

Authenticity and Activism in Spoken Word Poetry: Staging the Self across Media

Spoken-word poets have been credited with creating new audiences for poetry through live performance as well as in the digital realm. A particular attraction of spoken word poetry seems to be the author's appearance "in the flesh", which may explain why the art form has become strongly associated with notions of authenticity (cf. Ailes 2021). Interrogating the link forged in spoken word between intratextual speaker and the physically present poet-performer, I will discuss how contemporary oral poetry performance can function as a form of activism in the context of political projects such as fourth-wave feminism and movements for racial justice.

This paper will first focus on the affordances of "authenticity" as a basis of social and political activism in spoken word. I will examine three mediated versions of Hollie McNish's poem "Embarrassed" as examples of how contemporary spoken-word poets harness personal experience to address larger political points. In the past fifteen or so years, McNish has made a name for herself in the British performance scene as a poet who addresses themes such as sexuality and motherhood from an overtly feminist perspective. I will discuss the way in which "Embarrassed" is framed autobiographically and draws on an "aesthetics of sincerity" that is typical of spoken word poetry. The authenticity effect thus produced serves, in "Embarrassed", to render McNish's poem an embodied feminist critique of dominant attitudes towards public breast-feeding in the UK, and it does so in slightly different ways across the two digital versions I am presenting, which will also be compared to the print version.

Finally, I will address the problems and constraints that the prominence of "authentic" self-presentation places on the practice of spoken word, and point to alternative ways of "staging" the authorial self.

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