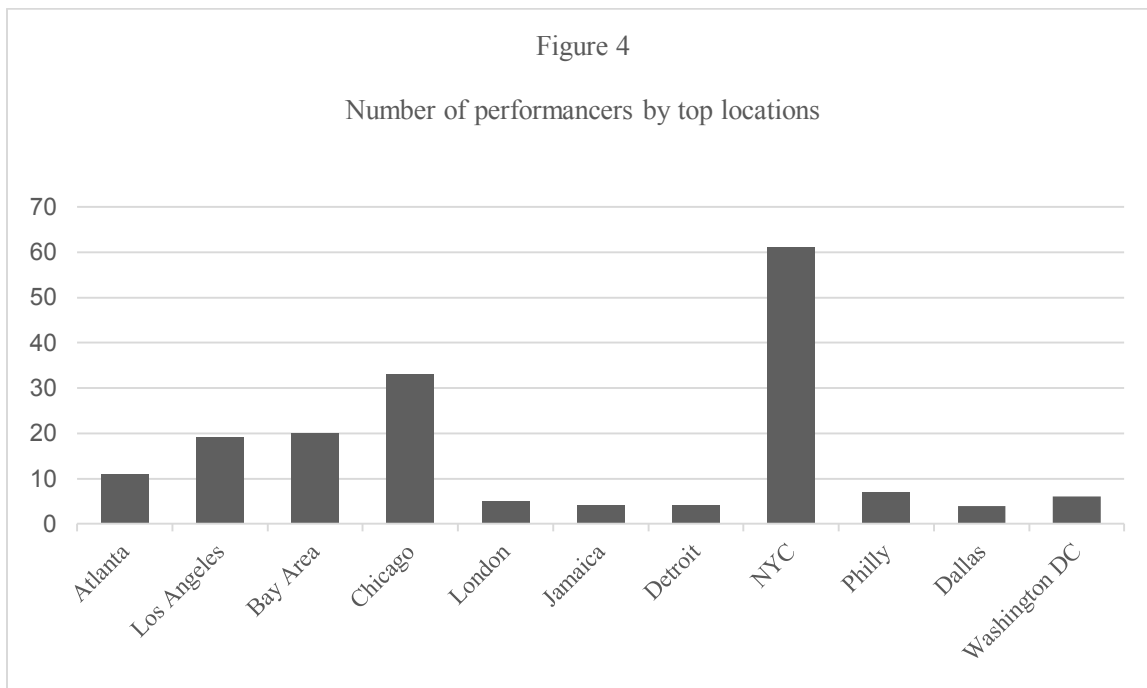
### *Findings (Quantitative)*

While this research focuses on the negotiation of entertainment and critical consciousness in the poetry, performances, and the production of *Def Poetry Jam*, it is prescient to acknowledge the quantitative data generated by the analysis. As figure 1 illustrates, Black performances overwhelmingly contributed to the content of *Def Poetry Jam*. Black men appeared in one hundred forty-eight performances, which was more than all non-Black performances combined. Black women appeared in eighty-one performances. Performances by White poets comprised the second largest racial or ethnic group representation with seventy-two performances, followed by forty-four Latinx performances, twenty Asian performances, eleven Jewish performances, ten Arab/Middle Eastern performances, eight Caribbean performances, six multi-racial performances, and four Native American performances (figure 2). Examining representation of performances rather than performers reflects the viewing experiences of race and ethnicity on the screen rather than composition of poets and performers on the stage. For example, of the twelve Arab/Middle Eastern performances, one poet, Suheir Hammad, performed six times. In addition to *Def Poetry Jam* overwhelmingly representing Black performances, men represent sixty-four percent of the performances. Meanwhile, women compose thirty-five percent of the performances and both men and women who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities compose only two percent of the performances on the series (figure 3).



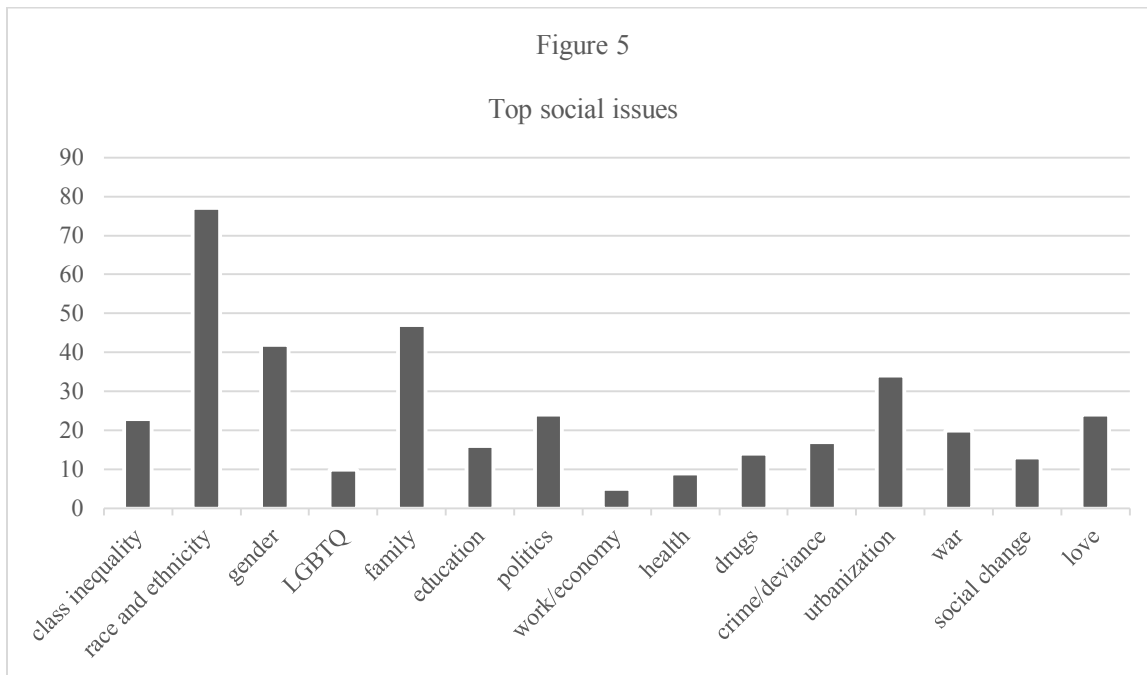
Examining the top location of performers revealed a significant presence of poets from New York City, sixty-one (figure 4). More poets represented the borough of Brooklyn, twenty, than any other location, with the exception of Chicago who featured thirty-one poets. The two California poetry communities of Los Angeles and the Bay Area also had a significant number of

performers, combining for thirty-nine poets. Outside of these top cities, eighty-two other locations were represented. This data reflects the inherent need for poets to move to a metropolis to pursue the art of performance poetry, spoken word, and to join competitive slam teams during the 1990s. Closely related, this data reflects the growth of young poets who came from cities with existing performance poetry, spoken word, and poetry slam communities. The data therefore contributes to the historical nature of this research by capturing a snapshot of the national poetry community.



In looking at the social issues (figure 5), poems focused on issues of race and ethnicity most frequently appeared on *Def Poetry Jam*, with seventy-seven performances. Surprisingly, forty-seven poems about family comprise the next largest category. While initially puzzling, this data reinforces the sociological adage of family being the most basic institution in society. Poems about family cross a variety of social issues and subtopics, which further illustrates the significance of the family as a site, source, and reflection of how individuals making meaning

social phenomena. Similarly, the variable of class seemed surprisingly low with only twenty-three poems. Looking into poems about class reveals the pervasive yet invisible presence of class stratification and inequality. Poets on the series may not have spoken specifically about class inequality, yet their narratives indicated environments and situations which were class specific. For example, in Lamont Carey’s “I Can’t Read” (s6e5), the poem’s focus on illiteracy and the exploitation of Black athletes overshadows the class inequality that creates substandard education, particularly in the relationship between funding and local taxes. Thus, the variables of family and class highlights a limitation of coding poetry, where the meaning of poems are figurative rather than literal. Also, this variable highlights an opportunity to explore the potentiality of using more complex statistical analysis to capture the archives of poetry to help make meaning of society at particular moments.



As *Def Poetry Jam* was a highly curated spoken word and performance poetry television show, the results of the coding reflects the concerns of hip-hop communities in the 1990s and 2000s when these poems were written. Further, these results reflect the perceptions of the shows’

creators in the racial, ethnic, and gendered representation of hip-hop. These result guided the direction of my research as it addressed the negotiation of critical consciousness and entertainment. For example, building a historical map focusing on New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area reflects the poets represented on the series. Furthermore, the need to understand the series in the trajectory of hip-hop's representation in Black television programs stems from the large number of poems which address hip-hop culture and race and ethnicity.

While the coding of performances on *Def Poetry Jam* revealed more limitations and insight into the profoundly layered meanings which poets use to tell stories, this methodological approach demonstrates the potentiality for engaging with poetry outside of the arts and humanities. Certainly, I am not the first to offer poetry as a source for learning about the social issues, structures, and processes of a society at a given time. Yet, this methodological approach allows researchers to use larger collections of poetry to more accurately make claims about society as well as use poems that are currently being circulated rather than looking back over the course of poet's life or particular era of society.

### *Interviews and Additional Research*

In addition to the content analysis, this research employs personal interviews with poets who appeared on *Def Poetry Jam* and two of the series' talent coordinators, Shihan Van Clief and Walter Mudu. *Def Poetry Jam* relied on talent coordinators to help recruit performers and screen the audition tapes of aspiring poets for the series. Shihan and Mudu, both Black men in their mid to late twenties at the time of the series, were among the few consultants who worked directly with Stan Lathan and Russell Simmons to select poets for the series. These interviews yielded tremendous insight about the production of the series from the conception of an idea to

the filming and editing of the series. Shihan is a dynamic poet with an exceptional ability to create community, capital, and opportunities through spoken word and performance poetry. Shihan detailed the audition process, camera editing, rights and licensing, and most importantly, articulated the progression of *Def Poetry Jam* from a variety of perspectives. His ability to simultaneously describe, critique, and contextualize the series proved invaluable in recognizing the constant negotiation that occurs with *Def Poetry Jam*. While this research documents one formal interview, my findings have been guided by numerous in-situ interviews and conversations with Shihan over the four years of this project.

My interview with Walter Mudu occurred in the first summer of this research. At his core, Mudu is b-boy who, at the time of my interview, was finding meaning as a family-man in hip-hop. Meeting at a diner across from Union Square in NYC, Mudu discussed the links between hip-hop, poetry, and entertainment during the 1990s. As a result of his affiliation with *Def Poetry*, Mudu began managing spoken word and performance poets by helping them book college and commercial gigs. Mudu explained the ease with which performers negotiated the political radicalism and cultural consciousness with the profit-making potential of their art.

Along with these talent coordinators, I interviewed five poets who appeared on the series, each by telephone. Bob Holman, who is counted as an essential figure in the growth of slam poetry, graciously spoke with me by phone just before his trip to West Africa to research griots. Holman offered important resources, locations, people, and events in the formation of slam, spoken word, and poetry that were necessary precursors to *Def Poetry Jam*. Similarly, Willie Perdomo, one of the most celebrating Puerto Rican and New York voices of the last thirty years, helped make sense of the landscape that led to *Def Poetry*. Perdomo explained poetry in



insightful ways, dispelling the dichotomy between the page and the stage will also valuing the liberating potential of poetry in both forms.

My interview with Mayda del Valle occurred after the content analysis, when it became evident poets were using mimesis to contradict the very stereotypes and images they were projecting.<sup>11</sup> Del Valle, who appeared on *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* and all but one season of *Def Poetry Jam* became one of the most popular spoken word poets of the decade. Following *Def Poetry*, del Valle toured throughout the country, even performing at the first spoken word-centered poetry reading of the Obama White House. Our interview yielded profound insights about performing identity, especially at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Similarly, my interview with Abyss, one of the more celebrated poets from the Atlanta poetry scene, also occurred after the coding of poetry. Abyss' knowledge and explanation of the poetry communities in the south, particularly the Atlanta and Florida poetry venues highlighted the growth of spoken word and poetry slams in regions that have not been well-documented.

My last interview involved a conversation with Javon Johnson. Johnson, who appeared on one season of *Def Poetry Jam*, has since emerged as the premier scholar in the critical study of poetry slams, spoken word, and performance poetry. Similar to Shihan, this research only documents one interview, yet relied on years of formal and informal conversations about *Def Poetry Jam*, poetry, performance, and the study of Black culture. In the documented interview, Javon Johnson made invaluable theoretical contributions about the performance and politics of spoken word and performance poetry along with reflections about his experience on *Def Poetry*.

In addition to these interviews, Bob Holman's collection of interviews, poetry readings, and various media recordings at New York University's Fales Library provided a necessary

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<sup>11</sup> This is a key point addressed in the third chapter.

glimpse into the history, production, and negotiation of poetry and mainstream media. The Holman collection features some of the key issues and perspectives in the history of spoken word, slam, and performance poetry as evident in the second and third chapters. Most notably, this research incorporates previously unpublished interviews from that collection that were recorded with early spoken-word poets Reg E. Gaines and Tracie Morris about the racial politics woven into the growth of spoken word and poetry slams. In visiting this collection, it is worth noting my time spent in research and in community at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Nuyorican Poets Café, and the Edison Ballroom.

#### *A Note on Poems, Profanity, and Transcription*

*Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* was a unique television production in that the performer wrote the text for their own performance. Those poems where the performers are not the original authors were cited or otherwise credited before the performance, for example, Phylicia Rashad credited Vivian Ayers, her mother, before reading the poem “On Status” (s5e5). While HBO owns the rights to the show *Def Poetry* and the Lathan-Simmons Media Group owns the footage, each poet retains the rights to their poem (Van Clief). Therefore, these poems have been performed at open mics and poetry slams, recorded for commercial and independent productions, and published in poetry anthologies.

Using web searches to find the texts of poems resulted in one of five possibilities: First, the text is available via a published book. Second, a poet’s website or a webpage written by the poet revealed the text to the poem. In both of these cases, I used the text as printed on the page for the text in the database (f). When using this text in the body of the dissertation, I tried to stay as close to the printed text as possible, only making changes where words were added or omitted

in the *Def Poetry* performance. Third, reputable “lyric” sites, namely *genius.com*, has the text of the poem. In this case, I used the text of the poem in the database. Fourth, blog sites and microblogs, namely Tumblr posts, contain the text or partial text to the poem. In the third and fourth cases, I verified the accuracy of the transcription. Also, because the format often conforms more to the layout of the webpage than the *sound* of the poem as performed on *Def Poetry Jam*, I took more liberty in changing line breaks and punctuation to more accurately reflect the rhythm, stress, and beats of the performance. In the fifth case, the text of the poem could not be found by web search. In this case, the transcription of the poem in the body of this research reflects my interpretation of how the poem might be presented on the page.

In presenting the text of poems, and the responses of interviewees, the use of profanity is included. At times, this use of profanity might seem gratuitous. However, in each poem that uses profanity, I took extra consideration on when to summarize a poem, where to begin the quoted text, and when to end the quoted text. In some cases, the seemingly gratuitous use of profanity and blatantly profane words are crucial to the anger, humor, irony, or points of emphasis in the poem. I am thinking specifically of how the profane insults in Yellow Rage’s “Listen Asshole” (s1e2) gives the audiences a break from the barrage of historical injustices without softening the effect of the collective oppression faced by Asian-American women. In this case, the omission of profanity renders the poem ineffective in its narration, the overall point of the poem, and its contribution toward this research. Furthermore, I hope readers find the presentation of profanity in the context of a doctoral dissertation another application of Stuart Hall’s insistence on the “and” in Black popular culture, whereby language is formal and profane.

Another point of caution is my use of the word “nigga.” My utilization of this word should not be read as a personal, political, or cultural position that reflects the acceptance or

disassociation as a term of endearment, affiliation, or subversion to the historical “nigger.” Instead, my employment of this word occurs when it is used in the text of a poem, interview, or otherwise as a part of the collected data. It also occurs in the context of a theoretical intervention I wish to make, based on Mark Anthony Neal’s essay, “Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual” (2003). Thus, my employment of the term explores the way poets on *Def Poetry Jam* use, challenge, and make meaning of “nigga” as a potential site of resistance.

A final note on poetry, profanity, and transcription is my handling of oral language in both interviews and the performance on *Def Poetry*. Joe Schloss’ approach in handling the “disjuncture between the oral language” and “the written language of the author and secondary source” greatly informs my handling of transcription (11). Schloss notes, “If one is not familiar with it, a written approximation of African-American English — nonstandard by definition — may make the speaker appear to lack full linguistic competence” (11). Thus, I follow Schloss’ practice of using nonstandard spellings sparingly, unless they seem to be used intentionally by the speaker and the performer when they purposefully signal ethnicity and when the absence of this spelling would detract from the intelligibility of the poem or point made by the speaker (Schloss 12-14). I also use nonstandard spellings and capitalization when they appear in the published texts by a poet.

### *Organization of Chapters*

The organization of these chapters guides this dissertation through a history of poetry leads to *Def Poetry Jam*, the consequences of knowledge production in commercial media, the intellectual value of spoken word and performance poetry, and finally, the role of *Def Poetry Jam* in the tradition of Black television. The second chapter, “A Historical Map of *Def Poetry*

*Jam*,” will provide a historical mapping of poetry that led to the development of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. Beginning with poetry from the Harlem Renaissance, this map will follow various styles, genres, and historical developments where poetry responds to the social conditions of inequality, discrimination, and racial bias. This chapter will note critical links between the Harlem Renaissance, jazz poetry, the Black Arts Movement, hip-hop, spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams. The latter half of this chapter will follow *Def Poetry* as an idea conceived by Bruce George to the recording of its first episode. Chapter three, “Organic Intellectuals, Messy Intellectuals, and ThugNiggaIntellectuals” will expand Antonio Gramsci’s role of the organic intellectual, by considering Mark Anthony Neal’s essay, “Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual” and hip-hop scholar Regina Bradley’s concept of the “messy intellectual.” Given the commercial medium of television, this chapter will consider how poets subverted stereotypes to perform intellectual work and how *Def Poetry*’s eponymous producer, Russell Simmons, created a space for knowledge production by selling it.

While the third chapter focuses on the poet as an intellectual, chapter four, “Sociopoetix in a Post-9/11 America” will consider spoken word and performance poetry’s unique capacity to reveal knowledge. Based on Aimé Césaire’s promotion of poetic knowledge, this chapter will offer poetry as a production of knowledge that contested the emerging post-9/11 discourse of war, terrorism, and patriotism that dominated television during the presidency of George W. Bush. The fifth chapter, “New(er) Black Realism,” will explore the on-screen representation of spoken word and performance poetry, with particular attention to Black bodies, stories, and lives. This visual representation builds upon the narrative techniques of New Black Realist films, as explained by Manthia Diawara. I consider the implications of *Def Poetry Jam* in making these bodies *matter* as a foretelling of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In the conclusion, “Life

After Def’ I pose questions and suggestions for further research concerning the growth of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams following *Def Poetry Jam*, with a particular influence on YouTube channels and educational curriculum.

## Chapter 2: A Historical Map of *Def Poetry Jam*

“dis poem shall speak of time  
time unlimited” — Mutubaraka

On September 24, 2016, Oprah Winfrey and Will Smith traded the poems of classic Black writers in a mock battle at the opening of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. They proceeded back and forth with poetry by Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Albert Murray, and Toni Morrison, before ending with Martin Luther King Jr.’s quote, “A man cannot ride your back unless your back is bent.” Arm in arm, the pair walked off the stage, joyously greeting Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush and First Ladies Michelle Obama and Laura Bush.

Months later, Will Smith reprised his role as a poetry aficionado, when the ABC Television Network aired a two-hour special commemorating the museum’s opening, titled, *Taking the Stage: African-American Music and Stories That Changed America* (2017). In rhyming couplets, Smith introduced the emcees Common and Chuck D, along with beatboxer Doug E. Fresh, to illustrate the intertwining legacies of poetry and rap. Beginning with Langston Hughes’ poem, “I, Too” (1926), the trio performed a medley of verses from Chuck D’s own “Fight the Power (1989), “Rakim’s “Paid in Full” (1988), Melle Mel’s “The Message” (1982), and finally Common’s “Black America Again” (2016).

On the one hand, this folding of rap lyrics into the canons of poetry reveals the connections between seemingly divergent Black poetic traditions — the Harlem Renaissance and hip-hop, the page and the stage, the struggle for liberation and the struggle for gettin’ paid. On the other hand, the privileging of these texts is problematic, since the folding of these rap lyrics

into the canons of Angelou, Hughes, Hurston, and Morrison erases the impact of poets like Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott-Heron, and The Last Poets. Especially given these latter poets contributions to spoken word poetry as more directly responsible for the political and socially conscious rap lyrics in hip-hop.

*Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* similarly attempts to fold hip-hop and rap lyrics into the canons of poetry, both within Black poetic traditions and poetry traditions that cross time, place, and genre. In the introduction of the first five seasons, host Mos Def recited the works of Walt Whitman, Rumi, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Gwendolyn Brooks, Henry David Thoreau, Lalla, Hafiz, Christina Rossetti, Audre Lorde, William Shakespeare, and A.E. Housman. As he did in the first episode with Langston Hughes, Mos Def concluded each canonical verse by acknowledging the author and declaring them a Def Poet. Of this branding, performance and gender studies scholar, Katherine Sugg, explains, “This perfunctory moment sutures *Def Poetry Jam* to a revisiting of canonical literary history (and dominant culture) as feeding into and participating in poetry slams and spoken word performance. It also works to reanimate and offer its own pop cache to what is usually considered one of the more moribund and high-brow contemporary art forms: poetry” (16). In the opening chapter of *Gender and Allegory in Transamerican Fiction* (2008), Sugg explains how *Def Poetry Jam*’s attachment of itself to literary canons challenges the idea that spoken word and performance poetry is to be taken any less seriously than the poetry celebrated by academics and literary critics. Furthermore, she argues, this labeling of Def Poet, reminds audiences that many of the canonical poets wrote with the intention of sharing their work with the masses.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore vital to see these

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<sup>12</sup> Walt Whitman has garnered praise as one of America’s most influential poets by writing poetry that speaks to the experiences of the American masses. For Whitman, the masses included the white working class, and eventually, the Black slaves and freedmen (Kuhn 30). T.S. Elliott famously describes his infrequent publishing as a strategy for



introductions as recovering the notion of “popular” in poetry while trying to legitimize the poetry and overall project of *Def Poetry Jam*.

Based on these introductions, *Def Poetry Jam* presented itself as a progeny of the modernist poets, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and the prominent writers of color who emerged in the late twentieth century. The list of rappers, actors, musicians, and comedians who appeared on the series presented *Def Poetry Jam* as a celebration of Black popular culture in verse. Between these two poles were the nearly two hundred poets that crossed ethnicities, styles, eras, and subject matter, yet were beholden to the show’s politics of a particular Black representational space privileging hip-hop culture and the growing slam poetry scene. This chapter will, therefore, explore the evolution of the Black radical poetic tradition from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts Movement and into the slam poetry scene of the twentieth century to explain *Def Poetry Jam*’s repackaging of American poetry and American culture more generally.

While this research in its entirety will illustrate how *Def Poetry Jam* repackages American poetry into a representation of hip-hop’s multiculturalism and intellectuality, this chapter uncovers those histories, aesthetics, and poets that lead many people to equate spoken word and even slam poetry as *a Black thing*. Given the exploration of racial politics in spoken word and slam communities that too often positions *Def Poetry Jam* as “an authentic Black, urban, underclass expression” (Somers-Willett 99), it is necessary to disentangle those histories and aesthetics of Black radical poetics, poetry slams, and the tradition of American poetry.

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maintaining a high stature, describing his rare publications as “an event” (Elliot 285). As a transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, an essayist as much as a poet, discusses writing for the masses in his 1854 book, *Walden*. He writes, “I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well employed or not; but mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them” (19).

Employing a historical approach for this disentanglement highlights the themes of cultural resistance, community theater, and an influence of musicality that ties *Def Poetry Jam* to the Black radical poetic traditions. Finally, as a contribution to the emerging study of spoken word poetry, the second half of this chapter moves slowly through the development of the New York and national poetry scene, as it informed particular spatial and social interactions that led to the creation of *Def Poetry Jam*.

This historical mapping is by no means an exhaustive genealogy of the Black radical poetic tradition. By privileging the poets who appeared on the series, readers may note an underappreciation of many poets and poetic movements. For example, Gil Scot-Heron, the first artist signed to Arista Records, is considered by rappers like Chuck D and KRS-One to be one of the first emcees by fusing of poetry and music. Heron was, however, absent from the show while his contemporaries like The Last Poets, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka were present. As a result, readers can expect a historical mapping that privileges the contributions of the New York poetry scene as it led to and grew out of Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theater.

### *Harlem Renaissance*

It makes sense that Langston Hughes, arguably the most prominent Black poet in American history, writes the first poem recited on *Def Poetry Jam*. The choice to recite "Harlem Sweeties" (s1e1), however, foreshadowed the central theme that held all of the performances together through the six seasons. In "Harlem Sweeties," Langston Hughes writes beautifully of the Black women from Harlem, despite this country's propensity to see Black women and Black neighborhoods as undesirable, dysfunctional, and by extension, unworthy of poetic verse. As the

analysis of poetry in this research reveals, performances on *Def Poetry Jam* similarly drew on the stereotypes of people and neighborhoods of color to rearticulate that which is undesirable into something worthy of poetry. Furthermore, performances on *Def Poetry Jam*, like “Harlem Sweeties” relied on people telling stories about their own communities as a performance of poetic self-determination. While *Def Poetry Jam* featured poets of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, the celebration of Blackness in “Harlem Sweeties” foregrounded the role of Blackness, the connection to Blackness and Black culture, and the presence of Black bodies as central to the show.

“Harlem Sweeties” also makes sense as the first poem, given the significance of the poetic tradition that derives from Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century. As one of *Def Poetry Jam*’s co-founders and Russell Simmons’ oldest brother, Danny Simmons, describes, “Harlem is the historical home of the Black Arts” (McCray and Simmons). With Black folks in the South facing the bleak future of sharecropping, marked by unending debt, staunch racial violence, and Jim Crow, many decided to move north in the first Great Migration. Along with that push, the pull of increasing industrial and service jobs that followed the first world war made cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Philadelphia a plausible place to settle. In New York, that pull attracted Caribbean immigrants as well as southerners. Harlem, a large Manhattan neighborhood located a few blocks north of Central Park, became one such refuge. Between 1910 and 1930, the period associated with the New Negro Movement, the population of that neighborhood swelled from 9.89% to 70.18% (Beveridge). While most of this growing population consisted of unskilled labor workers and their families, this growth included businessmen, intellectuals, and servicemen returning from segregated World War I units, who

brought with them to Harlem a sense of optimism in social and economic progress for themselves and generations to follow.

Such drastic population shift was not without resistance from European immigrants and whites who previously occupied the neighborhoods where Blacks would settle.<sup>13</sup> In Harlem, the competition for jobs and housing did not result in the kinds of mass racial violence as experienced around the country during the Red Summer of 1919 nor the 1921 massacre of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Yet, a commissioned report by E. Franklin Frazier, Countee Cullen, Hubert Thomas Delany and A. Phillip Randolph following a 1935 unrest in Harlem that resulted in two million dollars of property damage, revealed significant “injustices of discrimination in employment, the aggressions of the police, and the racial segregation” as causes for the disturbance (Grimshaw 119). While the economic strain of the Great Depression is often referenced as a catalyst for the riots, *The Negro in Harlem: A Report on the Social and Economic Conditions Responsible for the Outbreak of March 19, 1935* (1935) describes the overall caste system which placed Black folks at the lower ends of the economic and social stratification. Unlike the South, where lynching and the pervasive threat of violence enforced second-class citizenship, New York City enforced racial inequality through a more nuanced method of depriving opportunity while protecting the illusion of meritocracy.

The concentration of Black folks in Harlem allowed for the possibility to address, if not confront, the racial bias. In *Harlem Renaissance* (1972), historian Nathan Huggins describes Harlem as a place where Black intellectuals and organizers could be explicit about their message, even if their vision for Black people contradicted each one another:

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<sup>13</sup> This distinction refers to the wave of immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe, particularly Jewish immigrants, who would not have a shared social status as whites.

It did not matter that these political leaders and intellectuals were often antagonistic toward each other; that merely suggested an openness, variety, and sophistication that had never existed for Afro-Americans before. What did matter was that these men were in New York, their manner and style was forceful, and they were being heard. It is not surprising, then, that Harlem drew young black intellectuals who wanted to find themselves and their own voices. (22)

Intellectuals like James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois found in Harlem the potential for racial uplift through cultural pride, education, and the arts. For Marcus Garvey, that uplift stressed economic independence, exemplified by the hundreds of people that the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) employed in Harlem alone. Groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Color People (NAACP) and the UNIA offered different visions for Black existence in the United States; as a result, those groups offered different strategies and ideas for achieving assimilation or liberation. Located in Harlem, publications like A. Phillip Randolph's *The Messenger*, NAACP's *The Crisis*, and UNIA's *The Negro World* circulated New Negro Movement ideas and strategies to Black readers across the country and beyond. Despite their differences, publications and organizations vigorously confronted the inequality that reinforced second-class citizenship in the North, South, and across the African diaspora.

Along with the workers, families, and intellectuals that migrate to Harlem, a creative class emerged to help distinguish Harlem as the Black Mecca of the early twentieth century (Huggins; Aberjhani; Wintz; E. Johnson). This "dramatic upsurge of creativity in literature, music, and art within Black America" (Locke, *The New Negro* ix) embodied the optimism of the Great Migration and the assertion of racial uplift that intellectual leaders and community

organizers sought. Recent explorations of the Harlem Renaissance include jazz, dance, and other entertainment forms. However, the core of this creative upsurge lie in the literary arts of novels, plays, and poetry. James Weldon Johnson never used the phrase Harlem Renaissance. Instead, he described this wave of arts as “the flowering of Negro literature” (Aberjhani et al. xvii).

Similarly, Alain Locke referred to this development as “the new Negro movement,” which became the title of his seminal collection of poetry, prose, and essays written at the height of this awakening. Crucial to this movement was the attention of mainstream critics and publishers who began to take these writers seriously. Such attention not only helped legitimize those authors, but it also spread their work to audiences, including white audiences, across the nation (Wintz 150).

Poets like Arna Bontemps, Waring Cuney, Sterling Brown, Frank Horne, Gwendolyn Bennett, Helene Johnson, and others of the era expressed a youthful optimism associated with the first Great Migration (Barksdale et al. 410). The poetry of the Harlem Renaissance was not without its critiques of the economic structure, social institutions, and white supremacy at large. However, the race problem in the United States was more often depicted as “social aberrations due to moral corruption, fear, or ignorance” (Huggins 27). No poem demonstrated this idea better than Claude McKay’s “America.” While describing a torturous relationship with America, one who “feeds me bread of bitterness,/and sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,” McKay venerates America’s potential as a “priceless Treasure sinking in the sand” (9). Thus the burgeoning body of literature contributed to what David Levering Lewis describes as a “civil rights by copyright,” which was an emotional and logical ploy for integration by exposing the malevolence of racists acts against Black people (*W.E.B. DuBois, 1919-1963* 194). One of the functions of poetry was to illustrate the inherent immorality associated with social inequality, in hopes that social conditions might have improved for Black folks in the United States.

Another part of this youthful optimism which nourished the New Negro Movement was an emerging Black identity; an identity that was neither defined by whites nor in opposition to white culture. This is to say that Black writers began to define a Black identity for themselves. Given their desire to integrate into American society, Nathan Huggins describes the goal of these writers as “delineating Negro character and personality in the American context” (140). Being generations removed from chattel slavery and over a century from the legal importation of Africans as slaves, those writers addressed the role and identity of Black people in the social structure. Notably, after Black Americans serve in WWI, writers began to challenge their relationship to America as merely existing at the bottom end of the economic structure. As Huggins continues to explain, these writers, artists, and intellectuals addressed questions like, “Did the Negro belong? Was he distinctive? How? Was he merely a white man with black skin?” (140).

What became of the literary work addressing these questions was the basis of Alain Locke’s *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), a now foundational text for the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance, which anthologizes the formation of Black self-determination in the United States. As art historian Eloise Johnson suggests, “The New Negro was often militant in outlook and filled with a sense of racial pride. According to Locke, the Negro would no longer be a ‘foundling’ in this country but a participant and contributor. Locke believed that by looking to the past—that is, an African past—the Negro could reclaim his heritage and free himself from the stigma of slavery” (16). Poetry, in particular, advanced Locke’s beliefs by rejecting antebellum stereotypes and promoting self-respect and racial unity (Wintz 31). Poetry romanticized the history and even the myth of an African past, associating Black identities with survival and strength to endure the middle-passage, slavery, and Jim Crow.

As activist publications like *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* joined mainstream literary journals in spreading poems of the Harlem Renaissance, poetry served as an early example of activism for Black writers. Some in the movement, such as W.E.B. DuBois, were more inclined to embrace the art of poetry as propaganda for assimilating Black folks into the United States. Others like Alain Locke and novelist Henry Thurman cautioned against the explicit creation of propaganda in the form of literature (Huggins; Wintz; Locke “Art or Propaganda”). However, as Eloise Johnson countered, the mere act of expressing self-determination was seen as “militant in outlook” (16). As a result, those declarations of racial pride and self-determination shifted the discussion of Black folkways and culture from a deficit model of socialization to the development of a distinct Black performative culture. Even as he expressed reservations, Locke would concede that those writers possessed “a vibrant new psychology” (Wintz 30) and that their work reflected the resistance towards second class citizenship in the United States.

Another vital contribution to the Harlem Renaissance was the use of language in poetry. Whereas late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century poet Paul Laurence Dunbar was all but forced to write in Negro dialect, depicting Black folks’ inability to grasp the English language, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance chose to employ the everyday speech of working-class Black folks to demonstrate their worth as the subject of literature and art (E. Johnson 48). Helene Johnson prominently features this Black dialect in her poem “Bottled” (1927), appreciating the joy of a Black man dancing:

Boy! You should a seen that darcy’s face!

It just shone. Gee, he was happy!

And he began to dance. No

Charleston or Black Bottom for him.



No sir. He danced just as dignified  
And Slow. No, not slow either.  
Dignified and proud! You couldn't  
Call it slow, not with all the  
Cuttin' up he did. You would a died to see him. (180)

As Johnson continues to admire what Black Lives Matter scholars and activists would identify as radical Black joy, she does so by defying the use of conventional English. Her choice of the word “cuttin’” instead of “cutting” and the phrases “could a” and “would a” instead of “could have” and “would have” express similar defiance for the confinement of poetry.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) takes this defiance of language even further. In one of the more profound passages, the central character Janie reflects, “Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (230). It is worth noting Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Alain Locke’s displeasure with this book, as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* did not fit into the project of African-American integration. Her exploration of a complicated Black female sexuality, especially in the lead character of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was especially derided by Wright “as ‘using highly charged language’ to titillate white readers” (Gates “Why Richard Wright Hated Zora Neale Hurston”). Yet as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison would later demonstrate, it is these stories which foreground the complexity of interpersonal relationships within Black communities, and the rejecting of a constant articulation of whiteness and presence of white people, that allowed her to explore the lives and humanity that Black people create. Thus, Hurston’s rejection of racial uplift led her to a radical politics, which also included Black joy as a political statement. For this reason, this text, with its

emphasis on people and language becomes an essential forbearer of the Black aesthetic in literature. As with many poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston and Helene Johnson's use of language demonstrated racial pride. Their work suggested a potentially liberating use of working-class Black vernacular as it allowed folks to see themselves in literature in ways they had not previously. Alternatively, at least, their use of language gave people access to literature outside of Victorian and Romantic poetry.

For all of the self-determinism, progress towards integration, and exposing of racial violence, the cabaret scene of the Harlem Renaissance cut through the intellectualism of the New Negro Movement with sexuality, pleasure, and barbarism (Lewis *When Harlem Was in Vogue*; Vogul). This is not to say that the dancing, music, and race-mixing in places like the Cotton Club were in opposition to the literature produced in publications like *The Crisis* and *The Messenger*. James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carl Van Vechten would have undoubtedly shared these spaces with bohemian types seeking exotic adventures in Harlem (Wintz 95). For many poets, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes most notably, the cabaret scene inspired and informed their poetry so much that they became known as the "Cabaret School" (Vogul 5). This pejorative was meant as a critique, insinuating that those poets worked against racial uplift by glamorizing the perceived primitivism of Black people. However, such critique leveled at the time failed to account for the ways in which resistance to heteronormativity both informed and was informed by white supremacy. As Shane Vogel argues in his book *The Scene of Harlem: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (2009), these cabarets serve as contested spaces for imagining and performing alternatives to the dominant narratives of race and sex (4).

Returning to James Weldon Johnson's image of "the flowering of Negro literature," the latter part of the 1920s was a withering away of the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro

Movement. In *Harlem Stomp! A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance* (2009), historian Laban Carrick Hill describes the conditions that changed Harlem from the Mecca of Black arts to one of the first Black urban ghettos in the United States:

The first to feel the effect of the Great Depression were the laborers and kitchen mechanics who worked low-wage jobs and paid high rents to live in Harlem. The phrase ‘Last Hired, First Fired’ came to mean that Black workers would lose their jobs long before whites would join in the unemployment lines. Many of these people could not find new jobs. A February 1930 edition of the New York *Herald Tribune* reported that the stock market crash had ‘produced five times as much unemployment in Harlem as in other parts of the city.’ By 1932 the median family income in Harlem had plummeted 43.6 percent, from \$1,808 to \$1,019 (\$13,379 in today’s dollars), while unemployment reached nearly 50 percent...<sup>14</sup> Under these dire economic conditions, Harlem changed from an oasis of Black pride into a slum, where two and three families lived in a single apartment and buildings became run-down from the stress of so many tenants. (129)

The stock market crash of 1929 exacerbated the decline of the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The Great Depression made the quest for employment and survival more pertinent than the quest for identity. Also, prohibition curbed the vibrant cabaret scene that brought many white New Yorkers and their money uptown.

Even if Harlem could endure those events, it could not overcome the aftermath of the 1935 riot. After a Black Puerto Rican teenager, Lino Rivera, stole a penknife from the Kress Five and Ten store on 125th Street, rumors that the teenager was beaten and killed drew a crowd to

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<sup>14</sup> Inflation adjustment is for the year 2004.

the store. The arrival of a mounted police officer and the neighborhood suspicion that Rivera was beaten or killed by authorities drew an anxious crowd. Despite the owners of the store not pressing charges and the police sharing photos of an unharmed Rivera, demonstrations around the neighborhood gave way to what Allen D. Grimshaw describes as the first modern riot in the United States.<sup>15</sup> With three Black people killed, over one-hundred mostly African-Americans injured, one hundred twenty-five persons arrested, and two hundred million dollars of property damage, the Harlem Riot of 1935 destroyed the post-war optimism that brought Black people to Harlem.

My interest in the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, with regards to *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, is to foreground how the content, themes, and the relationship between literature and social structure appear in the poetry on the series. By grappling with identity, use of language, and celebration of culture, the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance marks the near beginning of the Black poetic tradition in the United States. *Def Poetry Jam* followed this lineage, even if the content, sound, and style bear little resemblance to the poetry of the 1920s. While these aesthetics evolve through the twentieth century, the intellectualism of the New Negro Movement and the liberty to tell one's own stories are the underlying substance of the poetry featured on *Def Poetry*.

### *Jazz Poetry*

While the Harlem Renaissance is noted mainly for literary achievements, another enduring legacy of this movement is undoubtedly jazz music. The Great Depression and WWII,

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<sup>15</sup> Allen D. Grimshaw cites the following indicators as this modern form of racial riots: 1) violence is directed against property rather than people, 2) no clashes between racial groups, and instead 3) clashes are between the Black population and the police.

however, took its toll on big-band and swing style jazz as poverty and the war effort funneled musicians to military service. In *Hip Hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (2012), Reiland Rabaka explains how the decline of these jazz bands fuels the growth of jazz at large. For artists like Duke Ellington, the movement away from big band, swing, and cabaret seeking audiences offered a chance for musicians to introduce complexity and improvisation, which birthed bebop. The stylings of Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Charlie Parker, and the incomparable vocalist Sarah Vaughn challenged music as a structured form and entertainment art by foregrounding their expressiveness and creativity.

Bebop differs from the big band sound “by its instrumental virtuosity, extended improvisations based on a combination of melody and harmony, and its extremely fast tempos” (117). As described by musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey, the Afro-modernism of bebop became a way of exploring a distinctly Black modernity and a critique of Western modernity, by finding new modes of expression (97-98). Ramsey highlights “A Night in Tunisia” (1942), where Dizzy Gillespie employs a repetitive bass pattern to link an African past with Gillespie’s South Carolina upbringing, and to further imagine an Afro-Cuban future of jazz music (97). Whereas the shared culture of the Black cabaret, before the Great Recession, began a relationship between jazz and poetry, it was bebop’s shifting musicality and critical engagement with historicity that informs the structure, performance, and sound of jazz poetry.

I do not attempt to define jazz poetry — especially where scholarship on jazz disagrees on the definition, parameters, and genre-defining characteristics of jazz. Instead, Robert O’Meally’s use of the jazz cadence “as an overarching metaphor for the music’s pervasive influence on America’s cross-disciplinary forms of inter-artistic change and cultural

expressivity” (M. Jones 24) is most useful in distinguishing this type of poetry.<sup>16</sup> For example, in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), poets and essayists Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa base their collection on poetry that invokes a visualization of jazz. As such, jazz poetry includes: the use or influence of jazz music on writing politically engaged poetry; poetry as criticism or appreciation of jazz music and jazz culture; the reproduction of feelings and memory of jazz music and jazz clubs; jazz language; jazz as a backdrop for poetry about love and loss; and jazz as space for non-Black writers to engage with Black culture (Komunyakaa et al.; Rabaka; Ramsey).

While Langston Hughes’ notoriety comes from the Harlem Renaissance, it is crucial for the historical mapping of *Def Poetry Jam* to also consider his contributions to jazz poetry, as Yusef Komunyakaa describes him as “the first major jazz poet” (Feinstein and Komunyakaa; Kun). Langston Hughes pioneered the reading of poetry to jazz music in the 1920s, but by the 1950s, he made a public habit of hosting jazz poetry readings (Kun 167). As noted earlier, Hughes engages jazz music and cabaret culture in the text of poetry. Hughes also incorporates the musicality of jazz in the text and audio recordings of his poems. Most obviously, he expresses the musicality in the different use of beat, stress, rhyme, and line breaks. More subversively, however, Hughes incorporates “vocal instrumentality and performance for assessing the nuances in the gendered, racialized, and sexualized innovations evident in his blues and jazz aesthetic” (M. Jones 34). As literature and poetry scholar Anita Haya Patterson explains, “even his simplest, most documentary, and most historically engaged poems evince a characteristically modernist preoccupation with the figurative implications of form” (652).

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<sup>16</sup> Robert O’Meally is the co-founder and former director of Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Study.

While on the surface, Hughes is often read through a lens of literary realism, the 1955 recordings of poems like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Montage of a Dream Deferred” reveals how his text works with the arrangement of jazz music, and not merely using jazz as background music.

These more defining features of jazz poetry, as related to the experimental use of sound and form, are not easily captured on the page. Of utmost importance in the genealogy of *Def Poetry Jam* is how the consideration of each syllable’s beat and stress inspired a new generation of avant-garde poets. Bob Kaufman stands out among the early wave of poets synonymous with jazz poetry for exemplifying that jazz cadence. His use of surrealism, sound, and frequent improvisation inspired several of the established poets who appear on *Def Poetry Jam*. Furthermore, his use of in-line rhyme, assonance, and verb-makers is only distinguished from rap lyricism in its refusal to rhyme at the end of a measure bar. Whereas poets in the Harlem Renaissance had thought intentionally about the use of language and vernacular, jazz poetry goes a step further to consider the beat of each syllable and stress of each vowel. The composition of poetry came to mirror the sound, improvisation, and freedom of jazz music. Poets began to employ “syncopated rhythm and varied meter [and] a sense of movement, lyricism, and drama” (Komunyakaa et al. xviii) in order to capture on page the sounds that come from the stage. With rare exception, poets were selected to perform on *Def Poetry* because of this rhythm, movement, lyricism, and drama.

Unlike Kaufman, whose focus is primarily on the sound and experimentalism of poetry, Gwendolyn Brooks uses jazz to inform the sound and as the culture for the subjects in the poem. Brooks, who published her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* in 1945, serves as an essential poet linking the Harlem Renaissance to the tradition of jazz poetry. As a poet highly regarded by

Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, Brooks found herself as a mentor to Chicago writers in the Black Arts Movement. Her 1959 poem “We Real Cool” illustrates the use of jazz in poetry beyond sound and experimentalism. Upon seeing a group of seven young boys ditching school at the pool hall in her Chicago neighborhood, she writes from their perspective about their “contemptuous with the establishment” (Brooks “Gwendolyn Brooks Reads We Real Cool”):

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon. (Brooks)

Brooks’ use of sound embellishes boys’ disregard for rules and structure. In a 1964 recording of this poem by Brooks, there is a heavy stress of the first consonant in each line. She also holds many of the vowel sounds following the heavy stress, careful not to overemphasize the rhyming



words. The “We” at the end of each line is hardly pronounced, trailing like a musician’s note when they rush for a long breath.

When Mos Def introduces the third episode with this poem, he reads each “We” as the first word in each line. Instead of stressing the consonants and holding the vowels in the way that Brooks does, Mos Def’s reading emphasizes the alliteration that occurs in the piece. Even in these different readings, the sound devices demonstrate how the experimentalism of jazz becomes a part of poetry, even on the page. It can also be noted how the lines and rhythm of the poem, as read by both Mos Def and Gwendolyn Brooks, provides a consistent structure and form. This functions as content, providing patterns, rules, and predictable behavior for the boys to follow. Thus, while these cool kids might resist the structure of established social norms, going to school most notably, the performance of “cool” is very much ordered and based on predictable behavior.

As mentioned earlier, Brooks mentored and workshopped younger poets, especially in Chicago, who were growing up in the age of jazz. Among those poets was Haki Madhubiti. Madhubiti’s most noted contribution to literature and poetry is as a co-founder of the independent publishing house, Third World Press, with fellow Chicago activists Carolyn Rogers and Johari Amini in 1967, specializing in work that tells the stories, addresses the issues, and critically engages with Black communities. Yet, his work as a poet is all about the fusion of poetry and jazz. On the second season of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, Haki Madhubiti demonstrates the rhythm and sound of jazz poetry in his performance of “The B Network” (s2e3). In the opening stanza of the poem and throughout the piece, the alliteration plays like a drum:

brothers bop & pop and be-bop in cities locked up  
and chained insane by crack and other acts

of desperation computerized in pentagon cellars producing  
boppin brothers boastin of being better, best, beautiful (299)

When reading aloud, the consonants in the first and fourth lines of the stanza hit like the back and forth of a kick and snare drum. The assonance in the second and third lines mirror the high-hat and symbol work between the punches. This poem continues alliteration, but true to jazz poetry, maintains a structure of free-verse. While Haki Madhubuti's poem is a prudent critique of Black masculinity and the trappings of consumption, it is ultimately the sound which gives "The B Network" its prominence.

This relationship between jazz and poetry foreshadowed the emergence of spoken word poetry, primarily through the evolution of rap. Returning to Reiland Rabaka, he offers bebop as a resurgence of many elements of 1920s classic jazz aesthetics which led to a creative lyricism in the early 1990s. Rabaka writes, "the 'jazz rap' sub-genre of the Hip Hop Movement can be said to sonically symbolize a reemergence of many of the major margins of classic jazz, bebop, and the subsequent subgenre of 'modern' jazz that have come to prominence in their wake" (138). Spoken word poets and performance poets drawing inspiration from the culture of hip-hop and the art of rap are drawing from the well of jazz, according to Rabaka, especially considering the frequency with which jazz samples become a defining component of certain vibes in hip-hop musicality (Schloss 149). Furthermore, the rhythm and variety of rhyming patterns mirror the fast-paced improvisational tempo associated with bebop. This emphasis on sound and rhythm in jazz poetry lead, not only to the improvisation of poetry, but most recognizably, the reciting of poems from memory rather than reading from the page.

### *Baraka and the Beats*

Jazz poetry might have become a formidable genre of poetry as the music grew increasingly popular in the 1950s, if not for the popularity of the beat poets who absorbed many of the elements of jazz poetry. Most generally, beat poetry describes a surge of anti-establishment and anti-academic poetry that experiments with poetic form, language, and the delivery of poetry. While the bohemianism and focus on pleasure as a site of resistance defines the spirit of the beat generation, their more substantial contribution to poetry is their insistence that performance is as significant to the composition of a poem as the form and content, and in some cases more important (Somers-Willet 52). Along with their experimentation with form, sound, and performance, the most enduring contribution of the beats is their commitment to cultivating spaces for artistic performances and poetry readings. Whereas Langston Hughes popularized poetry readings, the beats became the evangelists helping to spread this phenomenon across the country. As such, the use of coffee shops, bars, lofts, libraries, and other public spaces for poetry readings reflect a rebellion against the academic elites who shared poetry in private readings or spaces otherwise inaccessible to the general public.

Poetry by beat writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Diana DiPrima, Greg Corso, Anne Waldman, Peter Orlovsky, or any of the beat affiliated poets would have been a likely choice for the *Def Poetry*'s introduction or to appear on the series. Bringing poetry into public spaces, alone, places *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam* as a progeny of the beat generation. Conspicuously, the major figures from the beat generation are absent from the stage and the introductions. Instead, *Def Poetry Jam* works around the beat poets by reciting the modernist poets who paved the way for the beats and the myriad of performance, spoken word, and academics who followed in the path of the beats. For example, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1955)

is considered a seminal poem of the beat movement. Rather than any work by Ginsberg, *Def Poetry Jam* features three poems by William Carlos Williams (s3e3, s4e7, s5e10) who provides indelible feedback to the text and performance of “Howl” and features Asian-American poet Beau Sia, whose friendship and deep respect for Ginsberg is well noted. With more analysis and discussion of William’s historically glossed-over Puerto Rican heritage, along with Beau Sia’s unapologetic centering of Asianness, *Def Poetry Jam* decenters the white figurehead for the representation of poets of color.

While beat poetry deserves recognition for establishing a space for anti-academic and anti-establishment poetry, their erasure from *Def Poetry Jam* reflects a concerted effort to address the appropriation of jazz poetry by the beats. Thus, it must be considered the degree to which privilege allowed for the predominantly white beat poets to create, share, and be labeled avant-garde, while Black writers of the same creative mindset struggled for legitimacy. As John Arthur Maynard writes in *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California* (1991), “Jazz served as the ultimate point of reference, even though, or perhaps even because, few among them played it. From it they adopted the mythos of the brooding, tortured, solitary artist, performing with others but always alone. They talked the talk of jazz, built communal rites around using the jazzman’s drugs, and worshipped the dead jazz musicians most fervently. The musician whose music was fatal represented pure spontaneity” (48). In the most innocent framing, Maynard describes the beat poets as developing from the participation in the culture of jazz and jazz poetry. In a more critical framing, however, the beat poets’ appropriation of jazz culture and jazz poetry was a thinly veiled practice of appropriation, contemporaneous to whites’ appropriation of rock n’ roll. Either way, the beats become synonymous with avant-garde poetry on the page and the stage, receiving an overwhelming amount of credit for incorporating the

theoretical and stylistic elements of jazz in their poetry. Thus the absence of beat poets in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* signals an attempt to locate the series in a Black poetic tradition rather than the broader American poetic tradition.

Where *Def Poetry Jam* is most connected to the beat poets is through their tutelage of Amiri Baraka.<sup>17</sup> Born Everett LeRoi Jones, in Newark, New Jersey, Baraka serves as the link between jazz poetry, the beats, and the Black Arts Movement. After graduating from Howard University with an English degree in 1957, he joined the United States Air Force. Never entirely conforming to military values and behavior, Baraka coped by reading the likes of Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ezra Pound, Gustave Flaubert, William Faulkner, Karl Marx, and other authors he describes as being challenging to get through (Baraka *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* 166).<sup>18</sup> At this time, he also took to journaling and writing poetry, submitting to publications like *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Saturday Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* (167). Facing accusations of being a member of the communist party, Baraka received an undesirable discharge from the Air Force (177).

Upon leaving the military, Amiri Baraka moved to New York City. Through his friendship with writer Allen Polite, Baraka became ingratiated with a host of painters, writers, musicians, and the Greenwich Village Beats — which included Ginsberg, Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. With his first wife, Hettie Cohen, he founded Totem Publishing and the literary magazine, *Yugen* (1958-1962), which they touted as “a new consciousness in arts and letters”

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<sup>17</sup> There were schools of beat poets across the country including the San Francisco beats, the Black Mountain school, the poets at Reed College in Portland, and Venice West in Southern California. Baraka is inspired by reading poetry from a variety of these schools. However, it is in New York where he first becomes a member of the beat community.

<sup>18</sup> Poets like Haki Madhubuti, Quincy Troupe, and Oscar Brown Jr. also discover Black radicalism through their time in the military.

(Watts 45).<sup>19</sup> *Yugen* featured poetry by Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Peter Orlovsky, Phillip Whalen and other prominent and up and coming beat poets. With Diane di Prima, he co-edited another literary magazine, *The Floating Bear* (1961-1969). Out of these publications, Baraka forged personal and artistic relationships with influential writers. His relationship with Ginsberg allowed him to meet, study with, and publish the beats poets in San Francisco, the Black Mountain Poets in North Carolina, and poets around the country whom he held in high esteem.

Amiri Baraka's publications, poetry, and increasingly, his personal life reflected the persona of a promising beat. The Greenwich Village writers gave him the social capital to establish a literary career, and Baraka's Blackness gave the Greenwich Village beats additional cultural capital for their anti-establishment and anti-academic expression. Despite his association and participation with the beats, Baraka reflects on his inherent disconnect with the beats, writing, "I could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncement of disillusion with and 'removal' from society as being related to the Black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit. Yet I was no stomp-down bohemian. I had enough of the mainstream in me, of lower-middle-class craving after order and 'respectability,' not to get pulled all the way over to Yahooism" (Baraka *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* 230).<sup>20</sup> For Baraka, the yahooism refers to a counter-culture driven by pleasure, creativity, surrealism, anti-capitalism, and exploration of eastern religions, that did not allow him to "grasp the wretchedness of Black subjugation without denying Black agency" (Watts 57). The experience of this strain lead him to cultivate politically-driven art and ultimately a move from the beats and towards Black cultural nationalism.

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<sup>19</sup> Cohen becomes estranged from her Jewish family for her marriage to a Black man. In her autobiography, she also describes a similar estrangement for being white as Baraka becomes more involved with Black radicalism.

<sup>20</sup> A large part of this "yahooism" that Baraka refers to is the use of drugs

The preverbal straw for Baraka was the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X. The death of Malcolm X impacted Amiri Baraka so much, he figuratively and literally left Greenwich Village for Harlem. The move to Harlem was in one way, a reclaiming of his Black identity and in another way, an effort to avenge Malcolm's death.<sup>21</sup> By this time, his plays and poetry develop into an expression of the "soul and mind connection with Black struggle" (Baraka "The Black Arts Movement" 13). In concert with artists and intellectuals Askia Touré, Larry Neal, and Max Stanford, who also abandoned the mainstream and avant-garde in order to pursue work dealing with the Black struggle, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre was born. While only operating for a little over a year, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre staged plays, hosted workshops, and offered classes in politics, drama, history, and even a class titled "Myth Science," led by the jazz musician and early Afro-futurist Sun Ra (Watts; Baraka "The Black Arts Movement"). The Black Arts Repertory Theater was short-lived, but the goal of the theater to create a Black revolutionary performative art space inspired Black theater companies around the country.

In the final episode of *Def Poetry Jam*'s first season, Mos Def introduces "the legendary, Amiri Baraka" to a standing ovation as he walks to the stage. His performance of "Why is We Americans" (s1e9), illustrates the connection between jazz and the Black Arts Movement's call for liberation:

Bu-de-daaaa. Bu-de-daaaa. Bu-de-daaaa.

We want education for all of us and anyone else in the black belt hurt by slavery.

For all the native peoples even them poor white people you show all the time as

funny, all them abners and daisy maes, them Beverly Hill Billies who never got to

no beverly hills. who never got to Harvard on they grandfathers wills. we want

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<sup>21</sup> Baraka is insistent that the FBI was responsible for the death of Malcolm X. Accordingly, he was vocal about his displeasure with Spike Lee's depiction of the Nation of Islam involvement in the death of Malcolm X.

reparations for them, right on, for the Mexicans whose land you stole. For all of North Mexico you call Texas, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Colorado, all that, all that, all that, all that, Bu-de-daaaa do do bap bap bap baaa du de do. All that you gotta give up, autonomy and reparations. To the Chicanos, and the Native Americans, who souls you ripped out with their land, give Self-Determination, Regional autonomy, that's what my we is askin, and they gon do the same. when they demand it, like us again, in they own exploited name. Yeh the education that's right two hundred...years. We want a central stash, a central bank, with democratically elected trustees, and a board elected by us all, to map out, from the referendum we set up, what we want to spend it on. To build that Malcolm sense Self-Determination as Self-Reliance and Self Respect and Self Defense, the will of what the good Dr. Du Bois beat on – true self-consciousness. Simply the psychology of Freedom.

Bu-de-daaaa Bu-de-daaaa Pu de-daaaa Pu de-daaaa bap bap bap bap bu de bu de bu de bu bu. (Baraka “Why is We Americans”).

“Why is We Americans” links race and class oppression, indicative of the Black Arts Movement’s inspiration from the influence of Malcolm X and Black Nationalist ideologies. His invoking of jazz traditions, particularly scatting, helps distinguish his words from a manifesto to a performance of art — to poetry. Even as the tone of the poem is a forceful demand for justice, Baraka breaks each stanza by scatting, “Bu-de-daaaa Bu-de-daaaa Pu de-daaaa Pu de-daaaa bap bap bap bu de bu de bu de bu bu.” This poem is Amiri Barka’s only performance on *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. However, his influence in the evolution of spoken word poetry resonates throughout the entire series through his style, mentorship of the numerous poets from



the Black Arts Movement who appeared on the series, and most prominently in his use of poetry to communicate political and social change.

“Why is We Americans” is emblematic of the politics and representation of poetry on *Def Poetry Jam*. The section of the poem cited is the second verse. In this verse, Baraka is inclusive in his call for reparations, “We want education for all of us and anyone else in the black belt hurt by slavery.” His inclusion of Native Americans, Mexicans, and impoverished rural whites encapsulates *Def Poetry Jam*’s concerted effort to present poets of different ethnicities and geographies. *Def Poetry*’s laudable repackaging of American poetry as inclusive of multiethnic histories allows audiences to find common ground in the shared struggles against colonialism, institutional racism, and systemic oppression. Like Baraka’s poetry, however, this inclusiveness foregrounds a Black, and more specifically, a Black nationalist, approach in the framing of these multiethnic experiences. The first verse of “Why is We Americans” is entirely about reparations for the injustices experienced by Black Americans during chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the appropriation of music, dance, language, and style. Furthermore, the end of the second verse frames the multiethnic struggles in the philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois and Malcolm X. When considering the jazz influence and scatting in the poem, “Why is We Americans,” like *Def Poetry Jam*, does just enough to recognize and name the oppression, culture, and identity of different ethnic groups, while maintaining Blackness at the center of representation.

### *The Black Arts Movement*

Between the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement reflected a significant shift in Black cultural expression across a variety of forms. Larry Neal, one of the foremost theorists of the movement, penned the 1969 article, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” for

*Ebony* magazine, describing the Black Arts Movement as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister” of Black Power. Whereas Black Power was often misrepresented as anti-white aggression from young Black militants, including by some Civil Rights leaders and Black activists at the time, Charles Hamilton and Kwame Ture offer Black Power as “a call for Black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for Black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations, and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society” (44). Black Power was, therefore, a call to organize and operate in the colonized West through a philosophy, history, culture, and through institutions centered on Black subjectivity. Black Power was critical of assimilation and mistrustful of well-intentioned white liberals. Black Power transitioned from a signifier, to ideology, to a social movement with organizations around the country practicing what they considered to be Black Power. Whether they were groups heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement like SNCC, gangs like the Gangster Disciples and the Black Guerrilla Family, or of course the most well-known organization to emerge from the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Party, young Black folks joined and supported organizations that embraced the ideas of Black Power.

For poets, Black Power was a call to rethink the purpose, process, and content of poetry, following a Civil Rights movement that did not immediately change the social and economic relations for Black people in the United States. Askia Touré, reflecting on the role of poets in the Black Arts Movement, recalls, “being *bards* as well as *activists*, we began the awesome task of imagining a *New Reality for African-America*. A reality where Black women and men would actually have, and wield, *power*...we were poets and visionaries who kept asking questions

about *who really controls America?*” (Touré 25-26).<sup>22</sup> Touré acknowledges the role of poetry, as one where art and activism meet.<sup>23</sup> As Du Bois offered many years before, to be a poet is to be an activist. Thus, the poetry of the Black Arts Movement challenged the systemic inequality and called-out racial violence, but unlike the Harlem Renaissance, those poems were not doing so with the hopes of integration. Instead, those poems sought to inspire, incite, and engage Black people towards the nationalist agenda of the Black Power Movement. Even as philosophically different, as the Black Panthers and the US Organization might have been, both groups employed the use of poetry as a source of communication, inspiration, and recruitment of young Black people to their organizations.<sup>24</sup>

When playwright and author Oscar Brown Jr. performs “I Apologize” (s2e4) on the second season of *Def Poetry Jam*, he demonstrates the defiance and resistance of Black Arts Movement poetry. Brown is not merely taking the audience on a historical journey of subjugation; he uses self-deprecation to highlight the use of physical and psychological violence enacted on Black bodies. In each stanza, he begins with “I apologize” followed by some form of stereotype, oppression, or violence against enacted by the state; these include “For letting you make me yo’ slave/And going to my early grave,” “for being slow, for being late,” and for the “resemblance most Black people share/Thick lips, flat nose, and nappy hair” (Brown Jr. 60-62). In the delivery of the final stanza, Oscar Brown Jr. looks directly into the camera, and recites:

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<sup>22</sup> This quote follows the italicization of the cited author.

<sup>23</sup> As a poet and professor at San Francisco State University, Touré is influential in the formation of the Black Panther Party.

<sup>24</sup> Panthers often employed “raps” in their speeches as a way of recruiting and engaging members (Sloan). Elaine Brown recorded and performed poetry that coincides with the Black Panther Party platform, most notably her album, *Seize the Time* (1969).

Following the closing of the Black Arts Repertoire Theater, Amiri Baraka and Maulana Karenga of the US Organization would have an enduring influence on each other. Of Amiri Baraka, Karenga writes, “Let our art remind us of our distaste for the enemy, our love for each other, and our commitment to the revolutionary struggle that will be fought with the rhythmic reality of a permanent revolution” (Karenga 54).

I apologize and tip my hat  
'Cause you so rich and free and fat  
Son of a bitch, that's where it's at  
And I apologize (62)

This defiant turn in the poem is not only matched by a change of tone from apologetic to hostile, but he also takes off his hat, crumples it in his hands, and then slams it on the floor. At this moment, the poem reveals itself as an act of resistance, consistent with the project of the Black Arts and the Black Power movements. Kathryn E. May explains, "He rises above the injustice, and the whirlpool of rage and superiority, ultimately, by not taking it personally. There is no self-hatred, denial or self-righteousness in his worldview" (382). Oscar Brown Jr. therefore invites the audience to bear witness or bear offense to the experience of colonization.

While the function of poetry changes in the Black Arts Movement, so to does the aesthetics. Compared to the Harlem Renaissance where Black writers were "almost always concerned with presenting ourselves in the best possible light" (Johnson "My Words Dance" 43) and the jazz poetry movement where the interaction between text and sound guided the direction of the poem, the Black Arts Movement's aesthetic is often used to define "proper Blackness" (44). Central to poetry, again, is the use of language. James Baldwin opines the function of Black language as cultural resistance in his *New York Times* article, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" (1979). He writes, "[language] is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public communal identity...Black English is the creation of the Black diaspora." If the use of Negro dialect in the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the folk language used by Zora Neale Hurston is meant to represent how

Black folks speak, then the use of language in the Black Arts Movements is Black folks speaking.

The work of Etheridge Knight best illustrates the use of language as a political instrument and a crucial key to identity. Sentenced to prison for a robbery in 1960, Knight was encouraged by Gwendolyn Brooks to take up poetry as an outlet for his aggression and frustration in lock-up. Subsequently, Dudley Randall's Broadside Press published Knight's first volume of poetry, *Poems from Prison* (1968), which immediately garnered praise from other poets in the Black Arts Movement. Following this acclaim, the left-wing political journal *Radical America* (1967-1999) published a volume dedicated to essays and work on Black liberation, which featured Etheridge Knight's "Dark Prophecy: I Sing of Shine" (1968), a reworking of the toast "Shine and the Titanic."<sup>25</sup> Performed by Lemon Anderson in the first season of *Def Poetry*, the poem tells the story of Shine, a Black man who works in the furnace of the Titanic. Knight contrasts the heroism of Margaret Brown, by praising Shine for saving himself rather than the wealthy and privileged white patrons of the Titanic:<sup>26</sup>

And, yeah, brothers,  
while white/america sings about the unsink  
able molly brown  
(who was hustling the titanic  
when it went down  
I sing to thee of Shine  
the stoker who was hip

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<sup>25</sup> Included in Knight's byline is his prison number.

<sup>26</sup> When Lemon introduces the poem, he begins by saying, "Y'all don't know, I'm a prison type mufucka...so this is for my peoples in jail who taught me how to read and write poetry alright. This one's for Ethridge Knight" (s1e1).

enough to flee the fucking ship  
and let the white folks drown  
with screams on their lips  
(jumped his Black ass into the dark sea, Shine did,  
broke free from the straining steel.  
Yeah, I sing to thee of Shine  
and how the millionaire banker stood on the deck  
and pulled from his pockets a million-dollar check  
saying Shine Shine save poor me  
and I'll give you all the money a Black boy needs-  
how Shine looked at the money and then at the sea  
and said jump in muthafucka and swim like me — (64)<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the wealthy banker, the banker's daughter asks Shine to save her, offering him all the sex "a Black boy needs," and a priest who grabs Shine's arm trying to swim away. Shine rejects the woman and "cuts the preacher's throat." The poem finishes, explaining "when the news hit shore that the titanic had sunk/Shine was up in Harlem damn near drunk/— and dancing in the streets." The profanity and violence in this poem are noteworthy, especially as it is used casually, rather than as points of emphasis, most evident in Oscar Brown Jr.'s poem. Furthermore, Knight's use of violence and misogynistic language in describing Shine's interaction with white people on the ship illustrates the emerging Black masculinity associated with the Black Power Movement. As much as this masculinity was empowering, especially as an

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<sup>27</sup> The text is presented as close to its appearance in the publication of *Radical Freedom* as possible.

attempt to assert equal status with white men, it was also callously chauvinistic in demeaning women's struggle for equality, including Black women.

Women in the Black Arts Movement, including poets, did not idly accept such degradation in practice nor verse. However, an outright challenge by women to Black Nationalism and Black Power's celebration of male dominance might have fractured the spirit of liberation (J. Johnson "My Words Dance"). Cherise A. Pollard, a scholar of Black literature and Black feminist literary criticism, explores the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez to illustrate how women in the Black Arts Movement worked through and against the framework of patriarchy to assert empowerment. She writes, "Attention to Sanchez's and Giovanni's shifting stances towards the Black male revolutionary highlights many women poets' deeply ambiguous relationship to their male counterparts' political positions. Black women poets sometimes voiced their opinions quietly, through more reflective lines; other times, a brasher, more subversive stance is apparent" (174). Similarly, the *Def Poetry Jam* performances of Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, along with Audre Lorde's introductory poem, demonstrates different techniques in addressing the issues faces by women.

Nikki Giovanni's "Talk to Me Poem, I Think I've Got the Blues" (s1e1) personifies a poem as someone with whom she can commiserate about her blues. While the poem itself is not gendered, Giovanni right away incorporates the struggles of women. She writes, "Talk to me I'm all alone/No one understands what I'm saying/Have you been in jail poem/A lot of poems go to jail/Like a lot of women who get tired of no good men." In this simile, Giovanni evokes the phenomenon of incarcerating women whose crimes are related to self-defense against an abusive partner. The allusion is subtle and easily forgotten through the myriad of experiences Nikki Giovanni asks the poem to tell her. However, for those interested or impacted by this

phenomenon, a poem that calls attention to a problem that few people speak of, or even keep data on, it can be a powerful moment in the poem.<sup>28</sup>

Sonia Sanchez's performance of "Poem for Some Women" (s1e2) also addresses issues faced by women, through a drastically different approach. Sanchez narrates the painful experience of a drug-addicted mother leaving her seven-year-old daughter at a crack-house:

And he laughed,  
this loooonng laugh.  
And I looked at him  
and the stuff he was holding in his hand.  
You know, I couldn't remember my baby's name.  
He held out the stuff to me,  
and I couldn't remember her birthday.  
I couldn't remember my daughter's face.  
And I cried as I walked out that door.  
What's her name?  
Pudd'n'Tang.  
Ask me again,  
I'll tell you the same thing.  
Couldn't even hear her screaming my name,  
as he tore into her pretty little panties.  
Prettiest girl you done ever seen.

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<sup>28</sup> Data is difficult to find as states do not keep a record of this. However, an oft-cited California Assembly Bill (593) offers the following data: 93% of the women who had killed their significant others had been battered by those individuals; 67% of these women indicated the homicide resulted from an attempt to protect themselves or their children.



Pretties little mama's baby you done ever seen. (73)

Sanchez continues describing the psychological damage of the child and the emotional torment of the mother. In this poem, the mother exists between the space of a victim deserving empathy and the perpetrator of unforgivable abandonment. As she is neither blameless nor non-complicit, Sanchez brings audiences into the most gut-wrenching effects of the War on Drugs, the under-discussed toll on women. Whereas Giovanni uses a quick and subtle punch to address inequality faced by women, Sanchez offers a profoundly emotional narrative.

Audre Lorde's poem, "Love, Maybe" (s4e1) offers yet another way in which women in the Black Arts Movement addressed patriarchy and chauvinism in the movement, through love poems. In the first episode of the fourth season, Mos Def recites the short poem:

Always  
in the middle of our bloodiest battles  
you lay down your arms  
like flowering mines

to conqueror me home (Lorde 82)

Mos Def reads this poem as a reconciliatory love poem. He begins with raised arms, slowly dropping and folding them around his body in an embrace by the end of the poem. When recited, Mos reads that line, "to conquer me home." However, as written by Lorde, the line is "to conqueror me home." Thus, the distinction between the act of conquering and a person who is a conqueror enforces the perpetual conflict and victimization of the narrator; "Always." As poems often have deeper meanings and invite audiences to read into the symbolism, "Love, Maybe" reflects the struggles of Black feminist movements, as articulated in "The Combahee River

Collective Statement.” Lorde, who was a member of the Combahee River Collective with writers like Beverly Smith, Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and Gloria Akasha Hull, articulate a politics grounded in a simple, yet radical, position that “Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s” (Combahee River Collective 11). Furthermore, their linking of sexuality to both racial and gendered oppression, asks readers to consider the ways Audre Lorde’s poem illustrates the feminist articulation of the personal being political. From this reading, Mos Def’s recitation of “Love, Always” articulates a capitulation of Black women into Black liberation movements and feminist movements that fail to address the unique oppression of Black women and queer Black women especially.

In these poems, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Audre Lorde illustrate the different uses of poetry to confront the chauvinism in the movement for Black liberation. This is not to suggest that these poems are indicative of their author’s overall style. For example, Sanchez’s later performance of “Our Vision, Our Voice” (s5e7) is a declarative and defiant piece about the power of an oppressed people.<sup>29</sup> What is important to note is how women in the Black Arts Movement employed allusion, narratives, symbolism, and *entendre* to address their unique oppression as Black, women, and in the case of Audre Lorde, queer Black women. By the time *Def Poetry Jam* begins, women have longed used poetry to directly call out patriarchy, including sexism by men of color. As Ursula Rucker proclaims in her *Def Jam* performance, “Embrace the profound and power of she/know if nothing else that her uniqueness is blessed/And a necessary component in the union between universe and people/Equal to man/At times above human understanding/She don’t have to lay down for nothing or nobody” (s5e7).

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<sup>29</sup> Sanchez’ poem “nigger” is recited by Mos Def as an introductory poem in the second season.

An understated, yet significant, contributor to the poetry of the Black Arts Movement and *Def Poetry Jam* is the Nuyorican poetry movement.<sup>30</sup> Occurring at the same historical moment as the Black Arts Movement, Puerto Rican poets in NYC reflected the in-betweenness of an island and a metropolis, colonial domination and migration, English and Spanish, and, as Nuyorican poet Paul Flores compares, New York as a “state of enchantment” and that city as “cultural sterility” (Flores; Acosta-Belén 983-989). In his chronicling of Nuyorican history, Urayoán Noel explains, “Nuyorican poetry must be understood in two distinct yet overlapping diasporic contexts: a specifically Puerto Rican one shaped by Puerto Rican vernacular traditions and expressive cultures, and a broader Afro-diasporic one that encompasses African and Afro-Caribbean culture and that finds significant points of contact with African-American communities in neighborhoods such as Harlem and the South Bronx” (Noel xvii). Among the themes of Nuyorican poetry are: expressing and redefining Puerto Rican identity, particularly the African influence on Puerto Rican culture; (re)examining the relationship towards, both, English and Spanish; incorporating the activism and energy of Puerto Rican youth, namely the Young Lords; performative culture, including music, dance, food, and life on the island; and evaluating the effects of social class and labor in the assimilation of Puerto Ricans on the mainland. (Acosta-Belén; Bernard-Carreño; Noel).

In 1973, poet Miguel Algarín began a series of poetry readings for Nuyorican poets in his Lower Eastside apartment (Aptowicz; Noel). He called it the Nuyorican Poets Café. By 1975, with the readings overcrowding his apartment space, Algarín and fellow poets Miguel Piñero, Bimbo Rivas, and Lucky Cienfuegos moved the Nuyorican Poets Café to a space that was formerly an Irish bar. Founded as a space for “playwrights, poets, and musicians of color whose

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<sup>30</sup> Nuyorican refers to a person of Puerto Rican heritage who resides or is raised in New York.

work was not accepted by the mainstream academic, entertainment or publishing industries,” the café became a gathering space for cultural and counter-institutional performances by Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, Afro-Latinx, and “artists of New York’s diverse population” (Nuyorican Poets Café; Noel 44). The list of notable Nuyorican poets who frequented the café was a veritable who is who of Puerto Rican poetry, including: Jorge Brandon, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, Sandra Maria Esteves, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, and Eddie Figueroa. While not identifying as Puerto Rican, poet Diane Burns and playwright Ntozake Shange both frequented and contributed to the development of the Nuyorican Poets Café. By the end of the decade, however, the café fell into disrepair due to mismanagement, city bureaucracy, and the effects of the crack epidemic on the Lower East Side, before closing its doors in 1981 (Aptowicz).

It is also important to note those poets from this era whose work thrived off the stage. The Last Poets, composed of Umar Bin Hassan, Abiodun Oyewole, with Babatunde appear in the first season of Def Poetry Jam. Felipe Luciano, a founding member of The Original Last Poets, also appears in the second season of the *Def Poetry Jam*. Their style, an evolution of jazz poetry prominently featured Afro-percussion conga and other drums behind their words (Acosta-Belén; Noel). Their template for politically charged content and rhythmic lyricism is among *Def Poetry Jam*’s defining features. Rather than mimicking the sound of bop with their text, The Last Poets use poetry like the verses in a song. They also strip the music down to percussion and voices, which, along with Gil Scot-Heron and The Watts Prophets, set the tone for what would emerge as rap music (Dery 412). Numerous hip-hop artists sample these poetry groups, including, N.W.A., The Notorious B.I.G., Brand Nubian, Ice-T, Digable Planets, A Tribe Called Quest, X-Clan, Too Short, and even the 2 Live Crew. Unlike most of the poets in the Black Arts Movement and the entire history of the Black literary tradition for that matter, the page is near

obsolete for The Last Poets. Their first book, *Vibes from the Scribes*, was published in 1985, well past the group's prime in the Black Arts Movement. Recording over eight albums in the 1970s, The Last Poets defined what it means to perform spoken word poetry.

The influence of the Black Arts Movement eventually filtered into the mainstream with songs like "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud" (James Brown 1968), "Respect Yourself" (The Staple Singers 1972), and Aretha Franklin's gold album *Young, Gifted, and Black* (1970). On screen, filmmakers wrestled with the same philosophical and ideological concerns, as seen in Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). Television shows like *Soul!* (1968-1973) moved Black Power conversation onto the small screen, even featuring many of the Black Arts Movement poets who would appear on *Def Poetry Jam*. As Black Nationalism increased its visibility in the 1970s, so too did the commodification of this emerging Black culture. Particularly in the form of Blaxploitation films, the lampooning of Black Power disrupted the ideology of the Black Arts Movement as if it were operating as the cultural wing to COINTELPRO's disruption of Black Power organizations, namely the destruction of the Black Panther Party. If that was not enough, the need for economic security became a priority as rising poverty in urban areas, the increased criminalization of drug use, and the inflation of the post-Vietnam era disproportionately affected Black communities. As Nelson George explains, the end of the 1970s sees artists trading their afros and dashikis for high-top fades and trendy suits (183).

### *Spoken Word, Poetry Slams, and Hip-hop*

By the 1980s, poets of color gained visibility in the academy and mainstream publishing. This is not to suggest that these poets were afforded equal opportunities and acknowledgements as their white male counterparts. However, the rising tide of multiculturalism made it difficult to

ignore the power of Black, Latinx, Native American, and various authors of historically marginalized groups. Cultural and media studies scholar, Douglas Kellner, explains multiculturalism as an inclusion of diverse cultures centered on the identities of different race, ethnicities, sexuality, gender, and otherwise marginal and oppressed people: “An insurgent multiculturalism attempts to show how various people’s voices and experiences are silenced and omitted from mainstream culture and struggles to aid in the articulation of diverse views, experiences, and cultural forms, from groups excluded from the mainstream” (7).

In poetry, “this questioning of the dead-white-males-monopoly on bookshelves and reading lists” (Nestor xiv) allows poets like Nikki Finney, Yusef Komunyakaa, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Martin Espada to win some of the country’s most prestigious awards. Gwendolyn Brooks and later Rita Dove achieved the nation’s highest honor in poetry by serving as the United States Poet Laureate in 1985 and 1993 respectively. Even if not recognized through awards, fully tenured academic positions such as those held by Lamont B. Steptoe, E. Ethelbert Miller and Black Arts Movement poets Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Quincey Troupe, and Nikki Giovanni allowed Black poetry and the poetry of other marginalized groups to become institutionalized. This institutionalization of poetry emphasized the literary aspects of poetry over the performative.

In response, a new crop of poetry readings emerged around the country, bringing back the orality and musicality of poetic performances (Rivera). In 1989, Kamau Daáood, the youngest member of the Watts Writers Workshop, and Billy Higgins, a young drummer in Horace Tapscott’s Pan African People’s Arkestra opened The World Stage in Leimert Park to help revitalize Black culture in Los Angeles (F. Williams). In 1991, the open mic at Spices Jazz Bar in Chicago hosted their first reading and “quickly became the epicenter of the Black spoken-

word scene” (Wiltz). This open mic inspired the centerpiece for Theodore Witcher’s film *Love Jones*, where the on-screen representation of the open mic fuses jazz and poetry on the stage, rumination and laughter through conversations on life and love, and an eclectic display of Black styles amongst the audience members. In what Maisha T. Fisher describes as African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities, poetry readings like Cafe Montage in Baltimore (Caruso), the Black Lily at The Five Spot in Philadelphia, and the Ying Yang Café in Atlanta also contribute to the growth spoken word and performance poetry across the country (Abyss).

On the other side of the tracks, literally in the city of Chicago and proverbially in the art of poetry, a new mechanism for delivering poetry to audiences would soon sweep the nation. On July 20, 1986, Marc Smith, staged the first poetry slam at the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago (Smith et al. *The Spoken Word Revolution* 117).<sup>31</sup> Smith, a white poet in his late thirties, foregrounds his employment as a construction-worker, and thus his working-class roots, to help the poetry slam appeal to everyday people. The creation of a poetry competition, in which random members of an audience judge the performance of poems, evolved out of Smith’s desire to increase audience size, attention, and interest in poetry. As he recounts in *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2004):

My initial goal was to increase the audience for poetry as a spoken art form. In the early 1980s, even the most established Chicago (and probably elsewhere in the U.S.) had little or no audience when they performed public readings. The few people who did attend poetry readings were a highly specialized audience. The general public looked at poetry readings with disdain. I knew that the public scorn

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<sup>31</sup> In *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, Javon Johnson discusses the hyper-segregation of Chicago neighborhoods in connection with segregation of the city’s poetry venues (119). Being on the city’s Northside, the Get Me High Lounge and The Green Mill Cafe, where the slam relocates to accommodate a growing audience, draws a predominately white audience and predominately white poets.

for poetry readings was an outcome of how it was being presented: a lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or pacing of the event—let the words do the work, the poets would declare, mumbling to a dribble of friends, wondering why no one else had come to listen. The slam changed that. (117-118)

Marc Smith's desire to create an audience-centric approach towards poetry readings led to three key developments. First, that poets should perform only one or two poems at a time, always under five minutes. Second, that the audience could respond to the poetry, even as the poem was in progress; this meant cheering, yelling, and clapping for good poets as well as booing, snapping, or hissing bad poets off the stage. Perhaps the most significant development was the reprisal of the idea that poems are meant to be performed, not merely read. As a result, poets should spend as much effort in the performance of the poem as they do the writing of the poem.

The end of the 1980s also brought a resurgence of the Nuyorican Poets Café. Following the 1988 death of Miguel Piñero, Miguel Algarín reopened the café with a renewed focus to create “a launching pad for generations of urban writers and performers” (Aptowicz 23). While the Nuyorican reflected Algarín's commitment to organizing and storytelling around the issues of Puerto Ricans and Latinx in New York, their Friday night slam hosted by Bob Holman, gave the café increased local and national press coverage. Holman, a middle-aged white man known for hosting the open mic at St. Mark's Poetry Project in the East Village, brought the idea of the poetry slam to Algarín and the Nuyorican Café in 1988. Holman, who often wore a question-mark printed suit during performances, gained the reputation as “the ringmaster of spoken word,” becoming one of slam's most recognized cheerleaders (Richardson; Aptowicz 54). As poet and scholar Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz describes, “With Holman as the emcee, the poetry



slam tended to have a carnival-like atmosphere, and scores like ‘0.0’ and ‘negative infinity’ were not necessarily looked on as reflections of the poet’s work but rather as a part of the larger mayhem. From an outsider’s perspective, the New York scene seemed like bedlam compared to the serious-minded writers coming out of the Chicago scene” (40). Holman’s enthusiasm exposes a still-standing paradox over the utility of poetry slams. Whereas Marc Smith envisioned the slam as a form of “quality control” to encourage both poets and audience members to engage in poetry, Bob Holman saw the slam as a way to bring poetry into the mainstream (40).

Cities across the nation began hosting slams. “In August [of 1987], Ann Arbor, MI starts a slam (the second oldest in the nation), with New York, San Francisco, and Fairbanks, AK following suit. The home of the New York slam, the Nuyorican Poets Café in the East Village, quickly becomes one of the best-known homes for slam” (Daniels et al. 7). In 1990, a San Francisco poet and florist, Gary Mex Glazner, organized the first ever team poetry slam between San Francisco and Chicago. The following year, the National SLAM grew to eight teams: Ann Arbor, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New York, San Francisco, and St. Louis (Vender).<sup>32</sup>

While Chicago won the second National SLAM, it hardly resembled the fanfare and excitement that the National Poetry Slam garnered from spoken word and slam poets in the coming decades. As New York’s 1991 Grand Slam champion Willie Perdomo recounts in an interview with me:

I don’t even remember nationals, for a few reasons. One, it was in Chicago which is just a crazy city. Two, there were three of us on our team, I remember it was me, Gavin Moses, and Adrienne [Su]. Back then, there were only a few other teams from major cities.

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<sup>32</sup> The National SLAM becomes the National Poetry Slam following the incorporation of the tournament’s governing body, Poetry Slam, Inc (PSi) in 1997.

Boston was one of them and Patricia Smith was on the team at that time. Where the other teams had like five members, we only had three. So, I was asked to go up twice against some of the teams. I got up all the way to the finals. It was me against Patricia and she beat me out by like half a point. I ran off with one hundred and eighty-three dollars and I had a great time in Chicago. That was the last time I ever slammed again. It started with the slam, but then after that I made a conscious decision not to do it again. (Perdomo)

If Perdomo's recollection of the 1991 National SLAM seems nonchalant, it is in large part because early participants did not view the poetry slam as necessary milestone in the way poets do today (Aptowicz; Perdomo; Holman). However, the audiences turned-out in increasing numbers for these poetry slams, locally and nationally, which made participating in a poetry slam one of the best opportunities to showcase one's work to large and engaged audiences.

The 1991 National SLAM had a significant development with the introduction of the three-minute time-limit. By this rule, any poem over three-minutes and ten-seconds receives a deduction in score. When you consider this new time limit with the two other essential rules for poets, "Each poem must be of the poet's own constructions" and "The poet may not use props, costumes or musical instruments" (Daniels et al. 30), the poetry slam as a competition begins to shape the parameters for the art of spoken word poetry.<sup>33</sup> Out of this early wave of slam, performance poetry, and spoken word poetry, recognizable writers and performers emerge that later appear on *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*. These poets include Paul Beattie, Maggie Estep, Regie Gibson, Reg E. Gaines, Tish Benson, Regie Cabico, Jerry Quickley, and as mentioned earlier, Willie Perdomo and Patricia Smith.

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<sup>33</sup> The fourth essential rule deals with the scoring system, where performed poems are judged by five random members of the audience, on a scale of zero to ten. The highest and lowest scores are dropped, thus a maximum score of 30 is possible for each poem.

By the mid-nineties, hip-hop found its way to the poetry open mics. This is not to say that folks like Reg. E. Gaines and Jerry Quickley did not represent hip-hop culture in their work and performances. Gaines' poem, "Please Don't Take Away My Air Jordans" (1993) embodies the paradox of poverty and conspicuous consumption in hip-hop style. Jerry Quickley frequently dropped the names of emcees, recited rap lyrics, and employed the language of hip-hop through a poetic style that blends drama and comedic monologues. In an interesting contrast, DJ Renegade's cadence, alliteration, and idiosyncratic rhymes-schemes resembled the triplet rap style popular in East Coast hip-hop in the early 90s.<sup>34</sup> The lyricism of rap began to attach itself to spoken word poetry, leading to more poetry readings and open mics that welcomed poems about hip-hop, poems that employed the techniques of rap music, and rappers who read their lyrics as poems.

In New York, the networks of hip-hop intertwined with the open mic poetry scene, as spoken word incorporated the elements of lyricism in free verse poetry. As Jerry Quickley writes, "Hip hop embodies a form of poetry just like sonnets, villanelles, litanies, renga, and other forms. Hip hop incorporates many of the technical devices of other forms, including slant rhymes, enjambment, A-B rhyme schemes, and other techniques, usually parsed in sixteen-bar stanzas, and generally followed by four-to-eight-bar hooks" (38). Quickley's explanation of hip-hop as poetry is what Bob Holman recognized instantaneously in rap music, "rap lyrics are poetry" (Holman). Beyond this, however, little was discussed about rap music, as a form of poetry, contributing to the performance and free-verse of spoken-word poetry. Both Quickley and Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz discuss Paul Beaty's emergence at the Nuyorican Slam as an

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<sup>34</sup> DJ Renegade's triplet style is on full display in his performance of "Miles" that appears in the film *SlamNation*. Jaz-O, mentor of Jay-Z, is among the early adopters of that style. The play on the word jazz in their names recalls the intervention of jazz and jazz poetry in their raps. Rappers began experimenting with the form and structure of rap lyrics and rappers like Jaz-O increase the speed of his delivery with idiosyncratic cadences.

early sign of hip-hop in performance poetry, yet the discussions fail to illustrate how the aesthetics of rap evolved into the poems prominently featured on *Def Poetry Jam*, particularly the speed, rhymes, and punchlines.

As early as the 1980s, Bob Holman tried bridging the gap between rap and poetry, by performing poetry at hip-hop shows and inviting rappers to the Nuyorican Poets Café.<sup>35</sup> Rappers, however, were hesitant to identify with the poets and the poetry community at large. As Holman recalls, “I said to LL [Cool J], ‘I consider you the poet of the year because you rhymed ‘Ayatollah’ with ‘granola.’ He said, ‘Bob, do not call me a poet because that’s economic death’” (Holman). Similarly, when asked to perform at a poetry reading, Russell Simmons’ younger brother Run, from Run-DMC, declined the invitation by saying, “if I go to one of these poetry slams, I’m going to lose all my rap audience” (Aptowicz 107). While Run delivers a conversational performance of Run-DMC’s 1985 hit “Peter Piper” (s5e3) on *Def Poetry Jam*, the early rejection of poetry by rappers illustrates the economic concerns and the extent to which rappers protected their “street” personas. Despite these rejections, Holman persisted and eventually persuaded Bill Adler, former publicist for Def Jam Records, to help him bridge the gap between rap and poetry. In January of 1993, the first rAP mEETS pOETRY open mic was held at the Fez in NYC’s NoHo neighborhood, before moving to SoHo in a space known for showcasing local hip-hop performances, S.O.B.’s (Aptowicz 108).<sup>36</sup>

In the six years this reading was held, the energy of hip-hop legends such as Dignable Planets, Fab5 Freddy, Brand Nubian, Grand Master Flash, the Cold Crush Brothers, along with countless other rappers trying to cut their teeth in the New York hip-hop scene, made the rAP

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<sup>35</sup> Holman attempts a career in rap music under the moniker the Plain White Rapper.

<sup>36</sup> The Fez is short for The Fez Under Time Café. Holman initially names his reading, Ayatollah’s Granola, after the LL Cool J rhyme. He soon settles on the stylized rAP mEETS pOETRY. SOB’s is the popular abbreviation for Sounds of Brazil.

mEETS pOETRY reading a significant location at the intersection of poetry and hip-hop (Mead). In the screenplay and book accompaniment for the film *Slam*, poet and rapper Beans reflects on the significance of these venues, “‘Before I came to the poetry scene I was surrounded by people who weren’t willing to experiment and do different things in hip hop,’ he says. ‘Fez was a spawning ground for some incredible shit. It opened a whole new world for me’” (Stratton et al.165). More than bringing rappers and poets to the same stage, rAP mEETS pOETRY fostered a space for the emerging poet-emcee hybrid. This new hybrid of poet-emcee brought the lyrical complexity and content of poetry, the idiosyncratic rhythm of jazz, and the intricate rhymes of hip-hop, without the musical accompaniment or constraint of measure bars. Furthermore, those poet-emcees addressed social issues through clever, humorous, and thought-provoking verse. Within a few years, spaces for the poet-emcee increased. A young Mos Def went from bum rushing the rAP mEETS pOETRY stage, to hosting the open mic at the Brooklyn Moon Café in Fort Green (Holman).<sup>37</sup> The Brooklyn Moon Café came to define the resurgence of conscious hip-hop and neo-soul music with regulars that included Talib Kweli, Erykah Badu, Common, Jill Scott, and The Roots, all of whom would perform on *Def Poetry Jam*.<sup>38</sup> Back at the Nuyorican Café, underground hip-hop radio DJs, Stretch and Bobbito, began hosting All That, a reading bringing rappers and poets to the stage with a live band and DJs.

And then there was 1995. When Jessica Care Moore won five consecutive amateur nights at the Apollo...when Saul Williams first performed “Amethyst Rocks” and in the same night was asked to be the opener for Gil Scot Heron and the Last Poets at S.O.B.’s, be the opener for The

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<sup>37</sup> Bum-rushing a stage refers to a person forcibly going on stage, usually taking the microphone, when they have not been invited or otherwise are a part of the performance.

<sup>38</sup> Black Thought, lead rapper of The Roots, appears on *Def Poetry Jam*.

Fugees and KRS-One in Union Square, and be the opener for Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez at Medgar Evers College (Aptowicz 211)...when Paul Devlin decided to film the formation of the Nuyorican Slam Team and their trip to the National Poetry Slam, in what became the revelatory documentary on the poetry slam, *SlamNation*, which premiered the following year...when Bob Holman, Bill Adler, and school teacher and poet Sekou Sundiata formed Mouth Almighty Records, which remains the only record-label to have dedicated itself to the production and marketing of performance and spoken word poets... when Henry Louis Gates Jr. chronicled his experiences visiting spoken word venues, in an essay published by the New Yorker called “Sudden Def”...when Beau Sia moved to NYC and helped organize the NYU poetry slam where Allen Ginsberg made his last public appearance (Aptowicz 7)...when the National Poetry Slam in Ann Arbor hosted its largest crowd up to that point, thirteen hundred people, crowning Patricia Smith as a four-time individual champion, and the debut of future NPS winners Team Albuquerque and Team Austin (Daniels et al. 8). As Cristian O’Keefe Aptowicz explains, 1995 would be the year that separated the First Wave poets, who viewed slam as a temporary excursion before returning to writing and publishing poetry, from the Second Wave poets, who sought to turn their experience in slam into a full-time job as a poet (119-120).

Within the next few years, this fusion of hip-hop and poetry spread across the country. In Los Angeles, Dante Basco, famous for his portrayal of Rufio in the film *Hook* (1991), started Dante’s Poetry Lounge with friends Shihan Van Clief, Poetri, and Brutha Gimel as the resident DJ. Dante’s Poetry Lounge later becomes the Da Poetry Lounge (DPL), which continues to draw the largest weekly open mic crowd in the country. Philadelphia and Chicago hosted poetry readings nearly every day of the week. In Chicago, readings included an off-shoot of Spices Jazz Bar, hosted by acclaimed spoken word poets and future Kanye West writers Malik Yusef and J.

Ivy, as well as another reading hosted by the nerd-slam trailblazer, Shappy Seasholtz. In addition to the spoken word and poetry readings in the Bay Area, Youth Speaks, a new arts education program began in 1996, as an idea by San Francisco State MFA student, James Kass. Youth Speaks incorporates spoken word and performance poetry as the centerpiece for literacy, self-empowerment, and civic engagement amongst teens. After hosting workshops at The San Francisco Main Public Library, the Southern Exposure Gallery in the Mission district, and The Luggage Store Gallery in the Tenderloin neighborhood, Youth Speaks hosted the first Teen Poetry Slam at the Stage Werx Theatre in 1997 (Youth Speaks).<sup>39</sup>

### *Making Def Poetry Jam*

The idea of a spoken word poetry television show did not originate with *Def Poetry Jam*. As early as 1987, Bob Holman produced “Poetry Spots” (1987-1993) for WNYC-TV, featuring short videos of poets reciting their work throughout New York City. A decade later, Holman produced the PBS television series, *The United States of Poetry* (1995-1996), where a film crew traveled across the country to capture poets reading in various Americana landscapes.<sup>40</sup> In 1993 and 1994, MTV aired three “Spoken Word” episodes of their popular series *MTV Unplugged*. The documentary *SlamNation* emerged when filmmaker Paul Devlin was unable to secure financial backing for a television series about the National Poetry Slam, which was to be titled *Slammin’* (Aptowicz 155). That documentary, along with the independent film *Slam*, achieved critical success on the big screen, largely on the strength of Saul Williams’ performance as both

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<sup>39</sup> The National Teen Slam becomes the Brave New Voices poetry slam in 1998. Following the last season of *Def Poetry Jam*, the docu-series, *Russell Simmons Presents Brave New Voices*, follows poets as they prepare for the 2008 Brave New Voices slam.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Tracey Morris performs in a New York City public housing project. Allen Ginsberg performs in an art gallery. Ismail Azim El performs on a bus in San Francisco.

poet and actor. It is, again, worth noting the motion picture *Love Jones*, for its on-screen representation of an open mic and Lorenz Tate's performance of the Regie Gibson penned "Brotha to the Night." However, the increasing on-screen presence of spoken word did not translate into a market for spoken word and performance poets on or off-screen, outside of the open mic and slam communities.

Rather, an essential precursor to *Def Poetry Jam* had nothing to do with poetry. In 1992, Russell Simmons created *Def Comedy Jam*, which premiered on HBO. In its five seasons, this series launched the careers of Black comedians that dominate television and film screens for the next two decades. It was more than the brilliance of the comedians which made *Def Comedy Jam* important in Black television and film. The content, the set, the reactions from audience members, and the hosts — Martin Lawrence, Joe Torry, D.L. Hughley, and Ricky Harris — creates a televised production of chitlin circuit comedy clubs that existed in Black cities across the United States. *Def Comedy Jam* fills the screen with Black audiences responding boisterously to jokes, narratives, and "the dozens" with meanings imbued in Black culture. Guthrie Ramsey describes these spaces as "community theaters," which mediate "the 'drylongso' ways in which Black ethnicity is 'performed' outside of the public discourses" (25). Referring to John Langston Gwaltney's book *Drylongso: A Self Portrait of Black America* (1980), community theaters are crucial arenas for storing and transmitting cultural memory, histories, and alternative meanings which come to identify African-American culture. For decades, the chitlin circuit in comedy was a relatively private space for crafting Blackness, marked by their location in predominantly Black areas of cities, coded language, and calling out of whiteness. These routines needed to be experienced live or on vinyl records, until *Def Comedy Jam* broadcasted this once private



community theater to televisions across the nation; of course, one needed the premium cable subscription thus alienating the majority of Black Americans.

Seeing the potential for spoken word and performance poetry on television, Bruce George, a Black poet at the fringes of the New York poetry scene, conceived of the idea for a poetry television show that mirrored *Def Comedy Jam*. He recounts, “Actually, I got inspired from *Def Comedy Jam* since it shared a similar profile as the spoken word genre such as a mic, audience, and a stage! So it made perfect sense: a poetry version of the comedy series” (Bonjoko). Unlike Holman’s *United States of Poetry*, which brought an artistic element to the filming of poetry by shooting on location and cutting between shots of landscapes, action, and the poet, George’s series would feature the poets performing on stage in front of an audience. Unlike *MTV Unplugged*, with its dimly lit stage and spotlight on the poet, George’s series would involve the audience by showing their reactions to the poetry. Furthermore, series like “Poetry Spots” and the *United States of Poetry* featured the poets in the Nuyorican poetry slam scene and recognizable poets across the country; after all, Bob Holman was hosting Nuyorican’s slam and was at the helm of the Mouth Almighty record label. Without the cache at the Nuyorican Poets Café and other emerging open mic communities in New York, like the Bowery Poetry Club and rAP mEETS pOETRY, George’s goal was to bypass the existing spoken word and poetry slam gatekeepers and get his vision directly to Russell Simmons.

Getting the idea to the founder and face of the Def Jam empire required careful maneuvering. The challenge for George was to ingratiate himself with folks in Simmons’ social network to share his idea for the series, without having his creative idea infringed or outright stolen. It happens that Russell Simmons’ oldest brother Danny Simmons is a poet, who hosted and frequented poetry readings around New York, including the Nuyorican and Brooklyn Moon

(Asher; Mudu). Danny Simmons credits George for “bugging me to take the spoken word movement to the next level” (D. Simmons and Schanbacher) as the eldest Simmons was not sure his younger brother could be sold on the idea. When I interview Walter Mudu, a talent coordinator for *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, he details:

Bruce was smart. He couldn’t get to Russell, so he went to his brother Danny who lived in Bed-Stuy. Danny Simmons had a gallery that people would also do shows at, not really my people.<sup>41</sup> Jessica Care Moore hung out with Danny. But he had a beautiful studio with a lot of Black art. Magnificent. Bruce started going to the shows, got up on Danny. Him and another sista [Deborah Pointer], she worked at the hospital. They put the money in, took the idea to Russell, the rest is history.

In a meeting with Bob Sumner, the producer of *Def Comedy Jam*, Danny Simmons agreed to pitch the idea to Russell Simmons. In preparation for the pitch, Deborah Pointer, who worked at SUNY Downstate Medical Center, transformed Bruce George’s vision into a thirty-page proposal that Danny Simmons took to his younger brother. As Danny Simmons recalls, “The success of my brother Russell’s HBO show, *Def Comedy Jam*, inspired me to call the project *Def Poetry Jam*. After some convincing, Russell consented to the use of the Def Jam brand” (*Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway —and More x*). After consenting, he Russell Simmons tells Danny, “Don’t fuck up my brand!” (Asher).

It may stand to reason that poets would have lined-up for the opportunity to perform on an HBO television series. However, this was not necessarily the case as the show’s creators were not ingratiated with the poetry communities from which they hoped to feature on the series, even

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<sup>41</sup> In the interview, Walter Mudu makes an appoint to explain that the poets and audience attending Danny Simmons’ poetry readings were “not really my people.” This rhetorical move indicates a difference between Black poets more aligned with the aesthetics, lyricism, and style of hip-hop at the time, like Mudu, and Black poets more aligned with an Afro-Bohemian culture.

with Danny Simmons hosting poetry readings at his gallery. In an interview with Shihan, he explains candidly, “[Bruce] was not that guy like that. So, there were a lot of people like, ‘who the fuck is Bruce George, who are these people calling.’” Similarly, Walter Mudu, who has a more favorable reputation in the hip-hop and poetry community in New York, had a difficult time convincing poets to appear on the series, because of Russell Simmons’ exploitation of hip-hop music and culture. Mudu recalls, “A lot of cats weren’t really trying to be a part of [*Def Poetry Jam*], because of Russell Simmons. They were saying, ‘He’s the one who destroyed hip-hop.’ I’m just being honest.” While I explore more of Simmons’ slippery promotion and exploitation of hip-hop culture in the following chapter, it is useful to offer Regina Bernard-Carreño’s critique as of *Def Poetry* as evidence of Mudu’s experience. She explains, “Performance poetry or Outlaw Poetry has been manipulated by capitalism... It has become a monopoly. It has become another route towards what capitalists call ‘stardom’ or what capitalism denotes as ‘freedom of speech.’ It has become another battle to be on top” (49).

To address the issue of credibility, talent coordinators Shihan and Walter Mudu were brought in to help identify a roster of poets and also to help legitimize the entire project. Shihan, a co-founder of Da Poetry Lounge, which became Los Angeles’ version of the Nuyorican Poetry Café and Chicago’s Uptown Poetry Slam, was a major fixture in the spoken word and slam community, with roots in both LA and New York City.<sup>42</sup> Along with Mudu and Shihan, Kamilah Forbes served as the series co-producer, whose background in hip-hop theater and music festivals tied her to the spoken word poetry scene and helped lend credibility to the show. Furthermore, by hosting Def Poetry Slams across the country, the producers and talent

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<sup>42</sup> Shihan was raised on the Lower Eastside as a child by his African-American father, Ron van Clief, a renown martial artist. He later moves to Los Angeles with his Puerto Rican mother, where he befriends the aforementioned founders of Da Poetry Lounge.

coordinators recruited and auditioned poets that did not have the notoriety from the national slam community and were not a part of the New York poetry scene. Producers and talent coordinators also scouted potential performers at the 2001 National Poetry Slam in Seattle, particularly the poets from Atlanta, that resulted in the first season appearances of Georgia Me and Abyss. With the exception of the well-established poets, folks were instructed to submit VHS recordings of their performances to Bruce George, Shihan, or Walter Mudu, who provided recommendations to Russell Simmons and director Stan Lathan for final approval.

In light of these efforts, *Def Poetry Jam*'s first season's roster features some of the most notable and influential poets in the spoken word and poetry slam scene, including three of the central figures of *SlamNation*, Taylor Mali, Jessica Care Moore, and Beau Sia. The roster also includes a few National Poetry Slam champions and popular competitors, such as Steve Coleman, Mayda del Valle, Dawn Saylor, Sarah Jones, In-Q, and Shihan. Joining these poets are some of the vanguard poets of the Black Arts Movement. The presence of Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and the Last Poets signals a "passing of the torch" (Abyss, Van Clief) from the old to the new. Four celebrities appear on stage to give the show commercial appeal: Benjamin Bratt honors Miguel Piñero by reading his poem "The Lower Eastside" (s1e1); comedian Cedric the Entertainer pens an appreciation for spoken word poetry, while mocking the form and culture at the same time; folk singer Jewel reads a selection from her book of poetry, *A Night Without Armor: Poems* (1998); and a pre-*Chappelle Show* (2003-2006), Dave Chappelle recalls a comedic story about stereotypes through poetic verse.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Bratt plays Miguel Piñero in the 2001 film *Piñero*.

Beau Sia would make fun of Jewel's book by publishing an intentionally sappy book of poetry titled, *A Night Without Armor II: Revenge*.

At the center of this show is the host, Mos Def. In many ways, there could not have been a better host. His albums *Black on Both Sides* and *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* (1998) were both heralded for lyricism and the unabashed addressing of socio-political issues. While gaining recognition as one of the top rappers, he garnered attention as a great actor, with roles in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* and *Monster's Ball*. His star-power on screen and on the microphone, along with his familiarity with the NYC spoken word scene made him a natural choice for the role. Mos Def especially shines as a host because he is an earnest fan of poetry, a fan of many poets, and in more than a few cases, he becomes a fan of poets after they perform (Van Clief).

Despite a first season featuring some of the best poets in local poetry communities around the country, two notable omissions remind us that *Def Poetry Jam* was not immediately embraced by all poets, including two of spoken word and slam poetry's biggest stars. Absent from the first season are Taalam Acey, who blazed a trail for poets to make a career out of spoken word poetry, and spoken word's transcendent figure, Saul Williams. Williams explains his reservations to Christian O'Keefe Aptowicz:

I was not on board with *Def Poetry* initially, because one of the organizers who initially called me I wasn't sure that I could trust in a business sense. I was being called to participate and at the same time I was getting calls from friends that told me they had agreed to participate because they had been told that I was participating. And I knew that I had not agreed to participate as of yet. So my name was being used, and so initially I distanced myself from it just to see what it was about. Just to see what would become of it. (232)

Whereas Saul Williams would eventually appear on the third season of *Def Poetry Jam*, Taalam Acey never does. Shihan explains the oddity of Taalam's absence, "So many people knew Taalam Acey. And so for me it's a little crazy to see all these people doing his routine on stage that they were having on the show. I'm like, 'you gotta get the source to show where that came from. That's important.' And then he was a little reluctant at first. And then by the time he said, 'yeah,' they said 'no'" (Van Clief).

As the shoot for the series approached, the marketing for *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* began. In addition to the Def Poetry Slams and performances touring the country to create a buzz for the show, prominent poets and poetry historians Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera, published the 2001 anthology *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. This anthology "sought to publish quality poetry of all styles and aesthetic concerns that reflect, for the most part, the last ten to twelve years of this new resurgence in poetry here in the U.S., as well as abroad" (Medina et al. xxi). While the anthology is a remarkable collection of acclaimed poets and popular spoken word and performance poets, the Def Jam branding and title, which borrows from Public Enemy's debut album *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* (1987), ultimately signaled Russell Simmons' entrance into the world of poetry.<sup>44</sup> In the way that the 1994 anthology, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, helps solidify the Nuyorican as the Mecca of spoken word, *Bum Rush the Page* can be seen as an attempt to make *Def Poetry Jam* the Medina.

*Def Poetry Jam* positioned itself to celebrate spoken word poetry as performance, storytelling, and lyricism. Yet two days before production was scheduled to begin at The Supper Club in Manhattan, two airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, bringing New York City

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<sup>44</sup> Public Enemy was signed to Def Jam records. Thus, the title *Bum Rush the Page* connotes the spirit of politically charged and socially conscious hip-hop, the hard-hitting sounds of Public Enemy's musical production, as well as the Def Jam brand. Rush is also Russell Simmons' nickname, which he also uses as names for various business ventures, such as Rush Communications, Rush Associated Labels, and the Rush Card.

and the rest of the country to a temporary paralysis. When production resumed in mid-October, the celebration of verse became a critical reflection of society, marked by poems of resilience, resistance, and survival (Aptowicz; Shihan; Sommers-Willett; Mudu). When Suheir Hammad concludes the first episode with a revision of her poem “First Writing Since” (s1e1) to address the events and aftermath of 9/11, she captures the stunned and instantly changed America:

there have been no words.  
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.  
no prose in trucks driving debris and dna.  
evident out my kitchen windows an abstract reality.  
sky where once was steel.  
smoke where once was flesh.

please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot’s heart, the plane’s engine  
please god, don’t let it be anyone who looks like my brothers (98)

No sooner than audiences are drawn into the solemnness of the collapsing towers, Hammad forces listeners to grapple with what it means to be Palestinian, a Palestinian-New Yorker, and a Palestinian woman in New York on the day of and in the days following September 11, 2001:

thank you woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking  
back tears. she opened her arms before she asked “do you want a hug?”  
a big white woman, and her embrace only people with flesh can offer...  
“my brother’s in the navy,” i said. “and we’re arabs”. “wow, you  
got double trouble.” word. (99)

*Def Poetry Jam* gives a platform for this public mourning and confusion that could only be captured by a poet. Yet, as Walter Mudu explains, Suheir Hammad was not originally scheduled to appear on the series:

Suheir was like a last-minute joint. The Suheir thing happened because she sent me an email or someone forwarded me the email...But after 9/11 happened and her being [Palestinian], she did that poem. I was like Stan, you need to see it. I had it on my Blackberry, that first Blackberry with the orange button. I'm reading it, I forwarded it to Stan, on his Blackberry, and you know, he pulled it up on the screen. He's like "Yo, you could reach her?" and I said "Yeah." So I call her and said [Stan] wanted to meet her. And that was it, she was in the show. (Mudu)

Walter Mudu reminds us that *Def Poetry Jam* is more television show than poetic movement. However, his story also illustrates the degree to which this television show is guided and informed by the emerging community of spoken word poets.

As this chapter has attempted to create a historical map of *Def Poetry Jam* through the poetic movements, traditions, and communities that led to the series, it is evident that this television show is a bricolage of Black, American, and popular poetic traditions. With influences from the Harlem Renaissance, jazz poetry, the Black Arts and Nuyorican poetry movements, poetry slams, and hip-hop, *Def Poetry Jam* brings to the screen a poetic history that rarely exists outside of jazz clubs, cafés, cabarets, and performance spaces of the big cities. With this history, the narratives of hip-hop, the voice of marginalized identities, and the moving bodies used in poetry help make sense of a post-9/11 America. There is an optimism that lies at the center of this television show and it is captured by Suheir Hammad's straightforward declaration that concludes her poem:



there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting,  
but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will  
shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the  
rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen. (102)

### Chapter 3: Organic Intellectuals, Messy Intellectuals, and ThugNiggaIntellectuals

“In this game appeal is the mission,  
but the love given is based on chart position” — MC Lyte

KRS-One broke on to the hip-hop scene in 1987 as a member of the group Boogie Down Productions with DJ Scott La Rock. Lawrence “Kris” Parker uses the moniker KRS-One as an acronym meaning knowledge reigns supreme over nearly everyone, which began as graffiti tag created in his youth (Parmer 128). Despite Boogie Down Production’s billing as east-coast gangsta rap, KRS-One reserved violent lyrics for describing the “reality” of the ghetto and for protecting the integrity of hip-hop. Even in the group’s break-out record “South Bronx” (1987), a diss song admonishing Marley Marl and MC Shan for insinuating hip-hop began in the borough of Queens, KRS-One approached the subject as a guardian of the history using the record to correct the facts. Following the murder of DJ Scott La Rock, KRS-One joined many of the top MCs and rap groups to record the song “Self-Destruction” (1987) as a supergroup named Stop the Violence Movement. “Self-Destruction” was in one part an attempt to distance rap music and hip-hop culture away from the growing association with violent crime while simultaneously appealing to rap audiences, particularly Black men, to refrain from the use of gun violence. If that in any way seems like a contradiction, so too was his decision to bum rush P.M. Dawn in the middle of a concert after their lead singer taunted, “KRS wants to be a teacher, but a teacher of what?”<sup>45</sup> As KRS-One later explained in an interview with *USA Today*, “I’m a teacher of respect” (Gale and Pain).

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<sup>45</sup> KRS-One, who also goes by the moniker The Teacha, has become a gatekeeper and valued informant for hip-hop’s values, philosophy, beliefs, and early history.

In the fourth season of *Def Poetry Jam*, 2005, KRS-One demonstrates these teachings by reciting the lyrics to his song “2nd Quarter - Free Throws” (s4e3) backed by the legendary beatboxer Doug E. Fresh:

But first you and I got to unify  
Stop the negativity and control our creativity  
The rich is getting richer, so why we ain't richer?  
Could it be we still thinking like niggas?  
Educate yourselves, make your world view bigger  
Visualize wealth and put yourselves in the picture!

With the crowd nodding their heads to the boom-kick of Doug E. Fresh's beatbox, KRS-One delivers a message of empowerment within the constraints of poverty, hyper-surveillance, and protection of wealth. KRS-One's performance offers insight into the relationship between intellectualism and entertainment that grounds *Def Poetry Jam*. Whereas the overt social and political awareness of rap lyrics dissipated in the 1990s with the commercialization of mafioso rap, West Coast gangsta rap, and the explosion of Southern “bling,” spoken word poetry readings, open mics, and poetry slams became the theatre for critical consciousness through lyricism. These readings and subsequently these poems created a space to continue conversations around social justice and cultural resistance that no longer existed in mainstream hip-hop. *Def Poetry* recovers this social and political awareness by attempting to commodify spoken word poetry. As a result, this chapter explores the subversion of *Def Poetry Jam* by the poets who appear on the series, where poets operate as organic intellectuals and expand the performance of organic intellectualism through a medium of television that relies on the inherent exploitation and reproduction of controlling images.

I introduce this chapter with a discussion of KRS-One, as his status and lyricism of a teacha, reflects the performance of what Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci, describes as an organic intellectual. As such, this chapter briefly traces Gramsci's conception of the organic intellectual, in order to demonstrate how *Def Poetry Jam* offers a platform for intellectuals who genuinely know the social, structural, and economic conditions of the groups they represent in their poetry. Turning to Black popular culture and American studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal, this chapter builds on his essay, "Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual" to explain how poets on the series subvert existing stereotypes, so their production of critical consciousness is made palatable in mainstream and commercial media. By offering ThugNiggaIntellectual as a model for cultural resistance, this chapter demonstrates how marginalized groups leverage their proximity to stereotypes to highlight the social conditions, institutions, structures, and attitudes that reproduce the oppression of these groups. Furthermore, the chapter explores hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and the attachment of the television series as part of his Def empire. Borrowing from hip-hop scholar Regina Bradley's notion of the messy organic intellectual, Simmons' desire to improve the conditions for disenfranchised communities while simultaneously profiting from these communities makes him one of the messiest organic intellectuals.

### *Organic Intellectuals*

Antonio Gramsci conceives the idea of organic intellectuals as an essential social position in the struggle for cultural, political, and economic dominance. Gramsci was a prisoner of Fascist Italy at the time of his writings that would eventually become *The Prison Notebooks* (1935).<sup>46</sup> In these notebooks, he wrote extensively about the ways power is exerted, not merely through

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<sup>46</sup> These notebooks are written between 1929-1935.

violence, legislation, and economic repression, but through ideology and cultural hegemony. Gramsci focuses on intellectuals, as he “believed that the most effective aspect of hegemony is found in the suppression of alternative views through the establishment of parameters that define what is legitimate, reasonable, sane, practical, good, true, and beautiful” (Blair 499). Among those intellectuals are those who exist on a horizontal dimension, which along with organic intellectuals include the traditional intellectuals and the true intellectuals.<sup>47</sup> Gramsci considers how these intellectuals function as social agents who produce and protect the parameters of culture.

These traditional intellectuals are the experts of matters in society who “align themselves with the existing dispositions of social and intellectual forces” (Hall “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity” 433). While perhaps leaders in their field, these traditional intellectuals do not transcend their specialties to become leaders in society in the political, economic, or even cultural hegemony (Gramsci, Inhausti). Gramsci describes the “true intellectuals” as the artists, philosophers, and writers who are “addicted to books, ideas, and the pseudo-autonomy” associated with being a member of the intelligentsia (Inhausti 98). Like the traditional intellectuals, the work of the a true intellectual is more of a function of culture and perhaps the political and economic system as well. However, these true intellectuals do not transcend the intelligentsia to become leaders. Both traditional and true intellectuals are valuable in the production, reproduction, and the protection of hegemony, yet these positions, Gramsci argues, are not highly effective in counter-hegemonic production as they are limited in their ability to influence those members of oppressed groups.

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<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the vertical dimension contains social positions such as administrators, managers, foreman, and otherwise experts that organizes industry.

In each episode of *Def Poetry Jam*, there is one performance by an established poet recognizable in academic or Black literary circles. These include the poets from the Black Arts Movement (Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, The Last Poets, and Oscar Brown Jr.) and national award-winning writers (Yusef Komunyakaa, Sharon Olds, Nikky Finney, Rita Dove, Quincy Troupe, Louis Reyes-Rivera, Joy Harjo, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Martin Espada). Also included in *Def Poetry*'s representation of traditional and true intellectuals are Princeton professor Michael Eric Dyson, acclaimed author Asha Bandele, *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) author Eve Ensler, and spoken word pioneers like Kent Foreman, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Miguel Algarín, and Sekou Sundiata. A conventional reading of Gramsci considers these traditional and true intellectuals as less effective in cultural resistance, as they have come to occupy positions in the university and publish works that are recognized as literary canons.

While Gramsci does not account for the possibility that institutions, like the university, might reward counter-hegemonic voices with esteemed positions in the structure as true and traditional intellectuals, he does note "the traditional intellectuals are more likely to be attracted to the socialist cause with the creation of proletarian organic intellectuals" (Bates 173). Because these established poets negotiate the counter-hegemonic production of knowledge through institutional social positions, their presence on *Def Poetry Jam* links the younger spoken word and performance poets to a historical trajectory of protest poetry both on and off the page. In doing so, these once radical poets are represented as true and traditional intellectuals in order to legitimize the younger spoken word, slam, and performance poets.

Unlike the traditional and true intellectuals, whose function is to teach others how to, or how not to, become members of society, the organic intellectual is influential in spreading the

ideas, values, and technical knowledge to particular social groups or classes as a member of the social group or class. Gramsci writes, “Every social group [i.e. class] coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gramsci 5). Organic intellectuals are not unique to the working class or a society’s subaltern group. Instead, these groups seeking to continue the structural arrangement and those groups struggling against the structural arrangement both develop organic intellectuals. “Managers, technicians, and engineers as well as the professional and administrative occupations more generally; or in the case of the labor movement, the worker who becomes a trade union official or political activist” (Frank et al. 75) are all examples of organic intellectuals. Each class develops these intellectuals, organically, as carriers of new ideas, legitimizers of that group’s power, and as influential members in maintaining the status quo or altering that group’s social conditions (Landy 55-59).

For these groups looking to improve their social position or challenge the structure of dominance at large, Gramsci finds it imperative for those classes to rely on their organic intellectuals for social transformation. Gramsci recognizes “that subaltern groups are particularly repressed by not having an articulate and self-conscious awareness of the nature of their repression” (Landy 55). Thus, if the initial qualification for becoming an organic intellectual is the “genuine knowledge and understanding of the experience of that oppression” (Siraj-Blatchford 213), and the reproduction of repression is rooted in the absence of the articulation and consciousness of that repression, then *Def Poetry Jam* becomes a useful site in challenging

the larger structure by giving organic intellectuals a medium for articulating the cause and consequences of the repression.

It is, therefore, significant to understand that organic intellectuals must possess an ability to confront the dominant structure and have access to reach other members of its class. The effectiveness of the counter-hegemonic organic intellectual is not merely in their capacity to confront the dominant structure and the expression of counter-hegemonic ideas, but, as Stuart Hall emphasizes, their capacity to transmit those counter-hegemonic ideas. As Stuart Hall explains, “If you are in the game of hegemony you have to be smarter than ‘them’....But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (Hall “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” 267).

Stuart Hall stresses the importance of organic intellectuals to “know deeply and profoundly” (267) the ideas, experiences, sets of knowledge, and the dynamism of power as it protects and reproduces social class, race, gender, and other sets of stratification. Hall also, and perhaps more vehemently, advocates for organic intellectuals to transmit these ideas, experiences, sets of knowledge, and to explain how power protects and reproduces social class, race, gender, and others sets of stratification. While Hall’s most notable contributions to the field of Cultural Studies include his works on the representation in mass media, particularly news, television, and film, perhaps his most pioneering contribution is his use of television to discuss his ideas. As early as 1966, and well into the 1990s, Hall wrote and produced television series addressing the discrimination and racists representations of immigrants and people of color. Hall, a Jamaican immigrant, produced the acclaimed seven part documentary series *Redemption Song*



(1991), which details the history of colonial relations between the Caribbean and Great Britain. He also created television series like *Minorities in Britain* (1966), “Surely You’d Agree to That” (1973), “It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum” (1979), *The State and Society* (1984), and *Black Faith* (1990), all dealing with the representation and discrimination of people of color.

It is this latter function of the organic intellectual that weighed on Hall so profoundly, that following his departure from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, he opted not to teach at prestigious institutions like the University of Essex, the University of Warwick, or Harvard.<sup>48</sup> Instead, Stuart Hall spent the remaining eighteen years of his academic career at the Open University, where he shared the ideas he had been developing at the CCCS with students of all backgrounds and not those selected to elite universities (MacCabe 260-261). Hall’s televised lectures created at the Open University, especially *Race, the Floating Signifier* (1997) and *Representation and Media* (1997), not only underscore his emphasis that organic intellectuals are responsible for transmitting ideas and knowledge to the broader public, but also illustrate his effectiveness in understanding the medium of television and film as significant in the transmission of ideas. I am careful not to suggest that only organic intellectuals were selected to perform on *Def Poetry Jam* or that not being selected is an indicator that a poet is less of an organic intellectual or less capable as an organic intellectual. However, an organic intellectual cannot dismiss television as a dominant medium to transmit counter-hegemonic ideas. Further, the capacity to access this medium for the transmission of counter-hegemonic messages is as much part of the work of an organic intellectual as having the message itself. Hall’s relationship with television captures what Gramsci and later post-Marxists, cultural

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<sup>48</sup> At the 2014 Cultural Studies Association conference, Stuart Hall’s student Lawrence Grossberg describes Harvard as offering Hall a “blank check” for a position at the university, which Hall refuses. Instead, he stays in London and work at the Open University.

theorists, and critical media scholars stress about the struggle for hegemony occurring on multiple fronts.

Poets on *Def Poetry Jam* are organic intellectuals, or perhaps, they are at least performing the function of an organic intellectual. Def Poets emerge from the margins of American society and share in the disillusionment of individualism, wealth as the ultimate indicator of success, white supremacy, and the United States as the moral and political center of the world. They use poetry to inform and educate others outside of the formal institutions of education and more traditional literary publications. More germane to the function of organic intellectuals, these were poets overwhelmingly in their twenties and thirties speaking to other young Americans. In an interview with Javon Johnson, a performance studies scholar who also appears on *Def Poetry Jam*, he explains:

When I look back at that show, I think about how young these folks were. And so yes there was this urban-ness and the appeal of Black and hip-hop culture and all of these things that come with an HBO show about poetry, but in a time before the internet is what is now, I look at how these were basically younger people speaking in ways about history and politics that most politicians don't even engage.

Johnson's observations about *Def Poetry Jam* highlight the significance of "younger people" speaking to other younger people about history and politics. If, as Black Arts Movement poet and playwright Marvin X optimistically suggests, "younger writers can be more easily reached through the television medium, and sparked to increase the blaze of Black Fire" (Betts), then these poets are certainly positioned as organic intellectuals to effect social change.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Tara Betts notes Marvin X's intentional use of *Black Fire* (1968), an anthology edited by Amiri Baraka.

The identification of poets, spoken word poets in particular, as organic intellectuals is explored more fully by Regina Bernard-Carreño in *Nuyorganics: Organic Intellectualism, the Search for Racial Identity, and Nuyorican Thought* (2010). Bernard-Carreño traces Nuyorganic intellectualism through Puerto Rican creatives in New York, whose experiencing of the “harshness of cultural duality, cultural exclusivity, and intellectual rejection, created a voice for those in similar cultural positions” (10). According to Bernard-Carreño, Nuyorganic poetry centers the historiography of the Nuyorican experience in the production of knowledge. It suggests Nuyoricans in the past, particularly poets like Miguel Piñero and Pablo Pietri, not only wrote about the unique social position of the Nuyorican, but wrote out of a unique intellectual framework rooted in the position, experience, and cultural identity of a Nuyorican — one that was influenced by, but not encapsulated by European and Black intellectuals, namely Gramsci and W.E.B. DuBois. Bernard-Carreño’s theory of Nuyorganics is, therefore, rooted in: “(1) Nuyorican lived history and (2) organic intellectualism, and (3) producing new knowledge through critical pedagogy” (146), with poetry as its primary mode of expression.

In the application of Nuyorganic theory towards community building and liberation, where poets operate as organic intellectuals, she expresses much skepticism around projects like *Def Poetry*. She describes such commercial ventures as a manipulation of outlaw poetry (48-49), where the potentiality of cultural resistance is compromised. While there are indeed elements of commodification and appropriation involved in televising spoken word poetry and performance poetry, Bernard-Carreño’s criticism of *Def Poetry* is primarily grounded in the processes necessary to produce a television show. For example, she finds the audition process antithetical to the democratic potential of spoken word and counter-public poetry readings. She writes, “It has been stated that *Def Poetry* was created to ‘lend a voice to the voiceless’...If that is actually

the case, then why do the ‘voiceless’ have to audition to be on *Def Poetry*? Are there specific characteristics of being part of a voiceless population? And what are the qualifications of judges who judge the voiceless; are they voiceless too? Why then are there unreturned phone calls from the ‘voiceless’ who want a shot at being heard and seen?” (49). Bernard-Carreño’s criticisms are valid, highlighting the commodification of spoken word poetry by selling the idea that *Def Poetry* lends a “voice to the voiceless.” Given Bernard-Carreño’s exploration of spoken word and oral poetry as both a tool and performance of liberation, the path to appearing on *Def Poetry* relied on an inherent gatekeeping that inevitably silences members of the voiceless.

Bernard-Carreño’s criticism highlights the fact that the creators of *Def Poetry Jam* were more interested in creating a good television show featuring poetry than using poetry to effect social change. Thus, the screening process for who appeared as a voice for the voiceless was in and of itself a reproduction of the fundamental principles in capitalism that spoken word poets often speak against, namely competition and the control of resources; in this case, the resource is HBO’s television audience. Her last critique further illustrates this point in that no one involved in the production of the television show was interested enough in helping poets improve their performance and develop the artists’ craft so that poets might have had a better chance to appear on the show.

If, as Edward Said suggests, the effectiveness of the subaltern organic intellectual is expressed through the confrontation of the dominant structure (335), then Bernard-Carreño correctly problematizes *Def Poetry*’s compromising of organic intellectuals’ ability to perform cultural resistance. Poets whose work may pose threats to the social structure were limited in their access to HBO’s national audience as producers and talent-coordinators screened audition tapes for elements such as: where the poets are from, what the poets look like, the content of the

poem, the length of the poem, the entertainment value of the poem, and the subject matter of the poem. However, these screenings also occur at open mic poetry readings and poetry slams across the country, especially the most popular readings. Even in these counter-public spaces, hosts and open mic list managers make determinations about what order to place poets and, if time is limited, which poets are cut from the list. While the audience size and notoriety of performing on television raised the stakes, the phenomenon of poets as organic intellectuals having limited access to an audience was not something that began with *Def Poetry Jam*, but rather, it fit in the tradition of oral poetry and poetry in counter-public spaces.

### *ThugNiggaIntellectuals*

For Gramsci's organic intellectuals, the end goal is the reproduction or dismantling of the cultural hegemony that dominates groups within the structure of capitalism. Particularly with regard to Gramsci's assertion that organic intellectuals are indigenous products of their social groups, poets on the series are both identifiable and credible as members of subcultures, while also having the ability to speak to and from their groups' position in the social structure at large. As such, Mark Anthony Neal's 2003 essay "Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual" offers a valuable reference point for understanding the significance of speaking to and speaking from one's social position. Neal's reflexive label of ThugNiggaIntellectual captures the intellectualism of *Def Poetry Jam*, where knowledge need not appear nor sound like antiquated notions of scholarship rooted in Eurocentricity. While feminists of color have long articulated subversive performances of identity for intellectualism, ranging from Gloria Anzaldua's politicization of mestiza to Joan Morgan's reverence for enterprising chickenheads, the choice to build upon Neal's essay reflects the particular centering of Black men by the producers of *Def Poetry Jam*.

As such, ThugNiggaIntellectual confers a gendered performance of intellectuality which grows out of Mark Anthony Neal's positionality. On *Def Poetry Jam*, the poets' positionality and identity are braided into their poetry to create performances of critical consciousness.

Neal describes a ThugNiggaIntellectual as "someone who credibly navigates the life of the mind and the life of the street" (Neal *Looking for Leroy* 10). Beginning with a reflection on his own existence as a ThugNiggaIntellectual, Neal writes:

Though I don't claim to have ever been a thug and have never accepted the status of a "nigger," the distinct New York styled Black masculinity that I wear means I have known thugs and a bunch of "niggers." I share a space with them each time I'm profiled in grocery stores, or chillin' with my homies Gramsci and Jay-Z at Starbucks. Folks are seemingly fearful and disgusted at my presence, as if a nigga ain't supposed to drink some expensive coffee and have a laptop. But it's the latter part of that term "Thug... Nigga...Intellectual" that perhaps raises the most eyebrows. ("You're an intellectual? You look like you should be working for UPS").

Throughout this essay, Mark Anthony Neal depicts ThugNigga as a space that he inhabits by both his proximity to *real* thug-niggas and because others view him as a thug-nigga. Neal's "New York styled Black masculinity" suggests a fluency and credibility in belonging to the ThugNigga group. Furthermore, his references and even writing style in the essay signals belonging to this group, even if it is exaggerated throughout the piece for emphasis.<sup>50</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> Neal's intentional braiding of Black vernacular and hip-hop phrases through densely theoretical discourse is best expressed by the following quote from this essay: "On the real, we can sugarcoat the realities of the Black experience to our students all we want (yes, slavery was terrible!), but when dealing with a generation of folk (myself included) that has lost all sense of nuance (courtesy of television and video games), somehow the phrase "No! The shit was fucked up!" resonates in a way that John Hope Franklin, the dean of modern Black historians, can never get to."

ThugNigga label also operates as a stigma imposed on him through the gaze of others. While this stigma inherently contrasts with the role of an intellectual, Neal reading Antonio Gramsci at Starbucks and his position as a Duke University professor suggests there is an inhabitable space between the seemingly contradictory identities of ThugNigga and Intellectual. It is from this in-between, infused, and intersecting space, that many of the Def Poets function as organic intellectuals in their performance on stage.

Mark Anthony Neal uses the label ThugNiggaIntellectual to explain the intellectual function of Black men who “know street shit” and “know shit that’s conscious” (Duckworth); I offer ThugNiggaIntellectual as a model which explains how organic intellectuals work within the constraints of legibility. One can follow Neal’s theoretical development of legibility from his self-reflexive analysis of negotiating identity and stereotype to his analysis of Black men in television, music, and film in his book, *Looking for LeRoy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013). In offering “illegible” Black masculinities that defy the conventional representation of Black men in popular culture, Neal defines legible Black bodies as those which, “body is continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture” (4). Thus, my use of the phrase “legible” throughout this research builds on the ways bodies of color, the bodies of women, and queer(ed) bodies are depicted in media as reinforcing the stigmas, stereotypes, and the positions afforded these groups in the social structure. ThugNiggaIntellectual, therefore, becomes a model to explain how organic intellectuals use their legibility as a member of a subaltern, marginalized, or otherwise stigmatized group to then challenge those structures which oppress their very group.

## *Thug*

First, the term Thug operationalizes gendered deviance and one's capacity to behave defiantly, which for Neal, ranges from simply being a member of a counter-cultural group to using violence as a means of obtaining the American dream.<sup>51</sup> Neal discusses Avery Brooks' portrayal of the titular character of the television series *Hawk* as the embodiment of an early Thug (Neal *Looking for LeRoy* 17). Rather than a "bad man" whose heroism is guided by a politically and morally developed knowledge of self, Neal considers how Brooks brought the "bad nigger" to the character of Hawk, with "bad nigger" referencing the disobedient slaves and free Blacks who challenged the institution of slavery.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Neal offers Avery Brooks' performance in the role of Hawk as "a rather sophisticated intellectual sensibility" that desires political and social relevance in Black communities, while being bound and scripted by the legibility of his body to white writers and viewers.<sup>53</sup>

Any discussion of the term "thug," especially in the context of hip-hop, is likely incomplete without considering Tupac Shakur's contribution to the popularization and politicization of "thug" as a social status. He prominently represented thug life early in his career, most notably with his THUG LIFE tattoo, which *Complex* magazine describes as one of the most famous tattoos in music (Schonberger).<sup>54</sup> For Tupac, being a thug is an expression of political radicalism and social agency. He explains:

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<sup>51</sup> In operationalizing gendered deviance, there is also an implication about sexuality. This operationalizing relies on heteronormative connections of sexuality and gender as hegemonically reproduced. Gender-non conforming and queer subversions would likely subvert controlling images associated with those identities.

<sup>52</sup> "Bad nigger" is an allusion to the book *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*, by Al-Tony Gilmore.

<sup>53</sup> In the fifth season of *Def Poetry Jam*, Avery Brooks performs a monologue from the Ozzie Davis' 1961 play, *Purlie Victorious* (s5e1). Except for a single patch of gray hair on his goatee, Brooks looks just as much as Hawk as he did when he first portrays the character in 1985.

<sup>54</sup> Tupac describes T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E. as a backronym for The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everyone.



“It’s not thugging like I’m robbing people, ‘cause that’s not what I’m doing...I’m not scared to say how I feel. Part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibilities and say this is what I do even though I know people are going to hate me and say, ‘It’s so politically un-correct,’ and ‘How could you make Black people look like that? Do you know how buffoonish you all look with money and girls and all of that?’ That’s what I want to do. I want to be real with myself.”

(Dyson 113)

In short, Tupac’s description of a thug is foremost a rejection of respectability politics. When considering the backronym he created for T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E., The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody, Tupac sanctions the “politically un-correct” and “buffonish” behavior as a product of the “hate” required to maintain a neoliberal illusion of the American dream. This hate, in the form of the limited economic opportunities and carceral-like conditions in Black neighborhoods, creates the deviant behavior of the young Black men whom Hillary Clinton described as a “superpredator” during a 1996 campaign speech for Bill Clinton.<sup>55</sup> Through the deviance of young Black men, not only are Black communities negatively affected, but the United States at large is negatively affected by a looping of violence and policing that exhaust resources and destroy lives (Alexander; Davis; Kelly *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional*). For Tupac and Neal, “thug” is merely a conduit of the United States’ culture of violence, hatred, and nihilism which protects white supremacy.

According to his stepfather Mutulu Shakur, Tupac adopted the label of “thug” because “that is what adults called him and his friends. Thug life philosophy is shaped by Tupac’s experiences of living in a dysfunctional home, with a drug-addicted mother and no support from

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<sup>55</sup> This term specifically, along with Clinton’s neoliberal centrist position at large, was significant factor in her 2016 presidential loss to Donald Trump.

a father. These experiences lead Tupac to seek refuge in the ‘streets,’ where his support system includes hustlers, pimps, and drug dealers” (Stanford 16). At the 1993 Indiana Black Expo, Tupac exclaimed, “white people think we thugs, that’s how they see us!” (Shakur). His speech continued by addressing the absence of Black men in the home and the lack of home, property, and proprietary ownership in the Black community. This set up Tupac’s dramatic point that young Black men have been deprived of humanity and therefore “we thugs and we niggas until we set this shit right!” In this sense, thug and thug life are expressions of critical consciousness through a defiance of respectability politics for young Black men, and also, an expression of self-determination that Tupac hoped could become a status of empowerment. A thug in Tupac’s mind held the potential to be a serious organizer and community level agent of social change, however, if the energy of thugs were not properly channeled towards social change, thugs would become a destructing member of the entire race and society at large.<sup>56</sup>

In an elegy performed on *Def Poetry Jam* that is as mournful as it is condemning, famed actress and civil rights activist, Ruby Dee, notes Tupac’s evolution from a child of Black Panther Party members to his post-incarceration superstardom (s4e6). Her poem reminds us, Tupac’s violent and misogynist lyrics, court appearances and subsequent incarceration, antagonistic relationship with mainstream media, and his hostility towards other rappers that contributed to the perception of an east coast versus west coast feud, ultimately upholds the stigma of thugs destroying themselves, rather than creating economic and institutional change. Her performance includes an implicit criticism of Tupac’s inability to empower Black communities through thug life:

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<sup>56</sup> Tupac attempts to subvert or at least complicate the stigma of thug, through socio-political lyrics and more practically through his articulation of the “Code of Thug Life” that becomes instrumental in the 1992 truce between Los Angeles Crips and Bloods.

But that revolution thang,  
We don't do that no more.  
Any number of ways to like get with it, get over, get down.  
Fuck revolution, Fuck thinking. Get yo self some money. Get with a gang.  
Be a star, actor, rapper, athlete, or the new town clown.  
Revolutionaries don't get job security.  
They compete with rats for cheese and with strays for shelter after the big bullets  
make feet out of their knees.  
Tupac spelled backwards, caput.  
Meaning finished over, ended, done.  
26 was, oh my God, so young.

While Ruby Dee's poem ends as a cautionary tale for the thug lifestyle, her poem also sheds light on the phenomenon that creates a thug, especially in the socialization of Tupac. When she says, "Revolutionaries don't get job security./They compete with rats for cheese and with strays for shelter after the big bullets make feet out of their knees," she captures in verse what Mike Davis describes in *City of Quartz* (1990) as the crippling of the Black Panther Party along with the unprecedented, systematic criminalization of Black youth by the LAPD and other police forces.

Like "gang member," "thug" is ultimately a response to overtly racist policing practices in Black and Brown neighborhoods and the subsequent institutional racist policing, most notably marked by the War on Drugs. When FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover declared, "the Black Panther party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" (UPI), the ensuing "neutralization" of the Panthers via COINTELPRO and the collaboration with city police departments destroyed entire communities and the social cohesion the Panthers

brought to Black communities via a free breakfast programs, health clinics, the unification of neighborhood gangs, and the positive affirmation of Black people in the United States. In the aftermath of the COINTELPRO, Father Namde Hamilton of the Watts Prophets recalls, “These kids got together. They knew to do that. But they got together with no leadership” (Sloan).

The void left by the assassination, incarceration, and social isolation of Panther leaders, including Tupac’s mother Afeni Shakur and aunt Assata Shakur, was filled by neighborhood pimps and drug dealers who profited from the social disorganization, politicians and poverty-pimps who profited from the funds designed to address the social disorganization, and Black youth trying to piecemeal social change for themselves. As Mike Davis explains, “the decimation of the Panthers led directly to a recrudescence of gangs in the early 1970s. ‘Crippin,’ the most extraordinary new gang phenomenon, was a bastard offspring of the Panthers’ former charisma” (298). Given the United States’ growing consumption of drugs and the opportunity to support the fund-raising efforts of Central American anti-communists, the organizational and territorial structure of these gangs made young Black men a ready-made labor force in the supply chain of illegal drugs (Sloan; Davis). Of course, young Black men also served and continue to serve as the commodity by which police departments profited, through the seizure of assets and the federal money marked exclusively for targeting drugs and gangs (Alexander; Davis). Whereas the status of “gang member” has more to do with policing, enforcement of gang injunctions, and the sensationalizing of Crip and Blood sets in news, politics, and popular culture, the status of “thug” conjures the same nihilism without membership to any one group or organizational structure.

## *Nigga*

Whereas Thug operationalizes deviant behavior, the second component, Nigga operationalizes social status. This social status is, of course, not an official designation or categorization of identity, but rather a label indicating an “index of the moral despair engendered by a thoroughly dehumanizing oppression” (Judy 108). In “Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual,” Neal cites Mos Def’s song, “Mr. Nigga” (1999) as a “veritable dissertation” on the word “nigga.” In the song, Mos places Black men with class privilege in a variety of social settings and scenarios. In each case, however, these men face discrimination ranging from various micro-aggressions, detainment by law enforcement, and treatment as a social pariah. At the conclusion of these scenarios, Mos Def is joined by rapper Q-Tip who describes these individuals as, “Mr. Nigga/Nigga nigga.”<sup>57</sup> While this label evokes the historical filth of the word “nigger” in its inferiority to whiteness, its potential for subversion is rooted precisely in its polarity to whiteness. Thus, for Mark Anthony Neal, Nigga is as much about the racialized stigma of that label, as much as it is about “generational shifts that are occurring within Black communities” (“Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual”).

There are no fewer than thirty-five poems that use the word “nigga” on *Def Poetry Jam*. Unlike the lyrics and stand-up comedy routines of many Black artists, where the term is used affectionately, as a generic pronoun, or merely as a filled pause, its usage on *Def Poetry* is usually more intentional. Most frequently, “nigga” signifies Black men who represent, perform, or otherwise embody the negative stereotypes associated with Black masculinity. “Nigga” is by and large not an endearing term on *Def Poetry*. While not used affectionately, its use is

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<sup>57</sup> Q-Tip interpolates his own 1993 song with A Tribe Called Quest, “Sucka Nigga” (1993), where he describes the antagonistic relationship between the etymology and the use “nigga” as a term of endearment, stating “I start to flinch as I try not to say/but my lips is like an owoop as I start to spray it [repeat]/Sucka nigga/Nigga-nigga”

consistent with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as a chiasmic slaying (66), where “nigga” inverts the dehumanization associated with “nigger” into personhood, agency, and affirmation (Gates *The Signifying Monkey*; Jacobs). Def Poets do not use “nigga” in a way that deprives Black people, and Black men in particular, of their humanity, instead Def Poets’ use of “nigga” suggests a criticism of how Black men use their agency to fulfill or to perform stereotypically prescribed roles associated with Black masculinity. The implication being, that if Black men use their agency in the performance of stereotypical representations of Black masculinity, then these men can use their agency to perform in less stereotypical behaviors, which is to say, in roles and behaviors more conducive to social mobility. Thus, the chiasmic slaying is not a transformation of a negative to a positive term, but rather a transfiguration by which “nigga” is a role that one may choose to take or choose not to take.

There are, however, a few poems which specifically address the word’s usage. Julien Curry and legendary singer Smokey Robinson each explore the transfiguration of “nigga” in a historical context. Curry (s4e4), begins his poem by greeting the audience with, “What’s up my niggas?” to which a large chorus responds, “What’s up.” He then begins his poem stating, “That was a trick question,” subsequently developing a critique of “nigga” as a term of endearment and group identity. After imagining a scenario by which a slave experiences the disappointment of hearing Black men affectionally referring to each other as “my nigga” on the train, Curry turns the poem into a criticism of the word’s usage in entertainment. He chastises *The Kings of Comedy* (2000), Quentin Tarantino films, and Jay-Z, for their perpetuation of the word and subsequent stigma in entertainment.

In contrast, Smokey Robinson’s performance of “A Black American” (s3e7), chronicles the racialized labels of Africans in America from slavery to the present. Robinson, who is

foremost critical of the term “African-American” for those members of Black communities who are not recent immigrants or the descendants those recent immigrants of African countries, uses the word “nigga” sarcastically, yet poignantly. While not necessarily cosigning the word’s usage, Smokey Robinson exclaims, “And if you think/Being called African-American sets all Black people’s mind at ease/Since we affectionately call each other nigga/I affectionately say to you/Nigga please.” In both Robinson and Curry’s performances, the audience applauds. Many give Julien Curry a standing ovation at the end of his poem. The camera shows individuals in the audience boisterously clapping and cheering when Smokey Robinson uses the term. These examples illustrate the poles by which “nigga” is both embraced and critiqued by the poets on the series; they also illustrate how the audience affirms this usage by applauding, laughing, and gestures of agreement with the poets. Not to suggest that the use of “nigga” is agreed upon by members of the audience, the poets, and certainly not *the* Black community, but rather, its use on the show is a mimicry of the chiastic slaying of “nigger” that attempts to reassert humanity through transfiguration or subversion.

Whereas Thug operationalizes behavior and Nigga operationalizes status, in combination, ThugNigga denotes a racialization of deviance associated with Black men in the United States. As Mark Anthony Neal explains, “the ‘thug nigga’ is a dangerous nigger and America has never romanticized about its fear of angry ‘don’t give a fuck’ niggers” (“Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual”). It suffices to say that the fear and representation of the ThugNigga can be traced back to the stereotypes of the “negro brute” and the “bad nigger” before. At the time of *Def Poetry Jam*, these representations were generally associated with the “gangsta” stereotype, most evident in the introduction to the character O-dog in *Menace II Society* (1993). As the film’s narrator describes, “O-dog was the craziest nigga alive. America’s nightmare. Young,

Black, and didn't give a fuck" (Hughes et al.). For many young Black men, ThugNigga is less about choosing to behave or perform in the roles associated with this label, but rather ThugNigga is inscribed by others on to the bodies and identities of young Black men as early as preschool (Gilliam et al.).<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, for young Black men who embrace the label and behavior of the ThugNigga, such performance is one of blatant opposition to the dominant culture as a means for gaining power, visibility, and capital (Judy 108).

### *Thug+Nigga+Intellectual*

A strict reading of Gramsci might offer ThugNiggaIntellectual as an intellectual organic to the ThugNigga group. For reasons stated previously, Tupac Shakur fits neatly in this category. However, being mindful that ThugNigga is not always a choice, but sometimes an identity that others inscribe on to Black men, ThugNiggaIntellectual might also describe an intellectual organic to Black masculinity who might be seen as legible in the role of ThugNigga. Otherwise stated, rather than being an intellectual that teaches folks how to be ThugNiggas, the ThugNiggaIntellectual is a true intellectual, a traditional intellectual, or an organic intellectual who cannot or chooses not to abandon their association with poor and working-class Black communities; the folks who are legible as ThugNiggas. As Mark Anthony Neal explains:

I'm part of the first generation of Black scholars who, like Rakim, "came in the door"<sup>59</sup> with designs to do the kinds of scholarly work that was deeply personal to

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<sup>58</sup> Research on implicit bias in early education, such as Gilliam et al.'s study on preschool expulsions and suspensions suggest that Black boys are surveyed more for challenging behavior than other boys and more than Black girls.

<sup>59</sup> Neal references Eric B. and Rakim's song, "Eric B. for President," where, Rakim's couplet "I came in the door, I said it before/I never let the mic magnetize me no more" is contradicted by his inability to quit rapping. Similarly, Neal expresses his inability to stop identifying with working-class Black folks despite his prestige and social mobility.



us writing about Black everyday life and the cultures that are embedded in those lives. This was a “scholarship” that allowed very little distance from the crack-head vestibules and cheese lines that some of us were privy to.

In this case, the style of a self-described “ThugNiggaIntellectual” takes the place of disciplined study and trenchant scholarship. The fact of the matter is that we don’t all have to ascribe to some dated Victorian-era version of Black intellectual life in an era when folks had to act and dress as if they were above the world, in order to be taken seriously by their white (and Black) peers in the world.

(“Confessions of a ThugNiggaIntellectual”)

The ThugNiggaIntellectual is a Black male intellectual who uses their legibility as a ThugNigga to address the social, political, and economic issues associated with ThugNiggas. Also, ThugNiggaIntellectuals transform the fear that others have of the “angry,” “dangerous,” and “don’t give a fuck” representation of Black men as a motivating force to study, learn, publish, and teach others about the issues and social conditions affecting Black communities.

ThugNiggaIntellectuals make space and hold space for other marginalized members in professional, academic, and otherwise white institutional spaces. As Neal defiantly states, “it is a commitment to intellectually choking a ‘Mfer’ to death, if need be.” Labeling poets as ThugNiggaIntellectuals is slippery, and thus avoided in this analysis. Like Mark Anthony Neal, many of the Black male poets could not be considered thugs and would reject the use of the word “nigga” in their own identity or its use of the term by anyone else.

However, the ThugNiggaIntellectual as a commodifiable identity *is* what inspired Bruce George to pitch a *Def Comedy Jam* styled television show featuring poetry. It is also what

Russell Simmons prefers as a style, content, and representation of oral poetry. Simmons' autobiography provides a context for his early recognition of ThugNiggaIntellectuals, namely in the role his father:

On the one hand, he [Simmons' father] could recite from *Hamlet* and write insightful, sophisticated poetry. On the other hand, he could talk derisively all day about “pussy-lipped niggers”—boring, fake, plastic people who wanna distance themselves from the gritty core of African-American culture. My father was very well-read and college educated, but that never made him feel he was superior to anyone. He really hated Blacks he felt had an elitist attitude. (Simmons and George 13)

It makes sense then that Simmons lists his favorite rap acts on the *Def Jam* label as Public Enemy and DMX (88). He sings praises for Public Enemy and front man Chuck D. for their Afrocentricity, intellectuality, and fearlessness in confronting those institutions which they felt oppressed others. He praises DMX for his vulnerability on record where “DMX deals with the spiritual struggle in a material world” (202). On *Def Poetry Jam*, this fusion of DMX and Chuck D, in the performance of spoken word poetry and oral poetry is the very heart of the series. In an off-handed remark about selecting poets, Shihan remarks, “Russell likes that thug shit.”

Throughout the series, the Philadelphia-based poet, Black Ice, most vividly represents the ThugNiggaIntellectual. While Black Ice began performing spoken word poetry in 1992 and 1993, his career transitioned from drug-dealer to barber, before signing to Def Jam Records in 2001 (Urban Scribe). In the first episode of the series, Black Ice performs “Bigger Than Mine” (s1e1), a poem chastising Black men who hide their “true self” behind the accumulation of

ghetto-wealth status and consumption. Black Ice concludes the piece in a forceful increase of volume and energy behind the following words:

I see you, diamond blinking, Cuban linking and full length minking  
All strung out on disillusional thinking  
And as the government subsidizes  
These laboratory high rises with new chemical surprises  
You continue to hide your true self behind movie gangsta disguises  
Oblivious to what life's true prize is  
Equating your stupidity with the length you think your dick size is  
The truth in your eyes is falsified, fabricated  
While you sit and wait for your fate to be debated by judges  
And juries who've held over four hundred and fifty years' worth of grudges  
Nigga get back, sit back and rediscover  
How to be an honest father, loyal lover, righteous brother  
And not just another motherfucking [ends poem abruptly]

The poem's rapid cadence and twisting in-line rhymes exacerbate the hostile tone of the poem. Black Ice's frequent and confrontational use of "nigga" demonstrates a condescending familiarity with the subjects of his poem. Add to this his misogynistic comparisons of these men as "fractionally vaginal" and "pussy for sale," and Black Ice's performance of "Bigger Than Mine" has all of the stylings of the ThugNiggaIntellectual. Black Ice's performance and poem draw on the performativity of anger and hostility associated with Black masculinity to draw attention to capitalism and conspicuous consumption as a disruption on Black families.

The centrality of the ThugNiggaIntellectual in *Def Poetry Jam* is not only marked by Black Ice's appearance in every season of series and on the Broadway version of the show, but by a performance of a Black male operating as ThugNiggaIntellectual in nearly every episode. This allows for a dynamic range of topics for ThugNiggaIntellectuals to explore, which amounts to a dynamic range of topics explored through a legible Black masculine frame.

ThugNiggaIntellectuals perform poetry about politics, history, love, intimacy, education, the record industry, and of course, the relationship between the ghetto and the prison industrial complex. The performance styles of ThugNiggaIntellectuals are serious, humorous, narrative, lyrical, and otherwise just as wide-ranging as the topics explored. This overrepresentation of ThugNiggaIntellectuals, which includes host Mos Def, is arguably the most significant factor in *Def Poetry Jam* being seen as representational space of Black, urban, and hip-hop story-telling.

### *Beyond ThugNiggaIntellectuals*

As ThugNiggaIntellectual extends the concept of the organic intellectual, it then follows that Def Poets, who are not Black men, also subvert stereotypes, behaviors, and statuses ascribed on their identities. While a future analysis might explore how poets *play* with the elasticity of identity through expanding and contracting the representation racial, gendered, and class identities the scope of this research limits these findings towards the suggestion that such elasticity is evident in individual performances and in the curated line-ups of the episodes, seasons, and series as a whole. In light of this, I offer ThugNiggaIntellectual as a model which explains how poets use identity to perform the intellectual work of fostering critical consciousness. Applying the concept of ThugNiggaIntellectual as model to explore the subversion of controlling images, the label of "intellectual" is static. The other two components

identify the stigmatized deviance and degraded social status connected to the identities of that organic intellectual. These labels are not arbitrary stereotypes. Instead, these labels rely on identifiable controlling images and status sets that one might subvert for intellectual work. Therefore, by replacing 1) Thug with a gendered-racialized term associated with deviance, and 2) replacing Nigga with a racialized term associated with status, it becomes evident to see how these organic intellectuals on *Def Poetry Jam* use identity in their performances to critique inequality within a social structure responsible for these very stereotypes.

For example, in the second episode of *Def Poetry Jam*, the Philadelphia based collective Yellow Rage performs “Listen Asshole” (s1e2) in the role of the DragonLadyOrientalIntellectual. In the first group piece of the series, Michelle Myers, who identifies as Korean American, and Catzie Vilayphonh, who identifies as Lao American, stand side-by-side in black t-shirts with bold white print. Myers’ shirt reads “ORIENTALIZE THIS — BAM” and Vilayphonh’s shirt reads “BACDAFUCUP ASIAPHILE.” After beginning their piece, simultaneously reciting separate verses, Myers becomes the primary speaker with Vilayphonh doubling the punchlines:

I see right through you  
You expert on me with your fake Asian tattoo  
You expert on me with your Tae Bo and kung fu  
So what you tried Dim Sum, and then some’ on the menu  
So what you a fan of Lucy Liu  
So what you read “The Joy Luck Club” too  
That makes you an expert on how I should look?  
Fuck you

What the fuck do you know about being Asian?

I'm about to put you in your place, son

What do you know about napalm and Saigon?

About Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

About Gandhi?

What do you know about demilitarized zones?

and No Gun Ri?

About My Lai and the military?

What do you know about the killing fields and the signs that read

“No Chinese or dogs allowed?”

What do you know about comfort women and Geisha girls?

About colonization all over the Asian world?

What do you know about the Great Wall?

I could school you on each and all

Mother fucker I'm about to get raw

You picked the wrong Asian woman to mess with

The poem turns when Catzie Vilayphonh becomes the dominant speaker, addressing the fetishization of Asian women through language.

So you want to learn how to say “I love you” and “hello”

Why you need to know?

You think of me as some Asian ho

Ready to turn around at your calls of:

“Hey baby, ahn young ha saeyo, ahn young ha saeyo”

or

“Ni hao ma, I love you China doll”

In their performance, Yellow Rage’s subversion of the DragonLadyOriental is made possible by their legibility as Asian women and also by their proximity to the dragon lady stereotype. This stereotype depicts Asian and Asian-American women as mysterious, hypersexual, deceitful, and dangerous, often using their sexuality to seduce non-Asian men for nefarious purposes (Oh; Patton; Herbst).

At the time of Yellow Rage’s performance on *Def Poetry Jam*, Lucy Lu’s portrayal of the character Ling Woo, from the television series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), exemplified the dragon lady stereotype as “the embodiment of sexuality” who is “blunt, rude, crude, and secure—the antithesis of McBeal” (Patton 250). The antithesis of the main character, Ally McBeal, therefore, represents the antithesis of whiteness and of white femininity. Yellow Rage’s proximity to the DragonLadyOriental is evident, foremost by their legibility as Asian women, but also in their blunt, rude, crude, and secure delivery of the poem. Their performance, as intentionally over-the-top blunt, rude, crude, and secure, suggests that they step into the role of dragon lady, which contradicts the notion that an Asian woman *is*, by nature, a dragon lady.

Their racial status as Asian, which Western colonial powers have dehumanized through the label of “Oriental,” is addressed in their poem as well as Myers’ t-shirt. Fundamental to this discussion is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), where Said illustrates the deeply imperial dominance exerted over the East, not only in political and military control, but in representations of literature, art, and epistemology. Yellow Rage’s performance responds almost directly to the following quote from Said:

The Orient is *watched*, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the *Description de l’Egypte* called “bizarre jouissance.” The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness. (103)

Yellow Rage confronts *the watcher* in this performance. The title, and subsequently their refrain of “Listen Asshole” is directed towards a non-Asian man at the micro-level, and at the macro-level, can be directed to “the West.” In their confrontation, Yellow Rage addresses this “reservoir of infinite peculiarity” when they begin with, “Stop trying to guess what I am,” and then proceeds to turn the gaze on the non-Asian and the West. By asking, “What do you know about...” and then listing a series of events where the West has exerted military and cultural dominance, Yellow Rage denies the non-Asian and the West the sensibility of being detached and uninvolved. Furthermore, in the second half of the performance, Yellow Rage confronts the fetishization of Asian women and the “bizarre jouissance” of language that, for Myers and Vilayphonh at the micro-level and women throughout Asia at the macro-level, is everyday life. In the role of DragonLadyOrientalIntellectual, Yellow Rage’s performance subverts the West’s gaze of Asian women, and particularly the United States’ representation of Asian women in popular culture, to address the socio-historic dominance inscribed on the bodies and identities of Asian women.

In *Race and Racisms: A Critical Approach* (2015), Tanya Marie Golash-Boza compiles two lists of prominent racial stereotypes and controlling images based on the works of Patricia Hill Collins, Shoba Sharad Rajgopal, Clara Rodríguez, Maria Kopacz and Bessie Lee Lawton. On *Def Poetry*, poets subvert these controlling images through performances that rely on their



legibility of corresponding stereotypes. Jimmy Santiago Baca's performance of "From Healing Earthquakes: Twelve" (s3e4) subverts the Wise Elder controlling image of Native Americans. Jaoqin Zihuatenejo's performance of "This is a Suit" (s5e10) subverts the Greaser controlling image of Latinos. Vanessa Hidari's performances of the Hebrew Mamita subverts the Jewish-American Princess controlling image of Jewish women. White performers also subvert controlling images associated with whiteness. Caroline Harvey, Buddy Wakefield, and a group piece with Rachel and George McKibbens subverts the Poor White Trash controlling image. Through humorous poetry about sex, or the lack of sex, performances by Rives, Steve Coleman, George Watsky, and Morris Stegosaurus subvert the controlling image of Nerd.

ThugNiggaIntellectual is a useful model in understanding how organic intellectuals leverage their legibility and proximity to stereotypes so that they might address the social conditions, institutions, and structures that reproduce these stereotypes. This point is not to be confused with the Gayatri Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism, where members of marginalized groups strategically conform to essentialist notions of their identity as a political strategy. Rather, this model is similar to Luce Irigaray's concept of mimesis, particularly on *Def Poetry Jam*, as poets present themselves as legible to the dominant group. Irigaray explains:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself - inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter" - to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible - the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (76)

As evident in this passage, Irigaray's discussion of mimesis is concerned with women's subversion of patriarchy through language, image, and ideologies. However, her framing of mimesis is useful, and certainly hopeful, not only for women to reverse the narrow confines of femininity as defined in patriarchy, but for other marginalized groups to reverse the narrow confines of "minority" as defined by white supremacy.<sup>60</sup>

Remembering that *Def Poetry Jam* is first and foremost a television show, legibility plays a vital role in the selection of poets. Because the project of *Def Poetry Jam* is about making visible the struggles of some marginal communities, *Def Poetry* relies upon the poets' ability to create change, confrontation, or at least conversation from these existing narrow representations. The performances, particularly the content of the poems, subsequently disrupts the stereotypes and controlling images associated with that legibility, and thus the power of the dominant group to control the meaning of those images. In a simple analogy, mimesis in *Def Poetry Jam* is akin to making children's cough medicine sweet in flavor, so they are more likely to swallow rather than resist that which could benefit them.<sup>61</sup>

Mayda del Valle, who performs in all but the second season of *Def Poetry*, provides an insightful reflection supporting the view that these poems are mimetic performances. Del Valle, a Puerto-Rican poet from Chicago who won the 2001 Nuyorican Grand Slam and in that same year the Individual Poetry Slam title, subverts the image of the Latina spitfire by precisely embodying many of the identifying features of this stereotype.<sup>62</sup> The spitfire stereotype originated from Lupe Vélez's portrayal of Carmelita Lindsay in the *Mexican Spitfire* films of the

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<sup>60</sup> A minority, in this case, is not limited to gender and racial minorities.

<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting the effect that if the medicine is too sweet, it ceases to be effective or could make them sicker; which is to say, folks can be immune to the subversion happening in *Def Poetry* and begin consuming, believing, and even fetishizing the stereotypes.

<sup>62</sup> Del Valle is the first Latina poet to win the Nuyorican Grand Slam and the first Puerto Rican to win since Willie Perdomo in 1991.

1940s. While Carmelita was “spunky, funny, and smart” and “often outwitted others, and always got to keep the guy,” she also “lacked breeding, spoke fractured English, had emotional outbursts in Spanish, [and] rolled her eyes a lot” (Rodriguez 94-95). As the stereotype of the Latina spitfire evolved, she became sexualized in a way that was more sensual than the provocatively sultry Latina and Latin bombshell stereotypes (172).

In Mayda del Valle’s performance of “In the Cocina” (s3e6), we experience the subversion of the Latina spitfire through del Valle’s quick cadences, rhythmically strewn lines, and Spanish pronunciation of foods, through a performance that brings both musicality and the veracity of the underground rappers who influenced her as a Chicago youth:

It was there in my mother’s kitchen that

I learned more

than how to cook

It is where

I learned the essence of rhythm and power

I learned how to dance

In the midst of clanging clave pots

and wooden mortars and pestles

she would say to me

the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach and your hips

so you better learn how to cook mija

she gave me the secret recipe for ritmo

Two and a half cups of caderas, a pound of gyrating pelvis

a pinch of pursed lips

a tablespoon of shaking shoulders

and a generous helping of soooooouuuuuuuul

combine and mix

now I'm dancing the way my mother cooks.

slow, sultry, spicy, sabrosa natural instinctively

drippin' sweet sweat like fresh leche de coco

spinnin' as fast as pirogues melt in summertime

southside heat

dancing with as much kick as cuchifrito and lard

standing strong like a morning time bustle

steamy as pasteles at Christmas

blendin' my hip hop and mambo like a piña-colada

my mouth watering for music with labor en caderas

soothes down my hips

dulce as Celia's Azzzucaaaaar!

Con dulcura

I'm cooking with labor

I'm bailando con sabor

cuz

mami's making mambo

mami's making mambo (del Valle "In the Cocina" 24-25)

Missing in the transcription of the poem is Mayda del Valle's movement. In a fitted blouse, denim skirt, and high-heeled boots, she moves across the stage at times like a bomba dancer and other times like an emcee.<sup>63</sup> Thus, her line "blendin' my hip hop and mambo like a piña-colada" is less of a metaphor and more of an *entendre* that describes both her performance of this poem and her identity as a spoken word and performance poet.

When "In the Cocina" was performed on *Russell Simmons Def Poetry on Broadway*, Elizabeth Méndez Berry's 2003 review of this performance for *Vibe Magazine* misses the subversion of the Latina spitfire, reading Mayda del Valle's performance as a reduction to an essentialist Latina identity. After praising Black Ice's "quiet, dignified passion," Berry writes, "it's jarring when Chicago Rican Mayda del Valle salsas out right after with her piece, 'In the Cocina,' which reduces Latino [sic] identity to dance steps and cooking tips. *No más!*" (96). In contrast, Katherine Sugg, in *Gender and Allegory in Transamerican Fiction and Performance*, describes del Valle's performance as a reconfiguration of the gendered and ethnic stereotypes, using "her voice and her body to convey pleasure in the very cultural markers that otherwise threaten to pin her within racialized gender stereotypes" (18). That Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Katherine Sugg receive conflicting messages about the performance of Latina identity, is a reminder that so much of poetry is dependent on the interpretation of the audience. Especially in spoken word and performance poetry, where folks might only have one chance to make meaning of the poem and the performance. These opposing views also demonstrate the danger of operating in what Suggs describes as "the slippage between an anticipated identity politics" (18)

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<sup>63</sup> Chicago rappers were especially influential in her early writing style and delivery. She is also an accomplished bomba dancer.

where, for any number of benign or malicious reasons, a poet's performance can be described as reproducing a controlling image rather than being seen as an organic intellectual challenging the control of those images and stereotypes.

When I interview del Valle about these readings of her performance, she acknowledges an awareness of how performances around identity, such as "In the Cocina" are a "double-edged sword." She admits, "[the production team] kind of pushed that hot Latina thing in the show. I was the hot Latina, and they kind of pushed that in the way that I was dressed in the show. I didn't have the awareness that I do now in terms of what that means for a woman of color's image to be portrayed in a certain way, you know?" While del Valle explains that she does not feel exploited by *Def Poetry Jam* for portraying her as the "hot Latina," she reiterates that at age 23, "I was a feminist without even knowing it. I was aware of it. But I don't think I had language and awareness that I do now."

On the other side of this double-edged sword, Mayda del Valle speaks with pride about representing for Puerto Ricans, Latinas, and women. While she may not have had an awareness of what it meant for her image to be portrayed in a certain way in her early twenties, she explains that she was "always hyper-aware" that her winning the Nuyorican Grand Slam and the Individual Poetry Slam titles broke barriers for the Latinx community in spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams. She then recalls what her appearance on *Def Poetry* meant to others:

I remember one time, I went to a college in Florida, and this young woman came up to me. It was for a Latino student fundraiser, or dinner, or something like that. They introduce me to this girl, and they were saying, "She's your fan. She's your number one fan." I was just thinking, "I don't even understand what it means to

have a fan,” you know? Even now, people are like, “I remember seeing you on *Def Poetry*, and it was life-changing.” But she came up to me and said, “You’re the first Latina I ever saw on TV. You’re the first Puerto Rican I ever saw on television.” I cried because I knew what that was. I knew the first time I saw a Puerto Rican on TV, what it did for me. (del Valle)

For Mayda del Valle, this experience far outweighs *Def Poetry Jam*’s dependence on legible racial and gendered representations. Along with being an inspiration to other poets, especially Puerto Rican women and individuals in Latinx communities, del Valle expresses enthusiasm about “representing” for Tito Puente on stage at Lincoln Center with fellow Def Poet, Lemon Anderson. While Mayda del Valle speaks with some regret about how she did not speak out against some of the ways *Def Poetry* pushed the Latina spitfire image, which she describes as the “hot Latina,” she ultimately concedes, “I wrote those poems. Nobody told me to go write those poems. I wrote those poems, and I was performing those poems before *Def Poetry* even existed. And they were poems that needed to be read. They were poems about my life. They were poems about my experience. They were poems that came from my truest experience at that point in my life.”

### *Intellectuals from the Breaks of Hip-hop*

As is the case with this research, many of the questions about poetry are less about content and aesthetics, but rather, these questions are about the relationship between poetry, politics, histories, and the culture from which hip-hop was created and consistently responding. At an early 1990s Nuyorican poetry slam, Reg E. Gaines explained the emergence of hip-hop into spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slam communities in a recorded interview to

Bob Holman. He describes, “After the 1960s, a lot of cultural events for people of color like poetry and art, went out of style because everyone was focused on one thing, rapping, and b-boying. Recently there’s been a wave, especially Black brothers and sisters are into reading their poetry. It’s really dope, because we need to express ourselves” (Holman *Rap Meets Poetry* 4). Gaines speaks not only to the growth of hip-hop, but to what S. Craig Watkins describes as the “maturity and introspection” of hip-hop (Watkins *Hip-hop Matters* 152). It is true that breaking, DJing, graffiti writing, and rapping express a response to the social conditions which created hip-hop. However, these elements are competitive collaborations which highlight the need for individuals and small groups to assert their agency and their real existence. Spoken word and performance poetry then, became a modality where individuals reflected on hip-hop as a culture and community. By extension, those up and coming open mic poetry readings and poetry slams became spaces to share those reflections and create visions for the community to harness that political energy.

Raquel Cepeda admits this much in her introduction of *And It Don’t Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (2004). She reflects, “My foray into writing came in front of the mic as a spoken word artist...when New York City was burgeoning with a raw underground rendering of what would become *Def Poetry Jam*. Spoken word artists were, like the journalists of the decade, using rap music and hip-hop culture as a societal reflector because the genre was, in turn, defining our generation” (xvi). As previously discussed in the historical mapping of *Def Poetry Jam*, open mics and poetry slams became counter-public spaces for addressing many of the same social conditions that birth hip-hop culture. The poetry scene became a gathering place for hip-hop intelligentsia, especially as the contradictions of hip-hop played out in mainstream media: the celebration of women and misogyny; the critical reflection



and perpetuation of violence; and the pursuit of material wealth and criticism of institutions that reproduce the conditions of the ghetto. Open mics and poetry slams became the space to continue social justice conversations pushed out of commercial hip-hop (Perdomo).<sup>64</sup>

Kevin Coval's introduction in the poetry anthology *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-hop* (2015), is a self-reflective exploration in how the relationship between hip-hop and poetry birthed an entirely new cadre of writers, aptly described as BreakBeat Poets. In his introduction, he boldly proclaims, "Hip-hop saved american [sic] poetry" (xx): Coval, a Jewish-American poet, who appears in four episodes of *Def Poetry Jam*, is among the pioneers of spoken word programming in youth education, serving as the artistic director of Young Chicago Authors and as a founder of the Louder Than A Bomb youth poetry festival. In describing the relationship between hip-hop and poetry, Coval elaborates on the significance of "the breaks" and the influence of "the breaks" on poetry:

A break in time. A rupture in narrative. A signifying of something new. Fresh. Dope. Ill. A generation unto itself. Arrived and here. A break from the Beats, an extension of the Black Arts, a continuation of the Nuyorican crew on the Lower East Side, a pidgin and Nation language to cite Kamau Brathwaite. Hybrid and mixed. The BreakBeat Poets blow up bullshit distinctions between high and low, academic and popular, rap and poetry, page and stage. A break from the wack. A break from the hidden and precious, the elite and esteemed. A break from pejorative notions about what constitutes art, who it's for and by and why. A break with the past. The bridge is over. The BreakBeat Poets and hip-hop culture are saving american [sic] poetry. (xvii)

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<sup>64</sup> The poetry reading scenes in the film *Slam*, feature notable scholars like Jelani Cobb, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Yolanda Wilson, and Alan C. Page among others.

Using the metaphor of “the breaks,” referring to the stripped-down instrumentation and percussion-heavy section of music allowing the early DJs to mix, cut, and blend records, Coval celebrates “the break” as a rupture in hip-hop that also births spoken word poetry.

It is no coincidence that Coval’s use of “the break” extends Fred Moten’s position that the break is a creative space for cultural resistance. In his text, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Moten demystifies the Marxist conditional “If commodities could speak...” offering the use of Black bodies as a commodity which does speak. While Moten offers jazz, Black radicalism, and sexuality as breaks from which Black folks resist subjugation, this theory can extend to hip-hop as a break from which Black folks, poor folks, and people of color resist the criminalization of poverty, the war on drugs, prison industrial complex, and widening income inequality. Thus, spoken word and performance poetry can be said to have emerged from the breaks of hip-hop, which is itself a break from the overarching system of white supremacist capitalism.<sup>65</sup>

Tracie Morris, a Black poet from New York, is among the early wave of poets to identify the influence of hip-hop as the center of the emerging spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slam movement. With a poetic style reflecting “the influence of varied interrelated musico-poetic idols, including hip-hop, jazz, and sound poetry” (Jones 191), Morris’ engages the language, symbols, and conditions of hip-hop culture in her performance. Her *United States of Poetry* appearance featured the poem “Project Princess” (1996), which celebrates the life and style of young Black working-class women; the same women LL Cool J pines over in his song “Around the Way Girl” (1990). In a 1993 interview recorded in the restroom before a rAP mEETS pOETRY open mic, Morris is asked if the growing spoken word scene is a revitalization

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<sup>65</sup> While invoking bell hooks use of the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” readers should note the intentional omission of patriarchy in this argument.

of the beat poets. She dismisses this comparison as an inability for people to credit young Black artists with developing and popularizing a form of poetry. She explains:

I don't think you can simplify it by calling it a revival of the beat movement or retro-beat. I think that's insulting to hip-hop, which has really revitalized this entire scene and I think it is the foundation for why the scene is as popular as it is. And on a very political level, I think that a lot of writers who are advocating this or pushing this despite hip-hop's obvious prominence and fundamental influence in the scene is racist. This has a racist orientation. A lot of these writers are white and are very comfortable with alluding to the fact that if it wasn't for white guys, which predominated the beat scene, that we wouldn't have poetry today. As opposed to young Black men, which over the last twenty years have revitalized spoken word and people's concept of spoken word. (Holman *Rap Meets Poetry I*)

While it is vital to recognize the convergence of various poetic traditions in spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams in the 1990s, Morris offers hip-hop as the force behind the growth of this movement, especially as it grows out of the NYC poetry scene. She makes clear that the intentional or unintentional failure, to acknowledge hip-hop's importance is grounded in racism, as white writers use their status in literary and journalism communities to render Black performative traditions in poetry invisible. Morris, like Coval, insists that hip-hop rescued poetry from existing solely in the academic and bourgeois institutions.

One of the challenges in speaking about *Def Poetry Jam*, especially when trying to evaluate the show as a site of organic intellectual production, is that the series operates at the intersection of hip-hop and poetry. Thus, many of the critiques leveled against *Def Poetry Jam* are the same critiques leveled against commercial hip-hop productions, especially those

addressing rap music and the rap music industry. These criticisms implicitly try to rescue poetry from the terrain of commercial hip-hop. However, this is not possible since the culture and the performative elements of hip-hop cannot be divorced from the pursuit of capital for survival, for leisure, or for conspicuous consumption. On the other hand, the privileging of specific hip-hop aesthetics, artists, and themes that include tolerance for misogyny folds poetry into hip-hop in such a way that it dismisses the craft, culture, and history of poetry on the page and on the stage.

While the critical study of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams is still rather young, researchers position *Def Poetry Jam* as *either* a commercial infringement on poetry or as an intellectual and creative intervention in hip-hop during the era of increased commercialization of rap music. However, by exploring the relationship between hip-hop and spoken word poetry, one finds commercial platforms as not only an inevitable terrain for spoken word poetry and performance poetry, but also a terrain that has existed before and will continue to exist well after *Def Poetry Jam*. Regina Bradley invites us to think of this negotiation as a form of messy organic intellectualism. In hip-hop, messy organic intellectuals “destabilize Gramscian notions of organic intellectualism to speak to commercial rapper’s grappling with being the touchstone of Black empowerment and liberation when profit, not protest, [is] highly regarded” (Bradley “Hip-hop’s ‘Messy’ Organic Intellectuals”). Bradley regards Tupac Shakur as the penultimate messy organic intellectual possessing the “hyperawareness of a Black nationalist agenda passed down from his mother and godfather Geronimo Pratt” while also being “very Hollywood, literally a rapper, actor, and connoisseur of commercial Blackness” (Peterson 24).

Both Robin D.G. Kelley and Craig S. Watkins discuss hip-hop in the context of Black and impoverished youth negotiating leisure and play with social mobility. For Kelley and

Watkins, hip-hop embodies a space where leisure, pleasure, and opposition are manifest through creativity. Especially given the constraints of poverty, “Black youth have fought diligently to create spaces of leisure, pleasure, and opposition from the social structure and institutional arrangements that influence their life chances” (Watkins “Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism” 564-565). As Kelley describes in *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional* (1997), Black youth trying to turn leisure, pleasure, and creative expression into capital is a strategy for survival in a system of capitalism. He writes, “This isn’t revolutionary, emancipatory or resistance. But it does comprise a range of strategy within capitalism to avoid low-wage labor while devoting energy to creativity and pleasure” (45). Kelley and Watkins do not offer the transformation of Black youth’s creative energy into social mobility as a form of revolution. However, this transformation of play to getting paid at least opens the streams for messages of resistance and counter-hegemony.

Just as commercial media constrains the emancipatory possibilities of hip-hop, it also operates as a site of Black culture, representation, and politics, in what Guthrie Ramsey describes as a community theater. (Ramsey; Herman Gray). Tricia Rose further details the emancipatory possibilities of hip-hop, explaining:

Inside of these commercial constraints, rap offers alternative interpretations of key social events such as the Gulf War, The Los Angeles uprising, police brutality, censorship efforts, and community-based education. It is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about Black male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, raw anger, violence, and childhood memories. It is also the home of innovative uses of style and

language, hilariously funny carnivalesque and chitlin-circuit-inspired dramatic skits, and ribald storytelling. In short, it is Black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel. (*Black Noise* 18)

For organic intellectuals in hip-hop, particularly in rap music, there has been a constant negotiation between consumerism and liberation. Given the economic and social constraints of the producers of hip-hop culture, as well as the pervasiveness of capitalism, these organic intellectuals have little choice but to work through the very streams of exploitation if they are to have any influence of real consequence.

The history of hip-hop certainly has artists, events, and instances where the exploitation of cultural performances has overwhelmed the utility of hip-hop as resistance. Despite the "sell-outs," Dipannita Basu demonstrates how rap music ultimately gives organic intellectuals tools to produce and share critical consciousness. Basu writes, "[R]ap music has given a substantial number of Black youth a worldview, a political philosophy, a language, and lifestyles that have in turn become the articulating principles for economic activity, from creativity to business, from music to films, magazines, clothing, and a whole host of auxiliary positions" (Watkins "Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism" 570). Organic intellectuals engage the elements of hip-hop to confront "imperialist white supremacist patriarchy capitalism" (Jhally), even as commercial and popular culture tries to subsume the performative elements into the dominant culture. By the time *Def Poetry Jam* aired, hip-hop generated billions of dollars for culture industries well beyond dance and music. This includes fashion, film and television, and magazines; it seemed that anything and everything in marketing created an urban division aimed at reaching hip-hop and particularly youth culture. Thus, the streams became wider for organic intellectuals, but so

too did the zeal of profit-making companies seeking to exploit the taste-making influence of hip-hop.

Despite the utility of rap music as a medium for critical consciousness, it is worth remembering that the birth of hip-hop, Kool Herc and his sister's "Back to School Jam," was a for-profit venture charging "25c for the 'ladies' and 50c for the 'fellas'" (Laurence). That hip-hop would produce not only "four hundred million dollars' worth of records a year, but hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of other products-shoes, jeans, haute couture, soda, beer, liquor, video games, movies, and more" (Chang *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* 418), is not antithetical to the culture and performance of hip-hop. It is, however, demonstrative of the global commercialization of the culture, and rap music in particular, which exploits the style, identities, and bodies of the young people who emerge from the post-industrial urban centers. According to Jeff Chang:

Once, there had been a creative tension between hip-hop's role as a commodity in the global media industry and as the lifeblood of a vast, vibrant network of local undergrounds. But, during the mid-'90s, the power shifted decisively in the direction of the media monopolies. And when corporations began to understand the global demand for postwhite pop culture, hip-hop became the primary content for the new globally consolidated media, the equivalent of gold dust in the millennial monopoly rush. (Chang *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* 439-440)

The effect of media monopolies on hip-hop, particularly rap music, was the cropping of hip-hop from a multi-dimensional response to the post-industrial conditions. In its place is the propping of an economy of drugs, misogyny, and poverty as a site of pleasure, play, and pain that fueled

profits for radio and television programming networks like BET, MTV, Fox, UPN, the WB, and the CW.

### *Russell Simmons and the Messy Organic Intellectual*

If there is one figure in hip-hop who best exemplifies the destabilization of the Gramscian organic intellectual, by creating avenues of profit from those very same avenues of counter-cultural performances, it is *Def Poetry Jam*'s eponymous executive producer, Russell Simmons. At best, Simmons is a pioneer who guides the careers of rap legends in the first two decades of hip-hop. Between the artists he managed, produced, or signed to his various Rush Communications imprints, most notably Def Jam Recordings, Simmons helped deliver hip-hop culture to the mainstream.<sup>66</sup> Rock journalist Frank Owen credits Russell Simmons and partner Rick Rubin with leading the battle against "the gentrification of Black music." He credits Def Jam Recordings as creating "the first Black music that hasn't had to dress itself up in showbiz glamour and upwardly mobile mores in order to succeed" (Chang *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* 231). Simmons' influence in hip-hop reaches beyond music. His Phat Farm clothing line, launched in 1992, introduced hip-hop to the fashion economy, targeting upwardly mobile professionals who did not wish to sacrifice their identification with hip-hop culture for professionalism. His film and television projects also brought the culture of Black and urban communities to the mainstream, through films and most notably through *Def Poetry*'s precursor, *Def Comedy Jam*.

Returning to Regina Bradley's identification of the messy organic intellectual, Russell Simmons, like the penultimate messy intellectual Tupac Shakur, maximizes the "ability to raise

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<sup>66</sup> Def Jam Recordings is founded by Rick Rubin in his NYU dorm room, with Simmons becoming an early partner before the label achieves commercial success.



the awareness about Black pathology while replicating pathology for profit” (Bradley “Intellectual Plight of Tupac Shakur”).<sup>67</sup> While Tupac ultimately sat among the lumpen proletariat, or thugs, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and profited by sensationalizing this lifestyle, Simmons sits among the elites and profits from the curiosity, fetishization, and appropriation of Black culture. Because of this, Bradley’s description of Kanye West and Jay-Z more aptly fits Russell Simmons. In reflecting on their joint album, *Watch the Throne* (2011), Bradley explains “[*Watch the Throne*] speaks to Jay-Z and West’s commercial elitism and the limitations of that elitism in regards to empowering the Black community; it’s a privilege to talk about being privileged and address social-cultural issues like poverty. It distorts claims of hip-hop as a form of post-racial discourse by using these same claims to highlight their limitations via stories of opulence and wealth” (“Hip Hop’s ‘Messy’ Organic Intellectuals”). Perhaps this description fits Russell Simmons’ messy intellectualism so well because both Jay-Z and Kanye West operate as artists and as executives in industries far beyond music. Where Jay-Z and West flaunt their wealth in efforts to demonstrate the impossibility for Black men to achieve the American dream and membership among the class elite, Simmons confronts the limitations of Black elitism by creating more revenue streams within hip-hop culture, hip-hop entertainment, and Black commercial industries.<sup>68</sup>

One of the earliest examples of Russell Simmons as a messy organic intellectual is demonstrated by his role in hip-hop’s first major endorsement deal; Run-DMC’s million-dollar agreement with Adidas. Their song, “My Adidas” (1986) may seem like a three-minute

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<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that Bradley discusses earlier in her paper that these pathologies have been “imposed upon the black poor and working class.”

<sup>68</sup> Jay-Z’s lyrics in the song “Niggas in Paris” from *Watch the Throne* capture this sentiment: (Ball so hard) Got a broken clock/Rollies that don’t tick-tock/Audemars that’s losing time/Hidden behind all these big rocks/(Ball so hard) I’m shocked too/I’m supposed to be locked up too/If you escaped what I’ve escaped/You’d be in Paris getting fucked up too

commercial for the sneaker company; however, the song was initially written as a clap-back to the Creative Funk record, “Felon Sneakers” (1985). Dr. Gerald W. Deas, whom the *New York Times* described as “a sort of country doctors in the city, although one with a penchant for urban poetry, music, and playwriting” (Day), wrote a poem describing criminality through the metaphor of wearing “felon sneakers.” Creative Funk, a soul band with moderate success in the 1970s, used this poem as rap lyrics, adding a chorus, and music which fully embraced the hip-hop drum tracks and record scratches, but could not help but leave out the synthesizers and keyboard guitar solo. The song begins with lyrics from the original poem “We’re gonna tell you about a few felony cases,/it started with the brothers wearing fat shoelaces” (Creative Funk). The song continues, “Your felon sneakers can’t fill the bill,/you got to know yourself to be really chill,/you rob, you rape, you shoot and kill,/you wearing those sneakers but you lost your will.” As both a poem and song, “Felon Sneakers” is admirable for discouraging an identity rooted in a fashion commodity and drawing attention to poverty-related violence before news outlets sensationalized the issue as solely about shoes.<sup>69</sup> The message of the song, however, reduces sneakers as a style reserved for criminality. In much the same way Bill Cosby admonished young “people with their hat on backwards [and] pants down around the crack” in the infamous Pound Cake Speech (2004), Creative Funk directs listeners to “tighten up on their shoelaces.”

In response, “My Adidas” does not explicitly beef with the group Creative Funk. However, in their signature trading of verses, Run-DMC describes all of the positive things they do in these “felon sneakers.” For example, they rap, “I stepped on stage, at Live Aid/All the people gave, and the poor got paid...Nowwww - me and my Adidas do the illest things/we like

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<sup>69</sup> The 1989 *Sports Illustrated* coverage of Michael Eugene Thomas, a teenager, is among the first instances of national coverage sneaker-related violence. In 1990, *Sports Illustrated* further sensationalizes this phenomenon with a cover story titled, “Your Sneakers or Your Life,” with the image of a gunman holding a pair of Air Jordan Vs.

to stomp out pimps with diamond rings...My Adidas, only bring good news/And they are not used as felon shoes” (Run-DMC). Based on the popularity of the song, Run-DMC secured a one million dollar endorsement with Adidas, after executives from the sneaker company saw entire stadiums hold up their shoes during the rappers’ performance of “My Adidas” (Warnett; Chang *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*). It is true that Run-DMC’s manager, Lyor Cohen, invited the Adidas executives to witness the stadium spectacle following a video that was sent to the executives with an acapella performance of “My Adidas.” In that video, DJ Jam Master Jay holds a *Billboard Magazine* with Adidas prominently shown on the feet of the rappers, and says, “Adidas could never buy this much promotion we give them” (De Longville and Leon). The video ends with a vehement Run looking directly into the camera, “Now give us a million dollars!” (De Longville and Leon; Chang *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*; Warnett).

Even as a celebration of street culture, fashion, and the bodies which they are adorned, “My Adidas,” is an intentional subversion of the stereotypes folks had about hip-hop at the time. While Run, DMC, and Jam Master Jay, who introduced the no-laces look to the rappers, are rightfully credited for this subversion, there is a particular irony that the creative spark originated from a “dusted” Russell Simmons. As DMC narrates in the documentary *Just for Kicks* (2005):

Russell Simmons was on Hollis where we used to live. One night, Russell is dusted. He is smoking angel dust, true story. Our homeboys came running down the block, “Yo, yo, Jo. Russell is up on Hollis dusted, talking some crazy shit.”<sup>70</sup> Alright, let’s go see what he was doing.

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<sup>70</sup> Run’s nickname is Jo, short for Joseph Simmons.

So, we get up there to Russell, and as a matter of fact, he was standing there with Butta Love.<sup>71</sup> Butta was like “Russell is in my ear telling me that y’all should make a record about your Adidas, your sneakers.”

Russell came over, like “Yeah, picture this man. Y’all say...my Adidas standing on two-fifth street,” because two-fifth street was where we were hanging out.

And we were like, “Nah, Russell you buggin’.”

[Russell] was like “Nah man, you really gotta make a song about your sneakers man, standing on two-fifth street.”

We were like “yo, yea, it could work. It sounds good, but we ain’t gonna talk about just standing on two-fifth street hangin’ out, smokin’ weed, drinkin’ beer, talkin’ to girls. We’re gonna flip the stereotype. We’re gonna say standing on two-fifth street in our Adidas - and say something positive.”

And Russell was like, “Whatever. Just make sure y’all say, ‘my Adidas, standing on two-fifth street.’” (De Longville and Leon)

In DMC’s retelling of this story, he gives Simmons’ dialogue a persistence and persuasiveness that suggests to audiences that Russell Simmons understood the cultural and financial potential in an ode to sneakers. When DMC considered how the song could put a positive spin on the stigma of “felon shoes,” Simmons’ response of “Whatever, just make sure y’all say, ‘my Adidas,’” makes it unclear whether his preference was on the content or the commodification.

The origin of the Adidas endorsement deal for Run-DMC, especially in light of the Simmons’ involvement in the creation of the record, not only illustrates how Russell Simmons is

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<sup>71</sup> Butta Love is DMC’s best friend and a member of Run-DMCs entourage.

a messy intellectual but perhaps one of the messiest intellectuals in hip-hop. The superlative “messiest” refers to: first, how early Simmons was in operating as a messy intellectual in hip-hop; second, the economic scale to which Simmons capitalizes on Black culture; and third, his platforms profoundly challenge, or has the potential to challenge profoundly, the cultural and structural dominance of white supremacy. These three elements are none more apparent than when Simmons’ discusses the RushCard with Complex Magazine:

When we created the card, when people got their checks they went to the check-cashing place. They paid more than, at that moment, than they paid in our whole monthly fee to cash their check. Then they got in a line and spent an average of eight to twelve hours just paying their bills. Now with the card and access to the American economic system, because you need plastic, they can pay their bills online. It gave people dignity and access. (Hunte)

When in the same interview, Simmons is asked to defend himself against the criticism that he exploits working class and poor people of color, he says, “I’m an Occupy Wall Street guy. I was at Occupy Wall Street everyday...I didn’t occupy Wall Street to try to destroy Goldman Sachs. I spoke to Goldman Sachs yesterday. I just want the world to be fair.” It is precisely these large-scale polarities that make Russell Simmons’ intellectualism messy. He profits on poor and working people of color’s inability to access “fair” financial institutions by helping to level the playing for those folks. He stands in the midst of the Occupy Wall Street, wealthy, criticizing lobbyists, corporations, and the government for the amount of money involved in politics, but speaks with Goldman Sachs, whose role in the mortgage crisis of 2008 is one of the primary catalysts for the Occupy movement.

Adding to this messiness is how Simmons unabashed commodification of hip-hop allows rappers to sell millions of records. Simmons uses the commercial record industry to allow organic intellectuals to communicate critical consciousness and counter-hegemonic ideas to millions of people. As Simmons describes in his autobiography:

If Rick and I had stayed independent back in 1984, I could have made a lot more money per record sold. But without the power of CBS's distribution and marketing clout, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys, and Public Enemy never would have gotten as big as they did. We did that deal for the artists and to grow the culture, but as an owner, I really did not get paid. Def Jam grossed millions for Sony, but I netted only a fraction of the profit generated. (110)

While Russell Simmons does not deny that Def Jam's distribution deal with Sony was profitable, or that his deal with CBS and later Sony meant relinquishing some control to companies that had little interest in the culture of hip-hop, outside of the profits it might generate, he views this deal as in the best interest of the culture and the artists seeking to disrupt the very industries they are beholden to.

At worst, however, Russell Simmons trades the emancipatory potential of hip-hop for commercial gain. In this capacity, Simmons does not merely benefit financially by growing the culture of hip-hop; he benefits from the commodification of a ghetto phantasm of Black-cool, largely paid for by suburban white kids. His staunchest critics echo the sentiment of hip-hop activist and eventual 2008 Vice Presidential candidate, Rosa Clemente, whose open letter to Simmons depicts him as a bourgeoisie in the strictest sense of the word.<sup>72</sup> She begins her letter

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<sup>72</sup> Clemente, a community organizer, journalist, and founder of organizations mobilizing hip-hop culture into political action, is the 2008 Green Party running mate of Presidential candidates Cynthia McKinney.

with, “Dear Russell. Here is a news flash, as quiet as its been kept YOU ARE NOT HIP-HOP!” before delivering a scathing critique of Simmons’ political participation:

So I read you are putting together a “hip-hop” summit which includes David Mays, publisher of *The Source*, a magazine that is 60% advertising, and much of the advertising totally denigrates Black and Latina women, and the Reverend Al Sharpton? Am I missing something, when did Rev. Al become hip-hop?...

Russell, you say rappers and hip-hop executives have closed ranks against Minister Conrad Muhammad, so what if they have?<sup>73</sup> Hell “Hip-Hop” executives, those who wish to make a profit of our culture have closed ranks against the Hip-Hop generation. Where were all of you when the Hip-Hop community united over the issue of AIDS, APARTHEID, POLICE BRUTALITY, GUN VIOLENCE, and the BOMBING OF VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO? Yes, I remember where you were; you were having those fundraisers for Senator Hillary Clinton, Former President Bill Clinton, and having your summer Hampton parties hob-knobbing with the likes of Donald Trump and Martha Stewart.

For Clemente, Russell Simmons is the link between the performative traditions of hip-hop and the corporations which exploit both the physical and creative labor across the globe. Clemente and other critics view Simmons’ as being on the front lines of exploitation. Even as Simmons helped create the economic infrastructure for hip-hop, including million-dollar payouts for artists

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<sup>73</sup> Minister Conrad Muhammad, now known as Rev. Conrad Tillard following his departure from the Nation of Islam, criticizes Russell Simmons for his exploitation and commodification of hip-hop culture. Simmons finds Conrad Muhammad’s criticisms of hip-hop as an attack on Black youth and Black youth culture. The feud escalates when Muhammad accuses Rev. Al Sharpton of taking the idea of a hip-hop action summit, but not seriously addressing social issues, particularly gun violence in the wake of Sean Puffy Combs and Shyne’s 1999 nightclub shooting. Thus, Simmons’ involvement in hip-hop political action is supported by folks like Rev. Al Sharpton and Minister Louis Farrakhan (who dismissed Conrad Muhammad).

and industry executives, this infrastructure is primarily dependent on the dominating media conglomerates. Thus, hip-hop in the mainstream and even those who obtain economic power and independence are still beholden to a market system controlled by the economic elite (Lusane).

There are limits to this messy organic intellectualism. In 2003, Ta-Nahesi Coates pens a feature piece on Russell Simmons for *The Village Voice*, mainly focusing on his work with the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, in a piece titled “Compa\$\$ionate Capitali\$m” (2003). Founded in 2001, this organization attempted to leverage the influence of hip-hop into civic engagement. As Coates describes, “Simmons has spent his life enumerating the ways that hip-hop’s energy can be converted into dollars. Now he’s trying to convert that energy into a social movement capable of reinvigorating the slumbering Black left.” When Russell Simmons worked with New York governor George Pataki to reduce penalties set in place by New York’s Rockefeller Drug Laws, activists and the director for the Drug Policy Institute at the time, Debra Peterson Small, view Simmons as something of a pawn for the Republican governor. Based on those meetings with Simmons, Pataki did introduce legislation addressing the drug laws, but even if it had passed, it would have helped only a small number of people according to Clemente. Ta-Nehisi Coates describes the pitfalls of this messy intellectualism explaining, “For many, Pataki working legislation with the politically green Simmons seemed a ploy to keep more informed—and less manageable—activists out of the loop.” Unlike other grassroots movements connected to or having grown out of hip-hop culture, Coates paints Simmons’ messy intellectualism as one lost in the compromise of social justice and commodification.

Understanding Russell Simmons as a messy organic intellectual does not absolve nor justify the blatant exploitation of hip-hop culture in music, comedy, fashion, and spoken word poetry. It does, however, give insight as to how or why hip-hop as a form of resistance has had



such a lasting impact across time and space primarily through mainstream avenues and commercial culture industries. Messy intellectuals, like Simmons, move seamlessly between benevolence, altruism, commercialization, and exploitation by continuously blurring the distinctions between these phenomena.

As Russell Simmons proved far more successful in profiting from critical consciousness and counter-hegemonic production than substantive political change, the concern of a Simmons' produced television series featuring poets reverberated through the spoken word poetry community. Would this be a genuine platform for poetry to challenge institutions and inequality in the United States or was this Simmons' attempt at exploiting artists whose lack of opportunities left them vulnerable to the HBO machine and Def Jam brand? In her criticism of *Def Poetry Jam*, Regina Bernard-Carreño poses the most base-level question, "Manipulation can be found in the production of televised poetry. Should poetry be televised? Does the end goal of being on television help to aid in the divisive characteristics of the oppressor? If Nuyorican poets cannot access the stations (HBO and other Cable stations in particular) to which their tradition is presented, should it continue to be televised?" (48). For Bernard-Carreño, who is examining the potentiality of Nuyorican poetry as a liberating practice and pedagogy, the inherent commercialization of spoken word poetry is antithetical. Like hip-hop, spoken word and performance poetry in the mainstream is too dependent on the acceptance of mainstream audiences to have any meaningful social impact.

Thus, it becomes a legitimate question as to whether Russell Simmons uses critical consciousness and Black cultural resistance to sell entertainment or if he uses his knowledge, cache, and capital in the entertainment industry to provide organic intellectuals with a platform. When he promoted *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, Simmons foregrounded his optimism in poetry

and hip-hop as a source of multi-cultural inspiration. On a late-night talk show interview, Simmons offers:

I can tell you, the RIAA states that 80% of the people who buy rap music are not African-American. So it's not a surprise that we have an Asian Guy, a Palestinian woman, a Jewish guy — you know, a West Indian girl who happens to be a lesbian, mostly people who feel like they're kind of outcast, because they kind of are. But they're American. They represent the voice of America. That's what rap has been always, like the voice for those people who are usually voiceless people. So that's what the poetry show is about. (Lathan)

Building on the multicultural appeal of hip-hop and rap music, Simmons' sincerity would have poets, audiences, and “young people around America,” grateful for the platform he created in expanding spoken word poetry. After all, it is precisely this blending of multi-racial and multi-ethnic voices that makes *Def Poetry Jam* commercially viable. In another interview, he doubles down on this optimism, offering poetry as the result of an internal reflection on society in contrast with raps externalizing of anger about social conditions. He claims, “Poetry is always uplifting, deeply spiritual. That's something we lost. When poetry becomes as popular as it has and is getting even more popular, it promotes visionaries. It makes visionaries out of our young people. That's what we're doing, and I think it's fantastic” (Morrison).

My analysis of Russell Simmons' highlights an opportunity to further develop the idea of the messy intellectual, especially in hip-hop studies, where the role of mogul reifies the meritocratic illusions and the title of record label CEO is rendered useless by distribution and publishing agreements. While I make the case that Russell Simmons' visibility and hands-on involvement in the both fostering and profiting from critical consciousness makes him as much

as a messy organic intellectual as artists like Tupac, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, I leave open the possibility that Simmons is less of a messy intellectual and more of a conduit of messy intellectualism. This may not present an entirely distinct analysis as relates to the negotiation of entertainment and political radicalism of *Def Poetry Jam*, but a study of Simmons as the conduit of messy intellectualism does emphasize a heightened level of power that is not evident in this analysis.

### *Poems and Profits*

The critiques of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* leading down the same path of hyper-consumption and celebration of materialism as mainstream hip-hop misses, or dismisses, the various individuals and institutions that sought to profit from the art and the poets for more than a decade before *Def Poetry*. MTV's productions of *Unplugged: Spoken Word* and the subsequent *Free Your Mind Tour* (1994), which featured Def Poets Maggie Estep and John C. Hall, illustrates a major television network's interest in spoken word and performance poetry. The *Lollapalooza* tour in 1994 highlighted spoken word poetry, with touring poets and local poets performing on their own stage, and subsequently publishing an anthology based on those performance titled, *Revival: Spoken Word from Lollapalooza* (1995). While Nuyorican's anthology, *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, is a groundbreaking celebration of the poetic movement growing out of the Nuyorican, it also utilized commercial entities for publishing and distribution. Finally, Mark Smith's conceptualization of the poetry slam was to make poetry accessible. As the slam grew to international recognition, both he and Gary Mex Glazner published books about the phenomena of slam and spoken word poetry.

Indeed, Bob Holman had been trying for years to bring spoken word to the mainstream and with varying degrees of success. Whether it was his Mouth Almighty record label, *United States of Poetry*, or the television spots he produced for WNYC-TV, Holman's dedication in bringing poetry to as many people as possible made him a significant person in the early growth of spoken word poetry. However, the criticism of Holman foreshadowed a significant issue in bringing spoken word poetry into the mainstream. Holman's attempts to spotlight the best poets on television, on record, and in poetry slams, "undermined the populist spirit" of the new poetic movement (Aptowicz 155). Also, he received criticisms for the perception that he was becoming the face of the Nuyorican Poets Café by doing more entertaining than consciousness-raising; this was particularly slippery given Holman's identity as a white man being at the forefront of culturally, historically, and politically Nuyorican and Afro-Latinx space.

My point here is not to compare these individuals and entities to Russell Simmons, but to suggest a history of commodifying and profiting from spoken word and performance poetry that contributes to the growth of this poetic movement. The criticism of Russell Simmons, like the criticisms of Bob Holman, and eventually Marc Smith and Poetry Slam Inc., illustrate a small conundrum for poets operating as organic intellectuals.<sup>74</sup> That is, "the commitment to being at the very forefront of intellectual, theoretical work, and simultaneously, the commitment to the

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<sup>74</sup> At the finals of the 2017 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) poets protest Smith's feature. While accounts differ on the specific protests, accounts from the event widely agree on the self-righteous tone of Smith's poetry that the young poets took as a condemnation of youth expression in poetry. This is also complicated by Smith's cis/hetero-performativity in a slam community that has grown in its participation and representation of LGBTQ folks of color. This would lead to Smith's name taken out of the "Official Emcee Spiels" at the other poetry slams, including the National Poetry Slam and other Poetry Slam Inc tournaments.

The following year at the 2018 National Poetry Slam, the executive council of Poetry Slam Inc. received heavy criticism from participants at the slam and members of PSI following the abrupt resignation of their executive director Suzi Q. Smith. The critique that PSI exploits, in particular, the labor of femmes of color, is a criticism leveled at the lack of financial opportunities for poets and those who organize, host, and volunteer for the organization.

attempt to transmit the idea thus generated, well beyond the confines of the ‘intellectual class’” (Morley and Chen 20). To frame this paradox another way, in order for poets to effectively function as organic intellectuals, they are dependent upon the messy intellectuals with a unique talent for the commercialization of cultural resistance; this includes the skillset and networks to commodify this commercialization of cultural resistance.

This paradox is in part theoretical, but also a material question. Terry Jacobus, a noted poet in slam’s precursor, Poetry Boxing, writes, “In poetry, the payoff is mostly spiritual, and in most cases, poetry may be the only art form where you pay to showcase your art. Poetry gives what you allow it to give and has a strong-willed aura unto itself that can maneuver experience, pleasure, and pain through a healing workout in the spoken air on the page” (81). Jacobus’ words capture the sentiment of performing poetry for the overwhelming majority of folks who get on stage. Even for folks who considered themselves spoken word poets, the majority of them had other jobs which provided a majority of their income.

However, as Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz describes, the aspiration to make a living solely from the writing and performing of poetry became one of the defining characteristics of New York’s second wave of slam poets (150). She highlights the 1996 Nuyorican poetry slam team, which featured Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, muMs da Schemer, and Beau Sia, who all appear on early seasons of *Def Poetry Jam*. Each of these poets built careers in the performing arts as they rose to prominence, especially with the help of the documentary *SlamNation*, but each of them experienced break-outs following their slam career. muMs would play the role of Arnold “Poet” Jackson in the HBO series *Oz*. Jessica Care Moore and Beau Sia participated in a range of literary and multimedia projects that built upon their writing, performance, and creativity. The most transcendent figure, not just of that team or in New York, but arguably in

spoken word poetry is Saul Williams. Williams, who stars in the widely acclaimed independent film *Slam*, which premiered the same year as *SlamNation*, maintains a successful career as a musician with a sizable international fanbase. Further, he has starred or guest-starred in major motion pictures, television series, and plays. Although the success of the 1996 Nuyorican slam team was more the exception than the rule, it did not stop spoken word poets from following their blueprint: first, build a rep in the open mic scene, next, get on a slam-team, and then become a famous spoken word poet, and live off of the various artistic projects that people will support because of your talent and reputation.

Like hip-hop, the rise of the full-time spoken word poet and performance poet demonstrated the transformation of “expressive cultures and forms of play and leisure into income-generating practices” (Watkins “Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism” 570). Thus, the goal of being a “full-time” poet became an aspiration for an increasing number of spoken word artists. With poetry venues growing around the country and an annual poetry slam that served as a de-facto networking and talent-audition space, spoken word poets set up “Troubadour tours” (Aptowicz 354) by serving as featured poets at poetry slams and open mics around the country. The pay at each venue was paltry, to say the least, with only the larger and more established readings paying more than one hundred dollars a night. As a result, poets sold chapbooks, audio recordings of their poetry, and other merchandise. The one real gem, however, was lucrative college performances that paid over a thousand dollars, in addition to covering the poet’s travel and lodging.

*Def Poetry Jam* disrupted the path to a career in spoken word and performance poetry, as an appearance on the show gave poets a cache that bypassed the networking, politics, competition, and otherwise “work” required of competing in poetry slams. At least that was the

assumption made by poets and the concern of those who put in the work in the spoken word and slam community who could not get on the show. Given the success of the comedians who appeared on *Def Comedy Jam*, this assumption is reasonable. However, as Shihan explains, the production of *Def Poetry Jam* was built around the promotion of poetry, not individual poets:

When it came to it, people were like ‘This is about to be *it!*’ I mean, almost everyone I knew was like ‘It’s about to go down!’ Initially, the reason why you did it wasn’t that, but after it aired, you thought about it like, ‘Yo’ it’s about to go down.’ But working for the show, it’s different, because I’ve seen how they’re dealing with the production and performances and I’m like, ‘Oh, this isn’t a long-term thing. This is just some shit for right now.’

Walter Mudu expresses a similar perspective. When describing how an appearance on *Def Poetry Jam* gave him additional leverage as an agent for poets booking college shows or other gigs, he concedes that this leverage was limited to the run of *Def Poetry* on HBO. Mudu explains, “I felt like cats were left hanging when [*Def Poetry*] wasn’t the flavor of the month. And that’s why you had so many people who were like, ‘I’m gonna be the next so and so and such and such, but when they had no platform to stand on [pauses for reflection]. That’s what it was, just a platform.”

*Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* may not have been responsible for the mainstream success of any individual poets, however, it is the position of this research that *Def Poetry Jam* contributed to the growth of spoken word poetry, poetry slams, and eventually, poetry as a whole. Following the first season of *Def Poetry Jam*, heralded poet E. Ethelbert Miller predicts *Def Poetry*’s effect on poets seeking to make a career in spoken word poetry, “It’s going to be critical for poets to participate in the distribution of their work. You enter into a market

economy, you're going to be packaged. It's good that people are in a position to produce a show. To keep a show like this on the air, they have to encourage a generation of young writers...The politics and the marketing of the show will interact" (Betts). In my interview with Abyss, he discusses the importance of the work that preceded and followed his appearances on *Def Poetry* as affording him the opportunity to make a career of his art and poetry. He offers *Def Poetry Jam* as a gift in so far as the show brought larger audiences to poetry and brought poetry to other audiences. He describes the show as a curse for people who only aspired to be a spoken word poet and could only do spoken word poetry. In an impromptu quatrain, he quips, "Cuz even before *Def Poetry* came we had a hustle/So we weren't depending on Russell/We were poetic muscle before we met Russell/All it did was enhance my hustle."

In hindsight, the fear that *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* would ruin the potentiality of poetry slams, spoken word, and performance poetry as, both, a form and forum of cultural resistance seem unfounded. An appearance on the show gave poets an advantage over other poets in booking more lucrative performances and allowed them to ask for a little bit more compensation for performances. However, *Def Poetry* did not launch any careers in the way that a show like *American Idol* launched the careers of Jennifer Hudson, Carrie Underwood, Kelly Clarkson, Adam Lambert, and Jordin Sparks. *Def Poetry* did, however, help to bring this poetry movement poetry out of the bars, cafés, and performances spaces and onto television screens across the United States.



#### Chapter 4: Sociopoetix in a Post-9/11 America

“We can’t drop science, we got to pick it up, wash off the grime and then stick it up on clothes-lines and ghetto backyards” — Michael Eric Dyson

It was a chilly Thursday evening in February at the Claremont Colleges. I have not been on campus for almost six months, but on that Thursday, two events peeked my research interest. Of course, both events occurred at the same time and on opposite ends of two campuses. The first event at Scripps College was a lecture with Doris Sommer and George Lipsitz exploring the artists who are reviving the lost promise of the humanities in aggrieved communities. The second event was an outdoor poetry reading organized by the Pomona College Museum of Art, in which they invited the hosts of A Mic and Dim Lights to run the show. Dim Lights, as it is often abbreviated, is one of the longest running spoken word and oral poetry venues in Southern California, hosting their open mic five miles from the Claremont Colleges. Dim Lights is also the home venue of Def Poets, including its host Besskepp.<sup>75</sup> While, ultimately, I settle on attending the lecture in its entirety and attending the poetry reading after, that tension signaled a spatial representation of the distance between theory and practice that this chapter attempts to reconcile. In the beautiful wooden decorum of Balch Hall was the much-needed information and ideas of Sommer and Lipsitz. Outside, in metal folding chairs, with coffee and cookies, was Besskepp reciting poetry and JB, the DJ, spinning vinyl breakbeats between poets. In one space a discussion about the production of knowledge, while in the other space, the production of knowledge through poetry.

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<sup>75</sup> Other poets to appear on *Def Poetry* from A Mic and Dim Lights are Mark Gonzales and Tamara Blue.

Whereas the previous chapter offers *Def Poetry Jam* as a representative space for organic intellectuals, this chapter extends this argument to offer spoken word, performance poetry, and oral poetry as a method for organic intellectuals to engage in the production critical consciousness. Borrowing from Aimé Césaire's and James S. Taylor's discussion of poetic knowledge, I introduce the term sociopoetix to discuss how performances on *Def Poetry Jam* circulate knowledge, history, and alternative perspectives. I offer this analytical framework of sociopoetix to explain how performances on *Def Poetry* explore social issues and frequently narrate the conditions, possibilities, and potentiality for cultural resistance around these issues. Sociopoetix is a tool critical analysis of social issues and an engagement with the formation of social problems through the performance of spoken word and oral poetry. Building upon the propositions of poetic knowledge, sociopoetix operates within the methodological framework of problematization, as explained by Michel Foucault in the interview, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations" (1984). For Foucault, problematization involves examining the historical, cultural, and institutional processes embedded in the formation and solution of various social phenomena. Problematization also involves the critical analysis of the systems of knowledge which shape and explain the formation and solution of social issues.

As *Def Poetry Jam* offers a representational space for organic intellectuals, this chapter explores counter-hegemonic narratives of an emerging post-9/11 United States. Demonstrating the utility of sociopoetix, I examine performances on *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* which deals with the following themes: 9/11, the War on Terror, American politics and cultural memory, Hurricane Katrina, and poverty and the hood. Collectively, the performances on *Def Poetry* depict the culture of patriotism as a thin veil of US militarism and neoliberal imperialism. Even as these poets link US imperialism abroad to domestic poverty and economic inequality,

poets on the series describe the everyday practices of resistance and community-building within confines of the hood. More simply, this chapter explores the organic intellectuals use of sociopoetix on *Def Poetry Jam* as a way of challenging the framing of political, social, and historical events that contribute to the cultural memory of the United States.

### *Poetic Knowledge*

Given the genealogy of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, poetic knowledge is rooted in ancient West African griots on one side of the diaspora and the metaphysical poets on the other side (Holman). The griots use poetry, along with songs, dance, and music, to share and maintain group history. While there is no direct English translation or equivalent for the word and social position of a griot, folks in the spoken word poetry community have adopted that position as a point of lineage to emphasize an African heritage and by extension a Black representative space (Eleveld; Holman; Walker). The metaphysical poets of the 17th century were among an early wave of poets who were as interested in expressing intellect and knowledge in their poetry as they were in expressing beauty, emotion, and sensory description (Crawford; Ellrodt). In Robert Ellrodt's article, "Scientific Curiosity and Metaphysical Poetry in the Seventeenth Century" (1964), he offers, "little disagreement is to be expected about the predominance of reason with Lord Herbert and Cowley, of faith and reason in the Christian philosophy of Traherne. Vaughan's position, not so sharply defined, clearly emerges from an earlier analysis of his modes of thought and sensibility. A few minor poets will be easily placed in one camp or another" (191). While eschewed in the Romantic and Victorian eras, metaphysical poetry would interest the modernist poets, who, also facing a rapidly-shifting world, incorporated new epistemologies of knowledge production and formal education into their

poetry (Crawford; Taylor). It is no wonder then that so many of the introductory poems on *Def Poetry Jam* rely on poets of this era, including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Dylan Thomas, Hayden Carruth, Thom Gunn, and William Yeats. Given the broader historical context through the legacy of the Black Arts Movement, performance poetry, and slam in the formation of *Def Poetry Jam*, the griots, metaphysical poets, and modernist poets are indeed worth mentioning as forebears of poetic knowledge.

This research, however, picks up the idea of poetry as a source of knowledge production and dissemination in the twentieth century. Grounded in Aimé Césaire's "simple but provocative proposition" that "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific" (Césaire and Kelley 17; Césaire "Poetry and Knowledge" xlii), this research leans on the praxis of Négritude poets as much as it relies on the historical trajectory of the Harlem Renaissance poets. As the following chapter examines Frantz Fanon's theory of existing in the triple, it is perhaps no coincidence that Césaire, Fanon's teacher and mentor, offers a substantial contribution to the analysis of *Def Poetry Jam*. Aimé Césaire, who is as much a poet, as he is a historian, as he is a philosopher, and as he is a politician, is among the early scholars in anti-colonial scholarship. Born in the French colony of Martinique and educated in Paris at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand followed by l'École Normale Supérieure, Aimé Césaire's early writing centers on the identity of Black folks in the colonies. Best exemplified in the book, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), Césaire blends prose and poetry to illustrate the conditions of the colonies, to elucidate a Black consciousness, and to ultimately name and define what would become the Négritude movement. Heavily inspired by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as an influence on the Pan-Africanist and anti-capitalist writing of early Black Liberation Movements, Aimé Césaire's

advocacy of poetic knowledge was not merely a project of epistemology, but an emancipatory methodology.

When Césaire declares, “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge” (“Poetry and Knowledge”), he takes the devices of poetry seriously as a tool to communicate and discover knowledge, and more broadly, the project of the humanities as a disciplinary check and balance to the impersonal effects of the scientific method. Furthermore, Césaire makes a claim about the inadequacy of scientific knowledge to absolutely explain, produce, and discover knowledge. He describes, “Physics classifies and explains, but the essence of things eludes it. The natural sciences classify, but the *quid proprium* of things eludes them. As for mathematics, what eludes its abstract and logical activity is reality itself” (xlii). Césaire credits the scientific method as helping humanity understand what is happening in the world but describes such epistemologies as inadequate in capturing the essence, its reality, or that which is proper about the object or phenomenon of study.

Césaire’s position similarly reflects Walter Benjamin’s discussion on technological reproduction’s inability to capture “the unique existence” of original art (221). For Césaire, science is unable to capture the unique existence of social processes, human life, and interaction. Whereas Benjamin’s discussion centers on the sphere of authenticity that is lost in the mechanical reproduction of art, Aimé Césaire raises the stakes by suggesting humanity itself is lost in the production of scientific knowledge (Kelley and Césaire). Césaire writes, “scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies, and kills...To acquire it mankind has sacrificed everything: desires, fears, feelings, psychological complexes. To acquire the impersonality of scientific knowledge making *depersonalized* itself, *deindividualized* itself” (“Poetry and Knowledge” xlii). Sharon Elise, a poet and sociologist, expands on this position when she

declares, “scientific knowledge *is* a religion.” While Elise’s statement is effective as a metaphor, a literal reading of her declaration suggests scientific knowledge is a mechanism of power embedded in ideologies that privilege objectivity, empirical evidence, and the scientific method. For example, a person born into an economically stable family, with an advanced degree conducting research around the issues of income inequality, is more likely to be recognized as an expert on poverty, rather than a person who has lived the duration of their life at or below the poverty line. Therefore, Elise and Césaire’s understanding of the silence in scientific knowledge is as much about power as it is the limitations of the scientific method and thus poetic knowledge is an epistemology of reclaiming that which has been rendered silent.

### *The Propositions of Poetic Knowledge*

In advocating for the use of poetic knowledge, Césaire offers seven propositions (“Poetry and Knowledge” lv-lvi), based on these propositions, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* exists as a site of knowledge production reclaiming that which scientific ways of knowing either lose, silence, or otherwise render absent. The first proposition states, “Poetry is that process which through word, image, myth, love, and humor establishes me at the living heart of myself and of the world” (lv). This first proposition foreshadows the central assertion of the following chapter; namely, *Def Poetry Jam* is a space that makes the lives, bodies, and experiences of people at the margins matter. Where the next chapter explores how the camera, audience, and on-screen representation of the poets’ experiences contribute to this validation, Césaire’s first proposition is a reminder that much of that work is simply an extension of poets already centering themselves as the object of their poem. The poems in *Def Poetry Jam* rarely position the poet as an unbiased observer or admirer of a phenomenon, thus what becomes uniquely

centered are the Black, ethnic, hip-hop, sometimes female, and on a few occasions, the LGBTQ+ ways of experiencing the world.

The second proposition offers poetry as “a naturalizing process operating under the dematerializing impulse of imagination” (lv). Similarly, C. Wright Mills’s seminal work, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), offers the ability to imagine the link between the biography of an individual and their place in history as the premise for making sense of the social processes that directly and indirectly impacts their lives. Imagination is not a replacement for knowledge, nor sociological inquiry. Instead, the imagination is the place to explore the range of possibilities that link one’s personal troubles to the broader public issues. In *Def Poetry Jam*, we experience poets that play in the realm of that imagination. Poets imagine relationships and explore the depths and details of these relationships. Other poets might not explore the depths, but instead suggests a breadth of links between their personal troubles and the public issues. The insights that this imaginative exploration might yield leads to Césaire’s fifth proposition, that, “Marvelous discoveries occur at the equally marvelous contact of inner and outer totality perceived imaginatively and conjointly by, or more precisely within, the poet” (lv).

The third and fourth propositions by Césaire reclaim what is human about knowledge production and the facilitation of knowledge. “Poetic knowledge is characterized by humankind splattering the object with all its mobilized richness” and “If affective energy can be endowed with causal power as Freud indicated, it is paradoxical to refuse it power and penetration. It is conceivable that nothing can resist the unheard-of-mobilization of forces that poetry necessitates, or the multiplied élan of those forces” (lv).<sup>76</sup> Césaire describes a paradox when the affective energy of poetry is refused power. This is to say that poets who command such attention on stage

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<sup>76</sup> Élan, in this case, is used to mean a growing momentum.

and poems which leave such an indelible impression on audiences cannot be dismissed or reduced to a fringe art. Rather, Césaire would have us honor the energy of these words, voices, the movement of the bodies, and the barrage of sound. Merely dismissing this poem and thus denying it power because of that cacophony is the paradox - how can two people with that much energy and passion say nothing? Thus, the strength of that poem lies in the veracious delivery of the poem, even if at times it overwhelms the audibility of the poem.

Aimé Césaire's final two propositions reflect the "beauty" ascribed in poetry and by extension poetic knowledge. He writes, "Scientific truth has as its sign coherence and efficacy. Poetic truth has as its sign beauty. The poetically beautiful is not merely beauty of expression or muscular euphoria. A too Apollonian or gymnastic idea of beauty paradoxically runs the risk of skinning, stuffing and hardening it" (lv-lvi). Beauty, in this case, does not exclusively refer to the pleasing aesthetics of poetry and poetic language. Instead, Césaire uses beauty in contrast to the logic and rationality of scientific understanding. Césaire explains, "What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience" (xlvii). Whereas a scientific understanding of a subject employs methods designed to partition and isolate variables for study, poetic knowledge explores objects, phenomenon, and social process in their physical, historical, and social place in the world. What is beauty in the poem is the poet's aspiration to locate an idea or experience within the realm of the intellectual as well as the emotional. Appropriately then, the response to a good spoken word or performance poem is often, "I felt that."



### *Poetic Knowledge vs. Scientific Knowledge*

James S. Taylor similarly offers poetic knowledge as a necessary alternative of scientific knowledge (6). In his book, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (1998), Taylor describes the scientific mode of learning as a system to “*acquire* knowledge” while poetic knowledge reveals “a *way* of knowledge” (30). Scientific knowledge, Taylor describes, is used to know externals (80). Furthermore, through empirical, quantifiable, or even dialectical means, scientific knowledge reduces any knowledge of importance down to facts. To *know* an object, a social process, or a phenomenon is valid when one learns or can recall the facts about the object or the process. While Taylor is not critical of *knowing* facts, he is apprehensive about privileging facts as the dominant system of knowledge. Of this, Taylor describes, “Alone, though armed with Facts, [sic] such a student is likely to become arrogant with a sense of dominance over nature when the universe is seen more and more as an obstacle and problem to be conquered instead of a companion reality to be learned from” (105). What is cautionary for Taylor is, however, the reality of colonization for Aimé Césaire. Césaire makes the connection between the achievements brought about by rationality and efficiency as the same process of forced labor, genocide, rape, militarization, and barbarism (Césaire and Kelley 6-8). Taking Taylor’s cautionary tale one step-further, Césaire defiantly writes, “in the scales of knowledge all the museums in the world will never weigh so much as one spark of human sympathy” (21).

Taylor is likely to agree with Aimé Césaire, that scientific knowledge is “an impoverished knowledge” (Césaire “Poetry and Knowledge” xlii). Where Césaire offers poetic knowledge as a more humane alternative to the production of knowledge, Taylor would have us to see poetic knowledge as an essential precursor to scientific knowledge. He writes:

First, there is an aspect in every act of intellection, in all its parts, that is effortless, spontaneous, requiring no stimulation other than the presence of the object of apprehension itself, where the mind arrives at material and immaterial knowledge of a thing by way of the senses, and the universal quality is abstracted—a *natural* transcendental gazing into the form of things...

Then secondly, there are simply particular experiences beginning in wonder and moving to the concupiscible (pleasure) appetite (touching on the subject of aesthetics), where there is harmonious integration of the exterior and interior senses, emotions, will, and intellect, knowing the good and beautiful in some thing, knowing this simply in repose, love, and adoration where these things are regarded as “something very much like perfection.” (57)

Taylor offers poetic knowledge as being grounded in the five senses. More specifically, it is in the relationship between one or multiple senses and the range of possibilities that the subject or social process might mean to the individual experiencing it.

Following the sensory experience, is an emotional experience rooted in the feelings of fear, anger, hope, and love (44). Taylor describes the next order of poetic knowledge, the will to knowledge, as deliberative or loving. This loving and natural will is a spontaneous will seeking an understanding and appreciation of the subject or social process. This will is “perfect” insofar as the knowledge of the thing does not necessarily disrupt its existence. Thus, a harmonious external and internal experience creates a poetic knowledge. The deliberative will follows this spontaneous will, seeking reasoning, and thus beginning the intellectual processes of inquiry that has come to be dominated by scientific methods (57).

Poetic knowledge and the use of poetry in the social sciences has experienced growth in the academy. The International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, founded in 2007, brings together scholars advancing the use of poetry in research, as research, and as a tool for presenting research. In the symposium's first anthology, *Poetic Inquiry* (2009), the book's arrangement of three sections illustrate this point: *vox theoria* pertains to the validity of utility of poetry in the social sciences, *vox autobiographia*/autoethnographia considers poetry as means of data collection, and *vox participare* offers poetry as a way to present data. In *vox participare*, poems are created from interview transcripts or as a collaborative effort between the researcher and their research participants. In an article by Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor and Kent Manard, poetry is discussed as a process and method for ethnographic data collection by proclaiming, "Poetry is as useful to the process by which we observe and take notes ethnographically, as it may be as a finished product (especially if the ethnographer is more novice at poetry)."<sup>77</sup> Poetic drafts may push forward how we remember or think about our experiences, or, ultimately, how we want to present and explain our material. For Cahnmann-Taylor and Manard and the International Symposium of Poetic Inquiry, poetry has a methodological utility. That is to say, poetry is not in opposition or as a precursor to scientific knowledge, but rather poetry can be a step in the scientific method itself. Where Chanmann-Taylor and Manard discuss the use of poetry as making the subject strange, this process similarly describes what Aimé Césaire names as beauty and what James S. Taylor names as perfect. "Strange," "beauty," and "perfect" therefore describe the poetic ways of knowing, in contrast to the objective, efficient, and rational descriptors of scientific knowledge.

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<sup>77</sup> The essay "Anthropology at the Edge of Words: Where Poetry and Ethnography Meet" (Meetnahu) provides another example.

While there are subtle yet poignant differences between Aimé Césaire, James E. Taylor, and Chanmann-Taylor and Manard's utility of poetic knowledge, I am cautious in positioning the entire series of *Def Poetry Jam* in one camp or another other. Whether the series is born in the great silence of the scientific ways of understanding the world, as Césaire would describe, or if *Def Poetry* can be seen as an important and necessary precursor to scientific inquiry, as Taylor would describe, my focus is on the capacity to transmit this beautiful or perfect knowledge. Taylor and Césaire help us to see *Def Poetry Jam* as a project concerned with the production of knowledge that yields new and alternative understandings. While individual poems may better fit Césaire or Taylor's utility for poetic knowledge, the series as a whole fits comfortably at the intersection of these two premises: that poetic knowledge is not inferior to scientific knowledge, but rather poetic knowledge captures an explanation of an object, process, or interaction in ways that the scientific method is incapable of observing or representing. Even when considering poetry as a tool within the scientific method, as the International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry and Chanmann-Taylor and Manard would have us to do, *Def Poetry Jam* offers a space for epistemologies not limited to logical and rational explanations of the social world.

### *Sociopoetix and the Praxis of Poetic Knowledge*

It is vital to consider again "The Promise" where C. Wright Mills advocates for understanding the private troubles of individuals as being rooted in broader public issues. In his essay, he considers the private troubles that people face as a result of unemployment, marital problems, and war. In each case, Mills shifts the focus from individual causes and responses towards structural causes and issues which create the conditions by which individuals must navigate, avoid, or survive as members of that society. Being able to shift the focus is, as he

describes, “a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves” (5). Developing this quality of mind is a skillset, however. While Mills offers important strategies and necessary conditions for understanding the relationship between private troubles and public issues, it is nonetheless a process rooted in the imagination. On *Def Poetry Jam*, the poets’ tendency to speak autobiographically and locate their experiences within the context of broader cultural, structural, and systemic processes does the same work advocated by C. Wright Mills. The difference is that rather than using one’s own imagination to understand the relationship between private troubles and public issues, one is examining the link through the work of the poem. This examination of society through spoken word poetry is what I call sociopoetix.

I offer the term sociopoetix as a pedagogical tool specific to the study of spoken word poetry as well as the study of culture and society through spoken word poetry. Sociopoetix views spoken word poems as an analysis, theoretical intervention, or source of qualitative data contributing to the study of society. Sociopoetix does not value the poet as traditional intellectuals, in the way that James S. Taylor and the practitioners of poetic inquiry do. Rather, sociopoetix values poets as organic intellectuals in their capacity to explore social relations through poetry that speaks from and to their social groups. Furthermore, sociopoetix recognizes the value of emotion, rhythm, movement, and body as an added dimension in problematization.

As a method of inquiry, sociopoetix relies on Michel Foucault’s concept of problematization. In the self-reflective style that characterizes much of Foucault’s work, problematization appeared as a methodological thread throughout his work. From *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* (1975) to *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge*

(1978), he articulated an increasing awareness that his method for investigation was not merely the topic at hand, as prisons and sexuality, respectively. Instead, his methods necessarily required an examination of an entire array of social processes, behaviors, institutions, and social relations involved in the investigation of such topics. Although his latter works directly draw readers' attention to his method of problematization, Foucault explains how problematization as a process of inquiry was present in his work as early as *Madness and Civilization: A History* (1961). In *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984* (1986), Foucault reflects:

What I have tried to analyze are the ways these conditions, and the context in which this kind of suffering—delirium, persecution, etc.—are problematized as an illness, a mental illness, something which has to be cured inside such institutions and by such institutions.

It is not a critical history which has as its aim to demonstrate that behind this so-called knowledge there is only mythology, or perhaps nothing at all. My analysis is about the problematization of something which is real, but that problematization is something which is dependent on our knowledge, ideas, theories, techniques, social relations, and economical process. What I have tried to do is analyze this kind of problematization as it conforms to the objectives which it presupposes. (418)

For Foucault, a problematization of mental illness is not merely a study about the psychological and behavioral deviance in individuals, but rather, a study involves the influence of culture, philosophy, government, and economics in the changing historiography of social institutions concerned with health. Similarly, a problematization of prisons involves a critical exploration of

the relationship between power, sovereignty, bodies, in addition to the influences mentioned above of philosophy, government, economics, and the changing historiography. Problematization is, therefore, the process of interrogating how and why specific behaviors, institutions, and social processes become problems and also how they become objects for thought (Barnett; Bacchi; Foucault *Foucault Live*).

In order to accept sociopoetix as a methodological intervention, one must accept the legitimacy of poets having the capacity to problematize, especially through the use of spoken word, performance poetry, and oral poetry in general. Unlike social scientists and other scientific method-based researchers who use poetry to enhance well-established methodological practices, spoken word and performance poets, with rare exception, lack the formal training that would qualify their work as “research.” It is, therefore, useful to recall Aimé Césaire’s position that “poetic knowledge is generated in the absence of scientific knowledge.” Because the knowledge generated by spoken word and performance poets serve a different function than the knowledge generated by academics using the scientific method, the legitimacy of poets to problematize does not follow the same merits, training, and processes of the academy. Instead, their legitimacy is earned through their reputation in open mic communities, participation and winning poetry slams, performances in front of large or prestigious audiences - this includes *Def Poetry Jam*, and more recently, having a performance go viral on the internet.

While sociopoetix is not equivalent to the knowledge generated through the scholarly and journalistic processes of checks and balances, there is value in understanding these poems as performances of autoethnography. More often than not, these performances share the same objectives as researchers trained in autoethnographic methods. Consider how Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner describe the process of autoethnography, “When

researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences” (Ellis et al. 276). Indeed, something that separates *Def Poetry Jam* from other presentations of poetry is that the poems overwhelmingly depict a moment of epiphany, insight, or revelation of a generally unspoken truth. Unique insider knowledge and perspectives helps generate these epiphanies and truths.

I am careful not to suggest that the poems on *Def Poetry Jam* are in need of an interpretative framework for them to be rendered intelligible or regarded as legitimate sites of knowledge. Spoken word, performance poetry, and slam poetry is not in need of sociopoetix. On the contrary, sociopoetix relies on *Def Poetry Jam* and other on-screen representations of spoken word and performance poetry. Sociopoetix does, however, offer evidence in the form of qualitative and quantitative research, as well as established theoretical perspectives, which contextualizes poetry within a sociocultural history. Whether on television or on the internet, the representation of spoken word, performance poetry, and poetry slams provide an incredible opportunity for others, particularly scholars in the social sciences and humanities, to access knowledge, narratives, and other nodes of meaning-making as presented in oral poetry. As a sociologist and as an instructor of sociology tasked with teaching introductory level concepts and theories in sociology, *Def Poetry Jam* offers stories, case studies, analysis, and explanations of topics germane to the discipline.



### *Sociopoetix of Def Poetry Jam*

As the rest of this chapter demonstrates, *Def Poetry Jam* provides an opportunity to employ sociopoetix as a methodological form of inquiry interrogating the social processes, culture, and policies that emerge in the United States during the George W. Bush administration. While poets are not as interested in finding and expressing plausible solutions to emerging social problems, their performances are invaluable as an interrogation of the meanings, histories, economies, cultures, governments, structures, social processes, and institutions shaping the United States after September 11, 2001.

### *9/11*

I ended the second chapter of this dissertation with Suheir Hammad's poem "First Writing Since" (s1e1) as it uniquely captures the process, politics, and significance of shooting a poetry television show in New York in the months after 9/11.<sup>78</sup> Thus, my use of Suheir Hammad's poem highlighted the lamentation and anomie experienced by Hammad as a Brooklyn-reared Palestinian American writer. By extension, "First Writing Since" is emblematic of *Def Poetry's* representation of spoken word poetry, performance poetry, and poetry's place in addressing culture, politics, and society. In thinking about Hammad's work in the context of sociopoetix, "First Writing Since" is as much about the confusion in the moments after the World Trade Center collapsed, as it is about the complexity of globalization, transnationalism,

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<sup>78</sup> There is no comfortable place to begin a critical analysis involving the events, the aftermath, and even the poetry pertaining to the events of 9/11. Merely choosing to identify the series of events as 9/11, rather than the use of the terms "attacks," "World Trade Center," and "terrorism," implicates a political and cultural articulation that I am much more interested in exploring rather than linguistically reproducing. However, the use of 9/11 is already political, as an acknowledgment that the aforementioned terms are not neutral.

Along these lines, my use of "War on Terror" refers mainly to the formal declaration and implicit policies, actions, enacted by the Bush administration, that give increased power to the government, institutions, and corporations associated with national security and the military.

and ideology. As the poem works its way through witness, confusion, and participation, Suheir Hammad abruptly changes her tone, writing:

one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.  
one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.  
one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.  
one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.  
or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a  
flag and words on a page.

we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma.  
america did not give out his family's addresses or where he went to  
church. or blame the bible or pat fucking robertson. (99)

In these stanzas, and again later in the poem, Hammad illustrates her role as an organic intellectual by giving the New York Supper Club audience and the television audience a different lens of understanding 9/11. When she explains, “never felt less american [sic] and more Brooklyn than these days,” Hammad makes a claim in how distant her identity and experience is from the ideology of American nationalism, particularly the components rooted in a militaristic patriotism. Her identification with Brooklyn represents an affiliation at the margins, where Brooklyn is located at the margins of Manhattan and by extension a less desirable place to live.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, this distinction evokes cultural plurality, even evidenced by Hammad’s reference to her Palestinian background. Thus, her account of 9/11 and the days that followed speak from and

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<sup>79</sup> Brooklyn in the 1990s is not the same as Brooklyn today. The documentary *Fort Green* chronicles the changes in the borough from revitalization to gentrification, occurring in the decade before 9/11. The television show *Sex and the City* captures competing attitudes about the desirability of Brooklyn, just after 9/11, gleaning insights into the eventual gentrification of Brooklyn.

speak to the group that did not or could not adopt the emerging nationalist ideology and American patriotism. Hammad's poem illustrates the sociopoetix of racial projects and the emergence of Islamophobia in the United States.

Throughout the piece, the camera cuts from Suheir Hammad to members of the audience who reflect different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Whether it is an Asian woman or a white man at the center of the frame, members of the audience are depicted as intensely focused on Hammad's every word. When addressing the privilege afforded white men not having to bear the responsibility of Timothy McVeigh's criminality, applause builds from the audience. The camera cuts from Suheir Hammad to a medium shot of a Black woman, with hoop-earrings and natural hair prominently decorating the screen, shouting in affirmation of Hammad's observation. On the one hand, I find this representation of the audience a necessary component of recreating an on-screen spoken word poetry experience. To this end, these shots of the audience legitimize Hammad's role as an organic intellectual and her poetry as a dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, the shots of different racial and ethnic groups signal to the audience that Hammad's issues with discrimination are a shared American phenomenon. While there is utility in considering the shared effects of racial discrimination, as well as gender, sexual orientation, ability and other forms of discrimination for that matter, these shots minimize the unique oppression of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11.

While Suheir Hammad's performance also illustrates the utility of sociopoetix through the experience and reflections of an Arab-American on the day of 9/11, Danny Hoch's poem, "Corner Talk" (s2e1) captures 9/11 from a distinctly New York masculine positionality. Hoch, a white poet, playwright, comedian, and actor who is also from Brooklyn, recreates a conversation that might occur in the weeks after 9/11. Like Hammad, Hoch's performance captures a

witnessing of the World Trade Center collapsing and the memory of loved ones, while challenging American patriotism. Hoch's performance, however, incorporates humor that is both written in the text and emphasized by the performance of a distinctly New York dialect:

hey yo, i rented the siege last nite son. i swear to god george bush is quoting bruce willis from the siege son. they had rounded up all the arabs and put em in some sprung shit, you know like internment camps, i mean, um, detention centers in brooklyn, and i swear to my grandmother kid, bruce willis said, "make no mistake, we will hunt them down, and find them, and we will wipe out evil in the world." rent that shit son! george bush said that shit yesterday! he think he in a movie son! george bush think he fuckin bruce willis. he think colin powell is denzel washington. That shit is fucking crazy son.

The similarities between President Bush's initial public response following the events of 9/11 and the dialogue from *The Siege* (1998) are striking. The dialogue from the film is as follows, "Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts" (Zwick). Where critics derided Ronald Reagan as an actor who approaches politics and speeches as lines from a movie, George W. Bush approached the nation's deadliest domestic attack from a foreign entity since WWII by seemingly using lines from an actual movie.

Through sociopoetix, Danny Hoch illustrates what Susan Brewer argues in *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (2011). Brewer writes, "Consciously or not, the president borrowed from the movies... The blurring of news, propaganda, and entertainment helped the administration to sell Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war seemed like a new reality show in which the entire country had been given a part to play"

(236). By suggesting that the president is *acting* like an *actor*, Danny Hoch rearticulates George W. Bush's leadership and subsequent decision-making as suitable for a fictional film, but laughable as presidential leadership. Hoch's approach is humorous, but no less effective in questioning the capability and legitimacy of George W. Bush's presidency, mocking the very response that brought his approval rating from 51% to 86% ("Presidential Approval Ratings - George W. Bush").

Unlike Suheir Hammad and Danny Hoch, whose poems occur in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Staceyann Chin's "A City in Tragedy" (s5e8) is not as much about the events or aftermath of 9/11, but rather, her poem is about the function of memory with 9/11 as a key example. Chin, who moved to New York in her twenties, after becoming intolerant with the violent homophobia in her birthplace of Jamaica (Maglott), begins her performance acknowledging her insider-outsider status in the United States. She starts, "So what should I do now with these causes I carry/burning on the front lines of a foreign war." Staceyann Chin is noted for her movement while performing. In the delivery of this poem, she takes steps across the stage, shifts to various positions in front of the audience, and eventually settles her body to a soft bouncing rhythm that follows the cadence of her poem. The camera pulls back into a wide-shot, where Chin opens her arms wide and looks toward the balcony proclaiming, "New York will never be the same again." The camera then goes to a medium shot where Staceyann Chin works her way to the middle of the frame, "and I will never really *be* American." The next shot, a full shot with Chin crouching her knees slightly, squaring her shoulders, and moving carefully across the stage, is where she delivers the following lines:

But this fight will have to be mine

Long after it ends we will remember the faces

Filmed out of focus

The names uncomfortable on our tongues

The mouths beneath the beards

The tears the women cried for the dead

The towers

The long hours of not knowing who had been at work that week

Who had been fired the week before

Chin's poem continues as a reflection of 9/11, collapsing memories from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the fall of the World Trade Center, making them one act of violence. The poem turns when Chin notes the hypocrisy of politicians who use religion, leading her to consider God's existence in her own life. The poem concludes with God responding to a fear that threatens to keep Staceyann Chin silent, with the last lines being the words of God, "If we do not tell these stories/Who will?"

The rhetorical conclusion of this poem provides motivation for Staceyann Chin to continue sharing counter-hegemonic poems. Diana Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), devotes one of her final chapters towards exploring that topic. For Taylor, it is not only a matter of who will tell the story of 9/11, but also how will the story of 9/11 be remembered. In her ethnographic account of 9/11 that begins five minutes after the first plane hit (238), Taylor demonstrates how the public performances of memory, including her own photography, deviated from the unfolding scripts of patriotism, heroic masculinity, containment, and the silencing of those who questioned the war effort. She recalls:

A photograph published in the New York Times the day after the attack had already converted witnesses into spectators. The caption read: “Spectators walking through debris from the World Trade Center.” Those of us who lived here were deterritorialized, not just by the events but by official pronouncements that turned us into tourists, walking through. (252)

Where Taylor’s book is concerned with performance and the body as a site of knowledge, the repertoire, this *New York Times* caption demonstrates the press’ ability to create a movie-plot style framing of 9/11 that Danny Hoch alludes to in his poem. If witness becomes equated with spectating, as Diana Taylor and Staceyann Chin warn against, then all who witness the events in New York, Washington D.C., Afghanistan, and Iraq, are to watch silently as news coverage, press conferences, and carefully written speeches make sense of these events. However, for Diana Taylor and Staceyann Chin, who equate witness with the participant, the act of photographing, writing a poem, and reciting a poem are performances which turn witnesses into actors.

If the coverage and responses of 9/11 attempts to reduce women as damsels needing the protection of heroic men (Brewer), Suheir Hammad and Staceyann Chin’s performances on *Def Poetry Jam* are quite the alternative. Hammad brings audiences into the unfolding of events of 9/11 through the experience of an Arab woman and Chin’s poem finds it necessary to carry the memories and events of 9/11 through the repertoire of poetry. Here, Diana Taylor’s poignant observation about the representation of gender in the narrative of 9/11 is worth noting:

It is interesting how quickly the official scenario of active men rescuing vulnerable women got reactivated. For an event labeled “unprecedented,” “singular,” a watershed that changed everything forever, it is clear how little the

logic of justification had changed and how much it relied on gendering self and other. The attacks immediately triggered the same old scenario drawn from a repertoire of frontier lore: evil barbarians, threatened damsels protected by heroic males. (244)

In a performance by Caridad de la Luz, a Puerto Rican poet from the Bronx who goes by the name of La Bruja, any heroism associated with masculinity is absent. Her poem, “W.T.C.” (s2e4) is a series of acrostics, where lines begin with “W,” “T,” and “C” respectively. For example, “Women try calming,” “Wounds to clean,” “Writing to courts,” and “Wanting to create worlds to cradle” make visible the experiences and traumas of those left out of the category of hero, which in large part was reduced to male police officers, firefighters, city and national government officials, and later military in the War on Terror. Her poem makes heroic the work of women, the work of peace, the work of domesticity, and the work of healing and care. When, de la Luz concludes her poem with, “But warriors think consciously/Waiting to contact/Witches turned counselors/W.T.C.,” she not only centers the experience of women, but highlights the value of Latinx, women of color, and indigenous women, whose spiritual practices differ from Judeo-Christian hegemony. Through an intersectional sociopoetix, Caridad de la Luz not only makes these women visible in the narrative of 9/11, but also, their work as healers is privileged rather than the work traditionally associated with heroism in 9/11.

### *The War on Terror*

In less than one week after 9/11, the Bush administration began framing the military response as a “war on terrorism” and then a “war on terror” (Bazinnet). Describing this as “a very different kind of war,” the administration prepared the American public for a lengthy and



widespread fight that required patience by the American people. Unlike Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld in the administration, and even Senators like John Kerry, who spoke about those military efforts in a geopolitical context, George W. Bush more often spoke in the absolutisms of hate, freedom, peace, and good versus evil. In responding to one question about Attorney General Rumsfeld's request for increased surveillance on American citizens, the president pivoted towards a discussion on the barbarism of the new enemy and the need for Americans to return to work. He ended his comments with, "It is time for us to win the first war of the twenty-first century decisively so that our children and our grandchildren can live peacefully into the twenty-first century" (Bush). Performances on *Def Poetry Jam*, however, do not share the view of war as a necessary means to a peaceful twenty-first century.

Instead, performances on the series describe the War on Terror as US imperialism which enacted terror on the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, and also, in the United States. Speaking about the first Iraq War, Noam Chomsky similarly warned about the use of empty slogans, such as "Support our troops," as a tactic to divert attention away from social policies that infringe upon individual liberties (21-22). Thinking through poems about the War on Terror as sociopoetix, these performances reflect Chomsky's position by describing the violence of war, the companies who profited from war and the security of military contractors, and the criticism of politicians whose support for the war increased the concentration of wealth among the owners of such companies. Furthermore, these poems cut through the entanglement of geopolitics, economics, and patriotism to convey the oft used quote by William Sherman, "war is hell."

In "Brown Dreams" by Paul Flores (s4e8) and "Andrew" by Kevin Derrig (s5e6), the violence of war is captured in verse. Flores describes the death of a soldier named Francisco, who joins the Army as a means to US citizenship and ultimately a college degree. He tells the

audience, “They were driving in the desert./They were taking fire, swerving./The tank lost control and headed straight into the river.” Kevin Derrig similarly details the atrocities of war by telling the story of his cousin Andrew, a third-generation Marine. Derrig narrates, “US footprints/trampling the homes of Iraqi children/who also believe the boogiemans exists/except not under beds/[inaudible]over rooftops/As Andrew marches through Bagdad streets/individuality engraved in his dog tags/...now tangled in the sound of explosions/He doesn’t know why he wants to kill them/He doesn’t know why they want him dead/But he’s a Marine.” In these poems, both Andrew and Francisco are under twenty years of age, which begs the question of George W. Bush’s claim that the first war of the twenty-first century will allow our children and grandchildren to live in peace. If *our* children and grandchildren were dying in war, how could they live peacefully? Or perhaps, are children like Andrew and Francisco excluded in “our children and our grandchildren” based on their race, legal status, or social class? The poetry of Flores and Derrig engage these questions, ultimately demonstrating Chomsky’s point about the use of empty slogans by politicians to galvanize support for war.

To the second part of Chomsky’s argument, that empty slogans divert public attention from social policies that infringe upon public liberties, performances by Jason Carney and Steve Coleman suggests soldiers fight wars, not for “our children and grandchildren,” but rather, for the protection of a US empire. In Jason Carney’s “Our Soldiers” (s5e9) and Steve Coleman’s “Terrorist Threat” (s3e3), these poems rearticulate the symbols of freedom and terrorism, respectively, to depict the War on Terror as a one-two punch of militarism and neo-colonial violence enacted by the United States. In “Our Soldiers,” Carney uses the refrain, “Our soldiers are dying for freedom,” before identifying various social processes that illustrate profit, punishment, and social control as taking precedence over individual freedom. When Carney

writes, “Our soldiers are dying for freedom/Like Haliburton builds pipelines on the heads of corpseless contractors/Our soldiers are dying for freedom,” his verse summarizes Naomi Klein’s assertion that the privatization of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan greatly exploited the citizens of those countries and the citizens of the United States (Klein 356-357).

While Carney rearticulates the symbol of freedom, Steve Coleman rearticulates the labels of terrorist and terrorism to implicate politicians and corporations as enacting economic and social violence on United States citizens. Throughout the poem, Coleman names Trent Lott, Katherine Harris, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Rudolph Giuliani as terrorists. Like “Our Soldiers,” Coleman’s poem highlights the social problems where profit, punishment, and social control take precedence over individual freedom, however, in “Terrorist Threat,” the poem identifies the role government and politicians have in terrorizing the Americans. For instance, he discusses the role of government in protecting the growth of the prison industrial complex, sweatshop conditions in the US and overseas, and also the profits of major corporations. He proclaims, “They finance corporate mergers/So when Enron and congress fucks/Everybody gets screwed.” Both Steve Coleman and Jason Carney use their performance to move beyond the propaganda that fueled patriotism and support for the War on Terror.

### *The War on Terror: Sympathetic Muslims, Black Muslims, and Bad Muslims*

Whereas a sociopoetix of *Def Poetry Jam* offers politically radical narratives regarding the politics of the War on Terror, the show is not as radical when it comes to the representation of Muslims and Arabs. In her article, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a ‘Postrace’ Era” (2013), Evelyn Alsultany discusses the increasing sympathetic and “positive” representation of Arab and Muslim characters, which

supposedly “reflects an enlightened (American) culture that can distinguish between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ [Muslims]” (168). She argues that the historical and turn of the century representations of Arab and Muslim characters in television and film contribute to the support for discriminatory policies, surveillance, and control of Arabs and Muslims, but notes the ways crime dramas and the news go to great lengths to create sympathetic characters or use disclaimers when speaking about Muslims and Arabs. *Def Poetry Jam* complicates Alsultany’s position, but ultimately affirms her argument by integrating the narratives of Arab-American and Muslim poets into that of an American struggle.

One of the most fiery performances is Amir Sulaiman’s “Danger” (s4e4). Sulaiman, whose poetry and music are deeply rooted in his Islamic faith, offers a dauntless performance and an unapologetic on-screen representation of Muslims. Amir Sulaiman defies the controlling image of the sympathetic and good Muslim in a performance that braids Black, Native American, and Arab revolutionaries. He writes:

Justice is somewhere between reading sad poems  
And 40 ounces of gasoline crashing through windows  
Justice is between plans and action  
Between writing letters to Congressmen and clapping the captain  
Between raising legal defense funds  
And putting a gun on the bailiff and taking the judge captive  
It is between prayer and fasting  
Between burning and blasting  
Freedom is between the mind and the soul  
It is between the lock and the load

Between the zeal of the young and the patience of the old  
Freedom is between the finger and the trigger  
It is between the page and the pen  
Between the grenade and the pin  
Between righteous anger and keeping one in the chamber  
So what can they do with a cat with a heart like Turner  
A mind like Douglas, a mouth like Malcolm, and a voice like Chris?

And that is why I am not dangerous I am danger  
I am not angry I am anger  
I am abominable stress, Iliadic relentless  
I'm a breath of vengeance. I'm a death sentence  
I'm forsaken repentance to the beast in his henchmen

Armed forces and policemen

I will slice his belly open and  
Free  
The souls of the Navajo  
The souls of the Iroquois  
The souls of the Ibo  
The souls of the Scottsboro boys  
The souls of great Black leaders

The souls of Kandahar and Baghdad  
I burn my white and raise my Black flag  
To free the souls of the great Black leaders  
The souls in Attica  
The piece of solace on the prison floor

Until then I am not dangerous I am danger  
I am not angry I am anger  
I am abominable stress, Iliadic relentless  
I'm a breath of vengeance. I'm a death sentence  
I'm forsaken repentance to the beast in his henchmen

Politicians and big businessmen

I'm a teenage Palestinian opening fire at an Israeli checkpoint

Point blank

Checkmate

Now what

I am an inmate short shanked to the C-O

Earlobe to earlobe

Cut short

Case closed

Now what

I am Sitting Bull with Colonel Custard's scalp in my hands

I am Cinqué with a slave trader's blood in my hands

I am Jonathan Jackson handing a gun to my man

I am David with a slingshot and a rock

And if David lived today he would have had a Molotov cocktail and a Glock

So I say down with Goliath

I say down with Goliath

But we must learn, know, write, read

We must kick, bite, yell, scream

We must pray, fast, live, dream

Fight, kill, and die free

In large part due to his legibility as Black man, both in skin and language, Sulaiman is not as legible as Muslim. Despite wearing a kufi, beard, long sleeves, and pants hemmed well above the ankles, he is rendered legible as a Black revolutionary. It is not until he proclaims, "I'm a teenage Palestinian opening fire at an Israeli checkpoint" that he becomes legible as an Arab-Muslim, which is to say in proximity to terrorists, and not merely a Black-Muslim like Malcolm X, which is to say not in proximity to terrorists. Amir Sulaiman's "Danger" complicates the notion of "sympathetic," "good," and "bad" Muslims as Sulaiman's use of violence in the pursuit

of “freedom” and “justice” is the same articulation as the Bush administration’s use of violence to spread freedom and democracy following 9/11.

Sulaiman is by no means a sympathetic Muslim. Nor is he a “bad” Muslim, as evidenced by his appearance on the show and furthermore by the standing ovation he receives after his performance. There is no space on *Def Poetry Jam* for the “bad” Muslim. Mark Gonzales, a Mexican and Muslim poet from Southern California, appears in the same season as Amir Sulaiman wearing a Black t-shirt with “Pal-es-tine” printed in red and the pronunciation (pal’i stīn’) in white lettering underneath. His poem, “As with Most Men” (s4e1), notes the value inconsistencies in patriarchy, where the celebrated use of violence against terrorism obfuscates the same use of violence against women. He writes, “men/sign peace accords while abusing their wives/accept the Nobel peace prize while reducing healthcare/pledge to rid the world of terrorism/while simultaneously denying government aid to any country that defends a woman’s right to choose.”

While this poem is a bold critique of patriarchy in a geopolitical context, it is merely a consolation for a poem Gonzales hoped to perform about the occupation of Palestine. As Javon Johnson recounts:

They told him he couldn’t do a certain poem that he really wanted to do. It wasn’t an anti-Jewish poem. It was an anti-Zionist stronghold on Palestine poem. He has no problem with Jews. He’s like “I have a problem with a Zionist stronghold. I have a problem with the murdering of Palestinians. That I have an issue with.” And they told him, he couldn’t do that one. Because one, they weren’t ready for that poem at the time, and two, Coca-Cola was a major sponsor. And Coca-Cola invests heavily in Israel. So the show was not without its own repressive politics. I



love the poem that he did on there, but it's ultimately not the one he wanted to do.  
(Johnson "Interview")

As we can see, there is no space for "bad" Muslims, and in this case, a Muslim poet speaking unequivocally about the occupation of Palestinian territories. While Amir Sulaiman speaks of violent ends to dominant power-structures, even using a "teenage Palestinian opening fire at an Israeli checkpoint," his poem can be read as the rage of a Black revolutionary, something *Def Poetry Jam* finds valuable. On the other hand, Mark Gonzales illustrates the extent to which *Def Poetry Jam* allows Muslims to speak; it is okay to be against the War on Terror, but not against the United States and the West's involvement in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. Similarly, Tahani Selah's poem "Hate" (s6e2) asks the question, "Why do these Palestinian children hate so much?" Yet, even as her poem describes violence, oppression, and constant surveillance of these children, her poem not once mentions Israel. Consistent with the themes of this research, *Def Poetry Jam* presents bold, hard-cutting perspectives, and radical narratives, but the show itself is neither radical nor revolutionary.

#### *Cultural Memory and Politics of the U.S.A.*

Although *Def Poetry Jam* as a television series is by no means revolutionary or radical, such criticism should not overshadow the use of these poems as productions of knowledge nor, for that matter, as performances of cultural resistance. For example, in playwright Brian Dykstra's performance of "Push Bush" (s6e5), he mocks President Bush's inarticulateness, drug history, and the election controversy in Florida as a catalyst for war profiteering by Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Similarly, Red Storm, a Chicago poet who began writing poetry in the middle of a thirteen-year prison sentence, discusses the same election, focusing on

politicians' irreverence for social inequality. He writes, "when niggas was strugglin' putting food in their mouths and clothes on their backs/Instead, you put millions in the military to fund another attack/So you tell me, man/Where's your muthafuckin' humanity at?" Where poems about 9/11 and the War on Terror are cautious, metaphorical, or otherwise clever with their critiques of US imperialism, poems about American politics and history are often quite evident in expressing a resistance of American policies, government, and the traditional narratives of American history.

In two of the more clear-cut calls for political action, Marty McConnell's "Give Me One Good Reason to Die" (s2e5) addresses political apathy, while Steve Connell and Sekou the Misfit's group-piece, "America Calls" (s5e8) addresses the lack of participation amongst eligible voters. McConnell, who was at the forefront of New York's Louder Arts poetry community, writes about a dispassionate generation amidst a myriad of social atrocities, ranging from the Ku Klux Klan annually erecting a cross in Cincinnati, sodomy laws throughout the United States, restrictions on abortion, and the rise of evangelical Christian conservatism. The conclusion of the poem gives an example of this strategy:

...is anybody listening?

I live in search of a cause worth dying for

It could be this revolution is all mouth and no legs

We are a generation of screamers

silenced by the conspiracy of comfort

that cradles us voiceless

in our PC cities, where only the drunk  
and the dangerous spill what seethes  
in so many  
I trade crusades like cards,  
flip issues like channels  
give me a god  
give me a rallying cry  
give me one  
good reason to die

While she writes as a member of this dispassionate generation, her performance invites audiences to consider what more might it take for individuals to get involved.

Steve Connell and Sekou the Misfit, who wrote and performed together for a decade following their membership on the 2002 Da Poetry Lounge slam team, approach politics through humor and wit.<sup>80</sup> In “America’s Calling” (s5e8) they introduce the poem by discussing the inconvenience and difficulty folks have in making choices. The poem turns when they both say, “if it ever gets to be too much/Remember, this is America.” Steve then looks directly at an audience member below and says, “Right, you can’t stop the phone from ringing/But you can turn the ringer off.” Personifying America, they leave alternating voicemails, escalating in importance, to the apathetic citizen. Steve Connell begins, “Yo, this America, I never head back/So while you were out, I got us a new home security system that gives your home security

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<sup>80</sup> Sekou the Misfit became the first artist who identifies as a spoken word poet to be nominated for a Grammy award in the spoken word category in 2019. Whereas nominations usually reflect the recordings of artists reading books, Sekou collaborated with alternative orchestra String Theory to record spoken word poetry with music. Poets who previously won awards in this category include Carl Sandburg, Maya Angelou, Rod McKuen, and Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis.

from everyone, except us.” Sekou responds, “Oh, I also took the liberty of taking your liberty/I’ll let you know where it is when security clears...you.” The poem ends with America, as personified by Sekou and Connell, saying, “thank you for making this easy.” As such, “America’s Calling” speaks indirectly to the effects of the Patriot Act. Both “America Calling” and “Give Me One Good Reason to Die” are performances designed to get audiences involved in social and political change. While McConnell’s “give me one good reason/to die” undoubtedly intimates more severe action and consequences than voting or otherwise participating in electoral politics, both poems nonetheless resist apathetic behavior and inaction presumably of young adults in the early 2000s.

Performances on the show do not merely address American politics and the issues at the time, poets also use their work to craft historical counter-narratives. Poems by Sekou Sundiata and Ras Baraka, the son of Amiri Baraka who would later become the mayor of Newark, chronicle American history through the injustice of white supremacy. In Baraka’s “American Poem” (s3e2), his refrain of “I wanna hear an America poem” recasts moments of institutional and de jure racism as integral to the culture and structure of the United States. He writes:

I just wanna hear an American poem  
Something native like the Trail of Tears  
Wounded Knee or smallpox and blankets  
You know American  
Something that represents us  
...  
Like Red summer  
Strange fruit

Palmer Raids

Hey you, yeah, you, yeah, you, you

Something American

USA America

America USA

As American as the KKK

A poem about Emmett Till will do

Tallahatchie River

Church bombings and child murderers

About Alabama red dirt and boycotts in Montgomery

About families migrating north with dignity and shotguns

Similarly, Sekou Sundiata's performance of "Come On and Bring On the Reparations" (s2e1) recalls an American history through the lens of racial injustice. In making his case for reparations owed, he even uses some of the same references as Baraka, for example, "For the privilege in your skin/A Wounded Knee and a Trail of Tears for the Indians" and "For the Birmingham gospel/Four little girls come Sunday." Unlike Baraka, however, Sundiata offers examples of from music and popular culture, mentioning the appropriation of rock n' roll, Black antebellum images in advertising, and a particularly damning critique of the beat's appropriation of jazz. He writes:

For the beat in beatnik...White Negroes and such

Getting off up under that great music in them little ass five spots

For the jazz in the jazz age

Making your women wiggle and squirm  
And you trying to twist and do the worm  
You know abstract expressionism gism dripping  
You might say  
If I was you, I would go on the road and howl too

In foregrounding systemic racism as an American value, practice, and otherwise central part of the culture, Sundiata and Baraka's performance accomplishes the same function as such historical works as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) and Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* (1994). Like these historical texts, Sundiata and Baraka's performances demonstrate cultural resistance by telling an alternative history of the United States.

The final means by which poetry functions as cultural resistance in American politics is the addressing of specific policies, politicians, and institutions. Roger Bonair-Agard, a Trinidadian poet, also a member and coach of the 1998 Nuyorican Slam team, performs "A Song for Trent Lott" (s3e5), directly confronting the Mississippi senator. Bonair-Agard begins, "You think you'd have survived/that vote Mr. White Man/do you know what we do in the dark?" Lott, who faced retribution for his 2002 remarks favorable to Strom Thurmond's segregationist policies in Thurmond's 1948 bid for president, was forced to resign from his Senate leadership position based on public pressure. Initially, Trent Lott's praise for Thurmond hardly generated the attention of news outlets. Yet the emerging political blogosphere kept researching and recirculating the story until mainstream outlets forced Lott's comments into the news cycle (Kahn and Kellner; Ekdale et al.). The following week, with Trent Lott scheduled to address his statements on the news program *BET Tonight* with host Ed Gordon, the Los Angeles Times

noted Black communities' dissatisfaction with the BET network for giving Lott a platform. The article began, "All day, chat rooms that cater to Black Americans buzzed with anger" (Neuman). Bonair-Agard's "Song for Trent Lott" articulates how Black American, Caribbean, and indigenous histories of resisting white supremacy is the same resistance that undid Lott's power in the Senate while calling for political action. Roger Bonair-Agard, who identifies historical figures like Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Assata Shakur, Cuffy, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, the Black Panthers, Nat Turner, Crazy Horse, the Move organization, the Black Panthers, and the Mau Mau among others, presents their resistance to colonization as a continuous and contemporary struggle for audiences to continue.

### *Hurricane Katrina*

While anti-war poems and criticism of the Bush administration increase throughout the series, these critiques take on new meaning following the August 29, 2005 storm in the Gulf Coast. The state of Louisiana and more prominently the federal government's response to the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina, and most notably the breached levees in New Orleans, change the conversation from social and economic inequality towards a biopolitics of disposability (Giroux). As Douglas Kellner explains, "The inability of the federal government to respond to the catastrophe called attention not only to the failures and incompetence of the Bush administration but also to the crisis of neoliberalism whereby the market alone cannot provide for the needs of citizens and deal with acute social problems and natural disasters" ("The Katrina Hurricane Spectacle and Crisis of the Bush Presidency" 232). Performances on *Def Poetry Jam* consistently criticize the corporatization of democracy, privatization of war, and the historical

legacy of white supremacy in the daily experience of social and economic inequality, but following the storm, these criticisms link neoliberalism with death and abandonment.

Performances on *Def Poetry Jam* illustrate sociopoetix about Hurricane Katrina, through autoethnographic accounts and insider perspectives. In the fourth episode of *Def Poetry Jam*'s final season, Mos Def introduces three Gulf Coast poets by singing: "It was a direct hit/the smash went splash/the house crumbled beneath the weight/There's water, water everywhere/and not a drop to drink/And if you can climb to high ground/closer to the sun/try not to drown/There's water, water everywhere/and not a drop to drink." He then brings up New Orleans poets Shelton "Shakespeare" Alexander and Sunni Patterson, with Mississippi rapper David Banner between them.<sup>81</sup> Alexander, who also appeared in Spike Lee's documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), narrates his escape from New Orleans through flooded waters days after the levees failed (s6e4). He describes the helplessness when passing by the convention center and not being able to help others leave the flooded city. Alexander describes caskets floating from their graves to the surface, some with remains spilled outside of the caskets.

In David Banner's poem, "What About Us" (s6e4), he addresses the lack of news coverage and federal response Mississippi receives in the shadows of New Orleans. He shares, "The levees broke in/New Orleans, and man/It was a shame, that/The camera crews and/The national news, merely/Whispered our names/'Mississippi' What about us." Unlike Banner and Alexander, Sunni Patterson's "We Made It" (s6e4) is not a narrative about life during or after the storm. Instead, New Orleans serves as the spatiality for Patterson's Afro-pessimist exploration of how Black life is not a social life, but rather, "Black life is lived in social death" (Sexton 29). She

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<sup>81</sup> Shelton "Shakespeare" Alexander is often listed under the pseudonym of African-American Shakespeare.



concludes her poem saying, “(death) comes so we might be courageous/to fulfill our obligation to our God and all creation,/and stand in determination,/able to look death in the face/and say we made it.”

While Sunni Patterson, David Banner, and Shelton “Shakespeare” Alexander implicate government failure for their lack preparation and response to the storm, a performance by Black Ice most clearly articulates the biopolitics of disposability described by Henry A. Giroux. Giroux explains, “neoliberalism, privatization, and militarism have become the dominant biopolitics of the mid-twentieth-century social state and that the coupling of a market fundamentalism and contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of capital accumulation, violence, and disposability, especially under the Bush administration, has produced a new and dangerous version of biopolitics” (181). Ice, as a Philadelphia poet and thus not an insider, does not speak through autoethnographic accounts of the storm. However, his prestige as *Def Poetry Jam*’s ultimate ThugNiggaIntellectual not only warrants particular focus in this section, his performance of “The Ugly Show” (s6e6) captures the systemic disregard for Black lives in the institutions. He writes:

Floodwaters outside the Superdome

Home no more

Show no more love

Than them third-world countries we take over

This is the real rape over

And this ain’t young boy frustrated emotion

This is grown man rationale

Hard to admit my national  
Don't give a fuck about its own  
But the evidence is clear we can stack it up  
Kanye made a statement  
Ice here to back it up  
...  
Top priority  
Make sure the rich folk stay rich folk  
Pitchfork type thinking  
New Orleans been sinking  
This ain't a new issue  
The Ninth Ward been the tissue  
That the city wipes his ass with  
...  
This is your nation's poor  
But you still stand here and ask us for our kids for war  
And the battalions from Bayou  
That don't know what they over there fighting for  
What the fuck can you possibly say to them  
When they learn that their parents died  
Casualties of the war in poverty  
Waiting for help outside a fuckin' stadium

“The Ugly Show” is profound in its simplicity, its accessibility, and its engagement through the use of rhyme, rhythm, and references. Ice’s claim that the nation’s top priority is the concentration of wealth and its effects of consistently oppressing poor Black communities, like New Orleans’ Ninth Ward. Also, his suggestion that the nation depends on its working-class children for war is exactly Giroux’s point about this new and dangerous version of biopolitics. As if the sociopoetix of “The Ugly Show” is not already convincing in its engagement with neoliberalism, coded in Ice’s lyrics is an effective comparison about the labor and disposability of Blackness; Black Ice references a song by Mos Def, saying, “This is the real rape over,” where Mos Def levels critiques of how MTV, Viacom, AOL and Time Warner, and “old white men are running this rap shit.”<sup>82</sup> Black Ice offers the exploitation of artists in hip-hop as an allegory for the disposability of Black and poor bodies in the advancement of neoliberalism.

### *War on Poverty*

Poems about 9/11, the War on Terror, and Hurricane Katrina are incredible responses to the actions and inactions of the Bush administration. Built into these criticisms is the growing income inequality that began in the 1970s (Piketty and Saez) and the wealth gap that fueled the Occupy Movement that follows the last season of *Def Poetry Jam*. With high-income earners becoming invested in stock-options, the Ronald Reagan era of neoliberal economic policies, globalization, and the attack on poor families and families of color, the result was a stagnation in social mobility that kept working-class and impoverished folks out of the middle class and folks

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<sup>82</sup> “The Rape Over” is itself a reappropriation of the Jay-Z song the “The Takeover.” Where “The Takeover” infamously disses the group Mobb Deep and explodes the beef between Jay-Z and Nas, Mos Def reappropriates the same music, cadence, and rhyme scheme to challenge the corporatization of hip-hop. Black Ice’s declaration of “the real rape over” is incredibly nuanced, asking the listener to move from rap beef, to commodification, to the disposability of life.

in the middle class working harder to maintain the lifestyle associated with their class status (Chetty et al.; Cork). While most of the problematizing around poverty, the economy, and income inequality briefly occur as lines embedded in poems about other subjects, there were a few performances where poets speak unequivocally about living in poverty. Poetri (s1e4), for example, anthropomorphizes money as an unfaithful companion, and Claudia Alick (s5e1), describes the life of the 8.6% of individuals considered working-poor (United States Congress Bureau of Labor Statistics). Through sociopoetix, poets on *Def Poetry Jam* demonstrate what Bakari Kitwana describes as a serious commitment to addressing the economic development, equal access, and unequal playing field that subjected the hip-hop generation to inferior schools, limited employment possibilities, and a quality of life subpar to the best of what America has to offer (49).

Among the most explicit engagement with economic inequality, are performances about lower-income neighborhoods in specific cities and through the conceptualization of the ghetto. For example, Al Mills and Nnamdi Chukwuocha, listed as the Twin Poets, depict the ghetto as the antithesis of suburbia in their poem “Dreams are Illegal in the Ghetto” (s2e1). What can be seen as an answer to the question posed by Langston Hughes, “What happens to a dream differed?” (“Harlem” 426), the Twin Poets suggest that dreams have been lost “in the midst of ghetto chaos.” The description of this chaos, according to the Twin Poets, is an amalgamation of social policies, policing, and the devil. In a similar view of the ghetto, Los Angeles rapper Pat’s Justice, a twenty-year-old at the time of his performance of “Innocent Criminal” (s6e2), elaborates on the ghetto chaos by historicizing the structural and economic conditions of Black neighborhoods. His opening lines, “They say the sixties was crazy, but the eighties was worse/Crack fucked Blacks and gave birth to a curse,” set up a reflective piece where the

exploitation of poor Black people in the hood are the cause of his nihilistic deviance and thug behavior.

Similarly, Chinaka Hodge and Flaco Navaja narrate the conditions by which the ghetto is a place where young people merely survive. Even though Navaja's "Kids Don't Play" (s3e2) employs humor and Hodge's "Barely Audible" (s3e5) relies on macabre imagery, their poems share the message that children in the ghetto are prematurely forced into adult roles, experience trauma, and engage in play that leads directly to deviance and crime. Both poems explore teen parenting, gun violence, and even the way liquor stores target children with sugary candies and beverages. Hodge describes "Pickles and red Kool-Aid sticking to her lips/Like blue Now & Laters/Spiced apple cider/Sunflower seeds/Chitterlings and abject poverty," which draws attention to the range of unhealthy foods offered at liquor stores. Navaja writes something similar, but instead sticks more to his point about the socialization of children into early adulthood. His punchline, "We went from Kool-Aid, to Mystics, to 40s" draws laughter from the audience.

In contrast to these depictions, poetry throughout the series offers the hood as a site of culture that defies the carceral logic of control, discipline, and punishment. These performances are constructed around, what Javon Johnson describes, as a politics of "hood-logistics" (Johnson "Interview"). Borrowing from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Johnson recovers the hood from being a symbol of socio-spatial dysfunction and instead, offers the hood as a space for community, culture, social bonds, and as a site of meaningful resistance to the very systems which exert power, control, and limited resources. If, as de Certeau suggests, "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an

enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (108), then the poems about poverty, inequality, and the hood, bring forth those histories through the poets’ performances. For example, Richard Montoya (s3e4) collapses space and history in his exploration of Miami, before offering Miami as a site for Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban and Native American resistance in the War on Drugs. In “The Promised Land” (s6e4), Georgia Me offers Atlanta as a site where slavery and Ku Klux Klan violence eventually succumbs to the optimism, opportunity, and family legacies that she describes as “the soul of America.” Laura Piece Kelly (s4e6) describes the rise of crime and poverty of Seattle’s Central District, but by the poem’s end, her anger and disappointment in the neighborhood’s decline becomes a source of inspiration to improve the lives of its Black residents.

There are four tributes to the socio-spatial logistics of New York. In “Nueva York” (s5e3), Emanuel Xavier offers New York as a vibrant place of Puerto Rican culture, where “the gringos watch curiously, lost in translation/unable to understand the slang bodega terms/the Nuyorican words that give the spice of life.” Lemon Anderson (s2e3) and Anthony Morales (s2e4) offer Brooklyn and the Bronx respectively as sites that cultivate a transformation of the carceral state into a range of performative and economic opportunities through the culture of hip-hop. While Dawn Saylor’s “Take You to Brooklyn” (s4e3) is not about the hood, it similarly illustrates the possibilities of resistance and repression, albeit it for a white working-class woman in Manhattan. Her poem welts the myth of the American dream into a daily practice of survival, notably by consumption, before Saylor injects hope by articulating the subtle practices of resistance, with reoccurring references to walking, notwithstanding. On *Def Poetry Jam*, New York stands as an allegory for the United States and the center of the spoken word and performance poetry movement. Thus, the performances of Anderson, Morales, Xavier, and

Saylor, not only reveal the socio-spatial logistics of their boroughs, but they invite audiences to consider how people make meaning of the culture, constraints, the histories, and opportunities that existed in their space. More specific to Michel de Certeau and Javon Johnson, these performances along with those by Georgia Me, Laura Piece Kelly, and Richard Montoya, demonstrate place as possible sites of resistance against those very structures and institutions that use space to confine those deemed less desirable.

In Roger Bonair-Agard's "How the Ghetto Loves Us Back" (s2e2), the poem explores the stylings of what pioneering hip-hop feminist critic, Joan Morgan, describes as a project girl walking through the hood. In *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, Morgan describes these projects girls, "with names like Pokie, Nay-Nay, Angela, and Robin" (17) through a lens of admiration:

I used to sit on our tenement stoop mesmerized by the way those flimsy little tops knew how to hug a tittie in all the right places, or the way a proper Bronx Girl Switch (two parts Switch to one part Bop) could make the skirts move like waves. Wide-eyed, I watched the regla project girls transform into Black Moses capable of parting seas go otherwise idle Negroes. (17)

While her passage foreshadowed a more substantial critique of how feminists, including some Black feminists, ignore the range of tactics that project girls use to resist intersecting locators of oppression, Roger Bonair-Agard explores their presence as both *of the hood* and *in the hood*.

In Bonair-Agard's poem, this project girl is *of the hood*, as evident in the way she dresses, the way she walks, and the way she is admired by those who are also *of the hood*; those are the young girls who want to be like her when they grow up and also "the most honest among us/the jobless and the laborers" who admire her sexually. Initially, the poet describes her style as

a “stench” and a “ghetto scent” that grows in her presence, but the poem turns as she walks into the distance, revealing the stench as the structural and economic construction of the ghetto: “gunmetal and acid,” “grade-schoolers jumping rope and cussing,” “four hair-dressing salons,” “three take-out Chinese food restaurants,” “two liquor-stores jeweled with bullet-proof glass,” “crabs in a barrel,” “police cars,” and “the armpits of the second racists mayor in a row.” As the poem crescendos, Roger Bonair-Agard, repeats, “and struggle, and struggle, and struggle” before concluding, “this is how the ghetto loves us back.” Thus, the poem, and word *love*, in particular, can be read as a “repository of bad values and economic failure” or as the “source of a vibrant culture of resistance” (Kelley *Yo’ Mama* 9).

“How the Ghetto Loves Us Back,” like many of the poems on *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, paints a vibrant picture of everyday life in the United States in order to reveal the processes of structural and social oppression. While my analysis concentrates on poems that problematize issues around 9/11, the War on Terror, politics, cultural memory, and the ghetto, performances on *Def Poetry* also problematize issues around education, family, patriarchy, and technology. In looking at the series through the lens of sociopoetix, *Def Poetry Jam* creates an archive of autoethnographic and observational accounts, describing the hidden and not so hidden mechanisms of power at the dawn of the twenty-first century. These performances offer a unique way of understanding social phenomena, especially in comparison to scientific method-based understandings. Although this research does not privilege one method of knowing over the other, the work of Aimé Césaire highlights the importance of poetic knowledge as an understanding of the world which values humanity above all. As such, the work of *Def Poetry Jam* provides a representational space for poets as organic intellectuals to challenge the inhumanity of US



imperialism, neoliberalism, and systemic oppression, through a knowledge rooted in human and the everyday struggles for survival, community building, and cultural resistance.

## Chapter 5: Matter-Based Narration in New(er) Black Realism

“Black as Black does,  
not a concept,  
not a privilege,  
but a natural law” — Rita Dove

In the final scene of the Albert and Allen Hughes’ film, *Menace II Society* (1993), the protagonist, Caine, runs into a hail of bullets to protect his girlfriend’s son, sitting on a tricycle directly in front of a car committing a drive-by. When the bullets stop, a montage of the film plays with Caine finally reflecting on his mortality. He recalls, “My grandpa asked me one time if I care whether I live or die.” When he answers, “Yea, I do,” the screen cuts to black, highlighting Caine’s final thought, “But now it’s too late.” The montage ends with two handguns pointed out of the backseat of the car. One gun fires the bullet that will presumably kill Caine. At that moment, audiences realize that Caine’s narration of the events in the film is the character’s life flashing before his eyes.

Twelve years after this fictional representation of a drive-by that left Caine’s body bullet-riddled and bloody, a real Miami shooting claimed the life of another Black male, this one was a poet. Will “Da Real One” Bell appears twice on *Def Poetry Jam*. His first poem, “So I Run” (s4e3), places him at the historical moment of murders, including the 1963 Birmingham church bombing, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and drive-by shootings of Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. Each time, at the brink of violence, a voice yells, “You better run, nigger.” The poem ends with Bell’s murder, where he expresses relief that he does not have to run and “be nobody’s nigga no more.” His second poem, “Diary of the

Reformed” (s5e2), follows his reflections on how inspiring people through poetry helps him denounce a life of violence. Bell, however, was killed just after closing his poetry reading at the Literary Café and Poetry Lounge. As the Miami New Times describes, “Childhood for Will ‘Da Real One’ was an all-too-familiar tale of African-American boys growing up in the inner-city neighborhoods of Miami” (Alvarado), which perhaps makes his murder all the more tragic. Poetry did not save him from a violent death.

With Will “Da Real One’s” life, death, and poetry in mind, this chapter examines how *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* contributes to the on-screen representation of Black stories, Black bodies, and Black lives. This chapter argues that *Def Poetry Jam* is an extension of the new Black realism films of the 1990s and new Black realism as it appeared on television, demonstrating an evolution which I describe as new(er) Black realism. As a result, *Def Poetry Jam* presents an early incarnation of a narrative technique, matter-based narration, to move beyond the representation of individuals merely surviving and dying in the hood. In light of this, my analysis of this representation and subsequent narrative technique draws heavily on the Martiniquais theorist, Frantz Fanon, as he considers “the fact of Blackness” in his book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Lastly, this chapter offers new(er) Black realism and matter-based narration as a foreshadowing of resistance to social control, especially police violence, that corresponds with the Black Lives Matter movement in the decade following *Def Poetry Jam*.

### *New Black Realism*

Manthia Diawara locates new Black realism along a continuum of Black filmmaking traditions. He begins with Oscar Micheaux, whose “camera positioned Black spectators on the same side as the Black middle-class ideology, acquiring for his films an aesthetic that was

primarily specific to the ways of life of that class” (Diawara 600). Continuing with Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, primarily Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback Baaddasssss Song* (1971), Diawara explains the narrative technique as relying on “the aesthetic draws on the logic of Black nationalism as the basis of value judgement, and defines itself by positioning the spectator to identify with the Black male hero of the film” (600). Even as the principal characters occupied roles likely to have been seen as detrimental by the Black community, such as the pimps, cocaine and heroin dealers, or revenge-bound anti-heroes, Blaxploitation’s fetishizing of anti-whiteness offered pleasure for Black spectators and profit for the white filmmaking industry. Together, Oscar Micheaux and Blaxploitation films serve as important markers for thinking about how on-screen representations of “real” are beholden to artistic, political, and ideological choices.

Diawara’s juxtaposition of independent new Black realist films, like *Sankofa* (1993) and *Tongues Untied* (1989), and the Black realist films set in the hood offers two modes of narration which produce the effect of reality for viewers: space-based narration and time-based narration. He describes space-based narration “as a way of revealing and linking Black spaces that have been separated and suppressed by white times, and as a means of validating culture” (603). Using Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Diawara examines how Black characters, particularly female characters, are always present and often foregrounded on their Ibo Landing setting. Unlike conventional Hollywood films where Black bodies occupy less space on the screen, the spatial narration of these Black independent films communicates possession and belonging.

The hood films in new Black realism, on the other hand, employ time-based narration which allows the director to link “the progress of time to Black characters, and make time exist

for the purpose of defining their needs and their desires” (603). *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) exemplifies time based-narration, as the protagonist, Tre, transitions into manhood through a sequentially marked series of rites-of-passage familiar to Black men and particularly familiar to Black men in the hood. Tre is shown surviving time in three interconnected episodes, marked by time with his mother, time with his father, and time with his friends. Tre survives merely because these figures make the decisions which keep him alive, and presumably into a higher understanding of life (607). By contrast, in *Menace II Society*, Caine’s inability to move into a higher understanding of life leads to an inevitably tragic death, and thus, the film is a reflection of the time that has passed. These space and time-based narratives illustrate the story-telling techniques that came to define the representation of “real” in Black films.

At the conclusion of “Black American Cinema: The New Realism,” Manthia Diawara reflects on his students’ responses to the film *Boyz N the Hood*. “Clearly, there is something in the narrative of films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) that links them, to put it in Aristotelian terms, to existent reality in Black communities” (606). Diawara explores “real” as a social construct. For his students, this realness is constructed through images of liquor stores, gang-life, police tactics, and the conditions of South Central LA and the Red Hook housing projects. The on-screen representations of poverty, blighted neighborhoods, and the stories taking places in these settings would dominate Black cinema, in large part because those images and stories brought audiences closer to the images and stories reflected in the news. As Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki explain in their book, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (2000), “unfortunately, the news workers’ decisions to suffuse so much of the news with images of Black crime and violence may reinforce the current White

audience's tendencies to develop schematic associations (or stereotypes) linking African-Americans closely with crime and violence" (93).

While new Black realism gave audiences representation of Black reality, it also demonstrated to Hollywood studios the profitability of stories set in the Black ghettos. Made with a budget of \$6.5 million, *Boyz N the Hood* generated over \$57.5 million. Against a budget of \$3.5 million, the Hughes brothers generated almost \$28 million for *Menace II Society*. Even *Straight Outta Brooklyn*, with a \$450,000 budget grossed \$2.7 million.<sup>83</sup> Such profitability led to the development of major Hollywood studios producing films catering to Black audiences. But rather than expanding the emerging new Black realist films that spoke to the inequality and social position of Black people, these studios opted for stories about families, friendship, and romance amongst successful Black professionals. Beginning with the Terry McMillan novel turned film, *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), Black films moved out of the hood and into the Black middle class and impossibly successful lives of a young Black bourgeoisie class.

Consider the film *Love & Basketball* (2000), which uses time-based narration in the romance of two standout basketball players, Monica and Quincy. Monica, the daughter of a high-ranking bank officer, and Quincy, the son of a professional basketball player, grow up in spacious houses, a clear sign of middle and upper-middle-class families in Los Angeles. Monica and Quincy attend Crenshaw High School as seniors in 1988. Coincidentally, in *Boyz N the Hood*, Tre and Ricky are depicted as seniors in 1991 who also attend Crenshaw High School. This contrast illustrates how Black films move from the subculture and stories about the hood in favor of the middle-class and upwardly mobile representations of Black people. Thus, Katharine Bausch laments the decline of new Black realism, viewing transition towards middle and upper-

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<sup>83</sup> Box office information retrieved from *The Internet Movie Database* on April 2018

class representation as a lost opportunity for the American public to bear witness “to the subculture of hood life that affects so many young men in America” (271-272).

### *New Black Realism on Television*

Outside of the hip-hop, R&B music videos, and programming on Black Entertainment Television, new Black realism was slow to appear on television screens. While Herman Gray finds 1980s television series, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Family Matters* (1989-1997), *227* (1985-1990), and *Amen* (1986-1991), as filled with representations of Black characters, they are confined to the limited tropes of social interaction within domestic and small group relationships. Except for shows like *A Man Called Hawk* (1989), *A Different World* (1987-1993), and *Frank’s Place* (1987-1988), which foregrounds the Black identities of main characters, Black television in the 1980s reproduced the “agendas of the moral entrepreneurs of the new right” (Gray 60). Beginning in the 1990s, shows like *In Living Color* (1990-1994), *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Martin* (1992-1997), *Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper* (1992-1997), and *Living Single* (1993-1998) incorporated hip-hop and Black youth culture, drawing “directly on the forms of music, dress, language, and style for their representations” (61). Through hip-hop, elements of spatial narration constructed the stories and representation of Black lives, albeit with minimal disruption to the agenda of the new right.<sup>84</sup>

While Black television shows saturated representations of Blackness with humor, there were occasionally powerful moments rooted in new Black realist elements, such as the discovery of an underground railroad safe house in *A Different World* and racial profiling by police in *The*

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<sup>84</sup> One could make a case for *In Living Color*, however, the constant oversight and censorship from the Fox Network and subsequent departure by the show’s creator Keenan Ivory Wayans leads me to include *In Living Color* in this argument.

*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. There were two noted exceptions, however, where the entire premise of the show was rooted in new Black realism, *Roc* (1991-1994) and *South Central* (1994). Both shows were centered around Black working-class families. *Roc* and *South Central* were in stark contrast to the middle-class life presented in Black skin and the cliché pop-vibrancy of hip-hop iconography that dominate television in the early 1990s. Whereas Stan Lathan, the producer and director of *Def Poetry Jam*, had limited his work in television as a freelance director, usually in television specials and pilot episodes, he dedicated himself to these shows by directing the majority of episodes for both. In *Roc*, we found the spatial-narration of new Black realism and in *South Central*, we found the time-based narration common to films set in the hood.

*Roc* stars Charles S. Dutton as the eponymous character, a middle-aged garbage collector living in one of Baltimore's working-class neighborhoods. During the three seasons, *Roc* evolves from a stock sitcom with subtle themes of race and class to a socio-political drama infused with comedy.<sup>85</sup> In *Roc*, the opening theme song is an acapella version of "God Bless the Child That's Got His Own" sung by The Persuaders. In a chiaroscuro filter, panned shots of a working-class neighborhood in Baltimore, cluttered with signs for liquor, discount groceries, and check-cashing shops accompany the song (Zook 79). Before each episode begins, *Roc* presents a spatial alternative to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*'s infusion of hip-hop, and *The Cosby Show*'s introduction which relies on historical Black bourgeois aesthetics, such as a mock-Alvin Ailey dance number and various jazz incarnates of the theme song.

As the show itself focuses on issues of domesticity, "*Roc* moves quite a way toward constructing and representing the integrity, frustration, and joys of Black working-class men and women who have histories, politics, conflicts, and hopes. And does so without reducing these

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<sup>85</sup> With Stan Lathan's experience in directing stage and theater productions, as well as each of the four principal cast members being accomplished stage actors, the entire second season is filmed live.



complexities to normative white middle-class frames” (Hunt 127). Indeed, the storylines constructs a representation of the Black working-class family, but of equal value is the spatial construction of Black working-class families. In *Color By Fox: the Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, Kristal Brent Zook’s analysis of *Roc* includes a discussion of the Malcolm X poster, which was often referenced by the male characters as a source of pride, power, heritage, and in one episode, heteronormativity. Between seasons two and three, Stan Lathan deemphasizes these shots as he felt they had become “overdone,” and they “bored him” (82). However, as Zook explains, replacing these shots with “Africanesque fabrics draped on the walls,” there is an implied replacement of one character’s quest for social justice and a movement toward the possibility of a collective social movement (82).

As its title suggests, *South Central* brought the world of *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* to the small screen. *South Central*, centers on a single mother, Joan, raising her three children after the 1992 Rebellion. The oldest child was murdered by gang-violence before the first episode. The next oldest, Andre, is a quick-witted teenager trying to negotiate his role as the man of the house with his teenage compulsion to have fun, all under the persistent threat of violence to his body. Joan’s middle-child, Tasha, is a bold and responsible girl, who is only emotionally vulnerable around issues of her absent father.<sup>86</sup> The youngest child is a mute foster son, described as a “crack baby” by one of the supporting characters.

Whereas new Black realism would focus our analysis on Andre’s survival and transition into manhood, *South Central* abruptly ended after ten of its scheduled thirteen episodes (Zook), thus leaving that transition unfulfilled. In only one season, *South Central* illustrates many of the elements of new Black realist narratives as defined by Diawara. The first element, the politics of

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<sup>86</sup> The character of Andre is played by Lorenz Tate, who also plays the character of Darius Lovehall in *Love Jones* and character O-Dogg in *Menace II Society*.

caring and generation to generation care, is demonstrated by the family learning to care for the mute child, Deion. Other than the repeating references of him being a “crack baby,” audiences never learn the relationship nor circumstances causing Joan to take him in. Those reasons are not necessarily significant, given Black families’ propensity to take in the children of relatives, rather than have them become wards of the court (Hine 238-240).

The second element, locating Africanism in American ways of life, is illustrated by Ujaama, a community co-op, which serves as the grocery store and employer of Joan during the day and a young-adult hangout at night.<sup>87</sup> As Ujaama illustrates the importance of Africanism in the restoration of a community after the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion, it also reinforces the subtle ways both capitalism and Africanism in the United States reinforce sexism.<sup>88</sup> Within the limited time of *South Central*’s run, we see each of the primary characters growing through rites-of-passage, especially the children. In the final episode, Tasha finds solace in the company and on stage with rappers who perform at the co-op. While Andre, on the other hand, goes through the rites-of-passage associated with gangs, he survives by continuously maturing in each episode. We do not see him develop a politics of caring for his community, in the way that his mentor and his mother’s employer displays, however, his failure to fully commit to a lifestyle of criminality suggests that Andre would have likely matured into manhood as common for the young male protagonists in new Black realism.

Stan Lathan’s involvement with *Roc* and *South Central* make them important forebears in the presentation of *Def Poetry Jam*. *Roc* and *South Central* positions violence, social control, and strain as an unavoidable consequence of poverty in Black neighborhoods. Stories about younger

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<sup>87</sup> Ujamaa means family in Swahili and represents the principle of co-operative economics in Kwanza.

<sup>88</sup> The use of the “riot” or “rebellion” in the show demonstrates the character’s perspective and politics. In the fourth episode, the co-op owner humiliates Joan by outing her status as a recipient of welfare.

characters involving them surviving the hood, while the stories of adult characters involve changing the conditions within the hood; this is much different from Black sitcoms, where these conditions are invisible or limited to isolated events. In *Roc* and *South Central*, as we find in *Def Poetry Jam*, to be in the hood is always to have to deal with the occurrence, the threat, or the memory of violence. To be in the hood is always to have to deal with the occurrence, the threat, or the memory of white supremacy; to be in the hood is always to have to deal with the peculiar institution that exists at the intersection of race, class, and gender. For those who are not Black, their presence in the hood is an indicator that they are also dealing with the same occurrence, threats, memories, or stressors. Alternatively, their on-screen presence indicates that they are an agent of those conditions. Most importantly perhaps, *Roc* and *South Central* began to offer the hood, and the unique social bonds that are created by the conditions of the hood, as sites of resistance to the very occurrences, threats, and memory of white supremacy and systemic racism. *South Central* and *Roc* exemplified new Black realism on television and link Stan Lathan's innovative approach to the on-screen representation of Blackness that led to *Def Poetry Jam*.

*Roc* was beginning its third season when *South Central* debuted on Fox's primetime Tuesday. However, both shows were canceled, along with *In Living Color* and *The Sinbad Show* (1993-1994), when Fox declined to renew their entire primetime Tuesday block. This move drew criticism, including the threat of a boycott by the Congressional Black Caucus and Jesse Jackson. As Kristal Brent Zook argues, the cancellation had less to do with poor ratings and more to do with "Black complexity" (11). At that time, Fox relied on narrowcasting and risqué programming to develop its position as the fourth major television network, alongside ABC,

CBS, and NBC.<sup>89</sup> The \$1.6 billion purchasing rights of the NFL marked the turn that Fox had grown big enough “to stop playing in the niches and move to the Big White Middle” (Chang *Who We Be* 201). Two new networks, United Paramount Network (UPN) and the Warner Bros. Television Network (The WB), emerged by emulating Fox’s “Black-oriented strategy” (Clark). Between 1995 and 2000, programming for these two networks included *Sister, Sister* (1995-99 WB from ABC), *The Waynas Bros.* (1995-99, WB), *The Parent ‘Hood* (1995-99, WB), *Cleghorne!* (1995, WB), *Moesha* (1996-2001, UPN), *The Jaime Foxx Show* (1996-2001, WB), *In the House* (1996-99, UPN from NBC), *Malcolm and Eddie* (1996-2000, UPN), *Sparks* (1996-1998, UPN), *Homeboys in Outer Space* (1996-1997, UPN), *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996-2002, WB), *Smart Guy* (1997-99, WB), *For Your Love* (1998-2002, WB from NBC), *The Parkers* (1999-2004, UPN), *Girlfriends* (2000-2006, UPN), and *The Hughleys* (2000-02, UPN). Criticisms aimed at the middle-aged white executives of Fox, UPN, and the WB, such as *Black Enterprise Magazine*’s assertion that “Dramas like *Under One Roof* (1995) are rarely given a chance to build an audience...while there seems to be an endless supply of comedies like *Homeboys in Outer Space*” (Wilkinson 78) rightfully called attention to the over-reliance of comedic representations of Black communities in the networks attempts to build audiences. Network executives, however, pointed to a 1995 Nielson report which noted that Black households watch one and half times more hours of television compared to all-white households, with two hours more prime-time television per week than all U.S. households (Carter; Wilkinson).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Other examples of early Fox content include *Married With Children*, *The Simpsons*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Cops*, *America’s Most Wanted*, and *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Examples of early Fox narrowcasting include *The Arsenio Hall Show*, *Martin*, *In Living Color*.

<sup>90</sup> Both Carter and Wilkinson cite a 1995 Nielson Media Group report about prime time television.

While networks defended themselves from the accusations of “ghettoizing” their schedule by pointing the viewership of young Black audiences, Bill Carter, in his 1996 *New York Times* piece about UPN and the WB’s Black-oriented strategy, revealed the early influence of hip-hop on advertising. Steve Sternberg, a senior partner of the now-defunct of BJK&E Media, tells Carter, “With ethnic programs, you appeal to the group that watches the most television, Black and urban viewers, and you also usually get younger viewers as well... Younger viewers—kids and teens—see a lot of trends starting with Blacks in music and other forms of entertainment.” While studying the changing representations of hip-hop in film during the same time-frame, Melvin Donalson notes:

hip-hop assumed a visibility through minor and/or supporting characterizations of American youth, who, due to their age, were the embodiment of hip-hop nuances strictly as members of a younger generation. The omnipresence of hip-hop was indicated as characters in these movies were often from various racial, cultural, and class backgrounds... hip-hop was referenced through dialogue-language, diegetic background music, and clothing of significant and/or major Black characters living in or residing close to an urban area. (54)

In Donalson’s analysis of films between 1996-2005, he finds the representation of hip-hop as shifting from “thugs, criminals, and prison-bound losers” towards “a generation that could survive society’s challenges and could negotiate mainstream standards” (54).

Correspondingly, television amalgamated hip-hop into the bodies, symbols, and settings of a multi-cultural and multi-classed youth culture with decreasing acknowledgment of the historical, structural, and economic conditions that create hip-hop. For example, a show like *The Waynas Bros.*, whose opening credits has Marlon and Shawn Wayans literally throwing away the

feel-good sitcom theme-song with a replacement by A Tribe Called Quest's "Electric Relaxation," employs hip-hop as a marker of style, language, and generational difference. Similarly, shows like *The Steve Harvey Show*, *Moesha*, *The Parent 'Hood*, and Nickelodeon shows like *All That* (1994-2005) and *Keenan and Kel* (1996-2000), conflate youth participation in hip-hop culture with generational differences between parents, teachers, and authority figures. With a growing market for Black romantic comedies, the exploration of white identities through hip-hop, and a television landscape saturated with Black representation in situational comedies, the images and narratives of new Black realism became a niche direct-to-DVD market (Donalson). The exception to this, on television at least, was Fox's police drama, *New York Undercover* (1994-1999).

Following the partnership of two NYC detectives, one Puerto Rican and one African-American, *New York Undercover*'s blend of procedural legal drama, complex characters, and hip-hop culture reflects the vision of the show's executive producers, Dick Wolfe and Uptown Records executive Andre Harrell. As audiences watch detectives J.C. Williams, played by Malik Yoba, and Eddie Torres played by Michael DeLorenzo, solve cases in NYC's fourth precinct, a fictional district resembling Harlem, *New York Undercover* dramatizes those stories familiar in the east coast mafioso style of rap. At the same time, the stories about the detectives' personal lives represent the capacity for the hip-hop generation "to survive society's challenges" and "negotiate mainstream standards" (Donalson 54) as consistent with the changing representations of hip-hop in film.

Unlike the sitcoms which invoke hip-hop in symbolism or as a marker of youth-culture, the lives and careers of Williams and Torres depict the struggles of the early hip-hop generation. For example, Torres' reconciliation with his father, a recovering heroin addict who contracts

HIV, offers a not-so-subtle reminder of the emotional and psychological costs of the conditions which created hip-hop, especially in New York City. Williams' co-parenting of his nine-year-old son, whom he fathered as a teenager, illustrates the dynamism of Black families well before "baby-momma" and "baby-daddy" will become noted stereotypes. In their careers, both Torres and Williams constantly negotiate their professionalism as police officers and their loyalty to their community, families, and friends; this serves as an overarching metaphor where members of the early hip-hop generation negotiate their integration into the dominant social structure and their loyalty to a hip-hop culture which marks itself by rebelling against the aesthetics of this structure.

In terms of music, *New York Undercover* eschews a hip-hop-inspired soundtrack and the occasional guest appearances by rappers and singers. Instead, music operates as a focal point, by featuring the song of a prominent hip-hop or R&B artist to accompany key moments in the plot and at the conclusion of each episode. In the first season especially, the setting of Natalie's nightclub, with Gladys Knight in the role of Natalie, centers the emerging genre of hip-hop/soul to the small screen. In her reflection of *New York Undercover*, Julian Kimble, describes, "Natalie's was as important a character to *New York Undercover* as the city itself. In addition to serving as a safe haven during the show's first three seasons, it was the place where hip-hop and R&B stars new and old would perform classics." Along with Natalie's, the series responds to the conversations and events happening in and around hip-hop culture at that time. The episode, "You Get No Respect" (1995), features a scene with the Notorious B.I.G., MC Lyte, and Sticky Fingaz in the role of gangsta rapper Khalil, as panelists on the talk show *Rolanda*.<sup>91</sup> When an

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<sup>91</sup> *Rolanda* was an actual talk show that aired between 1994-1997.

audience member asks how recent acts of violence at rap concerts might change the nihilism of rap lyrics, the panelists respond as follows:

Notorious B.I.G.: If my neighborhood is filled with drugs, crime, and violence, what else are we going to rap about - green grass and daffodils?

MC Lyte: We're only telling about what's really going on. If there's a house burning down, don't get mad at us because we're yelling "fire."

Rolanda: Yeah, but isn't glorifying violence the same as contributing to violence?

Khalil: We don't glorify violence. Put it like this, the government passed the anti-crime bill that put more money into brothas playing midnight basketball. I'm sayin, that's cool and all. But meanwhile, it's hard as hell to get a grant for college. And now they're talking about cutting poor people off from welfare? You damn right people is violent. But it ain't because of hip-hop. Speaking for myself, I feel that by bringing out the truth, we're only making things better.

The applause to Khalil's answer by the studio audience, and from Detectives Torres and Williams backstage, affirms Tricia Rose's position that the valorization of violence in rap lyrics reflects "a sign of crisis for which the nation as a whole is responsible" (*The Hip-Hop Wars* 53). Of even more significance, is that the television series entered ground zero of the debate about rap lyrics with an unabashed position of support for such lyrics. It is therefore no coincidence that following Fox's NFL deal, the network forces more white characters into the show and tampers the music to appeal to a broader market share. When, in the final season, Dick Wolfe



killed the character Eddie Torres and no longer featured performances at Natalie's Nightclub or songs into the plot, the ratings plummeted.<sup>92</sup> Having stripped the show "of its individuality, and more importantly, its voice" (A. Johnson), the abrupt cancellation of *New York Undercover* unraveled the last on-screen tie between new Black realism and the representation of hip-hop in the 90s.

While network television all but abandons the politics, nihilism, and social commentary embedded in hip-hop, HBO found in *Oz* (1997-2003) a television series that revels in these aspects. The prison drama's depictions of racism, homophobia, rape, and murder turns the subject of rap criticism into a landmark for the medium of television (Crouch). As Michele Malach notes, "*Oz* was the audience's introduction to what would clearly be HBO's philosophy of original, serialized, dramatic programming." Unlike most network dramas before, *Oz* eschews stand-alone episodes, with plots and character relationships that evolve over the course of a season and over the course of the entire series. "Although that kind of storytelling has become a regular feature of both cable and network drama programming, at the time *Oz* debuted, it was still a novelty" (Mesce Jr. 194). Without discrediting the innovative use of soap opera-length story arcs, character development, acting, and spatial narration that all but squeezes viewers in the tight quarters of Emerald City, *Oz*'s success relied on what Bill Yousman describes as the "spectacular consumption" of Blackophilia and Blackophobia that resonated with HBO's predominately white suburban audiences. Yousman defines Blackophilia as a manifestation of White consumption of Black popular culture and Blackophobia as a fear of African-Americans. Both of these phenomena work together to "other" Black people and Black culture for consumption and as interrelated aspects of White supremacy. There is little in the way of positive

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<sup>92</sup> The series finale did not even air on the Fox network the year.

representation, which, in comparison to the flattened representation of hip-hop youth culture and upwardly-mobile young Black professionals, made *Oz*'s mere engagement with prison, drugs, and racial conflict significant.

While *Oz* dramatizes the interplay of Blackophilia and Blackophobia, with evil white racists, sympathetic whites, and Latinos operating within this interplay, the series was as unapologetically political and deeply philosophical as it was melodramatic (Malach). The series' narrator, Augustus Hill, played by Harold Perrineau, provides political and philosophical musings at the introduction, conclusion and throughout each episode. Usually framed some way in a cube, Hill breaks the fourth wall to deliver these short soliloquies. These are, at times, deeply introspective, as exemplified by season three's episode, "Secret Identities" (1999): "Know thyself. That's what Socrates said. Or Aristotle. Or one of them dead white men. To know yourself is the hardest thing any one of us could ever do" (Berenstein "Secret Identities"). At other times these soliloquies are deeply critical, as exemplified by season four's first episode (2000):

Congratulations, America. This year, the prison population has reached an all-time high, two million. Two million people are, what do you call it? Incarcerated. Two fucking million. That's the population of Vienna. That's the population of Houston, Texas. The U. S. of A. has five percent of the world's population, yet it has twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners. Whoopee!...

Now, most citizens would say "Two million inmates? I got no problem with that because crime is down." But, California, which increased its prison population at a much higher rate than, say, New York, had a smaller drop in crime. Cause and effect? I don't think so. (Berenstein "A Cock and Balls Story")

Augustus Hill's soliloquies were significant insofar as Hill emotes vulnerability, intellectuality, and the effects of a carceral society, in ways that Hill, as a character, would not be able to express as a prison inmate. Augustus Hill did not merely provide additional context for plot-lines and character development, by breaking the fourth wall, he transformed the stories within Oswald State Correctional Facility into an allegory for life within the United States of America as told from a member of one of society's most vulnerable populations.<sup>93</sup>

*Oz* and *New York Undercover* act as a bridge between new Black realism and what I call new(er) Black realism, where characters are not merely struggling for humanity within their own systems of stratification, but rather, these characters interpret, criticize, and challenge the oppression of their fictional societies as direct interpretation, criticism, and challenge to the state-sanctioned oppression of the US at large. While this often takes the form of a narrator, such as Bernie Mac in *The Bernie Mac Show*, or Andre Johnson in *Black-ish*, *Def Poetry Jam* introduces new(er) Black realism by essentially featuring Augustus Hill's soliloquies with no storyline attached. Like *New York Undercover*, new Black realism represents the negotiation of being a part of the social structure while maintaining loyalty to a hip-hop culture that rebels against structure. However, whereas these shows couched the biting criticisms and the philosophical challenges of a society in comedic, dramatic, and entertaining narratives, *Def Poetry* foregrounds such criticisms in their presentation of short poetic narratives.

### *New(er) Black Realism*

New(er) Black realism follows in the tradition of new Black realist representations of life in Black neighborhoods families, and communities, however, new(er) Black realism moves

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<sup>93</sup> In addition to being Black and a convicted felon, Augustus Hill is paraplegic almost always seen with a chair.

beyond the “keep it real” sensationalizing of blighted poverty and survival in the United States. Instead, new(er) Black realism moves towards a dynamic representation of culture, consciousness, and the possibilities born out of institutional and structural constraints. Characters and performers within new(er) Black realism demonstrate sets of knowledge and understandings about the structure of society, even when they are represented as being constrained economically, socially, or institutionally. In short, new(er) Black realism in film and television represents the struggle for disalienation, without abandoning the institutional means and cultural goals of the American Dream.

As indicated by the use of the term, “disalienation,” Frantz Fanon’s detangling of history, identity, and social relations within colonization in *Black Skin, White Mask* underlie the representation of new(er) Black realism. In the final chapter, Fanon grapples with Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852) and its reduction of racism to a mere effect of economic exploitation. Whereas Marx suggested, “The social revolution...cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past” (Fanon 223), Fanon contends, this stripping itself of all its past superstitions is, itself, a project of intellectual alienation created by a middle-class European society (224). Fanon’s criticism of Marx foreshadowed the criticism of the color-blind rhetoric that emerged at the turn of the century and the eagerness to declare the United States a post-racial society following the election of Barack Obama. More simply, Black folks do not have the privilege to disentangle their current economic exploitation from the history of racial discrimination. Instead, Fanon suggests working through these past superstitions and a collective history of racial and economic exploitation as a means to achieve disalienation. Thus, *Def Poetry*

*Jam*, at its core, represents narratives which work through the historical, structural, and institutional entanglements that reproduce disalienation.

### *Matter-based Narration*

As a theme, new(er) Black realism illustrates the struggle for disalienation and Fanon's recognition that "I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other. One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices" (229). New(er) Black realism builds on new Black realist traditions by representing individuals as meaningful subjects through a narrative technique which can be described as matter-based narration. Physics defines matter as any substance with mass that occupies space. Matter exists in the phase of a solid, liquid, or gas. The phase which matter takes is dependent on energy, with energy being the amount of movement happening in at a given time. Whereas new Black realism and Black independent films in the early 1990s employs spatial and time-based narratives, new(er) Black realism's matter-based narration relies on the on-screen subject as matter, which is to say characters, and in the case of this research, the poets, represents their own reality in the midst of their storyline.

New(er) Black realism as a narrative technique attempts to capture Frantz Fanon's understanding of himself in "triple." He writes, "I occupied space. I moved toward the other...and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared" (112). In this passage, Fanon articulates his three existences as 1) matter occupying space, 2) a meaningful actor in a social setting, and 3) an embodiment of the prejudice, stereotypes, and historical constructions of race and racialization that his body has come to symbolize. New(er) Black realism, therefore, attempts to represent three existences on screen. Unlike time-based

narration, which shows the development of these existences through subsequent events in the film and unlike spatial narration, where different phases are juxtaposed in the same frame, new(er) Black realism attempts to give us three phases simultaneously. As a television show that relies on this matter-based narration, *Def Poetry Jam* illustrates Fanon's "existing in the triple" where the poets appear on-screen: 1) as a representation of mass taking up space 2) as a meaningful actor, observer, or narrator of the action in their poems, and 3) as explained in the third chapter, through a subversion of the prejudices, stereotypes, and historical constructions of race and racialization based on language, wardrobe, hairstyles, accents, and most certainly their race and gender.

Consider Will "Da Real One" Bell's poem, "Diary of the Reformed." After an off-camera voice introduction, Bell's first appearance is a full shot of him walking to the front of the stage. He looks to the audience on his left, and in a cut to a medium shot, he is shown looking above and around the camera, presumably at the audience in the balcony. The camera cuts to a close up of a woman in the audience clapping before Bell appears on the screen to begin his poem. In this sequence, Bell exists as mass occupying the most meaningful space, in the middle of the Supper Club stage and the middle of the television screen. Will "Da Real One" is shown, not as an actor playing a character, but rather as Will "Da Real One" Bell, himself.

Next, Bell exists as a meaningful actor, most obviously as the person delivering the poem on screen, but more importantly, as a meaningful participant in the action of the poem. In "Diary of the Reformed," Will "Da Real One" contemplates his responsibility as a community leader, while finding himself driving with a gun and bulletproof vest to confront the person who shot his younger cousin. After describing his influence as a role model and leaving behind a violent past, he recites the conversation with his cousin's shooter:

So I step out of the truck and position myself between my cousin and the victim<sup>94</sup>

“In order for this shit to go down

You gotta shoot through me to hit him

I understand you felt like you’ve been done wrong

But brotha tell me

‘How many, how long

Will we continue to throw deaths in our mind

And have our lives be defined

By how many we can put in a chalk line’

Way before there was this Black on Black crime

There was Black on Black [inaudible]

So let me break this shit down for y’all in this Black on Black rhyme

We made ourselves believe that we didn’t need each other

But how many times you done been in an all-white situation

And was so fucking glad just to see another brother

So we need to take that feeling from the boardroom to the streets

And nigga me not wanting to kill you tonight does not make me weak

What makes me weak is not having the ability to let you know

That in spite of yourself

And regardless of your actions

I still love you

You look just like me

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<sup>94</sup> He is already calling the person whom he may or may not shoot a victim. This illustrates how dehumanization makes violence against a person more palatable to witness and to commit.

And brotha we

Really ain't gotta do this"

In this poem, Bell's decision to speak with his cousin's shooter rather than presumably shoot and kill him illustrates how Bell is himself a meaningful actor in the story. What he says to the shooter makes this action even more meaningful as it imagines how Black men handle conflicts without violence; also, how Bell confronts his inner-conflict around violence. Thus, his decision to opt for a non-violent resolution matters within the poem he spares someone's life. It also matters beyond the narrative of the poem as an opening up to the possibility that those most affected by violence possess the agency to temper the violence.

Thirdly, Will "Da Real One" Bell exists symbolically as an embodiment of the various stereotypes, prejudices, statistics, and racialization relating to Black men and gun violence.<sup>95</sup> Bell has dark skin. In medium and close-up shots, the gold teeth in his mouth are visible. In this performance, he wears black pants and a long-sleeve black t-shirt, evoking something between the image of ThugNigga, as discussed in the third chapter, and an image of militancy as evoked by Black male revolutionaries. That his poem incorporates elements of both the Black male revolutionary, regarding his performances and protection of Black masculinity within the poem, as well as the ThugNigga concerning his initial decision and willingness to shoot another person in retaliation, might serve to legitimize these symbols. However, so too might the print on his black t-shirt, which is the logo of a Tampa-based poetry collective whose name, "Black on Black Rhyme," is visible in medium shots. Based on this, Bell does not exist as a ThugNigga or revolutionary, but rather as an embodiment of the space between ThugNigga and revolutionary.

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<sup>95</sup> While it is not my intention to criminalize Bell based on his appearance, it is impossible for me to have survived childhood and early adulthood without recognizing how threatening Bell's appearance is to people in this country, especially to police.



In which case, Will “Da Real” One matters, and exists as matter, that demonstrates the possibility of change at the personal level or perhaps as a microcosm of Black masculinity.

This matter-based narration, where the performances simultaneously represent a triple existence, is depicted in the overwhelming majority of the performances on *Def Poetry Jam*. Even when the poems are not narratives, such as persona poems, these performances still work towards making Black bodies and bodies of color matter by disalienating them from objects, symbols, and interaction deemed universal, ordinary, or as applying to all humankind. For example, Flowmentalz, a Black male poet from the New Jersey poetry scene, performs the persona piece, “Constipation” (s4e2), where he speaks as blocked stool to the person who is trying pass him. The poem is humorous, with lines like, “Now you wanna eat some goddamn fruit, trying to soften me up/Mutha fucka don’t you know I’m a thug/I’m thorough as hell/which makes you a constant patient of constipation.”<sup>96</sup> Flowmentalz enhances the humor, as he finishes his poem in a freestyle swimming motion indicating the stool has passed. While humorous, this performance does make an interesting observation about the digestive health of Black folks, lower socio-economic families, and communities of color. Flowmentalz attributes his existence as blocked stool to the person’s poor diet, saying, “That greasy diet is leaving your insides dried out, giving birth to me.”<sup>97</sup> In this piece, Flowmentalz does not comfortably exist in the triple. Indeed, he exists as a representation of matter taking up space and as a meaningful actor in the story of the poem. However, his existence as matter in the poem is not complemented by his on-screen representation as a Black man. Wearing a beanie, baggy jeans, and Phat Farm t-shirt, while using some of the rhyme techniques of rap and the language of hip-hop culture,

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<sup>96</sup> The entendre “I’m thorough” doubly refers to physical density and as a hip-hop phrase signifying a person who is honest, authentic, and unafraid to back up their statements.

<sup>97</sup> Among the causes of racial and ethnic health disparities, the Center for Disease control mentions diet and eating options as both a behavioral pattern and an environmental condition.

Flowmentalz brings the constructions of race and racialization associated with his body to the object he personifies in the poem. If, as Derald Wing Sue reminds us, “As long as Whiteness remains invisible and is equated with normality and superiority, People of Color will continue to suffer from its oppressive qualities” (28) than the epidermalization and attachment to hip-hop associated with the most basic of performance of the human body is at some level a project of liberation.

Similarly, poems which reveal the competing social statuses, roles, and behaviors that make up the poet’s identity illustrate the matter-making influence of new(er) Black realism. Daniel Beaty’s “Dual Duality” (s3e1) serves as a conversation between statuses, “the nerd and the nigga in me,” competing for Beaty’s core self. Where Beaty’s changing diction and bodily posturing between aggressive and tense, represents DuBois’ concept of the double consciousness, it subtly shifts the DuBois work from the dichotomy of “American” and “Negro” to the dichotomy of the “talented tenth” and the ThugNigga.<sup>98</sup> This is also the same approach in Sista Queen’s performance of “Try Being a Lady” (s5e8). Sista Queen, a nineteen-year-old Black woman, uses this piece to reject the position that she must be a lady who is subordinate to men. She recites, “Use me as your trophy so that you can parade me./Use my vagina to only birth babies!/Be your damsel in distress so a brother can save me!/hmmm, HOW BOUT NOT!” Like Beaty, Sista Queen challenges social roles by simultaneously performing as an accepted version of a lady and as an unacceptable version of a lady. As a “lady,” Sista Queen speaks in a higher pitch voice and keeps her hands closer to the body. When rejecting the concept of a “lady,” Sista Queen speaks from her diaphragm with more pronounced movement. Audibly, kinesthetically,

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<sup>98</sup> DuBois theorized that one in ten Black men could become exceptional leaders charged with uplifting the Negro race as a way of promoting formal education. While he later acknowledged that change could come from all types of educational levels, the talented tenth is still invoked, often implicitly, by upwardly mobile and Black bourgeoisie.

and visually, Queen demonstrates her rejection of the term “lady” by taking up more space. She even comments on her use of profane language as a way of rejecting the term “lady,” by saying, “I got too much gutter being slung from my tongue/If it was 92, NWA would have appeared to be nuns.”

Both poems ultimately conclude with a rejection of respectability politics, resembling Fanon’s coming to terms with Black consciousness in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In response to the “unwelcome” inevitability that Fanon would “change” or otherwise lose the connection to his culture, community, and Blackness through assimilation, Fanon responds, “Still in terms of consciousness, Black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower” (135). Beaty and Sista Queen’s poetry impress upon audiences that same conviction. Their performances of Blackness, both on stage and as representative of their identity, does not hold itself out as lacking cultural capital; rather, these performances of Blackness express a wholeness of who they are. While the credit for empowerment lies in the creativity and talent of the poets, *Def Poetry Jam* makes representative space for the assertion of Black wholeness, and in these cases, the dialectic processes by which some come to embrace this Blackness as wholly mattering.

The most complex use of matter-based narration is Patricia Smith’s performance of “Skinhead” (s2e2). At the time of this performance, Smith was already a celebrated poet. While praised for her writing as both a poet and a journalist, her stature in the performance poetry, spoken word, and slam communities is next to legendary. Similarly, “Skinhead” was already an acclaimed poem, first published in her 1992 book, *Big Town, Big Talk*. In the poem, Smith

speaks as a male white-supremacist by conjuring the feelings of hate, pride, violence, and awareness that might exists in a person identified as a skinhead. Smith's dark skin and feminine dress make for a compelling visual contrast from the text of the poem. She begins the following section of the poem in a low angle close-up shot, where her face occupies a large amount of the screen:

but I got my own beauty.

It's in my steel-toed boots,

in the hard corners of my shaved head.

I look in the mirror and hold up my mangled hand,<sup>99</sup>

only the baby finger left, sticking straight up,

I know it's the wrong goddamned finger,

but fuck you all anyway.

I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,

my face scraped pink and brilliant.

I'm your baby, America, your boy,

drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful.

And I was born

and raised

right here.

Red lipstick, dangling earrings, and braids that stop at her neck do not let the viewing audience forget that this is a woman, a Black woman, even when the poem gives us contradicting images.

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<sup>99</sup> Earlier in the poem, it is revealed that three of his fingers were sliced off by a machine at work - indicating a class and labor status of the skinhead.

While having darker skin, the black background offers a contrast that intensifies the emotional progressions in her face. It is a surreal juxtaposition that she is describing his beauty as a skinhead while visually representing the beauty of a Black woman.

Unlike most of the performances on *Def Poetry*, Patricia Smith does not exist in this action or observation of the poem; in the text of the poem, Patricia Smith does not matter. However, the image of Smith still exists as an embodiment of stereotypes, prejudices, and histories of Black women who exists at the intersection of no fewer than two interlocking oppressions. Thus, her performance representing a white male subject from the position of a subjugated Black woman, profoundly inverts the dynamic of subjugation, as the subjugated body exerts the ultimate power over the privileged subject. This is the power of existence, or of course, matter. This close-up shot also inverts dynamics of power among Black film and television makers. Where Stan Lathan was once told by a white director, “that he [the white director] avoided close-ups of African-American faces because he felt that white audiences would find their features grotesque,” Lathan’s response has been to take “extreme close-ups [of Black people] ever since” (Heitner 62). This close-up of Smith, highlighting her beauty while discussing the grotesqueness of the skinhead, demonstrates the possibility for Black film and television to exert power over traditionally white film and television making traditions through matter-based narration.

### *Bodies and Stories of Black Women in New(er) Black Realism*

In the introduction to *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African-American Women* (2001), the editors, Michael Bennett and Vanessa Dickerson, describe the bodies of Black women as “Literally the scapegoats—the sacrificial bodies—of so much of

the horrendous conservative assault on the body politic, Black women, are, like their foremothers, resisting the straitjackets forced on them by others and recovering their own bodies in more seemly garments” (5). While the controlling images of Black women in Hollywood and television are embedded in the history of print advertisements, film, and television, the images of Black women as sexual objects in hip-hop resonates with even greater influence on Black youth identity because these images appear as a homegrown identity (Rose *The Hip Hop Wars* 158). Whereas the hood films of new Black realism combined the traditions of filmmaking and hip-hop, Black women were not merely sexualized body props, but a ghettoed phantasm of the Madonna-whore dichotomy; young Black women, were either tenderonis or hood rats who become hard-working mothers or welfare queens.<sup>100</sup> Each of them served to nurture Black boys into manhood or hindered Black boys’ transition into manhood (Bausch). Despite an emerging wave of films and television series countering the misogynoir of new Black realism, for example, *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) in film, and *Living Single* and *Girlfriends* in television, the representation of complex Black women was by and large absent from the hood.<sup>101</sup> Except for John Singleton’s *Poetic Justice* (1993), the depiction of women’s experiences with poverty and state-sanctioned violence occurred through familial relationships with young Black men.

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<sup>100</sup> Tenderonis, especially as described in the Bobby Brown song “Roni” (1988), are the sweet, kind, and soft-hearted girls in the neighborhood. While they still manage to love and be loved by the young-homeboys, they presented as the antithesis of a hood rats. For example, the character of Brandi, played by Nia Long, from *Boyz N the Hood* offers a depiction of a tenderoni.

<sup>101</sup> Karen Bausch and Michael Eric Dyson are careful to point out the exceptions, specifically the character of Reva, played by Angela Bassett, from *Boyz N the Hood* who is “a more nuanced representation of an African-American female than some feminist critics allow” (Bausch 271).

*Def Poetry Jam* responds to this by capitalizing on the tradition of Black women's poetry.<sup>102</sup> The use of poetry as a medium of recovery for Black women's bodies by Black women predates the Harlem Renaissance era, as exemplified by the works of Frances E.W. Harpers. However, the struggles against racism and sexism were expressed subversively (Honey; Bennett and Dickerson). By the 1960s and the emerging Black Arts Movement, the poetry of Black women reflected "a turning away from the larger society and turning toward each other" that spoke explicitly to the "exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism" (Bambara 93). In hip-hop, "Black women rappers affirm Black female popular pleasure and public presence by privileging Black female subjectivity and Black female experiences in the public sphere. Public performance also provides a means by which young Black women can occupy public space in ways that affirm the centrality of their voices" (Rose *Black Noise* 182). *Def Poetry Jam* brings these eras together as a representative space where the performative aspect of Black female subjectivity and the way Black women occupy space highlights the BAM aesthetic of "turning toward each other" and unequivocally speaking to the systemic issues of racism.

After Black men, Black women constitute the second-largest racial/gender group on the series, with fifty-seven different women sharing their poetry. The thread between these performances is what Daphne Brooks argues is the use of the Black female body as a discursive and performative instrument of subjectivity "by virtue of the deeds done in her own body" (45). Where the imitators, appropriators, and marketers of Black youth culture commodify the pieces of Black bodies, such that Black women are reduced to the pieces of their bodies, the

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<sup>102</sup> Black women constitute 22% of the unique performers and 21% of the total performances. Black men constitute 57% of the unique performers and 38% of the total performances. This distinction suggests that Black women had more repeat poets compared to Black men who had fewer repeat poets. The significance of more Black men is the opportunity for more diverse and complex representations Black men's experiences and conversely less opportunity for diverse and complex representations of Black women's experiences.

performances by Black women on *Def Poetry Jam* renders the Black female body as a discursive site of restoration for political life and Black subjectivity (Louis 141).<sup>103</sup> These performances by Black women range from subjects of domestic violence, sexuality, prison, spirituality, and bad breath, but the reoccurring poetic themes center on the recovery of womanhood through following: the body, sexuality, and sisterhood.

When *Def Poetry Jam* presents Georgia Me's performance of "Full Figured Potential (A Fat Girl's Blues)" as the second poem of the first episode, the series unapologetically delves into one of the foremost body stereotypes associated with Black women: fat. Throughout the series, poems by Tamara Blu, Nikki Patin, and Aya de Leon further address this issue, each constructing Black femininities that complicates the controlling images and fetish of Black women's bodies. "Full-Figured Potential," for example, is Georgia Me's reflection about the discrimination and shame she experiences as a fat woman. Her addiction to "snacks," "Little Debbie's," "pies and cakes," "fried everything," "all kinds of pork," and "bi-products, additives and other shit" inhibits people's ability to interact with her as fully human. While in the conclusion of her poem she fully realizes her beauty, exclaiming, "I know that I'm beautiful in God's eyes," Georgia Me's use of the body and dynamic performance represent this epiphany from the beginning and throughout her performance. Dressed in an asymmetrical cocktail dress, heels, blue-tinted sunglasses, and a large cross necklace, Georgia Me appears more like a star than an insecure woman. The dissonance between how she performs her on-stage body and how she reflects on

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<sup>103</sup> Use of the terms "bare life" and "political life" are derived from Giorgio Agamben's use "zoe" and "bios," respectively, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995). Implicitly, the use of these terms supports the position of Black women as a unique type of homo sacer (one which can be killed but cannot be sacrificed), on the bases that they are not merely reduced to zoe (bare life), but the anatomy that composes zoe. As such, not only can a Black woman be killed, literally and symbolically, but that woman must still perform labor even after death. Symbolically, for example, Sarah Baartman becomes void of bios and zoe, but performs the labor of museum exhibit. More literally, the state kills Sandra Bland, but the explanation of her death by Waller County, including the videos and images released, means Bland as zoe continues to function as labor that protects the practices of the criminal justice systems.



her in-poem body becomes the space by which we experience Georgia Me as not constrained by the stereotypes of her body or the on-screen representation of her body. Instead, the dissonance becomes the space where the audience witnesses Georgia Me's agency in the construction of identity with relation to a fat body.

Similarly, Tamara Blue's "Thick Chicks" (s5e9) and Nikki Patin's "Sweat" (s4e2) illustrate the complexity by which Black women experience a fat body as a source of pride and as a source of pain. In "Thick Chicks," Tamara Blue pens an ode, writing:

Well this, this is for being called thick.

This is for the girls who know that being called thick is a compliment.

This is for the average woman in America because she wears a size twelve or a fourteen, not a six or an eight.

Six and eight, those are shoe sizes.

Those are not dress sizes.

36-29-42, (say it with me)

36-29-42 one hundred and sixty-nine pounds at 5'3

but grown men quiver when they look at me.

So this, well, this is for the real reason that velour came back into style.

For Big Lez, Beyoncé, Serena and Trina.

For the Tip Drill video on BET.

For the St. Louis, Atlanta, North Carolina, and Northern Cali,

cause they respect the booty

and the thickness. See this is for the thickness and this is for those jeans, those size fourteens and for the girl who put on those size fourteen and stepped out feeling fly.

See this is for feeling fly and loving life.

Tamara Blue, in her signature calm and conversational delivery, expresses such confidence in her body, that she coaches the audience into reciting her measurements. By the end of the poem, the entire room repeats “36-29-42,” with the camera capturing one man’s eyes following the mentioned areas.

In contrast, Nikki Patin begins her poem jogging in place, as her poem reflects the negative inner thoughts during her exercise. “No one ever wants to see the fat girl cry, because we’re the jolly sort the happy kind the desperate, wide-eyed cows who the tank top chicks in the locker-room lipstick look at sideways as the sidestep Aerobicize their way from the potential of looking like me” (Stewart 45). Patin continues to jog as she turns stigmatization into motivation to finish the workout. The poem concludes with the realization that despite her wanting to quit her workout, she admits proudly, “I can’t’ never came out of my lips.” Patin never demeans the body. She instead criticizes the socialization of the body and bemoans the difficulty of moving in that body. The inherently negative tone of “Sweat” contrasts with the celebratory tone of “Thick Chicks,” however, both performances explore the relationship Black women have with their bodies. Despite their differences, both poems offer the body as a process rather than an object. As such, any changes or maintenance to the body is rooted in the poet’s relationship to their body rather than the appearance of their body.

On *Def Poetry Jam*, Black women perform subjectivity through poetry on intimacy, sex, and sexual relationships. If nothing else, the wide-ranging experiences and narratives in and of

themselves made *Def Poetry Jam* unlike any other representative space for Black women in television at the time. For example, British neo-soul group Floetry performs a melodic poem about infatuation, “Fantasize” (s5e4) which appears in the episode following Aulelei Love’s poem about sexual assault in prisons, “Same Cell, A Poem for Women in Prison” (s5e3). Also noteworthy is the series’ representation of Black women’s sexual agency. Frenchie’s “Fucking Ain’t Conscious” (s3e5) seemingly pits the idea of liberation against sexual intimacy, until she offers intimacy as the reason and the reward for revolutionary struggle as a conclusion. In “Nails” (s6e6) audiences find Staceyann Chin’s agency through her exploration of unconventional sex. When the poem ends with, “Those days/I don’t want quiet/I wouldn’t know what to do with it/I like it when there are screams and battle scars and trophies/that way before the war begins/I already know what I’m about to fight for,” she raises her arm in victory and moves in an aggressive battle stance before delivering her last line. Chin’s writing is as brilliant as her performance, where she uses humor to move in to and out of erotic imagery while also beginning phrases in a loud authoritative voice that never quite fall into a soft or sensual tone.

In *Def Poetry Jam*, Black women perform poetry that is sexual without them necessarily being represented as sexual objects. This does not, however, mean that Black women and women in general avoid being reduced to sexual objectification. Throughout the series, love poems by men to women, and to Black women more specifically, blur the lines between celebration and dehumanization. Malcolm Jamal Warner, most noted for his portrayal of Theo Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, writes a sensual poem with innuendos called “I Love My Woman” (s3e5), in which the woman of this poem only exists as a sexual idol. In Reg E. Gaines’ “I Don’t Feel Like Writing” (s4e5), the woman in his poem is reduced to a body that the narrator “suddenly realizes” he is raping. Rock Baby, a poet influential in the Dallas’ poetry slam community,

shares two poems on *Def Poetry* whose uproarious humor obfuscates the objectification and celebration of women's bodies. His preface to the poem, "Titty Man" (s3e4), warning audiences that, "this poem is not suitable for those who take life too seriously" offers humor as a rhetorical strategy for sexual objectification. Similarly, his poem "That Sweet That Funk" (s5e10), relies on humorous punchlines and performative gestures as he professes his love for "dimples and rolls."

I am careful not to condemn these performances, nor the objectification of women's bodies and Black women's bodies, for two reasons. First, comparison is a central device in poetry, and inevitably, people will be compared to objects to create imagery and feelings within a performance. Secondly, each of these performances attempts to subversively challenge patriarchy, misogyny, or Eurocentric standards of beauty. Even in Reg E. Gaines' poem, the narrative arch that leads to a realization of sexual assault illustrates to audiences how men use intimate partner violence as an effect of stress, rejection, and otherwise lack of power in other areas of their lives. To this second point, however, *Def Poetry Jam* reveals the distinction by which Black men and Black women use poetry to confront the oppression Black women face. Whereas Black women use the Black female body to recover and reconstruct the humanity of Black women, Black men use the Black female body to recover and reconstruct the privilege and status of Black men. As consistent with the theme of in-betweenness in this research, *Def Poetry Jam* offers radical Black feminist poetry while simultaneously offering pieces of the Black female body for consumption.

Along with the body and sexuality, *Def Poetry Jam* is a representative space for the recovery of Black women through sisterhood. In *The Breakbeat Poets Volume 2: Black Girl Magic* (2018), Idrissa Simmonds considers the "cultural dissonance" as Black women are praised for cultural, scholarly, and institutional value while simultaneously experiencing discrimination

and disproportionately high rates of murder and violence (Simmonds et al.). This cultural dissonance that Simmonds describes is reminiscent of Black women as “the already Other” that Ann duCille describes in “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies” (1994) nearly twenty-five years before the publishing of *Black Girl Magic*. duCille writes:

I am hardly alone in suspecting that the overwhelming interest in Black women may have at least as much to do with the pluralism and perhaps even the primitivism of this particular postmodern moment as with the stunning quality of Black women’s accomplishments and the breadth of their contributions to American civilization. It is not news that by virtue of our race and gender, Black women are not only the ‘second sex’ – the Other, in postmodern parlance – but we are also the last race, the most oppressed, the most marginalized, the most deviant, the quintessential site of difference. And through the inversionary properties of deconstruction, feminism, cultural studies, multiculturalism, and contemporary commodity culture, the last shall be first. Perhaps. (592)

Where duCille’s pessimism traces the “hyper-visibility, super-isolation, emotional quarantine, and psychic violence” (“Feminism, Black, and Blue” 150) of Black women in the academy, Idrissa Simmonds confronts the condition of being “the already Other” with a slightly less pessimistic offering. Simmonds writes, “What do we do in the face of this dissonance? What we have always done, my loves: continue the work of healing and holding one another” (xxv).

As this project offers *Def Poetry Jam* as a representational space of a unique type of organic intellectual, it follows then that the performances by Black women express the pessimism of duCille and the “healing and holding” of Simmonds. Jessica Care Moore’s

“Warriors Walk Alone” (s1e4) illustrates this point both in the text and in performance.

Following an off-screen introduction, Moore prefaces her poem by stating, “This poem is called ‘Warriors Walk Alone,’ and I originally wrote it for Erykah, Erykah Badu. I’m going to give it to all Black women who use their words as their weapon and as their survival and to all the sistahs in the audience. You deserve it.” The camera cuts from Jessica Care Moore to a shot of the audience with only all Black women applauding in the frame. Two women in the foreground smile and nod in approval, before the camera cuts back to Moore beginning her poem: “Warriors walk alone/But stay protected by their pack/Give them everything they wanted/Then take it all back.”

Whereas Jessica Care Moore’s performance offers a recovery of Black womanhood through a grand and metaphorical poem, Nikki Finney’s performance of “Girlfriends Train” (s4e2) demonstrates the recovery of Black womanhood through a micro-level interaction. In Finney’s poem, a woman approaches her after a poetry reading, asking “How you do that?/Write like you never been hit before?” Finney likens the woman’s struggle to boxcars “carrying broken women’s bodies” before the woman again asks “We were just wondering/how you made it through and we didn’t?” and “Guess how many times I been stabbed?” Finney, in the poem, again speculates about the woman’s background before describing the action she takes in the concluding stanzas:

I moved towards her  
and we stood back-to-back,  
her hand grazing the top  
of our heads,  
my hand measuring out

our same widths,  
each of us recognizing  
the brown woman latitudes,  
the Black woman longitudes  
in the other.

I turned around  
held up my shirt  
and brought my smooth belly  
into her scarred one;  
our navels pressing,  
marking out some kind of new  
equatorial line. (65)

The action in the poem, especially as Nikky Finney brings the audience into the closeness of two bodies, is the space of healing and holding up Black women. While this action occurs between two women, the contemplation between Finney in the poem and the woman asking Finney, “How many women are there like you?” suggests that this “new equatorial line” these two women create are representative of how communities of Black woman heal and hold up others in Black communities. As is the case with Finney’s poem, who might not suggest that she is healing the scarred woman, when the opposite might be just as likely, the healing and holding up of Black women occurs in the connection between them rather than in one group saving another.

Returning to the three components of matter-based narration in new(er) Black realism, each poet firstly affirms Black women by taking up space on the stage and the screen. Secondly,

Black women exist as meaningful actors and narrators in the text, stories, or descriptions of the poems. Thirdly, each woman embodies a legible representation of Black womanhood. They each use their legibility, whether it be body type, hairstyles, wardrobe, voice, or the stories they share as experience, to confront the oppression and dehumanization of Black women as well as the recovery of Black womanhood.

### *Multi-culturalism in New(er) Black Realism*

Black bodies dominate the representational space of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, especially when factoring the presence of Mos Def introducing the episodes, concluding the episodes, and introducing the poets in between. However, of the two hundred and fifty-seven poets who appear on *Def Poetry Jam*, non-Black and poets who appear as Black and mixed-race compose nearly thirty percent of the poets in the series and comprise forty percent the performances. In considering the matter-based narration of new(er) Black realism, non-Black bodies uniquely represent three phases of mattering on *Def Poetry Jam*. The first principle holds that these bodies take up space on the screen and as representative of the space they occupy on stage at the Supper Club. The space these non-Black bodies occupy serves as a reminder that the project of hip-hop was never designed to be exclusively Black, and furthermore, that the poverty and inequality that shapes urban ghettos are not without the presence of non-Black bodies. This multicultural representation of poetry on television, on the one hand, reflects the increasing multiculturalism of spoken word, poetry slam, and hip-hop communities.

On the other hand, this representation of multiculturalism reflects a concerted effort on the part of Stan Lathan, Russell Simmons, producers and talent coordinators to showcase diversity. Both Shihan and Walter Mudu confirm that they gave extra consideration to poets of



ethnic identities and locations that had little or no representation on the show. Mudu is careful to acknowledge that he “would not go out of his way to find a white person or Native American poet” but that “if I got a tape of someone who wasn’t Black, but could write and perform in kind of the way that show was moving, yeah, they’re going to be someone I’m bringing to the table.” The results of these decision-making processes are a representation of spoken word and performance poetry that operates as a Black representational space, with just enough representation from non-Black performers, to not be considered “a Black show.”

*Def Poetry Jam* amalgamates the experiences of its non-Black performers into a multiculturalism located at the intersection of Blackness, hip-hop, and the crisis of the urban city, through the second component of matter-based narration, where non-Black poets matter in the action and description of their poetry. Some non-Black performers speak explicitly about hip-hop, impoverished neighborhoods, and Blackness. In-Q, a white poet from the Los Angeles poetry scene, illustrates this point in his performance of “When Hip-Hop was Fun” (s1e3). He writes:

I remember when Phife was a sidekick.  
When gangsta rap was still on the rise kid.  
When De La Soul was re-incarnated,  
When Freestyle Fellowship first circulated.  
When Run DMC wore Adidas sneakers,  
That’s the era this poem will feature!

From ‘86 to ‘95,  
When hip-hop was just too thick to describe.

I strived to become it in every way,  
So I practice religiously every day.  
On the bus ride home folks thought I was schitzo,  
In 8th grade I wore more rayon than Sisqo!

As illustrated in this section of the poem, In-Q's knowledge of hip-hop renders him legible as member of the hip-hop community. Further to the point, his inclusion of Freestyle Fellowship renders him exceptionally knowledgeable and close to the Los Angeles hip-hop community, where Freestyle Fellowship is uniquely celebrated by "real hip-hop heads" on the West coast. In-Q, does not merely name-drop rappers and moments in rap history, but discusses his participation in hip-hop culture, presumably as a lyricist. Because of In-Q's knowledge and participation in hip-hop culture, as assumed in his matter within the text of the poem, In-Q fits neatly into the multiculturalism of *Def Poetry Jam*. To this extent, performances by Gemineye, Danny Hoch, Denizen Kane, and Kevin Coval bring non-Black bodies into the multiculturalism of *Def Poetry* through hip-hop.

In other ways, the poetry of non-Black performers similarly connects to the experiences of Black performers, which allows *Def Poetry* to fit non-Black performances somewhat neatly into the series. For example, the performance of "You Bring Out the Vietnamese in Me" (s3e6) by Bao Phi, a Vietnamese poet from the Minneapolis poetry scene, foregrounds a Vietnamese consciousness in the ways that new(er) Black realism foregrounds an emerging Black consciousness. Bao Phi writes:

You  
bring out the Vietnamese in me

The waiting fireball.

The suntanned angel on a rice terrace.

The black-haired miracle.

You

bring out the Vietnamese in me,

the salted yellow boat child and military brat on airplane in me,

the tracer-bullet eyed Buddhist who gets presents on Christmas in me,

Bao Phi's remake of the Sandra Cisneros poem, "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" (1994), does not comment on Blackness or hip-hop. However, Bao Phi's expression of a Vietnamese consciousness parallels the assertion of a Black consciousness that Frantz Fanon insists upon and the representation of emerging Black consciousnesses. Even for those audiences who cannot understand the language or imagery that Bao Phi employs when he says, "the nuoc mam, ca phe sua da, mangoes and mang cut,/mit and coconut, sugar dried strawberries in Da Lat/and sweet xa xui stains Asian-American in me," the reconciliation of ones ancestry with their American identity parallels the new Black realist representation of locating African heritage in the lives of African-Americans.

Jason Carney, a former skinhead who has since led four teams to National Poetry Slam final stage appearances, similarly performs a poem reconciling his ancestry with his American identity. In "Southern Heritage" (s2e1), Carney shares quaint reflections of his childhood in the American south. The poem turns, however, to explore the racism and discrimination rendered silent in the culture of southern ways of life. He writes:

And I do love that old hymn . . . but I cant think about those fond memories of childhood anymore without seeing them through the pessimism of these eyes which are of a man, and I have to ask myself what kind of truth those old white Baptists found on them mountain tops.

Why couldn't they hear the voices dangling from the branches of the elms when death could have been peeled away into the forgotten generation after generation woven into our skin, into our bones?

All because they were silent.

Practiced at turning their heads.

Their heritage lies in the shades of my skin, it's twisted and scarred, worn by their words "colored," "negro," . . . and "nigger."

As the poem concludes, Carney reveals the source of these reflections. His concern that his multiracial daughter, "half Thai, half Irish, Choctaw and Snuff," is connected to her cultural heritage without reproducing the racism so inextricably linked to that heritage.

*New(er) Black Realism: The Audience Matters & Authenticity*

The audience has a notable presence in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*.<sup>104</sup> It may seem necessary to include an audience in a spoken word television series, given that the genre of spoken word poetry is distinguished by the performance of poems in front of live audiences.

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<sup>104</sup> Audience members received an e-mail inviting them to a taping of *Def Poetry Jam*. One needed to reply, requesting tickets for a particular date. One would have received the e-mail if they were on an e-mail list for events, promotions, or other interests which catered to urban markets. Regina Bernard-Carreño critiques this process in her book (112).

Before *Def Poetry Jam*, however, very little on-screen representations of spoken word, performance poetry, and slam poetry captures their audience. Bob Holman's "Poetry Spots" and *The United States of Poetry* were filmed throughout New York City and at scenic locations across the country respectively. While the three episodes of *MTV Unplugged: Spoken Word* were filmed on stage, the darkly lit audience hardly appeared on-screen, except for the applause at the end and the beginning of a poem. In the documentary *SlamNation*, the audiences became an integral part of the poetry slam as judges, and in the influencing of judges scores, yet the audience was hardly seen responding during the poems. In the films *Love Jones* and *Slam*, the audience had a more pronounced role as they were shown reacting to the poems. In both of these films, however, many of the audience shots involved close-ups of the performer's love interests, thus serving to drive the plot of the film rather than the strength of the poems.

Given Stan Lathan's career-long dedication towards the meaningful representation of Black images and his expertise at directing onstage television specials, shots of the audience in *Def Poetry Jam* do more than reflecting the reaction of audience members. Since his involvement with the television series *Soul!*, Lathan uses shots of the audience to convey a sense of community. As Gayle Wald describes:

Stan Lathan— conveyed an ambiance of Black community that sent forth powerful messages of Black political solidarity and cultural pride. But they were also helpful to young viewers in far-flung towns and small cities across the United States, who wanted to know about the latest fashions and hairstyles. As a national program, *Soul!* transmitted a New York-centric sense of emergent Black identities to a geographically dispersed audience, exploring the simultaneous diversity,

disunity, solidarity, and shared interest of a Black audience shaped by multiple diasporas, displacements, and migrations. (10)

As *Soul!* was dedicated to the culture, politics, and identity of the Black liberation movements in the 1970s, the shots of the audience members became an extension of the messages, music, and poetry featured on the show. Similarly, in *Def Comedy Jam*, shots of the audience's raucous laughter served as an extension of the unapologetic and bold culture of hip-hop in the 1990s. In *Def Poetry Jam*, the audience is shown as providing "harmony and stability" for the speaker, which Felicia R. Walker and Viece Kuykendall describe as a fundamental element of Afrocentric discourse (237). Thus the audience does more than represent matter occupying space, the *Def Poetry* audience serves as a meaningful reactors that help make the narratives matter.

As much as a poem relies on the writing and the performance of the poet, the poem also relies on the audience to receive its intended message and respond in such a way that the message is validated. Following the opening credits of each episode, there is a wide panning shot of the Supper Club ballroom with the audience shown applauding Mos Def as he approaches the stage. Similarly, before the end credits, there is a wide panning shot with the audience standing in applause with Mos and Russell Simmons on stage closing with Simmons' signature "Goodnight and God bless." While the audience is also shown and heard applauding the introduction and conclusion of each poet, it is the audience's presence during the poem which is noteworthy. Throughout a given poem, there are shot-reverse-shot showing audience reactions to the poetry.<sup>105</sup> These reactions are generally contemplative, expressing laughter during funny

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<sup>105</sup> I draw a similar parallel to a scene from Dorothy Arzner's film, *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), where the main character, Judy, grows frustrated with her role in a burlesque show as the ballet dancing foil. When a particular heckler captures her attention, she walks sternly back to the middle of the stage to deliver a scathing speech, by which she reverses the objectifying gaze of the primarily male audience and in turn objectifies them for their pleasure in fifty-cent burlesque shows. Judy never breaks the fourth wall. Instead, the scene is edited between wide

poems, and occasionally, individuals are caught reacting with surprise. Other times, there are high angle long shots from behind the poet, which shows the audience watching the poem. The stage for *Def Poetry Jam* has a short catwalk, therefore, side angle medium shots of the poet keep the audience in view throughout the poem. As the television audience is watching the performer speak to the audience in the theater, the television audience is aware that the performer's message is meant for the television viewing audience just as much or perhaps more so than the audience in the theater.

In *Def Poetry Jam*, shots of the audience further contribute to new(er) Black realism through a production of authenticity where audience members, rather than the poets themselves, validate the "realness" of the poetry. *Def Poetry* does not eschew the centrality of authenticity in hip-hop and the credibility of hip-hop performances. On the contrary, *Def Poetry Jam* contributes to the semantic dimensions demarcating what is "real" and what is "fake," as explained in Kembrew McLeod's article, "Authenticity Within Hip-hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation" (1999). In this article, McLeod defines authenticity in social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social location, and cultural terms. For hip-hop, each of these terms appears as "being true to oneself, being 'authentically Black,' supporting the underground vs. mainstream, promoting hyper-masculine behavior, identifying with 'the street,' and understanding the traditions and history of hip-hop culture" (McLeod, J. Williams). Although *Def Poetry* allows for performances which slightly challenge these demarcations of realness in hip-hop, each episode and the series as a whole upholds McLeod's demarcations.

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shots with the performer facing the dimly light audience, low angle cameras from the perspective of front-row audience members for medium and close-ups, high angle wide shots from behind the performer to orient the audience in the theater, and close-ups and medium shots of groups of audience members reacting to the performers message.

The *Def Poetry* audience in the Supper Club has a significant role in validating the authenticity of the poets. The audience gives standing ovations, audible responses and clapping during the poem, and are shown as visibly engaged with those poets who fit McLeod's definition of realness. This explains why Jewell's first season appearance is the singular performance by a white celebrity with mainstream success during the series' run. Except for staying true to oneself, her performance of "Poem Song" (s1e2) defies every other category of realness associated with hip-hop. Even before she takes the stage, Mos Def has placed her squarely in the mainstream and out of the underground, by humorously interrupting his introduction, stressing "With twenty-three million albums sold—that's a lot of damn albums, shit." On the contrary, Black Ice consistently receives loud cheers during his performances and standing ovations, because his performances precisely fit into each demarcation of realness in hip-hop. Whereas most performances violate one of the demarcations of realness in hip-hop, another demarcation overcompensates the realness of the performance, and thus draws cheers from the audience. For example, New Jersey's Narubi Selah is by no means hyper-masculine in her appearance or performance of the poem "Uncle Benz" (s5e6). Selah receives audible cheers as her poem takes on the lyricism of a technically skilled rapper and receives a standing ovation for its critique of mainstream hip-hop artists. In that same episode, Mike Cirelli, a white poet, receives applause by demonstrating his knowledge of Black female vocalists, a tradition that helps birth hip-hop culture. In "Love Song for Kelis," Cirelli begins by praising the stylings of Sarah Vaughn, Billy Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Chaka Khan, and Tina Turner, before expressing his admiration for Kelis. By stringing together performances that limits its violation of McLeod's demarcation of realness, *Def Poetry Jam* manufactures authenticity through the applause, cheers, and ultimately, the validation of the Supper Club audience. Unlike hip-hop and the new Black



realism of the 1990s, where the burden of authenticity lies with performers, authenticity in new(er) Black realism is manufactured by the representation of audiences validating performances of realness.

### *Foretelling #BlackLivesMatter*

On July 13, 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza took to Facebook in a series of posts which shifted the national consciousness, language, and mediums by which we speak of race in the United States. She writes, “The sad part is, there’s a section of America who is cheering and celebrating right now. and that makes me sick to my stomach. We GOTTA get it together y’all...stop saying we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on Black life” (Lowery). In her final post, she writes, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” Garza’s posts inspired her friend, Patrice Cullors, to post a status more defiant than Garza’s, albeit in the same spirit: “declaration: Black bodies will no longer be sacrificed for the rest of the world’s enlightenment. i am done. i am so done. trayvon, you are loved infinitely. #Blacklivesmatter” (Lowery). Soon, Garza and Cullors reached out to Opal Tometi to coordinate a campaign around the phrase “Black Lives Matter.” This campaign primarily involved social media sites Tumblr and Twitter where users shared stories of why #Blacklivesmatter (King). The following year in Ferguson, Missouri, officer Darren Wilson received no indictment for killing eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, sparking a community and social rebellion against police brutality in the St. Louis suburb. Social media users, particularly on the platforms of Facebook and Twitter, who were following the rebellion, began to identify their comments with #Blacklivesmatter.

As new(er) Black realism is primarily defined by matter-based narration, I find it essential to consider “matter” as critical thread between the on-screen representation of Black life and the political movement defined by recognition of Black life in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM). In “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” Alicia Garza offers Black Lives Matter as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” Similarly, new(er) Black Realism uses matter-based narration as an intervention in television and film, to affirm the humanity of Black subjects and confront larger systems, institutions, and individuals that enact forms of oppression. *Def Poetry Jam* does this by featuring poetry addressing anti-Black police violence, the criminalization of Black bodies, and the institutional arrangements which exacerbate these issues.

Under the guise of poetry, performances on the series incorporate the emotionality of anger, rage, sadness, and fear, when such emotions are typically seen as counterproductive to American politics and the challenging of white supremacy. Debra Thompson illustrates the paradox of rage as a political strategy, where Black rage “is viewed as incompatible, or even dangerous, to the operation of American democracy; meanwhile, the anger expressed by dominant groups (especially heterosexual white men) is easily incorporated into political discourse, normalized as politics as usual” (460). The emotionality of anger, rage, and fury, lies at the heart of the BLM movement that began in the decade following *Def Poetry Jam*. This is not to suggest that *Def Poetry* leads to BLM or directly influences the ensuing movements for Black Lives; rather, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* provided the representational space to incorporate emotion as a rhetorical and political strategy that eschews the politics of

respectability. Perhaps one of the most significant if, albeit, subtle interventions of *Def Poetry Jam*, was that poets on the series warned the United States about the consequences of racism and police violence with no equivocation.

Anti-Black police violence and policies which unfairly target Black communities most frequently appear as lines or in stanzas in several poems. For example, Oscar Brown Jr. in “Children of Children” (s4e1) invokes the prison industrial complex, writing, “The children of children are trapped by adults failed and jailed to hide the results.” In Ras Baraka’s “American Poem” (s3e2) he implicates the war on drugs writing, “I wanna hear an American poem/About a dead girl on Chadwick Avenue with a bullet in her neck/From a cop doin’ his job ordered by Fascism and crack cocaine/You know, something made in the USA.” Also, while Ishle Yi Park’s performance of “Sai-I-Gu” (s5e4), is ultimately about the victimization of Korean stores during the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion, she carefully pens this victimhood in solidarity with the Black community. In a conversation with her mother, Park asks, “but why hurt us/she chokes/Because, Ishle, we live close enough/while l.a.p.d. rings beverly hills like a moat,/they won’t answer rings from south central/furious and consistent as rain” (Park).

While these allusions to the issues raised by Black Lives Matter frequent *Def Poetry Jam*, there were a few performances which delved heavily into the phenomenon of anti-Black police violence, for which #BlackLivesMatter would spread. None more so than Bassey Ikpi’s performance of “Diallo” (s4e3). In her piece, Ikpi uses the murder of twenty-three-year-old Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by four New York City police officers to describe the cultural and structural conditions that produce anti-Black police violence. While Ikpi begins the poem with heavy use of symbols and imagery, the poem moves deftly into a synopsis of how the criminal justice system renders Black lives meaningless:

Welcome to a place where Black loses lives in urban streets,  
Cops cry, say, begged him not to die,  
Defense says he fits the profile,  
Righteous say, he never should have drawn gun anyway,  
He never should have trapped sun anyway,  
What are we still doing here anyway still jury say, murder is justified,  
And cops went right to life, while that brother is still without his.

Bassey Ikpi's poem transitions quickly from the specificities of Amadou Diallo's family and immigration experience to the commonalities of how the New York police department murders Black boys and men including thirteen-year-old Nicholas Heyward Jr., Malcolm Ferguson, Patrick Moses Dorismond, Ousmane Zongo, and Timothy Stansbury. Thus, Ikpi's piece is less an elegy for Mr. Diallo and more so an indictment of how cultural and structural anti-Blackness operates through the use of force by New York City police and in the institution of criminal justice nationally.

Whereas Bassey Ikpi writes about police violence as an observer, Flowmentalz and Dahlak Braithwaite write poems as participants in the violent or potentially violent police encounters in the poems "Payphone" (s3e7) and "Just Another Routine Check" (s5e1) respectfully. In "Payphone," Flowmentalz describes a Verizon payphone swallowing his thirty-five cents and the failed attempts to call for 2-1-1 for a refund; in frustration, he punches the payphone with a "left, left, right, left/Even threw a flying kick at that bitch/All out of breath and shit."<sup>106</sup> The cops arrive, seeing a Black man by the payphone and presumably his actions toward

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<sup>106</sup> Each time Flowmentalz says this refrain, he punches, kicks, and hunches over to catch his breath.

the payphone.<sup>107</sup> Flowmentalz immediately tries to quell the situation by summoning the police, where the following ensues:

So I'm like, "Overseer. Overseer. Overseer-Overcer-Officer, Officer."<sup>108</sup>

The payphone took my change"

They was like [imitates the pulling back of a gun chamber]

Click-click-click

"Get on the ground and put your hands behind your goddamn head"

Being that they had Glocks pointed at me

I fell to the ground with no resistance

They started frisking my clothes and grabbing my shit

The other cop was fondling the coin return

He pulled out a bag of herb

I was like "Hell no, hell no!

Don't plant that shit on me

I don't even smoke weed"

To make it even worse it was that Mexican Brown

They was like, "Yea nigga, we're taking your ass downtown"

I said, "Fuck that shit [moves arms wildly as if breaking free]

You better give me my thirty-five cents"

Left, left, right, left

Even threw a flying kick at the bitch

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<sup>107</sup> In "What Killed the Pay Phone? It was more than mobile phones: An Object Lesson," Renée Reizman illustrates how the payphone became a target of broken-windows law enforcement policies.

<sup>108</sup> This is an allusion to the KRS-One song "The Beast" where he points out the similarity in the sounds of officer and overseer.

They started hitting me with batons and shit

While “Payphone” makes light of the methods multinational media conglomerates use to exploit people, even if only for a mere thirty-five cents, the poem’s turn toward police violence illustrates the ways primary deviance is met with brutal and sometimes deadly force.

In contrast, Dahlak Brathwaite’s “Just Another Routine Check” involves no deviance committed by the narrator, nor any violence committed by the police, but instead illustrates how the fear and sources of fear operate as social control. In this poem, Brathwaite explains the moments before and during a routine traffic stop:

I can’t tell the difference

Good cop, bad cop

That one, this one

All I think is Black man trying to hit up the club

Policeman trying to hit me with one

And as I’m changing lanes,

Sweat drips like rain pours

My head spinning like the Sprewell’s I’m too broke to buy

And too smart to pay for

Ain’t no way I could be a criminal

‘Cuz already I’m trippin picturing myself in a cell, thinking

They finally got arrest warrants for them skittles I stole when I was twelve

License?

Check

Registration?

Check

Sambo smile while handing him my glow in the dark wallet?

Check

And check

It was just another routine check

Check license, check plates

But most importantly, keep my ass in check

Like Flowmentalz, Braithwaite tries to minimize his presence as a potential threat by offering a “Sambo smile.” This preemptive tactic to make one’s body appear non-threatening, which is to say make one’s matter not matter, is a peculiar phenomenon where de-escalation becomes the responsibility of Black men rather than peace officers. These two poets use humor, which makes the violence and the potential for violence palatable. Flowmentalz uses hyperbole as humor while Braithwaite offsets trauma through witty punch lines. At the center of each performance is how their bodies, which is to say how their matter, can turn the mundane experiences into potentially violent or deadly encounters with law enforcement. Despite the different circumstances and methods by which police officers engage Braithwaite and Flowmentalz, each narrative illustrates how violence, perceived or real, comes to dominate the interaction between Black communities and police.

What is also noticeable about Braithwaite’s poem are the use of the words “routine” and “check” in the poem’s title. First, as police officers often express, “There is no such thing as a

routine traffic stop” (@LAPDHQ) as each stop could potentially lead to any number of potential violations or threats to the officer, detainee, or other members of the community. Second, and more germane to this poem, is that the use of the word “check” suggests that the purpose of a traffic stop is less about the temporary detaining of a person suspected of a violation and more about reinforcing the subjugation of Black people by exerting power and control through policing. The use of stops as a reinforcement of social positions is a point well-made in *Between the World and Me* (2015), where Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy” (9). To this degree, Coates’ synthesizes what Braithwaite, Flowmentalz, and Bassey Ikpi illustrate in their performances. These are performances which highlight the ways Black bodies are destroyed and rendered disposable, which is to say the ways Black lives can be made not to matter. While the #BlackLivesMatter would allow the stories of anti-Black police violence to be collected and shared instantaneously over social media platforms, *Def Poetry Jam* similarly gave a nationwide platform for poets to speak on the issue, which can in effect be understood as a way to make the experiences, these stories, these lives, and these bodies matter.

In new(er) Black realism, Black lives are no longer represented as either in the process of assimilating into the dominant culture or as existing in a culturally plural setting with values and behaviors that mirror the dominant group. Instead, these stories reflect a range of experiences of those who survive the hood and either cannot or will conform to neoliberal ideals of success. New(er) Black realism is, therefore, a representation of Black folks who have transitioned to adulthood yet still experience the burden of growing up Black or working class. For some, this



burden is material. For others, this burden lies in the memory of past generations of Africans in the United States to ensure the survival of future generations of Black folks. These stories, as presented in matter-based narratives, allows the viewing audience to see how “Black” as culture, as identity, and as a racial group, is a dynamic social process rather than strict social category (Hall “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation”). *Def Poetry Jam*, through its repositioning of Black subjects at the center of social relations, sets the stage for further innovation. A show like *The United Shades of America* (2016-), where the host, Kamau Bell, explores racism and social stratification, privileges a Black identity and understanding of the world as normal, whereby those groups and individuals who reproduce the systems of oppression are made to explain their dysfunction.

There are not always happy endings in new(er) Black realism. While the *Def Poetry* audience cheers Will “Da Real One” Bell’s decision to play peacemaker rather than an enforcer in his poem “Diary of the Reformed,” Bell tragically died as a victim of gun violence just as he was locking up his open mic for the night. Bell’s life, death, and poetry is a reminder that surviving is not something that happens, but rather, survival is a constant happening. That survival relies on the decisions on the subject and the decisions of any number of folks within their environment, including that policies and institutions designed to protect and serve. *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* represents the bodies, and the stories of those are continually surviving the hood and learning to survive a post-9/11 United States; which is to say, *Def Poetry Jam* gives voice, bodies, and matter to the often dismissed ignored, and not widely disseminated stories.

## Conclusion: Life After Def

“Russell Simmons wanna pray for me too

I’ma pray for him ‘cause he got MeToo’d” — Kanye West

On July 14, 2017, Russell Simmons hinted at the return of *Def Poetry Jam* through the following tweet, “Super excited. Been in negotiation with @chancetherapper to host Def poetry jam for HBO. !!! Would u guys like to see that #Emmys” (@UncleRUSH). This tweet is effectively *Def Poetry Jam*’s swan song and a final glimpse at the messy intellectual tight-walking the line separating the margin from the mainstream in spoken word, slam, and performance poetry. When the excitement of this tweet subsides after a few days, there will be no more announcements, no rumors, and no mention of a new *Def Poetry*. Five months later, Simmons announced his resignation from all business, production, and media properties following three sexual assault allegations in two weeks.<sup>109</sup> Hours after Simmons’ announcement, a spokesperson for HBO announced their severing of ties with Russell Simmons, including the removal of his name and presence from their upcoming series *All Def Comedy* (2017). In the most poetic of endings, the absence of a *Def Poetry* reboot because of the #MeToo movement allowed *Def Poetry* to comment on a present-day socio-cultural issue, at least one more time.

bell hooks writes, “Without a way to name our pain, we are also without words to articulate our pleasure. Indeed, a fundamental task of Black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory” (2). On *Def Poetry Jam*, spoken word and performance poetry serve as the mediums to name the

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<sup>109</sup> Over the next six months, fifteen more women publicly accuse Simmons of various sexual misconduct across thirty years.

pain, articulate pleasure, and to inspire others to see themselves in ways that are liberatory. For six years, *Def Poetry* gave poets the representational space to break the hegemonic modes of existing in the colonizer's gaze. While the series in and of itself is not a revolutionary project, the ideological challenge *Def Poetry* presents to a post 9/11 United States of America fits well within the tradition of Black radical poetry and subaltern counter-public narratives.

At the same time, *Def Poetry Jam* reproduced the institutional constraints of access, both, for poets trying to get on the *Def Poetry* stage and for audiences who need the premium HBO network to watch the series. Further, in couching the stronger ideological challenges and unequivocal criticism of neoliberalism, capitalism, and imperialism, *Def Poetry Jam* relied on legibility to make these narratives palatable. Thus, one can never be too sure if the audience received a performance as a subversion of stereotypes or as a reproduction of that stereotype. For example, one cannot be too sure if the audience received a Black male's representation of a ThugNiggaIntellectual as a subversion of the ThugNigga stereotype or if the audience received him as a ThugNigga. Of course, given Russell Simmons' legacy of profit-making that relied on the blurred-distinctions between ThugNiggas and ThugNiggaIntellectuals, *Def Poetry Jam's* affirmation of Black culture and hip-hop culture made it difficult for viewers to come to such a conclusion. Although *Def Poetry Jam* made some representational space for groups that are underrepresented on television, particularly members of Latinx, Asian, Muslim, and LGBTQ+ communities, their narratives were framed inside of a multicultural America that reflects the struggles of Black communities and hip-hop culture.

*Def Poetry Jam* is, however, incredibly valuable as an archive of knowledge. Each performance offers an auto-ethnographic, observational, or self-reflexive account of the United States in the early twenty-first century. Even for the poems written decades before *Def Poetry*,

these poems illustrate something noteworthy and worth considering in the new millennium. While the poetic knowledge of these performances is invaluable in and of itself, applying a sociopoetix framework offers significant connections between the scientific knowledge and the poetic knowledge of a thing. As such, their performances bring feelings, emotions, and humankind to otherwise neutral concepts like social processes, institutions, and inequality. A sociopoetix of *Def Poetry* reveals how individuals, families, and communities experience broad public issues in their private lives. By this same token, a sociopoetix of *Def Poetry* allows the poets to problematize the broad public issues based on their effects on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Given the United States' involvement in two foreign wars as retaliation for 9/11 and the perpetuals war on drugs and poverty, *Def Poetry Jam's* problematization of politics, politicians, and neoliberalism reveals the systemic war on people within and outside of the US.

As a television show, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* moved the representation of Black bodies, Black stories, and Black lives into new(er) Black realism. Building upon the tradition of new Black realism, the performances of *Def Poetry* move beyond the representation of Black communities, families, and neighborhoods on the screen; *Def Poetry Jam* employs matter-based narration to depict the lives, stories, and bodies of Black people in the context of historical and institutional anti-Black racism. Performances on the series depict the struggle for disalienation, particularly, where Black women use poetry to recover, affirm, and assert their subjectivity. New(er) Black realism is still a manufactured space. For *Def Poetry Jam*, the on-screen audience validates the authenticity of performances. Even for those performers not legible or not a member of a Black community, the audience validates their stories, lives, and bodies in new(er) Black realism based on their proximity to Blackness; this could be in the form of shared

oppression, shared cultural experiences, hip-hop, or an appreciation of Black culture. *Def Poetry Jam* creates a representational space for Black lives. In doing so, the series foreshadows Alicia Garza's declaration that "our lives matter" and subsequently Patrice Cullors and Opal Tometi's organizing around #BlackLivesMatter.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

In the seventh episode of the fifth season of *Def Poetry Jam*, Rafael Casal, now a writer and actor whose credits include the film *Blindspotting* (2018), offers an insightful critique on the institution of education through the exploration of the hidden curriculum, "Barbie and Ken 101." The episode aired on July 22, 2005 ("Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry: Season 5 Episode Guide"). Six months later, Casal uploaded his performance to a new video-sharing site, YouTube. Casal's video now has more than one million views. The following month a different user uploaded Kanye West's performance of "Bittersweet" from that same episode. This video has nearly four million views. Even more astonishing, this episode features Lemon Anderson and Flaco Navaja's performance of "Boriquas" which a user uploaded in April of 2019, fourteen years after this episode airs on HBO.

With this in mind, my suggestion for future research involves a study of how YouTube, and later the micro-poem phenomenon on Instagram, changed and continues to influence the experience of spoken word, slam poetry, and poetry at large. Javon Johnson's final chapter of *Killing Poetry* explores the troubling cultural and racial politics of YouTube channels featuring spoken word and oral poetry, particularly the lack of representation in early videos by Button Poetry. More pedagogically focused research on spoken word and oral poetry discuss YouTube and video-sharing sites in terms of access and modeling for creating communities of young

writers. However, as this research has considered processes, consequences, and various factors involved in the representation of poetry on television, future research might build upon these findings to explore representations of poetry that is sharable, searchable, and curated by algorithms.

My suggestion for future research also involves more documentation on spoken word and slam poetry. To this point, future scholars, poets, and practitioners might benefit from the following interventions. First, the field could benefit from a more precise definition of spoken word poetry, especially as it concerns the aesthetics and various styles often grouped in the category of spoken word. Second, the documentation of local poetry communities would greatly benefit these local communities and the poetry community at large, especially with an emerging field concentrating on spoken word and slam communities. Without more knowledge of these local communities, the field relies too heavily on the development of this art through a limited number of social processes, particularly those which occur in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Without detracting from the significance of these poetry communities, the field benefits with a greater understanding of the people, places, and histories in spoken word communities around the globe.

## Appendix: List of poems performed on Def Poetry Jam

<b>Season 1 (2001-2002)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	Steve Coleman	I Wanna Hear a Poem
1	Georgia Me	Full Figure Potential
1	Benjamin Bratt	Lower East Side (by Miguel Piñero)
1	Vanessa Hidary	Culture Bandit
1	Lemon Anderson	Shine (by Etheridge Knight)
1	Nikki Giovanni	Talk to Me Poem, I Think I've Got the Blues
1	Black Ice	Bigger Than Mine?
1	Suheir Hammad	First Writing Since
2	Taylor Mali	What Teachers Make
2	Yellow Rage	Listen Asshole
2	Jewel	Poem Song
2	Flowmentalz	They Call Me Drama
2	Sonia Sanchez	Poem for Some Women
2	Shihan	This Type Love
2	Dawn Saylor	When I Was 14
2	Kayo	Who Am I?
3	Cedric the Entertainer	Untitled
3	Sarah Jones	Your Revolution
3	Beau Sia	Give Me a Chance
3	Willie Perdomo	How Beautiful We Really Are
3	Abyss	God Gave Me Grey Skies
3	Last Poets	Take Your Time
3	IN-Q	When Hip-Hop Was Fun
3	J. Ivy	I Need To Write

<b>Season 1 (2001-2002)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
4	Mayda del Valle	Descendancy
4	Poetri	Money
4	Jessica Care Moore	Warriors Walk Alone
4	Dave Chappelle	The Corner Store
4	Amiri Baraka	from Why is We Americans?
4	Liza Jesse Peterson	Ice Cream Fiend
4	Kevin Coval	Family Feud



<b>Season 2 (2002)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	Beau Sia	Asian Invasion
1	Jason Carney	Southern Heritage
1	Thea Monyee	Woman to Woman
1	Sekou Sundiata	Come on and Bring on the Reparations
1	Marty McConnell	Give Me One Good Reason to Die
1	Twin Poets	Dreams are Illegal in the Ghetto
1	Jamie Foxx	Off the Hizzle for Shizzle
2	Danny Hoch	Corner Talk, September
2	Patricia Smith	Skinhead
2	Dante Basco	Nikki
2	Maggie Estep	Emotional Idiot
2	Black Ice	Truth Is
2	Kent Foreman	Epiphany
2	Roger Bonair Agard	How the Ghetto Loves Us Back
2	Erykah Badu	Friends, Fans, and Artists Must Meet
3	Lemon Anderson	Where I'm From <i>and</i> A Toast
3	Basseyy Ikpi	Sometimes Silence is the Loudest Kind of Noise
3	Taylor Mali	Totally Like Whatever, You Know?
3	Regie Cabico	What Kind of Guys are Attracted to Me
3	Haki R. Madhubuti	The B Network
3	Ratsack	I'm Losing You
4	Ishle Yi Park	All I Have Ever Done is Write You Love Poems
4	Shihan	Say What?
4	Suheir Hammad	Not Your Erotic, Not Your Exotic

<b>Season 2 (2002)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
4	Big Poppa E	Wussy Boy
4	La Bruja (Caridad de la Cruz)	Lopla and WTC
4	Anthony Morales	Story Avenue Stuck
4	Amalia Ortiz	Some Days
4	Oscar Brown Jr.	I Apologize
5	Felipe Luciano	Jibaro, My Pretty Nigger
5	muMs	Ploylessness
5	Amanda Diva (Seales)	Hot Shit
5	Malik Yusef	I Spit
5	Asha Bandele	Morning was My Mentor
5	Malcolm Jamal Warner	I Love My Woman
6	Sekou the Misfit	I'm a Rapper
6	Steve Connell	Why Not Wine Coolers?
6	Georgia Me	NigGods
6	Louis Reyes Rivera	Bullet Cry
6	Jessica Care Moore	I'm a Hip Hop Cheerleader
6	Keith Murray	Man Child
7	Denizen Kane	Lost and Found
7	Staceyann Chin	If Only Out of Vanity
7	Big Rube	Alphabet Acrobat
7	Wood Harris	Night Song
7	Goldie	No Title
7	Regie Gibson	For James Marshall Hendrix
7	Joy Harjo	A Poem to Get Rid of Fear
7	Linton Kwesi Johnson	If I was a Top-notch Poet

<b>Season 3 (2003)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	Black Ice	Lone Soldier
1	Rives	Sign Language
1	Helena D. Lewis	Stank Breath
1	Poem-Cees	Power
1	Mutabaruka	Dis Poem
1	Daniel Beaty	Duality Duel
1	Rupert Estanislao	Empress
1	Jill Scott	Nothing is for Nothing
1	Suheir Hammad	We Spent the 4th of July in Bed
2	Mayda del Valle and Lemon Anderson	Tito Puente
2	Flaco Navaja	Kids Don't Play
2	Gemineye	Poetic Bloodline
2	Ursula Rucker	Get Ready
2	Michael Ellison	Light Skin-did
2	Ishle Yi Park	Pussy
2	Ras Baraka	American Poem
2	Dana Gilmore	Wife, Woman, Friend
2	Common	God is Freedom
3	Poetri	Krispy Kreme
3	Emanuel Xavier	Tradiciones
3	Marc Bamuthi Joseph	For Pop
3	Richard Montoya	Miami
3	Vanessa Hidary	The Hebrew Mamita
3	Danny Hoch	PSA

<b>Season 3 (2003)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
3	Bassey Ikpi	Homeward
3	Lemon Anderson	Gangsta MCs
3	Steve Coleman	Terrorist Threat
4	Staceyann Chin and Black Ice	Jammin'
4	Rock Baby	Titty Man
4	Alix Olson	Women Before
4	Mike 360	Twilight Zone
4	Cheryl "Salt" James (of Salt N' Peppa)	We Follow Your Lead
4	Shappy	I Am That Nerd
4	Jonzi D	3000 Casualties of War
4	Amalia Ortiz	Cat Calls
4	Jimmy Santiago Baca	from Healing Earthquakes ("Twelve")
5	Roger Bonair Agard	For Trent Lott
5	Frenchie	Fucking ain't Conscious
5	Geoff Trenchard	Of Copper Chipped Teeth
5	Chinaka Hodge	Barely Audible
5	Quincy Troupe	Forty One Seconds in June, in Salt Lake City, Utah (for Michael Jordan)
5	Dufflyn	Single Life
5	muMs	Brooklyn Queen
5	Kevin Coval	Jam Master J
5	Beau Sia	Love
6	Shihan	Sick and Tired
6	Jason Carney	Out Here
6	Gina Loring	Somewhere There is a Poem

**Season 3 (2003)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
6	Kanye West	Self-conscious
6	Jamie Kennedy	Grim Fairy Tale
6	Bao Phi	You Bring Out the Vietnamese in Me
6	Roscoe P. Coldchain	Trouble
6	Mayda del Valle	In the Cocina
6	Buju Banton	How Long
7	Maggie Estep	Happy
7	Malak Salaam	Warrior's Love
7	Joel Chmara	Sweet Tooth Tollbooth School Year
7	Flowmentalz	The Payphone
7	Saul Williams	Coded Language
7	Georgia Me	Hit Like a Man
7	Deb Young	Children of a Lesser God
7	Smokey Robinson	A Black American

**Season 4 (2004)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	Daniel Beaty	Knock, Knock
1	Rives	Kite
1	Nafessa Monroe	White
1	Mark Gonzales	As With Most Men
1	Zena Edwards	Laugh
1	Oscar Brown Jr.	Children of Children
1	Amalia Ortiz	Women of Juarez
1	Black Ice	Or Die
1	MC Lyte	I Was Born
2	Gemineye	What Are You Fighting For?
2	Bonnie (Harvey)	My Man
2	Javon Johnson	Elementary
2	Suheir Hammad	What I Will
2	Rachel McKibbens and George McKibbens	Multi-tasking
2	Vanessa Hidary	Fling Gone Awry
2	Flowmentalz	Constipation
2	Nikki Patin	Sweat
2	Nikky Finney	Girlfriends Train
2	Kanye West	18 years
3	Bassey Ikpi	Diallo
3	John S. Hall	America Kicks Ass
3	Tish Benson	Fifth Word Email
3	Kelly Tsai	Mao
3	Tracy Morgan	Feeling Fucked Up
3	Will “Da Real One” Bell	So I Run

**Season 4 (2004)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
3	Morris Stegosaurus	Big Man II
3	Dawn Saylor	Take You To Brooklyn
3	Michael Eric Dyson	Intellectual MCs
3	KRS-One and Doug E. Fresh	2nd Quarter
4	Poetri	Dating Myself
4	Julian Curry	Nigger, Niggas, Niggaz
4	Ishle Yi Park	Open Letter to Soldier
4	Taylor Mali	Like Lily Like Wilson
4	Adele Givens	That Shit Ain't Funny
4	Kevin Coval	My G-dself Loose
4	Yolanda Kae Wilkinson	Circa Valentine's Day
4	Amir Sulaiman	Danger
4	Floetry	Everybody Heard
5	Lemon Anderson	Love Poem
5	Regie Cabico	You Bring Out the Writer in Me (after Sandra Cisneros)
5	Rafael Casal	Abortion
5	Kim Fields	How Come
5	Reg E. Gaines	I Don't Feel Like Writing
5	Jon Goode	Barbara
5	Dana Gilmore	Wife, Woman, Friend, Pt. 2
5	Rita Dove	Black on a Saturday Night
5	Talib Kweli	Lonely People
6	Flaco Navaja	Revolution
6	Liza Jesse Peterson	Waitress

**Season 4 (2004)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
6	Robert Karimi	Get Down with Your Catholic Muslim Self
6	Triple Black	Love Poems
6	Bonafide Rojas	In front of the Class
6	Laura "Piece" Kelly	Central District
6	BessKepp	Rotten Pomegranates
6	Michael Franti	Rock the Nation
6	Ruby Dee	Tupac
7	Georgia Me	Bitch Ass Nigga
7	Jus Cus	Homeland Security
7	J. Ivy	Dear Father
7	Marlon Esquerra	Morning Papers
7	Marvin Tate	My Life to the Present
7	Martin Espada	Imagine the Angels of Bread
7	Alix Olson	America on Sale
7	Ani DiFranco	Coming Up
7	Mike Epps	I Love the Hood
8	Mayda del Valle	Hood Days
8	Andy Buck	*69
8	Faraji Salim	Star Spangled Banner
8	Bob Holman	Rock & Roll Mythology
8	Patrick Washington (of the Poem-Cees)	Letter to the Editor
8	Tara Betts	Switch
8	Paul Flores	Brown Dreams
8	muMs	The Truth Parts I & II
8	Buttaflysoul	Queer Eye



<b>Season 4 (2004)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
8	Dead Prez	4 the Hood
9	Beau Sia	I'm So Deep
9	Ayisha Knight	Until
9	Buddy Wakefield	Convenience Store
9	Shihan	The Auction Network
9	Miguel Algarin	Met Walking
9	Kendra Urdang	To Every Man Who Never Called Himself a Feminist
9	Speech	Night Time Demons
9	Red Storm	My Debut
9	Universes	Don't Front
9	Common	A Letter to the Law
10	Tommy Bottoms	Basic Economics
10	Staceyann Chin	Three Frenzied Days
10	Joe Hernandez-Kolski	Cool
10	Marc Bamuthi Joseph	Move
10	Denizen Kane	Love Song
10	Aya De Leon	Cellulite
10	Musiq	Pieces of this Life
10	Yusef Komunyakha	The Sure Beat
10	Beau Sia, Georgia Me, and Suheir Hammad	First Taste

**Season 5 (2005)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	J. Ivy	Never Let Me Down
1	Dahlak Brathwaite	Just Another Routine Check
1	Claudia Alick	Employed Poor
1	Black Ice	Imagine
1	Gideon Grody-Patinkin	Touching
1	Avery Brooks	from <i>Purlie Victorious</i> (by Ossie Davis)
1	Lauryn Hill	Motives and Thoughts
1	Rachel McKibbens	After School Special
1	Dave Chappelle	Fuck Ashton Kutcher <i>and</i> How I Got the Lead On Jeopardy
2	Al Letson	The Ball the Rim and Him
2	Dan Sully and Tim Stafford	Death From Below
2	Georgia Me	For Your Protection
2	John Legend	Again
2	Caroline Harvey	Spoons
2	Bounty Killer	Look Into My Eyes
2	Bassey Ikpi	I Want to Kiss You
2	Will "Da Real One" Bell	Diary of the Reformed
2	Alicia Keys	P.O.W
3	Reg E. Gaines with Savion Glover	Pawn Shop
3	Tommy Chunn	Computer Wordplay
3	Scorpio Blues	Second Guessing
3	Gemineye	Penny for Your Thoughts
3	Emanuel Xavier	Nueva York
3	Mayda del Valle	To All the Boys I've Loved Before

**Season 5 (2005)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
3	Rev. Run	Peter Piper
3	Aulelei Love	Same Cell, A Poem for Women in Prison
3	Mike Booker	Hoodology
3	Smokey Robinson	Gang Bangin'
4	Poem-cees	Cheatin'
4	Geoff Trenchard	Ode to my Bathroom
4	Marty McConnell	Instructions for a Body
4	Nikki Giovanni	Nikki-Rosa
4	Roger Bonair Agard	Calypso
4	Joaquin Zihuatanejo	This is a Suit
4	Ishle Yi Park	Sa-I-Gu
4	Willie Perdomo	Nigger-Reecan Blues
4	Floetry	Fantasize
5	Poetri	Driving
5	Sharrif Simmons	Fuck What You Heard
5	Michael Ellison	Mezeker Means to Remember
5	Phylicia Rashad	On Status (by Vivian Ayers)
5	Ratsack	Free the Toes
5	Abyss	She
5	Kevin Coval	Nothing Fight
5	Mollie Angelheart	Psychotic Bitch
5	Flowmentalz	Talkin' to God
5	Thea Monyee and Gaknew	A Different World
6	Wyclef Jean	Immigrant
6	Ise Lyfe	Popular Dirt

**Season 5 (2005)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
6	Nayeli Adorador-Knudsen	Priceless
6	Michael Cirelli	Love Song for Kelis
6	M'Reld (Green)	Ready for Love
6	Red Storm	Snake in the Grass
6	Kelly Tsai	Aftershocks
6	Paul Mabon	The Toothbrush
6	Kevin Derrig	Andrew
6	(Mighty) Mike McGee	Like
6	Narubi Selah	Uncle Benz
7	Kanye West	Bittersweet
7	Ursula Rucker	What A Woman Must Do
7	Rafael Casal	Barbie and Ken 101
7	Terry Creech	Lost Bird
7	Thadra Sheridan	Bad Boyfriend
7	Beau Sia	Hip Hop
7	Shihan	In Response
7	Sonia Sanchez	Our Vision is Our Voice
7	Amir Sulaiman	She Said, I Prefer A Broken Neck...
7	Lemon Anderson and Flaco Navaja	Boriquas
8	Preach	Cotton
8	Steve Connell and Sekou The Misfit	America Calls
8	Big Poppa E	Poem For Castadera Antoine McGee
8	Amanda Diva	40 Emcees
8	Al B. Back	Super Negro

**Season 5 (2005)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
8	Sista Queen	Try Being a Lady
8	Jerry Quickley	3-Part Bitter X-girlfriend #167249-B
8	Oscar Brown Jr.	This Beach
8	Staceyann Chin	A City In Tragedy
8	Brother J (of X Clan)	Atlan
8	Common	Be Known
9	Suheir Hammad	Mike Check
9	Lemon Anderson	Poor People
9	Tamara Blue	Thick Chicks
9	Rives	Op-talk
9	Otep	Dedicated to my enemy
9	Heru Ptah	Why
9	Sharon Olds	Self Portrait, Rear View
9	Perre Shelton	Dandelion
9	Consequence	Friend Zone
9	Jason Carney	Our Soldiers
9	Black Thought	Untitled
10	Gina Loring	You Move Me
10	Rock Baby	That Sweet That Funk
10	Chinaka Hodge	Cousin
10	Denizen Kane	Patriot Act
10	Sekou Sundiata	Amman
10	Kristiana Colon	From the Clay
10	Jimmy Tran	Mediocre Penis
10	Flaco Navaja	Dimple

<b>Season 5 (2005)</b>		
<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
10	Eve Ensler	My Father's House
10	Black Ice, Poetri and Shihan	We Are Men

**Season 6 (2007)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
1	DMX	The Industry
1	Big Mike	Sexy
1	Asia Samson	The Waiting Hour
1	Dasha Kelly and Dan Vaughn	Six Million
1	Kelly Tsai	Grey Matter
1	Red Storm	Black Barbie Doll
1	Shanelle Gabriel	Why I Love You
1	Idris Goodwin	What is They Feedin' Our Kids
1	Jill Scott	Ain't a Ceiling
2	Dahlak Brathwaite	Peculiar Evolution
2	Skim	Your Eyes
2	Eamon Mahone and Paul Graham	Black Irish
2	Tahani Salah	Hate
2	George Watsky	V For Virgin
2	Shannon Leigh	Sudanese Children
2	Pat's Justice	Innocent Criminal
2	Lyfe Jennings	Rough Stuff
2	Matisyahu	Late Night In The Field
2	Talib Kweli	Hell
3	Sarah Kay	Hands
3	Sciryl and Riva	My Best Friend (Hip Hop)
3	Rafael Casal	First Week of a Break-Up
3	Meilani Clay	Lost
3	Shihan	Father's Day

**Season 6 (2007)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
3	Shannon Matesky	My Space
3	Carlos Andres Gomez	What's Genocide
3	Carole King	Touchstone
3	Natalie Stewart (of Floetry)	Her Story
3	Jamal Joseph	Ricky Do & The 4th of July
4	Oveous Maximus	Salcedo's Breakdown
4	Sonya Renee	Connections
4	Anis Mojgani	For Those Who Can Still Ride an Airplane for the First Time
4	Rives	Dirty Talk
4	Mush	Next Wednesday
4	Joe Hernandez-Kolski	No Disclaimers
4	Shelton "Shakespeare" Alexander	Will You be There
4	David Banner	What About Us
4	Sunni Patterson	We Made It
5	Big Poppa E	Propers
5	Bassey Ikpi	Apology to My Unborn
5	Alvin Lau	What Tiger Said
5	Saddi Kali	Goin' Platinum In 2 Days
5	Liza Garza	My Everything
5	Lamont Carey	I Can't Read
5	Brian Dykstra	Pushing Bush
5	Vanessa Hidary	Ph.D. In Him
5	Basikknowledge	Numbers
5	George Clinton	Dope Dog



**Season 6 (2007)**

<b>Episode</b>	<b>Poet</b>	<b>Title</b>
6	Black Ice	The Ugly Show
6	Mayda del Valle	The Gift
6	Steve Coleman	I Want To Eat Your Pussy
6	Georgia Me	The Promiseland
6	Beau Sia	Back To The Now
6	Staceyann Chin	Nails
6	Poetri	Monsters in My Stomach
6	Suheir Hammad	Daddy's Song
6	Lemon Anderson	Experience
6	Nelly Furtado	Nevis

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