

TRAPPED BETWEEN GRAFFITI'D WALLS AND SIDEWALK BORDERS:  
RESISTANCE, INSISTENCE AND CHANGING THE SHAPE OF THINGS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Beat poetics, specifically exemplified by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Alan Ginsberg, offer a political aesthetic voice of dissent within both the canon and the nation. Creating their own fold of heterogeneity, these poets base their critique of the Western Enlightenment technocratic and logocentric philosophic tradition upon a performance of marginality. Separating themselves from this way of being in the world, Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg use American institutions and industries as metaphors for a Moloch-like system of imprisoning and/or destroying individuality and excess, sacrificing difference—political, aesthetic, mystical and spiritual ways of knowing and operating in the world—in the name of efficiency and progress. In this strategy of dissent, however, the Beats set up a system of dividing authentic ways of participating in the dominant national sphere from inauthentic participation in a manner that may potentially trap meaningful dissent within the graffiti'd walls and sidewalk borders of marginality. The Beat strategy of dissent sets the stage both literally and figuratively for Slam and Spoken Word dissenting poetic movements. The means by which Beat poets construct marginal positions as affording a truth based discourse garnered from the authentic experience of marginality both offers the possibility for a radically multicultural movement of dissent and threatens to force this movement to remain marginal within a wider social sphere. While Slam and Spoken Word threaten to continue this Beat paradigm based on uncritical notions of authenticity, the theatrics of performance found within these movements problematizes essentialized conceptualizations of identity, marginality, and the authentic confessional moment. The spectacle blurs the boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic, between the meaningful and meaningless, in a manner that allows for the possibility of dissent based on marginality to participate within a wider national, cultural, and political sphere.

## CHAPTER ONE

## DESPERATE DESIRE: THE MARK OF URGENCY

A voice that desperately desires to be heard—to break into the world, to break the world—cloaks itself in urgency. And with this cloak, it has potential: a potential to be heard and a potential to be hidden. At San Francisco’s 6 Gallery, in 1955, Alan Ginsberg put on this cloak and gave a reading of “Howl” that was inspiring enough for its traces to remain, woven into other works throughout time. And while this voice, and many others within the Beat Generation, have since been endlessly rewritten and written over, it is safe to say that, at least for now, this voice is in the world. Urgency is the mark of a genre, and while it is not exclusively paired with desire or dissent, there is rarely a desire for dissent without it. In urgency, movements of dissent run the risk of not being heard, for while they are louder in their attempt, shouting in speech and action, bold face print and exclamation points, desire can be a funny thing, a covering up of complication, contradiction, and implication. Desire mixed with urgency can be unconvincing. Movements like the Beats, Slam and Spoken Word very much run this risk. Often associated with romantic notions of direct transmission of truth and knowledge, Beat and Spoken Word aesthetics privilege orality, spontaneity, performativity, musicality, quotidianity, and concepts of presence, valuing both the speaker and the spoken to (Bennett, Class Notes). Like all of these aesthetic characteristics, urgency is ridden with its own complexity. It is performed, can be faked, and, most importantly, can be futile.

The Beats and Spoken Word artists could very easily be miming urgency, may have no real desire for change, may have nothing important to say. These movements could very well be moving loudly and incredibly fast, both repeating and creating dissenting practices that are moving dissenters in the wrong direction. But what if they aren't?

In "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," B. Gallagher and A. Wilson ask Michel Foucault about individual agency and dissent in a social sphere that is inextricably intertwined with his endlessly repeating play of dominations. They wonder how one can move, speak out, and make change. Questioning that his concept of power relations necessarily traps an individual, robbing him or her of agency, they state, "You write that power is not just a negative force but a productive one; that power is always there; that where there is power, there is resistance; and that resistance is never in a position of externality vis-à-vis power" (167) "If this is so," they ask, "then how do we come to any other conclusion than that we are always trapped inside that relationship—that we can't somehow break out of it?" (167). To which Foucault replies:

Well, I don't think the word trapped is a correct one. It is a struggle, but what I mean by power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other...the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power relation situation is not the same; but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this struggle can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So we are not trapped. We cannot jump outside the situation and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said doesn't mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free—*well, anyway, that there is always possibility of changing* [my emphasis]" (Foucault, Sex and Power 167).

Further on in the interview, Foucault discusses the possibility of dissent to change power relations by advocating what he calls resistance, but not in the form of merely saying no,

for saying no is just a part of dissenting practices. It is not the beginning, but rather a beginning, to resistance as a creative production of power that affirms pre-existing powers structures even in the process of denying them. It is in this affirmation that we are not free, and while Foucault says that he “doesn’t mean we are always trapped,” but that “we are always free,” he stumbles over the word, pauses, then rewords it more carefully. “Well, anyway,” he says, “there is always a possibility of changing,” a repeating with difference (Foucault 167).

This Foucauldian system of power relations does not allow one to construct a space or form of dissent within that space that is free of power, but it does allow for a construction of a space in which an individual and a voice has agency. Therefore, dissenting practices may say no, but in that no is a double affirmation, not merely a negation. At the very least, it is a construction of the other as threat, a construction of the dissenter and the role of dissent, and a construction of the position from which he or she speaks. However, when speaking of whole movements of dissent, of countercultural practices in general, there is a series of created identities, systems, and spaces, constructed and wielding varying degrees of power within the social sphere.

Movements like the Beats and Spoken Word create an aesthetic based on the traces of the desire to make change. The term counterculture, as problematic as it may be, is the trace of the trace of this desire. Counterculture does not denote pure transgression, does not suggest the breaking out from one’s own episteme, out of false consciousness, to pit ourselves against the culture in which we once resided. Foucault states, “We cannot jump outside the situation and there is no point where [we] are free from all power

relations,” but, he writes, “there are always possibilities of changing the situation” (167). And so, while we may never be free from the boundaries of culture and the endlessly repeating play of dominations, our dissent as a double affirmation allows us to change the shape of them—it is the shaping that matters.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida demonstrates this process of shaping as a matter of the future. Discussing the archival process, the manner in which we give ourselves to another for safekeeping or for disposal, the way history is made and comes to determine our place in the world, Derrida implies a great significance and responsibility within enacting our agency in the world. Discussing the archive Derrida writes of this agency as a promise, a “spectral messianicity,” at work (41). “The question of the archive is not a question of the past,” he writes, “It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (Derrida 41). The way in which we deal with anything, including movements of dissent is part of the archival process, part of the historical future, that great text, that narrative that it is “the question of the future itself,” and within this question, within this spectral promise, there is much responsibility.

Beat and Spoken Word movements, while seemingly marginal within a national political sphere, are groups that very much affect the culture in which we reside, both visually—through product placements, media portrayals, readings, and competitions—and as well as ideologically, through reinforcing and celebrating specific truth based lifestyles and ways of knowing. In their attempt at dissent, they are one of many groups throughout history repeating this genre with difference, and, therefore, certain strategies

have been both reinscribed and created, becoming methods within countercultural practices. Set within the theoretical discussion surrounding these movements, we can gain insight into how we ought and ought not construct and move within world. Focusing specifically on language and how we use it, these movements demonstrate the role of discourse in the production of knowledge and truth, and therefore, are overtly political, demonstrating the political potential, or lack thereof of a cultural and aesthetic production.

Through their political aesthetic, their poli-poetics, each movement can be read as seeking to resist, insist, or offer an alternative to the techno-rational logocentrism of the Western philosophic tradition as it is manifested, with its institutions, industries, and governments. With their privileging of the oral, the performance or reading, and the vernacular, Beat and Spoken Word can be interpreted as seeking to resist the perceived scientific and technocratic ways of knowing the world, based on linearity, logic and the impersonal. And so, through their work, attempt to appeal to a different sensibility. However, like Foucault implies in his interview, these movements do not simply resist, as in the form of saying no the Western world, but create something in this process. Through Beat strategies of dissent and the manner in which they've been theorized, a specific kind of knowledge production is created and continued; a knowledge production that both allows Slam and Spoken Word movements to exist in the radically open multicultural form it takes, and traps it within the cyclical knowledge production based on concepts of authenticity and marginality. The Beats can be read as setting the stage,

both figuratively and literally, for both Slam, Spoken Word, and dissenting movements to come.

## CHAPTER TWO

## BEAT DISSENT: COMPROMISE AND COUNTERCULTURE

In January of 1956 he told us he was “putting his queer shoulder to the wheel,” and 50 years later, it appears America is left wondering what exactly he meant by that. When attempting to analyze the potential implications of this single poetic line, a battle based on interpretation ensues. Was Ginsberg lighting out for his urban and fellahin territories, fed up with America and fleeing the scene in a form of escapist politics? Was he highlighting his homosexuality, and thus marginality in an attempt to advocate a politics of identity? Was he suggesting taking control, situating himself in the driver’s seat, leaning down to push or stop the great American wheel in advocacy of social agency, a politics of engagement? “America,” he writes, “this is quite serious” (Ginsberg 43). And, as recent scholarship would suggest, it certainly is. With this line alone we can see why contemporary Beat scholars are currently at odds with one another in a critical discussion defining, redefining, explicating and rehistoricizing the Beat agenda and effectiveness. In “Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Beats,” Robert Bennett discusses the “new directions in Beat Studies,” highlighting both the recent increase in scholarly interest in the Beat generation, as well as the competing discourses either cynically tearing down or naively rebuilding the movement and its participants.

Dealing primarily with Jennie Skerl’s anthology, *Reconstructing the Beats*, and Manuel Luis Martinez’s *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent*, Bennett constructs and questions the sharp divide these texts create in a manner

that suggests a compromise or common ground should be made between what he refers to as “a relatively un-theorized, and somewhat naïve, sense of countercultural dissent,” and an “over theorized critical cynicism,” that reads the Beats as reinforcing a patriarchal imperialism, which, as Martinez describes, has “nothing countercultural about” it (117). However, dealing with movements of dissent or revolutionary practices as advocated by Skerl and Martinez’s texts, one must wonder if a compromise adequately describes the solution to such a divide.

### The Great Divide

Describing Skerl’s anthology, Bennett highlights how it “advances a rather traditional sense of the Beats as countercultural rebels,” demonstrating how Clinton R. Starr defines the Beat Generation as a “vibrant counterculture that facilitated individual resistance and collective political activism,” how Daniel Belgrad connects the Beats to Mexican Magical Realists in that they both were “opposing the ‘hemispheric dominance of corporate liberalism,’” and how Skerl describes the Beats as “‘nonconformists’ who ‘critique...mainstream values and social structures’” (qtd in 178). On the other side of the divide in Beat scholarship, Martinez’s text seeks to deconstruct this notion of the Beats as rebels, presenting them, particularly William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Alan Ginsberg, as embracing “many of the ‘reactionary, nativists, racist ideologies,’” making them not “‘against a vacuous, rigid, bourgeois conformity, but echoing, albeit dissonantly, the same tune” (qtd in Bennett 179). In Martinez’s text, the Beats were anything but revolutionary. Through their strategy, Martinez paints not only the Beats

themselves, but also their literature as “a mere ‘rehashing of an American rugged individualism that was ultimately hostile to a Rousseauian commitment to civic participation and radical egalitarian democracy’” (qtd in Bennett 179). As it appears within these descriptions, Beat studies are currently in two separate camps, situated on opposite sides of a theoretical divide, at war through discourses that don’t even touch one another.

While Bennett is accurate in describing the conclusion that both these texts make about the Beat Generation as “opposing theories of countercultural dissent,” his review suggests that these projects may be more interrelated, leaving it up to his readers “to explore more carefully what those subterranean relationships might be” (182). As it turns out, Bennett’s call to the reader was right on the mark. Both *Reconstructing the Beats* and *Countering the Counterculture* are in fact interrelated, but only in the manner in which they construct Beat attempts at dissent. Both discuss Beat dissent as being based on their cultural appropriation, negative or positive, of marginal identities. Both describe the Beats as forming their individual or collective heterogeneity with mainly Blue Collar, Black and Mexican cultural characteristics, including the Blue Collar dress of Levi’s and white T-shirts, Black jive talk and arts such as Jazz and Bebop, and Pre-Columbian myths and symbols of nature. Both authors agree that the Beats did have a strategy of self-marginalization in order to self-fashion either individual or loosely connected group identity. What creates the aspect of opposition in these texts is their reading of this dissent’s structural effectiveness based on differing political agendas. Those in strong favor of the Beat generation as countercultural rebels and those in strong opposition of

constructing the Beats in this way have very different conceptualizations of what revolution means, as well as what revolutionary ends ought to be.

Skerl and Martinez's texts oppose one another not because the Beats themselves either acted as revolutionaries or not at all in a pure sense of the term, as a theory of opposition might suggest, but rather they differ in conclusions about the Beat generation because they have different conceptualizations of revolution itself. The essays in Skerl's anthology, particularly Robert Holton's "The Sordid Hipsters of America: Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity," base their concept of Beat social effectiveness in terms of individual, or, at most, a loosely defined notion of community politics. Skerl defines the Beats as a "loosely affiliated art community...who sought to create a new alternative culture that served as a Bohemian *retreat* from the dominant culture as a critique of mainstream values and social structures..." [my emphasis](2). This definition serves to illustrate the manner in which Beat theorists celebrate the movement in that it demonstrates their conception of community as a "loosely affiliated" one, their definition of social critique as forming Bohemian alternatives, and their concept of alternative or counter culture as creating a "retreat." Holton highlights this notion within his text, particularly in his desire to contrast writers unsuccessful at finding a habitable American space, like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with Beat writers. According to Holton, "for these young men and countless more like them, both literary and real, no fold—sacred or otherwise—could be located in which to find shelters; no habitable space..." (15). The Beats, on the other hand, investigated "various forms of heterogeneity," finding that the dregs of life offered

a place of possibility where the “ticky tacky boxes all the same” of suburbia could not (Holton 26). If, as Holton does, one defines revolutionary political effectiveness by an individual’s or loosely connected group’s success in creating their own spaces of heterogeneity amongst a perceived American fabric of homogeneity, then the Beat movement and politic was not only hugely successful within their own generation, but also for generations to come.

While critiquing the means in which the counterculture has been disseminated through commercial representation, Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool* traces the Beat trajectory through the 1960’s countercultural movements into contemporary society, demonstrating the prevalence of beatnik ideals throughout multiple generations. While he writes that “the counterculture has long since outlived the enthusiasm of its original participants,” he admits that it has “become a more or less permanent part of the American scene, a symbolic and musical language for the endless cycles of rebellion and transgression that make up so much of our mass culture” (Frank 31). Based on the Beat template for individual liberty, gained through refashioning identity in terms of language, clothing, cultural lifestyle, and mythology, we have seen many movements—ranging from individual subversive consumerism to separatist groups including Black Nationalists, Chicano/a communities, Native American separatists, up through more contemporary underground groups such as graffiti, punk and hiphop movements—create their own “spaces of heterogeneity within the fabric of American Modernity” (Holton 26). Based on this criteria alone, it would be difficult to argue that the Beats were not successful in paving the way to an American ideal of individuality and difference leading

to a national space full of different discourse communities or enclaves, with their own unique and self-fashioned forms of language, style, culture, and stories. The point at which the Beat Generation is read as either unsuccessful, or not successful enough occurs when the politics are no longer based on individual liberty and movement. It is at the point where the politics take a radical departure, basing revolution or social change on a reformation of the American system on a national level.

If one were to base revolutionary political success on Martinez's form of politics, the reading of Beat effectiveness in terms of revolution would differ drastically. Rather than based on a negative individual liberty, Martinez advocates what he calls positive liberty, based on a sense of community with national participation towards a democratic and egalitarian American space. When defining the difference between individual and community based liberty, he draws from Anthony H. Birch's political theory:

On the one hand, liberty has been asserted to be freedom for the individual to do whatever he or she wants to do; in short, that liberty is the absence of restraint. This is the negative concept of liberty. On the other hand, liberty has been asserted to be freedom to do things worth doing, to engage in self-development, to have a share in the government of one's society. In Isaiah Berlin's terminology, this is the positive concept of liberty. (qtd in Martinez 7)

If set within a politics that privileges positive liberty, as defined in this way, then the Beats cannot be read as effective in creating a radical revolution of the American system at large. Similar to Frank's reading of co-optation, leading to a watered down and commercial cycle of transgression and revolution at a consumer level, in this system of politics, the Beats' form of individuality found in their self-created spaces of

heterogeneity “lent itself to fixed positions within a hierarchy that allows for personal movement, product choice, and promotion for its approved agents, but not for challenges to the system or structure itself” (Martinez 51). Rather than merely creating individual or group spaces within the “fabric of American Modernity,” this politic seeks to radically alter that very fabric in an attempt to create a new American space based on an egalitarian and positive liberty.

Both Holton and Martinez construct a Beat generation that successfully formed heterogeneous spaces, the problem Martinez-like theorists have with this success is that they did so through appropriating marginal identities without having to remain marginal. Through their politics of individual liberty, the Beats were successful in operating within a space of heterogeneity with access to the privileges the American system had to offer, but, according to Martinez, they were only successful in creating this communal-national space for themselves. As Martinez explains, his critique of the Beats is not directly opposed to the Beat desire or attempt for social change, but is in direct contestation with the underlying ideologies that fail to direct change toward a radically communitarian end. “I focus my critique on the ‘counterculture,’ defined broadly, not because it ‘failed’ or was hypocritical,” he writes, “but because its effects have come under attack even though its strategies did not produce a long-lasting cohesive or communal instinct...creating not a radical *communitas* or radical collective alternatives” (Martinez 8). What Martinez seeks to do is flesh out effective and ineffective countercultural practices and strategies that produce *his* desired effect within society.

Reading Skerl's *Reconstructing the Beats* and Martinez's *Countering the Counterculture* in opposition to one another, Bennett states that, taken together, these texts raise "an integral question facing Beat studies today" (182). He asks, "How are critics to reassess a Beat counterculture that was less revolutionary than it thought but more powerful than its harshest critics contend" (182). This question, while important to Beat scholars at large, could be read as suggesting that these theories should seek a synthesis, creating a common, or middle ground. But because each critique of the Beat generation is based on a form of politics, a vision of how the world ought to be, the integral question facing Beat Studies, or studies of counterculture in general, is not only how one should reassess the Beats as neither purely successful nor purely unsuccessful, but must also simultaneously include a question regarding what political end the Beats and other countercultural movements were and ought to have been working toward.

When dealing with the literature as literature alone, a synthesis or common ground may be found, but when dealing with literature as politics, as a countercultural literary genre suggests, this may not be, and perhaps *should* not be, an end goal, especially when speaking in terms of revolution and dissent. In discussing counterculture, dissenting, and revolutionary literary movements, one must take into account an aesthetical-political analysis of how the movement constructs an American fabric within the literature, as well as how the movement suggests an alternative to, or alternative way of being within, this fabric through their aesthetic: the difference between the way the world is and ought to be, as well as how to get there.

Dissenting from Within an American Moloch

Beat literature attempts to offer a solution to their constructed western civilization and its techno-rational logocentricism through the advocacy of participating in an aesthetic that might create alternative ways of knowing. The Beats strongly advocated a fusion of aesthetics and politics, as the very existence of their literature attests to, and as Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind* more easily describes. As the title suggests, Ferlinghetti's anthology advocates a carnivalesque exercise of the imagination. Due to the title's reference to this "carnival" only existing in the isolated island of the imagination, his anthology could be read as advocating an escapist politic, as many interpret Beat road narratives. A reading like that, however, not only underestimates Ferlinghetti and the Beat politic as a whole, but suggests that written discourse is non-participatory within a social sphere wider than the text itself. While the concept of carnival as pure subversion of a dominant hierarchy or social order is wishful thinking at best, and inaccurate/illusory at worst, the fact that Ferlinghetti alludes to this kind of thought and imaginative capability suggests that if we change the way we see and talk about the world, we can change the world

Beat poli-poetics, specifically exemplified by Ferlinghetti and equally demonstrated by Ginsberg, construct American society as one dominated by a western philosophic tradition, privileging the techno-rational and logocentric to the point of refusing or confining excess, imprisoning alternative identities (race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality), and most importantly, alternative ways of knowing. "Moloch the

incomprehensible prison!," Ginsberg writes of America, "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!" (Howl 21). Like the machinery of Moloch, countless critics have discussed the Beat episteme as one of hegemonic conformity. In *Conquest of Cool*, Frank writes of this general conception of the 1950's as a post-war tale "told and retold with the frequency and certainty of historical orthodoxy" (10). "Author after author," he writes, "warned in the 1950's that long-standing American traditions of individualism were vanishing..." and the people were "in danger of being reduced to faceless cogs in a great machine, automatons in an increasing rationalized and computerized system of production that mindlessly churned out cars, TVs, bomber jets, and consciousness all for the sake of the ever-accelerating American way of life" (Frank 10). In the age of Un-American Activity trials, systematized highways, Levitownesque suburban sprawl, glossy Time magazines depicting nuclear families buying the latest consumer goods in the first climate-controlled, Muzak-filled SouthDale center, the 1950's serves as the quintessential metaphor for the conformity that so threatened Beat conceptions of authentic identity and human essence. This was the Beat conceived Beast to which all excess, all difference, all dreams, myths, spirituality, and creativity was sacrificed, in the name of American progress and efficiency. Moloch, typically referred to as an ancient god of sacrifice and mentioned 38 times in Ginsberg's 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of "Howl," is represented as this Beast of Western society. Reinscribing the historic/biblical Melek of the past as the contemporary "king" or god of American civilization, Ginsberg replaces the brass with "cement and aluminum," with blood of money, fingers of armies, and eyes of "a thousand blind windows" (2). What is interesting about Ginsberg's use of Moloch, particularly in a poem

entitled “Howl,” is that, in both the 12<sup>th</sup> as well as the 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions, Moloch is not separate from its location, the child, the priest, nor the father. In order for the sacrifice or sacrament that saves the nation for its *transgression* to take place, all must be present, crossing into one another in the material, through hands, in fire, sound and movement.

Tophet is Moloch, which was made of brass; and they heated him from his lower parts; and his hands being stretched out, and made hot, they put the child between his hands, and it was burnt; when it vehemently cried out; but the priests beat a drum, that the father might not hear the voice of his son, and his heart might not be moved. (Wiki, Singer and Barton 1)

This sacrificial process creates a scene in which the place *is* the beast, his hands stretched to the other, with the exchange of the child. All the while, the drums are beating over the faint screaming, screaming that the father may or may not strain to hear. It could be said that what Beat poets like Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti attempt within their aesthetic is not to purely separate themselves from America, constructing a dichotomy between mainstream and rebel postures, but rather attempt to increase the volume of the vehement scream of individuality just enough to overpower the incessant drumming of modernity, “so that the father might hear, and his heart be moved.”

Ferlinghetti’s *Coney Island of the Mind* and Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* are both anthologies that construct the American fabric as a Moloch-like entity to which the human, the authentic, is sacrificed. Within their texts they create an America that privileges the techno rational logocentric Western philosophic tradition as it is manifested with its institutions, its industry and with its obsession with time, economic gain and consumption. Specific poems within Ferlinghetti’s work, describing a “suffering humanity” delusional with grandiose notions, chasing “false windmills, with illusory

“dreams mislaid” among the American “sunbathers,” easily lend themselves to a reading in which the poet-persona is merely critiquing the American scene, not implicated with the evils he envisions by either looking *down* from a bird’s eye view, looking *above* from the cracks of the street or looking *in* from the periphery of marginality (9, 13). After all, it was Ginsberg who told the American public to “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” (39). However accurate or inaccurate this reading of the poets, and the Beats in general, may be, it is not useful in that it simplifies their work to the point that analysis of the Beat Generation has missed the mark in critiquing the dichotomous nature of countercultural movements at large. Throughout their literature, Beat characters and personas exhibit awareness in varying levels to their role within their constructed America, and no one demonstrates this awareness better than the very poets who seem to advocate the dichotomy the most. It is true that *Coney Island of the Mind* and *Howl and Other Poems* construct a national fabric that nearly eliminates all folds of heterogeneity. However, these poets do not situate themselves on one side of a dichotomy between hip and square, between counter culture and mainstream culture. Their poet-personas are not situated as somehow outside of their own culture, free of possible implication or free of false consciousness. In fact, as their poetry demonstrates, they place themselves so squarely within this America, that they do not perceive themselves as free at all, specifically when it comes to consciousness.

Art and the Battlefield of Love

Throughout *Coney Island of the Mind*, Ferlinghetti continually refers to the surreal, in his advocacy of altering perspective to create social agency. He references surreal artists, landscapes, conceptions of time, and the implications of the surrealistic nature of a Coney Island Bakhtinian carnival and circus. While certainly alluding to the style's fantastic imagery, derived from the subconscious with no adherence to traditional logic or realistic form, Surrealism's association with the horrific, the strange and the grotesque—specifically represented through Francisco de Goya's later works—could easily lead one to read Ferlinghetti's use of it as an attempt to paint an American landscape that is dark, frightening and wholly negative; an America no one would fault Ferlinghetti for desiring to escape. And, perhaps he is painting such an America. He does use surrealistic imagery to depict "humanity," writhing on the page, "heaped up/ groaning with babies and bayonets," and the American space as a "surrealist landscape of/ mindless prairies/ supermarket suburbs..., a kissproof world of plastic toiletseats tampax and taxis" (Ferlinghetti 9,13). This depiction of an American landscape filled with heaped up babies and bayonets is grim, at best. However, Ferlinghetti also uses this surrealist vision, his "poet's eye obscenely seeing," to demonstrate that this is not how America is, per say, but rather how one should view it. Demonstrating that he makes use of the style consciously, Ferlinghetti sets up the surreal as perspective and device. In poem number ten of his anthology, Ferlinghetti advocates a metamorphosis of perspective to gain

individual agency within an American social hierarchy. While he does depict America, specifically those within American institutions, as greedy and self-serving, true escape from this system is not an option that Ferlinghetti assumes or puts forth. Changing perspective in order to transform the world around an individual, as Ferlinghetti does, necessitates a being within, a subject that must look *around* and see the place in which they reside differently.

Comparing art directors to church officials, Ferlinghetti suggests that America's institutions are in control of knowledge production. He writes that art directors are like those who decide heaven and hell, who interpret and ultimately define sin and salvation in that they meet "upon the choicest of/ church seats," to "choose the things for all immortality" (Ferlinghetti 23). He even goes on further with the function of immortality as a concept to illustrate that these heads of institutions control knowledge production through a cyclical logic of power that rests on the authority granted them to name and to define. He writes that because they themselves have tasted and lain with the immortal, they are able to recognize it and thus gain a truth-based authority:

And they have lain with beauty/all their lives/and they have fed on honeydew/ and drunk the wines of Paradise/ so that they know exactly how/ a thing of beauty is a joy/ forever and forever/ and how it never never/ quite can fade/ into a money losing nothingness. (Ferlinghetti 23).

Here Ferlinghetti plays with many issues, including a description of a kind of class-based caste system, in which those who experience something are granted authority to define it, and by doing so are able to continue a cycle that never quite fades into a "money losing

nothingness.” This line has an endless duty to the possible interpretations of the excerpt because it ties economics to truth and knowledge production in general. In this cyclical pattern of retaining power/knowledge, the heads of institutions know the truth of beauty “exactly,” and thus have the authority to define it, and by defining it as immortal, they perpetually have power over the truth of beauty, for all time. However, in this particular excerpt, language theory does not come to light. Beauty is not a definition that can be debated. Instead beauty is a thing that “lies apart/ among the aborigines/ of art/ and far above the battle fields/ of love” (23). This line is of particular interest because it suggests that the Beats were incredibly savvy when it came to language and how it might operate in the social sphere, describing that when a term or concept is defined as “immortal,” it lies above the battlefield, above the war of discourse and the discourses of war. Ferlinghetti writes that beauty, “Is above all that,” but those with power are not, for they have drunk and eaten and lain among the aboriginal, among of the truth of art and the art of truth.

Throughout his text, Ferlinghetti makes it clear to the reader that, unlike the heads of institutions, he has “not lain with beauty all [his] life.” By contrasting himself in ideology to those of the church/art directors, Ferlinghetti advocates a potentiality of individual agency through a change of perspective. He makes it explicit that he does not define art as immaterial or immortal, it is a thing of this world and should remain in the battlefield of *human existence*. He writes, “I have not lain with beauty all my life/ and lied with it as well/ telling over to myself/ how beauty never dies/ but lies apart” (Ferlinghetti 23). Here it is important to note the emphasis on putting the term lain in the

past tense, for it would read fine without the second line. But Ferlinghetti writes that he has not lain or *lied* with beauty, which could be read as saying that he does not lie *with* or *about* art. He does not deceive. This distinction will become crucial when attempting to critique Beat strategies for dissent, for while this poetic-persona criticizes the institution's power to define based on truth production. It appears here that truth derived from a particular form of authenticity is still the base on which to gain authority. The particular hold that institutions may have on the cyclical pattern of knowledge production may be the key difference. Depicting his way of defining as distinct from American institutions, Ferlinghetti writes that he does not lie, *over and over*, about "how beauty never dies," that he does not need nor desire to use an institution-like way as a crutch to gain the power to define and name his own world in a cyclical pattern. He writes, "Oh I have not lain/ on Beauty Rests like this/ afraid to rise at night/ for fear that I might somehow miss/ some movement Beauty might have made," suggesting that he, unlike an institution, is not afraid of the movement or shifts that concepts might make. And therefore Ferlinghetti still lies with beauty, only it is in his own way—through his surrealist perspective. "Yet I have slept with beauty/ in my own weird way/ and I have made a hungry scene or two/ with beauty in my bed/ and so spilled out another poem or two/ and so spilled out another poem or two/ upon the Bosch-like world" (24). In this "weird" manner of copulating with beauty, with bringing beauty into the realm of human experience, the body, and sexuality as he defines it, Ferlinghetti seems to break the cyclical hold that institutionalization has over knowledge production, for, to him, his art is not "above the battlefields of love," but spills into it.

Advocating a change in perspective, like Ferlinghetti does, suggests that if one desires individual social agency within the American system, one must take control of their own knowledge production. To change one's world, one must make change from within. If the Beats advocate an escape at all, it is in the sense of a distraction from reality as it is defined within their own episteme, an ephemeral and precarious "escape" of the mind, the Bakhtinian carnival of imagination. However, this escape is not free, not free of troubles, struggle and is most certainly not free of culture. Like Bakhtin's carnival, it is not outside of the strictures and mores of society in the purest sense; it is instead a revision, a reshaping of them through creative reinterpretations. Ferlinghetti sees this process as risk, the possibility of danger, the possibility of failure, and the possibility of unintended and harmful consequences. Describing the poet as "constantly risking absurdity/ and death/ whenever he performs/ above the heads/ of his audience/ the poet like an acrobat/ climbs on rime/ to a high wire of his own making" (Ferlinghetti 30). In this risk, the poet must perform and he or she must self-fashion the wire, and while Ferlinghetti writes that the poet risks to perform "above the heads of his audience," which suggests a complete separation from them, his discussion of truth moves him away from the dichotomy of us and them, and into a more complex attempt at describing the desire and strategy for individual social agency within the mores and strictures of culture. The poet must risk, must attempt to transgress, to push the boundaries so that he or she might change the shape of things.

The conflict within Ferlinghetti's strategy rests in the search for the boundary, and demonstrates that the Beats did not place themselves outside of anything, for the struggle

to find the boundary occurred most frequently in a search from within. Throughout their work, there is a desperate struggle to locate these boundaries, most specifically between the authentic and the inauthentic within themselves. The poet is a “super realist/ who must perforce perceive/ taut truth/ before the taking of each stance or step/ in his supposed advance/ toward that still higher perch/ where Beauty stands and waits” (30). Here Ferlinghetti demonstrates Ginsberg’s “insane demand,” for the poet’s job is to somehow perceive the “taut”/taught truth, before he or she can advance into transgression. He or she must distinguish between the learned and the natural, between the false and the real, between the inauthentic and the authentic. But, unlike what many critics posit, this not a known and controlled effect. It is one based on an imperfect perception, uncertainty and a call to an unknown other. Ferlinghetti ends his piece in suspension, yet unfinished, and waiting, “spreadeagled in the empty air/ of existence” (30).

### Changing America One Strophe at a Time

Similar to Ferlinghetti’s reading of America and how to operate within it, Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* creates an image of a nation that is systematized, hierarchical, technocratic and logocentric to the point that it imprisons, expels or murders alternative identities and ways of knowing. Ginsberg asks the reader, in rhetorical wonder, what caused the best minds of his generation to be destroyed by madness: “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” (9). His answer, of course, is Moloch. Constructing an American system

that behaves like a monstrous god to which the most inspirational, the most unique, and the most creative are sacrificed, Ginsberg implicates U.S institutions, architecture, industry, foreign policy and the obsession with economic gain/time. His American Moloch is the “soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows...the vast stone of war...stunned governments...whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovah’s whose factories dream and croak in the fog” with a soul of “electricity and banks” (Ginsberg 21,22). In the pages of “Howl,” we find an America as grim and grotesque as Ferlinghetti’s surrealist landscape. It doesn’t take much imagination to envision the people writhing within Moloch, heaped up and groaning. With a scene as horrifying as this, it seems natural to assume that Ginsberg would not implicate himself within it. After all, nearsighted, psychopathic and queer, he is the excess, he is amongst the best minds “who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time” (Ginsberg 16). However, one merely has to read a few pages more to find that Ginsberg admits his implication within the American system down to his core. “Moloch,” he writes, “Who entered my soul early” (22). While “Howl” hints at his position within his constructed America, no better poem illustrates the Ferlinghetti struggle of finding an authentic individual agency within the system that infiltrates one’s very consciousness than “America” itself. Throughout “America,” Ginsberg sets up an ambiguity between the individual and the nation that leads to a desperate struggle between the authentic self and the socialized self, a battle that Ginsberg both wins and loses. The struggle set up in the beginning sections of the poem ultimately leads to a textual conflation of Ginsberg as individual and America as nation only to split once

again, asserting Ginsberg as the excess within the American system. Ginsberg's process of dividing the authentic from the inauthentic based on difference suggests a construction of America that admits that no individual exists outside of one's own episteme, but can still operate within it based on a politics of marginalized identity.

"America" begins with nothing but the date: a place, time (as money), month and year. Ginsberg writes, "I've given you all and now I'm nothing," no thing but, "America two dollars and twenty seven cents January 17 1956" (39). Here Ginsberg starts the reader nowhere but the place as date. Written as a journal entry title, this line leaves it ambiguous as to whether the poem begins with Ginsberg's location within America, as if I were to sign this thesis with mine, Bozeman 2.47 May 26 2006, or whether the poem begins with America's location as state, the particular condition that someone or something is in at a specific time. This ambiguity leaves the reader, as well as Ginsberg's poetic-persona, at a crossroad: Is Ginsberg signing his address to America as location, suggesting his role as one within it, or to America as state, suggesting a description of the individual national condition? Within this confusion of the individual and state, both Ginsberg and the reader continue with the struggle to differentiate between the two. Throughout the first section, he performs a back and forth debate, an argument that confuses and separates America from himself—an America that has infiltrated his self—signified by the alternate use of the pronouns I, we, you, and back, to perform the cycle again. He begins, "I can't stand my own mind," then moves to "America when will we end the human war?" to "Go Fuck yourself with your atom bomb," and back to his proclamation, "I don't feel good don't bother me" (Ginsberg 39). Read within the

ambiguity set up with the date as location and the date as state, Ginsberg's performance demonstrates the state of America through his place of mind. Caught amidst a human war of atomic proportions, neither Ginsberg nor America can stand themselves, neither feel good, neither are yet angelic, free or truly alive. "When will you be angelic," he asks, "When will you take off your clothes?/ When will you look at yourself through the grave?" (Ginsberg 39). Here Ginsberg uses a Whitmanesque and Fugitive poetic stance to critique an America and an American individual with potential, asking not if, but when this promised democratic American liberty will be realized. "America," he writes, "it is you and I who are perfect not/ the next world" (Ginsberg 39). With this affirmation of the future as present, written like a Thank You for Not Littering sign, Ginsberg quickly reverts back to the struggle between individual and national identity within his subjectivity, desperately hoping for an alternative method of reconciling the two. Demonstrating that the two cannot exist harmoniously, he writes, "Your machinery is too much for me. / You made me want to be a saint. / There must be some other way to settle this argument" (Ginsberg 39).

His next move or attempt to settle the argument between self hood and nationhood answers the Ferlinghetti call to the poet figure, the attempt to find the border through separation, by going through a list of how Ginsberg perceives himself as different from the America he constructs. Unlike America, he "hasn't read the newspapers for months," is "sentimental about the Wobblies," "used to be a communist," and "smokes marijuana every chance he gets" (Ginsberg 40). In his last attempt at true separation, Ginsberg differentiates himself from the techno-rational logocentrism of the

American system, writing that unlike the system's technical and rational ways of knowing the world through scientific logic and fact, he has a spiritual and unearthly sensibility. Ginsberg writes, "I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations" (40). However, this delineation falls short, when his true separation from the culture he despises cannot be maintained. Alluding simultaneously to the inauthentic conformity caused by the media and our obsession with time (always associated with money for Ginsberg), he asks the illusory separate-from-himself America, "Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?" only to state immediately afterward that he is "obsessed by Time Magazine" himself (41). This realization of his unbreakable ties to American culture comes to a full head when he begins to see himself and the nation as the same entity. He writes, "It occurs to me that I am America. I am talking to myself again" (41). It is here that the complete textual conflation of individual and national identity takes place. The nation becomes synonymous with the individual in current foreign relation policies, resources, institutions and social hierarchies:

Asia is rising against me. / I haven't got a chinaman's chance. / I'd better consider my national resources...of two joints of marijuana millions of genitals an unpublishable private literature that goes 1400 miles an hour and twenty-five thousand mental institutions. / I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns. (Ginsberg 41).

This textual conflation allows for a full-blown fusion of the self with the nation within his poetic persona's subjective identity; however, this conflation does not serve to release America from critique. America is not cleansed through the fusion with Ginsberg's identity, but rather, Ginsberg becomes fully implicated in the social ills of the nation in

which he resides. He becomes a part of the system that he sees as creating academic hierarchies causing voices to remain unheard, that not only defines sanity and law, but creates psychiatric and prison based institutions to control and re-enforce those definitions, and that allows a social hierarchy to exist that keeps millions of people living a low class existence while only a few live in privilege and decadence. Ginsberg and the nation may be one, but Ginsberg's critique still remains, only now he is just as responsible for creating change.

It is because this critique is still seen as necessary that, even with complete conflation of the individual and the nation, a newly formed identity with individual agency and social responsibility must be formed. Ginsberg suggests a creation of identity that is critical of, but implicated in and thus responsible for, the system, social ills and all. However, as Ginsberg also suggests through the strategies he employs, this is not just any identity, but an identity based on the dissent afforded by performed marginality. Using similar distinctions to those made in his earlier attempt to separate the self from the American system, Ginsberg begins his "holy litany" with the ability to form an authentic dissenting voice; a voice that he perceives as stemming from the characteristics of his identity that do not fit within his constructed America. "After all," he writes, "I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway" (43). Here Ginsberg defines himself by the qualities that would have been seen as deformities or abnormalities during his episteme in order to gain the aesthetic perspective and social authority for dissent. By constructing a poetic identity that performs difference in a manner that remains excess, he advocates a political aesthetic of dissent. He writes: "I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are

as individual as his automobiles more so their all different sexes./ America I will sell you strophes \$2500 a piece \$500 down on your old strophe” (Ginsberg 42). Here Ginsberg states that he is going to operate with the speed and efficiency of a poetic assembly line, churning out literature of dissent and difference. He is even willing to operate within an American system of exchange, based on an exchange of ideology through literature. Ginsberg accepts. He accepts the America that has infiltrated his soul, but he will not let it go unscathed, taking America in, cutting it up, revising, rehistoricizing, making it “new,” only to give it back again. This new American strophe begins with calling for justice, by freeing radicals who are or were imprisoned or oppressed because of a national naivety and brutish understanding of foreign ideology. But this is just the beginning. “I’d better get down to the job,” he writes, “I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” to continue his Henry-ford like exchange to change the world one strophe at a time.

#### Marginality as a Means For Dissent

Ginsberg and the rest of the Beat writers are often cited by Beat theorists as self-marginalizing, usually by using their biographies and personal histories to depict their ironic and often counterproductive travels into the seedy underbelly of urbanity and the fellaheen lands of Mexico, either to escape the American system or to create their own folds of heterogeneity within it. While Beat biographies are useful, and above all else, extremely interesting, it is actually their poetics that more fully demonstrate the potential

and pitfalls of their political aesthetic. Similar to his use of his own marginalized characteristics in “America,” Ginsberg ends “Howl” in a Rockland of imagination, using Carl Solomon as a poetic device to advocate an aesthetic politic of engagement based on and afforded by the marginal position of the anomic. Robert Holton, borrowing the term from Emile Durkheim, defines the anomic as “the diversity of maladjusted individuals existing beyond—or perhaps—beneath the reach of conformity” (Holton 23). Finishing “Howl” with this particular poem suggests that, for Ginsberg, the delusional perspective of the maladjusted, like Ferlinghetti’s own weird way of sleeping with beauty, offers a potentially radical alternative perspective and voice of dissent. Throughout the poem, Salomon stands in for the irrational, superstitious, magical, and delusional: banging “on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse...,” accusing “doctors of insanity...,” plotting “the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha...,” splitting “the heavens of Long Island” and resurrecting “his living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb” (25). Within an institution, defined by America as insane, Salomon’s dementia-created perspective is the metaphor for excess and possibility of transgression; however Salomon is not excess and transgression in and of himself. Ginsberg writes that he is with him, that they “wake up electrified out of the coma,” that “imaginary walls collapse” (26). “Forget your underwear,” he writes, “we’re free” (26). But they are not free in the purest sense or Ginsberg would not have to write this ode. This is a dream. This is Ginsberg’s dream of transgressing the American system. “In my dreams,” he writes, “you walk dripping from

a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night” (26). To Ginsberg, like other Beats, transgression of the mores and structures of America that eliminate or imprison excess is a desire—the crossing of America “in tears” to the enclave, the space that’s only free to Ginsberg because it exists in the darkness afforded by perceived difference and excess, by a self-created marginality.

In the Beat poli-poetic there is no real escape, but there is an individual social agency. Both Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg’s work use and advocate the use of aesthetics, of art, to defines one’s world, control one’s own knowledge production, and thus affect social change through altering social perspectives and ideology. They illustrate the Beat success in the fusion of art and politics in a manner that is useful and overt. However, in the Ferlinghetti attempt to break an institutional-like hold over knowledge production, the Beats successfully created the same cyclical pattern of control. In their attempt at meeting the “insane demand” of perceiving taut/taught truth and distinguishing between it and their authentic subjectivities, they, like the art directors as church officials of Ferlinghetti’s work, create a strategy of dissent that “never never quite can fade into a money losing nothingness” (23). And judging by the amount of Jack Kerouac and Beat related memorabilia, it just might not. Defining the ability to gain individual agency as one based on their perceived differences, their perceived marginality, the Beat solution not only defines marginality, but also defines it as authentic, as more true, a more truthful way of existing. Ferlinghetti writes that he has not lain with or lied about an immaterial and immortal beauty; however, he has lain with beauty in his “own weird way” (24). And

so, while he has not “fed on honeydew and drunk the wines of Paradise,” he has “made another hungry scene or two,” a scene placing art within the human experience as he, and other Beats, define it. Deconstructing the notion that beauty “is above all that,” the Beats place beauty in their own earthly scene. The Beat Generation may not have eaten and lain among the aboriginal in Paradise, but they have eaten and lain among the downtrodden in other urban and “fellaheen” locations, exalting the human experience, defined as gritty, seedy, sexual and raw. Through a long ideological and poetic strain, ranging from a Rousseau’s noble savage, untainted by the evils of civilization, to Whitman’s mechanics, carpenters, and shoemakers “singing how it should be, blithe and strong,” and Ginsberg’s “visionary Indian angels...dragging themselves through the negro streets...with dreams and drugs,” what is defined as different from a perceived sameness associated with power or privilege, the “marginal,” is defined as authentic. It seems that, like the institutional power structures that Ferlinghetti desires to critique, the Beats too have mastered the truth of art and the art of truth. Through the dissemination of Beat ideals, authenticity prescribed by a performed marginality threatens to remain “above the battlefields of love,” above the war of discourses and the discourses of war.

## CHAPTER THREE

## BEAT SCHOLARSHIP: CONTAMINATION AND COMMODIFICATION

Illustrated through the work of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, the Beat politic was not one of escape, but rather a political and social aesthetic of engagement through poetics. Their definition of authentic subjectivity and identity, as defined by performed marginality or excess, allowed them to successfully create their own enclave within their constructed Americas. Creating Ginsbergesque cottages in the Western night, the Beats lend themselves to a political-cultural form of operating in the world similar to that of the separatist movements of the 1960's and 1970's, and up through the underground movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is hard to argue that the Beats were not effective in creating habitable "folds of heterogeneity" (Holton 24). After all, most who celebrate the Beats do so for their unique use of vernacular, incorporating the slang and Black jive talk of their time, as well as their dress, mannerisms, and lifestyles. However, these characteristics, constructed and put forth by the Beats, as well as our contemporary construction of the Beats based on them, are derived from their particular strategy of dissent based on difference, hinging on the circular logic provided by conceptions of authenticity. These constructed folds of the heterogeneous require a perception of America and the American individual that is divided in terms of authentic and inauthentic subjectivities, cultural production and social participation.

It is easy to critique the Beats for a posing in a rebel stance that was not so rebellious, reading them as making what Bennett calls, “‘hipper-than-thou’ attacks on ‘square’ values...” (2). It could even be said that in constructing a dichotomous 1950s, the Beats were so busy attacking and resisting square America that they overlooked some of their own patriarchal, misogynistic and racial insensitivities. Martinez exemplifies this argument, reading Beat “movement” as one of attempting to become free of restraint that ultimately leads to a reestablished patriarchal colonization:

In rejecting encroaching domesticity or “conformity,” Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and fellow travelers move in order to reestablish a strong patriarchy, create a colony and homestead in a ‘fellaheen’ area for the purposes of establishing a male domestic sphere, itself liminal and ‘freewheeling,’ while establishing their independent identity through a self-marginalization that, more often than not, took its characteristics in appropriating ethnic or subaltern forms. (Martinez 81)

The critique of the Beat authors, illustrated within this excerpt, rests on two interpretations: firstly, like Martinez, many read the Beats as actually constructing a binary in thought and throughout their work between the dominant culture and their counterculture, thus creating the illusorily and dichotomous 1950s that caused them to reject it, escaping through a movement based on rugged individualism; secondly, this critique of the Beat appropriation of marginal identities and subaltern forms, argues that by using these appropriated identities to create their own individual spaces of heterogeneity, they ultimately left, and perhaps forced, those who had less power and voice within the American system to remain that way, thus reinscribing and enforcing the existing social hierarchy, not allowing the subaltern to speak. However, while it may be true that the Beats were incredibly insensitive when it came to race relations and cultural

appropriation, judging by the critique made in Kaufman's "Bagel Shop Jazz," the Beat construction of the 1950s, their place within it, and the affects of their strategy of dissent suggests a different reading. Instead of constructing the starkly dichotomous 1950s that Beat critics are currently deconstructing, the Beat ideology created a system of dividing the authentic from the inauthentic in terms of cultural signs and symbols in relation to perceived power structures. And through their self-marginalization and appropriation of marginal identities, the Beats did not reinforce a hierarchical system that forced marginal, oppressed and subaltern voices to be silenced within America, but rather defined those identities and their voices as more authentic within that very system and thus granted marginality an authoritative credibility, hinging on a truth based production of knowledge garnered through the authentic experience of being marginal or oppressed.

Thus, the Beat poli-poetic has a paradoxical effect. It is positive in that it leads to voices of dissent that may have not otherwise been heard, because it grants these voices credibility based on their authentic experience of marginalization and oppression. However, it simultaneously creates a form of dissent that must remain tied to this marginalization in order to retain its truth-based authority. One can speak out from a marginal position and be heard as truthful and credible, but once that position is seen as entering into a perceived mainstream status, it loses its perceived authenticity and thus loses its potential authority within the American system. Therefore, like Martinez's analysis of a Beatnik fear of contamination, either by socialist or bureaucratic forces, there is currently a fear of contamination, now spoken about in terms of co-optation and commodification, that creates a similar resistance to influences perceived as inauthentic.

This resistance advocates an individual and communal politic based on the folds of heterogeneity that dissenting communities create for themselves; however, a fear of contamination through co-optation or corporate influences leads to a community that must remain separate from a “dominant” culture—in visibility and in politic—becoming what can be referred to as underground movements based on separatist ideologies. A concept of authenticity that creates a privileging of difference or rugged individuality within a system, whether it be in clothing, music tastes, or power relations, is a cycle that traps the potential of a movement’s national participation and agency inside the graffiti walls and sidewalk borders of “marginality,” as it is continually defined and redefined through notions of authenticity, set up by Beat literature, continued through 1960s “rebellion,” and reinscribed within Beat and countercultural scholarship.

### Deconstructing the 1950’s

Often describing the Beat view of the 1950’s as one of encroaching conformity, there is a reading of the Beat construction of America as one that sets up an essentialized dichotomy, creating an ill-defined definition of the public sphere that potentially leads to theoretical discussions that successfully deconstruct 1950’s binaries, but fail to use the same deconstructive technique within contemporary society. In this reading, the Beat notion of cultural hegemony is interpreted as aiding to define the American space as one of uniformity, and thus as one to be either escaped or resisted in a manner that fails to allow for a nation changing, community based politic to be formed. As Martinez writes,

“The end of the war with its attendant home boom and baby boom created the suburban space and a burgeoning crisis in the male, middle-class psyche, challenged as it was with the threat of being absorbed by domestic uniformity” (75). Using Daniel Whyte’s *Organization Man*, written during this post-war historical moment, Martinez demonstrates how “mass culture” is generally thought to have been perceived. In *Organization Man*, Martinez writes, “the collective is always negative, easily manipulated as well as manipulative, conformist, and self destructive” (76). In fear of this encroachment, Martinez writes that the Beats created a rugged individualism that resisted this advance through individual movement. In *Countering the Counterculture*, Martinez has many crucial and useful critical discussions of the Beats, discussions that I weave throughout my own argument, but this reading of the Beat politic as one based completely on a movement of the white subject suggests that all Beat authors write themselves and their roles within America as one of unrestrained movement—not implicated in, and thus not responsible for the state of America and its social ills—and while this may be the case with certain Beat life styles, specifically that of William Burroughs, this conception of Beat literature creates the binary relationships so often associated with rebel or dissenting movements; essentialized relationships that Beat and counterculture scholars, including Martinez himself, are successfully problematizing.

Similar to the story of 1950s conformity that is “told and retold with the frequency and certainty of historical orthodoxy,” the argument against depicting this conformity as an either/or condition of the Beat episteme is also critiqued and recritiqued within contemporary Beat and countercultural studies. There is a current reaction against

theorizing the Beat Generation in binary terms of hip versus square, subculture versus dominant culture. Critic after critic use more complicated methods of rehistoricizing the 1950s and have at least one sentence, paragraph or chapter within their texts suggesting that the 1950s mainstream and the beat movement as counterculture were not as binary as once thought, as well as suggesting that to operate as if they were is a serious mistake. Beat scholars Bennett, Frank and Martinez all posit that constructing the 1950s and 1960s in essentialized dichotomies is negative to varying degrees. Whether it is committing a simple inaccuracy, making a mistake of epic proportions, or going as far to say that there is no such thing as counterculture at all, each of these critics warn against essentializing history and cultural interaction.

In “Teaching the Beat Generation to Generation X,” Bennett writes that “looking back...it is easier to recognize that the cultural complexities of 1950’s America cannot be reduced to a simplistic confrontation between the Beats and the Squares” (7). He demonstrates that it no longer requires a radical to critique the media’s images of the nuclear family, living fulfilled lives in suburbia. “After all,” he writes, “not everyone was allowed either to participate in or to share equally in the ‘homey pleasures’ of ‘square’ America’s patriarchal families, suburban homes, and racially segregated institutions” (7). He also goes on, using texts like Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, to describe “how even people included in ‘square’ America often experienced it as a site of anxiety, entrapment, hypocrisy, and injustice rather than as a sanctuary of ‘homey pleasure’ (7). All throughout Bennett’s text he advocates a pedagogical method of teaching Beat literature and politics to a contemporary generation

that takes into account the complexities and contradictions within the movement and within the time period at large. Suggesting the use of various first source Beat literature, Bennett also suggests augmenting these works with secondary criticism—such as John Tytell’s *Naked Angles*, the Whitman Museum of American Art’s anthology, *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950-1965*, Carolyn Cassady’s, *Off the Road*, and other critical works such as Bob Kaufman’s “Bagel Shop Jazz,” and Amiri Baraka’s “Poem for Halfwhite College Students”—to reinterpret “beat texts as sites of overlapping, conflicting, and contradictory cultural exchanges...instead of as declarations of a cultural war between the Beats and the squares” (9).

In *Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank similarly critiques the traditional way of reading the 1950’s as well as the 1960s, stating that viewing these periods in a dichotomous nature is a careless mistake. He writes that “to identify capitalism, its cultural products, and its opponents according to an inflexible scheme of square and hip—‘homogeneity’ versus ‘heterogeneity,’ the ‘power bloc’ versus ‘the people,’ conformity versus individualism—is to make a strategic blunder of enormous proportions” (19). According to Frank, this strategic blunder leads to a misunderstanding of the corporate world and how it overlapped with, not against, the rebel youth cultures of the 1950s and primarily the 1960s. Throughout his text, Frank demonstrates a thorough explanation and analysis of the more symbiotic relationship between the corporate world and the rebels that were supposedly so starkly contrasted against it. Tracing advertising agencies’ methods of marketing their product, as well as the shifts in these marketing concepts, Frank demonstrates that the corporate world experienced a “rebel revolution”

right along with the grass-roots movement. Using the adman's transformation into the youth rebel as an example of this symbiotic relationship, Frank writes that "the adman was fast being saddled with a new image: no longer was he the other-directed technocrat, the most craven species of American businessman, but the coolest guy on the commuter train, turned on to the latest in youth culture, rock music and drug-influenced graphic effects" (115).

Like *Conquest of Cool*, Martinez also advocates a more complicated view of the 1950s and countercultural movements in general with his use of postmodern and poststructuralist theorists to question the validity of counterculture altogether. Martinez does not advocate postmodernism in and of itself, questioning "the wisdom of deconstructing the possibility of a national culture" and viewing it as inadequate in addressing "the issue of practical material inclusion" (276). However, he uses postmodern theory in deconstructing binaries. Martinez states that "the common critical view that has the Beat tradition emerging against conformity posits a false dichotomy," going on to say that there is no such thing as pure counterculture (276).

My intent is to challenge the understanding of the counterculture as the antithesis of something that might be conceived as the 'culture of the 1950s.' Rather, as various cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault (*History of Sexuality*), Stuart Hall ('Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms'), and Antonio Gramsci (Selections from *Prison Notebooks*) have argued, there can never be such a thing as a true 'counterculture'. (Martinez 25).

Instead of using the term counterculture, due to the complications and contradictions associated with it, Martinez deploys the term "dissent" throughout his text to rehistoricize these movements within a more complex reading of cultural relations.

Bennett, Frank and Martinez's attempts to deconstruct prior notions of historical essentialization are extremely useful when discussing the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of literary-political movements. Placing these dissenting or countercultural voices within a historical and cultural moment similar to Foucault's concept of an endlessly repeating play of dominations, allows one to read these literary genres as not "above the battlefields of love," but rather in the war-like battle of discourses amongst discourses. However, strangely enough, these critics only take this theory of cultural complexity so far. It seems that Bennett, Frank and Martinez all successfully problematize the hip versus square, hegemony versus heterogeneity, and dominant versus subculture binaries of the 1950s and 1960s. However, their work, as well as most contemporary theoretical critiques of dissent and counter-like movements, leaves the binary between complicated concepts of authentic versus commodified culture unproblematized. One must question why these scholars critically theorize with such acumen about essentialized dichotomies of the past but refuse to apply the same theoretical savvy to our own cultural time period. Why, when dealing with co-optation, specifically in the realm of corporate appropriation, does analysis of cultural commodification still remain so cut and dried? The issue with Beat dissent, as well as theorizing Beat dissent, may not lie within the traditional dichotomies of hip versus square or mainstream culture versus counterculture themselves, but rather in the underlying value system that allows these binaries to be created in the first place. It may be that, in the case of countercultural critique, the most important concept that needs analysis is our conceptualization of authenticity.

### Commodification and Cultural Politics of Visibility

In “Teaching the Beat Generation to Generation X,” Bennett advocates pedagogical methods of teaching Beat literature in a way that “will enable our students to recognize, analyze, and explore—rather than oversimplify and foreclose—what Beat literature has to teach us...” (19). He writes that “to help students begin to recognize some of the limitations of and contradictions within countercultural movements, it is useful to assign a work like Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool*,” because it “analyzes how the media and capitalist economy misrepresent and co-opt countercultural movements” and may help students “locate and analyze their own examples of how Beat culture has been commodified and repackaged for Generation X consumers” (16). Using Thomas Frank’s *Conquest of Cool* in the classroom to combat what could be called an under-theorized celebration of rebel and countercultural movements by the students of Generation X, Bennett desires to challenge a concept of “authentically countercultural practices” but does so by presupposing that “contrasting contemporary examples of repackaged Beat culture with Beat texts can develop a more critical understanding of how the Beat Generation’s current appeal might differ from its historical reception in the 1950s” (16,19). “After all,” he writes, would Generation X students “be so ready to celebrate Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs if these writers really opposed the cultural and corporate logic of their own historical moment?” (Bennett 17). In the 1950s, Beat texts dealt with censorship issues and scathing reactions against the beatnik aesthetic, politic, and way of life. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems as though Beat is taken at face value, accepted and celebrated as a rebel posture without rebellion.

Despite the desire to combat a student's perception of authentic countercultural practices, this reading of the potential use of analyzing commodified Beat ideals against the ideals espoused within Beat texts suggests that the countercultural evolution is one of an authentic *then* versus the inauthentic *now*. "To begin with," Bennett writes, "there is a qualitative difference between actively producing a contemporary cultural revolution and belatedly consuming that revolution fifty years after the fact" (5). Qualifying this belated consumption, Bennett points to the hyper-mediated experience that Generation X students have of Beat culture. Discussing this experience, he writes that "many contemporary students have been introduced to Beat culture not at bohemian poetry readings or in seedy jazz clubs but rather by advertisements for Gap khakis or by Rhino Records' three-volume Beat Generation CD" (5). Pointing out the proliferation of Beat memorabilia in the form of advertising and products, Bennett lists examples such as "contemporary advertisements...new multimedia Beat tributes...and the rapidly proliferating Jack Kerouac CD collections" to demonstrate the speed at which Beat ideals have been commodified, disseminated, and consumed to the point that Generation X youth can no longer "distinguish between authentic countercultural movements and the various ways in which those movements are neutralized, co-opted, and commodified" (6). A belief in this inability to distinguish between the authentic and the commodified leads to a fear that actual dissenting voices will either be diffused by a commercialized cycle, or not created at all through the potential thought that owning a Jack Kerouac CD alone represents a rebel stance. Bennett worries that students "might celebrate a contemporary image of the Beat Generation which significantly differs from the Beat Generation's

historical reality” (6). And this fear is not unfounded. Both Frank and Martinez agree that a commodified version of a revolutionary movement has seriously negative ramifications.

According to Thomas Frank, the rebel movements of the 1950s and 1960s were not as starkly different from the corporate world in the way in which we typically construct 1950s conformity versus a 1960s rebellion. He writes that theorists that continue to construct mainstream culture as “tepid, mechanical, and uniform,” and a rebel youth as “joyous and even a glorious cultural flower,” are actually perpetuating a harmful myth that views business as “the monolithic bad guy who caused America to become a place of puritanical conformity and empty consumerism” (Frank 7). Throughout his text, he attempts to steer readers away from a conception of corporate culture as a vulture-like entity that takes rebel posture, sucks it of its true components of rebellion, and sells the empty countercultural carcass back to an unsuspecting population, hungry for the anti-authority rebel posture put forth by advertising companies and corporations. In *Conquest of Cool*, Frank critically demonstrates where the 60s rebellion overlapped with corporate technique and ideology, blurring the boundaries between mainstream and countercultures. He attempts and advocates a revision of corporate culture, to view it not as an unchanging monolithic system, but rather as a continuously fluid one that no longer represents “repressive adherence to tradition or patriarchy but...a valorization of constant change, of individuality, and of the eternal new” (19). To Frank, the current state of rebellion is a commercial myth, and he distinguishes his study as not being about counterculture in and of itself, as if it were ever real, but rather about the genesis of this rebel myth. In his introduction, he writes that his study “is not concerned with the

counterculture as historical phenomenon as much as it is concerned with the genesis of counterculture as an enduring commercial myth, the titanic symbolic clash of hip and square that recurs throughout post-sixties culture” (Frank 32). And while he attempts to avoid falling into the complexities posed by concepts of authenticity, his use of the term genesis here hints that he is already situated squarely within that trap.

Within his study of counterculture as commercial myth, Frank attempts to avoid what he calls “co-optation theory,” defined as “faith in the revolutionary potential of ‘authentic’ counterculture combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that ‘real’ counterculture represents,” only to offer a great example of just that (7). In discussing co-optation, he states that “every year the cycles of the sixties repeat themselves on a smaller scale, with new rebel youth cultures bubbling their way to a happy replenishing of the various culture industries’ depleted arsenal of cool” (235). In a cyclical pattern, “New generations obsolete the old, new celebrities render old ones ridiculous, and on and on in an ever-ascending spiral of hip upon hip” (Frank 235). To him, rebellion and revolution has become a product. “We will have new generations of youth rebellion,” he writes, “as certainly as we will have new generations of mufflers or toothpaste or footwear” (Frank 235). Like Bennett’s fear of a generation that believes that Beat simulacrum offers authentic countercultural practices, and thus diffuses any possible attempt at real dissent, Frank believes that through “commercialized rebellion,” our celebrities, rebel icons and, most importantly, “our imagined participation in whatever is the latest permutation of the rebel Pepsi Generation, we have not solved,

but have defused the problems of mass society” (232). Both Bennett and Frank’s concern for Generation X and those generations to follow are put into a more political context within Martinez’s theoretical work. Unlike the former, however, Martinez warns of the potential effect that distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic rebel movements might have on political efficacy.

In *Countering the Counterculture*, Martinez fleshes out the fears exhibited in Bennett and Frank’s texts as a fear of a purely “cultural model of progress” within politics. In his chapters analyzing the Chicano/a movements specifically, he deals with concepts of co-optation and commodification in terms of “visibility” and media representation. According to Martinez, cultural politics is “an easily commodifiable multiculturalism,” that will “not push for communal, egalitarian transformation of the national sociopolitical culture” (268). A form of pure cultural politics, he writes, “Is an abandonment of a loftier goal of creating civitas for a mess of pottage. It is the new assimilation” (268). Putting this into material perspective, he writes: “Buying Selena posters or wearing Los Tigres Del Norte T-shirts might make ‘us’ feel more visible or resistant, but it is not likely to counter the effects of post-Fordism or the increasing gap between the poor and the rich in America (278). Comparing the culturist model of politics to an acceptance of visibility within mainstream media, Martinez discusses the problem he sees with equating visibility with success in completing one’s political agenda. He writes that famous Mexican Americans like Edward James Olmos and Gregory Nava “have made inroads in an industry that has long ignored Mexican American culture and subject matter. But to suggest that this ‘awareness’ or ‘increased

visibility' is an adequate substitute for insistent, coherent, participatory politics is an equivocation that will do very little in ameliorating not only the lives of Mexican Americans in the United States, but will do even less in affecting the shape of a national culture and broadened political sphere" (267) According to Martinez, a form of purely cultural politics is not enough and will most certainly not combat the role of corporate culture that "has long proven that it is willing to forbear 'diversity' and 'difference' so long as it can profit by its commodification" (267). However, Martinez does warn against an authenticity based theory of "selling out," when discussing visibility, co-optation and commodification in his discussion of the narrow definitions of pure and impure, authentic and inauthentic that are found within separatist ideologies.

In his chapter on Americano Narratives, Martinez describes a Chicano form of separatism that is based on narrow definitions of identity and authenticity, and he demonstrates how separatist ideologies tend to "narrow the range and the acceptance of 'authentic' identities, limiting an intra and intercultural political debate" (250). He writes that such a narrow view of authentic participation within a perceived inauthentic American space has the potential to thwart participants of a dissenting movement in their conceptualization of a national space and agenda by "keeping them from asking important, productive questions," such as:

Should a national agenda be created? How should a 'nation' be (re)defined? What is the nature of a 'progressive/revolutionary' citizenship and how is it implicated within the context of the (re)defined nation? How should political and civic participation function within a national scope? What are the limitations and benefits of expanding the parameters of 'community' outside of its restricted localizations? Might U.S. culture be moved radically in the direction of a communitarian model in order to effect an egalitarian civitas? (Martinez 250)

While it would be a mistake to say that these are not crucial questions both an individual and community should ask, dissenting or otherwise, Martinez plays into Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg's "insane demand," walking a fine line, and requiring his revolutionaries to walk a fine line, between intra- and inter cultural political concepts. He argues against the "easily commodifiable" cultural forms of political engagement, an engagement that allows individuals to become "too quickly satisfied with increased visibility, product placement, and a modest decisionist impact on local and national politics"; however, he also argues against a form of separatist politics that hinges on narrow definitions of identity and chastises members to the point of expulsion from the community for "selling out" when they desire to participate within the "dominant" public sphere (Martinez 269). Martinez writes that participants of dissent should realize that "cultural citizenship and national citizenship are not mutually exclusive," and while I couldn't agree more, I question where the assumed boundaries between them should be drawn (251).

It turns out that the important, productive questions that Martinez posits are not so easily answered. Within an ever-increasing techno-globalization that challenges conceptions of borders altogether, one must ask if the relationship between intra- and inter—individually, culturally and nationally—is so cut and dried. Along with Martinez's questions, one must wonder: How does one distinguish between cultural and national citizenship? What is the relationship between national citizenship and global citizenship? And, more importantly, how is an individual able to construct these relationships in a way that he or she is able to operate ethically within, amongst, and between them in an

uncontradictory manner? It appears as if a dissenting subject is not situated in a social space where cultural and national citizenship are “mutually exclusive,” but rather in a space where they are not exclusive at all. However, the distinction Martinez makes between cultural politics and national politics would suggest differently. To Martinez wearing a Tigres del Norte T-shirt does not indicate or advocate a rebel stance of resistance. But, what if it does? Concepts of co-optation and commodification create an avenue in which the answers to complex questions become simplified; and while I do not wish to suggest that a national agenda should not be a consideration within countercultural practices, I do wish to suggest that contemporary discourses regarding co-optation and commodification theory create too hasty assumptions about the difference between cultural practices and political ones.

### Sell Outs, Separatists and Underground Politics

Current conceptions put forth about co-optation, commodification and consumer culture create a dangerous perception of cultural production that not only has the potential to perpetuate a fear of contamination that traps meaningful dissent within underground politics, both individual and communal, but also has the potential to create a cynical apathy within a society that views their American space as merely a glossy surface, purely based on entertainment and spectacle, devoid of meaning and any potential for meaning. Martinez’s discussion of Hunter S. *Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is an excellent example of the risk involved with uncritically equating commodification, co-optation and appropriation with inauthentication. While Martinez

is quick to dismiss Hunter's cynicism, interpreting it as stemming from a notion that dissenters are just not competitive enough to be effective, his analysis demonstrates how concepts of commodification can effect an individual's perception of social agency.

Martinez uses Thompson throughout his work to demonstrate that the 60s rebel agenda failed because of the Beat strain traced throughout grassroots politics. According to Martinez, "Thompson's reaction to middle class vacuity, like that of many of his brethren of the 1960s generation, was to replicate a Beat expiation," which ultimately "proved to be a ritual of reintegration rather than one leading to lasting radical alternatives" (Martinez 126, 121). Reading Thompson's cynical portrayal of past rebel movements, Martinez writes that Thompson believed that these countercultural participants merely "lacked the 'teeth' to compete effectively," and he comes to the conclusion that Thompson failed to grasp that "true radicalism was rejected for the atavism of Ronald Reagan, and not for the lack of competitive edge (individualistic killer instinct), but because of it" (142). Quoting *The Curse of Lono*, Martinez writes that "Thompson's contempt is for a generation of 'competitors' who transformed a 'progressive' political movement into a pointless circular movement, similar to the marathon" (141).

The same people who burned their draft cards in the Sixties and got lost in the Seventies are now into *running*. When politics failed and personal relationships proved unmanageable; after McGovern went down and Nixon exploded right in front of our eyes...after Ted Kennedy got Stassenized and Jimmy Carter put the fork to everybody who ever believed anything he said about anything at all, and after the nation turned en masse to the atavistic wisdom of Ronald Reagan. / Well, these are, after all, the Eighties and the time has finally come to see who has teeth, and who doesn't...Which may or may not account for the odd spectacle of two

generations of political activists and social anarchists finally turning—twenty years later—into runners. (qtd in Martinez 142)

Martinez's interpretation of this excerpt is contingent on a reading of what Thompson meant by wondering who "has the teeth, and who doesn't" in the Reagan 80s. While it could be read as the competitive drive that has become a metaphor of Reaganomics, it could also be read as "the teeth" to withstand it, to resist it; and set against *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, first published in 1971, this notion of running could very well be seen as a marathon, as Martinez suggests, but must be seen as a marathon set within the boundaries of a black-top track. Even Martinez reads *Fear and Loathing* with this concept of empty revolution for economic gain. Discussing particularly the Circus-Circus scene in which Raoul Duke, or Johnny Depp in my mind, feel "the Fear" associated with finding the "main nerve" of the American dream within the carnivalesque simulacrum upon simulacrum of a Las Vegas casino, Martinez describes the effect that a perception of one's American space as a purely commodified one has on the individual (Thompson 48). He writes:

The idea of 'revolution' is itself compromised severely within the Circus-Circus, entrapping its subjects even while they aimlessly circle. In the interior of Circus-Circus, the subject is given the impression of unlimited opportunity, but the patron revolves in circles and is transformed from a participator into spectator. To 'entertain' suggests to 'engage' or 'involve' but it also connotes a superficial engagement that deflects or subverts serious consideration...In the spinning vortex Thompson finds the free American individual immobilized and impotent in the seductive circulations of consumer capitalism...The entertainment state has co-opted liminal spaces, sponsoring money-making carnivals where its subjects can temporarily feel liberated. (Martinez 135)

As Martinez writes, the implications of this construction of an American space co-opted to the point that everything, including revolution, has been commodified, turned into the

“Merry-Go-Round Bar” on the second floor of Vegas’ Circus-Circus, “are grim” (Thompson 47, Martinez 135). It is a system in which the individual as “the transfixed automaton” is unable to gain “social agency” (Martinez 135). Because Thompson reads the American system as ultimately closed, where movement is an illusion and liberation is a temporary feeling provided by entertainment industries, Martinez believes that he, like the Beat generation before him, “retreats to an individualism that promises to secure movement within this systemic enclosure...” (Martinez 139). However, if there is a retreat to a rugged individualism that fails to affect national political change toward an egalitarian *communitas*, it is not because Thompson suggests that the individual lacks the grit and determination to compete. For the characters in his novel still make a decision within Circus-Circus, between remaining on the eternally spinning wheel or taking the elevator to a potentially easier way out. “‘Don’t go *near* that elevator,’ I said, ‘That’s just what they *want* us to do...trap us in a steel box and take us down to the basement...’ ‘Don’t run,’ I said, ‘they’d like an excuse to shoot us’” (Thompson 50). Constructing and us versus them dichotomy, the characters associate the elevator with a “system” of co-optation, refusing to come above ground. Instead, Thompson’s characters “walked fast along the big indoor midway—shooting galleries, tattoo parlors, money-changers and cotton-candy booths—then out through a bank of glass doors and across the grass downhill to a parking lot” (Thompson 50). “You drive,” the attorney says, “I think there is something wrong with me” (Thompson 50).

The fear and loathing these characters experience at the nerve of things, at the heart of the American dream, in the heart of America, stems from a desire for revolution

within a system that is constructed as taking all revolution, all authenticity, and creating entertainment industries, void of meaning and the potential for meaning. It constructs a concept of a 'dominant' culture that is threatening to the dissenter and traps the dissent in steel boxes, keeping it down in the basement of this Circus-Circus American space. The landscape Thompson describes when he moves his characters into the nation's parking lot could come straight from Ginsberg's "Howl." However, with *its* "shooting galleries, tattoo parlors, cotton-candy booths," and "a bank of glass doors," this American space no longer offers the individual the dregs of life in a real sense, no authentic folds of heterogeneity. For in this contemporary American landscape, the new evil is not conformity, but a hyper-commodification.

Scholarship concerning the 1950s and 1960s movements of dissent, ranging from the Beats and Chicano/a to the hippie rebellion, attempt to rehistoricize these cultural time periods in order to deconstruct binary oppositions like boundaries between dominant and countercultures, but still seem to espouse co-optation and commodification theories that perpetuate Beat descriptions of authentic as associated with the marginal versus the inauthentic. Based on privileging first hand experience of the dregs of life, or at least an experience of Beat and 60s rebellion and dissent, as defined by location and a specifically mediated contact, these scholars seem to reinscribe a reading of dissent that forces movements to remain underground in order to be considered credible—taking away their potential authority within a larger social sphere. The issue of authenticity is not merely a peripheral one to be dealt with in an introduction giving a disclaimer that one's work risks essentializing it, but is central to any critique of countercultural movements or

movements of dissent. Like the rebel movements they discuss, theorists suggest that success lies in remaining countercultural—when countercultural objectives suggest a desire to have their ideologies enter into the social sphere at large, both visibly and politically. If the movements of the 1950s and the 1960s failed to be effective agents of radical political change, it was not because of commodification or a conquest of cool. If our revolutionary political and literary movements have truly become watered-down versions of themselves that can be bought and sold through media, music, television and clothing industries, it is not because hip somehow became molded with square, but because we have failed to recognize that it always was. The issue within Beat and Counterculture studies today, while articulated well through deconstructing a hip versus square dichotomy, is not within those dichotomies alone, but rather within our concepts of the authentic versus the inauthentic and how we choose to delineate between them. Associating corporate involvement necessarily with commodification, and therefore with the inauthentic, creates an inadequate and unuseful essentialization of cultural production in a way that allows for “sell out” critiques that limit, and potentially rob, a movement’s potential for creating social change, even before the movement’s inception.

Leading to a politic of separatism, or a politic of the underground, the Beat strategy of dissent created a definition of marginality and marginal identity, authenticated it, and thus perpetuated a notion of dissent that only resides, and can only reside, within these definitions, within remaining, or at least performing marginality. Within this paradigm, the folds of heterogeneity and those who reside within them must resist inauthentication, as demonstrated by Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and

thus end up resisting an actively self-conscious political participation in a national system. Martinez's critique of separatist movements is that they operate with strategies of *resistance*, rather than *insistence*. He reads resisting movements, specifically that of the Chicano/Mexican American, as fixated on "a particular notion of 'resistance,' which posits the same sort of self-marginalizing, self-interpellating move of an older cowboys and Indians paradigm" (245). Instead of remaining marginalized, and continuing this kind of paradigm, Martinez advocates a politics of *insistence*, a persisting political agenda that insists that a cultural group be allowed to fully operate and have socio-political agency within the same social space as the "dominant society" (251). This kind of insistence, then, must deal critically with concepts of authenticity and how it relates to power relations in the public sphere. While I do not wish to destroy the concept of authenticity altogether, as it seems to prove useful to notions of credibility and thus authoritative power, I do wish to remove the concept from "above the battlefields," and place it squarely within the battle of discourse. It is a term that should be seen as metaphor and device, critically conceptualized, consciously used, and incessantly fought over and debated.

With the common use of the term "sell out" to describe any and all aesthetic or political movements associated with economic exchange as related to power structures, Martinez's reading of countercultural failure is extremely prominent in contemporary society. When discussing graffiti, punk, hip-hop, slam or spoken word, poets and critiques alike are continually rueing the quick absorption of the authentic into the commodified within "corporate America". While only speaking of the 1960's up through

the 1980's, Thompson's cynicism is still very much in the forefront of critique against sub/countercultural movements. While concepts of commodification are prevalent within cultural studies today, it is this deeply rooted attachment to authenticity, as a way to gain cultural credibility, and thus authority, will develop a form of social agency on a short term basis, in terms of visibility and individual participation in cultural production. However, essentialized notions of authentic and inauthentic cultural practices and participation ultimately hinders any long-term social or political change. It may grant a form of access to an American system that was previously unavailable, but it will not change the system at large. Under the illusion of authenticity, we fail to realize that revolution occurs as a cultural battle, a war of meaning, symbols and signs that have no real attachment to a movement or to an identity.

The strategy of distinguishing between the authentic and inauthentic ways of being in the world, set up by Beat writers and continued through Beat scholarship and studies of countercultural movements at large, creates a paradigm that equates knowledge and truth with an authentic experience of the "marginal," as it is defined in resistance to whatever social institution or system that is constructed as a threat. Attaching this authority to marginal subjects does have the potential to allow for more and more diverse voices to speak and be heard, but simultaneously forced these voice to remain within these constructions of marginalization, to perform it, in order to retain this credibility. Therefore authority derived from performing marginality also has the potential to rob it of its possibility, its potential to be considered as credible outside of this performance,

ultimately robbing it of its agency to participate and affect change within a national sphere by defining it as a cultural model of engagement and not a political one.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## SLAM AND SPOKEN WORD: PERFORMING PRESENCE AND EXCESS

This Beat paradigm sets the stage, both literally and figuratively, on which the contemporary poli-poetic movements of dissent perform. Both Slam and Spoken word derive their popularity and justification as aesthetic movements from the authority granted them through current conceptions of the authentic truth based discourse afforded by “marginal” positions as they are constructed and performed. Similar to Foucault’s notion of the specific individual, as one whose authority over and access to truth rests on his or her expertise knowledge of a specific subject, i.e. lawyers, scientists, or physicians, the voices within Slam and Spoken Word have authority over and access to truth based on lived experience, experience that has given them expert knowledge of a specific situation and context. As the prominence of the confessional poem found within this movement suggests, Slam and Spoken Word rests on notions of identity. However, like Ginsberg’s strategy of dissent through difference in “America,” this is not just any identity. It has to be an identity and a voice with “something to say.” Therefore, Slam and Spoken Word movements are radically multicultural, consisting of members of multiple races, genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. Poets within these movements come from a very wide range of ethnic and cultural communities. But within all this “openness” and “difference,” they all seem to have one over-riding theme within their work and performances: a form of cultural dissent derived from positions of marginality, either real

or performed. Beat scholarship and studies of counterculture, as well as contemporary scholarship regarding Slam and Spoken Word movements, perpetuate the cycle that allows “marginal” voices to be heard. It is what allows Slam and Spoken word to exist in the multicultural multigendered and multiracial form that it is currently in. However, the way in which we define authenticity, marginality, and conceptions of reification or commodification also has the potential of closing it off from any serious consideration and thus any serious political agency and efficacy within society.

Like Beat poetics, the participants within Slam and Spoken Word movements exhibit a desire for a Martinez-like American space that is radically open to difference, they advocate language as a means of creating social change, and they use performed marginality to situate themselves within various folds of heterogeneity. Also similar to the Beat aesthetic, Slam and Spoken Word participants advocate a fusion of aesthetics and politics, and understand American society as one dominated by a Western philosophic tradition. Within these similarities, Slam and Spoken word strategies offer a position from which dissent can be made and heard, often contingent on conceptions of truth based discourse garnered from what is seen as authentic experience of specific marginalized contexts. Often working within ideas of an authentic presence indicated by the privileging of orality, as well as concepts of authentic identities based on race-gender-class specific experiences, these participants actively seek its authority and agency within the fabric of American modernity. The poets and critics within Slam and Spoken Word use various American institutions and institutionalized knowledge, such as that produced by academic, scientific, and corporatized mass media industries, as metaphors for a

techno-rational and logocentric way of knowing and being in the world that destroys or dismisses difference by deciding what is privileged and/or valuable and what is not, decisions that are seen as creating a seamless Western reality that whitewashes or covers over difference. Because of this, Slam and Spoken word movements could very easily be read as merely continuing the Beat paradigm in a manner that perpetuates a potentially harmful politic based on identity and marginality, hinging on uncritical notions of authenticity. Participants within this genre often put Slam and Spoken Word to use in ways that suggest this continuation.

Throughout its relatively short history, both Slam and Spoken Word have been discussed for a variety of theoretical purposes that lend themselves to reading these movements as perpetuating notions of authentic spaces or folds of heterogeneity that allow for authentic forms of dissent. There are those who congregate in similar camps, (like Maria Damon, Tyler Hoffman and Katharine Crown), but each theorist puts Slam and Spoken Word aesthetics to work differently within their texts. Despite the fact there are some texts that describe the poetry as a pollutant in the arts, and some that suggest it is simply outside the scope of any real academic value—reading Slam and Spoken Word as merely a form of populist entertainment—most of the scholarship on Slam and Spoken Word come from those who advocate, even celebrate the movement and its participants. Like those authors within Skerl's *Reconstructing the Beats*, these celebratory texts tend to read Slam and Spoken Word in terms of its potential social significance, claiming that the movements' particular and unique contexts, as formed on the margins of institutionalization, serves as an open forum for multicultural voices, as a potential

catalyst for civil action, and as places of resistance to cultural hegemony. While critics of Slam and Spoken Word use vastly different theoretical approaches to read the movements in this way, ranging from Marxist to feminist to queer, each rests on the premise that through presence—the presence of place, the reader and the audience—the Slam or Spoken word *event* is a unique place or space of possibility.

### Places, Spaces and Human Faces: Performing Presence

Marc Smith gave life to Slam and Spoken Word Performance Poetry in 1984 at the Chicago Get Me High Lounge in reaction to the elitist status of American Poetry. A former construction worker, Smith had supposedly been turned down by a number of poetry journals for publication of his work. In the prologue to *The Spoken Word Revolution*, Mark Eleveld uses a rhetorical strategy often seen within Slam/Spoken Word scholarship, dramatically juxtaposing Smith, “Chicago tough,” against “smartly dressed” business men and the U.S poet Laureate Billy Collins, in order to quote Smith’s discussion of the sixteen years of rejection that led to the creation of Slam Poetry. “You see...you had to get in,” Smith states, “...and I was an outsider...and I thought I had something to say, like a lot of outsiders do. There were a lot of people snubbing me who shouldn’t have been snubbing me. So I just ended up doing it my own way...” (Eleveld 2). While Marc Smith as the sole creator of the Slam movement is often contested throughout smaller, lesser known documents, the uniqueness of Slam’s social significance as described by Smith is consistent throughout nearly all publications. Smith uses the academy versus the “real world” of everyday blue collar workers as a metaphor

to discuss this significance as a democratization of poetry, a poetry that doesn't discriminate as to who both hears and creates it. "When I started," he writes, "nobody wanted to go to poetry readings. Slam gave it life...a community where you didn't have to be a special something, feel bad that you weren't educated a special way..." (qtd in Eleveld 2). This community that Smith describes is the ideal metaphor for the potential seen within Slam and Spoken Word. Both the description of "The Open Room" of the Nuyorican Café and the Get Me High Lounge within Chicago illustrates this possibility. Like the "Open Room" of the Nuyorican Café, the Get Me High Lounge is described as a space that ideally leads to a radically democratic and egalitarian *communitas*.

The Open Room was the original concept on which the Nuyorican Café was founded. It was a place where anyone who walked in could sign up to read his or her poetry, to voice his or her personal and political viewpoints, and would have the potential to be heard. Miguel Algarin, one of the founders of the Nuyorican Café, describes that, while the space has changed throughout the 32 years of operation, the concept of The Open Room has not. He writes that it was a "gathering place for all kinds of writers and readers" and now is seen as "the basis for the open, generous, embracing attitude that is in fact the aesthetic of the café, and its continuity throughout all the years is our root" (Algarin 36). Similarly, the Get Me High Lounge serves as this metaphoric space within America, a Ginsbergesque cottage in the Western night. Described as a run-down bar in the center of Chicago's Bucktown, this is a poetic space that ideally embraces "all walks of life." With narrow walls, "painted black and graffit'd upon," covered with "news clippings, album covers, and old jazz posters," the Get Me High Lounge ideally offers a

cultural space that allows for audiences that, like the Nuyorican Café's, range from "immediate working-class neighbors out for a beer and fun to serious poetry lovers" (Heintz 1, Algarin18). This desire for a radically democratic and egalitarian American space that allows for "all walks of life" does not remain situated within the public places that hold Slam and Spoken Word Performances, but can be traced throughout publications as well. For example, Bob Holman's "Invocation" to *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Café*, goes to great lengths to recreate this radically free space within the anthology.

Attempting to invoke the run-down bar or café, "painted black and graffit'd upon," *Aloud* uses broken fonts in deconstructionist style, bold faced print, and exclamation points to suggest that, upon opening the text, the reader is entering into the café itself. Beginning with a conflation of past and present through a tense shift, Holman attempts to cross time and space, to bring the reader across these dimensions so that he or she may actually be situated within the Café. "Where were we," he writes, "we are at the Nuyorican Café...because *Voices from the Nuyorican Café* is a place, 236 East Third Street to be exact, between Avenue B and C in the heart of Midtown..." (Holman 1,2). He goes on to persuade the reader that upon opening the cover of the anthology, we are opening the door to the Café itself. He writes, "This is not the cover of a book you opened, that is Julio Dalmau at the door, hustling you for five bucks to see the slam. And there is Louis Griffith just inside..." (Holman 1,2). While this is a very persistent attempt to invoke a presence of place, no one is surprised to find that Julio Dalmau is not waiting inside the next page, nor are they relieved to find that there are no hands reaching

through the anthology attempting to snag the five-dollar cover from their pockets.

However, one very well might be surprised by Holman's effort, futile as it may seem, to recreate authentic place and presence through his use of language.

The desperation and urgency that Holman's invocation demonstrates, signified mainly by tense shifts, bold print, ellipses and exclamation points, can be read as a desire for an authentically democratic space that allows multicultural voices to speak and be heard. As Tony Medina writes in the introduction to *Bum Rush the Page*, a telling title in and of itself, these grammatical signifiers mark the poets' "refusal to shut the fuck up and swallow [their] silence" (intro.) Although written with less vigor and admittedly paradoxical, *Bum Rush the Page* also attempts to invoke this open democratic space in which a multiplicity of voices can speak and be heard without restriction. In the spirit of the title, alluding to the action of storming a stage and suggesting that action also occurs within the pages of the anthology, Medina writes that, "here," within the text, "is a democratic orchestration of voices and visions, of poets of all ages, ethnicities and geographic locations coming together to create a dialogue" (Medina). Here the poetic and political desire for real democracy, for actual equality, for an authentic egalitarian American space is intertwined with the presence of identity and orality—through a democratic orchestration of multicultural *voices* that create *dialogue*—a calling forth of that which "lives in performance" (Medina, intro). Unlike the disconnected and potentially *dehumanized* form of speech, the word separated from its author and thus its contextual significance, Slam and Spoken Word aesthetics attempt to retain this form of human interaction, even within writing, as paradoxical as it may be.

This ideal form of human interaction, of communication, advocates a privileging of the speaker and the audience. Within Slam and Spoken Word there is a dynamic insistence of the presence of the speaker, the listener, and of the words in air. In “The Sidewalk of High Art,” Algarin calls Slam and Spoken Word “Prime Time Interactive Literature,” “a live form of recreation,” that offers audience members an “intensely interactive relationship” between his or herself and the poet (18). Within the Slam and Spoken Word event, whether performed orally or in writing, the reader/poet/author and the audience/listener/reader are depicted as embodied, material, contextually bound, and it is through the act of communication, the interaction between them, that the word is set free. While most likely written about actual oral poetry readings, Billy Collins’ “Poems on the Page, Poems in the Air,” serves to demonstrate the desire for a humanized connection and interaction that frees voices from the silence experienced within the prisons of American institutionalization, signified by “print culture” and not print itself. “What is the draw,” he asks, “Why insist on being in the presence of an author... Why not submit to our print culture and stay home with a cup of tea—or a few inches of whiskey—and open a book?” He then goes on to answer that it is within a *concept* of “presence” that human connections can be made even within the techno-rational and logocentric ideologies that underwrite “print culture”:

The poetry reading offers a double connection: one with the poet who stands up from the page and delivers, and another with the audience united by a common interest... To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison of the page, where silence is enforced, to a freedom dependent only on the ability to open the mouth—that most democratic of instruments—and speak. (3)

While this excerpt easily lends itself to a reading in which Collins' advocates authentic presence, a reality in which poet/audience is knowable, within the presence of one another in real time, and able to experience a knowable interaction, there is no place in which this passage limits itself to that. The poem enacted releases itself into the air; it makes it real and tangible in sound; however, in Collins' passage, it remains ambiguous as to whether this must occur in an authentic present tense. The poet stands up from the page, not the stage, the audience is united by a common interest, which could either read as being in the same room or by picking up the same book, and hearing and speaking a poem is not contextually bound to a "poetry reading." Why not submit to our print culture and stay home with a cup of tea, he asks; because the ideology behind orality should be maintained, whether hearing a poem from a stage or from the page. What matters is the democratization of being able to open the mouth and to make connections with one another, real or imagined.

In "An Incomplete History of Slam," Kurt Heintz discusses the academy in a way that can be read as metaphor for the dehumanization that occurs within a techno-rational, logocentric American space. He discusses Slam and Spoken Word in terms of evangelicalism, writing that, "the magic, the supernatural fire and brimstone which slam has returned to poetry, has helped poetry in general escape from the soporific effects of high scholasticism" (forward 2). Here Heintz makes a rhetorical move that is seen throughout Slam and Spoken Word movements, carving out their own uniqueness in relation to other institutionalized aesthetic forms. Described as visceral, cranky, and energetic, the importance of Slam and Spoken Word aesthetics is in its animation. Unlike

the half-dead or sleeping poetry of academia, Slam and Spoken Word poetics attempts to sound, to have energy, to make the present present, to allow for connections and interaction. The Slam and Spoken Word desire for a democratized art form and place that allows for radically diverse voices to speak and be heard seems to override their desire to appear consistent, and, quite possibly, convincing. Like the overtly spiritual manifestation of evangelicalism, one must wonder, if these spaces are so open, so radically free, if these poets are so diverse and free to speak diversity, why do the poets, editors, and theorists alike mark them as such with an agonizing fury?

#### Democratic Desire: Reclaiming The Individual

The lengths to which certain scholarship go to evoke presence and speech, the speaker and the spoken to, demonstrates the desperate desire to retain or to reclaim the “human,” the “authentic” within individual and social interaction. Alan Kaufman describes the grip this desire has on various people throughout the nation and even goes as far to say that it has a hold on the world. In *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, Kaufman writes that “from the clubs of Manhattan’s East Village to the cafes of San Francisco to the rock stages of Venice West, a new cultural front is riding the upsurge of populist verse in our time, a passionately lyrical energy that’s spreading fast around the globe” (intro). He goes on to replicate the discourse of democratization and authentication found throughout Slam and Spoken Word scholarship, writing that “in every town and city people from every walk of life, young and old alike, are standing up at open mikes to bare their hearts in protest against their dehumanization” (Kaufman,

intro). “A need for authenticity,” Kaufman explains, “has gripped everyone” (Kaufman, intro).

This desire for what is seen as the human, as the authentic, to be retained or reclaimed within an American techno-rational and logocentric way of knowing and operating within the world, is also demonstrated within Medina’s introduction. In *Bum Rush the Page*, Medina describes the poets within his anthology as situated within an American space full of prisons that have multiplied, “as a result of the so-called war on drugs, gentrification, and racial profiling,” where “the death penalty threatens to be the next reality show,” and where “globalization threatens to dumb every one down and suck the life blood of the earth, turning everything nice and shiny and white as an American Standard toilet bowl” (Medina, intro). Situated within this space, he reads Spoken Word artists as “armed with the word,” laying out “a broad, sweeping range of aesthetic and social concerns, right (read: write) on time” (Medina, intro). He writes that in this American fabric of illusory democracy, misguided law enforcement, disillusioned individuals only connected to crucial social issues through the misrepresentation of reality television and an American way of living that threatens the unique cultural differences of the world, “the primary goal of the poet, the primary role of poetry, is to humanize” (Medina, intro). “These voices, these visionaries, understand this,” he writes, “this is their mission, their goal” (Medina, intro). It is the face, the human face “they see in the mirror, or through their window, that drives them to force the world to keep it real, act like it knows, and ultimately, to recognize their beauty—and their pain” (Medina, intro). Medina demonstrates here that, similar to the Beat aesthetic, Slam and Spoken

Word participants desire a world that “keeps it real,” that recognizes humanity, often defined by difference or excess in relation to the institutionalized or hegemonic.

The participants in Slam and Spoken Word use this concept of the authentically human as a strategy of dissent, and advocate language as a powerful means to enact change. The Slam and Spoken Word aesthetic often views the personal, or human as inextricably intertwined with politics and the potential for dissent on a national level. According to Danny Simmons, co-producer of Russell Simmons’s *Def Poetry Jam* on MTV, HBO, and Broadway, “Spoken word could be the most potent tool for social change America has ever seen” (ed. Note). Comparing Spoken Word artists to poets like Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and the Last Poets, Simmons writes that “today, like yesterday, spoken word is giving a voice to the voiceless” (ed. Note). Giving voice to the voiceless is a phrase used consistently throughout celebratory scholarship and demonstrates the political nature as well as the marginal performativity of the movement’s aesthetic. In *Spoken Word and Slam Performance Poetry* it is the “everyday” that matters, for the political is read as personal and the personal is read as political. In *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Café*, Algarin states that it is the “political and aesthetic responsibility of the oral poet to tell people how to relieve themselves from the anxiety of the day,” advocating a poetic movement in which “the artist becomes a catalyst through which social change is made” (9, 11). Like the Beat poli-poetic, the marginalized poetic eye and voice can act as a way of changing the way people see and speak about the world, and is advocated as a catalyst for effective dissent. Cited in both *Def Poetry Jam* and *Bum Rush the Page*, Sonia Sanchez’s redefinition of blackness

serves as an example of the role language is seen as playing within this marginal-artist-function.

In discussing a personal incident in which she had seen some African American children being chased by white boys shouting nigger, Sanchez says she wrote a poem, a poem that Mos Def, primarily known as a hiphop artist and actor, recites at the beginning of *Def Poetry Jam* season three, episode two. A black shadow on a red wall, with nothing but the microphone in front of the camera, he begins: "...Nigger,/ that word ain't shit to me/ don't you know where you at when you call me nigger?/ I'll say it slow for you— niiiiggger./ I know I'm black/ beautiful with meaning" (Mos Def, Sonia Sanchez). Demonstrating the value Slam and Spoken Word participants ought to place on how terms and concepts are defined, Sanchez connects language to power in the production of knowledge. In the foreword to *Bum Rush the Page*, she writes, "If they could chase someone with just one word, then they have the power, but if you could stop the word's importance by replacing it with something new, then you had the power" (Sanchez, foreword). In her attempt to redefine "nigger," by defining blackness as beautiful and with meaning, Sanchez writes that she "tried to reinvent the word to give them new power," and goes on to advocate this as a means of gaining individual agency over knowledge production. Addressing the reader, she writes, "And that's what you have to do" (forward). Like Ferlinghetti's attempt to advocate individual agency through taking control of knowledge production, Sanchez demonstrates the power behind defining one's world. However, also like Ferlinghetti's attempt, this power relation runs the risk of existing within a zero sum game, a place where asymmetrical power is not dissolved, but

rather shifted, shifting sides. Sanchez describes power as “*the power,*” switching hands from “they” to “you.”

The manner in which other Slam and Spoken Word performers often use their performed marginality to advocate social change also runs this Ferlinghetti risk of attempting to break the cyclical pattern of institutionalized knowledge production, only to create the same cyclical pattern with a difference. Like the Beats, Slam and Spoken Word poli-poetics also attempt to combat or offer an alternative to the techno-rational logocentric Western philosophic tradition that is seen as infiltrating the American space and dehumanizing individual and social interaction. And also like the Beats, the place in which the poet situates his or herself within their constructed American space varies. However, through urgency, marked by the privileging of fast-paced and loud spoken and written performances signified by volume, rapid speech, little punctuation, broken sentences and bold faced print, the artists within Slam and Spoken Word have two things in common: a vision of an America that is in desperate need of repair, and a loss of faith in American leaders, whether it be presidents, senators, corporate executives or academics, to make that repair. As Algarin writes, “there is an urgency among us. We must listen to one another” in order to effect change (10). Slam and Spoken Word artists construct an American Moloch to which individuality, difference, and excess is sacrificed. In these constructions of the American space, various institutions and industries become metaphors for technocratic logocentric ways of knowing the world, a way of being in the world that is seen as dominant and negative.

Resisting the Great White American Toilet Bowl

Slam and Spoken Word performers often situate themselves in a position of difference, as part of the American excess, whether it be their difference from academic institutions, scientific or otherwise, or mass media industries. *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* demonstrates the most overt attempt of separating their poets and poetics from the American techno-rational and logocentric. In the introduction, Kaufman welcomes the reader “to the Wild West of American Poetry,” and defines the “space” in which the reader is about to enter as “the Hole-In-The-Wall of Blakean vision, a two-fisted salon of New World dreams where you’ll meet the greatest Outlaw voices from the post-war era to the present day” (intro). Including poets ranging from William Carlos Williams to Bob Kaufman, and songwriters and performers from Woody Guthrie to Tupac, *Outlaw American Poetry* claims to offer “the demons of imagination,” named as “Hipsters, Queers, Rappers, Nuyoricans, Renegades, Hustlers, Slammers, and Cons” (Kaufman, intro). In discussing the situated difference from American institutions, Kaufman writes that “Outlaw poets relate to the poetic tradition, and to their contemporaries in the Academy, with the bristling wariness of a street hustler getting frisked by a cop” (Kaufman, intro).

Demonstrating the possibility afforded by performed difference or marginality, the poets within *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyoricana Café* illustrate the manner in which the Slam and Spoken Word aesthetic might combat, offer an alternative to, or resist Western philosophical traditions. In “Science Was Invented by a Bunch of Guys who were so Ugly they Couldn’t Possibly Believe in God,” Matt Cook sets up and weakens

the techno-rational and logocentric way of knowing, utilizing scientific discourse regarding paleontology as a metaphor for the manner in which Western philosophic traditions create metanarratives that smooth over difference. Toby Colby takes this into the realm of aesthetics in “Lemon Brown,” a poem which contrasts the significance of the more political aesthetic of Slam with the insignificance of the apolitical nature of “traditional” poetics. And Wanda Coleman defines the relationship of the Slam aesthetic to academia as libratory. Mike Tyler and Tony Medina, however, best demonstrate that the solution or alternative to this American fabric of modernity lies in grassroots resistance and a militant guarding of multicultural hybridity that suggests a politic of underground invisibility.

In “Science Was Invented,” Cook challenges the construction of Western logic that perpetuates a notion of truth as fact-based and seamless to the point that it leaves no room for the mystical, mythological and spiritual. Making fun of the process in which scientific discourse is formed, he equates it to a haphazard process based on arbitrary values and economic gain. Speaking within this discourse, he writes, “We found a bunch of bones lying around/ and we think we know how they fit together/ right,” and so those in power of scientific discourse have “arranged all those bones all sorts of ways/ come up with all sorts of crazy shaped/ beasts/ this one just happens to look the most ferocious/ some kid probably liked it the best/ it sells dinosaur books” (Cook 414). Highlighting the political significance of the Spoken Word aesthetic, Colby contrasts it with the insignificant a-political poetry of tradition in “Lemon Brown.” Feeling like a caged animal within the American space, Colby writes, “I’m really getting tired of this

century,” and instead of relying on a Wanda Coleman figure to liberate him, he writes, “I’m going to stomp on some necks tonight/ I want to rip my fucking skin off/ and be exposed to the stupid starlight” (410). And when he is asked why he is so jumpy, he answers, “Because it’s a great god damn time to be writing/ beautiful little poems/ in expensive little books/ going on and on/ about birds, trees, and flowers” (Colby 412). In “Tough Language,” Coleman suggests that the Slam and Spoken Word aesthetic is not only politically significant, but also potentially libratory. Situating herself within an academic institution, she paints herself as “a one-woman lynch mob marauding/ thru the streets” of the traditional poet’s “mushy pampered academic boredom/ robbing and raping her 1-dimentional way across town/ to shoot the sheriff and liberate him from himself” (190). Taking this potentially libratory aesthetic further, Tyler advocates a politics of grassroots resistance.

In “The Most Beautiful Word in the American Language,” Tyler uses a Ferlinghettiesque surrealism as a strategy to construct and critique an American Moloch that destroys individuality. Tyler uses of concepts of addiction as individuality and excess and uses the way in which American institutions deal with this excess as a metaphor for the Moloch like rationale that destroys individuality. Describing the standard method of how institutions deal with an individual’s excess, Tyler asks “Why 12 steps/ why not 11 steps/ or 39 steps/ how bout 1 step” (164). He goes on further to suggest that one step is all it really takes to rob an individual of their difference. “Humane Beans,” he writes, “fall quick” (Tyler 164). Entering “thru the arches of tried self examination...,” Tyler describes how “a pudgy baked complicated marshmallow/ is machine rolled into flat

dough/ and cookie cluttered on a grey tan tin pan” (164). Like a Ginsbergesque portrayal of Rockland, excess is contained through methods of social control such as therapy and medication. Individuals become “alley waste of flat little bitter/ crunchy duplicate yellow Xeroxed spills” (Tyler 164). However, unlike Ginsberg’s Rockland, *these* institutions do not harbor the potential of the anomic. Within the walls of the facility, one finds no individuals capable of offering a radically new perspective. The end result of this kind of treatment only has the potential to create individuals that are flat and bitter duplicates, spills of dehumanized sameness.

Using this metaphor of cookie cutter individuals, he goes on to explain that this American method of standardized treatment of individuality creates sameness, but not a sameness that brings individuals closer to one another, that promotes interaction and dialogue as the Slam and Spoken Word aesthetic desires, but rather a sameness that dehumanizes the individual to the point that he or she becomes pathetic, stiff, and unable to touch one another. “With pathetic stiff hands/ reaching out in exactly the same position to pathetic stiff hands/ reaching out in exactly the same position/ to/ fingers never bend/ touching is only abutting...” (Tyler 165). Here Tyler touches on the conformity that Beat writers feared, but goes on to state that this conformity not only creates sugar-cookie American individuals, but also causes individuals to lose any real agency and connection to one another. Baked stiff into positions of reaching out, these American individuals are frozen in the desire to reach out, making a call for another, but a call that is transformed, stock-still and empty through institutionalization. Within this process, American individuals are reaching, but do not touch another. They are merely abutting, remaining

next to one another but incapable of reaching one another in any real and meaningful way.

Returning to his metaphor of excess, Tyler uses an intertextual speaker, the voice of his friend, to discuss agency through issues of individual will power and personal freedom, ultimately determining that, while claiming to save an individual from the potential harms of the excessive, institutions actually rob him or her of agency. Tyler discusses the power of institutions as similar to putting a towel over the television set, attempting to take control of one's life by merely blocking out potentially negative stimuli. "But isn't it a good thing/ to stop the demon drink/ to turn winos into whiners/ to remove the grape from the expectant gape/ to put a towel over the tv set" (165). His friend is thinking of putting a towel over the TV set. "Doesn't want to get addicted. / What's willpower and personal freedom/ to a dead person/ but that's my point" (Tyler 165). Here Tyler uses the standard way of looking at the consequences of addiction, of excess as negative, potentially resulting in the death of an individual, only to reverse it, demonstrating that it is the consequences of institutionalization that leads to the death of individuality through robbing a person of personal freedom and will power. He explains that while excessive living may have harmful consequences to an individual, the method in which American institutions remove individual agency is more deadly.

To Tyler, the solution to this American Moloch lies in the most beautiful word in the American language: Resistance. "When the weapon wants you/ when the crosshairs meet at your heart...when the noise is quieter than the silence...when magic is explained," he writes, "Resist/ Resist/ Resist/ Resist/ The most beautiful word in the

American Language is/ Resist” (Tyler 168). Tyler ends his performance within the pages of *Aloud* in a surreal American landscape of confusion, in which the leaders of American institutions and industries are in positions of leadership without the knowledge to lead America in the right direction. Tyler’s “The Baker has no Bakers,” begins with a bakery with no bakers, “instead/ behind the steaming muffins/ auto parts salespeople lounge with unfamiliarity in sugar smocks” and ends in a presidency with no president, in which the responsibility to create change rests on the shoulders of American individuals. Taking charge of the state of affairs,” he writes, “A country feels in its pocket for change” (Tyler 171).

Similar to Tyler’s discussion of the elimination of difference through his metaphor of addiction, Medina constructs an American fabric as caught within the domination of a Western philosophic tradition, signified by his use of “white European” knowledge production that takes all difference and whitewashes it through media misrepresentation, politics and even education. In “New York City Rundown (European on Me),” Medina uses a metaphor of the standard white American toilet bowl and urination (*European*) as a method of eliminating cultural diversity to advocate a “militant” political position that takes Tyler’s suggestion and attempts to resist this process. He begins by describing a Martinez like “sell-out,” an individual too satisfied with visibility and media representation, as well as the economic gain that such visibility affords. He writes that these individuals “work for the man,” and perform marginality for the consumption and approval of a white audience. Medina describes these sell-outs as “Aunt Jemima Oprahs, prime time mammas of the rotted airways/ breast feeding/ old

white ladies/ sucking on her bourgeois boob/ tube test tube stupidity” (91). He goes on to explain a purely cultural form of progress as promoting an individual based politics that merely creates a commodified multiculturalism, reifying marginal identity in a fraudulent manner in order to be economically profitable. He describes those who give into this commodification as “self hated individualistic/bootstrap token success story/ pick & choose role model,” that are “in perpetual fraud/...bought & sold to you/ in living color/ corporate coon,” greedily “suckin the white man’s cream for mo’ money” (Medina 91).

Demonstrating that authentic diversity is undesirable within the American system, Medina attributes any visibility within the dominant public sphere to a performed whiteness, a discussion that very much resembles racial epithets such as “Oreo” or “apple.” Discussing the erasure of authentic diversity, Medina explains that people of different races and ethnicities are accepted only if they pass for white. “They only accept her cause she chooses to pass/ for white,” he writes, “But if she ever accepted her Mexican Latin/ roots, they’d/ down play her/ in a heartbeat” (95). In this description of the Western philosophic tradition that perpetuates the illusion of participation within an egalitarian democracy only to wipe out difference and excess, Medina goes on to implicate movie stars, politicians, Jesse Jackson, Miss America, Barbie, talk show hosts and Nike. Speaking of those who endorse products like Nike sneakers, he writes, “hey ray Leonard, wanna endorse & sell/ \$150 sneakers/ when our kids go hungry/ & get killed for such warped and distorted status symbols and illusions!/ sell this/ bastard louse criminal/ your image is poison/ it must be destroyed” (Medina 97). Associating America with the great white standard toilet bowl, Medina creates an image in which diversity is

urinated on by a white Western philosophic tradition that underwrites aesthetics, consciousness, economics and education. “Hey Teacher,” he writes, “bold faced liar/ collaborated, cohort & co-conspirator/ with/ your hand in the cookie jar of history/ with your hand in the piggy bank of imperialism/ & cultural annihilation...eropean on me” (Medina 95). “And so here we are again,” he writes, “in this great big toilet bowl...America! America!” (95).

Desiring to resist this American toilet bowl, Medina calls for “militant gardeners” to help nurture “multi-colored flowers” (97). “We don’t need to be/ dried up tulips in/ somebody’s garden box/ only to be pissed on/ by the gardener & his clumsy/ trained mutated son” (97). Instead, Medina advocates an underground fold of heterogeneity, a garden of their own, with their own kind of education, buildings and nourishment. “We teach, we learn, we study,/ we create, we build/ we plant our own garden/ & and nourish it &/ watch it grow/ trees among dry bushes and corrupt weeds” (Medina 97). Within this fold of multicultural heterogeneity, Medina seems to advocate a separatist politics of resistance to, not insistence on, participation with the dominant sphere and national politic. For while critical of itself, this garden is separate from the dry bushes and corrupt weeds. He writes, “We need to be militant gardeners...severely critical of ourselves & outside/ antagonists,” militant gardeners “that don’t let nobody fuck with our garden” (Medina 97). “A big ass giant multi-colored/ garden/ grows in the world” he writes, “and we must/ save it” (Medina 98)

Advocating a political aesthetic that is resistant in its difference or diversity potentially perpetuates a Beat paradigm that divides the authentic from the inauthentic

based on participation in what is conceived as dominant culture. While attempting to remain a radically open space that grants equal access and voice to all identities, the manner in which Slam and Spoken Word describes these spaces and voices could lead to the narrow confines of underground status and the virtually closed system of separatism. Even in the desire for an authentic multicultural hybridity, this hybridity risks being essentialized or embodied in a manner that traps it within identity politics and the performance of marginality. Ed Morales' "Rebirth of New Rican" can be read as illustrating this possibility. Describing his Puerto Rican identity as liberating, Morales writes, "Mixed race is the place/ It feels good to be neither/ It's a relief to deny racial purity/ We're amused as America slowly comes to see/ the beauty of negritude and the Native American attitude/ We've been living it day to day since 1492" (99). Possibly alluding to the contemporary scholarly appropriation and use of border dwelling theories, Morales describes hybridity as a place that is embodied and has been since the onset of a Western philosophic tradition. Morales describes "mixed race" as a "weapon," and "the revolution" as a "groove" that resides within the "hearts" of hybrid individuals (98). Through hybrid identity "new and revolutionary communication/ comes into being/ Porque only a multicultural pueblo can understand" (Morales 98). However, the proclamation of one's hybridity risks essentializing it, risks making it knowable, metaphysically authentic, and thus, reconstitutes it as a singular identity that consists of two or more knowable cultural or ethnic ways of being that one can move in and out of, perform as easily as switching from English to Español. It may not be hybridity itself that

offers a radically open space, but rather the performance of it, as the complex performativity of the spectacle suggests.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## DIALOGIC, SPECTACLE AND PERFORMING PERFORMATIVITY

Through performance, Slam and Spoken Word artists must give themselves and their message up to the ambiguity within spectacle, the performance of performativity. The performativity of Slam and Spoken Word is discussed in multiple contemporary publications in which performed presence, material/embodied speaker, marginality and authenticity is problematized. Discussing the spectacle or carnivalesque nature of Slam and Spoken Word Performance, authors like Tyler Hoffman, Kathleen Crown, Charles Bernstein, Maria Damon, and Susan Somers-Willett take on issues of orality, presence, authenticity and performativity in ways that, while limiting Slam and Spoken Word to specific possibilities, offer the potential to free these movements from a separatist or underground politics based on essentialized notions of authentic identity and participation within the social realm. In “Treacherous Laughter: the Poetry Slam, Slam Poetry, and the Politics of Resistance,” Hoffman uses Bakhtin’s carnival to counteract the dismissal of Slam and Spoken word as events of empty entertainment, interpreting these movements as performing “‘a second life’—one alternative to (and subversive of) the official culture and its orderings,” in an attempt “to undo ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes” (11). Similarly, Kathleen Crown’s “‘Sonic Revolutionaries’: Voice and Experiment in the Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris,” deals with problematic notions of authentic presence and speech. Attempting to avoid perpetuating naïve conceptualizations of “‘natural speech’ as truth” and of “identity-based poetry” as “representative verse,” Crown

asks “how poetic ‘voice’ might be detached from its baggage of transparency, presence, authenticity, and identitarian claims to representativeness *without* losing its ability to invoke participation and meaningful political response” (217).

Both Hoffman and Crown attempt to read Slam and Spoken Word as socially significant aesthetic movements despite the spectacle of the performative event, and within postmodern/poststructural readings of presence and speech. However, the way in which Slam and Spoken Word movements are characterized as socially significant within these problematized notions is best exemplified by Bernstein, Damon and Somers-Willet. Each of these three theorists discuss the social significance of Slam and Spoken Word, either negatively or positively, all refer to a kind of plurality that exists within the performance of poetry, and all deal with the spectacle of Slam and Spoken Word in ways that have the potential to free the poetic aesthetic from harmful essentializations.

#### Dialogic Potential and Authenticating Marginal Identity

In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein brings together an anthology of seventeen essays written specifically for the volume “on poetry readings, the sound of poetry, and the visual performance of poetry” (Bernstein 3).

Within this text, Bernstein and the other authors advocate what they call “close listening,” “not only to the printed text of poems but also to tapes and performance” (4).

Included in the anthology are a range of essays that, while focused on contemporary poetry, work together to discuss traditions of the lyric poem, of orality and of performance poetry as it has been conceptualized and discussed throughout history. In the

introduction, Bernstein reminds his readers that these essays are not intended to privilege speech over writing through deconstructing notions of a poetic language that was once more pure, a language that either reconnects us with an ideal past by combating the “loss of the ‘presence’ of the word,” or the loss of “language’s interconnectivity with the more-than-human world” (Bernstein 20). Throughout his text, Bernstein successfully problematizes notions of a fixed and stable performance, one that essentializes through notions of the origin and the unitary textual performance. However, in this problematization, Bernstein also admits that, while there are multiple versions of textual performances, not all performances have equal authority. To combat this asymmetrical authority, Bernstein attempts to strip the Spoken Word performance of its spectacle nature, claiming that the spectacle creates an unuseful distance between the reader and the listener that does not prove to be successfully dialogic, but rather reifies language as representation. In “Was that ‘Different,’ ‘Dissident,’ or ‘Dissonant,’” Damon attempts to counter this reading of Slam and Spoken Word, reading the spectacle within these movements as a stereotype that, upon further analysis, is incorrect. To Damon the spectacle does not distance the reader and the listener, for the audience acts as a corrective based on notions of authenticity that forms Bernstein’s dialogic construction between reader and audience. Unlike Bernstein, Damon does not see reification or commodification as a negative aspect of Slam and Spoken Word disseminations, but rather as offering a piece of a potentially “total experience” of a poem. Somers-Willet, on the other hand, uses a Damonesque concept of the corrective audience to demonstrate how, through notions of authenticity, marginal identity is performed, authenticated, and

reified in potentially negative ways. In “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity,” Somers-Willet uses the performativity and the scoring involved within National Slam Events to illustrate the fact that it is marginal identities that are most often rewarded within these competitions. While all three critics of Slam and Spoken Word bring up incredibly useful arguments regarding the potential social significance of the performed poetic event, each of their analyses rely on their form of a dialogic exchange in order to come to their conclusions, a connection between reader and listener that is known and that produces known effects. However, the spectacle, though regarded differently by each theorist, is the lever that continually opens Slam and Spoken Word to possibility. Like Bernstein’s analysis, the spectacle does create distance, but not negatively. Rather, it is a distance that allows for excess and for the unknown to occur.

Throughout his text, Bernstein successfully deconstructs notions of authentic performance as a monologic singularity, based on an original. He begins this discussion by demonstrating that one should not think of the spoken word as more real or more authentic than the written word. Dealing with notions of a prelapsarian edenic state of being, in which the individual was once connected to the word and to the world, he writes that “the power of the symbolic does not come in Faustian trade for the virtually Edenic space of undifferentiated connectivity,” and offers an alternative way of thinking origins. “Better than to speak of the presymbolic,” he writes, “we might say asymbolic or heterosymbolic. Instead of projecting a preliterate stage we might say analphabetic or heteroliterate” (Bernstein 20). Putting this notion into relief, he explains that works characterized as “presymbolic,” and either praised or condemned as primitive or

childlike, should rather be characterized as “postsymbolic,” described as complex or chaotic and “hyperreferential” (Bernstein 20). Characterized as hyperreferential, these performances take on possibility. “Such works,” he writes, “affirm the bases of reason against a dehumanizing fixation on the rigidly monologic and rationalistic” (20). Desiring a concept of aurality over orality, of the physicality of sound over speech acts, Bernstein writes that “sound brings writing back from its metaphysical and symbolic functions to where it is at home, in performance” (21). To Bernstein, it is sound that brings the listener or interpreter into the performativity of language, not as speech act as a representation of a monologic meaning, but rather language and sound as multiplicity and excessive. Sound spills out and over. He writes that there is “no one original written version of a poem. Even leaving aside the status of the manuscript, there often exists various and discrepant printings—textual performances—in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also in spacing, font, paper, and moreover, contexts of readerships; making for a plurality of versions, none of which can claim sole authority” (Bernstein 8). Calling these “multifoliate versions of *performances* of the poem,” Bernstein goes on to demonstrate how this characterization of the poetic event combats or offers an alternative to a Western philosophic tradition of metaphysics (Bernstein 8).

Like the performers within Slam and Spoken Word, Bernstein constructs a perspective of a poetic performance that potentially subverts techno-rational and logocentric ways of knowing and operating in the world. He writes that to highlight the performative nature of poetics destabilizes metanarratives that refuse or eliminate difference. “To speak of the poem in performance,” he writes, “is to overthrow the idea

of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object; it is to deny the poem its self presence and its unity” (Bernstein 9). He goes on to demonstrate the paradoxical effect of the poetry reading as present, material and embodied in a way that constantly questions that presence, materiality and embodiment. He writes that “while performance emphasizes the material presence of the poem, and of the performer, it at the same time denies the unitary presence of the poem, which is to say its metaphysical unit” (Bernstein 9). Quoting Andrew Benjamin (at length), Bernstein suggests that within performativity, the text, the speaker, the audience, and the event itself is “anoriginally plural” (qtd in Bernstein 9). This way of interpreting performance poetry is useful in that it has the potential to free it from a metaphysical notion of the authentic, placing it within performed authenticity—a place in which one cannot say whether the performance is authentic or not—where the boundaries between authenticity and inauthenticity become liminal spaces of undecidability. However, in this anoriginal plurality, Bernstein points out that authority over the performance is not equal. “An actor’s rendition, like a type designers ‘original’ setting of a classic,” he writes, “will not have the same kind of authority as a poet’s own reading or the first printing of the work” (Bernstein 9). Instead of developing this discussion of asymmetrical authority over performance, Bernstein seems to sidestep the issue, moving on to concepts of the spectacle in contemporary poetic movements in a manner that suggests that stripping the poetic performance of its theatrical nature may help to create a more egalitarian dialogic constituting and reconstituting the textual event.

While he writes that he does not wish to undermine the significance of the more theatrical poetry reading altogether, he does privilege the formal style of “traditional” poetry readings, and is tempted to call this mode “anti-performative” (Bernstein 11). Bernstein writes, “where the visual spectacle creates a perceived distance separating viewers from the viewed, the emphasis on sound in the poetry reading has the opposite effect—it physically connects the speaker and listeners” (11). He goes on to explain a “typical” dislike among poets for the more theatrical reading of poems as a dislike, not for the vocalization, but of a “style of acting that frames the performance in terms of character, personality, setting, gesture, development or drama” (Bernstein 11). “The acting,” he writes, “takes precedence over letting the words speak for themselves,” and he desires a formalist perspective that finds “the sound in the words, not in any extrinsic scenario or supplemental accompaniment” (11). Later in the essay, Bernstein qualifies his desire for “letting the words speak for themselves,” writing that, while any reading is a site that makes “it visible to itself,” the “bodily grounding of language” loses its social significance when it is “reified as (represented) speech or sentimentalized as a return to orality” (22). He writes that more attention has been paid to those poetic events that seem to crossover to a wider audience, events that have been popularized like Slam and Spoken Word readings. However, Bernstein does not see this as a positive thing. To him, the social significance of the poetry reading “has to do with infrastructure not spectacle” (23). Reading the infrastructure of the poetic even as a dialogic exchange, and the “invisibility” of the formal reading in terms of mass-cultural representation as positive characteristics, Bernstein perpetuates notions of authentic and knowable exchanges

within speech acts versus an inauthentic exchange on a cultural level. “Poetry is constituted dialogically through recognition and exchange within an audience of peers, where the poet is not performing to invisible readers or listeners but actively exchanging work with other performers and participants” (Bernstein 23). Similar to Martinez and Medina’s reading of a politics of visibility, Bernstein suggests that poetry “is among the most social and socially responsive—dialogic—of contemporary art forms...” and that “the value of the poetry reading as a social and cultural form can be partly measured by its resistance, up to this point, to reification or commodification...” (23). “That is,” he writes, “the (cultural) invisibility of the poetry reading is what makes its audibility so audacious” (Bernstein 23).

Within *Close Listening*, Damon rereads the notion of the spectacle within Slam and Spoken Word not as an aspect of the performed event that distances the reader from the audience, but rather as a stereotype that is corrected through audience participation signified by scoring. She reads Slam and Spoken Word as a continuation of a “public poetics oriented toward a more direct intervention in and commenting on public affairs” (Damon 332). Pointing out the location of open mike readings and slam poetry competitions as situated in “relatively democratized spaces,” such as “bars, night clubs, coffee houses, high school gyms, college lounges, auditoriums and other public spaces,” Damon writes that these movements “participate in poetic activity with roots in a collectivity...” (332). In the beginning of her essay, Damon plays on the sonic confusion of difference between dissonant and dissident to demonstrate “the significance of close listening and its relevance to the public arts of contemporary poetry” (326). Similar to

Bernstein's approach to reading the multiplicity within performed versions of a poem, Damon writes of preserving the nuance that can be found within sound and semantics. "The respect implied by this book's title," she writes, "permits us to hold all semantic/sonic resonant possibilities concurrently, our attentive apparatus flickering between them all with such lucid intensity as to create a kinetic web of energy that is its own possibility" (Damon 326). Addressing Slam and open mike readings specifically, Damon touts this sonic/semantic plurality as an aesthetic and political possibility that offers "an important venue for grassroots poetic activity that rewrites the privatistic lyric scene into a site for public discourse" (326).

Despite disapproval by critics such as Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and even Bernstein to a certain extent, Damon attempts to counter a reading of Slam and Spoken Word as a mere form of populist entertainment. She writes that, unlike what these critics posit, these poetic movements exceed what she calls "the lowest common denominator" critique of mass cultural productions. Writing that these critics "need to be retrained to listen differently (dissidently, dissonantly)," Damon suggests a reading of Slam and Spoken Word performances that creates a public sphere that allows for dissenting voices. She writes, "The world of poetry slams and open mike readings, while not directly politically interventionist, perhaps, creates a public sphere that is healthily contestatory" (Damon 327). She goes on to explain a Martinez-like division between a pure form of cultural politics associated with popular representation and a cultural politics that operates directly within a national political sphere. "From the 'right' it's not 'really poetry' because it is too public and aims too aggressively for mass appeal," she writes,

while “from the ‘left’ it’s not public enough because it is merely poetry, a cultural expression everyone knows to be effete, impotent, and elitist” (Damon 327). Similar to my issue with this Martinez like divide, Damon writes that “this critique draws a distinction between cultural *politics* and *cultural* politics” (328). Like Bernstein’s discussion of Slam and Spoken Word, both of these readings often associate the competitive, loud, and aggressive nature of Slam performances with pure spectacle, empty entertainment at best and distractingly cheap at worst.

Instead of reading the spectacle as possibility, in her attempt to counter the negative connotations associated with it, Damon merely describes it as a misrepresentation of Slam. Damon writes of the general stereotype of the slam performance “as promoting an in-your-face bullying theatricalism,” and of the slam poem as “delivering a simplistic personal or political message,” but goes on to say that, upon closer inspection, this is an inaccurate assumption about how the slam event operates. Similar to Bernstein’s description of the social significance found within the dialogic infrastructure of the formal poetry reading, Damon goes on to explain that, while some performances do adhere to the stereotype, the infrastructure of the slam is also dialogic, promoting recognition and active participation and interaction between the poet and the audience. Countering the stereotypical slam poem as “theatrical imitations of bullets from assault weapons,” Damon delivers an account of a female newcomer who performed an “honest,” “unaffected,” and “unique” poem about living with alcoholism, only to turn around and deliver the slam stereotype later in the slam finals. “It was awkward,” Damon writes, “as if she were forcing herself to do something she felt was required of her” (329).

Between these two readings, Damon interprets the audience as a corrective force, demonstrating that Slam is not about spectacle, but about authenticity. Scoring high on the “honest, unaffected” performance and lower on the “slam stereotype,” Damon writes that “the audience itself acted as a corrective,” using their scores as if to say: “No, no, we like you for who you are, not for who you think we want you to be” (329). Falling back into the trap of a knowable authentic dialogic relationship between reader and audience, Damon writes, “Vague as it may sound, the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of ‘realness’—authenticity at the physical/sonic and metaphysical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels” (329). This criterion is what Damon suggests listening closely for. She states that when hearing a spoken word performance, you’re “not just listening for technique, or for ‘original imagery,’ or raw emotion, but for some transmission/ recognition of resonant difference, a gestalt that effects a ‘felt change of consciousness’ on the part of the listener” (330).

Using this notion of authenticity, Somers-Willet also reads the audience as a corrective force through a dialogic participation, only she reads this as a reversal: not as possibility, but as problematic. Instead of interpreting a judge’s scoring as saying, “No, no, we like you for who you are, not for what you think we want you to be,” Somers-Willet sees it differently (dissonantly, dissidently), reading *failure* in a slam competition as saying, “No, No, we don’t like you for who you are, we like you only for who we think you ought to be.” In “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity,” Somers-Willet does a reading of the performance of marginal identity within National Slam Competitions. She writes that “The National Poetry Slam community is overtly

concerned with the expression of racial, gender, and sexual difference in its ranks” (Somers-Willett 66). She points to “the increased presence of organizations (such as slamsisters, a group dedicated to women’s interests) and performance poetry troupes (such as Born with Two Tongues, a Pan Asian poetry group)” as a confirmation “that marginal identity will continue to influence the life of performance poetry” (Somers-Willett 66). Citing the most widely attended slam events as those that showcase special readings by Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, women, and gays and lesbians, Somers-Willett highlights the desire of slam audiences to experience the diversity of marginality within the poetic movement. Using a Damonesque framework for the infrastructure of the slam event, Somers-Willet demonstrates that through a corrective audience, hinging on uncritical conceptions of authenticity, marginal identity is performed, authenticated, reified and created through slam performance.

#### Trapped Within Marginality: Performing Race, Gender and Sexuality

Highlighting the first-person, narrative-mode of Slam and Spoken Word aesthetics, Somers-Willet demonstrates that these poetic movements encourage “a live audience to perceive the performance as a confessional moment,” and as such, she writes that “one of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet’s performance of identity and identity politics” (52). Like Damon, Somers-Willett reads the high scoring poets as an affirmation that slam audiences reward a performed identity that is perceived as authentic. She quotes Damon’s criterion for slam success as “some kind of realness—authenticity...that effects a ‘felt change of ‘consciousness on the part of the listener,’” to

illustrate the audience's role in rewarding successful identity performances. However, like Bernstein's reading of the asymmetrical authority over performance, she writes that "not all identities appear to be created equally authentic in the eyes of slam audiences" (Somers-Willett 53). "More often than not," she writes, "marginalized gender, class, sexual and racial identities can be especially rewarded" (Somers-Willett 54). Using performance theorists such as Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, she writes that through slam performances certain voices and identities are authenticated, and with this process of authentication, poetry slams "*generate* the very identities which poets and audiences expect to hear" (Somers-Willett 56). She writes, "A poet performing a poem about marginalized identity may gain the reward of authenticity from a slam audience not only for his or her writing and performance, but also for the well-executed performance of marginalized identity" (57).

Somers-Willett then goes on to lay out the potentially negative consequences of this reified and generated marginalized identity. Rewarding such performances, she writes, "might assuage 'white guilt'...helps to proclaim an audience's liberal political identity...invites them to support 'revolution' without implying a need for their own action...[and] can reward a construction of marginal identity without having to recognize their own complicity in that construction" (Somers-Willett 64). Here, Somers-Willett outlines some of the potentially harmful ramifications that viewing marginal identity as authentic might have on an "unmarginal" audience. She suggests that, through the process of performing and interpreting marginality, a listener may not feel moved to actively participate in a national politics geared toward effecting social change. However,

she does not mention the potential consequences that performing marginality might have on the poetic movement itself. Trapped within a continual cyclical pattern of performing, reifying, authenticating, generating, and back full circle, both dissenters and dissenting movement could lose a potential social significance within a wider national sphere. Once she lays out these issues, Somers-Willett goes on to suggest that the relationship between performer and audience may be more complicated than she previously explains.

Using Homi Bhabha's dual notions of fetishization, Somers-Willett offers a more complex possibility within the poet-audience interaction and exchange. " 'Fetishism,' according to Bhabha, is a non repressive form of knowledge that allows the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one the official and one the secret, one the archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division" (qtd in Somers-Willett 65). Using Kobena Mercer, she writes, "In this case, the fetishization of the 'other' can hold sway as a deconstructive strategy which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations" (qtd in 65). Somers-Willett goes on to write that because of this deconstructive potential, the slam event could prove to be a more complex "site of negotiation between poet and audience" (70). To demonstrate the "the complexity between poet-audience relationships" as precluding "the dynamics between poet and audience from any one thing—fetishistic, revolutionary, essentialist, liberating, entertainment," Somers-Willett desires to problematize the slam event. However, within this desired complexity, she seems to answer Damon's call for a close listening for a gestalt effect. Despite her desire to problematize slam performativity, she still somewhat

gives into a knowable speech-act, a recognizable exchange and interaction between performer and performed to. She writes that instead of being only fetishistic, revolutionary, essentialist, liberating, or entertainment, “the performance of slam poetry is usually a host of these forces working together at a particular moment in history *to authenticate one’s identity* [my emphasis]” (70). And in writing this, she certainly widens the possibility of relationships between slam performer and slam audience. However, through offering a solution of dividing essentialized identity performance from nuanced ones, she simultaneously risks closing it off once more.

In demonstrating a possibility for ambivalence within the Slam event, Somers-Willet divides Slam Poetry performances into two camps: those that “seek to confirm the slam poet’s identity in sometimes narrow ways” and those that “tap the potential to critically investigate the performance of identity on the slam stage” (66). While writing that a “few poets make use of this deconstructive potential,” she goes on to say that most performers “rely on the cultural politics of marginal identity and resistance to the status quo in order to further authenticate, not explode, these identities” (Somers-Willet 69). She does, however, offer two examples of what she deems as positive and deconstructive performances of identity and identity politics. Using Taylor Mali’s “How to Write a Political Poem” and Patricia Smith’s “Skinhead,” Somers-Willet suggests that parody and persona performances are the key to deconstructing notions of essentialized identity.

### Opening Closed Doors

Somers-Willett's concern for a conceptualization of marginality as an authentic way of being in the world is not unfounded. Necessarily connecting these two in a metalinguistic/semantic manner could very easily lead to the negative ramifications she discusses within her text. It is possible that these notions could "assuage white guilt," could lead an audience to conflate attending a reading with actively engaging in issues of race in America, and could also lead to a construction of marginality and marginal identity that the audience members fail to recognize their role in creating. However, her solution to the potential reification and authentication of marginal identity seems to be rather narrow. After all, she writes that very few performers operate in the more complex deconstructive mode she advocates, leaving all the rest in a state of negative essentialization. It is difficult to argue that specific performances, such as Mali's "How to Write a Political Poem," Smith's "Skinhead," and even others such as Louis Rivera's "A Place I've Never Been," are not performing an identity that appears to be more complex than other identity performances. This appearance, however, may be deceiving, for it seems that in dividing performances between those that appear to perform essentialized identity versus those that appear to be more complex identity performances misses the point of performativity. It could even be said that this process of dividing reifies and authenticates identity all over again, suggesting that a more nuanced identity performance, such as the parody or persona poem is a more accurate representation, more true to life. However, Somers-Willett's argument as a whole should not be discredited nor

dismissed. The manner in which she deals with performativity of race and identity and its potential ramifications, ranging from her discussion of Erving Goffman and Judith Butler to her reading of Bhabha's fetishization and the other, raises crucial issues within the study of popular culture, mass media representation, and, most importantly, dissenting cultural practices.

Somers-Willet's reading of the cyclical pattern of rewarding performances of marginality suggests the privileging of a truth-based discourse garnered from the authentic experience of being marginal. And while these conceptualizations of the "authentic experience" and the "authentic confession" of that experience are problematic, as Somers-Willet suggests, they are also integral to the formation of this radically multicultural poetic. While it does threaten to trap marginal voices within marginality, it simultaneously privileges these voices in a way that suggests credibility and authority. This is not to say that one should not problematize authenticity. But if, as Somers-Willet suggests, we encourage and look to *only* the performances that stage a nuanced identity, working to deconstruct notions of the authentic confessional moment, then we destroy the potentially very powerful dissenting practice that could emerge from that moment. One will find that Somers-Willet's reading of Mali and Smith's performances usefully recognizes their potential to deconstruct harmful notions perpetuated by the authentic identity based confessional, but is blind to the way these kinds of deconstructive performances simultaneously reiterate and affirm this moment. Similarly, one can also see that her reading of essentialized identity performances usefully highlights how these this performances threaten to reiterate and reify marginal identity in harmful ways, but is

blind to the manner in which these pieces are also deconstructive methods of continually questioning the authentic confessional. To suggest that some performances avoid essentialized notions of authentic identity when other do not ignores the demand of performance itself, it refuses to acknowledge that *all* performance must give into the spectacle in order to be performed, to be read, seen or heard at all. As such, Slam and Spoken Word poets perform performativity, are released through the contamination of the spectacle, a spectacle that ultimately makes any difference between a purely authentic or inauthentic performance ambiguous.

Somers-Willet reads Mali's "How To Write a Political Poem" for its potential to "critically investigate the performance of identity" through the form of parody. She writes that, unlike most performers, Mali's performance does not "rely on the cultural politics of marginal identity and resistance to the status quo to further authenticate these identities," but suggest that he uses them to "explode" these essentialized constructions (60). She writes that "Mali makes apparent many of the usual rhetorical techniques slammers use to gain legitimacy and authenticity on stage—including call and response, repetition, sampling, beat boxing, and effusive rhyme—all of which one can recognize from black popular music" (69). Emphasizing the appropriation of black cultural art forms, Somers-Willet celebrates Mali for making this appropriation of a potentially marginal position as truth based visually apparent. Throughout his performance, Mali does create an effective parody of these methods of gaining credibility and authority. Mocking the rhetorical strategies that could be considered as institutionalized within the Slam aesthetic, Mali is critical of the formulaic nature of the political poem. Throughout

his performance, Mali parodies the symbolic and strategic nature of performing a powerful, socially significant, and sincere delivery. Using the strategies themselves, Mali specifically mocks methods of evoking power through an increase in volume, urgency through tempo manipulation, social significance through the use of repetition and audience interaction, and sincerity through appropriating typically African American aesthetic techniques.

Beginning with the association of power with volume, he writes, “However it begins/ it’s gotta be loud/ and then it’s gotta get a little bit louder/ Because this is how you write a political poem/ and deliver it with power” (Mali 174). He goes on to discuss this empowerment through the appropriation of what is typically associated with the performance style found within contemporary hip-hop movements. Working within constructions of “marginality” as a truth-based discourse, Mali writes that the manner in which a performer gains credibility is by mixing current social issues with the fast-paced urgency of rap. He writes that the way to deliver a powerful and honest political poem is to “mix current events with/ platitudes of empowerment/ wrap it up in rhyme or r-r-r-rhyme it up in rap until it sounds true” (Mali 175). Through this line, Mali suggests that the “traditional” political poem has the potential to “sound” true through rhetorical methods, but hints that it may not always be so. Critiquing this method of empowerment, Mali suggests that a performer “wraps” the message up, covers it over, with rhyme. Also associated with this method of “keeping it real” through the appropriation of what is typically read as African American cultural modes, Mali makes use of the standard strategy to evoke audience participation. Appropriating the call and response technique

found within contemporary music movements, as well as within sermons, Mali parodies this strategy by emptying it of potential meaning, using nothing but the words call and response themselves to “create” “participation.” “Peep this,” he writes, “When I say ‘call’, / you all say, ‘Response.’/ Call! Response! Call! Response! / Call!” (Mali 175). Using this within his staged performance and also within the textual one, Mali mocks the potential emptiness of rhetorical strategy as well as the specific means in which a Slam performer might mime other cultural methods of creating an active and emotive audience participation.

Using a similar technique to critique the methods of conveying urgency, Mali demonstrates the traditional ways in which Slam poets create a sense of importance and significance, even if what they are saying isn’t important or significant at all. Beginning to sing “Amazing Grace,” Mali stops in mid line, stating that this dramatic pause creates a feeling of urgency. He writes, “Because there is always a sense of urgency in a political poem” (Mali 175). Mali parodies this technique suggesting that, as a rhetorical strategy, it has the potential to imply a significance that doesn’t, or perhaps shouldn’t, exist. “There is no time to waste,” he writes, “Corruption doesn’t have a curfew,/ greed doesn’t care what color you are,/ and the New York City Police Department is filled with police officers!/ Who carry guns on their hips/ and metal badges pinned over their hearts” (175). While the sarcastic tone of this line is hinted at with the use of the exclamation point to punctuate the obvious, that the Police Department is filled with police officers, his reading of this poem in other venues, such as *Slam Nation* and *Def Poetry Jam*, overtly illustrate this caustic tone. Within these performances, Mali pauses to cover his mouth

and gasps, feigning shock and surprise. This mimicry suggests that Mali is not only critiquing the techniques used within the Slam aesthetic, but also the subject matter. As if to say that this urgency stems from and covers over uncritical notions of corruption, greed and justice, Mali goes on to utilize rhyme as a means of “wrapping” up the content of the poem “until it sounds” significant and true.” He writes, “Injustice isn’t injustice it’s just in us as we are in ice. Yeah!” (Mali 175). Utilizing the standard means by which Slam performers use urgency to potentially cover up the uncritical or mundane, Mali critiques these methods in a manner that suggests inauthenticity. Mali goes on to demonstrate this potential insincerity within strategies that are often used to evoke sincerity.

Using repetition throughout the poem to suggest a sincere and socially significance message, Mali writes that in a political poem, “you gotta have a hook,” but he goes on to describe this hook as the most important part of the performance. According to Mali, the hook is what touches the audience and forms political significance. “More than the look,” he writes, “It’s the hook that is the most important part./ The hook has got to hit and the hook’s gotta fit./ Hook’s gotta hit hard in the heart” (Mali 175). Playing off of notions of a punch, or left hook, as well as notions of a fishing hook that the audience in, Mali explains that it is this “connection” that is what creates sincerity and significance. It has to hit and fit the audience as well the contextual moment, reaching, and perhaps snagging their hearts. The hook Mali uses to illustrate this strategy the repeated line, “Because somewhere in Florida votes are still being counted” (174, 175). Mali’s hook is repeated throughout the entirety of the poem, and pulls some

weight right up until the end, where he transforms what could have been a meaningful line into mere device and mimed sincerity. Right after he harshly critiques the stylistic form and subject matter of Saul Williams, “speaking with great articulation about cosmic constellations,” Mali writes:

And maybe they are still counting votes  
somewhere in Florida,  
but by the time you get to the end of the poem it  
won't matter anymore.  
Because all you have to do is close your eyes,  
lower your voice, and end by saying:  
the same line three times,  
the same line three times,  
the same line three times. (175).

Miming the visual and verbal marks of sincerity, soft spoken and eyes shut, Mali undermines the potentially significant meaning behind the fouled presidential election. Instead of continuing any political theme, Mali merely uses the phrase itself to say the same lines in an attempt to empty them of their possible significance. However, in undermining the significance of his own hook, Mali creates a new sincerity and a new significant message: a sincere and significant critique of the formulaic rhetorical strategies used within the slam performance of a political poem.

While Mali parodies, as Somers-Willet writes, “the usual rhetorical techniques slammers use to gain legitimacy and authenticity on stage—including call and response, repetition, sampling, rapping, beat boxing, and effusive rhyme,” he necessarily does so by utilizing those very strategies rhetorically. He may be mocking the means by which power, significance and sincerity is strategically employed within the “traditional” slam political poem, but he can still be read as powerfully critiquing power, significantly

critiquing significance, urgently critiquing urgency, and, most importantly, sincerely critiquing sincerity, a reading afforded by the same strategic employment. For just as he mocks the critical distance performers tend to create through pulling a rhetorical move “that must mean” that their “sensibilities/ are much more finely calibrated than yours,” in this parody, Mali reiterates that critical distance within his method. In mocking this strategy, he lumps Al Gore in with Rudy Giuliani and Colin Powell, and writes, “Oooh—see what I did? I just called Al Gore a Republican/ that must mean that my political sensibilities/ are much more finely calibrated than yours” (qtd in Somers-Willet 67). However, in his use of the very same methods that specific slam poets use to gain legitimacy and authenticity, Mali creates this same critical distance from them in order to gain his own legitimacy and authenticity. If I were to write a parody of Mali’s parody, I might utilize this same line to gain critical distance with difference: “Oooh—see what I did? I just used Saul Williams’ performance technique and subject matter to critique Saul Williams’ performance technique and subject matter.” And if I were to write a parody of my parody of Mali’s parody, it might read: “Oooh—see what I did? I just used Mali’s technique of parodying Saul Williams’ technique and subject matter in order to parody Mali’s affirmation, reconstitution and repetition of the very formulae he’s critiquing.” According to Mali, that *must* mean that my critical sensibilities are much more finely calibrated than his.

Somers-Willet’s explanation of Mali’s performance is accurate in that, through parody, the poem has deconstructive potential. But like all parody and deconstructive modes, Mali’s performance does not do so through completely “exploding” the premises

on which it is based. Mali's parody becomes a matter of the undistinguishable, of the undecidable difference between citation and usage. The performativity of Mali's text creates a double possibility at every turn, each line questions itself even while making a statement. Throughout his text, Mali could be read as cynically appropriating the marks of the genre in order to demonstrate that all poems should be read as such, for he illustrates very clearly that urgency, significance and sincerity are all iterable marks within the genre, and as such, they can be faked and they can be mimed. However, through the use of these very iterable marks to make his message, Mali also has the potential to be read as authentically urgent, significant and sincere in his critique. Simply making the strategies one uses to mark one's self and performance more apparent does not free the performance from authenticity, but rather, it makes the difference between the authentic and the inauthentic difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish.

Like her reading of Mali's text, Somers-Willet also reads Smith's "Skinhead" as one of the performances that "tap the potential to critically investigate the performance of identity on the slam stage" (66). Throughout "Skinhead," Smith is read as performing the persona of a white supremacist. On stage, making her African American and female "identity" visible, this performance is quite jarring. Even Somers-Willet admits that "the *obvious* contrast between this persona and the slam poet's identity can be shocking [my emphasis]" (69). And while, upon further analysis this contrast isn't so obvious, Somers-Willet argues that it is "this difference opens up a space for dialogue about identity," writing that there is unique possibility within "taking on the voice of another on stage" (69). She goes on to write that, through the persona poem, the poet "must focus much

more on consciously performing a different identity than his or her own” and that the audience “may become aware of the construction of identity undergirding the slam performance” (Somers-Willet 69). While Somers-Willet writes that “Skinhead” “becomes just as much a display and negotiation of Smith’s own identity as a black woman as it is the display and negotiation of a white supremacist identity,” it seems that this “display and negotiation” may not be as easily discerned as Somers-Willet might suggest. She writes that this poem’s difference from the more essentialized identity pieces is that it “makes the slam poet’s negotiation of identity *visible*,” and while I understand her desire to bring identity construction to light, valuing the persona poem for its ability *to display* the negotiation of identity on stage dismisses the possibility that the persona poem might actually make this negotiation *invisible*. Somers-Willet writes that the potential of the persona poem lies in “taking on the voice of another” and the visible “display and negotiation of identity.” However, one could very easily read Smith’s performance as not at all taking on the voice of another, but rather performing her identity alone. In order for the “display and negotiation of identity” to become visible, one must make it so, for there are no visible marks that separate Smith from her performance. While she says she is white, has no hair, has a pocked mark face and boots with razor blades in them, the fact that she writes this piece suggests that the persona poem itself does not separate her from her construction of the skinhead. Her role within this construction of identity, then, is inseparable, and as such, identity becomes multiplied, but not in a visible way. If read as visible then, both on the stage and in the written text, the persona poem read as persona poem conflates Smith’s identity, her

persona and the identity and persona of the white supremacists into a single and essentialized identity construct.

If read as a visible negotiation and display of both Smith's identity as a black woman as well as the white supremacist's identity, then through Smith's attempt to "understand the man who unconditionally hated what [she] was," she performs the persona of an unemployed, uneducated and violently hateful skinhead through the persona of a black, middle to upper class, educated, female. Read in this way, Smith constructs white supremacy in an essentialized manner that implicates religion, low-income status, the working class, education, and suggests that there is a relationship between being proudly situated within America with the hateful and violent nature that destroys people of other races and sexuality. Through references to Christian terminology, occupation type and status, the use of a vernacular associated with low-level or poor education, and a conflation of birthright, belonging, blood and America, Smith plays her role in the construction of white supremacist identity and white-supremacy in general.

While not indicated within the written textual version of "Skinhead" Smith begins her performance of the persona poem by widening her stance, pressing out her chest and proclaiming, "They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty" (Def Poetry Jam). After this rather shocking first line, she goes on to construct a masculine white supremacist identity whose beauty "is in the way his eyes snap away from the obvious" (239). Going through what appears to be a routine, Smith constructs the living quarters and actions that create such beauty. "I sit in my matchbox/ on the edge of a bed tousled

with my ragged smell/ slide razors across my hair/ count how many ways I can bring blood closer to the surface of my skin (Smith 239). “There are the duties of the righteous,” she claims, “the ways of the anointed” (Smith 239). Implicating Christianity or religiosity with white supremacy, Smith also uses repetition to bring together blood as birthright and righteousness, creating a refrain of the line, “I was born to make things right” (239, 240). Moving the character from the bed to a mirror, Smith describes the man’s face as “huge and pockmarked/ scraped pink and brilliant,” and then continues on to construct white supremacist identity and physicality through occupation and then unemployment.

Constructing a working class individual who feels no pain, Smith explains the persona’s situation. “Two years ago, a machine that slices leather/ sucked in my hand and held it/ whacking off three fingers at the root/ I didn’t feel nothing till I looked down/ and saw one of them on the floor/ next to my boot heel, and I ain’t worked since then” (Smith 239). Later using this image to demonstrate the persona’s disregard and general hate for others, in a comedic gesture, Smith moves this persona from the mirror to the stage. While he looks in the mirror to hold up his “mangled hand” with “only the baby finger left, sticking straight up,” Smith points her own pinky to the audience and says, “I know it’s the wrong goddamned finger/ but fuck you all anyway/ I’m riding the top ring of the perfect race” (Def Poetry Jam). This movement from the mirror to the stage becomes significant in the end analysis of the poem in which Smith can be read as implicating both the audience and America within her construction of white supremacist identity.

Continuing her persona performance, Smith uses his unemployed status to give the white supremacist the free time to move within the American space, purifying it by inflicting violence on different racial and sexual identities that “lower their heads to his beauty” right before he bashes in their skulls with a lead pipe. “With a lead pipe up my sleeve/ a razor tucked into my boot,” Smith says, “I was born to make things right” (239). “Easy to move now,” the white supremacist is entertained to the point of arousal by the violent manner in which he “makes things right,” doing his part to purify America. “It’s a kick to watch their eyes get big/ round and gleaming like a cartoon jungle boys/ right in that second when they know/ the pipe’s gonna come down...I get hard listening to their skin burst/ I was born to make things right” (Smith 240). Implicating his extremist religiosity with the violence of hate crime, it is suggested that this persona also desires to purify America of homosexuality. It is through this suggestion that white supremacist ideology is constructed.

Creating a scenario in which the persona must explain himself to the nation, a reporter enters the scene. “Then this newspaper guy came around/ seems I was a little sloppy kicking some fag’s ass/ and he opened his hole and screamed about it” (Smith 240). So “this reporter finds me...those TV flashes licking my face clean...Same ol’ shit” (Smith 240). Answering the reporter’s questions, the persona speaks white supremacist ideology as Smith constructs it: “Ain’t got no job, the coloreds and spics got em’ all/ Why ain’t I working?/ Look at my hand asshole...I’m just a white boy who loves his race/ fighting for a pure country” (Smith 240). Implicating a love for one’s own race and racial purity, often found within separatist ideologies, Smith explains the white

supremacist mentality and violence as a desire for purity, for a pure country. It is in this desire that Smith implicates the audience and America at large.

Moving the persona from the mirror to the stage, Smith critiques this notion of purity and the social hierarchy it creates. After flipping off the crowd with only her pinky finger, Smith goes on. “I’m riding the top ring of the perfect race, my face scraped pink and brilliant/ I’m your baby boy, America, your boy...I am goddamned fuckin’ beautiful/ And I was born/ and raised/ right here” (Smith 240). Within the staged performance of this poem, Smith creates emphasis in the line *right here*. Pausing right before and shifting her pose to a rigid stance, Smith scrunches up her face and reaches out to point toward the ground: “And I was born/ and raised...*right here*” (Def Poetry Jam). As Somers-Willet suggests, this particular ending to the poem can be read as a call to the audience, asking them “to consider the nation’s support—and perhaps their own implicit support—of the skinhead’s views on race”; however, Somers-Willet also suggests that this reading of social implication is “made abundantly clear” through the “purpose” of the persona poem as one that makes the poet’s negotiation of identity visible (70). And while this interpretation of a national and individual implication in, and therefore responsibility for, the creation and allowance of the ideology behind white supremacy and identity is an incredibly positive one, it is not the “visible” display and negotiation of this identity that generates this reading as an “abundantly clear” one. Reading the performance poem as “taking on the voice of another” is to suggest a separation of the poet from the other. But in performance, the difference between poet and voice is indistinguishable until it is constructed as such. While it might appear clear where Smith’s identity is separate from

the white supremacist's, to read this as such has the harmful consequences of not only reconstituting essentialized identity in the form of stereotypes, but also perpetuating the notions that make such essentialization possible. Smith's "Skinhead" can be read as performing the persona of a white supremacist, as Somers-Willet reads it, or it can be read as Smith's persona performing the persona of a white-supremacist, as Somers-Willet alludes to. However, "Skinhead" can also be read as performing performativity in general. The "I" of the poem is decentered, but not because of a visible negotiation of identity, but rather because this negotiation is always already invisible. The overlap and negotiation between Smith's identity, her poet-persona and her performance of a persona of her own construct is indistinguishable unless a reader moves into distinguish the difference between them with clean-cut definitions of intentionality and authentic notions of identity. It is through the invisible visibility of performativity, the performance of performance, that identity constructs can remain open and negotiable in the manner that Somers-Willet desires.

Unlike the dialogic that both Bernstein and Damon advocate, and Somers-Willet implies throughout her analysis of identity authentication, performativity already suggests the anoriginal plurality that resists essentialization of identity, marginality and authenticity itself. Bernstein himself writes that "to speak of the poem in performance is to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed...object; it is to deny it of its self presence and its unity" (9). Performativity presents us with the spectacle, a spectacle that, unlike Bernstein's reading, can be extremely positive in that it creates the distance between a reader and his or her audience in a way that allows for a moment of undecidability to take

place. And unlike Damon's reading, it is *because* of the spectacle, not despite it, that Slam and Spoken Word retains possibility. While both Damon and Bernstein celebrate the poetry reading for the dialogic infrastructure—claiming that it leads to an open form of dialogue, interaction, and exchange—the infrastructure of the spectacle does not allow for such a comfortable experience produced by a knowable interaction. Instead, it produces a performance, a staging, in which one cannot so easily distinguish between surface and the depth, the real from the fake, the authentic from the inauthentic, and thus, the meaningful from the meaningless. The performed spectacle remains open until decided upon, until closed violently by definition.

In *Def Poetry Jam*, Mos Def opens season two, episode three with a recitation of a poem by Susan L. Parks that is exemplary of the manner in which poetic movements of dissent both set themselves apart from institutionalized knowledge production as well as give into this kind of process. Walking out on a lit-up cat walk, surrounded in black, Mos Def approaches the camera, and face up close to the viewer, and begins: “It’s historical. / People like their historical shit in a certain way/ They like it to unfold the way they folded it up/ neatly, like a book/ not raggedy and bloody and screaming.” Opening the season with this line highlights the ambiguity within practices of poetic dissent. The use of Park’s text describes a process of historicizing that creates a seamless and linear narrative, one that covers over cracks and fissures, dissonance and difference in a way that both opens and closes like a book. Within its lines, it contrasts this form of historicizing with another, one that doesn’t fold up neatly, one that is raggedy, bloody and screaming. What occurs within Slam and Spoken Word movements lend themselves

to both forms of historicity. Within what is called Slam and Spoken Word art are a variety of distinct ideological, theoretical and political premises on which these poetic movements base their social significance, both aesthetically through form and socially through politics. Anthologies and scholarly criticism within this genre demonstrate the various ways in which people attempt to fold these poets up. These authors illustrate the premises by which editors make decisions—ultimately leading to who and what gets representation and who and what does not. It is not unlike any other process of canonization. Despite this effort, however, cracks and fissures remain. Ranging from a pure celebration of “outlaw” status to an attempt to appeal to a more academic sensibility regarding “good” art, what is written by and about participants within Slam and Spoken Word fits together imperfectly, it performs with ragged edges, staged blood and screaming. Because of performativity and the spectacle, Slam and Spoken Word movements refuse to be packaged neatly. They do not fold or unfold into a seamless history unless made to do so.

## CHAPTER SIX

## VIOLENTLY FORGETTING

Beat, Slam and Spoken Word movements can be read as politically aesthetic movements of dissent. Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind* demonstrates a dissenting practice that advocates a taking control of one's own knowledge production through altering one's perspective in order to create "transformative translations" of the world surrounding (Beehler, discussion). Ginsberg takes this notion even further, accepting the Mollochian America that has entered his soul, but not allowing it to escape unscathed in his attempt to change the world one strophe at a time. Poets like Colby, Brown and Coleman advocated a poetic aesthetic practice with libratory potential. Tyler and Medina suggest a form of resistance to the American standard toilet bowel that they see as flushing out individuality and difference. Each of these poets can be read as creating an ideological stage from which their dissent can be made, a stage that could be read as the place from which one is able to divide the authentic from the inauthentic ways of being and operating in the world in potentially negative ways. Or, it could not.

As the performativity within poetics suggests, staging is a practice that denies clean cut definitions, confuses the "staged" with the "unstaged," the fake with the real, the authentic with the inauthentic. Kathleen Crown asks the crucial question within dealing with aesthetic practices of dissent, ranging from the Beats to Slam and Spoken Word, and even into separatists nationalist politics and underground movements such as graffiti, punk and hiphop. In each of these movements, one can read a fear of a

contamination of the authentic being, subjectivity and voice, whether it be a fear of conformity represented by “ticky tacky boxes all the same,” or a fear of reification, representation and commodification represented by the appropriation of a rebellion’s signs and symbols by the contemporary corporate world. Crown asks how this claim to and protection of authenticity can be removed without losing political efficacy and meaning in the world. She wonders, “How the poetic ‘voice’ might be detached from its baggage of transparency, presence, authenticity, and identitarian claims to representativeness *without* losing its ability to invoke participation and meaningful political response” (Crown 217).

The solution to this conflict is not so easily made, for the detachment Crown suggests threatens to rob the voice of the very means by which it gains credibility and agency in the world. Attached to a truth-based knowledge garnered from the experience of living, this voice is a potentially very powerful counter to a system based on technocratic and logocentric rationale. And while its credibility rests on a notion of authenticity, of authentic experience and an authentic confession of that experience, it does not have to rest on an unproblematized conceptualization of these notions. The spectacle allows for these voices to retain their possibility of the authentic and meaningful dissenting practice, but not without contamination, not without the ambiguity within the staged performance. In order for dissent to be made at all it must give itself up to iterability, to the contamination of the performed, the real or faked marks, signs, symbols, tactics and strategies only provided by the spectacle. But this is not to say that the authentic cannot or does not exist, it is rather to say that it cannot and does not exist at

all without contamination. Instead of fearing or even lamenting contamination, representation, or commodification, one should thank it, for without it, dissent and dissenting voices and practices would not become, would not come into the world.

Once in the world, the manner in which people, poets, critics, and theorists alike distinguish, decide, and ultimately define between notions of authentic and inauthentic, meaningful and meaningless dissenting practices is a battle filled with necessary essentializations that violently cut the movements and the participants into what they need to be. In this process, there becomes a way of reading, a way of seeing, and a way of interpreting that never does justice. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida explains the process enacting and forgetting the violence, violation and injustice that occurs within archiving, for the archive is constructed by “the law of consignation,” the handing over to another for safekeeping or disposal (83). “As soon as there is One,” he writes, “there is murder, wounding, traumatism” (Derrida 83). In the process of archiving, the process of performing, of discourse, and of the canonization that makes dissenting practices become into the world both “keeps and erases the archive of this injustice that it is, of the violence that it does” (83). In “Truth and Power,” Foucault desires us not to forget this unavoidable situation. “The history which bears us and determines us,” he writes, “has the form of a war rather than of language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Truth 114). This line might suggest that language is unlike the history that bears and determines us, but to read in this way ignores the archive, both the process and the meaning of the archive. He goes on to write that that which bears and determines us has “no meaning,” but not in the manner that it has no language, no textuality, and most

importantly, effects in the world. “It is intelligible,” he writes, “and should be susceptible of analysis,” but this analysis ought to be “in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics” (Foucault, Truth 114).

It is interesting the way in which this violence and injustice is forgotten. Both Bernstein and Damon desire an infrastructure of the dialogic that forgets, that reads the dialogic as “recognition and exchange” an active “exchanging” of work and ideas “with other performers...” and listeners that does not highlight the cutting that occurs within “constituting and reconstituting” the textual event (Bernstein 23). Covering over the competitive nature of Slam movements, Algarin also forgets, writing that “we do not lavish praises on the sensibility of the poet, we imbibe him,” and then after this exchange, they “give him a numerical value,” that is “illogical,” irreverent” “raucous,” and “funny” (17). In *Bum Rush the Page*, Medina attempts to counter the violence within Slam in his attempt to construct a poetic movement that “weaves worlds” and “weaves people together” in order to create a “democratic orchestration of voices and visions...coming together to create a dialogue and to jam—not slam” (intro). He writes that “in the time it takes for a punch to be thrown...a switch blade to jut from the shadows, or a bomb to be dropped on a village of innocent men, women, and children, poems are being built, constructing a world less agonizing, a world that weaves worlds—weaves people together” (Medina, intro). “The poems here,” Medina writes, “work for a common goal and purpose...” (intro). But in this “dialogic exchange,” this “democratic orchestration,” this “weaving of worlds” and people, even Bernstein and Somers-Willet admit a scene of asymmetrical power relations that suggests inherent conflict. Bernstein writes that not all

performances of a poem will “have the same kind of authority,” and Somers-Willet writes that “not all identities appear to be created equally authentic in the eyes of slam audiences” (9, 53). This asymmetrical power suggests struggle, suggests a conflict that the dialogic, at least the manner in which these theorists use it, does not adequately account for.

While discussing the structuralist notions of the dialectic and the semiotic, Foucault demonstrates that when communication becomes as structured as a skeleton or as harmless as a system of signs and symbols detached from relations of power, it refuses the open and hazardous, the bloody and lethal. “Dialectic is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing to a Hegelian skeleton,” he writes, “and ‘Semiology’ is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm platonic form of language and dialogue” (Truth 114). When dealing with Beat, Slam and Spoken Word dissenting practices as well as the criticism and scholarship within this genre, it cannot be said that neither the semiotic nor the dialectic does not occur. However, one might, and perhaps should say that what occurs “is much more than that,” it spills out and is excessive until it is repressed (Caler 2006). As such, it is not despite that fact that we may never be free from the boundaries of culture and an endlessly repeating play of dominations, but because of this situation that our dissent might change the shape of things. However, one should not forget that “it becomes what it is, the very violence that it does to itself” (Derrida 83). Dissent, this repeating with difference, this affirming transformation, is not limited to a calm and

peaceful nature; it does not lie above the battlefields of love. It is a battle, a war of discourses, there is conflict at every turn. There is conflict even now.

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