

# **Epistemic Barriers and Breakthroughs:**

## **Black Female Spoken Word Artist's Journey to Being Heard on Stage**



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## **Introduction:**

While poetry slams are heralded as safe havens for personal expression, they are marred by the pervasive influence of epistemic violence. As Suzen Baraka, a distinguished two-time Emmy Award-winning poet, poignantly stated in her interview: "It's almost as if they put us on a pedestal just to disempower us." Baraka's observation highlights a critical tension within poetry slams—while it provides a stage for self-expression, poetry slams simultaneously enforce structures that undermine the value of Black female poets' contributions. Through an in-depth analysis of interviews, this paper delves into how slams operate as a site of epistemic violence that obstructs the acknowledgment and assessment of Black women's words. Yet, equally important is the exploration of how Black women poets assert their epistemic agency in the face of such adversity. In this section of the analysis, I investigate how Black women actively confront and transform the knowledge landscape. Ultimately, by conducting and analyzing interviews with Black female spoken word artists, this paper highlights the significance of using their narratives to understand their roles and experiences as epistemological agents.

## **Background: Slam Competitions as Sites of Knowledge Production**

Emerging in 1984, poetry slams were created by Marc Smith in Chicago, who sought to revitalize poetry by introducing a competitive element to spoken word.<sup>1</sup> Spoken word is a form of poetry delivered aloud and performed before an audience. Slam poetry, a subset of spoken word, distinguishes itself by demanding a highly interactive relationship between performer and audience. In slam, a random panel of judges from the audience evaluates the performance by

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<sup>1</sup> Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. University of Michigan Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.322627>.

assigning scores ranging from one ('poor quality') to ten ('outstanding quality').<sup>2</sup> Non-judge audience members also participate by either 'booing' or applauding the judges' scores which highlights the collective involvement in evaluating and rewarding the best performances. After each slam competition, a winner is crowned and advances to higher-level contests, with the goal of becoming a finalist on a more prominent stage.

Although slam competitions were established in 1984, their evolution into spaces for activism and storytelling was deeply influenced by the Black Arts Movement.<sup>3</sup> Originating in the mid-1960s, the Black Arts Movement focused on empowering Black communities through cultural and artistic expression. The movement's goals were to "address black audiences, celebrate the African American cultural tradition (known as the "black aesthetic"), and take poetry, drama, music, and visual art to the streets".<sup>4</sup> During the Black Arts Movement, poets were characterized by their militancy, as they were deeply involved in the broader Black Power movement. Black Arts Poets disrupted the dominant white discourse by addressing the social and economic struggles faced by Black communities and were instrumental in cultivating Black consciousness.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Black Arts poets, such as Amiri Baraka, emphasized that poetry should ignite social and political consciousness while being performed in a manner that could resonate and be understood by the Black masses.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, poets were encouraged to draw inspiration from the cadence of powerful speakers like Malcolm X rather than Western poetic

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<sup>2</sup> Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. University of Michigan Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.322627>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsby II, Howard. *The black arts enterprise and the production of African American poetry*. University of Michigan Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. University of Michigan Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.322627>.

traditions.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, artists developed a distinct Black aesthetic for spoken word, blending Black performance traditions with contemporary urban realism. This style incorporated street language, West African vocabulary, percussive sounds, and rhythms, singing, scat, rapid diction, repetition, and call and response into performances.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary slam events, such as the BRIC Brooklyn Poetry Slams and Nuyorican Bowery Slams, which I attended as part of my research, retain, and embody many of the revolutionary ideals of the Black Arts Movement. For instance, many features of Black aesthetics, essential to fostering audience-performer connections, are prominent in poetry slams, including call and response and percussive sounds. Call and response is a Sub-Saharan African tradition that involves speaker's statements ("calls") that prompt responses from the audience.<sup>9</sup> In slam, this dynamic is often seen when poets introduce a new piece by saying, 'This is a new poem', to which the audience enthusiastically responds with 'New shit!'—a collective expression of appreciation for the unprecedented performance. Additionally, in poetry slams, percussive sounds—striking, hitting, or tapping an object—manifest when audience members resonate with a poet's words.<sup>10</sup> As a response to the emotional and rhythmic flow of the performance, audience members are often moved to stomp, clap, or snap their fingers.

The subjects explored in poetry slams uphold the Black Arts Movement's legacy, with poets utilizing their art as a tool for social empowerment. At slam competitions, many poets use their work as a diagnostic tool to critique and challenge the socio-political structures that shape

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<sup>7</sup> Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. University of Michigan Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.322627>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richards-Greaves, Gillian R. 2016. "'Say Hallelujah, Somebody' and 'I Will Call upon the Lord': An Examination of Call-and-Response in the Black Church." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 40 (3): 192–204. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=ofm&AN=125104213&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>10</sup> Francis, Sherese. "African vibrations: the percussive approach in hip-hop music." (2012).

their lives. For example, at BRIC I witnessed a poet speak on how genocide is a deliberate outcome of neo-liberalism and settler colonialism. At a Nuyorican slam competition, I witnessed Lyrical Faith, a Black educator, activist, and spoken word artist of 12 years perform a poem about Sha'Carri Richardson and Simone Biles. Incorporating gymnastics and track terminology into her poem, Faith deftly illustrated how society reacts with outrage when Black women take time off for mental health or injury.

Performances addressing social justice issues are highly prevalent in slam competitions and often garner the most acclaim from both audiences and judges.<sup>11</sup> These poems are highly valued and scored for their ability to challenge the audience's perception of the world and inspire deep emotional resonance. This appreciation for such knowledge demonstrates how slam competitions are spaces where creative ways of knowing thrive. Slam competitions serve as unique sites of knowledge production and dissemination, where poets skillfully utilize their poetry to reflect on and interrogate social injustices.

As a locus of knowledge production, this paper examines how poetry slams simultaneously operate as a site of epistemic violence and a platform for epistemic agency. The study of epistemic violence and agency in slam develops across four sections. In the first section, I outline the methodology of my research, including the slam venues I attended and the interview questions I posed to six Black female spoken word artists. In the second section, I draw on the work of Kristie Dotson, a philosopher, to explore the concept of epistemic violence, focusing on how pernicious ignorance causes testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. The next section reads new dimensions of epistemic violence by turning to the narratives of contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. University of Michigan Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.322627>.

Black female spoken word artists. In this section, I explore how poetry slams uniquely perpetuate epistemic violence and negatively impact Black women's ability to produce and disseminate knowledge. The final section examines how Black women harness their performances to challenge epistemic violence and assert their roles as authoritative creators of knowledge.

### **Section 1. Methodology**

Over a six-week period, I conducted a literature review to examine the history of spoken word, slam competitions, and epistemic violence. As part of my research, I attended local New York City slam poetry events, including Nuyorican Bowery Slam and BRIC Brooklyn Poetry Slam. The core of my research involved in-depth one-hour online interviews with six Black female spoken word artists including Lyrical Faith, Suzen Baraka, Kyla Lacey, Luna,<sup>12</sup> Shnayjaah Jeanty, and Sonya Marie. Through these interviews, I explored their motivations for becoming spoken word artists, their encounters at slam competitions, and the stories behind their poems. The list of questions I posed is outlined below:

1. Can you tell me about your professional and personal background and how you first became interested in spoken word?
2. What drove you to compete in poetry slams?
3. Do you have any favorite venues you like to perform in and why?
4. How would you describe your creative process and the subjects you decide to write about?
3. What factors do you consider when selecting the performance strategies you employ?

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<sup>12</sup> Luna is a pseudonym for a spoken word artist who would like to remain anonymous

4. Do you believe certain themes or subjects tend to resonate more deeply with audiences at spoken word events, including in slam competitions?
  5. What sorts of conversations do you find yourself having after performing? How do you respond to criticism and feedback?
  7. What has been your most memorable moment in your career as a spoken word artist?
  8. What does being 'heard' on stage mean to you, both as a performer and as a Black woman?
  9. What unique strengths or perspectives do you feel you bring to the spoken word community?
  11. If there is anything else you want to add regarding your experiences and encounters as a Black female spoken word artist?
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## **Section 2. Kristie Dotson: Epistemic Violence**

As Black women navigate the world carrying the social scars of their identity, it is unsurprising that poetry slams emerge as sites of epistemic violence. In this section, I utilize Kristie Dotson's framework of epistemic violence to define epistemic violence and its key components: reliable ignorance, pernicious ignorance, testimonial smothering, and testimonial quieting. The experiences of Lyrical Faith and Shnayjaah Jeanty, two Black female spoken word artists, will be examined to elucidate these concepts.

Epistemology, the study of knowledge, focuses on understanding the roots of our knowledge and how it is substantiated.<sup>13</sup> This includes understanding what we know and how

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<sup>13</sup> Steup, Matthias, and Ram Neta. "Epistemology." (2005).

that knowledge was acquired.<sup>14</sup> In a white patriarchal society, white Western knowledge predominantly shapes what is widely accepted and understood as truth. As a result, the perspectives and experiences of marginalized individuals are often excluded from the broader discourse. In her paper, *Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing*, Kristie Dotson examines how pernicious ignorance impedes marginalized individuals' capacity to share knowledge, thus, leading to epistemic violence.

Dotson first clarifies how a successful linguistic exchange between a speaker and audience must meet the condition of "reciprocity."<sup>15</sup> Reciprocity demands that an audience "hears" a speaker where the audience comprehends both the speaker's words and their underlying intentions.<sup>16</sup> However, a speaker cannot force an audience to hear them. Instead, the speaker depends on an audience willing and capable of doing so.<sup>17</sup> Pernicious ignorance impedes the process of understanding and truly "hearing" a speaker. According to Dotson, **pernicious ignorance** is reliable ignorance that causes harm. **Reliable ignorance** is a "predictable cognitive gap in cognitive resources"; it is a knowledge gap that is expected to happen.<sup>18</sup> For instance, one can expect a three-year-old to be reliably ignorant of voting practices in the U.S. due to their limited cognitive capacities.<sup>19</sup> Hence, when an adult speaks about voting rights, the 3-year-old will presumably fail to "hear" them. In this sense, reliable ignorance is not harmful. However, when harm does occur, reliable ignorance becomes pernicious ignorance. For example, a three-year-old is also reliably ignorant of the effects of a fire. Thus, like the voting practices

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<sup>14</sup> Steup, Matthias, and Ram Neta. "Epistemology." (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-257.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

example, the 3-year-old would also fail to “hear” an adult speaker when the adult attempts to warn them about fire, a substance they are not familiar with.<sup>20</sup> Pernicious ignorance would occur in an instance in which the 3-year-old has set fire to a property. The 3-year-old harmfully failed to heed the speaker's words. Pernicious ignorance obstructs marginalized groups' capacity to share knowledge as pernicious ignorance results in epistemic violence. Dotson defines *epistemic violence* as "a refusal, intentional or not, or failure of reciprocity in communication due to pernicious ignorance."<sup>21</sup> Dotson describes two forms of epistemic violence: Testimonial quieting and Testimonial smothering. I will explore how the experiences of the Black spoken word artists I interviewed exemplify these phenomena.

**Testimonial quieting** occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower due to the speaker's epistemically disadvantageous identity.<sup>22</sup> Black women are burdened with stereotypes that paint them as "mammies, welfare mothers, and whores."<sup>23</sup> As these stereotypes undermine how others perceive Black women's cognitive authority and credibility, when they share their knowledge, Black women are not deemed credible knowers. Dotson cites the work of Nancy Tuana to describe how in this case, reliable ignorance, a predictable cognitive gap in cognitive resources, is “produced by the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities.”<sup>24</sup> According to Tuana, certain social identities can be made to indicate a lack of credibility. She writes: "In instances such as these [where epistemically disadvantaged identities produce ignorance] it is not simply facts, events, practices, or technologies that are rendered not

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<sup>20</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-257.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Tuana, Nancy. "The speculum of ignorance: The women's health movement and epistemologies of ignorance." *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 1-19.

known, but individuals and groups who are rendered 'not knowers.'<sup>25</sup> This ignorance is pernicious as denying a person's ability to be a knower harmfully dismisses their testimony as irrelevant. When certain social groups are judged according to stereotypes against them, people fail to detect the truth and validity in their testimonies and ignorantly render them as mere images of the stereotypes placed on them.<sup>26</sup> When this happens, testimonial quieting also occurs, as the audience fails to genuinely 'hear' a speaker they do not take seriously.

In her interview, Lyrical Faith, a Black educator, activist, and spoken word artist of 12 years, expressed deep frustration when recalling a time when she nearly experienced testimonial quieting. After performing at an open mic event, a man approached Lyrical and said, "When you first walked in, I thought you were just a pretty face. But then you opened your mouth and did your poetry." The use of the phrase "just a pretty face" is a form of objectification that is consistent with the Jezebel trope that hypersexualizes Black women and paints them as mere sexually attractive and promiscuous objects.<sup>27</sup> Due to the Jezebel stereotype, the man was reliably ignorant to Lyrical's intellectual capacities. This ignorance is particularly pernicious as the man's wrongful assumption that Lyrical Faith had nothing insightful to say left Lyrical feeling disgusted as she questioned why the man felt entitled to impose his expectations on her. Lyrical Faith's experience of being expected to be "just a pretty face" until she "opened her mouth" exemplifies how she is not initially perceived as a credible knower or an epistemological agent until she challenges stereotypes unfairly held against her. As Lyrical was able to "prove

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<sup>25</sup>Tuana, Nancy. "The speculum of ignorance: The women's health movement and epistemologies of ignorance." *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 1-19.

<sup>26</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011):

<sup>27</sup>Simmons, Christina. "African Americans and sexual victorianism in the social hygiene movement, 1910-40." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (1993): 51-75.

herself”, the process of testimonial quieting did not fully occur. In the end, the man did render Lyrical a credible speaker. Nonetheless, one can easily imagine how, in many cases, men, like the one who approached Lyrical, do not give Black women the opportunity to "prove themselves", a burden Black women should not have to bear. In such instances, Black women are not recognized as credible knowers but are instead judged through the lens of harmful stereotypes. Hence, their words aren't truly heard, and they are consequently victim to the full force of testimonial quieting.

The other form of epistemic violence Dotson discusses is **Testimonial smothering** which occurs when the speaker perceives their audience as incapable of comprehending their testimony. In a linguistic exchange, the audience must demonstrate accurate intelligibility.<sup>28</sup> Accurate intelligibility means that the audience genuinely understands the speaker's words and what the speaker is trying to communicate with those words.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, an audience is aware of the information they may need help comprehending due to an unfamiliarity with a particular domain of knowledge. However, if an audience fails to demonstrate their accurate intelligibility, the speaker concludes that they are incapable of comprehending the depth of their knowledge. Testimonial smothering occurs when a speaker feels the need to censor their words or silence themselves because the audience fails to demonstrate accurate intelligibility and prove themselves competent.<sup>30</sup>

In her interview, Shnayjaah Jeanty, the 2024 South Regional Youth Poet Laureate, recounted experiencing testimonial quieting during the delivery of her "Genesis" poem.

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<sup>28</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011)

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Shnayjaah Jeanty began her spoken word career in high school as a member of the slam team. At slam competitions, Shaanyajh frequently performs her poem “Genesis”, which utilizes the Biblical scripture Genesis as an extended metaphor to critique the racism embedded in American dating preferences. Shnayjaah recounted that after performing her poem, a white male teammate reacted angrily, claiming that her poem overlooked the reality of racism against white people. He asserted that, unlike Black people, white people are disadvantaged "everywhere"—in music, colleges, and slam competitions. To understand Shnayjaah's teammate's behavior, it is crucial to consider how his reliable ignorance stems from situated ignorance or "unknowing" that is prompted by different social positions.<sup>31</sup> Shnayjaah’s teammate navigates life as a white man whose privileged social position shields him from the dehumanizing effects of racial dating preferences that devalue Black women’s beauty. Utilizing Kristie Dotson's framework, he is "reliably ignorant" to the realities of racism and its impact on Black women. However, his ignorance moves into the realm of pernicious ignorance when, rather than engaging with Shnayjaah’s words as an opportunity to learn, he becomes defensive at her critique of America’s beauty standards and instead victimizes himself as a white man. By insisting that white people face racism "everywhere," he actively deflects from the purpose of Shnayjaah’s poem. Ergo, the white teammate failed to demonstrate to Shnayjaah that he has accurate intelligibility; the capacity to accurately grasp the significance and intentions behind her words. Although this experience has not discouraged Shnayjaah from performing, she is more reluctant to perform for predominantly white audiences. Shnayjaah’s reluctance reflects a form of testimonial smothering

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<sup>31</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011)

as the white man's failure to demonstrate accurate intelligibility dictates the spaces she decides to share her experiences.

Kristie Dotson's exploration of epistemic violence underscores how pernicious ignorance affects Black female spoken word artists' credibility and their audience's ability to genuinely comprehend their knowledge. In the next section, I investigate how slam competitions function as unique sites of epistemic violence.

### **Section 3. How Slam Poetry Reinforces Epistemic Violence**

In this section of the paper, I explore how epistemic violence manifests in ways both consistent with and beyond the framework outlined by Dotson. Specifically, I highlight how slam poetry reinforces and perpetuates epistemic violence by 1. Privileging certain narratives more than others and 2. exploiting and fetishizing Black women's knowledge and experiences.

#### **Section 3.1 Privileging Certain Narratives Over Others**

As previously noted, poetry slams are competitive spoken word events where poets strive to deeply connect with the audience to secure high scores. This competitive format establishes a hierarchy, which leads to some poems being valued more highly than others. Spoken Word artist, Luna, describes the epistemological consequences that arise when certain stories are privileged over others due to the speaker's identity.

In her interview, Luna expressed initial intrigue at the existence of all-women competitions such as the Womxn of the World Poetry Slam. However, the more slams Luna competed in, the more she recognized the critical need for all-women slams. According to Luna, when a man performs a poem, particularly one expressing woeful emotions or addressing

sensitive topics like sexual assault, his poem tends to receive higher points and praise than when a woman performs a poem on the same subjects. Consequently, Luna prefers participating in all-women slams. I conceptualize the unfair discrepancy in scoring as a manifestation of epistemic violence, *the denial or failure of reciprocity in communication due to pernicious ignorance*. Specifically epistemic violence in the form of testimonial smothering which occurs when the *speaker perceives their audience as incapable of comprehending their testimony*.

The patriarchy stigmatizes emotional vulnerability in men, emasculating those who exhibit sadness and/or pain.<sup>32</sup> Due to its rarity, male vulnerability is often regarded as a more courageous form of expression than female vulnerability. Likewise, due to the high prevalence of female sexual victims, male accounts of sexual assault are deemed rare and thus more poignant than female accounts, which is perceived as an unfortunate norm. Therefore, female performances on pain and assault are often seen as less meaningful and emotionally engaging than those by men. Drawing from spoken word artist Luna's experiences, it appears that many audience members at slams are reliably ignorant to such biases and are thus more receptive to, and perhaps even more willing to validate, male narratives over female poets' narratives. Therefore, artists such as Luna believe that audiences and judges do not afford female poets the same level of accurate intelligibility as their male counterparts. This results in a lack of genuine appreciation for the significance of female artists' work and knowledge. As Luna feels compelled to avoid certain topics, it becomes evident that poetry slams perpetuate an inequitable hierarchy where a speaker's identity affects the evaluation of their work. This results in some forms of expression being more validated than others, leading women like Luna to censor themselves—an example of testimonial smothering.

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<sup>32</sup> Munsch, Christin L., and Kjerstin Gruys. "What threatens, defines: Tracing the symbolic boundaries of contemporary masculinity." *Sex Roles* 79, no. 7 (2018): 375-392.

### Section 3.2. **Fetishization and Exploitation of Black Women's Knowledge**

Through my interviews, I have identified how epistemic violence also manifests in ways beyond those discussed in Kristie Dotson's framework. Specifically, many Black women performers in slam competitions face a paradox: their knowledge is simultaneously deemed insignificant yet highly valorized within slam competitions. By examining Shnayjaah Jeanty's experiences during her first and last year on the slam team—not as separate events, but as interconnected experiences—this paradox is exemplified.

As previously noted, the Black Arts Movement positioned spoken word as a powerful tool for Black individuals to critique systemic discrimination. However, during her first year on the slam team, Shnayjaah Jeanty felt that her non-Black teammates and white team president failed to grasp the significance of her performances exploring Black womanhood. During her first year on the slam team, Shnayjaah and other Black team members faced ridicule for writing about the social and political issues affecting the Black community. Shnayjaah's non-black members of the team perceived performances about racial discrimination as “boring” and “redundant” because numerous Black performers addressed systemic injustices. The team even had a term, “the M word,” used derisively whenever someone mentioned “Melanin” or their race on stage. This culture of mockery made Shnayjaah and other Black poets feel unsafe, prompting them to censor their poems and avoid themes related to their Black experiences. Despite this enforced silencing during her first year on the slam team, Shnayjaah's last year experience on the team reveals how Black experiences are paradoxically valorized when they could be exploited for competitive gain.

Performances that interrogate social injustices are highly valued and scored in slam for their ability to challenge the audience's perception of the world and inspire deep emotional resonance.<sup>33</sup> As individuals who occupy the lowest social position, Black people, especially Black women have a rich understanding of the ways that forms of oppression intersect and operate.<sup>34</sup> However, in a space where Black knowledge is valued for its provocative insights, the mere desire to win slam competitions fetishizes this very knowledge. During the last year on her team, Shnayjaah articulates a profound sense of exploitation as the sole Black woman on her team. She recounts an incident where a white team member, struggling to craft a poem for an upcoming competition, was instructed by the team manager to utilize one of Shnayjaah's poem. This request placed Shnayjaah in an uncomfortable position, given that her poetry predominantly addressed Black issues that her white colleague could not relate to nor perform with the same conviction as Shnayjaah. Despite her reservations, the team insisted that her white teammate deliver the poem to enhance their competitive prospects. Additionally, Shnayjaah's team went beyond merely assigning a white female to perform her poem. By the time of the competition, Shnayjaah had contributed significantly to the team's repertoire, having written approximately 70% of the material judged and performed on stage.

Shnayjaah's experience during the first versus last year on her team underscores a troubling dynamic of exploitation: Black testimonies are dismissed as insignificant—exemplified by the "M-word" policy—yet are deemed valuable when leveraged for competitive advantage. Shnayjaah experiences are consistent with the alienation and fetishization of Black knowledge discussed by Grace Hong. In her paper, *The Future of Our Worlds" Black Feminism and the*

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<sup>33</sup> Muhammad, Gholnecsar "Gholdy, and Lee Gonzalez. "Slam poetry: An artistic resistance toward identity, agency, and activism." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 49, no. 4 (2016): 440-453.

<sup>34</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics [1989]." *Contemporary Sociological Theory* 1 (2022): 354.

*Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization*, Hong describes Black feminist theory could be soon fully integrated into universities without the presence of Black women theorists<sup>35</sup> If this were to transpire, knowledge would become completely disconnected from the Black women who produce it.<sup>36</sup> Shnayjaah's team's insistence on using her work merely for competitive advantage exemplifies Hong's notion that Black women are perceived and treated as mere vessels for producing knowledge. Such exploitation reflects a broader system of epistemic violence in poetry slam that commodifies Black knowledge. As Shnayjaah's slam team failed to acknowledge the significance of her work beyond its potential to secure a win, a form of pernicious ignorance, they failed to reciprocate her right to be truly *heard*.

Social and cultural biases among audiences and judges clearly hinder the dissemination of Black women's knowledge. The experiences of Luna and Shnayjaah Jeanty illustrate how epistemic violence, through the systemic devaluation and exploitation of Black women's voices, persists in poetry slams. Situating epistemic violence within the context of slams reveals how practices of silencing and systemic invalidation can unfold even in spaces presumed to be safe from such marginalization.

#### **Section 4. Reclaiming Epistemic Agency**

While I have delineated the epistemological injustices present in poetry slams, it is equally important to consider how Black women resist epistemic violence by asserting their epistemic agency. Epistemic agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to actively shape, validate, and disseminate knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Rather than accepting the social norm that values

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<sup>35</sup> Hong, Grace Kyungwon. "'The Future of Our Worlds' Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization." *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 95-115.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Dotson, Kristie. "Conceptualizing epistemic oppression." *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115-138.

privileged individuals' perspectives, epistemic agents challenge and redefine what constitutes credible knowledge. Epistemic agency also encompasses the power of individuals to communicate knowledge in diverse and innovative ways.<sup>38</sup> In this final section, I analyze how Black female spoken word artists reclaim their epistemic agency through the *stories they tell* and *the ways in which they tell them*.

In her interview, Bronx-native spoken word artist Sonya Marie expressed how she feels no need to censor herself while performing on stage. Instead, she proudly articulates profound truths, regardless of how unpopular or controversial her topics might be. One of Sonya's most celebrated performances is her poem "Fluent". "Fluent" addresses the lack of respect men have for women which leads to unfulfilled relationships where lust replaces genuine intimacy. While performing "Fluent," Sonya vehemently states how women are "objectified unless we take it as a compliment"<sup>39</sup>. She also questions whether men only value women when they are "in -em like property" and if their masculinity is solely defined by the aggression they "can't keep intact", lines that challenge the pervasive sexualization and violence directed at women.<sup>40</sup> Through "Fluent," Sonya claims epistemic agency by offering a robust critique of societal norms that diminish women's worth. Sonya explained that, while people might assume she, as a woman, would deliver "soft shit," that's not the case.<sup>41</sup> According to Sonya, "I'm really coming at men...For lack of a better term, I'm coming at their necks."<sup>42</sup> The phrase "coming at their necks" exemplifies how Sonya bluntly and harshly criticizes men for their sexualization and belittlement of women. By rejecting the expectation to be passive or accommodating, Sonya positions herself

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<sup>38</sup> Chen, Bodong, and Jianwei Zhang. "Analytics for knowledge creation: Towards epistemic agency and design-mode thinking." *Journal of Learning Analytics* 3, no. 2 (2016): 139-163.

<sup>39</sup> Voices In Power. "Fluent." *YouTube* video, 4:51. June 10th, 2024. <https://youtu.be/3Ail3Vo9HsY?feature=shared>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Sonya Marie. Interview. Conducted by Jezlyn Montas. 7 June. 2024. Audio recording.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

as an authoritative voice on issues related to gender, respect, and intimacy. Therefore, she resists testimonial quieting, countering the negative stereotypes intended to undermine her credibility. Sonya also notes that whenever she delivers her piece, the crowd responds with enthusiastic approval, nodding in agreement. After the shows, she often engages in conversations where men, despite their initial defensiveness, realize that she is making factual assertions. By evoking defensiveness and then prompting men to reconsider their actions, Sonya demonstrates the power of her unfiltered narrative to challenge dominant perspectives and provoke critical thought, and to her that's what makes her performance such crowd-pleasers.

Lyrical Faith, the poet who described being expected to be “just a pretty face”, echoes a similar sentiment where she feels empowered to articulate her truth with conviction on stage.

*“When I have this stage and when I have this microphone in my hand, I'm in control. This is not a dialogue. It can turn into one, but at that moment, this is not a dialogue. I wrote this. This is my story. This is my truth. You are going to hear me because you are sitting in these seats. You probably even paid to sit in these seats. And so, there's no interrupting me. There's no going back and forth. There is you, the audience member, and there's me with the microphone and I have the ability to impact and empower.”<sup>43</sup>*

Lyrical positions herself as the central figure in shaping and conveying their knowledge. As I will briefly describe, Lyrical precisely does this by communicating knowledge that is not on the forefront of people's mind.

When performing, Lyrical ensures that she represents herself in a way that is authentic to her “work, brand, and story”.<sup>44</sup> For Lyrical, embracing authenticity involves crafting poems that

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<sup>43</sup>Lyrical Faith. Interview. Conducted by Jezlyn Montas. 28 June. 2024. Audio recording.

<sup>44</sup> Lyrical Faith. Interview. Conducted by Jezlyn Montas. 28 June. 2024. Audio recording.

convey her commitment to educating others and highlighting systemic injustices that are overlooked. For example, in her “Roe v. Wade” poem, Lyrical Faith addresses how discussions about reproductive rights neglects the needs and socio-political circumstances of Black women. While decriminalizing abortion and supporting birth control services are crucial, it is equally important to ensure that Black women have access to these resources. Lyrical observes that her “Roe v. Wade” poem tends to offend and irritate many white audience members. These negative reactions underscore Lyrical's capacity to challenge the predominantly white feminist narrative and introduce knowledge that provokes discomfort. For those who do resonate with the poem, Lyrical shares how her poem generates significant energy and engagement. People often approach Lyrical to keenly discuss the research she incorporated into her work and share how it has impacted their understanding of the issue. Additionally, Black Women have come up to her show expressing gratitude for her performance and its focus on their experiences. Faith's poetry educates the masses and gives voice to those who are systematically excluded from the discourse. Her poetry actively reshapes the knowledge landscape, compelling audiences to reevaluate their perspectives. This demonstrates her profound ability to effect change and assert control on stage, precisely as she proclaimed.

Lastly, Black women reclaim their agency not just through their words, but also their delivery. Poetry slams place significant emphasis on not merely reciting poems but performing them in a dynamic and creative manner. One key rule in slam competitions requires poets to present memorized poems without the aid of props, costumes, pre-recorded music, or musical instruments. This rule is designed to encourage poets to innovatively utilize their voice and body to deliver a stirring performance. Many poets, including Suzen Baraka and Luna, reclaim their epistemic agency through their distinct and ingenious performances.

Suzen Baraka, a two-time Emmy Award-winning poet, writer, actor, and activist with over 17 years of live performance experience, describes a profound transformation when she takes the stage. During her performances, she taps into an "alter ego" that allows her to express facets of her identity—such as being sensual, indignant, or spirited—that she feels compelled to repress in her everyday life. As Suzen describes, on stage, she is allowed to be “loud, sexy, and angry.” Furthermore, Suzen’s performances illuminate aspects of her identity that she had not yet recognized. She recounted an encounter where an audience member remarked, "I can tell you're sassy" following a show. This observation prompted Suzen to reflect critically on her own self-conception, prompting her to personally ask "Am I sassy? Is that really me?"

Suzen’s process of embodiment and self-discovery is a powerful act of epistemic agency because it involves expressing knowledge in ways that are often denied to her both internally and externally. Society frequently discourages Black women from displaying qualities such as loudness and anger. By describing how she can be loud, sexy, and angry on stage, Baraka challenges social norms that seek to silence or marginalize her expression. Additionally, Baraka’s internal dialogue—questioning whether she is truly "sassy"—reveals how poetry acts as a medium for knowledge production. She uncovers parts of herself she didn’t even consciously recognize. This represents a profound manifestation of her agency, as she generates knowledge that is authentic and grounded in her true self.

Luna, a distinguished spoken word artist, exemplifies how a multifaceted performance style also challenges epistemological frameworks. Each of Luna’s poems starts off in a different cadence, different voice and/or different speed. While performing a poem about beauty standards, she imitates the voice of Barbie. In another poem about being confident as a Black woman, she draws inspiration from the style and cadence of Megan Thee Stallion. One of her

most cherished performances humorously explores her personal insecurities, which she finds particularly cathartic. She enjoys how, as she lists her vulnerabilities and insecurities in the poem, the audience responds with laughter and snaps. While Luna was deterred by the epistemic violence evident in the privileging of male narratives, she takes pride in her ability to innovatively convey knowledge. She states that her performance showcases the plethora of ways Black expression manifests. By embracing diverse styles, Luna does not subscribe to the epistemological notion that knowledge can only be shared in a certain way. Instead, the diversity in performance style is a deliberate choice to reflect the multifaceted nature of her own experiences and ideas.

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of epistemic violence and agency within the realm of poetry slams illuminates the complex dynamics at play when marginalized voices take stage. Epistemic violence, driven by pernicious ignorance and entrenched prejudices, marginalizes the authentic expressions of Black women poets. However, through innovative performance techniques and insightful critiques of established truths and norms, Black female artists' performances showcase the profound impact of art as a means of resistance and empowerment. Ultimately, this work highlights the vital role of Black women's perspectives in reshaping our comprehension of knowledge production and representation within artistic and academic contexts.

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