SLAM AS METHODOLOGY: THEORY, PERFORMANCE, PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis study theorizes slam as a research methodology in order to examine issues of access and representation in arts-based educational research (ABER). I explain how I understand and materialize slam as a research methodology that borrows concepts and frameworks from other methodologies such as, ABER, participatory action research (PAR) and theoretical underpinnings of indigenous theory, feminist theory and anti-oppressive research. I argue that ABER and slam, as a particular form of ABER, needs to ‘unart’ each other to avoid trying to situate slam within the Western canon of ‘high arts’. I apply PAR methodology to discuss participant involvement in the research process and use anti-oppressive research to speak about power and race in slam. Finally, I argue that a slam research methodology has the ability to enable critically conscious communities.
I am overflowing with gratitude. A great deal of this is due to the loving, inspiring and wise community of family, friends, and professors, with whom I have been blessed with.

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Finally, I believe that it is our challenge to foster work that immerses us in murky terrains, empowering us to shift the borderlands with hopes that as we change so will the world around us. This is just the beginning.
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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Research and Questions

This thesis study considers how slam can be mobilized as a research methodology to think about issues of access and representation in the field of arts-based educational research (ABER). Slam poetry is a spoken word performance that has a distinct performative, linguistic, and social/political framework. Transitioning away from the conventional approach of theorizing slam as a discourse of intervention (Bruce & Davis, 2000) (e.g., by targeting ‘at risk’ youth), I argue that slam as a research methodology facilitates notions of community (Fine, 1992; Mohanty, 2003), audience (Goldstein, 2003; 2006), participation (Gallagher, 2006; 2007), anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000), indigenous approaches to research (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2012), and feminist representation (Endsley, 2009; Keleta-Mae, 2012).

In order to conceive slam as a research methodology, this theorization draws on scholarship from ABER, participatory action research (PAR) anti-oppressive work, feminist theories, and indigenous theories while keeping performance as the central thread through these different epistemological approaches. I explore slam poetry as a critical anti-oppressive research methodology which makes claims about voice, access, and representation. To conceptualize my theorizing of a slam research methodology, Figure 1 illustrates the foundation and frameworks from which slam as a research methodology has materialized:
Currently, there is a vast amount of both empirical and theoretical literature about the various theories and practices of ABER (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Denzin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 2002; Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2006; Huss, & Cwikel, 2005; Kershaw, & Nicholson, 2011; Leavy, 2009; McDermott, 2010; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Oikarinen-Jabai, 2003; Phillips, 1995; Saldaña, 1999; 2005; Smith, & Kraynak, 2009; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005; Woods, 2008). Most of these focus on such genres as performance or drama, visual, and literary arts. These genres typically reflect the Western canon of ‘art’ in that the forms represented are classical and modernist. However, understanding slam performance poetry as an arts-based research methodology is under theorized. While Endsley (2009) and Keleta-Mae (2012) both explore a ‘version’ of slam poetry as a research methodology, their work does not necessarily probe what it means to engender slam as a methodology. The issue

**Figure 1:** Foundation and Frameworks of Slam as a Research Methodology
of slam as a ‘content’ of their analysis gets muddied with their methodology. Endsley is a spoken word poet, activist and actor. She focuses on issues of performance and identity and the ways they intersect with feminist pedagogy, race, and popular culture. Keleta-Mae is a spoken word poet and performance studies scholar. She is a Black feminist activist who examines performances and considers them as being a racialized space. She perceives her poetry pieces as ‘mini case studies’ – a way of giving a name to the nameless. In using the term ‘mini case studies’, Keleta-Mae entrenches slam into the normative discourse of ethnography and qualitative research. I use the work of scholars such as Endsley (2009) and Keleta-Mae (2012) as entry points to theorize a *methodology of slam poetry*, paying attention to where meanings and interpretations are situated and how they emerge in the use of space, language, performance, and social/political understanding. A slam poetry research methodology complicates the spaces that reside in these areas and interrogates and disrupts the in-between spaces that exist. In using a slam poetry methodology, I wonder: what is possible when the focus of *making* art is displaced by the act of ‘witnessing’ in art and performance? Slam performances invites audience members to have an embodied experience with the practice going beyond simply *making* art. Furthermore, what are the possibilities when the importance of producing an art product is placed equally on being part of the performance and process? These are central concepts to my research and to slam as it draws attention to the ‘lived’ curriculum/pedagogy of this methodology; the ‘in the now’, as opposed to something determined prior to entering a research site.
Slam as methodology effectually resonates with other methodologies like PAR, performance-based research and ABER work, such as a/r/tography,¹ in which its “openness, uncertainty, and exposure of meaning that situates this work and others like it, as potential acts that allow us to inquire into and create new models for thinking and conducting research” (Irwin & Springgay 2008, p. 105). The importance of theorizing the methodology of slam is to further add to the growing methodological discussions surrounding arts-based research.

Through this thesis, I consider slam’s distinct performative, practical, and theoretical frameworks to materialize a methodology of slam poetry. I hope that by theorizing slam from a praxis-oriented performative perspective, I can offer insights on the possibilities that slam may allow arts-based educational researchers when conducting research. The following research questions guide my research and inquiry:

1. What are the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, performative and practical theoretical frameworks within ABER that may help us understand slam poetry as a research methodology?

2. What does a methodology of slam poetry enable?

3. What are the implications of using slam poetry as a research methodology with marginalized and oppressed communities?

¹A/r/tography is a research methodology that entangles and performs what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as a rhizome. A rhizome is an assemblage that moves and flows in dynamic momentum. The rhizome operates by variation, perverse mutation, and flows of intensities that penetrate meaning, opening it to what Derrida (1987) calls the “as yet unnameable which begins to proclaim itself” (p. 293). It is an interstitial space, open and vulnerable where meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured. Building on the concept of the rhizome, a/r/tography radically transforms the idea of theory as an abstract system distinct and separate from practice. In its place, theory is understood as a critical exchange that is reflective, responsive, and relational, which is continuously in a state of reconstruction and becoming something else altogether. As such, theory as practice becomes an embodied, living space of inquiry (Irwin & Springgay in Cahnmann-Taylor, & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 106). As a form of inquiry, a/r/tography encompasses six renderings: contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005, p. 899).
The questions I am using to guide my investigation are interwoven throughout this thesis study. It is hoped that academics working within a slam research methodology may also use the ideas put forth here to help them understand the researchers’ positionality and the participants/audience in the research process. This is different than understanding the researchers’ positionality in comparison with participants in any other research process. It is important to acknowledge the researchers’ positionality for art forms such as slam given its historical and cultural origins. My intention is to incite further discussions about the defined space that slam resides in.

**Personal Background**

Prior to inquiring about the possibilities that slam poetry may have as a research methodology, it is important to acknowledge my own personal background so the reader has context about how this may influence my work. I bring, to some extent, a different point of view as I do not have any formalized training in the ‘arts’. My background is in education that is comparable to that of a classroom teacher; however, it is my passion that drives my interest in arts-based research practices. My strong desire comes from what I learned about the potential of art practices to enable notions of community while growing up. Although I have not taken an arts course since high school, I have always been interested in artistic practices. The purpose of exploring my positionality is to inform the reader of my narrative and how it shapes my point of view of ABER and slam.

My interest in slam stems from my high school experience where I developed a strong passion for rap and hip hop culture. I listened to underground rap as I was unable to connect with the commercialized hip hop music available at the time. This immersion in underground hip hop culture allowed me to gain access to different groups of people
and local events. During this time, I first came in contact with dub poetry, freestyle, slam – all of which are considered variations on the form of spoken word performances (Boudreau, 2009; Endsley, 2009; Johnson, 2010). My engagement with slam was limited to being a spectator, having never built up the courage to perform any of my own work.

Unfortunately, possessing continued ties to the slam community did not translate into the confidence I needed to get up on stage. Nevertheless, my role as a member of the audience played a significant part of my interest in slam as a research methodology. I remember the amount of energy I, as part of the audience, invested into participating during the performance, while simultaneously trying to interpret the performer’s words (or what was missed while I engaged in discussions with other audience members as the performance went on). The audience participation in the performance was sometimes so overpowering, it felt that the audience had some control over the performance. Audience participation included shouting out ideas and opinions on the topic, giving feedback to the performer by cheering or booing. Sometimes, it felt like the audience was in charge of how or even whether, a performance progressed. Despite the fact that I did not directly participate on stage in the performance, my role as part of the overly active audience appeared crucial to its success. This in-between space that I, as a member of the audience, fell into was challenging to work through. And so, I approach this work from the standpoint of a fan or an avid listener whose tastes and familiarity evolved from a series of identifications and disidentifications within the genre of rap and hip-hop. Hip hop culture still remains a huge part of my interest and pedagogy.

After completing my Bachelor of Education degree, I entered the Masters of Education program at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. I
enrolled in my first mandatory course as part of the program called Foundations of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning which was being taught by Dr. Stephanie Springgay. This course, along with Bronwen Low’s *Slam School* (2011), influenced my decision to change to the Masters of Art program. The course prompted me to consider its similar utility in other more concrete and provocative ways and being better able to contribute to the field of education, anti-oppressive theories, and arts-based educational research methodology.

Another aspect of myself that I would like to share is what some may see as the privilege I come from. While I do not come from excess, after living in an underprivileged neighbourhood in Etobicoke, my parents moved to a middle class neighbourhood in Brampton in hopes of providing us with better access, agency, and opportunities in life. I grew up with both of my parents, and my father worked to support my entire family of six. There was always the expectation that I would seek a post-secondary education and, although I knew my family would assist me, I was aware that the reality could be financially difficult. Throughout my life, my racial background has denied me entrance into sites of social power and, at the same time, has given me access to the perception of someone of a visible minority.

Yet, I recognize that the colour of my skin has granted me a certain privilege within marginalized and oppressed communities. For instance, as a visible minority researcher, these communities may be more trusting and thus, forthcoming with their actual lived narratives because of the understanding that we share common lived experiences. Rather than trying to make their experience fit into what they think is expected of them, they may feel a sense of connectedness in sharing with someone of
As an able bodied, Singaporean, heterosexual, female, as much as I may have been allowed entry, and as a result an insider status, I have spent a greater portion of my life negotiating the spaces between inside and outside these sites of social power. My own positionality, narrative and experiences shape my insights and interpretations and contribute to my understanding of the research.

The Importance of Theorizing a Methodology of Slam Poetry

Exploration in this field is essential to constitute a framework of study as seen with the increased interest in slam poetry by scholars, critics, and artists working on theses, dissertations, and scholarly journal articles. Yet, academics interested in slam poetry tend to analyse the work of the performance poets based on “whichever cultural signifier peaks the interviewer’s interest,” (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 77) but are unaware of the context in which the artists’ work should be positioned. As a result of their wilful ignorance, researchers may attempt to fit the performance poets within dominant constructions of identity and may lack the ability to engage the work in any meaningful manner. That being said, researchers and academic institutions hold significant amounts of power and influence the way in which slam poetry is taken up and disseminated within the institutional setting. Desai (2009) suggests that art “has increasingly drawn the attention of educators interested in re-conceptualizing education in these times of testing, standardization, and accountability” (p. 25). Furthermore, she argues that there is a need to “develop a politics of the imagination in schools and universities that strategically uses the power of the image to ‘unframe’ the serious issues that we face today by asking critical questions that envision alternative just futures” (p. 25). This influence is
connected to my thesis research as it supports the need to theorize a slam research methodology by creating a space to purposefully ask critical questions around representation, audience, participation, anti-oppression and cultural production in relation to slam.

My interest in undertaking research related to slam further stems from my belief that there is something important to be learned about the possibilities slam performance poetry offers in negotiating meaning and exploring relationships during performances. A methodology of slam poetry seeks to investigate complex and interdisciplinary artistic and cultural forms as research. For this reason, I am interested in examining the intersections of performance, language, hermeneutics, and social/political frameworks, each of which is woven together with subjects of resistance, conflict, marginalization, cultural production, advocacy and social justice. By taking on this thesis study, I am in no manner making the assertion that I have all or even some of the answers to these points at which these subjects intersect and cross boundaries with one another when it comes to the interdisciplinary slam practice. My purpose here is only to tease out, and interrogate the ideas presented below in hopes that it will lead to future research in the rich and complicated field of arts-based educational methodologies.

Slam poetry’s distinct linguistic, performative, and social/political understanding contributes to the importance of thinking about slam as a research methodology since these understandings are often either ignored or silenced in academic work. Moreover, slam’s close relationship with hip hop culture plays a crucial role when it comes to the resistance that is encountered when used in educational settings (Hanley, 2007). For example, Low’s (2011) book features several stories of conflict and misinterpretation
between hip hop education and White administrators and Black and Latino students. She describes a situation where Black and Latino performers prepared a slam performance and were asked to provide a translation for some of the words that were used. These students provided alternative meanings for certain terms, otherwise their performance would not be accepted into the talent show. The conflict that arose out of this censorship by the White administration speaks to the resistance that permeates from administrators and teachers. Stopping youth from breaking out in slam in the halls is another example that slam and hip hop culture are not readily accepted in educational institutions. Hanley (2007) discusses a teacher’s recollection of discouraging students from gathering in groups and performing in the hallway as it resembles gang-related activities.

However, slam has been gaining momentum as a topic of research (Bell, 2004; Boudreau, 2009; Gregory, 2009; Johnson, 2010; Low, 2011). Some researchers who I use as entry points explore a version of slam as a research methodology (Endsley, 2009; Keleta-Mae, 2012). By theorizing slam poetry as a research methodology, I can offer researchers ways of creating new knowledge within and across disciplinary areas from a collection of epistemological and theoretical points of view. These slam practices can be used, depending on context and research, together with critical perspectives on knowledge creation. Further, the practices are capable of challenging stereotypes and existing philosophy, accessing occupied perspectives, raising critical awareness, building partnerships, and fostering compassionate understandings.

In addition, this research contributes to the growing body of work on re-lived performances. An example of re-living performances emerges from being able to record slam performances on video. Since slam can be re-lived through a video recording, it can
be related to digital storytelling/narratives (Chung, 2007; Hughes & John, 2009). A slam research methodology can encourage researchers across disciplines to develop new ways to expand and diversify how we understand slam poetry as a form of cultural production. This enables potentially new and different audiences for educational research.

This research also contributes to the growing theoretical investigations in various areas of social research (such as, education). Because slam occurs in the moment, a slam research methodology affords access to experiences otherwise inaccessible or difficult to attain through other (re)presentational forms. Slam has the ability to challenge and critique the dominant class when it is used to study the experiences of youth. It is used to create a space where marginalized youth are able to increase personal growth, improve their understanding of social and moral issues through consciousness-raising (Charity, 2012). Also, slam poetry enables researchers and practitioners “to better understand how young people ‘read’ existing race, ethnicity, language, immigration, sexual orientation, and class stratifications as these stratifications organize systems of oppression” (Akom, 2009, p. 63).

In thinking about the emerging field of slam performance poetry, I hope that we can stay away from “historical pitfalls of North American academia” (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 79). The pitfalls I refer to here include: resisting forms of knowing, ignoring lived experiences and refusing to acknowledge forms of record keeping that are counter to dominant ideologies. For instance, “oral transmission of stories, histories, lessons and other knowledge [are used] to maintain a historical record and sustain [Indigenous] cultures and identities ... [whereas] Western discourse has prioritized the written word as the dominant form of record keeping” and ways of knowing (Hanson, 2009, p. 1). Slam
can align with Indigenous forms of knowing, like oral transmission of stories, and can be used to avoid these and similar obstacles. In essence, as a research methodology, the use of slam helps researchers interrogate and rupture their own ways of knowing and various sites of struggle that they sometimes occupy. Researchers can use slam to ask questions about the ways in which the practice of slam is used to avoid pitfalls related to marginalization and oppression of artists and researchers with respect to cultural signifiers, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and/or ability.

**Structure of Thesis**

Chapter two aims to discuss the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, performative, and practical frameworks that will help us begin to understand slam as a research methodology and how it relates to ABER. The ground work for theorizing slam as a research methodology is laid by aligning with the research of Gaztambide-Fernández (2013). He discusses the rhetoric of cultural production. I put forth the argument that ABER needs to ‘unart’ itself to make room for artistic forms such as, slam as a form of cultural production.

Chapter three continues to discuss the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, performative and practical frameworks of slam as a research methodology. The chapter begins by describing how slam is embedded within a discussion of hip hop culture and describes the nature of slam poetry as being culturally symbolic and concerned with the conditions that shape the lived experiences of the performers. Slam as a research methodology connects to other research methodologies, such as participatory action research and performance-based research because of their association to audience participation in the research process. In addition, the critical/feminist communities, that
are afforded a space/forum through slam as a research methodology, are explored. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the interactions between slam and the academy.

Chapter four explores slam poetry as a (re)presentation, as a topic of research and as a process/method of inquiry. I use videos of slam from YouTube as examples to think about their contributions to slam as a research methodology through the lenses of audience, participation, anti-oppression, feminism and representation.

Chapter five summarizes the research study. Here, discussion regarding the implications for future research is considered. How slam as a methodology for studying marginalized and oppressed communities is explored along with final thoughts regarding this methodology. The chapter focuses on those who may reside in the spaces in-between the mechanisms involved in the naming of normal\textsuperscript{2} and seek insider status but are often denied access by those who hold power.

As the aim of this research study is to disrupt and interrogate issues of access and representation through the use of slam in the field of ABER, and evaluate and theorize a slam research methodology, there are many lessons that can be applied to historically marginalized communities. This does not imply that there is a shared experience between all racialized groups, but that there may be some common ground from which others can benefit. At the same time, this thesis study does not attempt to prescribe resolutions for the issues discussed.

\textsuperscript{2} The naming of normal, as described by Keleta-Mae (2012) is the process “wherein some people with access to power occupy insider status and invite outsiders in, often depending on trends in benevolence and the market” (p. 78).
CHAPTER TWO:
THE NEED FOR ARTS-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH TO ‘UNART’ ITSELF

In order to argue for the potential of slam as a research methodology in the field of arts-based educational research (ABER), I begin by carving out its philosophical, theoretical, cultural, performative and practical foundations.

Thinking About the Rhetoric of Cultural Production

In this section, I will argue that ABER needs to ‘unart’ itself. There are two reasons why this is crucial. First, it is important to avoid trying to situate slam within the Western canon of ‘high arts’. Second, it is important to ABER to ‘unart’ itself so outsider art, such as slam, are taken up as forms of ABER. Arts-based educational research only counts certain art forms and not others as valid. I begin with the arguments that currently exist for the importance of the arts in education.

Many of the contemporary arguments that are set forth for why ‘the arts’ are relevant, use an instrumentalist or intrinsic argument. For instrumentalists, the argument is about the impact on educational achievement (Deasy, 2002). Alternatively, the intrinsic argument is focused on values such as aesthetic perception, “aesthetic experience” (e.g., Eisner, 2002, p. 81) or artistic “habits of mind” (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007, p. 41) which are argued to be evidently innate to the arts. Both instrumentalist and intrinsic arguments are used in the literature available on the importance of arts in education to mainly focus on advocacy statements (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).
Moving away from the instrumentalist and intrinsic arguments that are used to discuss the importance of ‘the arts’, I draw on Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013) work to lay out the foundation of slam as a research methodology.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) has taken a discursive approach to write about why ‘the arts’ do not actually do (p. 215) anything.

To think of the arts discursively means that we examine the ways in which claims are made, the assumptions that support such claims, and the social rules and relations that enable some people to make claims about particular kinds of practices to particular ends. In the case of the arts, particular notions of culture and cultural change define which practices and processes of symbolic creativity we come to qualify with the label ‘the arts’ and, by extension, how we make claims about what the arts do (p. 215).

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) claims that advocates of ‘the arts’ tailor their arguments to focus on the effects of ‘the arts’. This “rhetoric of effects”, as he names it, “enforces the prevailing normative and technocratic view of education, reinstating the same social hierarchies reproduced through traditional school” (p. 213). It enforces the normative and technocratic view on education by focusing on the outcome of traditional schooling. Specifically, the perspective of schooling that has produced standardized tests, continuous exclusion, and gaps in academic outcomes. Scholars contribute to these technocratic views by overly romanticizing ‘the arts’ which are considered ‘high’ arts. Arts such as opera, ballet, jazz bands, and staged plays have gained enough stature to be accepted as artistic by nature. However, others such as knitting, comic books, krumping “only achieve the status of artistic form under specific institutional circumstances – further illustrating the discursive character of the arts” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 215).
Mainstream discourses on the arts are used by certain affluent groups who have inherited the ability to distinguish between them and by such distinguishing, to name what is worth the label ‘the arts’. Sociologists have argued that focusing on aesthetics is a form of social distinction and part of a discourse that justifies social inequality that are always bound to reproduce the status quo (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Zolberg, 1999). In order to step away from the argument that “things-in-themselves should be valued for some particular essence” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 222) we need to think about the alternative approach that Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) puts forth: an approach that speaks to the rhetoric of cultural production.

According to Gaztambide-Fernández (2013), the rhetoric of cultural production “underscores the central importance of symbolic creativity” (p. 216). Rather than a focus on the outcomes as is the case with the rhetoric of effects, the focus here is located on the “... conditions that shape experience ... [and] raises questions about whether and how we mobilize the concept of the arts in relation to educational projects committed to social justice” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 216). This is important to understand as it lays a foundation for slam as a research methodology as performances emerge from conditions that shape lived experiences.

Similar arguments can be applied to performance poetry. In this context, slam is thought of as cultural production that revolves around experiences, culture, and symbolic creativity. Through this framework, slam is viewed as one of those forms of art that Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) refers to as “only being able to achieve the status of artistic form under specific institutional circumstances” (p. 215) such as, circumstances where those who have power are able to organize resources to give status to specific art
forms for their own purpose. However, slam fits within the rhetoric of cultural production if the practices, processes and products of symbolic creativity are understood.

Consequently, to capture cultural production revolving around experiences, culture and symbolic creativity, ABER needs to move beyond the current discursive way in which ‘the arts’ are romanticized as ‘high arts’. To ‘unart’ itself, current methodology must think about a variety of forms of cultural production as a research methodology. By rethinking ABER as a method of various kinds of cultural production, we avoid the mistake of trying to fit slam into this ‘high art’ methodology.

Arts-based research, in academic institutions, currently illustrates that only particular affluent people (scholars/researchers, ‘fine art’ artists, and publishers), who are socially and institutionally situated in specific contexts, and as a response to explicit needs, are in a position to mobilize the concept of ‘the arts’. Thus, in order to make such claims, and to effectively organize institutional resources to support art work, implies a hierarchy of power that those outside of an elite European class cannot access. Since the community who typically access slam poetry is made up of those marginalized due to race, gender, sexual orientation or the effects of colonization and oppression (Krpan, 2008), they are not part of this hierarchy that allows access to artistic resources (economic as well as symbolic) or any effective decision making status. In contrast, slam poetry is centered on the idea of returning power to those who are discriminated against through practices and processes of oppression and colonization (Smith & Kraynak, 2009).

Moreover, during a slam performance, the interaction between the performer and their audience members is in constant motion. Instead of performing only for the
audience, slam poetry performance passes back and forth the authority and influence of the text/performance thus, blurring artistic “Euro-American boundaries between performer and audience, life and art, and ethics and aesthetics” (Gilroy, 1993 in Krpan, 2008, p. 29). This is critical to ‘unarting’ ABER as this passing back and forth of authority makes it difficult for hierarchies to emerge. In this way, slam is used as a practice that disrupts the mainstream elitist understanding of ‘the arts’ and ABER methodology.

Consequently, attempting to fit slam into a Westernized canon of art discourse is problematic because that discourse inherently excludes those not part of the hierarchy of power. As such, we must go to a critique of ‘the arts’ as it applies to ABER methodology.

**Taking ‘the Arts’ Out of Arts-Based Educational Research**

Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013) paper encourages questions about how scholars of ABER qualify what is ‘art’ in research and what is considered creative or aesthetic. On the role of arts in social exclusion, cultural theorists like Hall (1992), Said (1978), and Spivak (1999) have written that humanities have participated in the development of colonization and imperial expansion. Said (1994) cautiously depicts the function of cultural production and the ‘fine arts’ in particular, in the processes of imperial conquest. According to McDermott (2010) “what makes ‘good art’ and what makes one a ‘good artist’ have been steeped so long in oppressive colonial values systems that ways of making art and the products of the artistic process that do not adhere to an Eurocentric aesthetic value system remain marginalized” (p. 7). Slam could be considered a practice outside of the Eurocentric aesthetic value system and thus, a form of outsider art. As a result, trying to fit slam into an ‘art’ practice takes away from the practice itself since
slam does not fit within the Westernized ideology of ‘the arts’. Thus, as previously discussed, if ABER ‘unarts’ itself, then we can think of multiple forms of cultural production as a research methodology. Moreover, the researcher can step away from the established predetermined set of ‘standards’ about what qualifies as good arts-based educational research (McDermott, 2010). By taking out the predetermined set of ‘standards’ of ‘the arts,’ and thus out of arts-based educational research, researchers can shift the focus from what constitutes aesthetic qualities of art-work itself, and move towards preventing practices that perpetuate marginalization and oppression.

The purpose here is to think about issues of access and representation in ABER. In turn, the hope is to convey a message that encourages action and changes the ways in which ‘the arts’ and ABER are taken up. If we continue to enable a practice that focuses on elitist aesthetics and creativity, then we perpetuate the “boundaries of quality [which] are ... marginalizing” (Huss & Cwikel, 2005, p. 46) to those forms that do not fit within them, such as outsider forms of art. At the same time, I must be cautious not to imply that this study is attempting to “mobilize discourses of the arts in educational research contexts [since it] always carries the risk of being trapped by the same institutional hierarchies that demand the rhetoric of effects” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 224). Rather, the interest in describing/discussing slam as a research methodology is to dislocate and make unclear the boundaries within which we consider arts in the academy. It is important to motivate those who read this work to rethink and challenge the ways in which current methodology of arts-based research restricts how we imagine our efforts to expand our knowledge of conducting research.
CHAPTER THREE:
FRAMEWORKS UNDERLYING SLAM AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Now that we have explored the ways in which slam might become an arts-based educational research method, I turn to a discussion on the ways slam as a research methodology is related to participatory action research (PAR) and performance-based research methodologies.

Approaching the Literature on Participatory Action Research and Performance-Based Research Methodologies

One of the key challenges of this thesis research was attempting to study and learn from participatory action research (PAR) and the emerging field of performance-based research methodologies while being confronted with the limited research on slam poetry. Studying the embodied experience of slam is a challenging prospect as particular methodologies about the body’s interactivity during the research process are still being interrogated. In slam, the performer, the stage and the audience are not neutral sites and are in constant negotiation. Questions about an embodied experience unavoidably bring up questions of identity, such as gender, race, sexuality, ability and class. These identities carry with them various intersections of power and privilege, as well as oppression and marginalization. Therefore, slam performances are shaped and influenced by various discourses related to gender, race, sexuality, social class, and ability.

This chapter reviews the literature available on slam poetry, in general, and the very limited research on slam methodology. This thesis study is located within the available literature on slam poetry, participatory action research (PAR) and performance-based research methods. As slam methodology has not been previously articulated
meaningfully, this paper examines slam as a pedagogical genre and as a performance. It makes use of anti-oppressive theories of education, and performative arts-based theories, to tease out what a methodology of slam poetry means, why it is important to, and the impact it has on the field of education. Thus, while I appear to draw on a number of unrelated theories, they are used to craft out a foundation for slam as a research methodology. This chapter draws on scholarship from anti-oppressive work, feminist theories, and indigenous theories to conceptualize and analyze a slam research methodology, paying particular attention to performance, audience and notions of community.

What is Slam?

Slam poetry is a spoken word performance. The term, spoken word, acts as an umbrella term for a range of oral performance-oriented poetry practices such as dub poetry, slam poetry, hip hop poetry, storytelling and performance art (Boudreau, 2009; Endsley, 2009; Keleta-Mae, 2012; Krpan, 2008; Smith and Kraynak, 2009). I use the term ‘slam poetry’ as it “reinvents the oral tradition [and so] it is not just a spoken word recitation; it is also competition amongst spoken word performers” (Boudreau, 2009, p. 3). Slam may involve storytelling but it is never an essay or a novel; rather it is a moment in time whereby a performer expresses a narrative and lived experience in a performative way. Often, performers search for slam venues to tell their stories of marginalization and survival. Still, traditional forms of poetry and slam can be set apart by slam’s distinct linguistic, performative, and social/political understanding. Unlike traditional forms of poetry, slam poetry “carr[ies] an urban vibe, portray[s] a grittier view of life, is counter-mainstream, convey[s] culture, and sport[s] an activist position” (Boudreau, 2009, p. 6).
According to Smith and Kraynak (2009), there are five major features of slam: “Slam is poetry; Slam is performed; Slam is competitive; Slam is interactive; and Slam is community” (pp. 5 – 6). This study draws on these distinctive features to theorize and validate slam as a research methodology.

The history of slam poetry is long and complicated and heavily influenced by hip hop music and culture (Elevand, 2003; Kirsh, 2011; Smith & Kraynak, 2009). In order to value the educational and research possibilities of slam, it is important to understand the history of hip hop.

Hip hop emerged in the early 1970s in the post-industrial Bronx as an “expressive culture of resistance in which youth groups made music, danced, and created graffiti art about their rage, alienation, resistance, and desires” (Hanley, 2007, p. 37) as well as a way to develop the identities and social statuses of Black and Latino people (Chang, 2005; Petchauer, 2009; Rose, 1994). Rose (1994) describes hip hop as:

an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by post industrial oppression and the binding ties of Black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame. (in Sparks & Grochowski, 2002, p. 3)

It is this association to hip hop that slam employs, giving slam the power of a strong cultural practice. The hip hop culture of the 1970s was different than the hip hop culture of today. It was more concerned with raising consciousness, social justice, and activism. As a result of the commodification and exploitation of the cultural expressive forms of 1970s hip hop, most corporate media representations of hip hop today reflect a very different ideology, often filled with misogyny, violence, pornography and homophobia.
Today’s hip hop is usually “portrayed as a narrow musical genre synonymous with rap music” (Petchauer, 2009, p. 946). This depiction is constructed by corporate media industries concerned with generating capital. The result is an unfortunate and inaccurate representation of hip hop culture in the public sphere. Moreover, Dimitriadis (2001) writes:

older African-American men hold self-described values of hard work and honesty, and think younger African-Americans have eschewed these values in destructive ways. These young people do not have a living memory of racism and the kinds of values it helps to build ... The notion that younger generations do not have a tradition of history rooted in oppression is a common theme in dominant representations of young African-Americans. The ‘hip-hop’ generation, many note, is radically and dangerously different from the generations that have come before it, a notion underscored by Michael Dyson who writes that some young people today maintain violent rule over their communities, helping to constitute a kind of ‘juvenocracy’. (p. 70)

This is an important point as much of the discourse references Black youth who are associated with hip hop and a “racial history ... [that] has been emptied of values” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 70). Corporations conceal the multiplicity of the hip hop genre of the past and the present, as well as other hip hop practices, such as slam poetry, that still thrive in local scenes. Together, these factors contribute to current (mis)representations in society of the culture which can implicate the ways that identity, race, and hip hop culture has been taken up in current literature.

Sparks and Grochowski (2002) state that, “although the lineage of performance poetry is often debated, it is hip hop’s central performance and cultural street forms of rap music, break dancing, graffiti and MCing that youth are revising and expanding for their own purposes through spoken word performance” (pp. 1 – 2). Slam’s contested history began with a movement in 1984 by a construction worker named Marc Kelly Smith (Boudreau, 2009; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Woods, 2008). He hosted poetry
readings in a jazz club called Get Me High Lounge in Chicago. Smith developed an idea to bring to life his ‘open mic’ format, which was to match up the artists’ poetry performances against each other as if they were in a battle with one another. In 1986, the Uptown Poetry Slam was born. It emerged with more momentum after Smith convinced the owner of the Green Mill, another Chicago jazz club, to host weekly Sunday night slam competitions. Slam was Smith’s response to poetry’s elitist and therefore, inaccessible, form regarding members of the African-American and Latino community. Smith wanted to develop a space that required high levels of audience interaction and allowed for anyone with a poem to participate. Woods (2008) says that:

> Slams are the embodiment of the idea that art belongs to people and not institutions or fashion-makers. The Everyman criticism is necessary in a poetry slam. Slams prove that art meant for people ultimately belongs to people, and proves this to the point that it demands their opinion be made known to be considered a genuine Slam experience. (p. 19)

As such, poetry slams provided a space for everyday individuals and gave them power to “say what they love and what they detest rather than leaving it to the academic elites” (Smith & Kraynak, 2009 in Kirsh, 2011, p. 51). Battson and Norris (1995) support this idea by recognizing slam as a “political/cultural movement that returns language to the people” (p. xi). Smith’s intention was to empower the community with words through this oral performance-oriented cultural practice.

Building on these concepts of empowerment, resistance and slam as a culture, researchers can use slam research methodology to develop critical research which examine the discourses brought forth by slam and hip hop as a culture. This in turn has the ability to enable consciousness raising discussions among urban youth about topics such as identity formation, violence, drug abuse, war, bullying, self esteem and disease.
Slam research methodology is apart from other research methodologies like participatory action research (PAR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR), critical anti-oppressive methodologies, and other feminist methodologies because of its ability to work with distinct linguistic, performative, social and cultural contextual understandings. Similar arguments are made when talking about using hip hop and slam poetry in the classroom. Often the knowledge reflected in these slam pieces could “engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics” (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, p. 89). Topics include those of racism, single parent homes, drug and alcohol abuse, gun violence, homophobia, and misogyny. These subjects are relevant and prevalent in urban settings where hip hop culture manifests itself. Through this integration of highly influenced hip hop cultural forms, it is possible to ask questions like, whose voices are being included? Furthermore, does the inclusion of some voices then lead to the exclusion of others? Whose narratives are then being excluded? Teaching hip hop as a music and culture of resistance can aid the development of critical consciousness in urban youth which is what Giroux (1990) states is a significant part of our role as educators; that is, to create critical thinkers. While slam may be a derivative of hip hop, it has always operated as critical consciousness. Slam poetry has the potential to empower people and create critical thinkers and thus, can be used to conduct critical, anti-oppressive research.

Nature of Slam

Slam poetry is infused with popular culture and thus, slam performances can be seen as culturally symbolic. Even if a performer references an artist, individual, or uses a
line from another rapper, slam poets are influenced by their own lived experiences, society, and the community of slam. These influences are impressionable by popular culture. Since popular culture directly influences the artist and thus, their poetry, slam performances are also influenced by, and reflective of, the media and popular culture.

When thinking about slam poetry performances as cultural products or culturally symbolic, it is important to first consider the conditions that shape lived experiences. By doing this, researchers can think about cultural production in slam as research methodology. In considering the conditions that shape lived experiences, Dimitriadis (2001) talks about history and the generational gap between older and younger African-Americans.

Popular culture uses the concept of youth, as put forth by Dimitriadis (2001), and ‘the arts,’ which has been co-constructed with entertainment industries, to further the generational gap between older and younger African-Americans. Since the mid-nineties the notion that young African Americans are “out of control and without traditional notions of community and solidarity is elaborated on” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 69) in popular culture. With the growth of Black popular culture, Black youth (especially males) have been portrayed as “nihilistic” or without “support systems of previous generations ... young and out-of-control gang members with no social vision” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 69). The combination of the “lack of traditional support systems ... [and the] rise of the predatory market culture (which clearly informs much Black popular culture)” are important conditions when examining the cultural production of slam as a research methodology. Intersections of gender, race, sexuality, social class, and ability
which together make up a performer’s identity are important conditions that shape lived experiences.

Performers and artists may express their identity in many ways, such as through their performances and in their poetry. One’s identity is constructed based on their personal history and narratives. In slam and as members of the audience, that history may be:

interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations. (Lauretis, 1986 in Endsley, 2009, p. 15)

The performer’s identity can be interpreted and reconstructed during their performance, and in many cases, by the audience and slam community they are performing to. In this way, the interpretation and (re)construction of a performer’s identity can change depending on the make-up of the audience. For example, consider the personal reflection I provided in the introduction. As a member of the audience, I entered the slam venues with my own preconceived subjectivities, understandings, ways of knowing and experiences. Those of which make up my identity and are constantly being created, re-created, and co-created by my environment (social and political interactions) inside and outside of slam events. As a result, my identity as a participant of the audience interacts and intersects with the identities of the performer. Thus, my perception and interpretation of the performer and performance is always affected and understood within that precise discursive relationship in space and time.

If we acknowledge that popular culture plays an important role in shaping our lived experiences, then slam, which is also occupied by popular culture, becomes a
product of cultural production and supports a move towards a methodology of cultural production of slam.

**Participatory Action Research and Performance-Based Research Methodology: Use of Participants and Audience**

As I am unwilling to use the ‘art’ language that has been made available by ABER, I am choosing to borrow from other research methodologies, such as participatory action research (PAR) and performance-based research methodologies. I understand slam as a research methodology that borrows concepts and frameworks from PAR methodology because of its connection to involving the participants in the research process. I begin by attempting to define PAR methodology.

Using Merriam-Webster Incorporated (2014), PAR can be seen as what the name implies: *participation*—“to have a part or share in something”—and *action*—“the bringing about of an alteration”—using research as a tool. Reason (1994) describes the two main goals of this form of research as being the “production of knowledge and action directly useful to a community” and “empowerment through consciousness-raising” (p. 48). Participatory action research is a process in which the researchers and the participants construct goals and develop methods, collaborate in the gathering and analysis of data, and apply the results in a manner that raises critical consciousness and supports change in the lives of the participants (Reason, 1994). Moreover, these changes are controlled and led by the participating group or community (Reason, 1994). There is also an emphasis on emancipatory change at a larger socio-cultural level that is often embedded into this process of research, as well as the intent to effect change in the lives
of those involved (Elliott, 2011; Kidd & Kral, 2005; McIntyre, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

In thinking through the possibilities of participation, it is important to examine the empirical research available to ground the theoretical discussion about developing a slam research methodology. Participatory action researchers like Conrad (2002) and others, used improvisational drama not only to present a research text in multiple ways (also see Gallagher, 2006; Goldstein, 2008; Saldaña, 1999; Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Mienczakowski, 1995; Norris, 1997) but also to produce data and connect youth participants/co-researchers in the investigation and forms of analysis.

Gallagher (2007) also used an improvisation activity relating to themes of identity–representation–surveillance. In her research, students and researchers were asked to imagine themselves in a fictional workplace where students – as employees – would undergo a work performance review by the company (played by the researchers). The students and researchers “enter imaginatively into a created world to improvise and reflect upon our understandings of, and responses to, this imagined world and its relationship to our ‘real world’” (p. 75). Henry (2000) argues that: “The structures of qualitative research and of dramas take innovative forms in which means and ends, thought and action, intertwine in an unpremeditated, improvisational fashion. Both involve ways of knowing which people use in their everyday lives: existential knowledge” (p. 51). Drama is a practice which requires that the students have an understanding of past lived experiences in order to inform the present. This is what Courtney (1990) describes as the ‘real world’ informing the imagined world and, in turn, the imagined world stimulating the ‘real world’, as “they are not separate cognitive
categories” (p. 18). In Gallagher’s (2007) study, participants entered the research study with diverse lived narratives and so, their ways of knowing the ‘real world’ differed and contributed to their interpretation of the imagined world. By involving the student participants in the research process, they were given the opportunity, as co-researchers, to actively participate and collaborate with the researchers to co-create ways of knowing, influenced by their existential knowledge. Gallagher believes that the participants in her study “accomplished something quite different both in terms of the work we created with youth and the effect this collaboration had on other aspects of our research collaboration, particularly our interviews/conversations with youth and their decisions – at critical moments – to ‘return the gaze’” (p. 73). Turning towards the use of theater can fundamentally change the terms of participation engagement, and contribute to the modes of communication that are available to researchers for the duration of their study.

As stated, slam research methodology relates to PAR as they share the centering of participant or audience involvement. In slam, performance is reflective of both a process and a product or event. Slam research methodology uses participant audience members during the research process to construct new ways of understanding and interpreting relationships and notions of community. Thus, the implication for knowledge production during a slam performance, like that of a live theatre event, opens up certain possibilities for interactions, for dynamic engagement of the audience, and “makes tangible the postmodern theoretical interest in contingency” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 108). Slam is the kind of text/performance that speaks to, and with, the Other, but also for, or about, them. A dialogic text/performance, like slam, attempts to keep the “conversation between text, performer, and audience open-ended, to produce honest intercultural
understanding” (Conquergood, 2003, p. 409). Slam’s commonalities with drama theatre-related PAR contributes to critical research, social movements and cultural production. Slam also presents ways of challenging dominant ideologies and recreating new views for social justice through the exchange between audience and performer.

Slam research methodology aligns with performance-based research methodology in similar ways. Performance as a research methodology is important to explore in order to focus on the issue of ‘performance’ and audience ‘talk-back’. This connects the study of slam to pieces that work with a performance-based research methodology. Currently, many researchers of arts-based research methodology employ the use of “Readers’ Theatre as a method of representation to display qualitative data and findings to audiences, often in conference venues” (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; 1998 in Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 211). This form of representing data and findings allows the audience to become part of the performance. The interaction with the audience and their imagination lends insight into the interpretations of the text and discussions that may come forth as a result of their embodied participation in the performance.

Goldstein (2008) uses critically performed ethnography and ethnographic play scripts to provoke reflection that is useful to teacher candidates and engage them in discussions of how they can work toward social justice and equity within their own classrooms and schools and:

there have been times when teacher candidates have said that encountering a new perspective or point of view from one or more characters (i.e., research participants) in an ethnographic script or performance has helped them question or re-think their own professional practices. (p. 4)
This reflexive practice is what Goldstein (2008) describes as the mutual exchange “of meaning making that occurs between the performance of a play and its audience” (Goldstein, 2008, p. 3). This provides a sense of the influence a particular arts-based research project can have in provoking public insight and reflection from the emerging meanings. Moreover, this speaks to the idea of audience and performance ‘talk-back’. Following in the footsteps of other kinds of arts-based research, performance is immediate and occurs in the moment. This means a response to this art form can arise instantaneously. “A performance event is both temporal and ephemeral in that an artifact such as a video recording may remain, but not the event itself” (Saldaña, 1999 in Leavy, 2009, p. 135). Performance-based research methods have the ability to bring to life the research findings in a representational way not possible by way of traditional methods.

Performance enables audiences of diverse backgrounds to engage and participate in the particular form of art or exchange. As Saldaña (2005) writes:

...theatre is one of the artistic media through which fictionalized and non-fictionalized social life – the human condition – can be portrayed symbolically and aesthetically for spectator engagement and reflection. (p. 10)

The idea which Saldaña (2005) contends is that performance gives the spectator an opportunity to reflect and engage with the performance while the performance occurs. In this way, the audience is enabled as active participants in the performance. During this immediate transfer between the audience and artist of the performance, “meaning is imparted, negotiated and multiplied” (Leavy, 2009, p. 261). The accessibility of performances contributes to the transfer or negotiation between the performer and the audience. These negotiations can relate to identity and can involve discussions of complex meanings. Additionally, during a performance, there is an exchange of
information that occurs while the identities of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ constantly shifts between the ‘artist’ and ‘audience member’ until “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire in Garoian, 1999, p. 60). These negotiations of identity and preparing for “the new role has the potential to be powerful because it sanctions the subject with an implied sense of control or authority in relation to external social and cultural boundaries” (Endsley, 2009, p 50). The exchanges between performer and audience can change depending on the environment which may impact the research.

The performance genre has the power to disrupt traditional ways of knowing by creating new ways of challenging current knowledge and research. Oikarinen-Jabai (2003) suggests that a performance-based methodology allows researchers “to make use of the human capability to empathize, to place [the researcher] into different positions ... to effect change and transformation in ways of knowing” (p. 578). Performance can be used as a means of personal growth, empowerment, consciousness-raising and subversion, such as exposing contradictions. The link between the “performance paradigm” (Turner, 1974) and qualitative research can be attributed to the:

- developments in embodiment research and the mind-body connection, ...
- postmodern theoretical advancements ... [and] the larger academic move to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarship, as well as the cumulative impact of researchers expanding and refining the qualitative paradigm in accordance with new theoretical, epistemological, and methodological innovations. (Leavy, 2009, p. 137)

Researchers, Endsley (2009), Leavy (2009), and Oikarinen-Jabai (2003) argue that performance-based research and the use of audience is a critical approach to the research process because they work together to situate one another into diverse positions that allows them to co-create meaningful knowledge.
To relate these ideas to theorizing slam as a research methodology, it is helpful to consider the matter of ‘performance’ and audience ‘talk-back’. Comparable to performance-based research methodologies, slam poetry involves the audience members. In slam competitions, audience members are encouraged to give feedback to the performer by hollering and cheering or by booing to let the performer know how effective their piece is in communicating to the audience. By involving the audience members as judges of the performance, slam is able to purposefully disrupt the usual submissiveness involved in listening to traditional forms of poetry readings which requires little to no audience involvement. Endsley (2009), a performance poet, states that “the performance text that we were to produce must do more than invoke a shared response of empathy from the performer, the performed, and the audience” (p. 22). Denzin (2003) says, slam poetry should “interrogate, criticize, and empower” all of the individuals in these shared roles (p. 55). Feedback from the audience contributes to empowerment as it speaks to the idea of social collaboration. There is a sense of empowerment that emerges from stepping onto a stage and performing lived narratives to an audience that is intent on providing feedback. Slam poetry as a research methodology has the ability to achieve a level of interaction and audience engagement that does not occur with traditional poetry or traditional research methods.

**Audience Participation in the Slam Research Process**

Now that I have explained the concepts and frameworks from participatory action research (PAR) and performance-based research methodologies that provide a foundation for slam as a research methodology, I continue my discussion to explore audience
participation and ‘talk-back’ in the slam research process. Members of the audience play various crucial roles during slam performance.

As part of the interactive nature of slam, the audience is implicated in an exchange with the performer, providing commentary and feedback during the performance based on their interpretations during, and after, the exchange. During a slam performance, the poet performs their original piece of work for an audience usually positioned on something that can be defined as a stage. This may include spaces such as, a table in a school cafeteria, a classroom, a street corner, a slam poetry club or through video on the Internet. According to Endsley (2009), these sites of public performances are always “contextualized historically and undergoes immediate social re-construction and re-production during each performance” (p. 13). This then means that the stage, whatever it may look like, is a disputed site where discussion or negotiation about the meaning and interpretation of the performance and therefore, the performer, take place.

Slam allows for immediate responses from the audience. “Audience commentary is ongoing during the performance” (Boudreau, 2009, p. 1), and contributes to the interaction between the performer and the audience. Hence, slam poetry is the relationship between a physical performance and text to an audience which has the right to speak back to the performer/poet regarding the effectiveness of their communication. Slam poetry performances can situate its transient power in these interactions between the performer/poet and the audience. In this physical performance involving the body, slam requires “the presence of other bodies, the audience, [in order to access] the instantaneous power of face-to-face communication” between performer and audience (Dolan, 2005 in Krpan, 2008, p. 29). Through this interaction between the performer/poet
and audience members, there is a constant shift in roles moving back and forth. The authority, or influence, of the text and performance is transformed by the dialectical interactive engagement with the audience. Audience feedback gives the performer the option to improvise based on the commentary during the performance, making alterations to the text and performance (Boudreau, 2009). Through the exchange between the audience and performer, the stage becomes understood as a contested space (Endsley, 2009). These contested sites encourage comments and criticisms from the audience, and the randomly selected judges, in various forms of response such as, cheering, booing, finger-snapping, applauding and shouting out ideas.

It is also important to explore slam’s competitive feature because slam draws on audience members to judge the competition based on audience commentary and subjectivity. Artists compete against one another to determine the winner of a slam competition. Judging for slam performance events are done by members of the audience who have been randomly selected. Therefore, the performances are judged by local members of the community and not critics with a long list of credentials. It is members of the audience, “not your professor, or the Council on Deciding What’s Art [who] has the biggest say about what’s deemed good or bad” (Smith & Kraynak, 2009, pp. 5 – 6). The competitive nature of slam allows an opportunity for the performer to improvise during the performance, making alterations as needed (Boudreau, 2009). As a consequence, the competition facet creates a dynamic relationship between the audience members and performer. Thus, the stage is understood as a contested space, (Endsley, 2009) resulting from the relationship between performer and audience.
Audience participation is significant for slam competitions as they determine the winner of a battle by clapping and cheering for the performances they enjoyed and booing for the ones they did not enjoy. For example, Marc Kelly Smith’s aim for selecting random members of the audience as judges was to encourage the “poets to consider the audience as well as his or her personal vision and to remind them of their responsibility to communicate effectively” (Burrows, 2001, par. 2). The slam poetry performances became a way to take art and develop it into something that could be thought of as being owned by the community as these members of the audience played a role in shaping the performance.

According to Aptowicz (2009), randomly selecting audience members to be poetry judges was a “relatively simple idea [that] had a revolutionary impact on contemporary poetry” (p. 382). However, how ‘revolutionary’ was the actual impact? By giving the role of poetry judge to the randomly selected members of the audience the poetry slam was telling the public that their idea of poetry was just as valid as any formal tendencies in traditional poetry readings. On the other hand, why compare a radical approach of performance poetry, like slam to traditional poetry readings? Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) says, 

one of the lessons to be drawn from the trajectories of radical approaches to cultural production is that the moment such approaches are recognized as belonging to the realm of practices associated with the concept of the arts, their radical potential is radically diminished.

He continues, 

Once a particular cultural practice comes to be recognized through discourses of the arts, the social processes and institutional hierarchies that constitute what Becker (1982) calls ‘the art world’ tend to neutralize its potential for provoking social and cultural change (Diederichsen, 2011; West, 1990). The privileged position of artistic subjectivity in bourgeois society, explains Diederichsen
By speaking about slam in terms of other formal poetry readings (which are not necessarily academic) is to ignore the lesson of Gaztambide-Fernández (2013). By relating radical practices to cultural production, such as slam, with the practices of ‘the arts,’ slam as a cultural practice, comes to be accepted through discourses of ‘the arts’. Furthermore, the decision to be able to advance through succeeding slam poetry rounds in competitions are dependent on five randomly selected judges’ scores which are in turn, conditional on whether or not the poetry performance connected with the judge. This notion of connectedness is related to one’s interpretation and subjectivity, which is explored in detail below, and is linked to notions of competition that is characteristic of slam.

Audience participants are also implicated in the research process when it comes to meanings and interpretations that emerge as a product of the exchange or interaction with the performance and performer. It is important for performers of slam poetry and researchers engaging in this practice to be critical of interpretation and meaning. Society depicts the audience as being independent, making their own assumptions and interpretations of such things. However, “the power of viewers to reinterpret meaning is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to contrast the texts which the viewer then interprets” (Morley, 1997 in Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 75). Thus, due to issues of power, the “meanings that people create here are circumscribed by forces beyond their control” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 75). Additionally, no two audience members will come to the same meaning and interpretation of an identical piece of work regardless of the various sites the work is performed in. However, that is not the purpose of slam
poetry performances. Endsley (2009) says, the “purpose of repeated performances in different venues and contexts is to gain different perspectives and values that will drive future understandings and readings of the performance and thus the performer” (p. 14).

During a slam performance, it is expected that competing meanings and multiple interpretations will arise from the connection between the poet, the audience and the performance. Since language is often understood as a site of political struggle (Endsley, 2009; Krpan 2008; Weedon, 1997), it is important to consider whose meanings are often uncovered. The audience may not draw the same meaning from the performance piece since these meanings are always in a state of negotiation and can be quite subjective.

There is often a push back and forth for control that results in conveying a passion for intervention. However, the negotiation that takes place is important for slam to evolve into a research methodology since it speaks to the co-creation of knowledge production with the audience and performer. Slam becomes helpful in exploring the possibilities it offers as a method of resistance.

Slam as a tradition of resistance solicits multiple meanings from diverse audiences through the use of slam’s distinct linguistic, social and political frameworks. Slam poetry is based on a recurring process of analyzing and refining the process/product and, subsequently, can be viewed as dramatically changing the oral practice in the way in which it,

indents, notches, partly destroys and rebuilds differently these myths/stories in order to adapt them to the concrete situation which is one of exchange. Myths are not a text ... but living matter which allow people in a community to vibrate at the moment of transmission. (Peeters, 1999 in Krpan, 2008, p. 29)

As such, many of these slam poetry events have been argued to be generative spaces of social practice where identities are negotiated through performance, repeated and
questioned (Endsley, 2009; Krpan, 2008; Somers- Willet, 2003). Slam poetry as a practice makes suggestions about the multifaceted transformative possibilities of the oral tradition. This is particularly evident for colonized persons who have been systemically required to conform to the dominant ideologies and languages through various forms of oppression and marginalization. Krpan (2008) proposes that “performance is knowledge-making of a different sort when access to written culture is denied and when literacy and education are wielded as tools of colonial domination” (p. 30). These variations of oppression, which make up lived experiences, contribute to the interpretation of the oral performance-oriented cultural production.

Hip hop culture uses language that may be politically unacceptable, such as “cursing, sexual, racially strong, misogynist language” (Boudreau, 2009, p. 7) to shock and incite an emotional response in the audience. However, slam performers have always used language in critical ways to foster a strong sense of community, promote awareness of issues, and encourage discussions and empowerment. For this reason, it is important to explore the use of language in slam to challenge Eurocentric discourses and more traditional forms of poetry.

When thinking of language, it is important to consider the power that language holds but more importantly, the different meanings it can convey. The question to address here is whose meaning is most important? Language plays a significant role in performance poetry. “Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses ... which implies differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle” (Weedon, 1997, p. 23). Endsley (2009), who draws heavily from a feminist poststructuralist theoretical standpoint says, that by performing
poetry, artists are given new and “competing ways of giving meaning to the world ... [which] can re-write some of the dominant discourses” (p. 15). Therefore, the distinctive linguistic frameworks used in slam poetry pieces are seen as a powerful tool to question whose meanings will prevail and are available to be mobilized as “an act of resistance” (Endsley, 2009, p. 14). For example, by refusing the illusion of the hidden ‘constitutive forces’ that shape prevailing poetic or mainstream discourse, the slam performers take up, and take on, the work of challenging oppression. Slam’s distinctive linguistic framework can be used to create tension and conflict. In these instances, interpretation and identity are heightened and negotiated among the audience and performer. Somers-Willet (2005) regards these slam performances as a ‘confessional experience’ which is shared with the audience. In these situations, slam still remains a critical methodology because these slam identity pieces encompass socio-political ideas as well as personal ones about identity and meaning (Boudreau, 2009; Endsley, 2009).

With the presence of conflict and tension, slam can still operate as a critical methodology (see Low (2011) for a discussion on the value of conflict and how it can lead to new understandings and insights for both performers and audience participants). In fact, the negotiation of conflict/tension and subjectivity between the audience and performer adds to the very reason that slam is a critical methodology. Conflict contributes positively to the criticality found in slam as a research methodology as it disrupts the ‘dominant culture’ by emphasizing the narratives of those otherwise marginalized and oppressed. There are slam performers who develop anti-oppressive themes and ideas, while others use mainstream poetry circles to exclude different voices and their message. In instances where mainstream poetry is used as a form to marginalize
and exclude, slam allows us to question the hidden epistemological and ideological assumptions that may structure the decisions the performers make and the traditions they select. These ideas parallel those of Low (2011) and Apple (2004), who believe that conflict and contradictions could have positive effects on learning and knowledge production.

Returning to a discussion on competition, Endsley (2009) states:

the winner is determined by the organization of social power—whoever talks the loudest and has the access to distribute their words is often who is heard ...
Language is the thrust of the message that is composed by the performer; however, the delivery of that message, the embodied performance adds another layer to the already complicated performance moment ... (p. 15)

She continues,

The embodied performance or “acting out” that carries the message immediately reconstructs the meaning that is embedded in the original written poem. Because of the very immediate physical situation that confronts the audience member, spoken word poetry becomes a method of mediation between the contentious dynamics at play in any given performance. Such dynamics are informed in part based upon the positions of the subjects—both performer and audience member—which are going to be diverse. (p. 16)

Does the responsibility for constructing meaning shift to involve both the audience and the performer? Does acknowledging these roles impact the way that social transformation comes to be understood? What is the value of conflicting interpretations? Endsley (2009) asks: What happens if what is interpreted by the audience (the visible) does not accurately signify what is actually meant by the performer (the invisible)?

In order to grapple with these questions, I begin by drawing on Lugones’ (2003) anti-oppressive work and her connection between the internal processes, the external processes and ideas about interrogating sites of resistance. Lugones (2003) describes the internal as individual processes that depend on lived experiences and the external
processes as the way in which those individual processes and lived experiences are distributed to and shared among others. “Personal experience must be analyzed separately from the public and their interpretation before the subject will be effective as an activist” (Endsley, 2009, p. 116). In Lugones’ (2003) and McRobbie’s (2008) work on feminist theories about social change and identity, they argue that the notion of social change cannot be experienced through individual accountability. Lugones (2003) recommends that using internal processes such as performing from lived experiences produces agency that can be utilized to oppose the way individual processes and lived experiences are distributed to and shared among others (external processes).

Nonetheless, making sense of the self cannot occur within the dominant hierarchies of power that are already embedded in those lived experiences. This means that the internal process and acknowledging the self, starts with changes from within (Lugones, 2003).

Identifying the self as a subject can produce alternative strategies for confronting the systems of meaning that work to oppress and limit interpretation. Slam performance provides a method to display those internal alternative strategies to an external audience that may live with the very condition that the performer seeks to interrogate. “Combined with the environment and the context of the performance venue, the different patterns of action represent not chance occurrence but the sincere, visual expression of the ideology and psychology of the participants” (Boal, 1979, in Endsley, 2009, p. 117). This quote speaks to the relationships that are present between the audience members and the performer. However, this should not be misconstrued as a relationship where the intended invisible (internal) message is smoothly relayed from performer to audience and back.
Instead, the performers are passionate and are stakeholders in their personal and social/political ideologies. Therefore, once the performance of their values and beliefs are enacted in a visible way, there is the possibility for the audience members and performer to critically examine the ideas represented through the performance resulting in diverse interpretations.

While the audience and the performer are confronted by the morals and beliefs of others, how that is interpreted relies upon those that are present at the performance venue and their role within the community. This external process is challenging and important to consider. While advocates of slam performances may effectively perform these strategies, it is not promised that these will be understood as intended. Meaning is still negotiated during a slam performance regardless of how well constructed the foundation of internal processes. The challenge to make those alternative meanings visible brings us back to the privilege invested in the systems of oppression and the value of conflict.

Coming back to the questions posed above, when the role of the performer and audience is recognized in a performance, the expected result of the performance alters to engage both. The audience and the performer then become accountable for creating the meaning behind the actual language of performance. This approach emphasizes the performance by unsettling the normalized social/political structures and expectations of language, and binaries of the roles. The positions of the performers are extended to include a sense of responsibility for meaning and its social/political impact that underlie the linguistic and performative aspects of slam. This is fundamental to the idea that slam research methodology offers a chance to reflect the social/political changes that contextualize the performers’ account of marginalized lived experiences. At the same
time, slam research methodology shifts the power inequalities that limit their relationships and respond to tensions/conflict within a performance.

Enabling Critical Communities

Slam as a research methodology can enable critical communities. Smith and Kraynak (2009) describe slam communities as being made up of people across international borders that come together for the same love, which is performing slam poetry to a rowdy audience in attempts to incite some sort of emotional response and connection. Slam poetry events can be found on a stage in any space that allows for the possibility of people to gather. Frequently, the events take place in accessible locations within the community, such as school cafeterias, street corners, coffee shops, bars and community centres (Somers-Willet, 2003). In this section, I explore ideas of critical community that exist, are developed and are co-created in slam. The concept of community is tricky and is not without feminist criticism about access, power, relationships, ownership, collaboration and representation. Slam itself is a contested form, characterised by various discourses, which do not always exist alongside one another peacefully. Consider that,

poets are notable for the way they resist pressures, coming sometimes from within their marginalized communities, to write on particular themes or to use a style that the community has identified as culturally subversive or transformative –whether the demand is for accessible or direct language, or for innovative or disruptive poetic techniques. The poet who speaks to or for a particular community may experience her “representativeness” not only as empowering but as constraining, whereas a reader who lacks knowledge about a marginalized community or tradition may evaluate the work by inappropriate criteria. (Crown, 1998, p. 652)

Slam can be understood as varying in nature and importance based on the subjective reading of its participants and audience members (Smith and Kraynak, 2009).
While exploring community in slam poetry, I maintain the idea that the performances of these narratives are considered feminist. Since these performances are enacted in front of slam community members, it is necessary to keep this view in mind in discussing notions of community in slam. Slam performances are considered feminist because the lived experiences of the performers have been devalued by a classist, racist, and patriarchal society (Endsley, 2009). For this reason, it is important to consider what this means for the local community of slam performers. The classist, racist, and patriarchal society is embodied in local communities and through educational systems. Therefore, performers are situated within classist, racist, and patriarchal visions or ideologies that make up their societies which means their personal narratives are also implicated by dominant ideologies (Cahill, 2007). By performing their identities and being involved in the process, slam performances, slam participants, and audience members, resist the limitations and/or borders in which they are systematically positioned, within the society they occupy and perform in. Through performances and interactions with the audience, slam communities can alter the possibilities that exist by working to challenge the negative ideologies and the so-called ‘solutions’ they have inherited. In this way, slam poetry is used as a practice by those who have been marginalized as a way to re-imagine and interrogate the power hierarchies within their own social and political context.

Continuing to investigate notions of community, Mohanty’s (2003) work focuses on feminism and borders. In her book, she raises critical questions around the idea of community. Comparable to hooks’ (1981; 1984) work, Mohanty (2003) interrogates the authority whose borders have been carefully drawn, and the “economic, cultural, and
ideological [practices that] …establish relations of rule that consolidate and naturalize the dominant values” (p. 189). In her research and throughout her research process, Mohanty (2003) asks, “who are the insiders and outsiders in this community?” and “what notions of legitimacy and gendered and racialized citizenship are being actively constructed within this community?” (p. 188 – 189). The questions she poses are significant enquiries into the boundaries that are often just adopted, remain unquestioned and claim to be progressive during the research process. She insists that responsibility and accountability be declared by those that develop their groundwork upon notions of community. Her study encourages researchers to delve deeper into notions of authority the researcher may hold in developing perceptions of community and creation of borders. For instance, during a slam research process, what sort of community would researchers try to create and for whom? Having aligned slam with PAR, the proposed research methodology follows a more ‘organic’ nature when it comes to the dynamic relationship between the researcher and ‘the researched’. For instance, participation in slam is voluntary (Smith and Kraynak, 2009), the direction of the work/performance is determined by performers and the audience (Somers-Willet, 2003), ideas/feedback is generated from within local slam community groups and during performances, (Bourdeau, 2009) there is ownership of ideas distributed across all members involved (performer and audience participants), and opportunities to share those ideas (Endsley, 2009), and generally, there is sufficient time allotted to these collaborative activities. Drawing from PAR, a methodology of slam problematizes existing borders/limitations of conventional methodologies and creates spaces for young urban youth and other marginalized people to engage in processes that “place them as agents of inquiry and as ‘experts’ about their own lives” (McIntyre, 2000,
Working to represent their lives, the audience ‘talk-back’ conversations help shape and establish meanings of the words that are used together (Gergen, 1999). This understanding, or coming to know, comes about through building trust and relationships with others. In this way, people can come to know collectively and participate in co-creating knowledge and practices that hold promise for improving society (Bray et al. 2000; Draper et al., 2011; Habermas 1976, 1981). Based on my own experiences and familiarity with being categorized as a subject that was marginalized, I am motivated to extend an opportunity to members of the slam community who I know have felt that same exclusion, at some point. Through slam performance, and building a space where critical issues are shared among the community, participating in performing their own lives works to legitimize the issues and validate their experiences.

Next, I shift to draw on indigenous theories to further contribute to my earlier discussion on PAR and performance-based methodologies to describe the role of the researchers and participant in spaces that are seen as colonized such as, the research process. Slam poetry as a methodology can draw from indigenous theories to decolonize qualitative research methodologies which are implicated in forms of colonization. In general, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) identifies three ways in which Western qualitative research and in turn, knowledge making, is colonized. First, Western science research is occupied with forms of colonization. In other words, the way research is conducted and conceptualized is colonized in and of itself. Second, she says that academic disciplines have their roots in the Other. This means that “scholarly construction has been supported by a corporate institution which “makes statements about it [the Other], authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching about it, settling it, ruling over it” (p. 2) and are
intertwined with the process of research. These embedded roots need to be decolonized so that while in the pursuit of knowledge, one can attempt to give voice to the voiceless.

Third, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) sees research as an institution of power that is viewed by others as misused, and that this particular approach needs to stop. Slam poetry is what Tuhiwai Smith (2012) would refer to as a “counter-practice of research within Western critique of Western knowledge”.

Meyer (2008) poses questions which I find are relevant to my own research. She asks, “will your research bring forth solutions that strengthen relationships with others or will it damage future collaborations?” She replies that “knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now. This is the purpose we as indigenous people posit.” She therefore makes a direct plea to researchers to “see your work as a taonga (sacred object) for your family, your community, your people,” and recommends that “your relationship to your research topic is your own. It springs from a lifetime of distinctness and uniqueness only you have history with” (p. 219 – 220). She maintains that researchers should recognize that “objectivity is a subjective idea that cannot possibly describe the all of our experience,” and advocates them to “expand [their] repertoire of writers and thinkers” in order to rise above “the limitations of predictable research methodologies.” At last, she challenges researchers to have the maturity to seek “what most scholars refuse to admit exists: spirit” (Meyer, 2008, p. 226 – 228).

As a counter-practice of qualitative research, a slam poetry research methodology draws on the indigenous way of conducting research which aims to decolonize the traditional approaches to research and distribution of knowledge. Similar to indigenous
and post-colonial theories that are concerned with the relationship between researcher and participant, slam methodology values the relationship that exists between audience and performer. As mentioned, this relationship and interaction is a key characteristic to the effectiveness of slam and its various interpretations. Spoken word communities have their own tradition of knowledge creation and, generally, this knowledge is dismissed as irrelevant. Slam performance methodology is a framework that can be used to reclaim the knowledge and lived experiences previously dismissed by years of colonization.

Indigenous theories concern themselves with the way knowledge propagates. A methodology of slam can explore knowledge creation and share narratives. If narratives are embedded in colonization as having been part of a Eurocentric society, then slam performances interrogates this lived experience. Consequently, these performances act as a form of resistance against colonization. The lived experiences of the performers have been deeply embedded in imperialism. By tradition, imperialism has governed the way we think about knowledge as the dominant view of knowledge. This theoretical approach is about trying to understand the way dominance works. Indigenous theories about imperialism work to subjugate other ways of knowing the world and human condition. By performing narratives, slam performers can confront colonialism and develop ways to share knowledge among local communities that take care in its members. Thus, slam performance poetry can be used to question the colonized lived experience and give voice to those who are without a voice.

Furthermore, slam performance methodology can be used to decolonize qualitative research methodologies in ways similar to that of indigenous ideologies. Traditionally, the art form developed by slam poetry communities has been dismissed or
devalued when considered in comparison to dominant perspectives of ‘the arts’. Slam poetry performances work to decolonize arts-based educational research methodologies. When examining dominant views of what constitutes ‘art’, we see the definitions used by arts-based educational research methodologies implicated by forms of colonialism and imperialism. This makes it difficult to fit slam into the ‘art practices’ currently constructed within the discourses of arts-based educational research. For this reason, I draw on work from Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) to argue for a shift to cultural production, one that takes the ‘art’ out of arts-based educational research. A slam research methodology can shift the gaze from research that had a negative impact on communities to having a positive impact.

In order for researchers to consider their own role in the research process and the role of the participants, researchers can look to a decolonized Indigenous research model. Some scholars (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Fine, Tuck, & Zeller-Berkman, 2008; Rocheleau, 1994) are critical of the idea of participation and what it means for generating knowledge that serves colonized, Indigenous communities. Participatory action researcher, Rocheleau (1994) suggests that researchers and communities should rethink research, participation and community. She argues:

For some professional scientists, “participatory research” implies that “we” allow “them” (rural people) to participate in “our” research. For community organizers or rural communities it may mean that “they” allow outsiders (us) to take part in local land use experiments and their interpretation. (p. 5)

Rocheleau (1994) proposes a more integrative research approach that brings together knowledge generated by each distinct community. However, in some cases, there is overlap between these distinct communities (i.e. university researchers, Indigenous community members). Māori scholars, by virtue of their involvement in the academia,
are situated as outsiders-within, “who, in their communities, work partially as insiders, and are often employed for this purpose, and partially as outsiders, because of their Western education or because they may work across clan, tribe...boundaries” (Smith, 1999, p. 5). In recognizing this conflict and the researcher’s power, one decolonized Indigenous research approach emerges from the concept of whanau introduced by Smith (1999) in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Whanau is a “supervisory and organizational structure for handling research” (p. 185), and a way of resolving outsider-insider research dilemmas. The integration of outsider-researchers or researchers who are not members of a particular Indigenous community is mediated by this complex, organic structure.

It is argued that the whanau in pre-colonial times was the core social unit, rather than the individual. It is also argued that the whanau remains a persistent way of living in and organizing the social world. In terms of research, the whanau is one of several Māori concepts, or tikanga, that have become part of a methodology, a way of organizing a research group, a way of incorporating ethical procedures that report back to the community, a way of “giving voice” to the different sections of Māori communities, and a way of debating ideas and issues that have an impact on the research project. (p. 187)

Smith (1999) goes on to say, “when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms.” (p. 193). Therefore, researchers enabling a slam research methodology must attend to their own lived experiences in the field and be conscious of the research process as a relationship as well as “recognize the power dynamic that is embedded in the relationship” (Smith, 2012, p. 176) between the researcher and the community involved in the research. An important aspect of navigating this relationship is to understand the roles various members play in their community. Taking the time to
develop a strong community relationship has a positive contribution to the collaboration during the research process. For slam as a research methodology, this means understanding the direct implications for enabling a critical slam community.

Conversely, Fine (1992) says that it is necessary for feminist researchers to perceive themselves as advocates situated within a community. She maintains that “feminist researchers have little choice and much responsibility to shape our research through activist stance in collaboration with community-based political women” (Fine, 1992, p. 205). Consequently, it is difficult for research carried out for a scholarly purpose to somehow be separated from the context that it evolved from (Endsley, 2009). According to Endsley (2009), the research project is “held accountable by the relationship between researcher and community” (p. 94). For Fine (1992), the collaboration with the community requires the researcher to “press, provoke, and unbalance social inequity and to remember that such scholarship has serious consequences” (p. i). For example, when the internal issues of a community become open to the public through slam performance, the community is exposed to potential criticism, and misinterpretation. A further consequence is that the artist, whether self-identified or assigned to belonging to the community by the audience, becomes a target for criticism and misinterpretation.

Alternatively, feminist researchers and participatory action researchers like Fine would also argue that research is for the community, not outsiders. As a result, slam can have strengthening effects on community cohesion as performers share common lived experiences that may be common within, or across, communities. Thus, these performance events and pieces produce awareness of particular political discursive
practices with the intention to interfere with the influences of the current dominating discourses.

In general, slam is a performance whereby meaning is constantly negotiated. Slam is used by marginalized youth as a way to negotiate and work through existing sites of power within their own social and political spaces (Endsley, 2009). The use of slam poetry is also considered effective against dominant ideologies because it opens up discussions and engages audiences across academic borders that may not be otherwise possible. Although notions of community may be worrisome to embrace, at the same time:

there is power in numbers. Numbers provide support and support can assist in sustaining a purpose, a mission, and most fundamentally perhaps, encouragement. Solidarity is one benefit that standing in community and bearing witness can offer to those that join together. (Endsley, 2009, p. 94)

A slam research methodology provides the means to think about issues of access, representation, as well as notions of community. Through processes such as colonization, academic work has often excluded and silenced the voices of participants who have been marginalized through systematic methods of oppression. As researchers, the common goal is to develop critical research which helps to understand a social phenomenon and hence, effect social change. However, if particular voices are not represented, at any level of the research process, then it is fair to presume that those voices are also missing from the data, and in turn, the conclusions. Slam can be viewed as a possible instrument of expression and activism, meant to decipher a particular lived experience. A research methodology using slam poetry to conceptualize, frame, analyze and do research has the potential to interrogate spaces of exclusion and various subjectivities.
Interactions between Slam and the Academy

In order to lay out a context for the implications of using slam as a research methodology in arts-based educational research, with marginalized and oppressed communities, I examine the connections that exist between slam, ‘the arts’ and the academy. According to Keleta-Mae (2012), there has been an increase in the amount of performance poets that have been involved in research studies. However, that does not mean that the academy has welcomed slam into the institution. Upon further examination of the current presence of performance poetry in academic institutions, it becomes obvious the way in which slam has been given entrance into the “sophisticated fortress of Whiteness” (Keleta-Mae, 2007a, p. 31). Slam has gained access into academic institutions through processes such as, the naming of normal (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 78). Mechanisms, like analysis of the works of a performance poet of colour, depict the idea of inclusion of slam in spaces where power hierarchies are ‘normalized’. Interviews with many non-White performance poets are “always asked to pinpoint what makes [their] work representative of whichever cultural signifier peaks the interviewer’s interest. Then these interviewers usually collapse [their] poetry into musings on identity shaped to illuminate the challenge of the said segment of Canadian society” (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 77). For example, in a reflection by a slam poet:

They [academics and media critics] aren’t always aware of the forms and concerns that we engage, they are oblivious to many of the references we make, and in general, there is a lack of knowledge of the context within which our work should be situated. They don’t know anything about poetry performance by Canadian artists of colour. What this means is that they cannot engage our work in any profound way. They don’t know how to think about our work, and instead of acquiring the tools to discuss it properly, they gloss it over, ignore it, or worse, dismiss it outright. We may be mentioned, but what we are doing is not explored.
The same intelligence and attention to detail that we bring to our creative process is not applied to our work by academics or critics. (Kaie Kellough, a slam performance poet, in Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 77)

Compared to their White counterparts, performance poets of colour are often “asked to fit into one of the dominant constructions of ... multiculturalism and nationalism” (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 77). More often than not, the hierarchical relationship present between the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewed (artist) are highlighted by the discursive way the researcher takes up the performance poet’s work. This is particularly true when the poet is of colour. There is an underlying idea that those who are outside the “sophisticated fortress of Whiteness” are looking for a way in. But it seems that, unlike those performance poets of the dominant Eurocentric group, admission into the fortress comes with the price of displacing one’s identity. Performance poets of colour develop the ability to “morph, reposition, reiterate, and reinvent oneself, ...a flexibility born of necessity for those who routinely fall outside normal in instances when normal is being named” (Keleta-Mae, 2012, p. 78). For academic institutions, the flow of performance poets of colour intellect moves in one way which is from the outside rushing in.

The idea of slam performance poetry in academic settings is contentious. It may appear that slam, to be researched or studied, is forbidden in the academy but that is not quite true. In fact, there are complex reasons about epistemology, form, and its performative, linguistic and social/political framework as to why it may be less prevalent in institutional settings. However, this is also why it is gaining momentum in academic spaces.

There are studies suggesting there is tension between slam and the academy (Gregory, 2008; 2009). Some of these tensions can be associated to the potential cultural
capital of higher education for an outsider art form, like slam. Research indicates that slam poets seem irrational to ignore the “rich source of cultural capital which the prestigious institutions of the dominant literary world represent” (Gregory, 2009, p. 67). However, slam continues to permeate into the academy, giving researchers in the dominant literacy world the opportunity to not only capitalize on the large and diverse audience the outsider art form attracts, but also on reigning in, and subsequently controlling, this rebellious movement.

Nevertheless, there are increased signs of exchanges of mutual capitalization by the slam community and the academy. Differing from the common academic argument that genres like slam have devalued poetry, Bell (2004) and Kaufman and Heinz (1999) suggest that the success of slam has led to diverse audiences for academic readings and to a large number of poetry publications. Furthermore, the number of poetry workshops, writing programs and literary magazines featuring partnerships involving slam and academics lend insight into these increased interactions. These shifts can be construed as support of the increased popularity that slam has brought to the institution. On the contrary, slam has gradually accepted academic conventions with many slam poets publishing books of their work, performing in traditional academic settings or running formal courses to educate others on how to write and perform slam. These particular developments hint at an emerging approval of slam performers in the dominant literary world.

Despite the fact that such exchanges are increasing, tension between slam and the academy remains and continues to highlight its distinctive frameworks and discourses. Thus, I would argue that while it may be possible that many slam performers have
released poetry books, their publications are frequently self-published in small runs and sold, not in book stores, but at slam competition venues or over the Internet. Additionally, slam’s distinct oral performative structure is reflected in the number of slam videos and CDs which are released together with, or in place of, written texts. Academics, in contrast, have preserved the dominance of the written text, commonly publishing work through established poetry presses and magazines.

Looking closer, the issue surrounding the use of ‘urban’ language, or slang, further expands into the area of publishing and censorship. ‘Urban’ language is significantly marginalized in the academy when it comes to the climate of publishing. Research carried out within a slam methodology will be embedded with features of ‘urban’ language. By repressing ‘urban’ language in the academy, practitioners of slam are censored, which in turn, takes away from the attention, influence and power associated with the art form. This can be connected to Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013) exploration of the way ‘the arts’ have been structured through a discursive discourse approach. The inability for slam poetry to gain acceptance or the status of ‘art’ by institutional systems infers that only certain people in particular positions are able to mobilize ‘the arts’. This elite class of people, who have the power to assemble resources, are doing so in such a way as to exclude slam as a form of theory, performance and practice. This process of exclusion that occurs within the academy, through practices such as publishing, work to further oppress marginalized members of the community. Although it may appear that anyone can often make claims about what or how or for whom ‘the arts’ are; however, in actuality, “not everyone is socially or institutionally positioned to make such claims and certainly not everyone can mobilize institutional
resources on behalf of some activity or set of practices someone may or may not call ‘the arts’” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 223).

This process of omission and being in a position of power to effectively organize resources are contributing factors to the way certain voices are silenced and excluded in the academy. Publishers and academics are in positions of power and make decisions about what types of knowledge are acceptable and are able to be disseminated through affirming methods such as conducting research and publishing. Hence, this elite group of people are able to effectively gather together institutional resources and systemically keep slam as a theory, practice and performance out of the academy. By functioning in this way, publishers and academies are able to maintain the hierarchy of power whereby they are situated at the top.

Low (2011) has made similar arguments when talking about slam poetry in the secondary classroom. For instance, Low’s Slam School (2011) brings hip hop culture into the classroom and the spoken word curriculum. The spoken word curriculum “was a place to air and, at its best, work through these tensions, leading to new insights and understandings for teachers as well as students” (Low, 2011, p. 1). Low (2011) states:

the very reasons teachers and administrators might resist the deliberate introduction of hip-hop into the planned curriculum – the culture’s complete and contradictory politics of representation on issues such as gender, violence, sexuality, materialism, race, and language – are what make hip-hop so pedagogically vital. (p. 1)

Furthermore, Low’s (2011) discussion of the resistance, conflicts, and misinterpretations are indications of the way marginalized voices are prevented from being heard. This also points to the way those situated at the top of the hierarchy maintain their power. In this
sense, there is a lot of tension connected to bringing ‘urban’ language embedded in slam poetry into the academy when it comes to conducting research and publishing.

Complex and complicated connections between established and emerging art forms are important in exploring the exchange of both new and well-known artists and critics that impact the evolution of slam. Gendron (2002) suggests that the interaction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultural forms is most evident within activist art movements, where there is greater penetration to the mass market than within more ‘traditionalist’ arts. In opposition, Phelan (1993) writes of the advantage and disadvantage of performance art saying that “its resistance to mass reproduction is its greatest political strength” (p. 149).

While it may not be difficult to understand Phelan’s (1993) association between the political strength of performance art and her logical thinking that a ‘mass reproduction’ of such work would weaken the political value of an organic experience, raises issues. If an objective of avant-garde feminist art is to reveal and engage the public/audience on a large scale, then why resist it in the academy and its repeated performances? Actually, I wonder if performance can be reproduced at all – especially if it is based upon the assertion that each performance is a new representation and a re-enactment whose focus relies upon the actual instance that performance takes place, the audience members that are in attendance, the way in which that audience partakes and the position of the performer. In addition, the particular audience that has access to the oral performance art comprise an important part of its political nature. This brings forward the power relations that lie under the surface of allowing only a handful of individuals to be invited to participate in the potentially political insights that performance art can offer. It
is this constraint on who will have access to performing as an artist and participating as a member of the audience that makes me relate to academic systems embedded in a tradition of unfair gatekeepers that determine who will be granted insider status (Keleta-Mae, 2012).

Thus, innovative artists are generally seen as challenging the prevailing approach, introducing new ways of doing, understanding and consuming art, which threaten existing conventions and discourses. In this sense, slam can be aligned with avant-garde movements and the academy with traditionalist. Gendron (2002) demonstrates that each relies on the other for its continued existence. Slam obtains its identity, in part, by being defined in opposition to the dominant literary world. Kadushin (1976) suggests that striving against existing artistic conventions is typical of art movements. He depicts “art worlds as operating in ‘movement circles’, in which artists initially create works in opposition to established forms... [that it is frequently] the sense of embattlement that leads to common bonding between these artists” (p. 117). Kadushin (1976) argues that art forms which begin on the outskirts of traditional art habitually migrate inwards, becoming accepted as part of the very world which they once defined themselves against.

Lena and Peterson (2007) note that this pattern of development may also be true for practitioners of an art form. Whereas some strive towards new conventions, others react against this, seeking to maintain those which already govern the genre. In this way, changing convention may be viewed as a common feature of art worlds, as they emerge, develop, decline and give rise to new art forms. According to Lena and Peterson (2007), practitioners may react to these shifting conventions in two ways: they imply that ‘traditionalists’ seek to return to the genre as it was or as ‘avant-gardists’/activists, and
choose to carry on innovating within the genre, allowing it to evolve further to see the results. Lena and Peterson’s (2007) explanation can be applied to slam, yet it is not without limitations. The categories of ‘traditionalists’ and ‘avant-gardists’ are somewhat restrictive, since there are many slam poets who fit into neither camp or who combine elements of both. This leaves it open to consider not only how slam poets seek to define themselves in opposition to other art forms but also the diverse ways in which they respond to slam as an evolving art movement in different geographical and social contexts.

Scholars have expressed their concern with a slam-based research methodology as they do not want their research to be associated with the themes or content that has become part of publicized and commodified version of hip hop culture. However, that should not be mistakenly identified for the narratives that are shared by the slam performers as those narratives are an important aspect of the potential that slam requires, in order to be considered a viable research methodology. Slam poetry has distinction in its performance, language and social/political frameworks that differ from the watered down versions of hip hop that are heard now. Although, this is not due to mass reproduction as Phelan (1993) suggests; it is due to a lack of critical cultural understanding, production, and consumption on the part of the artist and on the part of the community as well as capitalist interests of the recording industry (Dimitriadis, 2001). By making a conscious decision to avoid using slam poetry due to their feelings of being uncomfortable with the ‘subversive’ messages being put forth (Kirsh, 2011), the academy is supporting the hegemony of the dominant culture (Apple, 2004) which excludes minority narratives and voices. Accordingly, the academy reproduces the social
inequalities among those who are of a minority culture. It is important that scholars/educators/artists take apart and disrupt hidden theories of knowing and systems of social belief assumptions that may structure the decisions they make and the traditions that they select. Slam works to “neutralize difference, assimilate, and establish for the “other” a worldview and a concept of self and community” (London, 2001 in Kanu, 2003, p. 69). For researchers, by using a slam-based research methodology, it becomes possible to facilitate a way to resist these challenges, by allowing artists the much needed space and opportunity to voice their lived experiences/narratives that enable slam to act as an agent of social change.

The context describing the contentious interaction of slam and the academy begins to set out the groundwork to discuss the implication of slam as a research methodology to enable critical research and critical communities. Academic institutions can be described as a “sophisticated fortress of Whiteness ... where few practitioners [/artists] ‘of colour’ have been allowed/‘qualified’ to permeate” (Keleta-Mae, 2007a, p. 31). Slam poetry can resist these challenges which reproduce dominant ideologies given that slam is a practice that accepts an unfiltered, authentic performance of lived experiences by artists who are not concerned with the aesthetics that limit traditional forms of poetry. Slam poetry demonstrates how marginalized individuals are attempting to reposition themselves in response to the dominant culture which continues to fail to understand their needs. Slam is used as a way to work through existing power structures and thereby break down barriers that are in place as a result of excluded and silenced voices. Slam poetry does not need to make pretty the voices of those who have been marginalized, rather it is focused on the ability it has to incite a response or connection
with its audience in a more real and gritty way which enables possibilities of opening up discussions to engage audiences across and within academic borders that may not be otherwise feasible. That being said, slam poetry needs to be accepted as a whole art form rather than attempting to fit it within the canon of a Westernized ‘art’ practice. It is not enough to allow pieces of slam poetry into academic work to comply with the agenda of publishers. It must be accepted in its entirety in order to fully uncover the potential of a slam research methodology.
CHAPTER FOUR:
VIDEO ANALYSES OF SLAM PERFORMANCES

Performance as (Re) presentation, a Topic of Research and a Process of Inquiry

Before providing video analyses of slam performances as a form of empirical work in an otherwise, theoretical or conceptual thesis, I should be clear about the ways in which I am contextualizing slam. For the purpose of my research, I am specifically thinking about slam performance in three ways: as a (re)presentation of research, as a topic of research and as a process of research inquiry. These are related to indigenous, participatory and anti-oppressive frameworks which I recognized earlier on as being fundamental to slam as a research methodology. These frameworks are, in turn, related to the themes I explored beforehand around representation, audience, participation, and cultural production.

Slam can be used to (re)present the findings from research studies that use typical qualitative methods. For instance, slam performance can act as the “staged re-enactment of ethnography derived notes” in which findings are enacted in embodied ways rather than entirely written (Alexander, 2005, p. 411). Hence, (re)presentation in slam is not only a text (for example, the poem, the script, the ethnography) but also an embodied, ephemeral depiction of cultural knowledge in a performative form (Conrad, 2008). It suggests the notion of ‘cultural performance’ which are the processes and resources available to community members to create and re-create (perform) their social identities (Denzin, 2005). Embodying cultural knowledge through slam not only portrays cultural practice but also leads to social change as the performers and audience members re-
imagine their social circumstances and realize that both are implicated in the performances (Alexander, 2005; Endsley, 2009). Thus, performance also becomes a critical mode of (re)presenting one’s own story/narrative with the understood or open claim, which the personal narrative can instruct, disrupt and incite a call to action. Moreover, slam as (re)presentation is critical since the participant (in this case, the performer) can directly contribute to the distribution of the research. According to indigenous theory and PAR frameworks, building relationships with participants or co-researchers is an important aspect of conducting/co-creating research (González y González & Lincoln, 2006; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). For the participant/co-researcher, being able to see that their contribution to the research is appreciated can build stronger relationships for future research in the slam community. Consequently, as a (re)presentation of research, slam poetry would allow alternative ways to disseminate research findings and, although not automatic, access to diverse audience members and participants, which may not have been accessible otherwise.

Slam can also be thought of as a topic of research. For instance, researchers can use the method of conducting a textual analysis from existing slam performance poetry pieces to arrive at conclusions about the nature of cultural production and/or human experience. Slam as a topic of research puts political and sociological imaginations to work in perceiving the politics and practices that form lived experiences (Denzin, 2003). Performance is used as a tool and a method of cultural consciousness and social transformation that seeks to position the performer and audience member as reflective practitioners.
Slam can also be employed by scholars as a method or process of inquiry to investigate and ask questions into a particular phenomenon. “Methods, as we consider them here, are the ways in which researchers encounter bodies to collect evidence and information, and to gain deeper understanding about performance” (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011, p. 211). To put it in another way, it can be applied as a means to obtain data or used to produce data about a particular social identity group. For instance, slam as a method would be that slam is the process by which data is being produced. Researchers can use slam to pose questions that have not been asked previously because of the lack of an appropriate process of inquiry. Slam makes it possible to conduct research in the area of lived experiences. For example, it can function to actively question existing sites of power hierarchies. On the other hand, for the performer and audience member, this inquiry process is twofold in that the initial interrogation occurs with the performer in preparing and enacting their piece and the second element is related to the exchange that takes place with the audience’s realization in how they are implicated in the performance. Moreover, it calls to question the strength and value of traditional methods of social inquiry that conduct research from the outside looking in and where researchers are far removed from the subjects of inquiry (Denzin, 2003).

The broad-based construction of slam as a research methodology opens up the possibility of engaging performance in strategic ways: performance as a (re)presentation or performance as a method of critical response, performance as a method of reporting knowledge and ideological critique, and performance as a method of inquiry or performance as a way of knowing. I realize I have discussed performance as (re)presentation, as a topic of research and as a process of inquiry separately but only for
the purpose of this paper and so that these ideas can be understood by the reader. However, the ways in which slam performances can be understood are very much interwoven with one another to the point that sometimes it is impossible to speak about them independently.

Developing slam poetry as a research methodology would enable artists, researchers, and educators to have access to a (re)presentational form of data production and analysis and a way to (re)present research findings that would be accessible to a diverse population. The result of using certain research practices is that sometimes the practice cannot be properly captured in a written text. Slam poetry is one of those research practices that simply cannot transcribe well textually. As previously mentioned, slam poetry exists in the moment; however, with advancements in technology, slam can be partially retained by means of videotaping. For those performances that have been videotaped, we are given the opportunity to relive, to some extent, these transient performance moments. Internet websites, such as YouTube, offer a space that is accessible by all those who can access the Internet, to publish and share their forms of cultural production. In contrast, traditional archival publishing methods of forms of artistic expressions offer only limited accessibility to a very narrow audience. YouTube videos, on the other hand, have greater accessibility as they can be streamed internationally and thus, allow exposure to a larger audience.

Below I provide analyses as empirical examples of videotaped slam performances. As I viewed these clips, I thought about the slam video examples as performances and as methodologies in order to develop my thesis about slam as a research methodology. By combining the theoretical chapters with practical examples of
slam poetry, I hope to provide a context for understanding the oral embodied performance-based cultural production as well as encourage the reader to think about what slam poetry may make possible, if anything, as a research methodology to assist in exploring questions of education. In the slam videos that I selected as practical examples, I consider each one’s contributions to slam as a research methodology through the lenses of audience and participation, anti-oppression and feminism, and representation. These are the issues I identified in earlier chapters as being central to a research methodology of slam poetry, and so the video examples are analyzed with this in mind.

In order to continue to attempt to unpack the theoretical, performative and practical frameworks that constitute a slam research methodology and develop my thesis study, I selected pieces of slam performances to view from the YouTube website. I began by searching for the words ‘slam poetry’ in the YouTube search tool bar. Then, I viewed approximately 50-75 video clips from the YouTube search results in the order they appeared. As I viewed these video clips, I was looking for examples that highlighted themes that I identified previously as being essential to constructing slam as a research methodology. After viewing all of the clips, I narrowed it down to three examples of videotaped slam performances that I wanted to use to highlight a different theme.

The Definition of Privilege by Adam Falkner
I selected this performance as an instance where the performer attempts to use slam to (re)present the interrogation or research that he has conducted into his own identity and lived experiences. In this occasion, slam is used to create a space where Adam can work through a crisis using an anti-oppressive framework (Felman, 1995). Felman (1995) suggests that working through a crisis can be done by offering testimonies of the experience of going through the crisis (i.e., by revisiting it in other ways). She argues that change can only really take place through entering and working through crises. Similarly, through Adam’s (re)presentation, he begins to question his lived experiences and identity through slam. In the video, he says:

And had no idea that darker skin of us with only minutes later/
end up with their chests on the pavement a stranger's hand/
scaling their waistlines and thighs while the lighter skinned of us would watch from the/
sidewalk with our tongues pretzel into knots like the barrels of/
cartoon rifles and I was nine years old on the verge/
beginning a fifteen-year obsession to prove I was not whatever it was that/
kept me off the pavement alongside Nathan and Davis/ (1:32 – 1:58)

In noting that this negotiation involves “liv[ing] through a crisis,” Felman (1995) explains that this exchange is called upon to be performative, and not just cognitive, insofar as they strive to produce and to enable, change. Both ... are interested not merely in new information, but, primarily, in the capacity of their recipients to transform themselves in function of the newness of that information. (p. 56)

For the performer, it is this process that moves and provokes the audience to a distinct political/emotional/intellectual place. In the video, Adam describes his “fifteen-year obsession” and describes how he worked through his crisis:

first by quitting classical piano lessons and growing my hair out/
and studying the Blues then traveling across continents with groups and quasi guilty Christians to build schools in Peru/
or community centers in Israel or soccer fields and Mexico or wherever the/fuck
and then working up the nerve to rock matching track suits/

Adam continues,

*I eventually started smoking so much weed before school that I got suspended for/
vomiting in the trash can during the third period English class/
and had to go to summer school which I really used as an opportunity to/
distribute the first of many mix tapes in my/
very serious rap career that I swore would be my ticket out of here/
in which I would use spoonfuls of words that my mother did not understand until/
I finally, not somehow, landed in college and registered in person/ (2:06 – 3:02)

During this recollection, the audience provides feedback in forms of laughter and
clapping which may indicate commonalities in experiences or they found it humorous but
immediately following that, the room goes absolutely silent as he recounts sharing his
earliest memory of race with his professor. In this video, how did slam operate as a form
of (re)presentation? In (re)presenting the crisis through a slam approach, Adam did not
simply replicate the lived experience or crisis, but supplemented it, giving it new
readings, new meanings, and new associations which in turn are negotiated with
members of the audience in possibly competing ways.

Acknowledging slam performance as anti-oppressive work allows one to enter
and revisit crises in different ways and develop a sense of self. This particular clip is
unique as Adam gives a contextual framework of which he invites the audience to read
into his performance at the beginning. Recast from a different angle, consider that
Adam’s (re)presentation of “learning about the Other with the goal of empathy often
involves seeing how “they” are like “us” (and that, deep down, we are all the same), i.e.,
it involves seeing the self in the Other, and thus, maintaining the centrality and normalcy
of the self” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 45). However, learning about the Other and interrogating sites of oppression through a slam framework can serve to “reinscribe sameness by allowing the privileged Self to see itself no differently than before” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 45). In contrast, Britzman (1998) argues that attempts to challenge oppression are required to involve changing the self, reconsidering who one is by seeing the Other as an ‘equal’ but on separate terms. Unlike Adam, it should not be the case that a performer

> looks for [his] own image in the other, and hence invests in knowledge as self-reflection and affirmation, [but that], in the process of coming to know, [the performer and audience members] invests in the rethinking of the self as an effect of, and condition for, encountering the other as an equal. (Britzman, 1998, p. 81)

Thus, Adam’s use of slam as a (re)presentation begins to deconstruct the performer/audience binary and Self/Other binary. His deconstruction of the Self/Other binary takes place when he responds to his professor when she asked:

> why Whiteness make me so/
> uncomfortable/
> and I said it doesn't but then I said/
> because I don't ever think about it and she replied/
> not having to think about something sounds like an amazing privilege/
> and then I started seeing kids who looked just like/
> me everywhere whose whole lives were bending into knots like the barrels of/
> cartoon rifles just to proved they weren't whatever it was that kept me/
> off the pavement when I was nine years old/
> which is to say guilty for something they didn't do which is to say I've/
> never owned slaves that never say the n-word/
> ever which is to say invisible I don't really have a race which is to say the/
> option of silence/ (3:18 – 4:05)

The performance was a (re)presentation not to reproduce normalcy or naming of normal (Keleta-Mae, 2012) but to interrogate his identity through self-reflection (how he is implicated in the dynamics of oppression), and self-reflexivity (he brings this
understanding to influence his own sense of self). We might ask as members of the audience, how does this knowledge come to influence my sense of self? Kumashiro (2000) suggests, “by changing how we read normalcy and Otherness, we can change how we read Others and ourselves” in our battle to give voice to those who are silenced (p. 45). Adam’s self-reflection (re)presented through a slam performance provides opportunities to audience members to participate in co-creating new meanings of the Self/Other binary, identities and privileges.

**Civil Rights by Shanita Jackson and Dakota Oder**

I selected the performance by Shanita and Dakota as it highlights themes of anti-oppression and feminism, as well as cultural production and notions of community, all of which I previously classified as being important to a slam research methodology. In my thesis, I claimed that slam can be seen as a feminist performance since it offers an opportunity to interrogate the experiences that the performer has lived which have been continually devalued by the patriarchal, classist, and racist society in which we live. As an example, in this performance, the female performers begin by saying:

Both: *I am a prime example of American unacceptability.*

Shanita: *I've always been too*
Dakota: *Gay*

Shanita: *Black*

Dakota: *Liberated*

Shanita: *Uppity*

Both: *And America has a time-honored tradition of keeping us in our place* (0:11 – 0:23)

In this part of the performance, Shanita and Dakota take turns and participate in verbally recognizing that this is the way they are envisioned through the dominant ideology. In this part of the performance, Shanita and Dakota name conventions of normalcy (Keletamae, 2012; Kumashiro, 2000) and by doing so, the performers call to question the construction of their own identities which are being re-/co-constructed even as they perform on stage. In turn, they provide the audience with an opportunity to read into their own identities and contribute to the construction as well.

Slam performances make way for multiple readings by member of the slam community. In this performance, there are several interactions that are occurring simultaneously between the two performers, Shanita and Dakota, and the audience, each allowing multiple readings. It may appear as though these two slam performers do not have much in common since their lived experiences would have been greatly different simply based on their physical appearances and historically oppressive past which they explain in their performance:

Shanita: *How could I forget anything when I look outside my window everyday and see the statistically correct neighborhood I was predicted to live in*
Dakota: *At least they can see you. All they have to do is look at you to see where you come from, what you’ve been through. I am still fighting for the right to exist. They’re telling my children we should be kept in pens so we can die out like you quarantine disease.*

Both: *How many times do I have to hear people say you fucking faggot/nigger?*

Shanita: *At least you know your last name. Our skin gives away our homeland but not our home. You aren’t owned or traded based on how hot you are as a commodity. We stood stark naked on a platform with the sun heating the skin beneath our shackles, watching our life value drain with every increasing bid. Bent backs, broken Bones and tear stained cotton is not something you could just forget.*

Both: *My bones are genetically thickened due to the brutality my ancestors bore*

Dakota: *My legacy has been swept under rugs. No one has ever sung me a closet spiritual to lead me to the Promised Land or made me rainbow cake to remind me of where I come from. We are history’s middle children who have to wear glitter to get attention. We are your siblings. We’re not looking to replace you on our family tree; we just want a hug at Christmas time.* (0:43 – 1:49)

However, their performance reveals a strong determination to use their differences in order to further their politically driven activist goals. It can be interpreted as co-creating a sense of community or coming together for a common purpose which is important for slam as a research methodology. In addition, the female performers also use slam in depicting the way it operates as a method or process of inquiry to deconstruct notions of community. Through a feminist approach, performance is a method to interrogate lived experiences and re-imagine a more desirable community (Endsley, 2009). By questioning the classist, racist, and patriarchal society that exists and inviting the audience to join in, slam begins to disrupt the classist, racist, and patriarchal society that has been created, thereby, possibly interrogating ideas of community and identity. This happens through
the reflexive critiques that occur during and after slam performances, the re-imagination and enactment of new identities and cultural practices that are historically oppressive influence new cultural identities. Below, is an instance in their performance where they begin to construct notions of community together in realizing that they should not be waging war against themselves:

Dakota: *Do you know why they call us faggots? The only history I have to cling to is that once I was a fire starter that wasn’t even worth the price of a match. Witches were burned on my ashes like I was never good enough to be anything but kindling anyways. You think your roots run deeper, but just because you couldn’t hear me screaming don’t mean they weren’t*

Both: *Raping and beating me, starving, and shocking, and anything to fix me.*

Shanita: *I know you are not talking to me about burning. Those crosses in Carolina blazed, those bombs in Birmingham incinerated, compare a sprinkle of holy water to skin shredding fire hoses.*

Dakota: *I was at Woolworth’s and Stonewall while you were too busy turning the other cheek to ask me if I’d walk with you. If it was possible that we could share roots. Didn’t want to see me at your rallies because it would complicate things. They tell me it was a different time, but you made sure times were changing, you just never looked back for your aunt Rosie and her roommate of 50 years.*

Shanita: *Our voices were only heard because we screamed.*

Dakota: *You didn’t give us a chance to open our mouths.*

Both: *Can’t you see they’re trying to kill me. Trying to kill us.*

Shanita: *So why are we waging a war between ourselves when*

Dakota: *It’s them, who put us on their hit list,*

Both: *We’ve been burned mercilessly, lynched ceremoniously, ostracized inhumanely, beaten brutally, lacerated, mutilated, segregated, bluntly hated (2:21 – 3:41)*
As a community of marginalized people, the performers speak to the audience and stand together to advocate for equal rights, for women, for race and for sexuality. This is supported in the video by the cheering of the audience. Relating back to multiple interpretations of slam, this performance could be recast from a different angle. Consider the history of Black women sacrificing themselves on behalf of White women, taking on roles which reject rather than attribute power to the women of colour. Slam performance, however, does not shy away from these opposing readings. They are all accurate even as they compete with one another which is why performance is a useful method for exploring the convergence of relationship building, privilege, and power. While the historical context would appear to sacrifice Shanita’s power, her choice to accept and include Dakota’s struggles as almost the same as her own and educate the rest of her audience about the oppressive history of Black people and successes is suggestive of the ability of performance poetry as a method to conduct research. Side by side the performers discover uneasiness together on a stage in a way that can invite the audience members to reconsider their own assumptions about race, gender, power, and sexuality. It is also possible that this performance could be read with Dakota as the main focus sharing her experiences of homosexuality and comparing that form of marginalization to Shanita’s lived experiences of growing up as a Black female. Such a reading would again recast the target of the piece which may raise questions about Dakota’s lived experiences.

The various subjectivities that influence the emerging meanings lead to critical discussions that can materialize and are shared after a slam performance creates a space where one can sort out how slam can be a powerful agent of change. Research conducted by Endsley (2009) with her student-artists had a similar outcome. She says,
they were experiencing the thrill of leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language. (Mulvey, 1975 in Endsley, 2009, p. 124)

She continues,

This transformation is exciting and all the more satisfying when the student-artist and audience member are able to acknowledge what is taking place as a result of their actions and reactions to one another’s performance. (p. 124)

This is an important point to consider. If I use Endsley’s (2009) description of the transformation that is occurring, there is actually something else happening that is equally exciting. Through this transformation, the slam poet recognizes that their work had an impact on their audience which is a significant step forward in considering slam as an agent of change and a process of inquiry. This is also tied into my discussion about interpretation and reflexive critiques, throughout.

It is also interesting to note that these two performers are young women. Perhaps one of the intentions here is that both performers are sharing information that would be important for any young person, regardless of how they may culturally identify themselves. Being able to recognize how widely their message can be applied is important because often in society a person of colour, sexuality or specific gender, especially a woman, does not hold a position of authority, and even if she does there is no guarantee that her work or instruction is always taken seriously. Having aligned slam with PAR, the discussions, the direction of the research and inquiry are determined with the participants instead of for them. Furthermore, through this performance, slam as a form to give voice and encourage social change becomes something relatable, attainable, and practical. Activism can be considered to be performed in a relevant way, provoking questions about whose forms of marginalization came out on top and what it means to be
accountable through interracial social relations. It seems that Civil Rights was deliberately designed as a political performance of oppression as well as a method that challenges the possible negative outcomes through this physically embodied action of coming together on stage.

**Niggers Niggas & Niggaz by Julian Curry**

I selected this performance for its explicit ability to call to attention the need to rework history/discourse which has been influenced by colonialism and imperialism by using slam as an anti-oppressive approach and a process of inquiry. In this performance, Julian voices a range of stereotypes and highlights the prevalence of the N-word among Black people. Just as with any slam performance, this piece can be read in multiple ways. Consider that his point was to show how stereotyping is harmful; it is possible that not all members of the audience heard the stereotypes being used in a critical way. For instance, at the beginning of the performance, Julian engages the crowd by saying “what’s up my niggas?” (0:05) to which the crowd responds in laughter. Julian calls out to the crowd again with the same question which incites the audience this time to call back with “what’s up”, “sup”, “wuddup” (0:09). At this point in the performance, it almost appears that the audience has not understood that it may have been Julian’s intent to draw
attention to the way the N-word has been culturally/socially (re)produced when members of the audience respond to what he then calls, his “trick question” (0:10). Alternatively, the reason some may have not responded to the stereotypes of their own group may be because they heard/interpreted the performer “using the stereotypes as they have traditionally been used, in other words, as a repetition of the same harmful meanings and effects they have historically perpetuated” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 43) in which case, Julian says in his performance, “and it is nice to see that the tricky ones haven’t tricked most of ya’ll into the answer” (0:13). He then goes into his performance using slam as a process to inquire and interrogate the increased popularity of the N-word by using the same phrases. For example, he says:

\[
\text{It use to be said by slave masters who weren’t in the business of breeding no dancing niggers/}
\text{They only wanted those good ol’ field niggers/}
\text{But I wonder how the field nigger would feel if he was sitting next to... anyday of the week and/}
\text{... he heard his little grandson speak dozens if not hundreds of times.../}
\text{the word that made Black families pack up in the South and move North (clapping from the audience)/}
\text{would he slam a couple of these boys against the doors and ask/}
\text{What’s the deal nigga? Do you think you’re keeping it real nigga? Do you know how I was killed nigga? They murdered me with hotrods and steel nigga./}
\text{Now how do you think this makes me feel nigga?/}
\text{Or would he just sit there and listen?/}
\text{Silently like White people do,/}
\text{silently like I do,/}
\text{silently like we all do/ (0:22 – 1:10)}
\]

Julian engages the audience by posing these questions to make them consider their use or misuse of the N-word which can be heard and seen throughout the members of the audience even after the performance is done. This instance speaks to the potential of slam as a research methodology to enable a critically conscious community because his performance takes time to portray something that may be commonly disregarded and
misused like the use of the N-word among Black people and other urban youths by taking the term apart and presenting it in a different context. This encourages the participants to interpret the performance from a new perspective. In his performance, Julian then proposes what he is going to do instead of sitting silently, he is “going down to Wall Street” (1:10). Again, he questions the audience,

*do you know why they call it Wall Street?/
because centuries ago there were these huge high walls/
and down on the street/
slaves with shackles on their feet/
were literally bought and sold by the fleet/
like shares of Intel/
phrases shouted daily like/
where's my niggas?/
there’s my niggas (pointing)/
who's niggas are those?/
and here we are centuries after slavery/
insulting our ancestors bravery/
by shouting phrases daily like where’s my nigga? (audience agrees), wuddup nigga? You know, you my nigga, right?/ (1:14 – 1:40)

During this part of the performance, you can see members of the audience shaking their heads in agreement and we hear the audience discussing the historical context compared to the present use of the term that Julian has presented. Again, this process of inquiry and coming to know these various perspectives is essential to developing a critical community.

Drawing from Kumashiro’s (2000) anti-oppressive work, had Julian included in his performance a “process of laboring to change the power of the stereotypes to harm, perhaps the audience members would have heard the stereotypes in the [performance] as a disruption, reworking, and supplementation [rather than a repetition] of the same harmful histories” (p. 42). Therefore, another reading is that the overuse of the N-word in Julian’s performance had a different meaning because he cites not only the harmful
meanings these stereotypes traditionally carry, but also the history of their own labor over
their own lived experiences to disrupt, critique, and rework these stereotypes. This is
evident in Julian’s piece when he begins to speak about Wall Street. Performance, while
not a complete solution for abolishing oppression, is one way to put the notions of
citation, supplementation, and repetition to use through a process of inquiry. Slam as a
critical anti-oppressive methodology can operate to address not only a lack of knowledge,
but a resistance to knowledge (Luhmann, 1998), and in particular, a resistance to any
knowledge that disrupts what one already ‘knows’. Britzman (1998) suggests,

that we unconsciously desire learning only that which affirms what we already
know and our own sense of self. In fact, it could also be argued that we
unconsciously desire to learn only that which affirms our sense that we are good
people and that we resist learning anything that reveals our complicity with
racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. (in Kumashiro, 2000, p. 43)

An anti-oppressive approach to performance involves overcoming the resistance to social
transformation and learning, rather, than a desire for change and or making a difference.
Kumashiro (2000) argues that “oppression is a situation or dynamic in which certain
ways of being (e.g., having certain identities) are privileged in society while others are
marginalized” (p. 25). Slam poetry is an anti-oppressive methodology as it sheds light on
voice, access and representation. Performing slam poetry is a means to question one’s
views, realities and ideas about oneself and society. Performance of these narratives,

itself, is an act of resistance. Julian’s performance invites the audience to be unsatisfied
with what is being learned, said, and known and instead to construct disruptive, different
understandings. Only then can slam be seen to operate as a process of inquiry that is
antithetical to the ways we traditionally think about researching, learning, and social
change that has been informed by theories of anti-oppression (Kumashiro, 2000).
This approach is organic. It is limited by the parameters set by the performer, which are dependent on what they are willing to share through their embodied performance. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that members of the audience in the talk-back process that can occur during a performance may address themes beyond what is comfortable to the performer. Slam, as a research methodology, challenges scholars to engage in research without judgement and encourages understanding of others who may have different values and beliefs. Slam enabled as a research methodology would be an effective process for bringing to surface the perspectives of different groups in a community and encouraging people to speak and listen to each other while enabling critically conscious societies.

There are parallels that exist between slam poetry performance and performance theatre in terms of silenced voices. Goldstein’s (2008) work in performance ethnography theatre provides similar links between these ideas on silenced voices and offers ways that performance can be used to transform these experiences for marginalized people. For instance,

Using theater techniques to raise awareness and expose the culture of those marginalized, Boal’s (1979) work can be situated in support of the post-structuralist ideas that suggest performance could entail disruption, producing new concepts in the process. He elaborates on what exactly the “new concepts” might be by describing a poetics of the oppressed, one whose goal is to transform the spectator into an actor, that is, an active participant in the drama production. (in Endsley, 2009, p. 111)

Similar to Boal (1979) and Goldstein (2008; 2006), slam poetry performances purposely engages with members of the audience and hopes to incite them to explore their own narratives as they may or may not connect to a particular performance. Boal (1979) states that “revolutionary theater must allow the spectator to work out new endings and
meanings of their own” (p. 122). In slam, the performer or actor, as in theatre, opens up the space for conversations and discussions around the performance. To relate to my previous point, performances raises awareness and understanding that may not have otherwise been possible. The possibility that slam and performance-based methodologies have to call out competing discourses allows for further action and interrogation to occur.

Social change begins to occur when the slam performers/subjects are able to re-negotiate a means to create meaning that no longer positions them as a victim. Rather, their re-positioning or re-alignment of their situation alters the social and lived narratives that have been placed on them at least within that transient moment. By applying their authority in this method, they develop the ability to educate others (in this case, the audience members) in the same way. Through the development and re-development of subjectivity the performers create new rendering of old oppressive experiences and tell new stories within existing social restrictions. Slam performance offers a mode to be seen and heard for artists whose concerns, lives, and dreams are often not given serious attention. This seemingly autonomous effort at understanding life becomes larger than the performer and the audience when what is private to one becomes placed in context to what is private to many. Comprehending the active collaboration between the performer and audience is fundamental for broadening the reach that performance art provides to present the outcomes of social inequality. To this point, Endsley (2009) states:

these active relationships demand that all those present in a performance (artist and audience) recognize their location, position, and participation in the construction of the performance, as well as in the construction of the content of the performance. Then the oppressive sense of isolation that often results from experiences of injustice or inequality can potentially be identified and altered once these personal experiences are located within the structural divisions that determine material aspects of social existence. (p. 25)
Performing slam makes accessible a dialogue through which a different image of such power structures can be made out. The ideas that can be perceived are not always seen clearly or heard enough. Nevertheless, once these power structures are recognized and their outcomes are understood in relation to lived experiences, then new plans of action (or attempts) can be created in order to encourage social transformation.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS OF SLAM AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As the final chapter in this thesis study, I will offer a brief summary of the preceding chapters and discuss the implications for slam as a research methodology.

Summary

In this thesis study, I have theorized slam performance poetry as a research methodology in order to disrupt and tangle with issues of access and representation in arts-based educational research. I explored how slam poetry is performance, practice, and theory in hopes that academic scholars may understand the reasons to set up an interdisciplinary approach that will position the researchers and members of the audience within the practice. I examined the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, performative and practical frameworks that constitute slam poetry as a research methodology. In addition, I thought about whether or not slam poetry could be enabled as a research methodology to study questions of education. Throughout my study, I examined the implications of using slam poetry as a research methodology as an alternative approach which may assist in our search for an interdisciplinary cultural methodology.

I began by setting up the grounds upon which my thesis is built by thinking of slam as cultural production to help theorize it as a research methodology. I discussed the shift from the rhetoric of effects to the rhetoric of cultural production that Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) puts forward which accentuates the importance of symbolic creativity and conditions that shape lived experiences. I take this idea a step further by suggesting that ‘the arts’ need to be taken out of arts-based educational research since the
underpinning assumption associated with ‘the arts’ refer to high arts which always leads to power hierarchies and silenced voices. By proposing that arts-based educational research needs to ‘unart’ itself, scholars are not forced to fit slam into an ‘art language’ rather they can think about what it may enable if we can think of cultural production as a research methodology.

My theoretical and conceptual framework brings together various sources of literature to think about slam. I introduce basic ideas about what is slam: slam is poetry; slam is performed; slam is competitive; slam is interactive; and slam is community (Smith & Kraynak, 2009). After that, I align my work with participatory action research (PAR) and performance-based research methodologies because of their use of participants and audience in the research process. Then, I developed why, how, implications for slam as a research methodology – in which issues of community, audience, and anti-oppression were embedded. The discussion ends with an exploration of the interaction between slam and the academy.

Lastly, I describe the specific ways I am thinking about slam performance: as a (re)presentation of research, as a topic of research and as a process of inquiry. Having described slam as a transient moment, I reviewed YouTube videos and other video clips that performance poets upload online to share their narratives. In viewing the YouTube video clips, I thought about these as performances and methodologies and their contributions to slam as a research methodology through the lens of the audience, participation, representation, anti-oppression and feminism.
Slam as a Contribution to an Ethics of Embodiment

My work contributes to discussions of what it means to pursue an ethics of embodiment – it provides an example of what such an ethic looks like. According to La Jevic and Springgay (2008), “the separation of morals from ethics distinguishes the approach to an ethics of embodiment because it depends upon an examination of engagement with others through encounters with others” (in Endsley, 2009, p. 172). If we agree that, during a slam poetry performance, there are constant shifts in artists’ and audiences’ roles, which are reliant on one another and are co-constructed, reconstructed and interpreted based on one another’s interactions and connections during the performance, then it is fair to make the association and say that identity is dependent on the interaction with one another. La Jevic and Springgay (2008) discuss this as an ethics of embodiment. For although “bodies/selves cannot exist without other bodies/selves” neither are “the two reducible to one another” which means that individual authority is only as powerful and meaningful as the community discourse in which it is employed (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008, p. 70). The moment a slam artist takes the stage in an informal institution, their identity is being reconstructed and interpreted by the audience. Once they start their performance, their poetry is critically being understood and analyzed.

Implications

Slam poetry enabled as a research methodology positions researchers and members of the audience within the framework that inform the foundation, construction and reaction of performance poetry. Most importantly, it acts as a form of resistance to classist, racist, colonized and patriarchal ways. I offer that producing and performing
slam as a means of cultural development, social criticism, and resistance is a viable practice. Negotiating cultural development through slam performance provides society with an approach and a chance to attempt to rebuild for themselves the foundation of authority and sense of independence that performance art appears to provide. I find it more politically useful to inform the public on the method and technique of slam instead of upholding its exclusive position.

Slam poetry enabled as a research methodology is an extension and expansion of arts-based educational practices which in itself extends traditional qualitative research methodologies. For instance, slam poetry as a research methodology encourages researchers to push the arts-based educational research approach forward by asking them to consider reimagining the current discursive discourse on arts-based educational research practices. Slam as performance poetry highlights the need for arts-based educational research to ‘unart’ itself to avoid perpetuating cycles of marginalization and by exposing the ways in which voices are silenced by and within institutional settings through practices such as funding and publishing.

Reimagining the approach of arts-based educational research rather than forcing slam into an ‘art language’ requires a different skill set from the researcher compared to traditional qualitative methodologies. Therefore, it is important for academic researchers to consider the possibilities that knowledge can be created with new forms of art and linked to new ways of understanding, such as the knowledge created through a slam research methodology. By means of the language, practices, and forms of the arts and specifically, slam poetry, researchers are allowed to think and see in new and inventive ways.
Furthermore, developing a slam poetry research methodology can enable researchers who are interested in exploring forms of experiences and narratives that are inaccessible or difficult to obtain through existing representational forms an alternative approach. With the possibilities of YouTube, slam becomes a poetry performance that can be re-lived, to some extent, allowing for the video clips to be thought of as performances and methodologies. Through those means, slam can be used to engage in discussions of access as well as it demonstrates the various ways in which individuals who have been oppressed are attempting to relocate themselves in response to a dominant culture that continues to be unsuccessful in understanding their needs.

According to Keleta-Mae (2012), this “movement to assemble an academic language of inquiry, framework of analysis, and methodology of critique” (p. 79) for this rapidly growing art form is being contested and is in much conflict. However, using Michael Apple’s (2004) framework of The Hidden Curriculum to advocate for the importance of conflict, slam can lead us to new understandings, insights and knowledge that can be transferable to the discourse and discussions on research methodology. The narratives of conflict and interpretation and perhaps even misinterpretation that occurs between performer and audience member further emphasizes the value of this type of research and provides a different response to addressing issues of representation, access and conflict.

Slam as a research methodology can interrupt how the concept of the arts shapes the way we think and talk about these art practices in order to provoke a different way of thinking, one that perhaps requires that we abandon the Westernize ‘art’ practices that make up the concept of arts-based educational research altogether.
REFERENCES


