



QUEERING PUBLIC SPACES:

*Spoken Word Performances as
Acts of Resistance, Hope, and
Community-Building*

By Jessica Van de Kemp

I. Poetry in Performance

Imagine stepping onto a stage, at your local bar or café. The ambient lights dim to a glow and the audience falls silent, waiting. Your heart pounds in your chest as you take a deep breath and then begin to speak. You perform a poem about growing up queer in a small town. Time slows down to a beat, with all eyes on you, and in telling the story of your first soul-bending love and heart-break—true words whispered from real love letters—you open your eyes, which had closed in the memory of her, tears welling as the audience applauds. In the moments after, warmth floods through you, as if the glow of the lights has taken residence in your chest. You can breathe again, as if stepping into the spring air after a long winter, soothed by the tender sound of poetry.

In my long experience as a poet regularly attending open mics, I have seen the power of public spaces as they turn into welcoming stages for feminist, queer voices when the performance of a true story (sometimes heartwarming; sometimes heartbreaking) results in the spoken word artist and their audience collectively cry, exhale, shout, or dare I say it: pray together—the kind of prayer that is inner quiet, like skipping a stone across the surface of a lake and suddenly feeling calm, still, and at peace with life and self. Spoken word poetry and open mics give me a way to talk about my queerness, something that I experienced as loneliness growing up in a small town; by performing my poetry for others,

my loneliness has evolved from self-hate into self-love. Every time that I step onto a stage at a live show, and share my truth with strangers, I “heal by experiencing the power of poetry through [my] own voice” (Carroll, 2005).

I write this original research paper, which mixes personal reflection with academic analysis, to show how performances of spoken word poetry, especially within rural areas, uplift feminist, queer voices by cultivating a powerful sense of community, hope, and resistance to oppression. The way we engage with space, both physically and symbolically, shapes identity; as Kelly Baker observes, “rural space is often [. . .] characterized by highly traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality” (2011). In this context, “queerness and localness” (Baker, 2011) exist in tension, reinforcing the association or spatialization of queerness with urbanity. In rural areas, where queer folks may struggle to find belonging, performing spoken word poetry can be a bold declaration of presence and identity. Among the many voices calling for justice, such as community activists and leaders, I join the conversation as a queer poet working from the perspective of *art-as-activism*, fighting for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights through my word-based performance art. This raises an important question: “What does meaningful activism look like for [you]” (Friesen, 2018)? For me, it means taking up space, holding space to empower others, and using my voice for social justice.

Even as an undergraduate student, now many years ago, I remember sitting in a creative writing workshop where the professor made us feel profoundly safe in the classroom to share aspects of our personal experiences and identities within our work. It was the first time, in my young adult life, that someone besides my loving family and friends had validated and affirmed my queerness; the professor often left hand-scribbled notes in the margins of my typed poems and short stories, finding all the deeper meanings that I had hidden inside of their stanzas and paragraphs. She even invited us to a showcase and open mic, on the last day of term, for a celebration of our creative writing. Among my incredibly supportive classmates, I performed an original poem for the first time in front of a live audience. I remember, in that moment, feeling an overwhelming sense of freedom in being

able to finally live my truth, comfortable enough to say aloud: *this is who I am*.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks emphasizes that an “engaged pedagogy” (13) thrives on vulnerability, fostering growth for both teachers and students. Similarly, my first open mic night deeply affected me, as that was the precise moment I chose self-acceptance and found my voice as a poet. A decade later, I joined the volunteer team of a feminist, grassroots, community organization in the same small town I grew up in, hosting events for anyone who identified as a woman (e.g., cis, trans, non-binary, etc). That small team of big ‘changemakers’ invited me to perform original spoken word poetry at numerous events, such as for *International Women’s Day* and the *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women*. This ultimately led to a ‘Person of the Year’ award nomination by a Pride organization and an invitation to a public celebration of over 150 activists in Ontario fighting for LGBT+ rights.

A caring professor, a classroom filled with students who believed, and a devoted team of community volunteers each saw something in me before I fully saw it in myself. Now, as an instructor, I carry forward those lessons of care, solidarity, and upliftment as my own pedagogical values, transforming classrooms into spaces of vulnerability. As I have shown in the telling of this true story, spoken word poetry is a tool for taking up space—with your body, words, and actions—in the community. These performances go beyond traditional academic boundaries, enabling queer folks to craft “*counter-narratives*, defined as acts of resisting an oppressive identity and demanding the respect of those within the dominant culture” (Trew, 2019), through artistic expression.

II. Open Mic Liminality

So, what do art galleries, bars, bookstores, cafés, classrooms, community centres, libraries, music stores, parks, theatres and more, have in common? They are all potential venues for a spoken word open mic—a one-night show where both emerging and established artists perform their poetry in front of a live audience. Spoken word, as the name suggests, is a performance art that focuses less on poetry in the

traditional sense (words in a book to be silently read), and more on poetry as performance (the voice to be heard). Like other performance arts “engaged directly with social reality, the specifics of space, and the politics of identity” (Tate Modern, n.d.), such as body art, spoken word is meant to be experienced live; it is also culturally rooted in the oral tradition and, in more recent times, has been digitally archived as audio or video recordings. Often, like music and theatre, performances of spoken word poetry hold the audience’s attention using “emotion, voice, and presence” (Brooks-Motl, 2019). When a spoken word artist takes the stage, they also use their own body and voice as poetic instruments, and so their performance is marked by experimentation (such as the coupling of poetry and music), improvisation, movement, repetition, rhyme, rhythm, slang, strong feelings, theatrics, vivid imagery, and wordplay, among the more widely known oral storytelling or vocal delivery techniques of varied pacing, pauses, pitch, tone, and volume.

There is also something to be said about the liminality of the spaces themselves, as potential venues for a spoken word open mic are all meeting places, where people come and go. If you have ever sat in silence at a coffee or tea house by yourself, and felt time slip away, you have experienced that mystical or uncanny sense of the present moment feeling slowed or suspended—a perpetual ‘now’ between the ‘before’ and the ‘after.’ Liminal spaces allow for an ‘in-between’ state to exist. For the spoken word artist, this makes possible the performance of identity as a process of becoming or continuing discovery, where one does not have to express a fixed self if they do not wish to but may instead move and speak in ways that are multiple—fluid; flow; flux. The second time that I performed spoken word was at an academic conference, and I went the route of experimentation, coupling original poetry and music. I remember one attendee lowering their face into their hands, *double facepalm*, clearly embarrassed, disappointed, frustrated, surprised, or otherwise disapproving of my advocacy for gender equality. I also remember another attendee squeezing my shoulder afterward, in a sign of solidarity, and offering supportive words of encouragement.

Over the next couple of years (before the global

COVID-19 pandemic), I performed that same queer feminist anthem, titled “Sisters,” in rural areas and was met with varying levels of acceptance and discrimination. Every time I print my name on an open mic night sign-up sheet, and am eventually called to the makeshift stage, I get scared. *What if people laugh at me? What if they ask me to leave? What if someone tries to hurt me?* These are not questions someone should have to think about when taking the microphone for their 10-to-15-minute time slot, but it occurs to me that some members of the audience may find my queerness downright offensive. I get scared and perform my poems anyway because it also occurs to me that there is immense power in taking up space, especially in rural areas where feminism and queerness are sometimes eschewed. Spoken word poetry in rural areas makes queer visibility an act of resistance. I get on stage and take up space so other queer folks in the audience, particularly those who are closeted or young, can recognize themselves in me and feel a sense of acceptance and belonging. “Everyone needs community,” including queer folks, who are at a higher risk for “feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety” (Cofer, 2024). The question becomes: How can spoken word poetry, performed in liminal spaces, give agency to queer experience and radical acts of love for both self and community?

The answer lies in the power of shared moments. In those 10-to-15-minutes, voicing your truth before a live audience and feeling it met with empathy can be extremely validating. This sense of belongingness is particularly important because queer folks often experience significant judgment and social disconnection (Elmer, van Tilburg, and Fokkema, 2022). Of course, it can also be challenging if the audience is not listening attentively, loses interest, or otherwise chooses to disengage; it takes immense courage to stand in front of a crowd of strangers and be vulnerable with them. The true power of performance poetry is in freeing yourself from judgment; it is well-known to “offer insight into racism, sexism, queer rights, and [other] issues of social justice” (Silverberg, 2025). Meeting places offer poets a stage for their performances, on the surface, but they offer the freedom to explore and express identity, on the deepest level. These liminal spaces dismantle the traditional performer-audience divide, reminding us

that the spoken word artist is not an actor on a distant stage, but rather one of, and among, the crowd—actively driving change, with their voice and lived experiences, *from within* the heart of the community.

III. Digital Poetry Platforms

Rainbow Intimacies

Next, I draw your attention to *Poetry in Voice*, which is an online resource that, true to its mission statement, “provides educators with engaging content and experiences, in English and French, to inspire their students to read, recite, and write poetry” (“About Us,” 2024). A strong example of Poetry in Voice’s mission in action is their *Rainbow Intimacies*¹ anthology of 2SLGB+ voices. This “poetry mixtape,” curated by Angelic Goldsky, a queer non-binary Jewish spoken word poet, explores queer intimacy. Goldsky describes it as a space where “we still find our self-love, the apologies we deserve, and we reclaim who we were always meant to be as queer people connected to our radical and authentic truth” (“Rainbow Intimacies,” 2023). The mixtape assembles a well-known group of poets, including Billy-Ray Belcourt, Ocean Vuong, Lucia Misch, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Amber Dawn, Arielle Twist, Kai Cheng Thom, Lindsay Nixon, Jason Purcell, Joshua Whitehead, Bernard Ferguson, and Cassandra Myers. These contributors, from Canada, the United States, and various other regions, many of whom are BIPOC artists, share, through their poetry, a commitment to gaining insight into, understanding, and affirming queer identities and experiences.

Feminist futurities encourage questioning across time (past and present) toward future possibilities; spoken word poetry, whether on stage, mixtape, screen, or another medium, has the power to start conversations and build solidarities. With the poetry mixtape fresh in our ears, let us turn our attention to its atmosphere, and then explore a specific poem. The mixtape’s soundscape is striking: a single voice delivers all the poems against a backdrop of instrumental music, in slow-shifting minor and major keys.

¹ For 16 minutes and 53 seconds of powerful poetry, listen to the mixtape on SoundCloud here: <https://soundcloud.com/oetrynoiceesvoixdelaposisie/rainbow-intimacies-poems-file>.

The music almost sounds like chiming bells, electronic piano notes, or those long, relaxing sounds that you hear in meditation or sound healing. Poetry and music are blended—sounds made by a human being and sounds made by musical instruments or digital/electronic equipment—and this makes the words and their meaning amplified by the music’s emotional depth. One of the poems on the mixtape that particularly resonates emotionally is “Another Set of Instructions” by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a queer Black feminist writer and scholar. Gumbs opens her poem with these compelling lines:

we are asking you to trust your hands. put them on your heart. trust your heart. hear what we are saying. trust what you hear. we are asking you to build a circle. always a circle. not almost a circle. face each other. we are asking you to trust the faces. face the truth. it’s round. we are asking you to make a sound. make the sound you need by breathing. make the sound that calls us in. we are asking you. not telling you. listen. we will not yell. well. not yet. (Rainbow Intimacies Poems File, 2023)

These lines evoke intimacy between queer lovers, heightening bodily awareness through words like “hands,” “heart,” “hear,” “faces,” “sound,” “breathing,” “listen,” and “yell,” while also deepening themes of trust and unity. The repetition of “a circle” reinforces the poem’s call for vulnerability by urging the listener to “face the truth.” Gumb’s phrasing, especially “make the sound you need,” captures the power of voice as a tool for reflection, healing, and even pleasure. Lowercase text in the printed version signals an intimate connection, but the mixtape’s audio delivery transforms it into a liminal moment, making the words feel directly spoken to the listener. Within queer intimacies, this poetic insistence on “trust” resonates with feminist futures where queer folks create spaces of safety and support for each other. This poem, in one sense, becomes a place where those futures feel possible.



Button Poetry

Instead of just live shows, online channels now make performance poetry into videos that anyone can watch, anywhere—a shift that resonates with Mirona Magearu’s exploration of “poetry as an exhibition” (Magearu, 2012). In “Making Digital Poetry: Writing with and through Spaces,” Magearu describes “the poem in performance” as akin to “an installed artwork [that] always requires being in the space and in the presence of the work” (Magearu, 2012). While she primarily examines the manifestation of text in digital formats, for the sake of our understanding, the invocation of ‘exhibition’ and ‘installation’ implies that poetry goes beyond mere text, positioning it as a performative medium. Button Poetry is a prime example of this and another online resource that I recommend. Their YouTube channel hosts a rich collection of Internet-famous slam poetry recordings; for instance, the Live playlist has amassed over 1,000 viral videos, and acts as a stage for a wide range of spoken word artists, amplifying many queer voices such as Denice Frohman (“Dear Straight People”), Zenaida Peterson (“Pride/Proud”), Andrea Gibson (“Queer Youth Are Five Times More Likely to Die by Suicide”), and many others. Those three videos illustrate the multiple facets of queer identity, exploring them through performance and extending their reach online. Of the many powerful performances available, one video (with 4.1 million views) that stands out to me for both its transformative quality and emotional honesty, is Edwin Bodney’s “When A Boy Tells You He Loves You,”² which explores the theme of queer intimacy. Bodney, a Black queer non-binary educator and writer, delivers each word of this poem with such precision that they command attention, creating an immersive experience.

Bodney’s performance is an affecting illustration of queer intimacies, especially the liminal space between public and private selves often found in queer relationships. When Bodney delivers the line “when a boy says, ‘I love you,’ he

² This is an impressive 2 minute and 41 second performance, recorded live at Da Poetry Lounge in Los Angeles, California. You can watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq1l-19pwS4>.

means ‘I am getting ready to be inconsistent with you now’” (Button Poetry, 2014), it gives a deep feeling of tentative affection, a kind of fleeting moment in time. This is not a promise of forever love, but more like a feeling suspended in that ‘maybe’ space, a thought that hangs in the air, delicate and not quite real. This evocative expression of emotional uncertainty draws my attention to another powerful moment of raw vulnerability at the end of the performance:

When a boy tells you he loves you, only to become silent like a folded sheet of tissue paper not wanting you to decrease him into the truth, do not crack your face into the fullest crescent moon at the tapered bottom of a blackened sky—he never meant a single word of any of it. (Button Poetry, 2014)

A clear tension emerges between Bodney’s confident delivery of the poem and the underlying anxiety that spreads through the words themselves. This tension pushes back against comedic views of queer relationships; it says that queer intimacy, like any other, is not a constant state of happiness, but rather a lively and sometimes unsteady back-and-forth between power, vulnerability, and moments of brief connection. Bodney’s spoken word performance engages not only of queerness but also *within* queerness, as both artist and audience inhabit “this trans-medial space [that] is self-transformative and transforming” (Magearu, 2012). Performance poetry allows for a public acknowledgment of the validity of queer experiences, including the ongoing process of working through self-acceptance, and invites the audience to bear witness and participate in that embrace. Raw vulnerability in online spaces, like Button Poetry’s YouTube channel of spoken word performances, builds feminist futures where marginalized voices are really *felt*.

IV. Final Takeaways

In this original research paper, which mixes personal reflection with academic analysis, I have explored how spoken word performances craft counter-narratives to oppression. Spoken word poetry has always been about turning personal experiences into collective (and often political) action. Live performances invite vulnerability

and, in that openness, radical self-acceptance can emerge. At the same time, online spaces forge new pathways to spread messages of resistance, hope, and community; projects like *Rainbow Intimacies* and platforms like Button Poetry’s YouTube channel show how going online amplifies queer voices, reaching far beyond in-person possibilities. Whether performed live or online, spoken word poetry creates space for queerness to thrive, in all its expressions. Even “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (hooks 207) where I can “reinvent” (3) myself as a teacher and artist by embedding feminist theory and praxis into my everyday work and life. To build feminist futures, we need to embrace vulnerability as a powerful act of resistance against systems and patterns of mistreatment, strengthening our collective fight for equity across identities. Even when you get scared, speak. Your voice is power!

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