

Black Female Spoken Word Artist’s Journey to Being Heard on Stage

Jezlyn Montas, Psychology & Women Studies

Mentored by Professor Alex Pittman, Center for Engaged Pedagogy

Introduction

At slam competitions, poets use their work as a diagnostic tool to critique and challenge the socio-political structures that shape their lives. 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, 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 study 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. Thus, I investigate how Black women actively confront and transform the knowledge landscape.



Figure 1. Photograph taken by Jezlyn Montas at the BRIC Brooklyn Poetry Slam

Methodology

- 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 one-hour online semi structured interviews with six Black female spoken word artists including Lyrical Faith, Suzen Baraka, Kyla Lacey, Luna, Shnayjaah Jeanty, and Sonya Marie.
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| 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 at 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? |
| 5. What factors do you consider when selecting the performance strategies you employ? |
| 6. What sorts of conversations do you find yourself having after performing? How do you respond to criticism and feedback? |
| 7. Do you believe certain themes or subjects tend to resonate more deeply with audiences at spoken word events, including slam competitions? |
| 8. What has been your most memorable moment in your career as a spoken word artist? |
| 9. What does being 'heard' on stage mean to you, both as a performer and as a Black woman? |
| 10. What unique strengths or perspectives do you feel you bring to the spoken word community? |
- To analyze the qualitative data collected through interviews, I performed an Iterative thematic analysis to identify common themes in interview responses. Themes that emerged related to Black female spoken word artists roles and experiences as epistemological agents

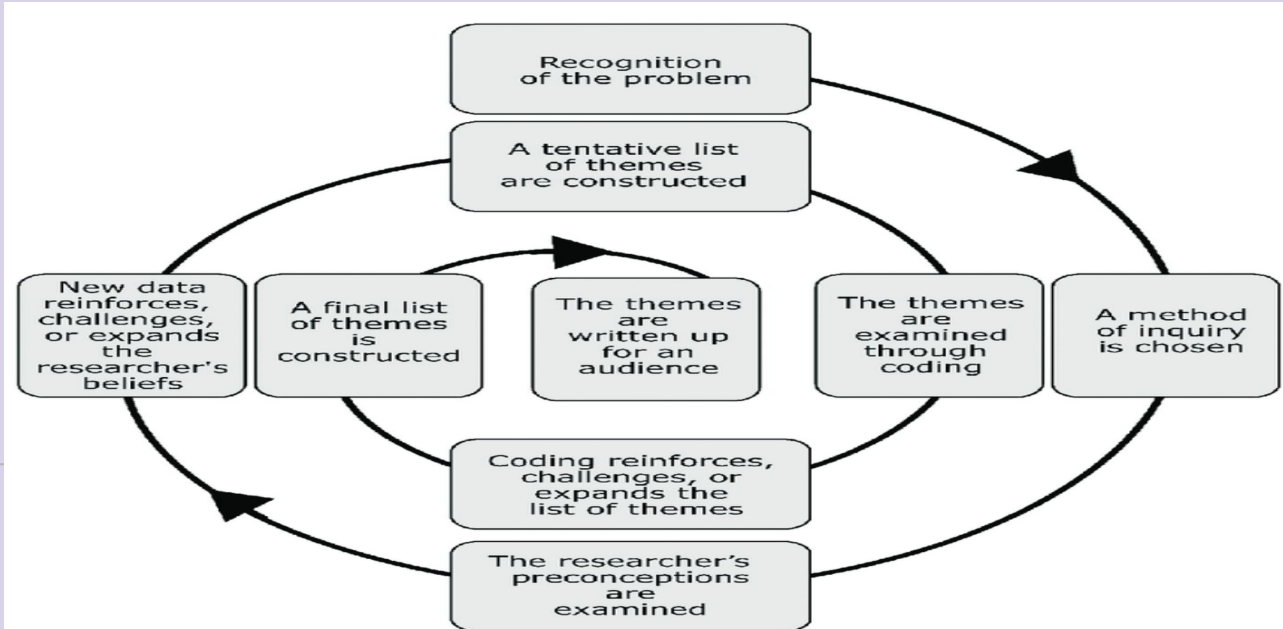


Figure 2. Phases of the data analysis method informed by Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) (Morgan and Nica, 2020)

Background

- A successful linguistic exchange between a speaker and audience must meet the condition of "**reciprocity**" [1]. Reciprocity demands that an audience *“hears”* a speaker where the audience comprehends both the speaker's words and their underlying intentions. However, a speaker cannot force an audience to hear them. Instead, the speaker depends on an audience willing and capable of doing so. Pernicious ignorance impedes the process of understanding and truly *“hearing”* a speaker [1]. **Pernicious ignorance** is reliable ignorance that in any given context harms another person. **Reliable ignorance** is a "predictable cognitive gap in cognitive resources"; it is a knowledge gap that is expected to happen [1].
- Epistemic violence** as "a refusal, intentional or not, or failure of reciprocity in communication due to pernicious ignorance". *As an audience fails to meet the speaker's need for reciprocity, where their words and intentions are not truly understood, they demonstrate an incapacity to truly “hear” a speaker, thereby silencing them* [1].
- Testimonial quieting** occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower due to the speaker's epistemically disadvantageous identity where an audience renders them as mere images of negative stereotypes placed onto them [1].
- Testimonial smothering** occurs when the speaker perceives their audience as incapable of comprehending their testimony as the audience fails to demonstrate accurate intelligibility, a genuine understanding of the speaker's words and intentions [1].
- Epistemic Agency:** ability to challenge and redefine what constitutes credible knowledge. Epistemic agency also encompasses the power of individuals to communicate knowledge in diverse and innovative ways [2].

Discussion

Epistemic Violence

- Privileging certain narratives over others** : The patriarchy stigmatizes emotional vulnerability in men, emasculating those who exhibit sadness and/or pain [2]. Due to its rarity, male vulnerability is often regarded as a more courageous form of expression than female vulnerability. Drawing from spoken word artist Luna's experiences, many slam audiences seem reliably ignorant of such biases, making them more receptive to and more likely to validate male narratives, while dismissing similar experiences shared by female poets. 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 more points and praise than when a woman performs a poem on the same subjects. Artists like 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, leading women like Luna to censor themselves—an example of testimonial smothering.

- Fetishization and Exploitation of Black Women's Knowledge** : 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. 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 Jeanty wrote approximately 70% of the material judged and performed on stage. Shnayjaah's team's insistence on using her work merely for competitive advantage exemplifies how Black women are perceived and treated as mere vessels for producing knowledge. This exploitation reflects a broader system of epistemic violence that commodifies Black knowledge. As Shnayjaah's slam team failed to acknowledge the significance of her work beyond its potential to secure a win, they failed to reciprocate her right to be truly *heard*.

Epistemic Agency

- Unfiltered Narratives** : Through her poem “Fluent,” Bronx-native poet Sonya Marie challenges the pervasive sexualization and violence directed at women. After shows, she engages in conversations where men, despite their initial defensiveness, realize that she's making factual assertions. In her “Roe v. Wade” poem, Lyrical Faith addresses how discussions about reproductive rights neglects the needs and socio-political circumstances of Black women. Both poets' refusal to self-censor enables them to actively reshapes the knowledge landscape, compelling audiences to reevaluate their perspectives.
- Dynamic Artistry:** While performing a poem about beauty standards, artist Luna 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. By embracing diverse styles, she doesn't 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.

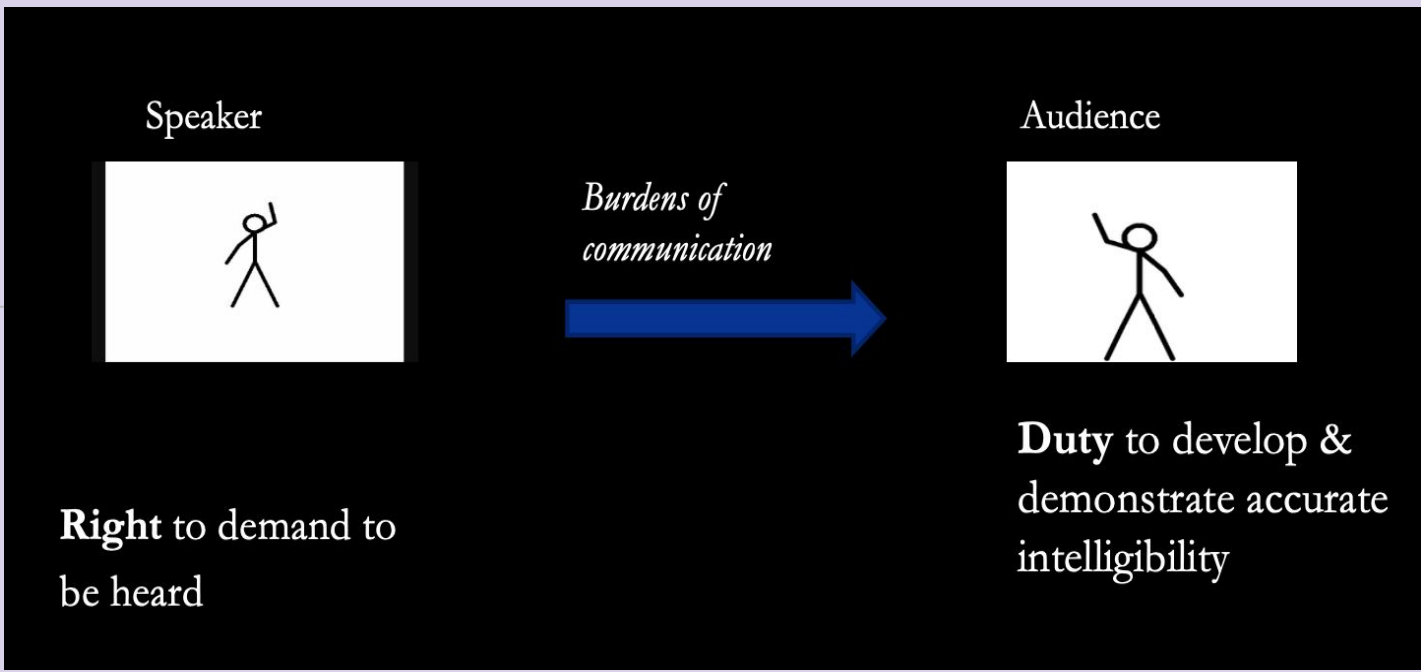


Figure 3. Illustration of Kristie Dotson's concept of reciprocity from Professor Christia Mercer's lecture

Conclusions & Next Steps

- 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 artist performance showcase the profound impact of art as a means of resistance and empowerment.
- Looking ahead, I am committed to extending this research in my LIA project by facilitating a spoken word workshop aimed at empowering young girls to utilize poetry as a diagnostic tool. This workshop will not only help them navigate and articulate their own experiences but also equip them to challenge the structural limitations placed on their knowledge. This next phase of my work will foster a new generation of poets who, like those I've studied, can reclaim their agency and shape the world around them through their art.

References

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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation, Athena Center, and Beyond Barnard for its generous support of Barnard students and thank you to Professor Alex Pittman for his profound mentorship. Lastly, thank you to the wonderful Black women spoken word artists for taking part in my project!