

'SPEAK YOUR TRUTH'

Authenticity in UK spoken word poetry

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In a small pub in Edinburgh, the host of a monthly spoken word night calls a young woman, Ella, to the mic. She is dressed casually in jeans and a colourful T-shirt, and doesn't carry any notes to read from. After pausing for a moment to compose herself, she looks up and begins her poem: a story in first-person voice which narrates the death of a brother. The piece is eloquently written, rich in metaphor and imagery. Ella performs it powerfully, gesturing to her throat and stomach when talking about the pain his passing caused her and making eye contact with the audience throughout. At one point her voice seems to break with emotion, but she finishes the poem strongly and returns to her seat in the audience to loud applause.¹

Spoken word has often been hailed as a powerful platform for sharing one's personal stories through verse. From these stages activists protest social inequality, marginalised and oppressed people assert the legitimacy of their identities, and those who have experienced trauma share their stories and are witnessed as survivors. For the audience too this can be powerful: to see their identities represented and reflected back at them onstage, to hear a poet who survived speak about how, to find empowerment and community through these gatherings. The potentially restorative and transformative power of this genre is enabled by a sense of mutual trust: an expectation that artists will be sincere in the material that they share, and in turn audiences will believe in them and respect them. Thus this socially charged aspect of spoken word poetry has cultivated certain expectations and conventions pertaining to artists' sincerity and honesty. As one article concerning the genre describes, spoken word poetry is 'totally *genuine* ... Audiences know *authenticity*, and poets are nothing if they're not *real*' (Fear, emphasis added). This apparently inherent 'authenticity' has become valued as a cornerstone of the genre: spoken word is framed as 'real,' honest, and refreshing in our increasingly mediated age.

However, what effects does the expectation of authenticity have for spoken word on an aesthetic level? Much of the media coverage and some academic scholarship

praises spoken word poems primarily for how 'real' and 'honest' they feel, and for the 'courage' of the artist sharing them, rather than focusing on the craft entailed in making this work (see the opening epigraph for a particularly effusive example). In this chapter I argue that while the centrality of authenticity to spoken word poetry is noted in the important social function of the genre, it is problematic as a marker of aesthetic quality. This is for several reasons, most notably that 'authenticity' is not an innate, essential quality of a poem (nor a poet) but is rather highly subjective, performative, and culturally contingent. What one audience member considers a deeply emotionally authentic and moving performance another may perceive as the poet fake-crying to manipulate the audience. Additionally, the focus on how 'authentic' a poem is ultimately constitutes a focus on the life of the artist (in order to determine whether a poem is true, one must investigate the poet's life) rather than on the craft of the work.

This chapter begins by defining authenticity as a subjective, culturally conditional quality which is not innate in artworks (or artists) but rather is performative. It argues that spoken word poets are generally aware of how authenticity is valued within our scene, and lists several techniques that poets may use to project it. It also considers how the structure and conventions of spoken word events reinforce a notion of the poet not as an actor or exaggerated persona, but as a 'genuine' person sharing autobiographical material. I conclude with a discussion on how the current critical focus on authenticity as an aesthetic quality within contemporary UK spoken word poetry has led to the fetishisation of marginalised identities, the incentivisation of poems concerning personal trauma, and generally poor criticism focused on the lived experience of the artist rather than the craft they apply to their work.

To begin: what exactly is 'authenticity,' and how does it function within spoken word? 'Authenticity' is an umbrella term of sorts: it has been used to denote truth, factuality, verity, sincerity, originality, realness, rawness, and more notions that an object or person is not artificial or false. Its connotations vary in different fields: for instance, 'authenticity' in the study of fine art generally refers to whether or not paintings are forged, whereas in politics it generally concerns whether voters find a candidate to be trustworthy and accessible. Within spoken word, there are multiple types of authenticity that may be perceived by audiences, ranging from whether they believe that the poet onstage is the author of the poem they are performing to whether they think the poet's emotional performance is genuine or faked for effect. Elsewhere I have developed a taxonomy of the varying types of authenticity which are relevant in the spoken word context in the UK,² but in this chapter I will be focusing primarily on three intersecting concepts. These are the perceptions that (a) poems are autobiographical (the 'I' voice in first-person poems refers to the poet performing onstage), (b) poems are factually true, and (c) the presence of the poet onstage is unfiltered and genuine (i.e. the poet is not adopting an exaggerated persona and/or faking emotion). Importantly, here I am discussing the *perception* and *expectation* of these forms of 'authenticity'; I am not arguing that they inherently exist in spoken word (I will turn to that matter

shortly). The perception of 'authenticity' is not dependent on the actual originality, autobiographical nature, veracity, or genuineness of the work: for example, an audience might perceive Ella's poem from the opening anecdote to be 'authentic' but it might be wholly fabricated.

I argue—as has much of the scholarship before me³—that 'authenticity' is highly valued within the contemporary spoken word sphere. As I have observed, spoken word has often been framed as a platform for artists to 'speak their truth,' and audiences are attracted not only by the promise of high-quality writing and performance but also personal storytelling. The way in which we commonly define spoken word, in short, has come to include not only a description of the craft (i.e. 'performance-based poetry') but also a characterisation of the common subject material (i.e. 'often used for confessional narratives').

A large-scale oral history project I conducted in 2017 strongly indicated that 'authenticity' is valued by audiences (as well as many artists) within the UK spoken word scene. I interviewed 70 figures within the UK spoken word scene (mostly poets), asking them about their composition and rehearsal practices, their senses of spoken word as a political genre, and the history of their local scene.⁴ But most relevant here, I asked how the self they project in their work corresponds to their actual lives: whether they consider their work autobiographical, whether it is literally 'true,' and whether they feel that they are 'being themselves' onstage or adopting a persona or character. I also asked poets about their audiences' perception of authenticity in their poetry: whether poets think that audiences take their work literally (i.e. believed it was true and autobiographical) and whether poets believe that authenticity is a valuable quality within our genre.

Generally, this study found that while spoken word poets think that their audiences assume this poetry to be 'authentic' and value that perception, the poets themselves do not consider their poetry to be 'authentic' to a high degree. To break this down, the majority of spoken word artists I interviewed believe that their audiences take their work literally as true and autobiographical.⁵ Many artists associated the assumption of truth-telling with spoken word's social purpose of being a platform for self-expression for those who have been societally marginalised or have experienced trauma. As Bohdan Piasecki shared,

I think audiences assume that everything that you say in the first-person is definitely about you. ... I think people take poems quite literally. I think there's an assumption of truth because of what the genre is and what it represents.

(Piasecki)

However, my research revealed a discrepancy between how authentic audiences perceive poems to be and how 'authentic' they actually are.⁶ While most poets claimed that their work is generally autobiographical (i.e. when they use first-person voice, they are referring to themselves unless explicitly performing as a character), many said that they are flexible regarding the verity of their work. Many poets value 'emotional truth' over literal factuality and they are comfortable with

fabricating details in order to make a poem 'feel' more authentic. Some even fictionalise major narratives within their poetry, although there are varying (and strong) opinions on how ethically acceptable that is given the general expectation of verity within our scene.

In terms of one's stage presence during live performance, most poets do not feel as though they are 'really themselves' onstage; the majority adopt a persona to perform. This is to be expected, as obviously standing onstage in front of a crowd is not a 'natural' state of being. For the most part, poets describe this persona as a heightened version of themselves, rather than a distinct character. Furthermore, poets vary in terms of the extent to which they engage with the emotional content of their poetry onstage: some cannot perform a poem without remembering the story behind it or their motivations for writing it, whereas others explicitly avoid reconnecting with those emotions as an act of self-care and in order to deliver a composed performance. But overall, this research revealed that poets are (of course) artists who are performing crafted material onstage, and thus not fully 'authentic,' although their audiences might be perceiving them as such.

The reality is that, as much as spoken word has been a platform for confessional narratives, it is still an art form which involves a great deal of craft, both in terms of writing and performance. Spoken word artists are not merely diarising but rather constructing eloquent, innovative poems designed to engage, delight, empower, and generally entertain their audiences. And, as I've indicated, spoken word artists are aware that their audiences appreciate the perception of 'authenticity' in their work. So, how do spoken word artists in the UK perform and project that authenticity? What influences audiences' belief that spoken word poetry is generally confessional and true? Their expectations are based at least in part in the way in which the genre is marketed (and self-markets) as confessional: as, again, a platform to 'speak your truth.' However, this perception is also reinforced through what I term 'authenticating factors' within the poetry itself, as well as in the settings and conventions of spoken word events. In the following sections I describe several of these factors which may increase the audience's perception of a poem's authenticity.

Starting at the level of the individual poem, there are many techniques a poet may use to convince the audience of the verity and sincerity of their work. Most simply, the use of first-person voice encourages the perception of the poem as auto-biographical, since it leads to the easy association between the speaker of the poem (the 'I' voice) and the performer of the poem (the literal person onstage). The poet may also use their own name within their work, as when Sara Hirsch in 'Death Poem' briefly takes on the persona of a hearing specialist speaking to her: 'So, Sara, this test shows you are indeed losing your hearing' ('Sara Hirsch - Death Poem'). That the name in the poem is the same as the name of the poet reinforces the perception that the poem is autobiographical.

The performer's body can serve as an authenticating factor as well: because the audience is physically present with the poet-performer (or watching a recording), they are able to compare the body described in the poem with the body in front of them. For example, in 'I Think She Was A She,' Leyla Josephine names some