“THIS IS WHERE THE POETRY COMES OUT”: EXAMINING THE PETERBOROUGH POETRY SLAM AS RESISTANT SPACE-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

“This is where the poetry comes out”: Examining the Peterborough Poetry Slam as Resistant Space-Making
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Since 1984, poetry slams have emerged as a politicized expressive movement of performing the personal and political through poetry competitions. Slams are also discursively spatialized, often represented as “spaces” that are “safe,” “inclusive,” etc. In this thesis, I investigate how, why, and to what effect the Peterborough Poetry Slam produces, consolidates, and challenges such “resistant spaces.” Drawing on interviews and participant observation, I consider how the slam’s reiterative practices facilitate its space-making by encouraging performances that resist, reimagine, and sometimes inadvertently reify dominant societal norms. I argue that this space-making is imperfect yet productive: though not resistant space in any straightforward or static way, the slam continuously produces possibilities to challenge norms and confront power. This thesis contributes to scholarship on performative space and creative resistance movements. In an era when political resistance to power structures is often silenced, this research offers insights of potential significance to other resistant space-makings.

KEYWORDS:
Poetry slam; spoken word; Nogojiwanong; Peterborough; space-making; performance; resistance; performative space.
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CHAPTER 1 || Introduction

January 2016
Nogojiwanong (Peterborough)
The Spill

On a snowy Thursday evening, over one hundred people crowded into the Spill, a cozy and dingy bar in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). All manner of folk braved the bitter weather, packing themselves into the well-loved venue. The anticipation, palpable, was only broken as the words “welcome to the slam!” echoed off the red brick walls. The host drew us into making a space together, calling us in to recognize the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and their lands on which we were gathered and compelling us to think about how living on these lands shapes the way we walk in the world and the art we create. As the night went on, all sorts of voices and bodies took up the mic: shifty teens, single mums, well-worn poet champions, first mic jitters, every gender imaginable, edgy buzzed haircuts, newly greying hair, nose piercings, and long wizened beards. On that small stage, these poets crooned, wailed, and murmured about new life and lives lost, homelands and colonization, anxiety and depression, privilege and inequality, love and fear, homework, homelessness, statelessness, corruption, desire, violence, and beauty. They fiercely spit calls to action; lilted ruminations on daily struggles; directly voiced pain; shakily named fears; tenderly illustrated sights, sounds, sensations, and emotions – each expression met with thunderous applause. These poets’ verses were accompanied by encouraging snaps, unsettled laughter, supportive cacophony, and thoughtful silences. Their voices puttered in my head even after the energy of applause on my hands, the pounding of noise on my bones, and the shock of silence across my skin had all faded. The charged atmosphere hung in the air long after the microphones were turned off, after glasses were cleared from the tables and mittens were retrieved from the dusty floor, after patrons settled their tabs and trickled out into the bleak, chilled night.

Slam poetry is both a competitive form of spoken word performance and a highly politicized, international, expressive movement (Somers-Willett 2009; O’Keefe Aptowicz 2007). The limited existing scholarship on slam poetry most often characterizes it as a transformative form of performed resistance (Boffone 2015; Cowan 2012; Dolan 2006). Similarly, participants and scholars alike perceive slam poetry events as “safe spaces” and as “radically democratic,” “diverse,” and “accepting” havens for subversive performances of marginalized identities

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1 For the purposes of this thesis, ‘slam poetry,’ ‘spoken word,’ and ‘performance poetry’ are employed as interchangeable terms referring to the form and practice of performed poetry. ‘Poetry slam,’ however, refers to the specific practice of competitive slam events. ‘Slam’ usually refers to the ‘space’ of the slam, though it is also used to denote specific events. These terms are contested and complicated among poetry slam scenes, but will suffice for this work (see: Somers-Willett 2009; Johnson 2010).
(Johnson 2010; Somers-Willett 2009). At the same time, scholars often depict the social contexts surrounding slam as counterculture, subversive, and anti-oppressive (Zepeda 2014; Chávez 2015). Clearly, something powerful and energizing comes out of these creative, subversive communities; however, in order to examine the possibilities of slam, it is necessary to raise questions about the limits, tensions, and complexities of this kind of romanticized space/practice/performance and about how power might be at work in and through making these spaces.

Tangibly, a slam is a regularly occurring two- to three-hour event with a competition that any participant can win by performing a three-minute, timed poem. The event has an organized structure and a set of regular practices that are mediated by the evening’s host, who is usually a member of the organizing group. In the mid-1980’s, slams started as a way to “radically democratize” the production and reception of poetry, to wrench poetry from academia’s “ivory tower” and “bring it back to the people,” and also to energize “lifeless” poetry readings through spectacular and ironic competition (Somers-Willett 2009, 3). While a poetry performance competition is a rather simple concept, these events and the culture surrounding them are discursively spatialized – scholars and slam communities talk about the slam as a “space,” sometimes more so than as an event or competition. More to the point, a slam is not just any space: scholarly representations, public media portrayals, and descriptions of different slam

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2 The most prevalent story about the origin of poetry slam tells of its beginning in working-class circles in Chicago in 1984, led by construction worker Marc Kelly Smith. Initially, the competitive element of slam was meant to be a joke, a one-off spectacle to highlight the irony of academic determining poetry’s “worth.” Nonetheless, the competition was a hit and became tradition. For more accounts of the origins of slam, see H. Gregory 2008; O’Keefe Aptowicz 2009; Somers-Willett 2009.

3 Javon Johnson, in particular, noted this spatializing tendency in a footnote which described how “most slam and spoken word poets refer to their shows as a venue” (2010, 417). This is reflected, too, in the vernacular of “going to the slam.”
scenes alike often ascribe values and intentions to slam spaces (like the aforementioned descriptions of “radically democratic spaces,” “safe spaces,” “inclusive spaces,” and more). As I elaborate below, this spatial language, or “appeals to space” (Bondi 2005), is a launch point for my inquiry and my arguments. Because slam has a strong association with evocative, “radical,” political expression (Chávez 2015; Melo 2009; Somers-Willett 2009), and because these expressions are often discursively tied to the spaces of slams, slam is a compelling site from which to consider how resistant (or counternormative) space is produced and reproduced, how it facilitates and is animated by poetic performances of creative social justice struggles, and how complexities, tensions, and relations of power are at work in making these spaces.

Certain slam communities often draw together the more recent phenomenon of poetry slam and the much longer lineage of spoken word as resistance in ways that work towards generating resistant spaces (Johnson 2010). Ziy von B, a spoken word poet in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) and a participant in this research, speaks about how different slam communities do not necessarily mobilize the structure and practices of slam in order to create resistant spaces. Ziy explains how they have witnessed slams (including slams hosted by Marc Kelly Smith who started the slam with the idea to democratize poetry through competitive performance) where intentions of safe space and of prioritizing marginalized voices were in no way present. As Ziy elaborates, “there’s nothing inherently socially radical about slam, but it has been taken up for

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5 Poetry slam and spoken word poetry are distinct terms, the former referring to competitive poetry events and the latter referring to the broader practice of performed poetry. Poetry slam draws on longstanding practices of spoken word, which are influenced by traditions of oral performance poetry, rap, and hip-hop (Melo 2009; Somers-Willett 2005). Spoken word is not bound to poetry slams or competitions and is instead distinguished by “the larger cultural and political dynamics it enacts through performance” (Somers-Willett 2009, 16)
that purpose, *really* effectively.” Ziy’s statement raises questions that frame my point of inquiry: if the rituals of poetry slam do not inherently generate “safe space” or spaces that prioritize marginalized voices, how and why do certain slam communities produce resistant spaces? How are power and resistance at work in cultivating these spaces? What does this space-making produce?

In this thesis, I take up these questions by considering how, why, and to what effect ‘resistant space’ is produced and reproduced through the Peterborough Poetry Slam. The Peterborough slam is a small slam that has been running monthly since 2007 in the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabek territory Nogojiwanong, in the mid-sized Ontario city of Peterborough. As evidenced across local news media, the Peterborough slam is romanticized in the local community as such a “radical,” “safe” space (Pollock 2017; Dmuchowski 2015). This space is situated in a town with a predominantly white, settler population (96% are “not a visible minority” with “non-Aboriginal identity” according to Statistics Canada 2011), an ongoing history of violent hate crimes (Syed 2015; Perkel 2015), and an ongoing context of settler colonialism (Migizi (Williams) and Kapyrka 2015; sy 2016; D. Lee 2010). As such, and as I will elaborate below, the Peterborough slam offers a compelling site for inquiry into how resistant spaces are performed and what these might produce. Further, Peterborough’s monthly slam, with its repeated structure, rituals, and dynamic performances of spoken word, lends itself well to

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6 Here, refer to just the city as colonial construction because I am thinking specifically about the state-bounded municipality and not the larger Michi Saagiig territory of Nogojiwanong.

7 The Peterborough slam has been narrated as such across many local print, news, and social media outlets, including The Peterborough Examiner, Arthur, Electric City Magazine, PTBO Canada, Peterborough & The Kawarthas Tourism site, KawarthaNOW, MyKawartha.com, and Trout In Plaid.
questioning: whether and how is space being produced, and, if so, what is challenged and consolidated in the process.

I consider whether and in what ways the Peterborough slam is performative, resistant space-making: the reiterative, repeated practices of the slam produce that space, give it meaning, and shift normative terms of engagement, thereby enabling performances that might resist and/or reify certain norms and that might animate impossibilities. In so doing, I consider how power and resistance are at work in, and how performances of spoken word catalyze, the making of such space. I understand this space-making as a move towards resisting or challenging the dominant, normative terms of engagement that regulate most public spaces in the North American settler colonial context generally, and in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) specifically. Participants explained to me that the slam aims to create a space that resists regulatory structures of power (e.g. racism, colonialism, heterosexism, etc.). Reflecting this goal, public narratives of slam and participants’ narratives ascribe certain discourses to the slam as a space: “safe space,” “safer space,” “inclusive space,” “diverse space,” “anti-oppressive space,” “decolonial space,” “welcoming space,” “space for open expression,” etc. These discourses are meant to capture slam organizers’ hopes to variously resist: colonial norms of erasing Indigenous peoples and histories from settler occupied lands; patriarchal norms of silencing, shaming, and blaming victims of gender-based and sexual violence; white supremacist norms that silence and devalue racialized perspectives, experiences, and voices, while also hierarchizing whose perspectives are valid and

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8 I use “making” throughout this thesis to denote the performative production, reproduction, challenging, and consolidating of norms and spaces.

9 Here I refer to the local print, news, and social media outlets mentioned in footnote seven, but also to the Peterborough Poetry Collective’s website (peterboroughpoetryslam.org), Facebook page (Peterborough Poetry Slam”), and event descriptions.
authoritative; ableist norms that pathologize neurodivergence;\textsuperscript{10} and heterosexist and transphobic norms that regulate narrow rubrics of love, gender, and companionship. Participants further explained that in seeking to disrupt these norms, those shaping the slam intend to make a space that also establishes counternorms: a space that celebrates marginalized voices; a space that values and validates emotional expression and expressions of stigmatized experiences; a space that heartily supports anyone sharing their perspectives and encourages anyone to express themselves freely; a space that encourages all present to really listen to what is shared; a space that, at the same time, does not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise bigoted assertions; a space that celebrates performances of subversion, or challenging through poetry the many other ways in which systems of power discipline lives and expressions. Importantly, these intentions of dominant norm challenging and counternorm establishing are inextricable from spatializing the slam and from creating ‘space.’

To build my arguments through this thesis, I first establish how the slam deploys routinized or repeated practices – rituals and rules that are written into the hosts’ scripts and that govern both poets’ and audience members’ roles – in order to produce and reproduce space-specific norms. Specifically, I explore how organizers are motivated to repeat these practices because they believe (or hope) these particular routines will spatialize the resistant counternorms mentioned above. I then argue that “on stage performances” (performances of poetry and ritualized audience participation, which the above practices facilitate) both consolidate and challenge space-specific counternorms and the dominant norms they are intended to disrupt (I use “(counter)norms” to refer to this duality). Finally, I demonstrate how facets of the slam’s space-

\textsuperscript{10} As I explain further in Chapter 4, the slam remains largely inaccessible and ableist in other ways, as a hearing and vocal dependent practice in a venue that is not wheelchair accessible.
making that the routinized practices do not facilitate (experiences of the slam not voiced at these events, ongoing relationships among poets and audience members, the organizational practices of Peterborough Poetry Collective\(^{11}\) members, and the learnings that Collective members carry out from the slam, which I collectively refer to as “off-stage performances”) reveal tensions and instability between how the space is named, how it is practiced, and how it is experienced. Here, I argue that resistant possibilities arise from these tensions, and can be amplified through relationships, strengthened through the creativity and resilience of poets, and carried out into other space-making.

Ultimately, I argue that the slam’s resistant space-making efforts are imperfect yet productive: the slam continuously produces crucial spaces for expression to many who experience marginalization in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), yet it is not space that is “safe” or “inclusive” or “decolonial” etc. in any simple way. In other words, the slam’s repeated on-stage and off-stage practices function to simultaneously consolidate and challenge these two sets of norms: space-specific counternorms (intended to confront systems of power) and dominant, systemic norms (which uphold these systems of power). Understanding in this more nuanced way (i.e. beyond whether ‘resistant space’ is failed or achieved) how the slam and its participants generate, practice, consolidate, uphold, and destabilize (counter)norms, and how power operates more generally, opens up possibilities with potential implications for, and extending beyond, the Peterborough slam. This thesis exposes, for instance, that deploying appeals to space can have the unintended effects of obscuring relations of power, consolidating rather than challenging certain forms of oppression, and even causing harm. There are always going to be such tensions in this

\(^{11}\) The Peterborough Poetry Collective is the group that oversees and organizes slams and other spoken word events, which I often refer to simply as “the Collective.”
kind of anti-oppressive project; it is worth looking at these tensions not as simply failures, but also for what else they can produce. As such, this thesis also offers insights into how resistant space-making, and indeed conceptualizations of resistant space-making, might better challenge, reimagine, and invert systems of power and oppression.

Underlying these arguments, I critique the assumption implicit in spatializing discourses that resistant spaces can be outside of, neatly against, or immune to broader systems of oppression. As part of this, and following Liz Bondi’s critiques of “appeals to space” in therapeutic contexts (2005, 147), I critique how these discourses are applied to spaces in a way that assumes space to be static (i.e. a space can be safe, decolonial, diverse, anti-oppressive, etc.) and also obscures how such spaces might be produced and maintained instead of merely named and intended. For these reasons, I take the subtle shift from naming space as resistant to instead examining resistant space-making as an imperfect, relational, continuous, and fluid process. At the same time, following Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) and Saba Mahmood (2004), I critique both the romanticization of resistance and the move to name resistance, as I explain further in Chapter 3.

With these arguments, I seek to draw together and extend scholarship on safe and anti-oppressive space (e.g. D. Lee 2010), space as performative (e.g. Gregson and Rose 2000), power and resistance (e.g. Mahmood 2004), and performance studies (e.g. Melo 2015). Notably, though I touch on performance studies and take a broadly interdisciplinary approach, I do not approach this research from a literary or performance studies lens; rather, I study the slam as a window into resistant space-making. I discuss this scholarship and its importance to my work in more depth in Chapter 3, and offer a brief exposition here. I particularly build on existing literature on “safe space,” “anti-oppressive space,” and other alternative spaces that seek to generate counter-norms. This literature recognizes the importance of counternormative spaces for challenging dominant
power structures and regulation of social space, while also recognizing how such spatializing discourses can be misattributed, misused, and even co-opted in ways that re-entrench power and oppression. Key pieces within this literature critique naming spaces, pointing to how discourses of safe space, queer space, and other alternative spaces can obscure and re-entrench relations of power (Leonardo and Porter 2010), regulate identities (Bain and Nash 2006), and silence marginalized subjects (D. Lee 2010). These discourses of resistant spaces are also prominent in communities concerned with social justice-oriented arts and activisms (e.g. Richardson 2015), but such contexts are not well represented in this scholarship. At the same time, scholars such as Gillian Rose and Nicky Gregson (2000) have called for more scholarship considering the complexities of space as performative. Within this literature, there has yet to be a consideration of how spaces that are named as safe, anti-oppressive, or otherwise resistant are performatively made. My project extends this scholarship by building on critiques of these spaces to also consider how they are produced, and reproduced, and particularly how resistant space is produced, consolidated, and challenged through the Peterborough slam.

As I also recount in more detail in Chapter 3, scholars such as Javon Johnson (2010) and Karma R. Chávez (2015) who examine slam raise critical questions about the possibilities of creative performances of resistance. There remains, however, much room within this work to engage these questions in depth, particularly surrounding three concerns that I begin to address in this thesis. First, I engage theoretically with space as performative, analyzing the politicized space of the Peterborough slam by considering how it is produced, consolidated, and challenged through formal performances and social relations. Second, I contend theoretically with power and resistance, considering the meanings, motives, and effects of resistance in performance, and the workings of power and resistance in the shaping of the slam space. Third, analyses of spoken
word tend to be enclosed within particular performances, eliding the ways in which resistance might reverberate beyond the instance of performance and through social relations; I consider the spatialities of these performances not as enclosed and static but rather as relational and performative. In so doing, I seek to meaningfully situate slam within the social relations and relations of power that are critical to its production, performance, and reception. As such, I analyze not only formal performances of spoken word, but also the spaces and socialities surrounding its practice, seeking to more thoroughly question the concept of resistance and the workings of power in the making of slam space. Overall, I analyze these dynamics in order to complicate such romanticized appeals to safe, politicized space and to performances of resistance.

The remainder of this chapter offers scholarly, local, and political context that shapes the arguments that follow. I first acknowledge the territories within which this research and the slam take place, considering what doing this work on these lands means epistemologically for this project. As part of this acknowledgement, I situate myself in this place and in this work. I next offer some context on the Peterborough slam and elaborate on the socio-political context of Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), where this resistant space-making takes place. I close by returning to the argument of this thesis, and considering why, at this current political moment in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) and globally, questions about spaces of resistance, how they are made, and what they produce (and for whom) are crucial. Finally, I detail the focus of each remaining chapter in this thesis.

**Acknowledging the land, situating myself**

you could go take a drive down this rural road outside Nogojiwanong….down 3rd Line Douro off Centre Rd. heading away from this place. Even with your windows up you would be able to hear the sound that will make you stop, put your window down, pull to the side, shut your daaban off and get lost in it.

the layered, eerily comforting sounds of frogs – leopard, chorus, and spring peepers.
you could go do this at night so it is only you, the dark, these sounds, their vibrations, and the wide open sky. you could go with your lover and set your seats back; get lost in the ancient calling of life in mud and frigid waters; get lost in these echoes and imagine your ancestors listening to these same sounds, listening to them with their lover. you could do that and lay there, nothing but the dark, omakakiig sounds, and the inhale and exhale of the one beside you. or, the one you wished was beside you.

- waaseyaa’sin christine sy, excerpt from “omakakiig”

waaseyaa’sin christine sy’s poem excerpt above is one Anishinaabekwe’s (Anishinaabe woman) storying of the place where this thesis has budded, gestated, and come to fruition. This research, as well as the spaces, performances, and relations it considers, takes place on the traditional territories of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, which is adjacent to Haudenosaunee territories, in the place known as Nogojiwanong, which in Anishinaabemowin means “the place at the mouth of the river” (Sy 2012). I am grateful, then, to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg who have cared for and lived with this land for millennia. Nogojiwanong has always been a meeting place and is governed by many agreements, including the colonial Williams Treaty and Treaty 20, both of which have been regularly dishonoured by settler peoples and governments since their signings (Migiza (Williams) and Kapyrka 2015). Through the process of colonization, settlers erased the Anishinaabe name of this place, delineated a city, and named it Peterborough. I engage in this territory as a white settler person whose daily privileges and movement through this world benefit from the ongoing colonization and exploitation of these lands, displacement and dispossession of Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg peoples, and erasure of these histories. The knowledges shared here are implicated in my occupation of stolen lands, and in many ways reproduce colonial terms of reference and ways of organizing the world. At the same time, my thinking has also been richly shaped by the knowledges that have been shared with me by Anishinaabe thinkers who have lived and walked in Nogojiwanong too. I sit with the tensions of

12 From Christine’s blog anishinaabewiziwin, gizismoon.wordpress.com/2016/04/18/omakakiig/
these conflicting knowledges, and also with the tensions of my access to and engagement with Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe intelligence as a white settler, and also as a treaty person (Koning 2015).

Certain Anishinaabe thinkers in particular have directly shaped this work, though I also recognize that there are many other ways in which Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe thought informs ways of living in this territory that have been appropriated and erased through colonial processes. As I engage with further in Chapter 3, knowledge works from Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy, Damien Lee, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Gitiga Migizi (Doug Williams), all Anishinaabe thinkers who have lived in Nogojiwanong, have influenced my thinking about space, resistance, relationality, and specifically how these are informed by, contested in, and animated through Anishinaabe ways of living, and settler-Anishinaabe relationships. This very approach to acknowledging my relationship with and responsibility to Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe lands, peoples, and intelligences comes from Simpson’s (2016) thought work. As I learned from Simpson, more than naming the territories upon which this work has taken place, recognizing how Anishinaabe knowledges have shaped, confronted, and enriched my thinking is critical to working towards right relations as a settler. I also hold Sy’s (2012) reminder in mind:

To be at Trent, in whatever capacity, is to know two truths about where we live: the popular truth that says, “I live in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada,” and the Indigenous Mississauga Anishinaabeg truth that says, “I live at the mouth of the river.” How we live with either or both truths will shape our individual and collective decolonization efforts locally and wherever we go in the world.

As such, I evoke both truths about this place in referring to it as “Nogojiwanong (Peterborough)” throughout this thesis.

Moreover, given that this research considers space – how spaces are produced, how they are occupied and performed – it is crucial that I recognize the inherent and irreconcilable colonial
tensions of “making spaces” and of safety-in-space on stolen and occupied lands, and also of examining these spaces as a settler person and uninvited guest in this territory. I seek to carry this tension throughout this work, and am deeply and especially grateful to Sy\textsuperscript{13} and D. Lee (2010) who, personally or through writing, have challenged and extended my thinking around these questions and have also challenged my position as a settler person asking these questions and accessing such spaces. It also means that the knowledges expressed through this thesis inevitably reproduce colonial structures and assumptions and as such can be questioned.

**The Peterborough Slam**

It’s been a long time coming  
but now it’s here  
So c’mon everyone, and give a cheer  
To ‘Girl with the’ and this rare invitation  
To seize the occasion  
Give up your hesitation  
No intimidation  
Share your creations  
Vent your frustrations  
Show your elation.  
Now we’re all buzzing with anticipation  
So without further pontification  
Make this your loudest ovation.  
C’mon, P’town, and join the slam nation!

- Ziy von B, poem shared to begin the first Peterborough Slam, November 2007 (in sachse 2007)

I came to this territory in 2013 from the unceded territories of the Algonquin which overlap with Mohawk and Anishinaabe lands (Ottawa, Ontario). I came here to take up work as a research assistant on May Chazan’s research project considering why and how older women from across North America are mobilizing for social change. That work, the activist-research

\textsuperscript{13} Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy has nourished and challenged my thinking through our interview for this research, through her regular blog posts (giizismoon.wordpress.com), and through her generous knowledge sharing throughout the process of creating the edited volume I discuss in the following footnote.
collective Aging Activisms that emerged from it, and the relationships and connections I have fostered through it have shaped my thinking about activisms and resistance and have informed my daily living in this place. Since making a home here in 2013, I have been regularly attending slam events. I was deeply captured by my first experience of spoken word here and found myself drawn to the gripping, thoughtful, witty, critical, profound, and occasionally hilarious ways in which poets were expressing themselves, their politics, and their struggles on stage. As an MA student with longstanding personal and scholarly interest in activism, and as a musician with longstanding interest in creative and artistic subversions of power, my research interest has been captivated by spoken word and the compelling ways it is mobilized through the Peterborough slam. My longtime attendance at, but not on-stage participation in, slam events influences how I engage in research with this poetic community. Moreover, the poetic work that comes out of the slam has played a part in shaping my politics and my own activist subjectivity.

The Peterborough Poetry Slam began in November 2007, and was started by poets K.E. McNeill and Ziy von B (both of whom participated in this research). When it began in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), slams were relatively new in Canada. Ziy reflected that Ziy and K were likely the only people in the city who had ever been to a slam before; nonetheless “people were ready for there to be a spoken word event in Peterborough … It was just, like, a really ripe

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14 This work, thinking, and relationship building has evolved into an edited collection, Aging Activisms: Older, Bolder, and Changing the World, for which I have been a co-editor with May Chazan and Pat Evans. This book project has sprouted alongside the writing of this thesis, and the development of my ideas in this thesis is inextricable from the process of creating this collection. Importantly, several of my participants – Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy, Ziy von B, Niambi Leigh – also contributed various poetic, reflective, and academic pieces to this volume. Throughout the process of pulling the book together, Waaseyaa’sin and Ziy specifically, through their written pieces and through countless other communications, shared in generous ways that have contributed immeasurably to my thinking. Similarly, my innumerable conversations with May throughout the process of the book have nourished the thoughts among these pages (see May’s forthcoming introduction to the book).

15 K and Ziy both spoke about a group of local poets who were also involved in starting the slam (jes sachse, James, Anu, Opus, Kim).
moment.” Since then, the slam has thrived here, with the Peterborough Poetry Collective hosting monthly slams but also running frequent open mic events and spoken word workshops, setting up “take-out” poetry carts at the local farmer’s market, and many other creative interventions into the city’s public spaces and cultures. Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) is also a “university town,” and as such relationships to Trent University have been significant in shaping the culture of the scene: many slam participants and organizers are current or former students at Trent University and many poets bring their spoken word into Trent classrooms and events, though a significant proportion of slam-goers have no direct connection to Trent. With a few brief exceptions over the past ten years, the slam has always been held at the Spill, a downtown bar and music venue which, on its Facebook page, is described as “A local pirate ship of art & culture, with worldwide connections - Focusing on originality.” As Sasha said, “it’s hard to separate the Spill, the slam environment, and Peterborough as a community.” The Peterborough slam is the only slam in this city and the surrounding area and, in the last two years especially, it has become one of the hubs for spoken word in Canada, hosting a provincial slam competition two years in a row and a forthcoming national competition in October 2017.

As Ziy explains, since 2007 little has changed in the values of the scene or the specific practices of the slam, but the people performing at, attending, and organizing slams often shift, as some people move away (often after graduating from Trent University) or disengage and others become enchanted with the space. Because of this turnover in attendees and organizers, this

16 This short description is all that is offered about the Spill, and its Facebook page is the bar’s only online presence: www.facebook.com/pg/The-Spill-355577846531/about/?ref=page_internal. The Spill, which is now something of a Peterborough institution (Rellinger 2016), opened in October 2007, one month before the inaugural Peterborough Slam.

17 This project will be the first of its kind, since scholarship to date has only considered spoken word in much larger urban centres, with only two pieces in the Canadian context, both located in Toronto (see Cowan 2012; Bateman 2015).
research reflects a specific moment in the bigger picture of the Peterborough slam. Ziy, who has remained more or less involved from that very first slam, describes how the Peterborough slam has developed its own culture and values that have persisted over the past ten years. At the same time, even during the short one year span of my research and writing, several people have left the Collective and several new people have joined. I consider this evolving context throughout my analysis.

From its beginning, the Peterborough slam has also held a strong association with activism, with many spoken word poets also actively engaged in social justice organizing across a variety of struggles. As a recent article in *Electric City Magazine* depicts, “In this city, the walls between artist and activist are always thin, but in slam they break down entirely” (Pollock 2017). Much like other social justice spaces in this city, slams tend to be among the more “diverse” spaces, in that slam audiences are disproportionally queer and racialized compared to the general homogeneity of Peterborough (Ibid.). Also, in my experience, individual poems, poets, and poetry events often present highly politicized themes concerning queerness, racialization, migrant justice, decolonization, poverty, capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, mental health stigma, body-shaming, and radical love, among others (occasionally all within the same poem!). Further, each slam begins by acknowledging and asking audience members to reflect on the fact that this art is created on stolen lands of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, followed by setting the tone for a respectful, accountable, and anti-oppressive space. This rich, creative, and political praxis frames the kind of space that is made through the slam and becomes all the more salient when taken alongside the broader context of the city.

**Nogojiwanong (Peterborough): A tale of two cities**

It’s a hard place to live sometimes with a lack of diversity and challenges with racism and xenophobia … but it’s also a community of activists, artists, and queers.
The quotation above, from another poet and research participant Sasha Patterson, exemplifies local discourse about Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). On the one hand, this municipality boasts a predominantly white settler and politically conservative population (Statistics Canada 2011; Perks 2017), and, on the other hand, it is home to thriving arts, activist, and alternative scenes. In local alternative print media especially, Peterborough has been characterized as a relatively conservative mid-sized city (Electric City Magazine 2016; Jarvis 2012). It has also been depicted as having strong undercurrents of racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and xenophobia (Hussan and Salazar 2008; Magumbe 2017; Bonham and Salazar 2008), and as having severe poverty and unemployment (McCullough 2017; Skinner 2017). Between 2009 and 2013, it ranked in the top four Canadian cities for police-reported hate crimes, with most crimes recorded as either homophobic or racist (Syed 2015), and, during the time of this research, the only mosque in town was attacked by arson in what was ruled as a (yet unsolved) hate crime (Perkel 2015). At the same time, Peterborough is home to dynamic, active, and well-developed activist networks that are part of longstanding and fertile mobilizations of creative resistance (see, for example, Changfoot 2007).

Relatively, Trent University is a prominent fixture in Peterborough as a small university with a reputation as a liberal arts institution and which began the first Indigenous Studies program in the country (then called Native Studies). Spoken word is one prominent avenue for resistance in this place: a dedicated, diverse, and vibrant performance poetry community has been flourishing in Peterborough for about ten years, anchored by the Peterborough Poetry Collective.

18 See the Statistics Canada reports on police-reported hate crimes in Canada between 2009 and 2013 (no data available before 2009 or after 2013): Allen 2015; Allen 2014; Allen and Boyce 2013; Dauvergne and Brennan 2011).
(Dmuchowski 2013), while spoken word, performance art, and other politicized performances have been a part of the community, and of Nogojiwanong, for much longer and have influenced the slam significantly (O’Connor, McLachlan, and Longhurst 2016; League of Nonexistent Poets 2016). Notably, many of the city’s well-known spoken word poets are also dedicated local activists and community organizers (Pollock 2017). Some of these poets have had their own experiences with violent hate crimes in this city (Jenkins 2016). Concerns about safety and about supporting marginalized voices are thrown into sharp relief: this context invigorates thinking about what resistant space-making like the slam might produce.

**Why? Broader political context**

You’re waiting
Waiting for me to speak
Ears curved toward the pulsing of a stranger’s heart
At a time when our leaders tell us to fear one another
Hoard from one another
Fight over a tinier and tinier piece of stolen pie
As gas companies tell us they’re environmentalists
And drug companies take money from mourners
to make more off false promises
At a time we are told
who to hate
what to wear and
whose lives matter
It’s no stretch to suggest
The most radical thing we could do tonight
is bend our ears toward the mic
and listen…


Ziy’s poem excerpt above captures the urgency of these questions in the current, and indeed recurrent, political moment. At the time of writing this thesis, there are global concerns about corrupt political leaders (Inglehart and Norris 2016), hate-mongering (Kutty 2017), xenophobic violence (Gilmore 2015; Tomlinson 2016; L. Young 2016), and governments silencing dissent
(Ziadah 2017). Thinking about creating spaces that are safer, are politicized, and support rather than silence marginalized voices is paramount in this political climate, but *naming* these spaces as such does not necessarily produce the desired outcome. These discourses of “resistant space” are often deployed elsewhere in anti-oppressive, activist, social justice, and therapeutic work (Bondi 2005; Brown and Pickerill 2009; D. Lee 2010). Even hate groups are taking up discourses of “safe space,” appropriating this language to condone and defend their right to perpetuate hatred, misogyny, racism, and xenophobia, and to promote white nationalism (E. Young 2017; Harkinson 2017). Here in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), questions of safety were recently raised in a series of aggressive acts of hate and subsequent “Make Trent Safe” protests at Trent University campus following the election of Donald Trump in the United States (Perks 2017; Trent Faculty 2016) and also elsewhere in the city in response to other Islamophobic and homophobic hate crimes (Tuffin 2016; kawarthaNOW 2017).

In this local and global political climate that works to enforce silence through oppressive violence, to muzzle resistance, and to control scholarship (Wong and Levin 2016; Barrera 2017; Richter 2015), the questions I raise here are particularly urgent. While not a new phenomenon (Bonspiel 2017), nation states and broader systems of power seem to be accelerating explicit attacks on resistance and especially on Indigenous resurgence (Barrera 2017; Wong and Levin 2016), quelling dissent through direct violence, police brutality, and displacement, through “a series of shaming tactics,” and also “by producing what will and will not count as a viable speaking subject and a reasonable opinion within the public domain” (Butler 2006, xix). While these systems of power threaten the survival and viability of dissenting voices in public space, the Peterborough slam’s space-making produces counternorms that seek to validate, celebrate, support, and amplify non-dominant positions and creative expressions of oppression. At this time
of violence and resilience, in the year of water protectors’ #noDAPL stand-off at Standing Rock, the Pulse nightclub shooting, the Trump election, the resurgence of white nationalism in Canada and the US (Thompson 2016; Ganim, Welch, and Meyersohn 2017), and even the violence that spurred the “Make Trent Safe” campaign at my own university, it is critical to think deeply about how communities make spaces that oppose fear- and hate-mongering, nourish resilient voices, listen to underrepresented experiences, and celebrate subversive performances without having these expressions co-opted into neoliberal regimes of control or silenced completely.¹⁹ Moreover, and to further interrupt the ways in which systems of power simultaneously discipline and appropriate creative languages and forms of dissent, it is crucial to examine precisely how these resistant spaces are not simply named but made and practiced, and how power is necessarily still at work in their making. These implications of power in space-making are not specific to the overt repression of dissent, and in fact are as pressing in contexts of organized resistance. While different social movements are deploying appeals to safe, anti-oppressive space (Sotirakopoulos 2016; Ferguson 2014; Ewing 2015), activists across movements are critiquing “activist spaces” for being as regulatory, though in different ways, as dominant spaces, exposing how activists police, shame, and even silence each other (F. Lee 2017; Brown and Pickerill 2009). While I cannot make conclusions about the implications of this spatialized language or space-making practices outside of the Peterborough slam, my analysis does offer some potentially important insights and cautions of broader significance: spaces cannot be made outside of relations of power and, more saliently, the tensions that arise from conflict between power and resistance, between dominant norms and counternorms, in the slam often produce the most generative possibilities for

¹⁹ For a spoken word related example, see Zachariah Wells’ scorching poetic critique of Shane Koyczan’s hyper-nationalist poem at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver: http://www.geist.com/poetry/canada-more-or-less/
challenging power structures; at the same time, while space is not static and thus cannot be simply resistant, the slam space’s relational production makes tenable the challenging of norms and confronting of power (even power within the slam).

**Thesis map**

Through the chapters that follow, I examine how, why, and to what effect the Peterborough Poetry Slam manifests resistant space-making. In the following chapter, 2, I outline the story of how this research transpired, explain the methodologies that have underpinned my processes, and describe my methods and analytic approach. In Chapter 3 I detail the conceptual framework that shapes my arguments, specifically considering space as performative and how theorizations of resistance and arts performance inform my analyses of the slam as space-making. The next three chapters present the data and analyses I have produced through this research. In Chapter 4, I detail the repeated practices and structure of the slam and explore participants’ motivations for making this space, arguing that the space is a ritualized performance which is facilitated through repeated practices (monthly rituals) and which produces spatialized counternorms. By narrating a typical slam from my perspective, I recount the structure of the space in detail while also evoking the affective atmosphere that is cultivated through and cultivates the space’s making. In Chapter 5, I consider the “on stage” performances that work within this structure, arguing that these both consolidate and challenge the counternorms of the space. In Chapter 6, I take up the “off stage” workings of the space that are not facilitated through the visible practices and structure of the slam. Here, I argue that the tensions produced through the space and the relations that surround the space are ripe with possibilities to enact the space’s resistant possibilities in more meaningful, if unexpected, ways. Finally, in Chapter 7, I suggest what this research might offer to the broader questions of space, power, and resistance.
CHAPTER 2 || Methodology

Scenes from community research in a small city: Number 1

September 2016, ‘Home’ Open Mic
Nogojiwanong (Peterborough)
The Spill

Today I learned that doing research with the Peterborough slam means that I just might get pulled up on stage by poet research participants. Tonight is an open mic to welcome students new and old to Nogojiwanong (Peterborough); a night to open up the stage to voices as a ringing in of the academic new year. Ziy von B and Sasha Patterson are the joint hosts for the evening, charming the audience with their clever and incisive poetry, witty banter, and unquellable queerness. For the second time, Ziy has convinced me to jump onto the stage to join in on the chorus of Ziy’s cheeky, educational poem “Call Me They.” After nervously yet eagerly lending my voice to the poem’s call backs and joining in on a mock jig through the audience, I returned to my seat and scrawled the experiences down in my notebook.

In this chapter, I detail my methodology and research process. In so doing, I seek to expose some of the complexities of undertaking social-justice-minded research within a small community of like-minded people, interrogate my own position within the slam space, and outline how I approached this project as both a feminist scholar interested in activisms and a young, queer person navigating the Peterborough slam scene.

Below, I describe the methodologies that have informed this work and recount my methods in detail, but here I offer a bit of context on the scope of this project. Overall, this research has been a rich, varied process, in which I have employed mixed methods, drawn on, established, and enriched friendly relationships with participants, and worked from my own personal experiences of and in the slam space since 2013. I have closely considered the Peterborough Poetry Slam space at the particular moment of research, offering an in-depth snapshot of space-making between September 2015 and December 2016. Though also informed by the slam’s longer history (from participant narratives, media coverage, and my own experiences prior to research), focusing on this period of space-making has allowed me to
undertake a closer analysis of the practices, relationships, dynamics of power and resistance that produce, consolidate, and challenge the Peterborough Slam as a resistant space. Because I kept the project bounded to the contemporary moment of the Peterborough slam, because of the relationships I fostered through this research, and because of the decisions I have made around methods, there are different strengths and limitations to this work. Though I focused on a very particular context and timeframe, my close reading of space-making in the Peterborough slam is much fuller and more in-depth than if I had broadened my scope, and this focused analysis still bears broader significance to questions of resistant space-making. I have also been able to draw not only on my formal participant observations of slam events during the period of research, but also on my much longer, informal experience of these events. My experience of the slam over time, and my immersion in the slam during research, offers me a thorough understanding of the space, but this understanding is also firmly rooted in how I experience the slam from my position. As such, I balance these observations with in-depth interviews with poets who have been involved in organizing slams, with one audience member who is invested in the slam (but has never performed), and one bartender who works at slams. Through these interviews, I have been able to gain greater perspective on the slam and also insight into the less evident relationships, tensions, and organizing that also shape the slam space. At the same time, this research largely reproduces who is most ‘heard’ at the slam, as, with one exception, audience members’ perspectives (especially those who are not connected to organizers through relationships) are not represented in this research. The relationships that I have developed with participants, the trust and comfort that has grown through them, and my somewhat ‘insider’ position as a long-time slam-goer have meant that my interviews have been very lush and compelling. I also recognize
that, especially in the context of these ongoing relationships in my “home”\(^1\) community, this knowledge has been produced intersubjectively and has been mediated by these relationships in ways that have also complicated my position as a researcher, a community member, and a friend.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first draw together the origins of this research project with the methodologies with which I have framed this work. Then, I describe my methods, explain how I analyzed my findings, and note some of the ethical considerations of this research.

**Methodological frameworks**

*Scenes from community research in a small city: Number 2*

*July 2016*

*Nogojiwanong (Peterborough)*

*George St N*

*Under a brilliant blue sky in the full heat of southern Ontario summer, I was walking the familiar route from the grocery store to my downtown apartment. “Melissa!” At first, I was not sure that I had really heard my name, so I kept walking. “Melissa!” This time I was sure, so I looked around, shading my eyes from the blazing sun. “Melissa!” I spied them: two poets, Sasha and Niambi Leigh, were sitting barefoot on the grass in the park next to me and waving me over. They had been in the midst of rehearsing poems for a team competition when they saw me walking by. They had eagerly called me over to ask if I would listen to the poems they were practicing and help to decide which to bring to the competition. I sat with them for nearly an hour as they ran over each poem again and again, accompanied by a warm, lively breeze. All the while, I was not quite sure whether the poets had called me over as a researcher, as a friend, as a slam-goer, or for other reasons entirely. This, I thought, must be what it means to do research in a small community.*

The idea to focus my project on the Peterborough Poetry Slam came out of months of ruminating and conversations. Before I thought in earnest about doing research with the Collective, the words ‘slam’ and ‘spoken word’ were scribbled in corners throughout my MA journal. I knew that I wanted my research to be related to social justice, to be locally-based, and to hopefully offer

\(^1\) I use quotation marks to contest such a claim as an uninvited settler guest living in stolen and occupied Michi Saagig Anishinaabe territory.
something to a community. When May Chazan, my supervisor, eventually suggested the idea, I realized that my thinking, reading, and exploring had all tacitly been leaning towards the slam. I had been attending slams, open mics, and activist rallies that included spoken word in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) for three years. The 2013 Pride Slam, one of the first events I attended in this place, was a formative part of the “home”-growing I was doing here. Over these years, the poetry that I have taken in has shaped my knowledges, my understandings of the world, and my activisms. The words, thoughts, and questions that poets have shared with me on and off the slam stage, both during and preceding this research, have been as much a part of shaping the analysis among these pages as has the formal academic theory that I draw on throughout. As one marker of the influence of poets’ knowledges and brilliance in shaping this work, I have included excerpts from poems by participants throughout this thesis. These poems, all written before this research took place, bring out the themes, complexities, resistances, and tensions that I examine throughout this piece of work. I also recognize that excerpting and reproducing these pieces textually cannot capture their rhythm, timbre, tone, or embodiment and falls short in doing justice to these poets’ work.

So, drawn in by the close ties between slam, spoken word, and activism, and motivated by my own intrigue around the Peterborough slam, I decided to take on research with this community. I was interested in the slam space and community as one connected to social justice, and as such I was drawn to social-justice-minded methodologies. Overall, my approach to shaping this research has been inextricable from the learning and research I have done with May as part of the activist-academic collective Aging Activisms (see www.agingactivisms.org).

Given that my research is concerned with a resistant space and with questions of social change, I take an anti-oppressive approach. This approach resonates with the conceptualizations
of resistance that I introduce in Chapter 3, particularly echoing both Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1990) assertion of resistance as a diagnostic of power and Saba Mahmood’s (2004) reading of agency as not folded into a presumed progressive politics. I draw in particular on three components of anti-oppressive research: “paying attention to power relations” (Potts and Brown 2005, 265), recognizing that all actors have agency, and disrupting hegemonic knowledge paradigms that privilege certain voices, positions, and knowledge systems while delegitimizing others (Brown and Strega 2005; Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2010). As part of this, I am compelled to do research that does not merely take up resistance as a subject of inquiry, but also strives to unsettle such normative notions of whose knowledge counts through the very process of doing research (Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2010). As mentioned, with an eye to valuing many different knowledges, throughout I have traced the knowledges and critical analyses that my participants shared with me, both drawn out through my analyses and represented by the inclusion of poems.

Since my project considers the social relations and dynamics of power that produce and are produced through the slam, community-engaged research is key to the kind of knowledge that I seek to bring forward (Campbell and Farrier 2015; Rutman et al. 2005). For my project, this has meant not only consulting with participants during the research process, but also engaging in ongoing dialogue throughout my analysis, supporting and being accountable to the slam community, and shaping my research questions and methods around input from participants. To this view, my project has been underpinned by insights from anti-oppressive, participatory, community-engaged, queer, and feminist methodologies (see, for example, Brown and Strega 2005; Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2010; Campbell and Farrier 2015). Throughout this section, I highlight a few critical considerations emerging from these works.

*Establishing the research question*
In March 2016, I met with members of the Peterborough Poetry Collective to introduce my proposed project, gauge interest, and gain input into the shape and direction of the research. At this first meeting, I introduced the possibility for the project to examine connections between the Peterborough slam and resistance, particularly considering how that resistance might reverberate out through local social justice struggles. I was aware of existing tensions and uncertainties surrounding the slam as a safe(r) space, but hesitant to introduce a research project that would excavate such tensions in such a small community. Yet – and ever a testament to the brilliance and willingness of Collective members to critique and challenge their own practices – most in the room (and one over email) suggested that I shift my focus to also examine these very “controversies and tensions within the scene, particularly around safe space.” Drawing on these suggestions and intrigued by the ‘space’ of slam, I reshaped the focus of my inquiry. As I carried out the research and as my thinking developed, I began to understand that questions of resistance were necessarily tied up in the ‘space’ of slam, so I looked back into the literature to consider questions of space as a making, as performative. Informed by conversations with the Collective, scholarly literature, and my own interests, I came to the central question of: How, why, and to what effect is resistant space produced and reproduced through the Peterborough slam?

**Positioning myself within the research**

In order to engage in critical feminist research and destabilize the power dynamics inherent in research in small ways, I situate myself as a researcher in this context with an ongoing awareness of and grappling with the power inherent in this position (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; 2007).

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2 Personal communication with Ziy von B, March 2016.
3 See Driscoll Derickson and Routledge 2015 for a discussion of “triangulating the research question” as a tangible way of shifting and challenging the power dynamics inherent in research.
In considering resistance itself as a subject for inquiry, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s interrogation is incisive and salient: she “identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (1999:2). While she is speaking directly to the ongoing colonial and imperialist legacies and impulses of research, her arguments illuminate the omnipresent contentious and complex dynamics between research and resistance. In my research, and in the context of the Peterborough slam, clean divisions between ‘dominant West’ and ‘resistant Other’ are impossible, which means that examining the workings of power in this research is murky and all the more critical to knowledge production.

As I consider spaces of resistance in contrast to and complexity with “Spaces of Racism” in Peterborough (Hussan and Salazar 2008; Bonham and Salazar 2008), taking into account the privilege that comes with my whiteness and settler-ness is crucial to how I might interpret, construct, or access narratives and performances about racism and colonialism (Sykes 2014; Alcoff 1991; Smith 2011), while my queerness also intersects with these experiences and this meaning-making (Morgensen 2011). I come to this research with many unearned privileges that have shaped my access to this education and to the funding that facilitated this research, and that also have shaped the ways in which I have navigated the slam space, both during and prior to research. As a young, able-bodied, white settler person with Canadian citizenship, I face no barriers to accessing and feeling secure in the politicized space of the Peterborough slam, at the many protests I attended throughout this research process, and in the academic institution that houses this research. I am also a queer and gender-non-conforming person who experiences the slam as a queer-friendly and queered space. These coexisting and indivisible facets of both my identity and my perceived identity directly shape my experience of ‘safety’ in the slam and thus
directly inform my analyses. How I am perceived by and known to participants, moreover, has shaped what has been shared with me. I have, in some small ways, worked towards unsettling and queering my own research practices in order to account for, make explicit, and challenge these interlocking positions and privileges.

I also took on this research with an existing level of familiarity with most participants and of comfort and recognizability in the slam space. While the slam community is “diverse,” I share similarities in age, settler-whiteness, queerness, and gender-non-conformity with several participants (though differently with each), as well as sharing similar politics and world-views with most participants. I have also developed friendships with several participants through the process of this research, and, though I have not shared poetry on stage, I did become more involved in spoken word events. Here is a list of examples:

- In September 2016, there was a “Farewell Frankie” event to send one participant, Frankie McGee, off to the West Coast with a celebration of poetry and music. I was invited to share a song for Frankie.
- At the Week Without Violence open mic (October 2016), I supported a friend (not a participant) who was sharing on stage for the first time.
- In November 2016, I performed with participant Sasha Patterson and alongside several other participants in the WordPlay Cabaret, an evening of spoken word performance put on by the Peterborough Poetry Collective as part of the Bernie Martin Festival.
- Also in November 2016, I participated as musical support in the Words On Fire Youth Poets workshop and performance, run by participants Ziy and Sasha.
- In February 2017, I performed with Sasha and some others (not participants) at a local music show at the Spill.
- In June 2017, participant Bennett Bedoukian invited me to join in an ensemble performance for a concert at a local community centre.

As such, and as someone who entered this research with an existing investment in the slam, questions of dynamics of power become complicated. Fairn Herising (2005) raises a salient concern with respect to these questions of position and power in my research: Herising cautions about how the power one holds as a researcher often becomes further obscured when the
researcher is negotiating some form of an ‘insider’ position. I heed herising’s cautions about this

tendency; given that I hold a similar social location to that of many participants, and also that I

navigate many of the same social networks, it is at least as critical, if not more, to be mindful of

the power I hold.\textsuperscript{4} Due to the social and collaborative nature of my research and to the ways in

which my social location overlaps with certain participants, in my researcher role transparency

and self-reflexivity\textsuperscript{5} have been crucial to forming ethical relationships with participants (Bain and

Nash 2006; Rutman et al. 2005; Potts and Brown 2005).

\textit{Research as “messy business”}

\textit{Don’t call me a poet before you call yourself one too.}
- From “Poet” by Beth Lexah and Sasha Patterson

One way in which I was not fully accountable to the slam community, and thus one source of
tension in the relations of power surrounding this research, lies in my unwillingness to share on
the slam stage. At the slam, poets make themselves vulnerable by sharing their words, feelings,
and experiences on the stage. When I first set out to do this research, I knew that sharing on stage
could be one meaningful way for me to disrupt the power and authority that are associated with
my position as a researcher. I held intentions of this kind of sharing and made small steps towards
those intentions (such as drafting and re-drafting poems about the process of the research,

\textsuperscript{4} For further discussion of how, particularly in the context of collaborative projects, it is crucial for researchers to
cultivate an ongoing awareness of and grappling with self and position in these collaborative relations, spaces, and
communities, see also Rutman et al. 2005.

\textsuperscript{5} Feminist researchers such as Pamela Moss (2002), Gillian Rose (1997a), and others argue for engaging in self-
reflexivity as a meaningful way of contending with the relationship between one’s positionality and their processes
of meaning making. Rose also acknowledges the limits of reflexivity: one can never fully know or understand how
one’s positions shape the knowledge being produced. Reflexivity involves making power relations visible and always
a central consideration in research. Extending this view, herising locates self-reflexivity as a social process and
argues that it necessarily must work in tandem with a politics of accountability to the communities engaged in
research (2005, 139). This dual, collaborative self-reflexivity and community accountability is a process I have strived
to engage throughout my project.
attending a spoken word workshop and sharing a few lines of my personal writing there, joining in on other performances). Despite this, I never managed to share my own words on stage.

Though in other ways my researcher position was not a comfortable one, my discomfort with sharing and comfort in listening has made this position partially comfortable, a comfort which I have tried to destabilize and be wary of. This tension resonates with the way in which Heidi Nast (1998) conceptualizes reflexivity, as, in part, a process of “letting go, allowing for the possibility of being out of control,” alluding to how, in contrast to dominant notions of research as neat representations of truth, research is an inherently messy endeavour (944). This framing calls the emotional body, my emotional body, into the creation of knowledge, exposes the corporeality of knowledge, and rejects the supposed purity of objective knowledge claims. By separating myself as researcher from the artistic creation I study, my choice also misses an opportunity to engage in power-challenging creative geographies (de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017), one which I have sought to regain through smaller narrative outputs through this thesis. Since I conducted this research in the slam, a space of heightened emotion, and in light of my failure to share on stage, this research has been a process of productive and contentious messiness.

6 This ‘messiness’ has been taken up by those articulating queer methodologies (Potts and Brown 2005; Campbell and Farrier 2015). Campbell and Farrier discuss the “messiness” of queer participatory performance research, which is “about sensations and the production of knowledge” (2015, 83). They contend that “messiness” in the queer research process “does not equate to methodlessness: by embracing failure, overflow, and unruly erotics, these projects produce knowledge in ways that add to the field while raising questions about the functioning and ideological biases of the academy” (Ibid.).

7 It is worth noting that de Leeuw and Hawkins identify agendas driving creative geographies that also resonate intimately with the agendas of poetry slams: “to do practical and important work in the world; to generate new academic [or community] knowledge; to create and aesthetic output, but also often to critique the politics and elitism of many art forms, including white heteronormative forms of cultural production and those based on elite expertise and knowledge practices” (2017, 307).

8 This consideration of messiness also evokes the embodied and emotional character of research. Many scholars refute the rational, dispassionate performances of objectivity in research, instead illuminating how researchers’ interpretations are deeply influenced by our emotions and relationships in research encounters (Kobayashi 2001; Askins 2009; Campbell and Routledge 2015).
“Messiness” in all of these senses has been an ever present consideration for me, particularly with an understanding that “resistance,” too, is a messy endeavour. At moments in this thesis, I seek to expose my position as a researcher as a contested one. Throughout data collection, I was acutely aware of the tensions of conducting research in a space that is meant to be safe or safer. I also came to understand that my presence as a researcher and my participation as an audience member were performances implicated in the making of the slam space and in the many complex resistances, relations of power, and transgressions of claims to resistant space that produce and are produced by the slam space. I bring these perspectives into my analysis.

**Methods: Researching the Slam Space**

With the above methodological considerations as a foundation, I drew on participatory, community-based techniques to generate research materials in two main ways: participant observation at slam events and other events hosted by the Collective, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with poets, one audience member, and one bartender of the slam venue. Alongside these methods, I maintained a detailed research log, took up a close reading of poet-participants’ chapbooks, and analyzed social and local print media concerning the Peterborough slam.

**Participant Observation**

From July 2016 to November 2016, I formally observed and participated in eleven events held by the Collective (4 open mics, 3 slams, two WordPlay Cabaret events, a spoken word writing workshop, and the Words on Fire Youth Poets event), as well as several activist rallies and events in which spoken word poets shared their work. The knowledge and material I produced through these formal observations was also bolstered by my experiences of the dozens of other slams and events that I have attended since September 2013. When I attended an event, I
observed and recorded how I saw power and resistance operating in the space. I organized different observations around specific goals (though I also engaged these ideas across all observations):

- I documented who was attending (without personally identifying attendees), noting the general social atmosphere, who performed ownership of the space, how the space was occupied and shaped by the different people in attendance.
- I documented the rituals of the event in detail (host script, scoring, audience responses etc.) and how slam-goers employed these practices, thinking particularly about how these practices shaped performances and reception of different poets and poems. I also noted how different people in attendance took up, participated in, redeployed, and circumvented these practices.
- I documented what themes and idioms were present in the poetry and how they were performed by different poets. I also examined whether audience reception, and particularly judges' reception, was related to the themes of the various poems, particularly examining whether scores might correlate with themes.
- I took a close observation of my own experience of the space, of performances, of social dynamics, and how I felt as a researcher in the space.
- At events in which I was a performer (WordPlay, Words on Fire), I examined my own role in the production of the evening, my experience on stage, and my dis/comfort behind the scenes.

These participant observations in the slam space produced detailed and varied insights into space-making, while also challenging me to think more deeply about my own positioning in the space and its making. At these events, friends, participants, and participant-friends would joke about my frenetic note-taking, commenting on how interesting it was to see my "brain at work" during the slam and speculating playfully about what I might be writing. I also had to balance my role in the space as a supportive audience member (cheering, applauding, listening attentively) with recording what I was witnessing and experiencing. At times, these roles held an uncomfortable tension with one another which manifested in uncertainty. Here are some examples of this:

- At moments when my desire to perform attentiveness trumped my impulse to document I would hold off on note-taking until the poet finished their performance.
There were other moments when my discomfort with the poetry I received was amplified by the added discomfort of visibly note-taking during the performance. Sometimes I would notice certain poets who were aware of my observation shuffling uncomfortably and glancing over when I was writing.

As these examples illustrate, despite intentions to not be invasive with my observations, my recording was uncomfortable for me and others, particularly given the vulnerabilities in sharing on stage and in receiving intense performances, even though these performances are public spectacle. My observations, then, were also a part of the making of the slam space, were also performative, and worked to bring different relations of power into space-making.

**Interviews**

From July 2016 to October 2016, I interviewed eleven participants. These interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with a slightly different set of questions for the two participants who had not slammed (Appendices A, B). Our interviews lasted between one and three hours, with most around one and a half hours. With these interviews, I sought to understand participants’ perceptions and narratives of spoken word, slam, and resistance in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) more generally, and their experience and descriptions of the slam space more specifically.

All but two interviews took place in person in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), in locations that participants identified as the most comfortable and convenient: four were in public cafes, three in participants’ homes, and two were in public common rooms at Trent's downtown graduate campus (Traill College). The remaining two interviews took place over Skype video call. With participants’ permission, I recorded and transcribed each interview (most in full, with longer interviews in excerpts). I sent each full transcript to participants to review, and every participant was given a chance to review the full draft of this thesis, and were directed to any
sections in which they were quoted. (See below for further discussion of the informed consent process).

Though it is not a simple task to delineate participants by their relationship to the slam space or by their status as poets, some distinctions are useful. Nine out of eleven participants had slammed several times at the Peterborough slam and were either current or former Collective members. Among these and at the time of our interviews, four were regularly organizing and participating in the slam, two attended semi-regularly, and two were mostly disengaged from attending the slam. Of the remaining two participants, one, Christine, is a spoken word poet, but had never shared her poetry at the Peterborough slam, and the other, Bennett, is a bartender at the Spill who has worked almost every Collective event over the past four years. Table 2.1, below, describes how each participant came to Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), how they became connected to the slam, and whether and when they were a Collective member.

Table 2.1 Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>When/how came to Nogojiwanong (Peterborough)</th>
<th>When/how engaged in slam</th>
<th>Collective member?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ziy von B</td>
<td>Grew up in Toronto. Came in ~2001 to go to Trent (interdisciplinary social justice studies). Has remained since.</td>
<td>Started doing spoken word in high school in the late ‘90s. Went to first slam in Toronto in the early 2000s. Part of starting the Peterborough Poetry Slam in 2007.</td>
<td>On and off since it started in 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett Bedoukian</td>
<td>Grew up in Toronto. Came to go to Trent (Indigenous Environmental Studies) in the early 2000s. Has remained since.</td>
<td>Went to a few slams when it first started to support partner. Started working at the Spill in 2013, and has bartended slams since then.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy Bunce Yaxley</td>
<td>Came in ~2000 with her son. Has lived here since, working and volunteering with various organizations and community projects.</td>
<td>Started infrequently going as an audience member in 2014. After a bit of time away, did her first open mic in 2015.</td>
<td>Joined spring 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Background/Experience</td>
<td>Started Slamming</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Hedderwick</td>
<td>Grew up in Markham. Came in mid-2000s to do a Master’s at Trent (Theory, Culture, Politics). Has been here on and off since.</td>
<td>~2012, ongoing</td>
<td>Went to first slam in ~2012. Very quickly started slamming every month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niambi Leigh</td>
<td>Born in Jamaica, but has spent half of their life in Canada. Came as a young teenager (~2006), and has stayed in the area since.</td>
<td>~2014-2016</td>
<td>Went to first slam in 2013 after a writing workshop and shared at that open mic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy</td>
<td>Anishinaabe from Baawaating (Sault Ste Marie) and also from Obijikokaang (Lac Seul First Nation). Came with daughter in 2006 for MA, stayed for PhD in Indigenous studies. Moved to WS'ANEC' territory (Victoria) in 2016.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Attended slams irregularly as an audience member ~2013-2016. Started doing spoken word in 2004, and then more after seeing Janet Rogers in 2011. Never shared poetry at a slam in Peterborough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Goodwin</td>
<td>Born in Toronto, lived here on and off since ~1991.</td>
<td>~2010-2015</td>
<td>Started slamming in Victoria in ~2007. Went to a few slams when it started in Nogo, and then became more involved around 2010.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across all participants, most are white settlers, several are racialized, and one is Anishinaabe. Five out of the eleven participants do not conform to the gender binary and use singular they pronouns. Most (six) participants were in their 30s, four were in their 20s, and one was in her 40s at the time of research. No participants described barriers to mobility that limit

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9 I use the singular they in referring to these participants throughout this thesis. As Ziy notes in their poem “Call Me They”: “kindness matters a bit more than grammar / so don’t sit and stammer / say ‘they!’”
their access to the slam venue, and a few participants identified with having mental illnesses.

Eight are Trent University graduates, and of those three completed graduate degrees at Trent. All participants had lived in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) for several years, though three moved away during the time of research. These participants reflect broader patterns in the Peterborough slam: audience members (especially returning ones and poets) tend to reflect a disproportionately racialized and queer group (compared to Peterborough’s demographics), are often current or former Trent students, and tend to be otherwise invested in other arts/activist communities in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). In order to not depict an artificial distance from participants – and as such to recall that this research is, as Ziy described, “all about relationships” – I refer to participants by their first names throughout this thesis.

**Analysis:**

I took several different approaches to analyzing the materials I produced. I engaged in a process of free writing my thoughts and observations throughout data collection, analysis, and writing; this free writing helped me to work out the patterns I saw across different data. In my research log, I kept note of these emerging themes, concepts, and narratives, and I then coded these through my transcripts and participant observation notes. Through this process, I drew out the different spatialized language in participants’ narratives of the slam, compared this language to media portrayals of the slam, and analyzed how slam participants (particularly the host) drew on or spoke around this language during events and how this related to the other practices of the slam. My analysis was an emergent process, and I sought to balance my own observations with the narratives that participants shared with me. Throughout, and drawing on my friendly relationships, I had informal conversations with several participants around some of these ideas.
I formed my analysis around three dimensions of spoken word – performances, spaces, and socialities – with the view that these concepts are socially constructed, contested, and complex. While I remained cognizant of the fluidity and interconnections of these concepts, these nevertheless have allowed me to engage with my research questions by directing my analyses of how power and resistance operate through the slam's space-making.

**Performances**

I analyzed performances of spoken word through my own experiences, through my readings of poets’ embodiment in participant observation, through poets’ accounts of their motivations, and through all participants’ accounts of poetry performances. This analysis extended beyond the content and stage performance of poems to also comprise audience reception, the practices shaping performances, the links across performances, and other interrelated factors. I was particularly mindful that my presence as a known researcher was part of each performance.

**Space**

In my analysis of the slam as spatialized, I incorporated a sense of space as constructed, reconstructed, and performed, and also of the space’s performance as shaping what the space produces (poetry performances, audience engagement, etc.). I first looked through my interviews and observations to draw together the different ways in which political or resistant intentions and experiences of the slam were discursively spatialized. My analysis of the slam as a space took into consideration the different ways in which participants narrated their experiences of, associations with, perceptions of, and interactions with the slam. I took particular interest in how power operated and was performed in space-making. I also considered how performances of poetry and of audience rituals worked in the making of the space. A significant consideration here
was how, given that I was there as a known researcher, my bodily presence and my practice of observation shaped the space’s doing. Considering my researching body and the power that is associated with it was particularly salient to examining ‘safe space’ and its construction.

**Socialities**

Finally, I considered the social, relational aspects of the Peterborough slam and how these were at work in space-making. Through participant accounts and my own experiences, observations, and relationships, I considered how social relations on and off stage contributed to the workings of power and resistance in making the space. My power as a researcher, again, was a significant consideration in this analysis, particularly as I negotiated this position in such a social context and as my relationships with poet-participants evolved.

**Consent process and ethical considerations:**

Prior to beginning participant observation, in July 2016 I met with several Collective members to go through a process of informed consent and to discuss how I might subsequently inform audience members and non-participant poets who would necessarily be implicated in these observations (Appendix C). We decided that I would include a flier at the door (Appendix G), and have a short announcement during the event (Appendix F). The flier and announcement would make it clear that I was doing research about the Peterborough slam without stating explicitly that I was observing each event. Collective members felt that this would adequately inform audience members without generating discomfort or making people feel exposed by using the language of "observation." In each interview I engaged participants in a process of informed consent: I gave participants a consent form (see Appendix D) ahead of time and then talked through it in detail, and assured that they were comfortable with and consenting to this process before continuing with the interview.
Here I highlight two particular ethical considerations of this research. First, I did not anonymize research participants; rather, I have personally identified all participants. Since this research has taken place in a small social context, and all participants are public figures locally in different ways (poets as public performers, Christine as the author of the public blog post and a well-known Anishinaabe academic, and Bennett as the only bartender at the Spill who regularly works slams) anonymity would not be possible. I was careful in the consent process to make sure that participants were fully informed of and consenting to this identification. I explained that there is a small social risk related to this exposure, but that this risk is minimal because my research is concerned with the public performances and networks of these participants. Participants also have remained in control of what information is shared and published: participants have had opportunities to withdraw, to amend the information that they have shared, and to review what they have shared and how they are represented in dissemination pieces. If I move forward with any publications following the completion of this thesis, I will continue to engage participants in such practices of review and consent. Second, since this research considers a small community of similarly-minded people, and since much of the research (participant observation) has taken place in a social setting, navigating social relationships as a researcher has been an ethical concern. I considered cultivating social relationships while maintaining certain important boundaries and being mindful of and transparent about my role as a researcher to be important to this kind of research. At the same time, I necessarily felt tension between these growing friendships and my research. With this in mind, I sought to be thoughtful and transparent through this research process, reminding myself and participants that consent in research is an ongoing process.

Conclusion
Overall, I have sought to continually question my position and authority as a researcher, as well as my position in accessing and participating in the slam and in engaging in relationships with this community. As such, I have aimed to reflect Paul Routledge’s methodological argument that “self-conscious research performances stretch debates about positionality and research ethics in new directions” (Pratt 2005, 526, citing Routledge 2002). For me, these “new directions” have meant considering myself as another agent in space-making by examining what my own unwillingness to perform vulnerability on the slam stage has produced and by recognizing the possibilities for this research to reify power and perform resistance in complex ways. With this in mind, I have tried to hold the following question alongside what I present in this thesis: as a researcher, what does it mean for me to be a part of this community, a part of this space-making, and a part of these relationships?
CHAPTER 3 || Conceptual Framework

In order to examine performative space-making, power, and resistance in the Peterborough slam, my conceptual framework draws together interrelated but not often partnered theorizations of space, performativity, resistance, and arts performance. I begin by building from three themes in scholarship on slam, and drawing on two particular scholars' interventions into this literature which question the romanticization of slam as inherently "radical." These questions bring into focus this chapter’s broader considerations of how power, resistance, and performance are at work in resistant space-making. I then bring accounts of counternormative spaces and theorizations of space as relational and performative into dialogue with one another. Following this, and in order to examine how performative space might be at work in the slam as a politicized space that is animated by poetic performance, I consider informative conceptualizations of both resistance/power and arts performance and how these speak to one another. These areas of scholarship, in tandem, shape and underpin my inquiry into how, why, and to what effect the Peterborough slam produces, reproduces, and complicates resistant, norm-challenging space.

Slam

None that I know has done it for fame
So I guess it’s all in the name
Although my people could never wrap
Their heads around the word free
They just couldn’t be
When your own skin becomes your cage
Your blood can only flow in rage
But in this poem I can change
The rules, I can break tradition and make it
A contradiction. Every drop of ink is like a shackle
Off my feet, opening a mind that learned to slave itself.

So don’t call me a poet before you call me a freedom fighter.

- Beth Lexah and Sasha Patterson, excerpt from “Poet”
To engage theoretically with the Peterborough slam, it is worthwhile to contextualize slam and situate my inquiry within existing scholarship. Despite attempts at de-centring the slam’s evaluative nature through chants like “the points aren’t the point, the poetry is the point!” (Somers-Willett 2009, 14), a salient feature of the practice of poetry slam is how competition and live judging affect the style and form of the poetry and its performance. According to poet-scholar Susan B. Somers-Willett (2009), while there is not necessarily a discerning style or characteristic of slam poetry, the performance of identity through the poet’s embodiment of verse is particular to slam, and these performances, much like the poem excerpted above, are highly politicized. In existing scholarship, and as reflected in public narratives, spoken word is most often characterized as a “feeling,” “sensation,” or “experience” (Dolan 2006; Somers-Willett 2005; Boffone 2015). In this thesis, I take up the specific competitive events of poetry slam, this more abstract practice, culture, sensibility, and sociality of slam poetry, and how these work together to produce and reproduce the slam as a resistant space. To situate my work, I draw attention to three general themes of scholarship on slam: (1) viewing slam as a pedagogy which politicizes youth, (2) framing slam as an artistic form which challenges literary traditions, and (3) analyzing slam as an embodied practice of resistance.

First, some scholars take slam poetry up as an educational practice and, in so doing, attribute great pedagogical clout to spoken word as a tool for developing political consciousness among youth (Carmack 2009; Fields et al. 2014; McPherson and Mazza 2014; Yanofsky, van Driel, and Kass 1999). While much of this literature is limited to young poet-students and

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1 These scholars often note the distinct ability of slam poetry to imbue youth with a critical analysis of their experiences, thus “empowering” them to articulate their political agency and to begin to translate this political consciousness into civic engagement and action (Ingalls 2012; Wells and DeLeon 2015; Stovall 2006; Dooley 2014; Low 2011).
classroom settings, these works expose the potential for slam poetry to be politicizing or to be a medium that prompts political agency. There is, however, a marked need to further analyze the political potential of spoken word in a way that might ascribe the capacity for political agency not solely to the medium, but also to the agents themselves. This liberal view of politicization is one to unpack further: though not focused on educational settings, my project seeks to complicate and extend such narratives of politicization while raising questions about the ways power still operates in these spaces.

Second, other scholars consider how slam poetry poses a challenge to traditional literary forms. Pointing to slam and spoken word as a “new artistic movement” and noting that performance poetry is undeniably approachable, these scholars question the implications of slam poetry for more established literary traditions (H. Gregory 2008, 70; Tolan 2010; Novak 2012; Woods 2008). These scholars begin to raise notable questions about the significance of the publics surrounding the production of poetry (Novak 2012), the dissemination and reception of performed artistic forms (H. Gregory 2008), and the implications of the public nature of these forms for their performance and subject matter (Woods 2008). It remains necessary to be critical of how a focus on the textual, or on individual pieces of poetry, can elide the socialities, practices, and spaces surrounding performances thereof. Rather than encapsulate slam in this way, I examine political, performative, social, spatial, and embodied character of slam as something that is returned to and ritualized through the repeated practices that frame each poem.

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2 There are limitations also in pigeonholing slam as a practice of youth, rather than a broader youth-dominated but not youth-bound cultural, social, and political practice. Marking slam as ubiquitous with youth is not only inaccurate; it also works to obscure the power and influence enacted by the older actors who shape and participate in such projects.

3 Some, like Jim Tolan (2010), denote a distinct polarization between textual and performance poetry (or “page” versus “stage” poetry). Others, like Somers-Willett (2009), see performance poetry as offering a lucid opportunity to bridge literary and performance studies, enabling deeper analyses of art, its reception, and its embodiment.
Third, and most saliently to my work, themes of slam as resistance, as politicized, and as politicizing are remarkably coherent across otherwise significantly varied pieces (see, for instance, Somers-Willett 2005, 2009; Spiers 2016; Johnson 2010; Fox 2010). These scholars emphasize the transformative potential of spoken word and locate poetry slams as havens for performances of “dissent and contested identities” (Spiers 2016, 134; Dolan 2006). These analyses, whether implicitly or explicitly, each frame slam poetry as a form of resistance enacted through performances of identity (see, for example, Somers-Willett 2005; Bateman 2015; Boffone 2015). In fact, Somers-Willett (2005) argues that, in contrast to other art forms, marginalized identities and performances thereof harbor a distinct cultural capital in poetry slams. Likewise, spoken word is recognized as a means of asserting the visibility of identities against dominant norms or oppressive stereotypes, particularly through performances of queerness, racialization, and their intersections (Cowan 2012; Boffone 2015; Bateman 2015; Dillard 2010; Chávez 2015; Gingrich-Philbrook 2010). Strikingly, though the performance of identity against norms is central to these analyses, this scholarship does not significantly draw on Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity, despite its evident theoretical salience to these questions.\footnote{While Somers-Willett (2009) is in some ways an exception to this omission, this is still prescient.} I seek to extend and complicate these conversations by drawing slam together with insights from theorizations of performativity – particularly as the performative is enunciated through and (re)constituting of spaces and relations.

In examining the space-making of the Peterborough slam, I build especially from the works of two scholars who differently exposed the workings of power in slam communities. Their interventions are especially relevant to framing my arguments as they raise questions about the possibilities, tensions, and obscured power dynamics at work in the “radical,” resistant, or
“safe” spaces of slams. Javon Johnson, a spoken word poet and performance and communication studies professor, questions how romanticized depictions of slam communities as “radically democratic” often obscure the tangible yet covert marginalizations and relations of power still at work in these spaces (2010, 396). He argues that blanket rhetoric of slam as “safe space” inevitably flattens the realities of oppression, leaving power “unchecked and undercritiqued” (Ibid.). Through these arguments, Johnson raises an invaluable question about how those involved in poetry slams constitute, legitimate, and enact unsubstantiated notions of community and safety through slam, while also ascribing these notions to the slam as a space. He draws attention to the fact that “there exists no dialogue that critically questions the ways in which these highly politicized performance poetry communities are produced and reproduced, maintained and negotiated, or empowered and subverted” (Ibid., 397). Furthermore, behind such romantic, idealistic facades of slam poetry, “the notion of community is always a contested concept,” particularly for those who are re-marginalized in those space-makings (Ibid.). Though Johnson’s arguments are not explicit in examining how power operates, his questioning of how safe or radically democratic space is constituted exposes tensions between viewing slam as a space of resistance (and thus in opposition to power relations) and revealing how power is at work within such a space. This tension opens an opportunity to build theorizations of resistance and power into considerations of slam and of the performative making of its spaces, which I begin to do in this chapter.

A second intervention by Karma R. Chávez, an activist and communication arts, Chican@, and Latin@ studies professor, extends Johnson’s critiques of power and resistance in performance poetry and slam spaces. Chávez, critiques “(White, male, professional, educated, able-bodied) gay slam poet” Ragan Fox for his problematic and occasionally appropriative
“poetic polemics” (2015, 450, citing Fox 2015). Chávez notes a broader issue in slam scenes wherein slam poets with certain privileges (particularly white men) indiscriminately take up struggles that are not their own, often under the misguided guise of “speaking for others” (Ibid., 449, citing Alcoff 1991). Chávez thus also hints at how power operates in these communities by exposing how commonly and unassumingly this kind of “discursive imperialism” occurs (Ibid, citing Alcoff 1991, 18). This “poetic e-race-ure” as enacted by Fox and interrogated by Chávez reveals a troubling undercurrent of unquestioned power in performances of identity and resistance through spoken word.

By drawing theorizations of performative space, resistance and power, and resistant performance (as discussed below) into my considerations of the Peterborough slam, and taking Johnson’s and Chávez’s critiques as a launch point, my work builds from this slam scholarship in three ways: I analyze poetic performances not in isolation, but rather as part of a collective and relational production of space; I challenge romanticizations of slam as inherently radical or politicizing, instead considering how both resistance and power are at work; and, most saliently, I thoroughly analyze the resistant spatialization of the Peterborough slam, its tensions, and what this spatialization produces. While I build on this slam scholarship, more importantly I also explore how studying the Peterborough slam can extend theorizations of how resistant spaces might be performed and to what effect.

**Space**

I have fought hard for this space,
This stage,
Fought hard against the
*happiness is not for you*
*Don’t go there, don’t be that, what are you?*
You see Identity will always push the boundaries of language
So I speak of mine within the italics of poetry […]
I may come on too strong sometimes
And sometimes I need this stage, I need this microphone
To lay my worries here, I have seen them disappear here
When you snap your fingers and my mind rests here, with you

- Sasha Patterson and Beth Lexah, excerpts from “Poet”

As the above poem written by two poet-participants captures cleverly, *space* holds a lot of meaning in the Peterborough Poetry Slam, and its meanings are also associated with resistant performances on the stage, with creative expressions of identity, and with relational expression among poets and audience members. In order to examine the Peterborough slam as a making of resistant space, I consider how space is constructed and performed, and what conceptualizations of space might lend to examining possibilities of performing resistance. I first briefly review some key insights from literature concerning other claims to resistant space, and then I draw on theorizations of the spatial as relational, performative, and fluid, which underpin my inquiry into how such resistant spaces are practiced, produced, consolidated, and challenged.

**Resistant spaces: space as safe, radical, decolonial**

Here, I consider scholarship regarding claims to resistant spaces, exploring how this work might inform my analysis of the Peterborough slam’s resistant space-making against how the community of slam participants ascribes certain discourses to space (naming the slam as a “safe,” “radical,” “inclusive,” “decolonial,” “anti-oppressive,” “welcoming,” space). Liz Bondi argues that this way of laying claims and “taken-for-granted meanings” onto a space, or “appeals to space,” depoliticizes the spatial and obscures its “active production” (2005, 147). One of the most prominent “appeals to space” in scholarship and in slam communities is the claiming of “safe space.” Much of the literature considering “safe space” examines specific pedagogical or therapeutic praxis in educational or therapeutic environments respectively and particularly focuses on spaces made for critical dialogue about race (see, for example Covington 2005; Holley
and Steiner 2005; Poynter and Tubbs 2008; Alvarez and Schneider 2008). Though not considering the performative, by framing safe space as a pedagogy some scholars have conceptualized and challenged a certain praxis of safe space (Stengel 2010; Leonardo and Porter 2010). Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter (2010) and others criticize safe space as both (1) shutting down meaningful conversation in the interest of preventing conflict, and (2) fostering unsafe environments for racialized students while protecting white students from the discomfort of having their privileges questioned. Leonardo and Porter argue that, more often than not, “safe space” claims “maintain white comfort zones” and relatedly produce a “culture of silence” by suppressing the very real hurt and anger of racialized subjects (2010, 149, drawing on Freire 1993). In analyzing how the discourse of safe space works in the Peterborough slam, I thus seek out the silences: in a space which normalizes performances of subversion, these silences will be especially telling of how power is at work.

Others have moved towards pedagogies of discomfort as a more meaningful way to reckon with the difficult, destabilizing, and never-ending processes of recognizing how systems of power uphold the daily privileges of those who hold dominant subject positions while simultaneously denying those same privileges to those who hold other marginalized subject positions (Boler 1999; Regan 2010; Stengel 2010). These scholars assert that safe spaces and deconstructing power are inherently at odds, since challenging power also threatens privilege, which can evoke fear in privileged subjects (Stengel 2010; D. Lee 2010). Relatedly, Alison Kafer examines safe spaces and the associated practice of “trigger warnings”\(^5\) from a disability studies perspective.

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\(^5\) Since 2014, “trigger warnings” have been a hot-button topic in institutions of higher education. Students at different universities began calling for campus-wide practices of trigger warning in classrooms, which led to heated debate in scholarly and public forums (see Robbins 2016; Lukanioff and Haidt 2015). Along with Kafer, Smith 2014, and others, I take trigger warnings as an imperfect and critiquable practice, “yet I still appreciate possibility in them” (Kafer 2016, 17).
perspective. She argues that contexts of disclosure (like the slam) confront notions of safety (2016, 10). Moreover, Kafer contends that different “safe spaces” tend to construct notions of safety around particular traumas and disclosures while often neglecting and rendering more vulnerable others (for instance, a BDSM workshop which preempted only sexual trauma thus neglecting “triggers” for other sources of trauma), and also that trigger warnings are largely ineffective in pre-empting traumatic relapses induced by benign, everyday “triggers.” This idea that “safe space” can be constructed somewhat limitedly around particular contexts or traumas lends another dimension to critiquing the limits of safety and the ways in which power is at work in constructing safety. Moreover, while trigger warnings can be a way to collectivize healing, Kafer argues that, much like safe space discourse, trigger warnings can also be “co-opted to serve neoliberal, white-supremacist, and ableist ends” by closing off disclosures that disrupt the status quo and make privileged positions suspect and uncomfortable (16). This small critical literature on safe space ultimately asserts that no space can promise safety for everyone and, as such, that naming spaces as safe can be irresponsible and even enhance possibilities for harm (Arao and Clemens 2013; Leonardo and Porter 2010). As such, I draw on this work to consider what is produced in the naming of the Peterborough slam as a safe and otherwise resistant space.

Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe scholar Damien Lee’s (2011) arguments extend thinking about decoloniality and resistant spaces in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). Lee exposes how safe space discourse in learning environments can re-produce colonial relations and erasure and can also be in conflict with creating decolonial spaces. Discussing workshops intended to create safe spaces in which youth in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) “could learn about Nishnaabeg teachings” (1), Lee teases out the tensions between seeking to advance Anishinabek space and
seeking to foster safe space. Since Nishnaabeg\textsuperscript{6} teachings confronted colonial realities and raised “complex feelings” for settler participants, these two spaces could not co-exist. He also examines how the spaces they created were “susceptible to becoming colonized spaces,” citing Leonardo and Porter’s disruption of pedagogies of safe space. Depicting how no space can be safe for everyone, and indeed how no space can be safe for Anishinaabe peoples, he ultimately questions whether “open inclusion” (here of settlers in Anishinabek spaces) inevitably draws in relations of power that cannot be reconciled into anything resembling safety or decoloniality. Moreover, he concedes that most settlers, even the well-intended, undermine resurgence through their participation and presence in these spaces. Lee’s insights are rich in contending with the complexities of making resistant spaces, especially in the specific settler-colonial context of Nogojiwanong (Peterborough).

I draw a few questions from this literature that I trace through my analysis of how power works in defining and establishing the space of the Peterborough slam. First, echoing Leonardo and Porter (2010), I ask “Safe for whom?” This literature identifies that it is not possible to have a space that is safe across subject positions. With this in mind, for whom is the safety of the Peterborough slam intended and for whom does it work? Second, how might productive possibilities for pedagogies of discomfort be closed off in working to make the slam a safe(r) space? Relatedly, how do safety and discomfort come into conflict in the making of the slam space and what is produced? Third, what are the tensions between decoloniality and safe space and how do these manifest through making the slam space? Though I consider the slam as more

\textsuperscript{6} There are many varied spellings of Anishinaabe, including Nishnaabeg. I use Lee’s spelling while referring to his work.
than a safe space, these tensions and questions resonate across the slam’s claims to space, and I consider them in investigating how the space is made.

The move to define “safe spaces” is part of a larger pattern of marking certain spaces as supposedly different and better than daily, public, normative spaces. Some, like Jen M. Self and Kimberly D. Hudson (2015), consider the very existence of these spaces – particularly queer spaces on university campuses – to be an iteration of resistance. Across this literature and resonating through popular social justice discourses, spatialization echoes through phrases like “making space,” “holding space,” “reclaiming space,” “accountable space,” “brave space,” and more. In this way, radical possibilities and politics are ever more spatialized, and the spatial is invoked to demarcate intentions of anti-oppression. However, despite claims to exceptionality, spaces do not exist separately from relations of power. Alison Bain and Heidi Nash discuss how, much like the “process of queering space, which is often interpreted as liberatory,” radical space “can paradoxically discipline gendered and sexualized selves” (2006, 101). Questions about space, then, are also implicated in questions of power and identity. Here too, skepticism surrounding the romanticization of resistant spaces is paramount: Who holds the authority to define space? How does power continue to operate in marginalized/resistant spaces? I seek to extend analyses of such spaces by examining how both power and resistance work through the resistant space-making of the Peterborough slam.

In analyzing such moves to define spaces against norms, it is important that I question how impulses to create, control, and define space might be tacit in these kinds of politics. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s critical analysis of space resonates: “ideas about progress are grounded within

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7 For accounts and critiques of these spaces in popular circulation, see: Truitt 2009; Adkins 2013; Arao and Clemens 2013.
ideas and orientations towards time and space,” and these ideas facilitate colonial violence, displacement, and erasure (1999, 51). As Tuhiwai Smith argues, the severing of space from time is a colonial imposition, the logics of which facilitated and continue to facilitate colonialism and its violence against and exploitation of Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and lands. To Tuhiwai Smith, not only is space deeply political, but so too is the colonial rationalization of space a political move to claim power and dominion over lands and peoples. At the same time, Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011), in articulating a framework of Nishnaabeg resurgence, sees possibilities for decolonial transformation in subversions of such colonial organization of time/space. Speaking about Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), she writes about a moment – a "community procession" and celebration of Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg in the main downtown streets – transformed colonial space and corrupted linear time: “For an hour that day, we collectively transformed the streets of Peterborough back into Nogojiwanong, and forward into Nogojiwanong” (2011, 12). Space, then, is inseparable from questions of power, resistance, and de/coloniality. The performative making of spaces can then work in re-colonial ways of constructing and binding space and/or decolonial ways of recreating space, and can be motivated by colonial impulses to define space and/or by decolonial desires for resurging space.

Holding this work in mind, I consider how colonial senses of an entitlement to space and/or decolonial claims to collective space might be at work in supposedly resistant moves to make a space of resistance through the Peterborough slam. How can the coloniality implicit in the impulse to mark and define space be reconciled, contended with, and unsettled? My considerations of the making of the Peterborough slam as a counternormative space speak to, but cannot answer, these questions.

*Space as performative*
In order to contend with these questions about claims to resistant space, I take up theorizations of space, and particularly of space as performative. I underpin these ideas with Doreen Massey’s work, which spurred paradigmatic shifts in thinking about space and time. Massey and others recognized “an intricate connection between power, knowledge and geography,” which “has transformed the ways in which contemporary human geography has conceptualized space” (D. Gregory 2000, 707). Post-Enlightenment structural reasoning fractured time and space into discrete categories and set them into an oppositional binary, with space as the static, apolitical, neutral field of play upon which the dynamic time enacted the political (Massey 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Massey and others resisted both the fracturing of time from space, and the depoliticization of the spatial. Building from this critical recasting of space, I hold Raka Shome’s question in mind: “How might thinking of power spatially both disrupt and add to our understanding of how power works?” (2003, 41).

Against understandings of space as static and apolitical, these scholars have contended the plurality of space, noting how it is shaped by and, in turn, shapes relations of power. Gillian Rose (1999), drawing on Butler’s theorizations of performativity, contested structural conceptions of space by “insist[ing] that space is not a pre-existent void or ‘a terrain to be spanned or constructed’: it is instead ‘a doing’, a performance” (cited in Gregory 2000, 709). With conceptions of space as relational and always becoming (Massey 1999), I take interest in understandings of space “as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power” (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434), which can facilitate “the possibility to envision differently” (Chávez 2010, 3). Before delving into such conceptualizations of the performativity of space, it is useful to clarify the different ways I take up performance and performativity, and how I understand these
to be related and as somewhat of a continuum. Like many others, I understand performance in
two senses. I use 'arts performance,' recognizing this as limited and limiting language, to convey
simply “live art by artists” (Goldberg 2001), or performances which are not completely
spontaneous and in which people’s actions play a role (Banes and Carroll 2003). Specifically for
the slam this means performed poetry and the host’s performance on stage, as well as the
audience’s participation in the rituals of audience engagement that contribute to the aesthetic
production of slam (cheering, scoring, chanting). These arts performances are part of broader
performance, or “what individuals do, say, ‘act-out’” (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434). For my
consideration of the slam, this dual sense of performance includes arts performances of poetry
and rituals, but also every other action of participants during the slam (at some points I refer to
these performances as individuals’ conduct), and related actions and interactions outside of but
directed towards slam events (e.g. organizing these events), all of which are part of making the
space. Finally, each of these performances are “intrinsically connected” to performativity
“through the saturation of performers with power” (Ibid.). Following Gregson and Rose’s reading
of Butler, I take performativity as “the citational practices which reproduce and/or subvert
discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and their performances” (Ibid.).

I draw considerably, then, on how performativity has been taken up by geographers like
Rose, Nicky Gregson, Geraldine Pratt, and others. In questioning how a politicized, safe(r),
resistant space might be enunciated through slams, I consider production, reproduction,
consolidation, and challenging of dominant norms, and space specific counternorms in the
making of the Peterborough slam. Gregson and Rose (2000), in particular, have advanced space
as performative, and have critiqued interpretations of performativity that elide spatiality. Most
importantly, they argue that performance and performativity are inextricable from the spaces
which they animate, are animated in, and are animated by. To them, spaces do not exist prior to their performance, but rather are brought into being through these specific performances. As such, Gregson and Rose advance spaces as messy, relational, temporary, and complex makings that are always becoming, and always implicated in relations of power.

I draw on these understandings of space as performative and, in so doing, must engage a bit more directly with theorizations of performativity itself. Butler (1988, 1990, 2004) and others argue that performances, as described by Gregson and Rose above, are “compelled and sanctioned” by norms and also, by citing these norms, work to reinforce them – in this thesis I refer to this as consolidating or upholding (Pratt 2000, 527, citing Butler 1990). With this understanding, Butler argues that performances also hold the possibility for subverting these norms through “slippage;” that is, incorrect or incomplete citations of these norms work to challenge them – in this thesis, I refer to this as challenging or undermining (Butler 1990; Gregson and Rose 2000). These norms work to discipline individual’s performances (for the slam, this means performance in both senses), but at the same time individuals’ agency is tied up in the instability of norms (Chazan 2015, 23). Other scholars, such as Saba Mahmood (2004), have challenged binary conceptualizations of either reinforcing or subverting norms, arguing instead that performances are always a complex and messy process of producing, challenging, and consolidating norms that cannot be understood within ‘Western’ conceptions of agency and progress. I draw on this understanding of performativity as complex and non-binary in examining the Peterborough slam space as producing, reproducing, challenging, and consolidating both space-specific counternorms and the power structures against which these counternorms are articulated. Overall, I use the word “making” to refer to this performative production and
reproduction of space and norms, and I question what is produced and *spatialized* through certain practices and performances of the slam.

Thinking of how repeated, daily enactment both consolidates and challenges norms, and how this happens through particular spaces and relations, textures considerations of the Peterborough slam as resistant space-making. Similarly, considering the less-theorized links between performativity and spatiality is important for reading the exceptional space supposedly generated through and crucial to slam. This means that I consider how reiterations and repetitions of practices, habits, and comportments related to slam work to constitute a ‘space’ and generate certain space-specific norms, terms of engagement, and ways of relating.

I draw on these ideas of space as a performative making to help me think through some of the ways relations of power are necessarily implicated in the spatial by bringing bodies into questions of space. In considering embodiment and space, Heidi Nast and Steve Pile centred “geographical explorations of how bodies and spaces simultaneously (re)create one another” (Bain and Nash 2006, 99, citing Nast and Pile 1998). Like Gregson and Rose, I “want to examine the social relations of performances and the relationality of their spaces, and to suggest that another source of performative instability is the blurring of clear distinctions between positions and spaces” (2000, 442). In the Peterborough slam, “the distinction between ‘actor’ and ‘audience’ is displaced, fuzzy; which is not to say that certain performances elude power relations, but rather to suggest that power operates in a rather different, altogether less predictable manner” (ibid.). With this fuzziness in mind, I further challenge where performance might end or what its boundaries might be by also examining those relationships, relations of power, and practices that might not be articulated *during* the slam events, but that nonetheless also make the space. I also take up Gregson and Rose’s understanding of collective, relational agency in making
space, rather than seeing space “as the creation of autonomous, intentional, knowing agents” (2000, 444). In this way, I do not ascribe the producing, reproducing, consolidating, and challenging of norms (both the slam’s counternorms and the broader systemic norms these resist) to individual actors, but rather to the complex unfolding of relations on and off the slam stage. This is not to say that individuals cannot assert their agency to shape the space, but this kind of shaping is always mediated by the relations that surround, produce, project, and refract the space. Moreover, in a ritualized space like the Peterborough slam wherein the culture, rituals, and intentions endure through the turnover of individuals, there is, perhaps, an agency to the space itself, or to its persistent rituals.

Chávez, the scholar-activist who called out the “poetic e-race-ure” enacted by certain privileged poets, offers a reading of the possibilities that space-specific norms can produce, though in a context radically different from the slam. In examining an immigration centre in the southern US, Chávez advances the idea of “ecstatic space.” Considering performativity as spatialized, as coming into being through and with different spaces and relations, she contends that an ‘ecstatic space’ is one in which usual frames of reference, terms of engagement, and norms of relating become radically distorted through the extremity of that space and the ways in which this extremity infringes upon the capacity for survival. In ecstatic space, for Chávez, circumstance suffocates the livability of bodies and intelligibility as self. She notes how, in these contexts, “space can compel ecstasy, which enables performativity’s subversive potential” (2). Unlike romanticizations of space, Chávez’s interpretations do not obscure or shy away from contending with the pain, loss, power and violence that come to be part of space. Instead, the visceral and urgent realities of silencing, control, and repression can compel subversion. I read this harsh and ecstatic space against claims to “safe” and resistant space. The Peterborough slam
also, though very differently, comprises a seemingly unique set of norms and ways of relating
that compel heightened affect but that also, rather, can *amplify* the livability and intelligibility of
bodies and identities. In this way, thinking about “ecstatic space” and the Peterborough slam
might extend readings of the possibilities that the space produces.

In turn, resistance, power, and performance, then, are textured, facilitated and enhanced
by the ‘spaces’ they produce and are produced through. In what follows, I turn to
conceptualizations of resistance to gain further understanding into how resistance, power, and
performance are spatialized, and how space is conjured, interpreted, and intended through and
with performance.

**Resistance**

This mouth transcends, sees value in voices speaking true.
This mouth loves like early morning, laughs lilacs laid out,
Dances dandelions in the wind.
This mouth, attached to this tongue, these teeth
Brings you poems this these, finds freedom in works on stages
And is no longer ashamed of experiences survived,
It is thanks to this mouth that this human is still alive.

- Niambi Leigh, excerpt from “This Mouth,” in *NiambiTree*

Johnson’s (2010) critique of how claims to “radical” or “safe” slam spaces often flatten or
obscure relations of power shows that resistance, or resistant space, is not necessarily liberatory.
A Foucauldian reading of power and resistance (i.e. not as discrete and oppositional, but rather
locating resistance as within and enacted through relations of power) can shift a conversation
about the transformative potential of performance poetry and slam spaces (Foucault 1980). I draw
particularly on Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood who extend Foucault’s assertion and raise
questions about the tensions of naming (and not naming) acts as resistance, about what is being
resisted, and about what reading resistance might tell us about the workings of power. I also draw
on Leanne Simpson, who critiques narrow Western conceptions of resistance that elide the many ways of challenging systems of power by living, loving, and learning. I build from these theorizations to understand how and why participants trace a broad understanding of “resistance” through their narratives both in interviews and in poems, like Niambi’s poem excerpted above. By unpacking some of the complexities of resistance and its relationship to power, I hope to enrich my analysis of the slam as a resistant space.

Abu-Lughod’s (1990) invaluable arguments about the romanticization of resistance resonate with Johnson’s (2010) critical apprehension surrounding the romanticization of slam poetry as safe and radical space. Drawing, in particular, on Power/Knowledge (1980), Abu-Lughod points to a troubling tendency within her own and others’ work of ‘finding resistance’ over interrogating power, which aligns resistance neatly against and outside of relations of power. She notes that “read[ing] all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated” effectively “collapse[s] distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose[s] certain questions about the workings of power” (1990, 42). As part of this, she exposes that this understanding of resistance assumes a certain progressive politics and always works against power. She cautions scholars to be careful about what resistance might assume, omit, and silence as a discursive category.

Abu-Lughod calls instead for a “small shift” in framing inquiry, one which moves towards reading “resistance as a diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990, emphasis in original). She argues that this shift to thinking “not about the status of resistance itself, but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power they are up against” enables potent analyses of specific, everyday, and localized resistances, which speak to greater questions about the
workings, adaptations, and subversions of power relations (Ibid., 47). Slam poetry, constructed as a space and practice of resistance, is similarly discursively posed in exteriority and opposition to relations of power. Reading the making of the slam space as an act of resistance, and thus as a diagnostic of power, extends not only the theoretical implications of performed resistance, but also the possibilities of this performance to speak to, and with, power. Moreover, being attentive to relations of power within and surrounding spoken word poetry – particularly in the context of competitive poetry slams – can critically address neat interpretations of slam as inherently and equally liberating for all. In this way, slam spaces are not exactly radical havens distinct from and in opposition to workings of power, but rather spaces that exist within and around relations of power that can expose and reify power’s workings in certain ways. Her work would suggest that studying slam as resistance in Peterborough should tell us as much about how power operates in Peterborough and in the lives of the poets as it will about the resistance per se. I draw from these insights not only in my questioning of certain poetic performances as resistant, but also in my broader questioning of the ways in which the Peterborough slam is named as politicized, safe, decolonial, space. This means that these namings of the space should tell us as much about how safety, politics, coloniality etc. are at play in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough).

This reading can be furthered by considering Saba Mahmood’s (2004) continuation of Abu-Lughod’s theoretical work. Mahmood commends how Abu-Lughod’s suggested shift “allows us to move beyond the simple binary of resistance/subordination,” while noting the limitations of “nevertheless impl[ying] that the task of identifying an act as one of “resistance” is a fairly unproblematic enterprise” (2004, 9). Mahmood interrogates resistance itself, questioning “whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular
meaning” (Ibid.). Mahmood similarly unveils and questions the tendency for feminist theory to enclose agency within a rigid narrative of “subversion or resignification of social norms” and construct political subjects as always liberatory (Ibid., 14). This “undue emphasis on resistance” closes off many questions, experiences, and interpretations (Ibid., 175), while these discourses limit readings of action to those which can be confined to and legible within such a narrative (see also Mohanty 2003, 1988; De Shazer 1994). From these points, Mahmood suggests that there is a great need in feminist scholarship to “detach agency from the goals of progressive politics” and read actions and agents as resisting and inhabiting norms in complex ways (2004, 14). Mahmood’s reading of the non-linear relationship between agency and norms fundamentally unsettles framings of slam poetry as the subversive performance of marginalized identities.

Abu-Lughod’s and Mahmood’s reframings of resistance echo in the knowledges that different Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe thinkers have shared from the territory in which I do this work. Simpson (2011) questions how colonial ways of taking up “resistance” silence Indigenous struggles against colonial rule and regulation. In articulating a politics of “Nishnaabeg resurgence,” she contends: “The cycles of shame we [Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg people] are cognitively locked into is in part perpetuated and maintained by western theoretical constructions of “resistance,” “mobilization” and “social movements,” by defining what is and is not considered” (2011, 15). Simpson’s point, enriched through her discussion of resurgence, marks

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8 Mahmood advanced this theorizing as part of a critique of “Western feminists” and their tendency to attribute their own politics and frames of resistance to the actions and mobilizations of women in the Middle East.

9 There are more questions to be asked about which identities hold cultural capital within slam communities, which will likely emerge throughout my own research. Further inquiry into slam should address these questions, particularly examining the intersections of age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability as represented on slam stages. Sium and Ritskes’ point is salient: “Stories like these tell more than the labels associated with identity politics. The contradictions, complicity, complexities of lived experiences cannot be grasped in the mere claiming of identities” (2013, VII).
the colonial tensions of naming and considering resistance in Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory. Elsewhere, Simpson (2016) draws on Audra Simpson (2014) in citing her own body as Anishinaabekwe, as an Indigenous woman, “as a political order [...] that beautifully and lovingly threatens the goals of colonialism, disposssession, and elimination.” Certain bodies, then, by their very being undermine the structures that are driven to erase and control them, the very same structures and systems that might restrict these bodies from banners of ‘resistance.’ I pick up on this broader frame for embodied power-challenging in questioning poets’ performances as resistance.

With the discrete dichotomy of power and resistance theoretically fractured by Abu-Lughod and Mahmood, resistance can no longer be read as simply manifest through poetry. There is, then, a need for a shift to instead conceptualize slam as a diagnostic of power and an articulation of agency, which may or may not be legible through a rubric of subverting social norms. With Abu-Lughod, Mahmood, and Simpson’s work in mind, I seek not to define or categorize as ‘resistance or not.’ Instead, I am compelled by the making of spaces that both undermine and reify relations of power in certain ways, but that most significantly hold intentions of disrupting power. I interrogate how those intentions manifest in the resistant space-making of the Peterborough slam, not in order to name what is and is not resistance, but rather to question such categories, and explore what is produced, challenged, consolidated, and spatialized through the slam. With these questionings of resistance in mind, I turn now to scholarship on formal performance, examining how it might contribute to understanding the making of the slam as a resistant space.

Performance

These are the voices of revolution
these are the voices of insight that see injustice and name it
that hold a hopeful vision of this world
and create with courage and integrity to inspire the rest of us
these are the voices that echo through generations
whose nuanced visions of the world
reveal themselves through their art
and we still find meaning in the things they left for us

- Frankie McGee, excerpt from “I hesitate,” in Peep Show: Poems from the Peterborough Poetry Collective

As Frankie's poem excerpt above evokes, art and arts performance are inextricable from social change and from imaginings and reimaginings of the world and its social order. At the same time, art "echoes" out from isolated moments in time. As an embodied, collaborative, and performative exercise, arts performance is deeply political and can catalyze resistance to norms, challenges to representations, and reclamation of identities (Matlok-Ziern 2014; Melo 2015; Boffone 2015). The dis-comforting capacity of arts performance, and particularly spoken word, can be a powerful medium through which to destabilize, expose, and/or otherwise invoke oppressive norms and relations of power (Melo 2009, 2015; Boffone 2015; Chetwynd 2006). However, as with resistance, this potential of performance is often romanticized (Dolan 2006). It is necessary, then, to keep considerations of performance in tension with questions of power and how it is reified and subverted in complex ways. Remaining critical of romanticization, then, I consider how both power and resistance might be at play in arts performance. With attention to the relationality of arts performance, I take up scholars’ considerations of two interconnected ways in which a destabilizing potential might manifest through performance: (1) by visioning alternative worlds and ways of being (Melo 2015), and (2) by performing the impossible in order to fracture the normative (Roysdon 2009). Though I hold the performative in mind, I consider here arts performance (i.e. communicating some message to some audience through intentional artistic expression).
I look to relational conceptions of performance in order to understand the social space of slam in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), how power and resistance operate through that space-making and through relations, and how arts performance shapes and reflects those workings. Speaking of practices and socialities of Bedouin oral poetry, Abu-Lughod (1986) argues that resistance and subversion manifest not simply from poetry’s performance, but through the interaction between the performance of poetry and the social relations surrounding its creation. She argues that “poetry is never a lone discourse” but instead is performed and received within relations of power (Ibid., 244). Positing that the “interplay” between social relations and poetic performance is “essential to their meaning,” Abu-Lughod’s analysis suggests that alternative worlds, when expressed poetically, might reverberate as transformation through social encounters (Ibid.). In the context of the Peterborough slam, where, in certain ways, the social relations of the space and the terms of response to poetry are enfolded within the ritualized structure of the event, this is especially salient. Similarly, Carla Melo (2009) and others have pointed to the capacity for performance to foster ‘temporary communities,’ which leads again to theoretical questions of how ‘social space’ is constituted, relational, fluid, and politicized (Dolan 2006; Spiers 2016).

Slam poetry, then, should be analyzed within its social and relational context in order to address questions of power and resistance. Conceptualizing relationality and spoken word practice in this way also re-invigorates the questions raised by Chávez (2015) and Johnson (2010) about the

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10 There are two important notes to make about this work. First, these particular writings on poetry and resistance predate and reflect Abu-Lughod’s later arguments about the construction of resistance as outside and against power, as is evident in the stark contrast between her 1990 arguments and this quotation from 1986: Bedouin oral poetry is, in so many ways, the discourse of opposition to the system and of defiance of those who represent it: it is antistructure just as it is antimortality” (1986, 251). Second, given the very particular context of Bedouin oral poetry, it is crucial to not uncritically transpose, and thus appropriate, the experiences and interpretations onto Western forms of expression, performance, and resistance. Without extracting these insights from their particular context, some of Abu-Lughod’s broader analyses speak to the practice of spoken word poetry in North America.
operations and socialities of power in slam. I conceptualize the slam’s performances of poetry/audience engagement in this sense of co-constituting social space and relations.

Simpson’s (2011) accounts of resurgence in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) complicate considering the capacity for performance to generate and transform spaces. Simpson describes her experience of a performance art piece that Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore performed in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). Discussing the decolonial and resurgent possibilities for performance to re-create spaces, Simpson writes:

My focus here is the transformative nature of the performance in terms of space. […] Belmore drew me into a decolonizing space. […] Downtown Peterborough, like any other occupied space in the Americas, is a bastion of colonialism as experienced by Nishnaabeg people. But for twenty minutes in June, that bastion was transformed into an alternative space that provided a fertile bubble for envisioning and realizing Nishnaabeg visions of justice, voice, presence and resurgence. (97)

Simpson’s account of this performance opens up questions about the potential for performance to create and transform space and to manifest decolonial space. Hers words, though, are also a reminder that who manifests these spaces (here, a Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe artist manifesting her own decolonial space in the settler-colonial context of Peterborough) is critical to thinking about these potentials. This narrative particularly informs how I conceptualize making resistant space on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory, and how I examine what is produced through naming the Peterborough slam as a decolonial space.

Extending from this idea of performance’s capacity to manifest social space, Melo (2015) and others cite the potential for spectacle to be a site for envisioning and enacting alternative imaginaries (Abu-Lughod 1986; Archuleta 2005; Johnson and Martinez 2009; MacKenzie with Taylor 2006). While many scholars and performers alike tend to revel in this transformative potential, it has been met with critique and skepticism. Pat Dolan, for instance, questions
constructions of utopias in performance in general (2010) and slam poetry in particular (2006). She argues that “[t]he utopian performative, by its very nature, can’t translate into a programme for social action, because it’s most effective as a feeling” (2006, 170). While her skepticism is important, rendering sensation and social action as mutually exclusive terms is surely questionable; perhaps the “poignant ephemerality” (Ibid., 165) of spoken word need not be limited, confined, or cut short simply due to its visceral character. While Dolan marks this potential as fleeting affect, others argue that such alternative world-building through creative spectacle need not be oriented to a past-refuting future nor confined to isolated ephemeral moments (Zepeda 2014; Boffone 2015). In the slam, this question of ephemerality is not straightforward: while individual performances are indeed ephemeral moments, the space of performance is regularly returned to and re-enacted, certain performances are ritualized (the host, the audience), and even certain poems are repeated many times as poets refine their craft. Moreover, the social relations surrounding the space are not fleeting as such. I engage with these questions of the joint impermanence and habitual re-enactment of the slam space, looking to what this produces.

While it is important to question how temporal framing limits alternative imaginaries, it is crucial to be wary of how such imaginaries might reinscribe relations of power or be unable to transcend existing social hierarchies. Mary K. DeShazer, citing Chandra Mohanty (1988), argues that there is a danger of viewing resistance as reactionary wherein “struggles for a just society can be viewed only in terms of inverting the current paradigm” (1994, 2). DeShazer looks to women’s written “poetics of resistance” for alternative imaginaries which might have the capacity to “dismantle the ‘master’s house’ with tools other than his own” (311, citing Audre Lorde 1984). It is vital to be critical of artistic practices and the alternative worlds they might
enunciate, but it is perhaps even more crucial to do so without collapsing the possibilities of these forms to nourish alternative visions that might in turn reflect, unsettle, and re-imagine social structures. Throughout, I consider the complexities and tensions of dominant relations of power as they manifest through the resistant space-making of the Peterborough slam in order to expose how claims to resistant space can also reproduce power, can be co-opted by those in power, and also how tensions between claims to resistant space and actual practices can produce possibilities to destabilize power.

Scholars taking up questions of power in such envisioning draw on examples of subversive performance that make apparent another of Mahmood’s (2004) criticisms: that focusing on resistance often obscures power. This is a danger of utopic thinking. While this critique exposes many ‘radical’ performances as participating in relations of power while disguising this participation, this question is complicated by artistic works which make power itself into spectacle (Melo 2015; Sium and Ritskes 2013; Routledge 2012). Melo (2015), in discussing a performance art piece staged in the middle of Toronto – Mass Arrival: The Intervention, by Farrah Miranda and others – depicts the artists’ subversion of expectations through the rendering of whiteness in Canada as hypervisible. Melo argues that the artists mobilized absurdity to disrupt the tacit supremacy of whiteness and that their disruption was enabled through the boundless imaginary of theatrical practice:

[Bertolt] Brecht used to say that art is not a mirror but a hammer with which to reshape reality. Yet the tool he had in mind was one that reflected the invisible through the visible, that is, false ideas through material possibilities, thereby revealing the materialist basis of thought. He was thinking of theatre, not just any art – a theatre that could make what is most familiar, like the family, the nation, our carefully made choices, radically strange, and the invisible things (like ideologies) thoroughly visible. (Ibid., 33)
Melo argues that ‘making [the colonial power of whiteness] strange, spectacular, and highly visible to the public imagination’ unlocked a certain potential for disrupting this power (Ibid.). This illustration depicts a practice of resistance which is firmly located within power relations while exposing them to be interrogated and deconstructed, and through this exposition rescinding some of that power in that space, even if temporarily. This example is a tangible manifestation of resistance as a diagnostic of power, but also as an uneasy practice which is implicated in conflict and dialogue with relations of power. It also raises questions about visibility, particularly drawing attention to what and whom are made visible, and what their visibility produces. I explore such questions of visibility and power through performance further in my analysis, particularly since visibility – both of workings of dominant power and of Othered agents – is salient to considering resistance in a seemingly homogenous town, and since the act of slamming also amplifies voices and makes bodies visible on stage (see Archuleta 2005; Arboleda-Ríos 2014). More specifically, I explore this question in considering how the mic and the stage are taken up at the Peterborough slam, and by whom, looking at performances that expose power, but also at those that reinforce it.

In order to not merely “invert the current paradigm” (DeShazer), some scholars and artists focus on occupying and performing impossibility. Here, spatiality comes into consideration through the possibility for performance to uproot spaces, or forge new ones. Pratt reinforces this, noting that performance’s “emphasis on creativity and play, the intermingling of the normative and transgressive, the limits of representation, the expressive qualities of the body beyond discourse, and the full range of the senses,” allow for a harnessing of the impossible and the

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11 Peggy Phelan (1993) has critiqued appeals to a resistant or re-ordering visibility politics, arguing for instance that such politics mistakenly equate visible representation with political power and the inevitable failure of these politics to manifest equality produces violence.
imaginary in visceral and spatial terms (2005, 526). Performance enables this by producing spaces that “allow the temporary suspension of norms” and because performance “can never be fully captured, preserved or repeated” (Ibid.). Here, Pratt evokes a spatiality of possibility: in thinking about the slam as a performative space, I also consider how the possibilities of arts performance (the capacity to temporarily suspend norms, to advance impossibilities, to transgress, reify, transform) are a critical element in making resistant space.

Building from this potential, Emily Roysdon, a performance artist and scholar, generated a manifesto of “Ecstatic Resistance,” a concept that “is about the limits of representation and legibility—the limits of the intelligible, and strategies that undermine hegemonic oppositions” (2009, no page). Ecstatic resistance shifts the registers, temporalities, and dimensions of engagement—it is felt deeply and viscerally and communicated through echoes of times past and times to come, images burned on retina, sounds that puncture the conscious, the inevitability of bodies and their limits. While Melo notes how some artists render the structures of power hypervisible, ecstatic resistance renders impossibilities within normative frameworks hypervisible and viable by “celebrating the impossible as lived experience and the place from which our best will come.” Contrary to Dolan’s argument that the visceral nature of the resistance embodied and performed through slam poetry cannot be translated into action, ecstatic resistance is compelling because “it’s most effective as a feeling” (2006, 170). As I contend, the slam space cultivates heightened affect, but it is also presented as, itself, and impossibility – a space in which privileging of marginalized voices, resistant poetics, and articulations of personal impossibilities are normalized, expected, and celebrated.

Again, it is crucial to remain wary of romanticizing these possibilities: within the “impossible,” within these alternative spaces, power is still at work. Who are these articulations
impossible for? Who decides which impossibilities refute power? What happens when different assertions of impossibility infringe upon each other? Articulating ‘ecstatic resistance’ relies on forming/finding spaces in which impossibility a) can be enacted, and b) remains impossible. In spaces which themselves shift terms of engagement, such as the Peterborough slam, what might be “impossible” elsewhere becomes possible – does this limit the radical potential of these kinds of articulations? Across all of these conceptualizations of performance as resistance, it was either implicit or explicit that the potential of this resistance was tied to generating a *space*, one that is different from the everyday spaces bordering these world-building or ecstatic performances. Performance, then, enhances and animates resistant space-making and opens up different im/possibilities for these spaces.

**Conclusion**

Never stop slamming,
These poems into the microphone.
Don’t let these ideas stay hidden alone on the pages of old notebooks
Collecting dust on the shelf,
Speak them loudly.
Slam your truths into the face of your community and let your heart be opened by the words of others.
Because if there’s anything I’ve learned from wordsmiths,
It’s that bravery is often met with opportunity,
That honesty builds community,
and that feeling safe for me,
Has a whole lot to do with poetry.

- Sasha Patterson, excerpt from “Never Stop Slamming”

How can a poetry slam in a small Ontario city speak to all of these questions and concepts? Sasha's poem excerpt above begins to illustrate this: poets capture, enunciate, and perform worlds of feeling, visioning, and possibility for a community of listeners who carry those words with them into their daily lives. These performances are part of creating space that validates and complicates these expressions: the slam spatializes the im/possibilities of this deeply personal
performance. In addition to contributing a new study to gaps in scholarship on spoken word (not confined to instance of performance, examining meaning and practices of resistance on and off the mic, considering power in the space), I hope to offer insights more broadly into conceptualizing spaces of resistance by considering the specific ways that tensions, possibilities, and power work through the slam. I call into question the boundaries, intentions, practices, and performances of these spaces, of who defines them, how, and why. My analyses sit amid the tensions and impossibilities of the slam to expose the tacit and question the visible, to celebrate the space for what it does and think deeply about what it can be, to amplify resistance but raise questions about power. Slam in Peterborough offers a platform to consider the implications of *naming* – naming resistance, transformative performance, safe space – while investigating the complex relations of power and assertions of agency at work in making, consolidating, and challenging space. I hope to contribute, then, to complicating such romanticizations – of resistance, performance, spaces, slam – while also giving credence to the genuine possibilities of slam, its resistance, its performances, and its spaces. Examining resistance in this way is needed; as Abu-Lughod again asserts,

This is the kind of contribution careful analyses of resistance can make. […] The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure-or partial failure-of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resistors but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power.

I hope that the work I express through this thesis can contribute this kind of learning.
CHAPTER 4 || Ritualized slam practices: Producing counternormative space

Tonight is the night […]
It is the night you turned off the television, wandered out into the street, found yourself at a poetry slam and figured out what it was you were going to do with the rest of your life, because tonight is a turning point, night’s [sic] like these are turning points, trust me. And tonight, your pain, your triumph, your struggle all prove that you are no spectator. You are a broken and beautiful, and tragic and worthy part of this show! Be tonight with us here tonight, because tonight this show, this is the something more begged for on ceilings; tonight, this show, this is how we teach the shadows to glow.
- Jon Hedderwick, excerpt from “Tonight is the Night”

With this chapter, I explore the workings, sensations, and spectacle of the Peterborough slam that draw slam-goers into space-making as “tragically and worthy parts of the show,” like Jon’s poem excerpt depicts. I offer a detailed exposition of how slam events run according to a series of scripted practices and how poets appeal to efforts to create “resistant space” (safe, inclusive, etc.) in discussing the motivations behind these practices. I contend that the repetition of these space-specific practices function to continuously produce, consolidate, and sometimes challenge space-specific counternorms – with the insertion of “counter” depicting that these spatialized norms are often, although not perfectly, resistant to dominant, societal, regulatory systems of power. In other words, I argue that the space is performatively constituted through routine practices, which comprise not only performances of poetry, but also social, emotional, and spatial relations which are scripted, conducted, expected, performed, and made possible through the slam’s regulated structure. To do this, I first outline the different roles that participants perform in the slam. Second, by narrating a typical slam from my perspective, I detail the repeated practices of the event while also evoking the sensations and culture of the slam, in order to depict the ecstatic context of the space’s making (Chávez 2010). Third, I examine how participants in my research (who reflect the overall values of the Peterborough Poetry Collective) explain these ritualized
practices as motivated by their hopes of producing the slam as a kind of “resistant space” – and
indeed how they appeal to spatialized discourses in these explanations. Thus this chapter details
the slam’s practices and what these practices are meant to produce and spatialize; in subsequent
chapters, I will then analyze the much more complex dynamic of how resistant space-making
actually operates at slam events, making and destabilizing (counter)norms not only through
ritualized practices but also through spontaneous performances, off-stage relationships, behind
the scenes organizing, and so on.

Roles:

Understanding the different roles that make up a slam event is useful to considering how
the rituals and practices of the event come together. Though ‘roles’ in the slam are hardly clear-
cut or discrete, at each slam people come to participate in different ways and these ways of
participating are lightly scripted or organized through the slam’s practices. Table 4.1 shows a
breakdown of the roles as they were practiced at the time of the research: according to longtime
Collective members, these roles have stayed fairly consistent since the beginning of the slam.

Table 4.1: Slam Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slam Host</strong></td>
<td>The facilitator of the slam script. The host performs a ritualized script and thereby mediates the event’s process and structure. The host, different each slam, is a Collective member and usually a well-known poet. The host does not compete and usually does not perform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage Manager</strong></td>
<td>A Collective member, supports the host off stage, having announcements, the list of slammers and open mic-ers, and so on at the ready. The stage manager runs the show behind the scenes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scorekeeper</strong></td>
<td>Usually a Collective member who will not compete in the slam. They record the scores of the evening and calculate any score deductions due to time violations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timekeeper</strong></td>
<td>Usually a Collective member who will not compete in the slam. They record the performance times for each slammer. They also call out when there has been a time violation (over 3:10). (sometimes also the scorekeeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Door</strong></td>
<td>A collective member who welcomes people in, watches over the money pot, and sells chapbooks for any poets who might have them. They also often encourage people, as they come in, to sign up for the slam or open mic, talking through the rules, expectations, and protocol when needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges</td>
<td>Meant to be randomly selected audience members, though on less busy nights they are often friends, acquaintances, regulars. Judges have come to listen (and sometimes to share in the open mic) and they are selected by a collective member who is not slamming (often the host). Judges do not compete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrificial poet(s)</td>
<td>Usually Collective members or otherwise seasoned poets who are fairly comfortable on stage but who are not competing or open-mic-ing. They “sacrifice” themselves by sharing a poem before each round so that the judges can practice scoring and “calibrate their scores.” Either one poet who shares a poem before both bouts or two poets who each share one poem before one bout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open mic-ers</td>
<td>Those who want to share their words (or sometimes music) on stage, but who choose not to compete. Apart from a maximum time on busy nights (under 5 minutes), open mic performers are not confined to slam rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience members</td>
<td>Though everyone is an audience member when they are not on stage, often many folks come only to listen – they do not judge or share on stage or have another role in the space. These folks engage only with their ears, cheers, snaps, claps, rumbling stomps, and slam chants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slammers</td>
<td>Slammers often arrive with the intention of slamming (or at least sharing on the open mic), but sometimes they are convinced to sign up at the entrance. Slammers bring two pieces to share that fit within slam rules (3 min max, no accompaniment or props, original work). Slammers compete and are judged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartender</td>
<td>Almost always Bennett. He sets the space up physically for the event (mics, lights, speakers), and serves everyone there throughout the night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Certainly not a ritualized role, but in order not to forget that I held a distinct role or my own in the space, that my way of engaging in the space was organized along with this role. Though poets (mainly Ziy) sought to disrupt this role at a few points by bringing me on stage, being a researcher in the space organized my engagement, too, as I often balanced my scribbled note-taking with the audience-expectations of attentive listening, supportive cheering and applause. Poets and friends who were negotiating the space often commented on my practices as a researcher documenting the space. I include this role here in an attempt to not invisibilize or distance myself, my presence, and my work from my observations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These roles are not static, but they sketch out the various ways in which people contribute to space-making space through the slam structure. Though no two people take up these roles in the same way, these roles loosely orchestrate how people might move in the space and use their voices throughout the evening.

**Ritualized practices**

Drawing on participant observation data, the following narrative passages chronicle the repeated practices of slams: the functional rules, the script of the slam host, and the chants, cheers,
and other mechanisms for audience engagement. These ritualized practices challenge, consolidate, and spatialize norms and counternorms and thus are part of what produce the space as resistant (as safe(r), anti-oppressive, etc). This section narrates the scripted practices of making counternormative space from my perspective, but, as becomes evident in later chapters, much is unscripted as well, and certain practices can produce different feelings/meanings of that space for different people.

Unless otherwise specified, the practices outlined here (from the detailed slam rules to the small audience phrases) are habitual elements that could be observed at any slam. With this narrative, I am not only explaining the routinized practices, but also seeking to evoke a sense of what those events feel like, of the social relations that saturate the space-making and inform my understandings of the space, and of how these practices also cultivate and re-cultivate the slam’s culture and emotional intensity and contribute to a sense of recurring space.

**The Spill, night**

You pronounce every sound with care,
Give every syllable fair representation, speak precisely every alliteration,
your utterance is magnificent.

You’re a philanthropist of phonetics,
Your rhymes make Dr. Seuss jealous.
You create couplets like a baker bakes cupcakes,
Your metaphors are icing on top.
And everyone holds in their breath when you come to a full stop.

Your similes silence the room. […]
You’re the perfect recipe of ruthless and radical,
Your protests have the eloquence of a masquerade […]

when it comes down to it,
The world is full of listeners,
Just waiting,

For the slam.

- Sasha Patterson, excerpts from “Never Stop Slamming”
On the third Thursday of some month, I walk into the Spill. As I open the door, the dimly lit and cozy space is a-bustle with chatty familiar faces, nervous new voices, and curious first-time listeners. The exposed brick walls, creaky floorboards, and long, dim, narrow room are animated with the low-to-medium rumble of whatever noise-core, punk-grunge, experimental improvisational album Bennett\(^1\) the bartender has put on that evening. I walk up to the small table by the door, toss a $5 bill in the bucket (if I can) and am warmly greeted by the poet at the table. Depending on the poet, they will more or less enthusiastically invite/encourage/imply me to share my words in the open mic or to compete in the slam. I move through the crowd making my way up to the bar, past the eclectic artefacts of Peterborough-past which hang from the walls and intermittently swept up with the obligatory ‘how’s it going’s with my various slamquaintances. Averting my eyes from whatever vintage campy horror flick is playing silently on the small screen behind Bennett, I might chat with him for a bit about what he is up to with his music these days and he will almost certainly invite me to a show.

Though the Spill opened a month before the first slam in 2007, its retro aesthetic\(^2\) makes the room feel like a relic of local culture. Glancing around from the dusty and dated Atari set up in the back corner across to the various tables stationed around the bar, I settle into a good spot. I see the usual motley mixture of faces: a small group of high school students stretching their newly found adolescent freedom, some current and former 20-something Trent students and sometimes a professor or two, an older couple eager to support the quirkier sides of culture in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), a middle-aged woman perched on a stool looking nervously

\(^1\) I only name Bennett in these narratives to signal his consistency in that space. Over four years he has staffed all but three or so slam events. All others in the narrative are fluid and not specific to any one person.
\(^2\) Although exploring this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to ask “whose retro aesthetic?” I extend my gratitude to Sarah de Leeuw for raising this question to me in my defense.
through her notebook, a handful of Collective members moving about, some of the usual 20-30-ish queer crowd, an older guy in workboots sitting at the far back of the bar who looks like he may have just happened to be there (though this sort of assumption is often proved wrong at the slam), and so many more. Most often, I will see folks of all ages, gender-presentations, skin colours, occupations, and energy levels shifting through the space more or less comfortably. The energy in the room is building as slam time nears, the list of slammers and open mic-ers growing steadily (or not, on the slow nights). A Collective member swoops through the room with small whiteboards, seeking newish faces to judge the night’s line-up. Sometimes the room is packed to the brim with anticipation and too many bodies; other times it is a smaller, more regular group gladly finding ourselves in this comfortable routine together.

Welcome to the slam

Just when it seems as though the chatter and background music are reaching something of a roar, a poet steps up to the stage and Bennett turns the music down and the mics up. The host is sometimes well-seasoned and at complete ease and sometimes a poet who is hosting for the first time and holding close to a list. The microphone crackles: “Welcome to the slam!” – the chatter dies down in anticipation and the low hum of the sound system fills the space. The host takes a breath, and then says, “We start every slam by acknowledging that we are on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee lands. I encourage all of us to think about what it means to create, to make art on stolen lands.” Some hosts will say that we are in the territory of the Mississauga Anishinaabe, others will stutter through “Anishinaabe” and leave it at that. Some speak more to the meaning of this acknowledgement, saying, “I invite you all to consider the

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3 I do not name the host, since this narrative is not based off of any one poet’s hosting. The narrative cobbles together different examples from different slams.

4 All dialogue presented in quotation marks is quoted verbatim from the different slams I formally observed.
privileges of living, working, and loving on stolen lands.” Some hold tension in the silence; others jitter awkwardly through a brief statement before jumping to the next item on the list. Some have thought about and practiced land acknowledgements for years, while others first heard of land acknowledgements at a previous slam. This acknowledgement sometimes is spoken as routine, as an item to check off on the host’s script, but more often that ‘space’ is ‘held’ for a moment by this decolonial ritual. The acknowledgement centres the space: it is the first sound and thought to capture all of the ears in the room. Occasionally, it is forgotten, and often, as Christine told me, “they don’t get it right, but they are trying.”

Tonight, our host takes another moment to address the crowd. This is not a ritual, but rather something that tonight’s host is holding onto – tonight is a slam in support of a local activist network, after all. They connect the acknowledgement of the lands on which we gather to this land’s traditions of spoken word and oral history, and to histories around the world of spoken word as resistance. These histories, they say, inform and shape what can happen here at the Peterborough slam. Though the rituals of the slam as competition came out of Chicago in the ‘80s, this host takes a moment instead to revel in the much longer lineages of spoken word as resistance, especially in this Michi Saagiig territory, and the kind of raising voice that is celebrated here, as a much deeper root to this space.

Following, often, on this gratefulness to Anishinaabe lands and peoples, the night’s rituals begin: our bodies and voices are called into space-making with a collective moment of silence and noise. Our host describes it in this way: “We start every poetry slam with a moment of silence, to help set the intention for the room, followed by a moment of noise in recognition of

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5 I leave this vague because the Collective often hosts slams to support different activist groups.
the fact that silence has never changed anything anywhere. So, I invite you to take a second with me and indulge in a moment of silence.” The intention set by this silence is not specified or named, but implied somehow, as though these intentions are to each our own.

The room and the breath it contains is held, still. Any lingering chatter that trailed into the host’s welcome is sucked from the room. Sometimes that silence is held for only a few beats. Other times it is held until it feels as if it is compressing me and the room around me, as if the silence itself has become a roar. Sometimes its effect is tempered by the dull storm of the dishwasher or by some unsuspecting slam-goer inadvertently creaking the door of the bathroom at the back of the room, but the sensation is nonetheless held for that moment. A gentle, amplified breath, and the host breaks the spell: “All right, let’s rock the fuck out!” Without hesitation the crowd joins in a furiously joyful thundering of feet against creaking floor, hands against thighs, and voices into the air.

**Setting the tone**

As the rumble from the crowd dwindles, the host takes a moment to address the ‘feels’ of the slam. This ritual is carried out very differently by different hosts: sometimes it is glossed over quickly with the other housekeeping notes, other times the host calls us to sit with it in different ways. Tonight, our host says this:

I do like to offer a general trigger or content warning. We’re poets. We bring the feels. Sometimes with the feels come subsequent feels that spread out in ripples through the room. So we want you to be cautious of that. We want you to honor that and make space for yourself… Do whatever you need to do. If you drop into the depths of your cell phone, or quietly remove yourself from the room – do what you need to do. If you need to talk to somebody, there are members of the poetry slam collective floating around the room. We sort of have our hands up – you can find us… We would happily just sit and talk with you.
Our host takes this moment, too, to point out where the exit is and where the bathrooms are, though not all hosts remember to do this. With this gesture towards the glass front door, they offer to us the possibility of escape. Most often, this acknowledgement of ‘triggers’ and of ‘do what you need to do’ compels us to rely on individualized coping, to adapt our own behavior to find comfort in the space. But tonight our host offers another suggestion: “Feel free to voice if you aren’t feeling ok with something that is said.” Tonight our voices, and not simply our silent management, are invited, or perhaps coerced, to shape the space. Some in the room shift in their seats, pull their phones near in preparation for what is to come.

Housekeeping

As with the acknowledgement of the land, the host often jumps right back into the night’s metre of excitement and anticipation, launching back into a high energy recounting of the other housekeeping items for the night. By now, the host is getting into the rhythms of the evening’s routine, moving into the small details that maintain the space. As the host makes an announcement about fundraising for nationals, Bennett chimes in from the bar: “Don’t forget about the milkshakes!” Assuring Bennett that they had not forgotten, the host goes on to implore the audience not to order milkshakes until the break – no matter how desperately they might need one. That way, Bennett will not have to put the blender on in the middle of someone’s poem. The host also takes this moment to ask the audience to bring their glasses back when they are done with them so that Bennett can serve everyone. They also call on the audience to “remember to tip your bartender.” These small routine gestures, though they may seem negligible and are sometimes missed, offer a bit of recognition to Bennett and his role in space-making. They also remind attendees that we are bodies occupying and moving through not only a poetry slam, but also a venue, and that our actions (like ordering noisy milkshakes) and inactions (like neglecting
empty glasses) impact others’ experiences of and participation in the slam. Tonight, the host takes this little acknowledgement of Bennett a step further, making it a moment not just to accommodate the logistics of his labour, but also to acknowledge all that he takes in: “Make sure to thank Bennett. He has to listen to our poetry every time. It takes its toll, I think.”

**Open mic**

The host, having walked through the necessary preamble, raises their voice in an almost shout: “When I say poetry, you say slam! POETRY! [SLAM!] POETRY! [SLAM!].” This, usually the first chant or repeated phrase of the evening, acts as a sort of calling in, or call to service. After the centring moment of silence/noise, this call-and-response, repeated through the night, brings the voices in the room together and reminds our bodies of where we are, reminds us that we are about to share and take in words. Throughout the night more voices join in on this simple call. Sometimes the host will repeat POETRY until it seems as though each voice in joining in the call-back of SLAM. Our voices catch on, becoming a part of the ritual. The host brings this chant back throughout the night, when the energy of the room needs re-centring, to call us all back into space-making, into the slam spirit. Whether the room is packed or sparse, this chant is taken up with strong boisterous voices and enthusiasm.

“And now it’s time for our open mic!” Most of the audience cheers while those who have signed up take in a sharp breath, look down at their hands, close their eyes, open their notebooks, receive pats of support from friends. The host celebrates the courage of the voices we are about to receive: “Our open mic is something that I love deeply because this is where our slammers come from!” Sometimes only one or two poets have signed up, sometimes many more. Sometimes someone will get up with a song and a guitar, or a comedy act, or a series of haiku, but most often they get up to share a slam-suitable spoken word piece. Open mic-ers are usually new or
infrequent voices, shaking with the thrill, exposure, and vulnerability of using their voices in ways that are not so available to them elsewhere. As each open mic-er’s name echoes from the mic, the host or an audience member calls out “All the way to the stage!” to prompt the audience to keep our cheers and applause up until each nervous body in turn has climbed the stairs to the stage and settled in behind the microphone.

When the first poet up begins to speak, the room falls into pin-drop silence at the evening’s first invocation of that evocative lilt of spoken poetry, the first expression of art for the evening, the sort of words that most have come to hear. Each in the assorted line-up take their moment on stage to share in many different ways: with “written words and booming voices” (Boyle 2014), with well-rehearsed performances that fit into the rhythm, timbre, and diction habitual to the Peterborough slam, with words that practice newfound politicization, with childhood stories of wonderment and despair, with adorable love poetry that mocks how adorable it is, with words out-of-sync with the culture of the room, and with everything in between and around. Some read words from a phone held in a quivering hand, speaking in a lightening-paced half-murmur; others speak directly with warm voices and only slightly sweaty palms; still others move confidently, making the stage a part of their art. Sometimes long-time slammers will share in the open mic rather than the slam to work on a new piece, to string music through their words, or maybe just because their “competitive fire” is not “lit” these days.

If the poet’s voice falters, if they are looking to the sky in uncertainty, if they are grasping at words flitting through their brain, the audience breathes in in empathetic anticipation, sometimes snapping in encouragement or calling out: “Remember why you wrote it!” to help the

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6 Niambi used this phrase in their interview, I borrow it here.
poet get back on track. These moments of hesitation, doubt, fear, are felt deeply in the room, the audience looking for small ways to hold that poet through their nervous uncertainty.

The richness and indulgence of the open mic often lies in this motley-ness of what is shared, of so many different voices and bodies and comforts and experiences sharing the same stage without evaluation and almost always with thundering cries of support. The open mic often feels like a little bit of magic and a lot of celebrating people for their brilliance, their words, and for the courage of bringing their thoughts to the mic.

The rules

“Another round of applause for our open mic-ers! It takes a lot of courage to get up on that stage.” The audience cheers heartily once more for the gift of vulnerability that was offered to us, as the open mic-ers each settle back into their seats with relief, encouragement, discouragement, or some mixture washing over their flushed faces. “The time has come,” the host speaks firmly into the abating din, “for the slam! When I say poetry, you say slam! POETRY! [SLAM!] POETRY! [SLAM!] SLAM! [POETRY!] You are good! I thought I had you.” The host playfully flips the litany to catch the audience up, but too many in the room do not miss a beat. The host lets the moment wash away and launches into a brief explanation of the slam, while slammers gather their wits, scorekeepers ready their charts, and judges listen attentively:

A poetry slam is a competitive poetry event. You are judged by judges who have been selected at random from the audience. Each poet is given two chances to impress the judges who will score them out of 10 (with up to one decimal point). The highest and lowest scores for each poet in each round are dropped giving them a total score for the

7 It is worth noting that the Collective also hosts many events that do not have a competitive slam portion. At these events, all of the “setting up” is the same, and the rituals of chanting and cheering are also present, but there is no scoring or bouts.
round out of 30 points. We take those scores at the end of the night and we determine who is the winner.

There are some rules – because art needs rules! All poems must be original; each poem has a three minute time limit with a ten second grace period. There is a half a point deduction the second you are over ten seconds. For every ten second period after that, there is another half point deducted.

We do not allow props, costumes, musical instruments, or nudity. Reading from the page is allowed, but so is memorizing. All styles of poetry are encouraged and welcomed. That’s basically a poetry slam!

The host then introduces the judges. A judge can be one person or a group, and they are meant to be random attendees who do not know any of the competing poets well (though often this is not possible). The judges have given the host a silly team name (e.g.: “Majestic Unicorns”), a fun fact about themselves (e.g.: “Their grandfather invented the easy bake oven!”), and something that they might be bribed with (e.g.: “Intersectional feminist mojo”). This last piece of the humourous bribe pokes fun at the alleged impartiality of the competition, a saucy way of acknowledging some of the ironies of a poetry competition. Tonight, melding roles, Bennett is a judge for the first time. The host introduces him: “Bennett has a secret life performing madrigals for the remnants of the British aristocracy. He can also be bribed with slick beats.” Before the host was through, Bennett cried out “That is so far from the truth!” while the room was swept up in laughter. These kinds of playful interactions between the host and audience are a central part of the character and culture of the slam space’s making.

With that momentary laughter-induced lapse from the anticipation passed, it is time to choose the order for the slam. The host reads out names as they draw each from a hat, with the audience cheering for each one. The host explains that the order will be reversed in the second round. The energy in the room continues to build: “Now,” the host says, “I think we are missing one more thing before we start…’’
“BLOOOOD!” – some audience members scream, catching new attendees (and even returning ones like me) off guard. Sometimes this is a shriek or a bellow, as certain people fill the room with their harsh, sharp, or growling voices; other times it is called out audibly, but without the same edge or indulgence. Sometimes the host relishes in this small ritual utterance, compelling theatrics from the crowd; other times, they pass through the ritual quickly and without garishness. This is one ritual that I have never bought into, one that always clenches my gut until it has passed. This disarming call for blood is a way to summon the sacrificial poet for the first bout. The sacrificial poet has a specific purpose, which the host explains:

We begin the evening with a sacrificial poet. Judges, this is your opportunity to calibrate your scores. I warn you, over the course of the evening, to be consistent. There is a phenomenon in poetry slam. It is the scourge of poetry slam: It is vile, we do not want to see it here. It is score creep. Over the course of the evening you are enjoying yourself, perhaps you are enjoying a beverage, perhaps you are not, you are getting moved more and more and as the night goes on, everything seems more awesome. And your scores go up. Try and be consistent. Use the sacrificial poet to calibrate your scores.

Another Collective member steps up to the stage and expertly adjusts the microphone to suit their stature. This poet usually speaks with ease – the stage is a comfortable, habitual place for them. Tonight, looking around the room at fresh and familiar attentive faces, our sacrificial poet dusts off an old favourite poem. They condemn the government’s racist and colonial policies, deftly weaving these condemnations into witty turns of phrase, luscious imagery, and incisive rhetorical questions that sweep the breath from the room. After the poet reaches the final cadence of their piece, the audience, momentarily intoxicated by the poetic spell, breaks the silence with a wall of encouraging noise.

First bout

Now that the sacrifice has been made, the slam begins. Poets step up to the stage one by one: some eagerly capturing the audience with confident performance, some who may have only
just worked up the courage to slam after months of listening and open mic-ing. One poet leaps off the stage mid-poem, moving their body through the crowd, using the volume of their voice to its full capacity in order to project through the room. Some sing, yell, hum, or dance parts of their poems; some play with pauses and differently metered speech to keep the ears interested; some muddle through mimicked cadence, grasping at rhythms through uneven nervous breathing.

Some poems are analytical – cerebral poetry conceived through shrewd scrutiny and wit – while others are blunt, emotional, personal truths made poetry simply by being spoken from the slam stage. Most are a mixture of wit and affect, a knitting of the personal and political. Teens speak about stigma and shame surrounding their mental health, their bodies; queers tell of their ways of loving and being in the world as radical; a mother speaks about losing her only child; a father weaves a letter of hopes to his yet unborn baby; an Ima\textsuperscript{8} links the sweet wonder-filled joy of their little one to another little one held in immigration detention who has only seen the moon through iron bars and the sun glinting through razor wire. One poet decries the violent injustice of colonial borders and nation states; another narrates gruesome childhood trauma through partial, alarming metaphors. An old poet shares a lusty poem, his quiet unassuming voice uttering the words ‘clitoris’ and ‘labia’ into the humming microphone – spurring cognitive dissonance, shocked snaps, surprised laughter, or awkward squirming among unsuspecting younger listeners. Another poet reminds the room that we are resilient, that we are here and that is something to celebrate; another uses each line of their poem to remind us that we are on stolen lands; yet another tells of their anorexia, painting hospitalizations in vivid and visceral detail.

Poets speak about addiction, unemployment, the prison industrial complex, white supremacy, trees, love, war, sex, school, penguins, zombies, and watching the sun rise from a cross-country...\textsuperscript{8} The Hebrew word for mother and how Ziy identifies as a nonbinary parent.
train. Poets perform deep vulnerability, share carefully or not-so-carefully cultivated words, share stories and feelings not hearable or expressible in their day-to-day realms. They speak feminist, queer, radical language to describe the seemingly benign; speak experiences of violence that are usually either silenced or sensationalized in victim-blaming scandals. Poets take to that stage as though there are no limits.

**Applaud the poetry (not the points)**

While poets share their verse, the audience performs back in different ways to show that we feel a truth or a resonance by participating in slam rituals. We snap our fingers gently or enthusiastically, and occasionally make other sounds too, like that involuntary “hmm” that sometimes jumps from the back of my voicebox when something someone has said catches me in a way I was not expecting. We summon a resounding cheer as each poet steps back from the microphone and eases off the stage. The judges grasp at their scorecards, scrambling to find a number to suit all of the words, feelings, and sensations they received. Sometimes the host buys the judges a bit of time by making a short announcement about the next slam or open mic, but after a moment they call out: “Score cards up!” Sometimes the crowd works to sway the judges, calling out “Get it right!” as the judges scribble onto the whiteboards. Some array of numbers with decimal points between 0 and 10 are thrown into the air – most often they are between 6 and 10. The host calls each score out from lowest to highest, with a chorus of “HIGHER!” flaring from the audience when they feel the scores are too low (which, in the Peterborough slam, is often). This little audience chirping of the judges is a small demonstration of support and solidarity for the poets who have put themselves on the spot. When all of the scores have been

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9 Calling "Higher!" happens often not because the scores in this scene are particularly low, but because there is a culture of always celebrating voices.
recorded, the host beseeches us, “Applaud the poet, not the points!” to reinforce the idea that the scores are secondary to the bravery and eloquence of sharing. Throughout the bout, there are very few people moving through the space. Bennett often goes out for a smoke during the poetry, and occasionally another smoker or two will slip out of the bar silently, or a latecomer will slip in, but usually the bodies in the room are in still reverence of the performances.

**Break**

After the last poet of the bout steps off stage and the last score is counted, the host calls for a round of applause for all of the poets who slammed. The audience lets out another cheer, but many are already reaching for our wallets to order another drink, slipping on our jackets and grasping at lighters, or getting poised to scurry to the bathroom before a line forms. “We’ll take a short break,” the host says, “Make sure to come back for our amazing feature and the second bout!” Some folks leave now, since it is already past 10, others line up for the washroom or seek out friends whom they did not yet have a chance to greet. At the first possible moment, Bennett cranks his choice of music for the evening – usually something loud, thick, crusty, and weird – and starts serving, since most attendees are now waiting at the bar. Before long the blender is blaring – someone has their milkshake at long last. The space that, a moment ago, was so still, rapt at the words coming from the stage, is now lively and loud; bodies move in all different directions, brushing past each other in the narrow thoroughfare of the space. A cloud of smokers encircles the sidewalk outside, Collective members seek out the first-time open-mic-ers to thank them for their words or wander over to the feature poet to make sure they have what they need, slammers look over their poems for the second bout. The room is filled with chatter, abuzz with a brief moment of relief from the intensity of the space we were making before.

**Feature poet**
Sometimes after only 15 minutes, sometimes after nearly 45, the music is cut and the host reappears on stage. The blender is now off and people settle into their spots with fresh drinks, frothy milkshakes, or warm ramen, and refreshed excitement. “When I say poetry, you say slam! POETRY! [SLAM!] POETRY! [SLAM!] When I say slam, you say poetry! SLAM! [POETRY!] SLAM! [POETRY!]” We are called back into space-making, our bodies brought back into the rituals of the evening. The host, usually with great delight and enthusiasm, welcomes the feature poet for the night. If the feature has something for sale tonight, the host announces: “Our feature poet has some chapbooks available for 5 dollars!” Before the host finishes the sentence, some of the audience dutifully and instinctively chime back “ONLY 5 DOLLARS!?!” – another small participatory ritual of the evening. The host speaks of the feature poet’s work with great respect, convincing the audience that what we are about to hear is worth hearing. The host turns to the feature and smiles as they step off the stage, relinquishing the mic to the visiting voice.

The feature steps up and captures the attention of the audience, seemingly with great ease and confidence. If it is Black History Month, we hear a Black spoken word artist; if it is International Women’s Day, our feature is a woman; if it is Pride Week, we are graced with a queer and/or trans voice. Most feature poets not only spit fluid and compelling lines, but also speak with reverence for resilience, with critical questioning of power, with obeisance to the harsh grace of survival. Some lace their political incisiveness with humour and parody, others with sprightly love poems. Some feature poets are a bit off of the mark of what kind of content this scene expects, but they are listened to and applauded nonetheless. They share poem after poem, but unlike the rest of the night we find relief in the banter between: unbound by time restrictions or other rules, this poet can address us freely, can speak about why and how they wrote certain pieces. After 20 minutes, or more or less, they pause for a moment, thinking of the best way to
close this time together. They share one last piece with the room and gracefully yield the stage, accompanied by the room's bellowing appreciation for their voice.

Second bout

The host thanks our feature and prepares us for the second bout. The anticipation has rekindled into restlessness, as our rustling bodies start to show signs of weariness. Our host calls us back with the reprise: “POETRY! [SLAM!] POETRY! [SLAM!].” The sacrificial poet makes their offer again, this time using the moment to stretch out a new poem, reading scrawled lines from a well-worn journal. The second bout begins: in reverse order the poets step back up to the stage, with the same nerves but a smidge more assurance in their stance. Some poets hit their stride in this bout, amplifying their performance, commanding the attention of the now less rapturous audience. One poet took a bit too much luxury with the pacing of their words: “We have a time violation!” calls the host, with slight disappointment and even slighter relish. “You rat bastard,” some in the audience boom, letting their voices fall into this reflexive chant, “You’re ruining it for everyone! But it was weeeell worth it.” Some voices join in as they recall this ritual, while others in the room look around in confusion. The poet pays a penance for their violation with a score deduction. In this bout, the scores tend to be a bit higher, as folks have settled into the comfort and delight of the space. Finally, the last poet descends the three steps from the stage, and the competition comes to a close.

The winner is crowned

We all cheer once more in a big energy-releasing raucousness for all who shared their words this evening. The scorekeeper huddles urgently over their sheet to crunch the numbers while the host buys them time with more announcements of events to come. Before long, the

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10 Occasionally this chant will be replaced with one that begins “Who do you think you are, Sir Sanford Fleming?”
scorekeeper hops up with a small scrap of paper for the host, who bates their breath, reaching their eyes out to the expectant room. “In third place” – they speak softly into the microphone, pausing for effect – “So-and-so!” The poet walks up to the stage to a cacophony of approval. “In second place” – spoken louder this time to compensate for the lingering applause – “So-and-so!” Another wave of sound accompanies this poet’s stride; they take their place alongside the other. “And our winner for the night” – some in the room rattle their fingers against the tables or their hands against their thighs, bringing the pressure that has marinated the room for the past few hours to a final boil – “So-and-so!” The anticipation breaks and we let out a roar – “Give it up for all of the poets!” – then one last roar for all of the voices that graced our ears. Before the host even takes another breath, we start gathering our jackets, readying our bodies to move into the open air. Before we have a chance to raise our stiff forms for departure, the host calls on us to extend our gratitude to the venue: “Please join me in thanking the Spill. We are the Peterborough Poetry Slam and this is where we do that.” The host finally steps down and, before 10 minutes have passed, most have trickled out into the night. The words and feelings hang unresolved in the air even as we leave: with no further opportunity for release or processing, the energy clings to the room, to our bodies. We hold the space’s affect in our restless bones, carrying them home to our beds.

**Spatialized counternorms**

For everything that has brought us to this moment in time. […]
For every word casting light
whether whispered to the beat of bending flames
or (w)rapped around the crystal of a mic.[…]
From every ounce of blood spilt to each grain of white guilt
From the first canoe to the last stampede
From the first atom splitting to the second
you were conceived
Through the tears of every tiny thing
that ever made you
want to pray.

All the way
all the way
all the wily way
to this.

This moment.
This confluence of forces
that finds us face to face
at this exact time
and precise place.

This
is sacred
space.

- Ziy von B, excerpts from “Shehechiyanu,” in AYD (witness), 2015

These compelling and peculiar practices of the Peterborough slam bring participants together into a collective space-making, into the kind of “moment” that Ziy evokes in their poem excerpted above. Slam participants mobilize these scripted practices in ways that produce the ‘atmosphere’ I narrated, but also through these repeated practices slam-goers participate in the “radically democratic” production of slam (Johnson 2010) to produce and reproduce the Peterborough slam’s specific values and culture. As Ziy explained, the democratization of slams means that different slam communities entrench different expectations and values:

The idea [behind slam] is the community gets to decide what they want here. So if you put that in a racist community, then they’re going to shut out voices of colour potentially, or people speaking about anti-racism. If you put it in a community that is invested in anti-racism, they’re going to shut out racists, right?

In the Peterborough slam, the Collective establishes practices that slam-goers (including the Collective) mobilize to challenge structures of oppression by producing counternorms and to resist dominant norms of society in a spatialized way. As Ziy explains above, the intentions that the community brings into space-making are important because slam practices alone do not simply produce resistant counternorms. I consider here the slam’s appeals to space (safer,
inclusive, diverse, anti-oppressive, decolonial, supportive space for open expression), how
Collective members spatialize their hopes for the slam, and what these produce. Below, I explore
their motivations for these practices in more detail.

As Jon told me, the Collective's “layering of intentions” on the slam informs how the
community goes about this counternormative space-making. Niambi’s words illustrate many of
the ways in which the Collective guides the making of the space with such intentions:

I’m going to say it [the slam] intends to, because we don’t always get to where we intend
to, but I think the poetry scene in Peterborough intends to create a lot of space. Space for
people to come and share their art, space for people to heal, space for people to have
community, space for people to feel safe saying the things that they don’t feel safe to say
elsewhere. I say intend because we’re all humans. We don’t always get to where we
intend to be, and… the people who are organizing can only do so much. Because we
never know who is really going to walk through that door and what they are going to take
to the stage.

Niambi highlights the many appeals to space that are intricately tied to the ways in which
participants and public narratives attribute the slam with radical or transformative potential
(Pollock 2017; Dmuchowski 2015; Boyle 2014). Qualifying these appeals, Niambi and several
other participants employed this language of “intention” in order to not foreclose the possibility of
failure in their space-making and also to recognize that the discourses they draw on (e.g. safe
space) are imperfect and worthy of critique. Niambi’s words also illustrate how most narratives of
the slam spatialize these intentions; that is, intentions are attached or attributed to the slam as a
‘space,’ rather than to the practices, people, and performances implicated in the production of that
space.

In table 4.1, I draw together different appeals to space across narratives of the
Peterborough slam, the practices that the Collective described as connected to these appeals, the
counternorms that these practices are meant to spatialize, and the dominant norms and structures
that these counternorms are meant to challenge. I should note that such a compartmentalizing
table does not accurately represent the intersections and indivisibility of these namings, practices, counternorms, and dominant norms (for example, creating a “safe space for expression” also contributes to “making space for marginalized voices to speak openly about oppression”).

Despite these limitations, I have provided it in order to succinctly draw together these elements of space-making, which I complicate throughout the following chapters. I should also note that poets reproduce (and also undermine) these counternorms through their performed poetry (as I explore in Chapter 5), but here I specifically examine how the slam’s *scripted* practices produce and maintain these counternorms.

*Table 4.2: Claims, Practices, Norms, and Challenges of Resistant Space-Making*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeal to space</th>
<th>Practice(s)</th>
<th>Intended counternorms</th>
<th>Dominant systems/norms to challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inclusive/ diverse space</strong></td>
<td>Open stage, scoring, voice-specific slams (e.g. Black History Month Slam, Pride Slam), inviting feature poets, easy to learn rituals</td>
<td>Supporting, celebrating, and “making space for” marginalized voices to speak openly about oppression.</td>
<td>White supremacist, heterosexist norms of silencing, invalidating, appropriating, pathologizing, and regulating the struggles, experiences, perspectives of Othered, particularly racialized and queer, subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive space</strong></td>
<td>Applause, snapping, “all the way to the stage,” booing judges who give low scores, structure (no eliminations)</td>
<td>Build up voices and confidence by validating all kinds of experiences and creative expression.</td>
<td>Cultures of severe criticism and competitiveness of other slam scenes and art forms that can discourage expression; devaluation of marginalized perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decolonial space</strong></td>
<td>Acknowledging Indigenous lands and peoples in host’s script, moment of silence/noise</td>
<td>Making expectations and possibilities for participants to, in small ways, be “accountable to colonial-decolonial realities and processes” (Sy 2016)</td>
<td>Colonial norms and systems of erasure of Indigenous peoples and languages, state suppression of Indigenous sovereignty, and architectures of settler ignorance and complicity in this erasure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-oppressive space (politicizing space)</td>
<td>Scoring and cheering (re-entrenches poetry as “tool for activism”), booing hate speech, booing judges who give low scores.</td>
<td>Creating “space for marginalized folks to speak openly about their experiences of oppression,” space for people to listen, “space of no nonsense” (i.e. oppressive speech is not tolerated)</td>
<td>Intersecting privileges and privileged complicity, social norms that tolerate (implicitly or explicitly) overt bigotry, norms of privileged voices (especially white men) dominating public spaces.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional space, Safe/safer space (for sharing)</td>
<td>Scoring, cheering, snapping, booing judges who give low scores.</td>
<td>Making space that values and validates stigmatized traumas or experiences of oppression and space to express these experiences and emotions without censorship.</td>
<td>Patriarchal norms of silencing/shaming/blaming ‘victims’ of gender-based and sexual violence. Norms of dispassionate, “rational” public spaces that condemn emotions as “irrational.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe/safer space (for listening)</td>
<td>Trigger warnings, “do what you need to do,” ”come talk to us if you need to.”</td>
<td>Normalizing coping, self-care in public contexts, accommodating different experiences and contexts of trauma without shame.</td>
<td>Ableist norms that pathologize neurodivergences, and that assume trigger warnings are only for the &quot;weak,&quot; &quot;fragile,&quot; and &quot;coddled&quot; (Robbins 2016).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the community participates in this multi-faceted, counternormative space-making to create a space that normalizes and uplifts performances of subversion, which resist intersecting and co-conspiring systems of oppression, regulation, and privilege (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, settler colonialism, white supremacy, ableism, capitalism). In what follows, I elaborate on what this table presents by explaining how the practices narrated above connect to these different appeals to space, why the Collective implements these practices, and how these practices elicit counternormative space. Along with each appeal to space, I have included a short phrase from an interview or article describing what the space “is” to illustrate how these ideas are ascribed to static space (Bondi 2005).

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11 These are the systems of oppression most present in the narratives surrounding the slam and the performances of poetry that I observed. Notably, some systems, like ageism, are not included in this list because they are not significantly incorporated into the slam’s practices and the Collective’s intentions for space-making. These systems are, however, challenged in certain poets’ performances, just less frequently.
**Inclusive/diverse space:**

A welcoming, affirming, inclusive, and diverse environment – (Quinlan 2014)

These somewhat rigid rules of slam are meant to open up *any* kind of expression around *any* topic from *anyone*. As Ziy explained, apart from rules against props, slam is “wide open” for people to “do anything [they] want” within the three-minute time limit. As Niambi said, “*anybody*, regardless of age, colour, whatever, should be able to come into that space, get up on that stage and say what they need to say in front of an audience that is going to be receptive and open and accepting of them.” In the Peterborough slam, the community mobilizes this open stage practice and routinized practices of applause, cheering, judging, voice-focused slams (e.g. Black History Month slam), and inviting feature poets\(^\text{12}\) to establish and maintain a counternorm of especially valuing and validating marginalized voices and to challenge the normative silencing of these voices. Related to this, participants and news media draw on discourses of “inclusion” and “diversity” in making claims to the slam space.

Many scholars have challenged discourses of inclusion and diversity, noting how these tend to commodify difference while flattening the relations of power that reproduce and subjugate it and reproducing the normalcy of those privileged social locations against which difference is defined (Bannerji 2000; Kafer 2013; Bulmer 2016; Ahmed 2012). Elizabeth Povinelli identifies inclusionism as a process that calls on those marked as ‘Other’ “to present

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\(^{12}\) Inviting feature poets is one practice that cultivates the counternorm of celebrating and listening to marginalized voices at the slam. The Collective invites feature poets with intentions of bringing new /diverse voices into the community, enhancing spoken word locally by introducing skilled artistry from elsewhere, and contributing to a broader culture of compensating spoken word artists for their work and their words. As the “About” page explains, feature poets “encourage and promote performances of poetry that are engaging, interactive, and relevant, and provide educational opportunities for local artists and enthusiasts, to increase the quality of spoken word in the community.” Collective members value what these voices bring to the community and also the opportunity that this offers to all of the others raising their voices at a slam: “people also have the amazing chance to perform on the same stage as some of the top poets in the country” (Boyle 2014).
difference (their alternative modes of living) in a form that feels like difference but does not permit any real difference to confront a normative world” (cited in Mitchell with Snyder 2015, 104). In the Peterborough slam context, this sense of inclusionism does not quite resonate with the normalization and celebration of performances from marginalized subject positions in order to confront the systems that construct and perpetuate their marginalization. Despite these salient critiques, narratives of the space as an inclusive and diverse one persist in public narratives of the slam.\footnote{This claim to inclusive space is exemplified in most of the local media coverage of the Peterborough slam over the past four years (Boyle 2014; Tsering 2014; Dmuchowski 2015; Pollock 2017). This quotation one such article is illustrative: “When you walk into The Spill on the night of an event [a slam], there is nothing but an overwhelming feeling of inclusiveness” (Boyle 2014). Bennett also echoed this, saying that slams are often “the most diverse rooms that [he] work[s].”}

On the “About” page on their website, the Collective links these appeals to “inclusive” and “diverse” space to their intentions to create space for marginalized voices: “The openness of the stage and our audience creates an inclusive environment where often-marginalized voices have an accessible space and are encouraged to speak.” The Collective’s use of “accessible” here merits consideration. As alluded to in my narrative above, the Spill has a stage with steps, dim lighting, a weighted door that needs to be pulled, and the slam is structured around assumptions of a hearing audience\footnote{This slam, as with most in North America, is not accessible to deaf and hard or hearing audiences or poets. In New York City in 2005, the ASL Slam started as a way to bring the dynamic possibility and expression of poetry slams to deaf and hard of hearing communities. The ASL slam has since started monthly events in other US cities. See: aslslam.com; Crum 2017.} while also having moments of extreme noise (loud music and cacophony of chatter). In these ways, the slam is not accessible from a disability perspective. The Collective’s use of “accessible” in this description exposes a conflicted relationship between the physical space and the socially constituted space: physical access to the stage shapes who has access to space-making through performance, and indeed to whom the stage is “open.”
the slam a “space for marginalized voices,” then, this making is predicated on abled and hearing bodies that can access this venue and these practices.

Critiques notwithstanding, the slam does work in many ways to make space for and to privilege otherwise marginalized voices. Participants all spoke about the importance of this counternorm of “space being opened up” for non-dominant voices as, often, the most crucial counternorm of the slam because it resists dominant norms that tend to silence marginalized perspectives, and also resists the prevalence of white, heterosexual, cisgendered men’s voices, especially in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). In fact, K described how this counternorm was an important part of the slam’s founding: in 2007, the very early slams actually displaced some white male voices by taking over the “Open Stage Night” at the Spill. As K said: “Sorry dudes with guitars, we need some queer women with microphones yelling at the dudes with guitars!” This counternorm of making space for marginalized voices certainly does not preclude privileged voices from participating in the slam or sharing on stage (except in the case of certain events, as I discuss in Chapter 5), but it mediates the openness of the stage.

Participants also spoke about how the easily learned rituals of audience participation can foster feelings of inclusion for audience members. These cheeky chants and cheers (“POETRY SLAM,” “All the way to the stage,” “Only 5 dollars?,” etc.) and the moment of silence/noise are inextricable from the slam’s culture; their repetition and simplicity allow new and returning audience members to take part in the ritualization of the space. Ziy spoke about how these small rituals signal to newcomers that “there is a culture to this – it’s not a completely neutral space;” these “funny little things we say” resound ten years of developing a community and a practice around the Peterborough slam. Ziy noted how, though these rituals mark the culture of the space, they are also easy to catch on to. By the end of the night, anyone who wants to can join in on
many of these phrases and feel like they are a part of generating that culture and space: “Those in-
jokes or whatever you want to call them are accessible so that it gives you a way to feel part of the
group. And the way that they do the minute of quiet and then yelling – right away you have an
opportunity to be part of the communal voice of the space.” This symphony of scripted responses
is not exactly the same from slam to slam (for instance, some slams go by without a time
violation), but it makes possible a “performative\footnote{A more accurate term for her arguments might be “performer audience.”} audience,” meaning that audience members
are “called upon to collectively produce many of the performed gestures of the art event [the
slam] while consuming one another’s acts as experience” (Santone 2014, 31). This means that, by
participating in scripted rituals, slam-goers perform themselves as audience while receiving each
other’s performances as affective space. As Gregson and Rose argue, this kind of active
participation, even if it works within and around certain scripts, blurs lines between performer and
audience and is part of space-making. Along with the moment of silence/noise, and judges’
scoring, then, these small rituals call audience members into the making of the space and its
performances.

Supportive space

\textit{The Peterborough Slam is a really supportive space} – Ziy

Participants described how the community mobilizes practices of cheering, chanting,
snapping, and high scoring to create and reiterate norms of enthusiastic support for those who
share on stage, which also entrenches the counternorm of a space for marginalized voices. Ziy
and others noted that this level of support is particular to this scene, saying that visiting poets from
across the country marvel at the “supportive space.” Ziy said that, unlike more competitive
scenes, “People will just be cheered and appreciated and, you’re kind of admired for your
courage regardless.” When the Peterborough slam started, K, Ziy and the others involved intentionally decentred competition in favour of this kind of support by structuring the slam as an open mic, two slam bouts, and no eliminations or cash prizes.¹⁶ That structure and the norm of valuing support over competition persist today.

One moment from the November 2016 slam beautifully illustrates how this highly supportive character of the Peterborough slam is performed. As host that night, Sasha was running the audience through the rules and protocols of the slam:

Sasha: [after explaining judging] Audience, it’s your job to try and sway the judges in **whatever way you can.** So if you really like a poem, what will it sound like?

Audience: [Huge cheer, applause, whooping.]

Sasha: Awesome. If you **hate** a poem, it’s the worst poem you’ve **ever** heard-

Audience: [Sympathetic laughter, Sasha laughing at themself]

Sasha: Well, maybe not, but what would that sound like?

Audience: [Cheers, whooo! A few quiet, half-hearted boos. Laughter.]

The audience’s cheers in place of the anticipated booing were a sort of cheeky, collective self-satire of the supportive environment of the Peterborough slam, but it is true that nearly every time a poet gets up on the stage, the audience performs hearty support and attentive listening. This support, the cheers and snaps, is a powerful, ritualized practice that maintains the norm of support, a norm which challenges cultures of severe criticism and the competitiveness of other slam scenes and art forms that can discourage creative expression. In the following chapters I look more closely at how, when, and for whom this support works.

¹⁶ Most other slams eliminate the lowest scoring poets after each bout, and often have three bouts instead of two, and they award a cash prize for each slam winner. In the first year of the Peterborough slam, K would make or find quirky prizes for each slammer, often mix tapes or used books. Though the organizers could not sustain offering these prizes as the slam grew, the norm of valuing support over competition remained, maintained by audience practices.
Decolonial space:

This is a space where decolonization is happening, where people are trying – Christine

The practice of acknowledging the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and their lands at each event produces a counternorm of being attentive to ongoing settler occupation and state colonialism while also recognizing the persistence of Indigenous life\(^\text{17}\) and resistance. Apart from the ritual land acknowledgement, decolonization\(^\text{18}\) is not otherwise explicitly named as an intention of the slam – it is not part of the Collective website’s “About,” “decolonizing” is not often spoken in the host’s script – but decolonization runs through the poetry of folks like Ziy and Sasha, and underpins the ways in which some Collective members approach space-making.

Some participants explained how the slam’s acknowledgement was their first exposure to the idea that these territories are stolen and occupied and hoped that this practice might bring awareness of de/colonization to others who might not otherwise encounter such acknowledgements. In her blog post about the slam, Christine wrote about how the acknowledgement is part of an expectation of the slam:

The sense I get from this community is that there is the expectation of being accountable to colonial-decolonial realities and processes. I say this because they acknowledge that they are living and working in Mississauga Anishinaabe territory; they declare that it is stolen land; the content of the poetry reflects this spirit; they recognize that the nature of the subjects being presented may be triggering and invite people to do what they need to to take care of themselves; and, they appeal to the spiritual/creative and invigorating energy of poetry by opening with a moment of silence followed by a loud, raucous shout-out. They have a good time. They hold space. (Sy 2016)

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\(^\text{17}\) This idea of persisting life also came to me through Christine through her forthcoming pieces in our edited collection. She also mentions this idea on her blog. See: https://gizismoon.wordpress.com/2016/03/05/indigenous-sacred-things-a-reward-chart/

\(^\text{18}\) See Tuck and Yang 2012 for a critique of certain ways in which decolonization is too liberally named and too often co-opted, which dilutes and undermines genuine decolonization.
For Christine, this expectation of decolonial intentions is built into space-making and is closely linked with the other rituals of trigger warnings, the moment of silence/noise, and the broader intentions of “holding space,” even though these might not explicitly be named as decolonial.

**Anti-oppressive, politicized space**

*It’s a space for people who feel oppressed in their community to talk openly about it ... and it’s a space for people to listen – Sasha*

The counternorm of celebrating marginalized voices is also linked to normalizing political expressions against oppression through poetry. This is part of the slam’s appeal to anti-oppressive space, or activist space. As Frankie said, the slam is “a space that people are able to openly speak about experiences of oppression,” which is “not the case in all slam communities.”

Since space-making opens up these kinds of expressions, it necessarily becomes a political space too. The Collective also sets out to organize and support activist events and political organizing through their poetry: not only does the Collective, and independently its members, directly organize activist events, but they also consider the slams themselves as a way to politically mobilize audience members, and thus some of the broader Peterborough community. The Collective explicitly states one of its goals as “promot[ing] spoken word as an art form and as a vehicle for driving social justice and community engagement” (“About”).

Jon, in speaking with *Electric City Magazine*, described how politicized expression has manifested as a normalized “diction” of the space:

> While all poetry forms and subjects are welcome, “certain communities establish certain sounds,” says Jon. “People imitate other people, people riff, people play,

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19 An article in *Arthur* describing the Peterborough slam exemplifies narratives of the slam as a radical, politicizing space: “Spoken word has become the tool used by systemically marginalized populations subordinated into existing power structures to voice emotionally charged political protest outside of academic institutions and small press. It has created an intentional space and community that celebrates subversive identities and politics” (Dmuchowski 2015).
and a diction sort of evolves.” And the diction that has evolved in Peterborough is the diction of the personal and the political, and the complex intersection of the two. (Pollock 2017)

These counternorms of politicization are shaped by performances, but also shape and perpetuate certain politicized performances. The slam’s space-making, however, does not only or simply open up possibilities for politicization. The practices of the slam also mediate and shape which kinds of politics are valued in space-making. Scoring and other built-in feedback practices like cheering, booing, and snapping entrench, consolidate, and/or shift the norms of politicization, most often reinforcing keen, cutting, and dissenting political poems. When poetry scores well, many poets tend to perform it more often, while if a poem does not score well they might revisit or scrap the poem. So, the community takes up slam practices to make a space that celebrates and reiterates marginalized voices challenging oppression, but also, as Sasha explained, the audience members listen attentively to these voices. Sasha, like several others, described how this counternorm of listening to dissenting expressions from marginalized voices challenges dominant norms that obscure these voices: “especially in a community that is this white and middle class, I think that that’s lacking: spaces where you’re just told to sit and listen.”

The Collective expresses this counternorm of “driving social justice” through discourses of “anti-oppression.”20 Event descriptions for slams often state that “setting a tone of anti-oppression” is “part of what we do.” This tone is mediated and mobilized by Collective members through their roles in shaping the space. In setting this tone, the Collective also implies expectations for the audience to be respectful and to not perpetuate hate. As Sasha said, “I think that the collective has, throughout the years, set the tone of ‘this is a space of respect, this is a space of anti-oppression, this is a space where you’re not going to get away with your bullshit.”

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20 For critiques of discourses of anti-oppression, see Brown 2012; Wilson and Beresford 2000.
For Ziy, as for most others, having a space that values and supports dissenting marginalized voices is a key part of what makes the slam space political or resistant, because it confronts “a lot of culturally normative spaces, where I don’t feel comfortable and I’m sure other people feel even less comfortable.” They went on, however, to say that this is not the case in every slam: “it depends, obviously, like how you set up the slam and what tone you set at the slam. Just the fact that it’s a slam doesn’t mean that it’s supportive or empowering or privileging of marginalized voices necessarily.” Here, Ziy’s words qualify how the intentions people bring into space-making can shape different kinds of spaces and counternorms out of the same set of practices.

**Safe(r) space (for listeners)**

*It’s a safe space for everyone – Beth*

The Collective hopes that the trigger/content warning that the host shares early on at each slam will contribute to making a safer space. This slippery appeal to safe(r) space is wrapped up, on the one hand, in appeals to open space and counternorms of speaking about experiences freely and feeling supported in that speaking, and, on the other, in appeals to inclusive space and counternorms of celebrating marginalized voices. The rhetoric, mythology, and vernacular of the Peterborough slam, as well as the broader community’s imaginary of the slam, is steeped in this underdefined conception of the space as safe(r) (e.g. Boyle 2014; Out of the Borough 2017).

The Collective states this outright in the “About” page on their website, where the second sentence reads: “We strive to create accessible, safer spaces dedicated to the creation and performance of poetry.” Naming the space in this way so prominently on a website that otherwise offers very little information illustrates the broader preoccupation with safety from the Collective and the community surrounding slam. In an interview with *Arthur* in 2014, a Collective member
said this as a catch-all statement of what the slam is about: “As much as it is a competition, it is also a safe place for people to come and share their narratives, that’s what we do” (Boyle 2014).

In this sentiment, the competition is peripheral to making a safe space for sharing. More often now, the Collective describes the slam as safer space in recognition of the problems with safe space rhetoric (though arguably “safer space” stands to many of the same critiques). Recently, in an article featuring the Peterborough slam, two poets brought this more critical narrative forward publicly:

Though Jon and EJ are quick to point out that a poetry slam can never truly be a safe space—the stories can be painful or triggering for some audience members, and the competition element will always serve as somewhat of an impediment to truly free expression—it is a space where poets and audiences alike can share and be respected. (Pollock 2017).

Though this was not voiced at a slam, this caveat is a clear move to make questioning safe space part of the public narrative of the Peterborough slam.

With practices of trigger warnings, declaring that the audience can “do what they need to do,” and so on, the Collective seeks to make this safer space by normalizing coping practices as welcome ways of participating in the slam. This small ritual, however it is spun by the host, is a gesture of recognition towards varied coping rituals and it implies that this is a “space” wherein our personal practices of safety are accepted, or at least acceptable, and wherein healing and coping do not need to be completely individualized (Kafer 2016). At the same time, these practices imply a narrow view of trauma. Speaking about the host’s script, Niambi explained how the hosts use the language of “trigger warning” or “content warning” with an implied reference to the trauma poems that often pepper the slam, but noted that there are many other ways to understand how one might be triggered. Referring directly to this language, they explained: “The trigger warning is just meant for trauma and violence really… but what happens about politics or
religion? Or just me doing poems about being a woman of colour?” Niambi reflected on how the political content of poetry might be, in a way, triggering to those who have not been exposed to certain concepts, experiences, or histories of oppression, especially as such politics might confront positions of privilege. The slam’s trigger warning, then, is directed towards graphic violent disclosures and more narrow definitions of trauma (Kafer 2016).

Beth’s words illustrate how she and others perceive the safety of the slams, but also how organizers’ intentions for space-making work together with practices and performances to transform the Spill for the duration of slam events: “We just have to make sure that we let them know that it’s a safe space for everyone. Like, it is a bar, a coffee bar thing, but ... at that particular moment, it’s not your typical bar.” As Beth implies, the invocation of safety suspends the norms and the nature of the venue, temporarily creating a different space. The performance of the slam, then, can make the Spill something else, can produces different meanings of the venue, can “bring the space into being” (Gregson and Rose 2000, 441). Ziy felt that, in Peterborough and more broadly, slam itself has “just been a tool that people have been able to use to create safer spaces” for marginalized voices to take space and be listened to. Here too, as with the excerpt from Arthur above, the spatiality of the slam takes precedence over the mechanics of a competitive, entertaining event; the ‘space’ holds layers of meaning, relationship, creation, and feeling that participants value in the slam. Sasha, like several others, noted the limitations of safe space, but also noted that the space was still safer than most: “It can never be a safe space, but I think that it’s one of the safer spaces in town. I know that a lot of folks who aren’t comfortable at other events around town are ok with slams and like the slam environment.”

*Emotional space (safe(r) space for sharers)*

*A space where people can express their experiences freely – Frankie*
“This is a space where we lead by our emotions,” Jon said to me after we had been circling around a discussion of the raw trauma so often voiced and performed on stage. Like many others, Jon spoke about the Collective’s intentions to make a space that is open to every kind of feeling and experience without censorship or invalidation. For many, openness to expression and to feelings that are so often snuffed, deemed unsavory, or shunned in daily living is a key characteristic of the space. This counternorm of openness compels poets to bring their feeling selves into space-making, and to relate differently by performing their own openness, vulnerability, and stigmatized experiences.

Many spoke about how this counternorm promotes healing because “it’s about getting to speak something [poets] maybe could never speak to anyone else” (Poet EJ, quoted in Pollock 2017). Frankie spoke about the challenges of opening up this kind of space and supporting voices in sharing, saying that they (personally and as part of the Collective) strive to make “a space where people can express their experiences freely,” but that since “it’s quite a vulnerable thing to go on stage and share your work,” the Collective must figure out “how do we create a space where people can share things that are very deep in them and feel supported and feel like there’s a network of the people around them?”

Routinized support for performances of vulnerability and practices that magnify affect entrench the more specific counternorm of voicing trauma, or ‘trauma poetry.’ Several participants described these performances and the counternorms that catalyze them as a resistant part of slam. At the same time, while the slam intends to welcome folks in, support them in sharing, and offer a safe(r) space to express themselves freely, this counternorm also perpetuates and condones the intensity and darkness that this expression so often takes. This openness to expressing deep emotion also shapes non-typical ways of relating; poets refute the stigma that
typically regulates ways of personal sharing in public spaces and silences or sensationalizes personal narratives of trauma by bringing artistic worlds of feeling into public, open stage space-making. This open expression is not only cathartic in its outpouring, but its embodied performance also compels heightened affect among the audience.

**Conclusion**

You see new people, new audience members come in every time and they’re just blown away and they really get something out of it. Even if people aren’t being super genuine or even if there’s political dynamics going on, there’s still something that people need that they get from slams … [something] people on stage need to express and people in the audience need to hear.

– Sasha

In this chapter, I have established how reiterations and repetitions of practices, habits, and comportments related to spoken word work to constitute a ‘space’ and generate certain space-specific norms, terms of engagement, and ways of relating. More specifically, I have set up how the intentions of organizers and slam-goers work through the slam’s routinized practices to produce resistant counternorms. Even through a “high turnover” of audience members and organizers, these practices and their performance continue to produce and re-produce the space and its counternorms, and to evoke resistant intentions among slam-goers.

Sasha’s words above illustrate how these practices, intentions of organizers, and counternorms together bring slam-goers into space-making that, for many, is unlike any other experience. The heightened affect of the Peterborough slam compels an “ecstatic space” which distorts usual frames of references, catalyzing counternorms by making the impossible/unlikely possible and conceivable (Chávez 2010; Roysdon 2009). How is this sense, then, this magic of slam translated into the on stage performances and off stage interpersonal relations that animate the space? The following two chapters problematize how these practices, resistant counternorms,
and appeals to space are consolidated and challenged through specific poet-audience performances and off-stage relations, reception of poetry, and organizing.
CHAPTER 5 || On stage: Consolidating/challenging (counter)norms through performance

please slam
share your narratives
verse
diverse as the curves we each traverse
detail the betrayal
how you severed the trauma
and discovered a way through
how you repaired the frayed threads
stitching together niches of strength
into a tapestry for change
how your resilience remains
whisper a moment shared with a sister
the weight of silence falling from your frame
scampering about like dancers
who’ve never known doubt
sparring with boxers at the end of a bout
this is where the poetry comes out

- Wes Ryan, *Initiation to Slam*

Regulated, at least to some extent, by the practices outlined in the previous chapter, what do poets and audience members perform and what do these “on stage” performances produce, challenge, and spatialize? To consider these questions, in this chapter I examine the “on stage” performances of the slam, meaning performances of poetry and rituals of audience engagement (rhymes spit into the mic, cheers thundering from the audience, scores raised into the air). In this chapter I argue that the structured, scripted practices of the slam play a part in disciplining “on stage” performances (which speaks to the Collective’s power in shaping the rubric of space-making), but there are also practices on stage that are unscripted and unanticipated and these too are part of space-making (power, resistance, and agency of slam-goers asserted through poetry, scoring), and different practices can make the space differently for different people (social locations are a part of this meaning making). In these ways, poet and audience performances/participation in spectacle can challenge or consolidate the slam’s practices, the counternorms they maintain, and the dominant norms they are meant to confront. First, I contrast
the counternorm of explicitly political poetry with the more subtle practice of resistant voicing in order to consider how such performances consolidate and challenge appeals to politicized space and counternorms of celebrating marginalized voices. Second, I examine how sometimes the counternorm of listening to voices can be contingent, which consolidates and challenges the slam as a supportive, diverse, inclusive, anti-oppressive space. Third, focusing on two contrasting feature poets, I analyze how these performances challenge and consolidate decolonial counternorms. Finally, I consider how, by rewarding trauma poetry and undervaluing resilience poetry, the audience consolidates and challenges appeals to “safety” and the counternorm of space for emotional expression. With each section, I illustrate how, through their performances, slam-goers mobilize the same set of practices to both create and undermine spatialized counternorms.

Wes Ryan’s poem above highlights some of the themes of the performed poetry I examine in this chapter – politicized poems, trauma poems, poems speaking from personal experience – and also illustrates how the slam generates counternorms to celebrate such “diverse” poems, voices, and perspectives. As explained in Chapter 4, in Peterborough, over time the community has entrenched different expressions and politics as valuable or undesired; throughout this chapter I explore how this valuing and devaluing works through performances, what it produces, and how relations of power implicate this process. By looking at how resistant counternorms are both consolidated and challenged, I demonstrate that the slam is not exactly a radical haven distinct from and in opposition to workings of power, but rather a space that is produced within and through relations of power (Abu-Lughod 1990). I also consider poets and

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1 Wes is a long-standing member of the Collective who was actively involved in the slam throughout my research. Though I did not interview him, I have included his poem to recognize his prominence in the period of space-making I consider in this thesis.
audience members both to be agents in shaping (and being shaped by) the space, while questioning how power might be covertly and complexly at work in and through these relations (Gregson and Rose 2000).

**Consolidating/challenging politicized space: Political poetics, resistant voices**

This section examines the ways in which poets’ and audience members’ performances consolidate and challenge appeals to politicized, resistant space, and norms of celebrating marginalized voices. In the first part, *political poetics*, I look at the more explicit practice of political poems, as in those performances which explicitly name and condemn systems or workings of power, often through a certain activist vernacular. I establish these political poems as normalized and expected in the slam space, and then consider how these performances do not necessarily enact the politics that they name, sometimes even undermining norms of politicization. In the second part, *resistant voices*, I turn to more implicit performances of politics by analyzing subtle understandings of raising-voice-as-resistance, which was a theme in participant narratives. While this sort of resistance might not be seen or named as ‘political’ in the same explicit terms, these expressions tend to make and consolidate politicizing space. What follows in this section considers how and to what effect performances consolidate and challenge this norm of politicization, which politics these performances do and do not entrench, and what different kinds of political performances (explicit, implicit) produce.

*Political poetics*

My grandmother, clinging tight to her ta-ta’s coat trim
de-boards a ship, headscarf tied under chin
Authorities butcher their names but let their flesh in
Canada’s open arms revealing only soft palms
Mere months later and they would have been
smacked back to the sounds of bombs […]

Orchestrated or arbitrary?
who amongst us will defend
the way we pretend
to have earned this *free*?

What gives us the audacity
to claim the veracity
of citizenship to this place
with genocidal origins that leave us shame-faced

- Ziy von B, excerpt from “Alpha,” in *AYD (witness)*

At any given slam, you will always hear at least one (usually many) explicitly “political”

poem. Participants described “political,” or “activist,” poems as those which directly address

power and oppression, whether by speaking to some specific issue, to larger structures of power,
or to experiences that are silenced or stigmatized. The above excerpt from Ziy’s poem *Alpha*

illustrates this kind of poetry well: it takes up the issue of immigration detention and exposes

structural power, privilege, and complicity. I use “political poems,” as a shorthand, but I reckon

with how the meanings of “political poems” are contingent and normalized in certain ways, and

also recognize that all poetry is political.

When I asked poet participants how and whether they saw spoken word as connected to

resistance, many referred at first to whether or not they had these kinds of “political poems.”

Several poets spoke about how such poems are characteristic of the Peterborough slam: as Sasha

said, “I’ve heard that from audience members, I’ve also heard that from visiting poets, that the

Peterborough slam scene is this, I don’t know, most people are doing poems about social activism

and justice [laughing].” Niambi also talked about how many poets do political work: “A lot of

poets I know are, I would say, ‘activism poets.’ Their work is solely about the kind of resistance

they do in the community and for certain organizations, and in their own lives.” Table 5.1 shows

a few examples of “political poems” from poet participants:

*Table 5.1: Political Poems*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet(s)</th>
<th>Excerpt from “political” poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>But this is for breaking the conjunctions they used to tie your hands with Stuck between a compliment of but…and…yet, too pretty for a dark skin girl This is for keeping calm, when they’ve torn the alphabets from your palms And you can only trace the Malcolm X in your veins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>From plantation to penitentiary, It’s all pretty much the same Because if you don’t have the right pigment, you don’t play the same game. Now we’ve traded the sugar for tomatoes and peaches, Washed up in greenhouses instead of sandy beaches We hide slavery between policy and racism behind bars Commit murder and genocide and then assimilate the scars Leaving a trail of borders and a scattering of reservations While telling tales of melting pots and welcoming reputations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziy</td>
<td>We call them illegals, But if goods move why can’t people? We say No One is Illegal! Human rights are for all people! […] We’ve got more than enough lawyers defending corporations Insurance brokers instilling fear in the nation Pharmaceutical execs taking golfing vacations Immigration officers enforcing deportations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Bring down the barricades built for keeping us parted keeping us chained write poetry like you’re bleeding for change Kick at lines and borders and get this shit started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niambi and Beth</td>
<td>As a black woman today. I’m saying fuck all of your views. Fuck all your stereotypes it doesn’t matter if they’re true. I don’t tolerate racism. Especially when you couldn’t last a day in my shoes. […] You call it attitude, I call it resistance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples in this table show both how poets perform about different issues and systems (racism, stereotyping, migrant labour, prison industrial complex, nation-states, borders, corporate greed), and also how they, differently, draw on politicized language and concepts (Malcolm X, racism, resistance, genocide, assimilation, change, ‘No One Is Illegal’, persistence). Throughout our conversations, though I introduced an open question of poetry as resistance, again and again participants turned the focus to this kind of explicitly political poetry and measured their own work against such expectations. The Collective members I spoke with each referred to such
poems, and all but one (Tammy, a rather new poet)² described some of their own work as having
more overt political messages.

There are two particular points of interest in how poets spoke differently about their work
as political and their motives for performing political poetry, which speak to how certain politics
are normalized, consolidated, and challenged in slam. First, while almost all of the poets spoke
about some of their poems as explicitly political, their motivations for this kind of explicit politics,
what they dubbed ‘political,’ and the content this poetry was all very different. Jon, for instance,
uses the stage to speak politically about his work as a job developer and employment counsellor,
seeing slam as a venue for the kind of explicit politics that are inhibited in his work. Beth spoke
about “political” poems as something she grew into in response to having the captive slam
audience; because of these listeners, she felt like she “had to have a message.” Sasha curates
their stage poetry from their page poetry, choosing to use the mic for poetry “about resistance and
oppression and the messages that I want to carry out into the world.” Poets, like Jon and Sasha,
mobilize the mic for their existing political work, while the repetition and normalization of
political poems of the slam has also contributed how other poets, like Beth, do politics through
poetry.

Second, poets tended to evaluate their own poetry practices against the entrenched
expectations for certain kinds of explicitly political poetry. Niambi and Beth both spoke about
how they started with more “personal” poetry, but began “writing activism or resistance poems –
whatever you want to title them,” developing a more explicitly political practice the more they

² It is worth noting Tammy’s narrative as an outlier in thinking about spoken word as normatively political in the
Peterborough slam. Though Tammy did not “find any resistance at all in it,” even she needed to qualify that, unlike
many other members of the collective who “have a political or advocating agenda in their poetry,” she is “not that
type of poet.” Thought she did not participate in explicitly political poetry, she acknowledged it as an expectation of
the space, and defined herself and her poetry against it.
slammed and listened to other poets. Niambi also qualified, again and again, that their poetry is not as political as others’, saying that certain poems are “slightly political, but still personal.” Frankie spoke about how, for a long time, they held a lot of uncertainty about whether their poetry was “political enough” or “political” at all, wishing that it was more so. In more recent years, they have come to feel that it is not necessary to “talk about larger systems” of oppression in order to challenge them through speaking to other ways of engaging in relationships. Though they initially felt that the audience expected such explicit expressions, Frankie did not need to impose the sort of politicized vernacular of social justice movements, which many slam scenes adopt, in order to be political. Ziy spoke about how many of their poems do explicitly name and unsettle systems of oppression, but that even their less explicit poems “end up being resistance” because Ziy’s way of living and being in the world tends to disrupt “normative ideology.” For Ziy, the political is sometimes incidental in their poetic work since their living is inherently political. For each of these poets, political poetry is reinforced as an expectation or assumption of the Peterborough slam, around and/or against which they described their own poetic work. As I return to in thinking about resistant voices, the ways in which these poets engage the political in their work also respond to, speak with, and shift the expectations of the space as politicized in certain ways.

Other participants spoke about how the slam’s practices produce possibilities for engaging others, the listeners, in raising awareness and in opening up political concerns in ways that most other public space-making would not facilitate. Sasha spoke about how the three minute format can work as a pedagogical tool to make the audience take political messages in differently: “It’s your three minutes on stage where people have to listen to you and people have to listen to what you’re saying, even if they don’t agree with it … it’s a different form of getting information
through and art hits people in a different way.” Jon similarly spoke about slam as a way to encourage the audience to look at things differently. He talked about how, though “everybody in Peterborough knows that it’s a challenging local economy, and everybody knows that there’s a high degree of poverty here,” there is a lot of silence and complicity around it, so he sees spoken word as “a way to help people to see this outside of their own context a little bit.” As he explained, “people listen when it’s a poem.” For Christine, a poet-listener in the space, the political messages of poems are implicated in the politicized practices of the slam. She spoke about how, at the slam, “the content is always social justice.” Before finishing that thought, she added that she sees this content as tied in with the practice of acknowledging the Indigenous territories that the slam occupies, which to her is an important, but imperfect, part of this politicized “social justice” space-making.

Practices of scoring, cheering, etc. produce the slam as politicized space, but these same practices can also challenge this politicization depending on how poets respond to these scores. As Christine noted, receiving this feedback encourages poets to tinker with their words, but also to reflect on their messages: “The poets are thinking about the feedback they just got, or didn’t get, and they’re fine-tuning their practice, but also thinking through the subject.” Resonant with many other interviews, Beth and I talked about how, while less prominent in Peterborough, some poets perform certain politics to “write for points.” From her perspective, this can “dilute the whole point of it,” because poets know that “those types of things don’t get scores or get more scores. So you’re going to lean towards writing for resistance even if you don’t need to resist anything!” In this way, the Peterborough slam compels certain performances of politics, but it is

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3 It is important to think about how these understandings of the political possibilities of slam are contingent on how they are received by the listeners. I return to this question in the following chapter.
much less clear how individuals’ own senses of the world and of their place in it might be shifted through this politicized space-making.

In July of 2016, I saw this kind of strategic performance in action when I joined some of the Peterborough poets in attending a provincial team competition in Guelph. After several racialized, highly political, highly skilled, and highly passionate teams performed ever more radical and clever poetry, a team of four white men and one racialized man took to the stage. Since Peterborough is not a highly competitive environment, the level of competitiveness at this event, and thus the strategies mobilized in performance, stood out; tied to this competitiveness, each poem seemed to be more political and more radical than the last. This team, however, used most of their three minutes to chastise selfie culture and other social media phenomena through banal and apolitical jokes.\(^4\) Near the end of the poem, though, they inserted a reference to Black Lives Matter. Though the rest of the poem was taken up with trivial wordplay, it seemed that now the poem was supposed to have a message about not letting social media frenzies indulge complacency. I read this kind of injected political message as a strategic performance of politics in order to garner more scores, a reading which Peterborough poets reinforced in conversations with me afterward. Despite their attempt and their relatively high scores, this team did not place in the competition, but this example is one of many in which poets might perform high-profile activist politics/political language for strategic, competitive reasons. Though this team named Black Lives Matter in their poem, the way in which they did so – by what seemed to be a selfish mobilization – worked to devalue those politics by appropriating struggles against anti-Black

\(^4\) This is not to say that these cultures are apolitical, but rather that the poets’ narrative was.
racism. This example is one of many such “score-scooping”5 political performances that participants described, and it recalls Chávez’s challenge of “discursive imperialism” in poetry slam. Notably, one of the highly political teams took the title for the evening.6

The politicization of the space, then, entrenched by and with practices of judging and scoring, encourages poets to buy into the idiom of slam-as-resistance. The connection between this norm of expression and high scoring also raises questions about the motives of some resistance poetry and about easy readings of slam as performances of resistance or politicized space. Indeed, to read all of these performances of political poems as “signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated” would certainly “collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42). With the question of ‘which poems are political,’ when thinking about how these poems produce, consolidate, and challenge politicized space, each poem is ‘political’ in that it shapes the space, is shaped by space-making, and shapes how other poems and voices can be heard. So certain kinds of politics are consolidated and challenged through performance.

5 “Score-scooping” political performances is a broader pattern in Peterborough and elsewhere (Chavez 2015; Johnson 2010; Somers-Willett 2009), that participants noted and that I observed several times.

6 This example of a team of mostly white men strategically deploying the language of Black Lives Matter, along with later examples of white straight cisgendered men ‘taking up space’ at slams meant for trans/queer and people of colour voices, and of a white settler feature poet appropriating Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawai’ian) chants and songs Indigenous Hawaiian language, reflect and expose some tensions raised by poet blogger Scott Woods (2016). Woods reflects on a comment from another poet who complained that, “if you [are] a cis white male, nobody wants to hear your story. You’re left with the option of appropriating, or walking away.” Woods condemned the poet’s statement and instead compelled white poets to go about their political work with honest integrity: “If you as a white artist want to address, say, racism and sexism, that’s fine, knock yourself out. But don’t do it because that’s the art you think will help you win a dumb-ass fake barroom-level competition that has arbitrary anti-creativity bumper lane rules built into it to defray the cost of a week-long road trip where you might get to perform two poems, assuming your want-to-win-pseudo-competition team doesn’t bury you in group pieces. Do it because you genuinely have that value and agenda on your heart to share.” For Woods, seeking scores inherently contaminates the politics of the slam space.
**Resistant voices**

When I reach the brinks of my mental capacity
Consumed by my black girl ragefire
Because I can’t pop back any more pills of privilege and white supremacy,
I turn to my sisters, my Queens

*Share stories of experience that don’t need the political programs to be built in*
because to a person of colour, you never have to explain the nuances that shape the lives of dark skin.
But we stay resilient

- Niambi Leigh, excerpt from “Queens” in *NiambiTree* (emphasis added)

Participants also attributed ‘resistance’ to the space of slam, but not necessarily in the same productive terms as political poems. Here I consider how some participants described raising their voices as a less explicit or direct practice than political poetry, but also as a resistant doing. I consider how this practice also consolidates/challenges politicized space in ways different from but related to explicitly political poetry.

The ways in which poet participants described what kinds of poetry are “political” and what kinds of poetry are “resistance” did not always align. Instead, resistance was less about specifically naming and deconstructing systems of power, and more about sharing the personal in ways that challenge regulatory norms and structures. Ziy illustrated this well in talking about how many of their poems “resist” “normative ideas about something” while also transforming expectations. Though much of their poetry is explicit in naming systems of oppression, their pieces do not have to have an explicit political agenda to challenge norms. Ziy described first spoken word poem they ever performed (as a teenager in the late ‘90s), which was about “coming out to [their] mom” but was also “resisting the frame that [their] sexual identity was tragic or

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7 It is worth noting that throughout Ziy’s narrative, they questioned my framing of ‘resistance,’ using the word apprehensively and with an acknowledgement that naming these kinds of things is complicated. They often qualified mentions of resistance with phrases like “if you want to use that language,” “if you want to call it that,” and “whatever resistance means.” Ziy brought a critical analysis of resistance into their narrative that resonated with and shaped my approach to these questions.
problematic.” They explained how this poem helped them shift the shame they felt into speaking about their sexuality as, in their words, “something about me that actually … gives me something to offer,” and as “a site of strength … as well as vulnerability.” For Ziy, this poem was not only a personal shift, but also a way to flip expectations of their sexuality as tragic; they did not need to name systems of heteronormativity, instead speaking from this personal place implicitly challenges the workings of these systems. Simply being openly queer and performing queer poetry (as Sasha said, “If you’re queer all your poems are queer”) at the Peterborough slam challenges heterosexism while repeating this kind of “outness” produces a counternormative/queernormative space, though, as I explain below, other slam-goers challenge this queernormativity.

Niambi spoke about destabilizing expectations, too, in describing their work as resistance. They described their poem Queens, excerpted above, as a poem that is “slightly radical, but in a different way, where it’s a flip the script kind of poem.” Niambi talked about the ubiquitously negative stereotypes and portrayals of people of colour, and how these work to regulate people of colour by “telling you to feel a certain way or act a certain way, or that you can only be capable of behaving a certain way.” Niambi’s way of contending with this regulation was in part by naming these regulatory narratives as part of a system of white supremacy, but mostly they wanted to take up the stage with a piece of art that was “just about being Black and carefree.” Like Ziy, in Niambi’s words: “the place I hold in society, which has so many layers and can get messy, … is also beautiful a lot of the times.” In this way, Niambi chooses to take their time on stage to celebrate their Blackness, rather than always giving that time to speaking about the systems that regulate it.
Niambi’s narrative shows not only that poets speak from their own experiences and celebrate their own lives as a resistance, but the way they qualify the poem as “slightly radical” also hints at the expectations to perform “political” poetry. By sharing this kind of personal poetry at the slam, again and again as they become a more established poet in locally and nationally, Niambi, Ziy, and others might shift these expectations for new poets who are saturated in their words and ways of engaging with their voices. Since, like Niambi, most of the well-established, well-practiced poets at the Peterborough slam speak from such personal resistance, this is what new poets hear again and again when they are finding their own voices. In this way, repeated performances of resistant voicing do not simply consolidate the slam’s norms of political poems, but also reshape what political expression can look like in the slam, thus slightly refiguring the space as political, while also celebrating resilience as resistance and opening counternorms of political expression up to broader and more nuanced expressions of what is and can be “political” or “resistant.”

Frankie also moved away from the explicitly political, speaking instead about “sharing your story” and “giving voice to different ways of loving” as radical. They shared a quote that sits with them in thinking about their poetry as resistant: “use emotionality as a radical tactic against a society that teaches you emotions are a sign of weakness.”\ref{8} They explained this saying, “I think that being emotional and being vulnerable in a public way like that is a form of resistance.” Frankie was less interested in taking up the politicized norms of the space by naming larger systems and speaking in politicized language. Instead, their poems evoke deep reflection on personal ways of loving and relating with others, choosing to share and celebrate this kind of quieter thoughtful loving as something that undermines norms of public engagement and

\footnote{8 This quote appears unattributed on many different blog sites.}
heterosexist expectations. The slam as an emotional space, then, can also be a radical intervention into norms that regulate and restrict emotional expression. Frankie’s practice of performing poetry about loving and caring challenges heterosexist norms that discipline expressions and ways of loving, instead producing a deliberately emotional space.

This emphasis on the affective, the personal, and unlikely and unexpected ways of loving as radical certainly does not fit within the kinds of explicit political language of political poems, but it resonates deeply with Roysdon’s (2009) concept of “ecstatic resistance.” The way Ziy advances the *impossibility* of their sexuality as something to celebrate, the way Niambi takes to the stage with the *impossibility* of carefree Black, the way Frankie advances *impossible* ways of loving as a radical act—these, too, are politicized expressions of poetry. These poets all work within/around, contribute to, and shift the political expectations of the space, but also carve out different ways of engaging the structures that they navigate day to day. Their “resistance,” here, is less about confronting the specifics of structural oppression in explicitly ‘radical’ terms, and more about revelling in the small impossibilities of their daily lives, about celebrating what societal norms deem to be un-celebratable, unacceptable, and undesirable. These utterances, as much as the “fire and brimstone” politics of some other poems, shape the slam space as political. Though the slam’s politicization is produced and normalized, such as with political poems, this politicization is also challenged, undermined, and reimagined through these kinds of performances.

**Being heard**

This mouth is bold truth unfolding, is thorny to touch,
It warms cold hearts, Laughs curse words and abuse. […]
This mouth doesn’t like itself.

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9 This is how Jon described his early performances of political poems and being swept up into the emphatic energy of the slam.
but it is resilient
smiles sweeten its speech,
tongue tasting thoughts traced on pages past.
tongue gnawing at emotions no longer useful.
this mouth transcends, sees value in voices speaking true. […]
this mouth, attached to this tongue, these teeth
brings you poems like these, finds freedom in works on stages
And is no longer ashamed of experiences survived.
It is thanks to this mouth that this human is still alive.

- Niambi Leigh, excerpt from “This Mouth” in *NiambiTree*

Participants revered how the slam facilitates radical ways of being heard that are not often possible in other public contexts, saying that this is one of the most important possibilities that the slam’s space-making produces. Participants spoke about “using [their] voice” or “filling the space with [their] voice” to illustrate the connection between spoken word and resistance; they tied “feeling heard” and “feeling like [their] voice is valued in the space” to confidence, safety, power and agency. The ways in which participants spoke about being heard were not particularly linked to the message or political content of the poetry, but rather to the social location of the poet. Like Sasha said of their and Niambi’s poetry, “there’s very activist-y [poems] … and then there’s *everything else*, which I would also consider activist-y.…. If you are a community organizer, then all your poems are about community organizing.”\(^{10}\) Being heard might not be explicit in the same way as ‘political poems,’ but participants more often spoke of it as the most powerful expression or mobilization of the space.

Poets brought up sentiments of being heard in different ways. Frankie spoke about how, as a queer person who also lives with mental illness, speaking from their experiences pushes at silence and stigma: “I wanted to be able to express to the community things that I was feeling

\(^{10}\) This quote comes from a performance Sasha and Niambi shared at a community workshop in the fall of 2016, part of my work with May on a project called “Stories of resistance, Resurgence, and Resilience in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough).”
really strongly or really passionate about, just to have my voice be heard…. As a poet… just owning that experience and being strong in your own voice, I think it can have a really big impact.” Though Tammy, the newest slammer among participants, did not identify with a sense of spoken word as resistance, she did say that she felt it was valuable to be speaking from her experiences as a teen mom, a recovering alcoholic, and a survivor of domestic abuse and childhood trauma; for her, speaking from these experiences openly and owning these positions is something slam opened up for her: “The scene is allowing me to peel back masks…. It’s finally allowing me the freedom to be like, ok, I don’t need to what I call chameleonize my personality to suit the needs of someone else.” The counternorms of the space opened up the possibility for Tammy, as with others, to come into her own voice on stage.

While these sentiments might seem to reflect Somers-Willett’s arguments about strategic performances of marginalized identities in slam, how poets spoke about their voices as resistant had less to do with representing or mobilizing their identities, and more to do with raising their voices from the bodies that they occupy. As Ziy explained, it is about those moments when someone gets up on stage and “it’s the first time they feel like someone’s listening to them. Like that first time they go up to a microphone, and it’s their voice that’s being amplified.” The sense of being heard as political and politicizing, then, is tied to being in certain bodies that are not often offered the possibility to be seen and heard. As Niambi said, “just by being in this body I am an activist because there are things I have to speak about because it’s my story.” Beth joked about how her body and other poet-bodies almost signal the content of their poetry:

I feel like sometimes when someone goes on stage, I can almost predict what they’re going to talk about! Because it’s like, if I go on stage, someone will probably think I’m going to talk about Black girl issues. And they’re probably right, I have to talk about it, because if I don’t, who is going to resist on my behalf about what I’m going through?
These poets are speaking about more than strategic performances of marginalized identities. Their bodies and voices are visibly taking up the stage and audibly taking up the mic in a way that confronts normative expectations that typically render their bodies less visible and their voices less heard.

Further, participants linked ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ to the space of the slam and how their bodies and voices move through, make, and challenge that space. This excerpt from Beth and Sasha’s poem, “Poet,” illustrates well how the sort of identity politics that Somers-Willett speaks of are implicated in the slam’s resistant space-making:

I have fought hard for this space,
This stage.
Fought hard against the
happiness is not for you
Don’t go there, don’t be that, what are you?
You see Identity will always push the boundaries of language
So I speak of mine within the italics of poetry

This poem exposes the regulation of identities, but also their malleability. It links identities to the performance of poetry, in a way that might resonate with Somers-Willett, but also to the making of space. Here, the poets describe their assertion of unfixed identities as a part of the struggle to make spaces to express these identities, struggles that are facilitated by and articulated through the slam’s space-making. Several poets spoke of this sort of radical potential in similar terms, not only as being seen and heard, but also as “taking up space” with their bodies and voices. As Sasha said: “The active, the spoken part of it [slam] is resistance…. I’m part of a few oppressed communities, even though I hold a lot of privilege. So, just taking up space on stage and taking up space at events and organizing events is an act of resistance and is going against the norms of
events and organizing.” Sasha’s words imply a spatialization of voice and a spatial assertion of non-normative identities, both of which contribute to resistant space-making.

It is not always, then, the explicitly political or most radical performances that make the slam a politicized space. As with the score-scooping strategy of taking up activist discourse, performances of politics can challenge the Peterborough slam as a politicized or anti-oppressive space by perpetuating “discursive imperialism” and the erasure of marginalized voices rather than challenging these. At the same time, more subtle expressions, such as poets who hold different marginalized subject positions simply making their voices heard, can politicize space-making by re-enunciating the slam as a space for marginalized voices. Poets who celebrate the small impossibilities of their daily lives can perform (in both senses) politicization by shifting expectations of marginalized positions from tragic to celebrated; by not engaging in ‘political poetry,’ they might produce politicized space by refusing in that moment to narrate their lives in terms of the systems that regulate them. At the same time, by engaging in political poetry and naming the relations of power that seek to confine them, they might produce politicized space by rendering these systems hypervisible (Melo 2015). These performances, then, are a complex politicized space-making.

**Consolidating/challenging open expression: Contingencies in being heard, hearing**

Picking up on the themes of being heard and taking up space as radical, here I consider how more privileged voices are not seen as resistant simply in being heard or taking up space to unpack how open expression is consolidated and challenged. I then consider further examples (though rare ones) in which slam-goers do not support certain voices. This section, then considers how appeals to the slam as a politicized space and counternorms of celebrating marginalized voices come up against claims to the slam as a space of open expression and counternorms of
unconditional support. Contingencies in support are part of making the slam as a politicized, anti-oppressive space: this making sometimes manifests in not performing the same kind of support for those whose voices are not marginalized.

**Privileged voices, oppressive space taking**

Here, reading the resistance of “taking up space” from marginalized positions as a diagnostic of power, I explore what this might tell us about the workings of power in how space can be taken up, or taken from (Abu-Lughod 1990). As such, I consider some of the ways in which privileged voices have taken up space at the slam that betray the workings of power. Collective members strive to make the slam an open space for all voices, expressions, performances, but they also strive to make certain slams open only or especially to particular voices which do not typically have access to captive audiences. K spoke about how the slam creates space for resistance simply by offering a mic to marginalized voices: “some people, the very act of them just opening their mouth is resistant to the structures and conditions they’ve been placed within.” For whom is speaking not itself a radical act, and how are their expressions taken up into space-making? Here I explore how and to what effect slam-goers mobilize or withhold support for voices through performance.

Though feeling heard was a strong undercurrent in several poet’s narratives, not everyone spoke about their own work in this way, which opens up questions about the contingencies of supporting voices. Jon, a white, Jewish, straight, cisgendered male poet, spoke about how he is captivated by how “the right words said in the right place at the right time” can “literally divide

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11 In Jon’s words: “I am technically mixed in that my father is of christian Scottish descent (more or less) and my mother is Jewish (mostly from Poland), but I do identify as Jewish. The tension however that comes from being mixed and the exclusion alongside the adding passing privileged that his provides me with is something that is at the forefront of my thoughts and to some extent my work these days so it caught my eye.”
but that *his* voice is not the one to speak those words. He said, in fact, that “hop[ing] that those words would be *his*” was actually “deeply problematic.” So instead, from his position, he “love[s] holding space for words that have [that] capacity,” which he can do through the slam. Jon’s narrative points to how, in the Peterborough slam, certain voices are perceived to have more resistant possibility because of where they are speaking from and what they inherently speak against, and that more privileged voices like his are not perceived to hold the same tacit radical potential. For Jon the personal is political in a different way, since his kind of voice is dominant and overrepresented in most contexts. Slam-goers certainly celebrate Jon’s poetry, but they do not necessarily perceive him to be resisting simply by raising his voice.

Like ‘being heard,’ participants tacitly described ‘taking up space’ as contingent on social location, a contingency that is consolidated through counternorms. Jon wondered about how hearing the voices of seasoned poets filling the space slam after slam might limit the possibilities of that space-making. Frankie spoke about “the presence or sometimes dominance of cis men’s voices” in the space and on the stage. Two examples in which “taking up space” went against the expectations of the slam as creating space for marginalized voices show how this contingent norm is established and reiterated, but also where the practices and structure of the space might fall short in assuring space for certain voices. The Collective hosts different events that cater to ‘making space’ for certain voices, such as the Pride Slam and the Black History Month slam. Several collective members spoke about the challenges of assuring that space for those voices. At the 2016 Pride slam, Sasha, the host, made the expectations of the event clear at the beginning of the slam by explaining that that the Collective intended for that slam to “creat[e] space for queer

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12 This is a thought that Jon’s grandmother shared with him when he was young and he has been captured by it ever since.
voices and tell the stories of queer voices in this community.” Despite Sasha’s explanation of that night’s intended space, several poets who did not identify as queer or trans still took up the stage. One particular poet, a straight white cisgendered man, said this to justify taking up the mic: “I am a straight man, but this poem uses the voice of a woman in some places.” Though afterwards several poets spoke to me about how that poet’s performance was inappropriate, within the event the audience gave the poet a polite clap and sent him on his way. Though the slam had been set out to privilege certain voices, others still felt entitled to that space. The half-hearted applause consolidated norms of support and an open stage, but challenged counternorms of making space for marginalized voices by implicitly reinforcing white, cisgendered, straight men’s entitlement to take up space and amplify their voices, and reproducing their unquestioned access to voicing.

Performing this support also somewhat contaminated the effort to make a queer space that evening. At the Black History Month slam in February 2016, the Collective chose a Black woman poet as the feature, with the intention, in that month, of creating space for Black voices. For the slam portion, however, at least two white men competed and one placed third (after two Black poets). One white male poet even scored the first 10/10 of the evening, so the judges validated him in taking that space. Several Collective members spoke with me about that night, and about how their intentions to create space for Black perspectives fell short. At the 2017 Black History Month slam, the Collective explicitly named that night’s stage as a space for Black, Indigenous, people of colour voices, imploring white poets to save their verses for another slam. That night, only those voices held the ‘space’ of the stage.

In both of these examples, the Collective implied conditions on the openness of the stage, hoping to hold it for certain voices. The hosts sought to assert these contingencies by naming the ‘celebration’ of those voices for each evening, but they did not name but only implied which
voices they meant to preclude from those nights (as in those who benefit implicitly from the marginalization of those who were to be celebrated). In both examples, too, slam-goers and organizers did not challenge these privileged voices in assuming the stage. In order to work towards an anti-oppressive space that celebrates marginalized voices, then, the slam norm of an open stage sometimes must be modified. At the same time, when poets expect an open stage and take up the mic on such nights, they undermine intentions of anti-oppression by reproducing power and privilege. In these ways, the counternorms of open expression, unconditional support, and making space for marginalized voices come into conflict. Their conflict reveals how power and privilege are necessarily still at work in resistant space-making, while slam-goers’ silence around and routinized applause for assertions of privilege both obscure and condone these working of power.

**Limits of support**

Many poets linked the norm of audible support to their own feelings of safety and confidence in sharing their words on stage. Here, I consider moments where support falters, looking at how audience members opt out of supportive practices to shape what can be said, and more importantly heard, in the space. Though support is generous and offered freely, there are some limits to what the audience supports on stage. Ziy noted how other slam scenes entrench discouraging environments through practices of booing. Speaking about this, Ziy remembered one memorable exception to support in Peterborough:

Z: So then you hear of these slams where someone starts doing a poem and if they’re too hesitant or if they say something unpopular, people just start booing so loud that they have to, like, walk off the stage. Which is obviously not what we do here. I think I’ve witnessed one time that there was a lot of booing and it’s like, someone doing misogynist comedy.

M: I think I’ve witnessed that. I don’t know if it was the same time
Z: Probably. I hope so, I hope it only happened once. [laughing] So that’s, so it’s interesting, right? Because that’s the idea, is the community gets to decide what they want here.

Ziy’s comments show how this support is somewhat conditional, and how these practices shape who and what slam-goers hear. The open mic comic’s explicit misogyny was not acceptable, the space was not open to this kind of hateful expression, so the audience pushed his voice off of the stage. Sasha reinforced this idea too; after they described how most poetry in Peterborough relates to social justice, they said that “it’s also sort of a space of no nonsense.” You’re not going to get away with screaming at your audience about hamburgers [laughing]. You gotta up your game! So, I think that it sort of sets that tone.” There are, then, some terms of engagement, expectations of politics and values that are established and maintained through audible audience engagement.

This is an example of how intentions of anti-oppression confront intentions of unconditional support. When someone’s words directly and explicitly reinforce oppression, like the misogynist open mic comic, the audience will boo them off stage. But what happens when that line is less clear?

In the preceding example, the audience collectively ousted someone who was not respecting the values of the scene. But sometimes audience members in the space hold values that conflict with poets’ performances, and they reflect this in their lack of support for those poems.

Scoring, again, is a way for the audience to have input into what can be heard, and to themselves

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13 Though Sasha was speaking to a certain pointless kind of nonsense, this sentiment, too, is contingent on who is doing the nonsense and how. Charlie Petch – a frequent feature/visiting poet, formerly of Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) – can do a smutty love poem to Chewbacca, but it is still a genderqueer person taking that stage, a well-respected poet who does more pointed poetry, so they are celebrated despite (or because of) this nonsense. Some of their poems speak more to identity, experience, but their performances of outrageous humour are also an intervention into the space, and a different kind of intervention than the misogynist comic: “Chewie / there is never enough chest hair / to satisfy me / never enough back hair to fill the cockles / of my star warring heart […] Chewbacca / I didn’t think our love / could outlast my crush on Han Solo / but when I’m with my / Han[d]s solo / it is your wookie cry / that blushes my neck.”
be ‘heard,’ allowing them to perform a different kind of power in the space by asserting their own conditions. While, as shown above, resistance often “gets you points,” and performances of marginalized identities are validated in the slam, the power for assigning these points – and in certain ways the power of marking which kinds of resistances, which performances of identity are valued – lies with judges who are meant to be unknown to the Collective. Sometimes, then, these unknown judges hold and assert values incongruent with the resistant counternorms of the slam, and their assertions shift and challenge space-making.

At a slam in November 2015, this was particularly evident. In the first round, Sasha performed a scorching condemnation of borders and nation states, citing the violence against Alan Kurdi as part of larger structures of colonialism in which we, the listeners, were complicit. This poem scored very well across all the judging groups, though I noticed that one table of judges gave a comparatively low score, as they did with other highly political poems. Sasha’s poem in the second round was an explicit expression of queer love as radical, a way for them to ‘take up space’ with their queerness. For this poem, that table’s scores plummeted to 3.5 points – it is rare for poets to get below 5 points, and this was the lowest score that I have observed at a slam. That table of judges valued these two differently resistant poems starkly differently than other judges, and overall this table reduced the valuing of marginalized voices that evening. Nonetheless, the practice of dropping the highest and lowest scores curbed the table’s effect on Sasha’s ranking for the evening and they still won the slam. While the check and balance system of scoring kept this table from swaying the competition that evening, poets and audience members still pay attention to each score. A score might not determine who ‘wins,’ but it informs that poet, and reflects to the audience what is or is not valued/appreciated/wanted by those participating in that evening’s space-making. Personally, I also remember how this low score,
which was so anathema to norms of support, affected my own experience and sense of the space that evening: the slam had always felt queered and queer-positive to me and this scoring violated that. Though the score-dropping practices maintained a ‘fair’ competition, it did not prevent that low score from shaping/contaminating my experience of the space. This example is a more extreme illustration of how judges do not always hold, express, or practice the same politics that are normalized in the space, and they do not necessarily validate the stage as a space to celebrate marginalized voices and experiences; when asserted through practices, these conflicting values produce dissonance in space-making.

**Consolidating/challenging decolonial space: Featured voices’ space-making**

Here, by examining two feature poets, I further question the ways in which the mic is taken up and given at the slam, and how performances of the slam’s routinized practices can reiterate, unsettle, and re-entrench resistant counternorms, politics, and expectations of space-making. Unlike the democratized three minutes of the rest of the slam, feature poets share up to an hour of poetry, stories, and banter between the two slam bouts. They also often come packaged with an implicit sense of trust and friendship from Collective members. For these reasons, feature sets are worth examining to see what is produced through these longer performances by poets who have not been saturated in the counternorms of the Peterborough slam space. I examine how these two feature poets differently mobilized slam practices to consolidate and challenge the space as decolonial.14

**Challenging decolonial space by consolidating colonization**

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14 It is difficult to separate decoloniality from anti-oppression, anti-racism, etcetera. Here I speak about decoloniality to sharpen the analysis of how the space is produced, consolidated, challenged.
A feature poet in May 2016 – along with Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy’s response to their set – churned a conversation among the Collective about who they invite as feature poets and how to assure that feature poets uphold the expectations of the space. This white settler feature poet’s performance draws out some of the colonial tensions of “taking up space” on stolen lands. I choose here to depict this performance by drawing from Christine’s own narrative of the evening, ‘holding space’ for her perspective as an Anishinaabekwe (Anishinnabe woman) responding to settler appropriation. The following is an excerpt from the blog post poem Christine wrote in response to the event. She illustrates well the way the poet took to the stage:

there was this guest (and celebrated) poet last night who opened their poem with a chant.
a song.
a chantsong.
my first thought was appropriation; the first sound (which didn’t get past my lips): ugh
i felt guilty for thinking appropriation right off the hop, for jumping to you-know-so-much so quick. i told my intuition AND gut to “simmer down. give the poet a chance. quit being so quick to assess, conclude, curl your lip, raise your eyebrow. you are not Elvis. it’s likely European Indigenous Knowledge. likely one of their own ancestral songs.”
chants.
song
i listened as they made their way around the world utilizing all the cultural, animalistic and mythological tools of poetic imagery they could to illuminate their idea, art, spirit, aesthetic; their effort to bring us into their world of one
love one earth
oneearthlovefreedomhopecompassionearthlove
was evident.

Following Christine, I do not use this poet’s name, and I use they/them pronouns to further anonymize them.

I do not wish to reproduce any appropriation by giving more space to this poet’s words, so I centre Christine’s narrative in depicting this feature set.

From Sy 2016, Chistine’s blog post about the event. All spelling, italicizations, capitalization are Christine’s.

Here, Christine cites Eyers 2016.
Christine depicts the feature poet’s appropriative performance. This light-skinned poet, who evaded situating themselves, but did mention that most of their family immigrated to Canada over several generations, brought appropriative art into space-making through their performance. The poet began with a songchant: words that, as they later explained, some Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawai’ian) Elders had shared with them. Christine describes how, as the poet continued through the set, it became clear that the poet’s aesthetic, performances of a certain ethic, and evocations of animalistic spirituality did not come from their own traditions; rather, they appropriated these from Indigenous communities they had ‘visited.’ Moreover, this poet conveniently incorporated these teachings into their lucrative poet persona. The ways in which Christine’s positions herself and her experience of the performance as Anishinaabekwe recalls how the meanings and experiences of the slam’s spatialized norms differ for different people. Christine continued her analysis:

when non-Indigenous poet does not name the Indigenous peoples they live with or work with or the Indigenous lands they most definitely occupy but appropriate the cultural forms and knowledges of Indigenous Nations from far away and then say “I’m not going to explain the songchantsong to you but the way I give back to that Nation for letting me use their knowledge and cultural form is by informing you that they are fighting for their sovereignty because the U.S. is bad and you should go learn about it. Know history!”

Here, Christine refers to how, rather than mobilize the platform to which they had access in order to educate fellow settlers about the political, social, economic contexts of colonialism broadly, and of the Indigenous nation from which the poet borrowed specifically, this poet asserted that it was the audience’s job to do that work to educate ourselves. In so doing, this poet evaded certain

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19 The poet’s decision not to name themselves as a settler, and also to make vague claims about their own ancestors’ struggles on this land, might be one of several instances of what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang call “Settler moves to innocence” in this poet’s performance (2012, 10). Tuck and Yang describe these as those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (Ibid.).
responsibilities to the knowledges and chants that had been shared with them, instead placing that responsibility on the audience. The poet, further, did not acknowledge the lands upon which they live and work, nor did they contend with their own privilege and complicity as a settler living on and visiting stolen and occupied lands. Their poems used the spirituality, the sacred stories, and the language that these Kanaka Maoli Elders shared with them without also contending with the relations of power implicating that sharing.

I will return to more of Christine’s account in the next chapter, because her way of engaging in dialogue and the Collective’s ways of responding all happened “off stage.” In what I have presented here, Christine illustrates the scene of this feature poet, illuminating two tensions of the poet’s performance in that space as they connect to ‘being heard’ and ‘taking space,’ tensions which resonate with Chávez’s (2015) critiques of “discursive imperialism” in poetry slam.

First, in this performance, ‘taking up space’ was not a radical intervention; it was not a pushing back against the poet’s own marginalization in other spaces, as they did not speak from their own experiences. Instead, it was a kind of assumption of a colonial entitlement to space, to speak, and to speak for. Though they may have been “given permission” to sing chantsong and though they mentioned the colonial history of Hawai’i, by not engaging with the tensions of using the same songs their ancestors would have criminalized and silenced, the poet erased ongoing histories of colonialism. By drawing on chantsong from far away Indigenous nations but not naming “the Indigenous lands they most definitely occupy,” this poet reinforced white settler entitlement to colonized space and to colonized knowledges. The way the poet spoke of others’ struggles was more of a bolstering of their own mystical artistry and less of a political entreaty to listening ears. They occupied that space with their white settler body and drew on the voices of
others, but also, crucially, remained silent about the tensions and connections between the ongoing colonization that facilitated their white body having access to that stage and to the Indigenous voices from which they took. In this way, the poet’s mobilization of the space reinforced ongoing colonial relations of power.

Second, and perhaps most indicatively of how the *practices* of the space did not successfully carry out *intentions* for decolonial space-making, the audience was largely complicit in the poet’s appropriation and colonial occupation of the stage. We snapped and listened and applauded politely. We did not boo the poet. Many participated in a *heads or tails* game the poet created which had us mimic colonial currency with our bodies. I participated – after the poet called us three times to stand and join the display, I participated too (Christine did not), and I was uncomfortable doing so. The audience’s participation in the practices of the space and in the poet’s games condoned the poet’s appropriation and silences. Beyond a land acknowledgement, intended counternorms of decolonial space-making were not made explicit or normalized through other ritualized practices. That evening’s space-making, through the poet’s performance and the audience’s complicit routine participation, reproduced colonial assumptions of a right to space and a right to extract culture when convenient and beneficial to settler bodies. This space-making was not resistant, but colonial. What does it mean when participating in slam rituals quietly condones this kind of covert colonial violence? When slam-goes only condemn highly *explicit* hate through the practices of the space?

**Consolidating decolonial space by challenging complicity**

Holding these tensions in mind, I turn to the ways in which another feature poet upturned these same practices to unsettle the audience and expose the complicity of privileged white settler bodies. Bashar Lulu Jabbour, a Syrian spoken word artist, was the feature poet for the November
2016 slam, which was a fund- and awareness-raiser for the End Immigration Detention Network. The way Bashar raised his voice towards space-making, and the way he unsettled the comfort in the room was so captivating and destabilizing that I felt uncomfortable writing in my research log until each poem came to an end. In one corner of my journal, I scrawled: “most palpable transformation of the space I think I’ve ever felt.” Despite claims to safety, participants explained that much politicized poetry at the Peterborough slam seeks to unsettle hearers, destabilize our assumptions, and pull us out of comfortable complicity. Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue that decolonization and anti-racism can only be violent pursuits – meaning not physical violence, but the violence of making settler whiteness uncomfortable, strange, and hyper visible (echoing Melo 2015). This motive to compel white (or other privileged) discomfort is evident in Bashar’s performance. Participants recognize unsettling privilege through uncomfortable performances of oppressed positions as a radical part of slam, and as such, disrupting the security of privilege is critical to making a politicized, decolonial, anti-oppressive space. Below, I share an excerpt from one long piece Bashar performed broken up with explanations of how he manipulated the practices of the space. This excerpt shows several critical ways in which Bashar’s performance re-purposed and challenged slam practices and counternorms.

There’s 6 million refugees, Syrian refugees externally
9 million internally
There’s 25,000 here, building home
But the way the CBC talks about it
It sounds like Canadians have done their part:
We’re done!
We’ve done it.
We have completed our mission
and all Canadians deserve applause

20 Website [www.endimmigrationdetention.com](http://www.endimmigrationdetention.com)
All I hear is applause
All I hear is applause

At this point in the poem, Bashar began clapping slowly and loudly as he spoke – each clap a sharp disruption of expected sounds, a stark punctuation of the ways in which complicity works to silence marginalized voices. He continued, clapping slowly and loudly throughout what follows:

What are you applauding yourself for?
You are filthy rich
And the filthy rich have always wanted to play god
And the gods have always demanded applause
and you love applause
All I hear is applause
All I hear is white noise
Drowning out our cries
Drowning out the truth
That we did not come here to be with you
We are here because there was a fire under our feet
And a growl in our stomach
We are a broken people
Do you applaud our brokenness?
Do you applaud to wash out the taste of guilt on your lips?
Does this white noise help you sleep?
Do you dream of white-on-brown-skin embraces. Airport hugs and smiles?
CBC, light, camera, action
Applause
Hands  Clapping away the truth:
60 million refugees worldwide
And you  Are filthy rich
You have played god with our lives
And you applaud to drown out the truth
Will you
for a brief second [clapping stops]
Stop [silence]
and sit
with the truth, the silence [silence]
Here, Bashar stopped clapping and held an elongated silence. Our ears, just becoming accustomed to the dissonance and interference of his loud clapping, were unprepared for this long stretch of uncomfortable silence. The small mammal hairs on my arms and neck shot up in uncertain alertness, and I grew restless as the stillness of the room made me feel that my movements and breathing were completely exposed. He let the speaker static saturate the room for a moment before continuing on, all the while holding open more of these dissonant silences:

Will you sit with it longer?
Will you take the truth home with you?
Will you take it to your family?
Will you tell your family about my family who have become refugees?
If I were to tell you their names, would you remember them?
Would you say them like they are a fire in your belly?
Would you say them like, if they were to die, you wouldn’t eat for a week?
Would you try? [silence]
Would you try to say their names with me tonight like they were your family
Like they were your next door neighbour?
Would you say their names like they are a fire in your belly? [silence]
Peterborough, I don’t hear you. [soft yes, snaps]
Would you say their names with me? [louder: yes]
I still don’t hear you. [Loud: Yes!]

The longest silence was held after the first few of these questions. The audience did not understand that Bashar was not asking rhetorical questions, as many poets do. Instead, he called on us to speak, to raise our voices and join his performance, to break our own silences. It took many lines for us to first realize what he was asking of us and to then draw our voices out beyond embarrassed, self-conscious murmurs. My own voice at first was an uncertain whisper, my vocal chords felt dry and unprepared as they do in the first light of morning. In this moment that seemed less like a performance and more like a despairingly yearned-for intervention, Bashar elicited our
voices and conjured a momentary solidarity in sound. He continued; this time we were prepared
to raise our voices, though no more comfortably:

My family is in Kitchener
My family is in Germany
My family is in the Netherlands, in Sweden, in Lebanon, in Turkey
My family is in Syria
And they need to hear you tonight

Will you say their names with me like they are a fire in your belly? [Yes!]
You don’t need to say them right, you just try. Ok?
Abbad [softly: Abbad]
I don’t hear you. [Abbad!]
Abbad [Abbad!]
Zayana [Zayana]
Osama [Osama!]
Rana [Rana]
Ali [Ali]
Ruba [Ruba]
Nura [Nura]
Hadi [Hadi]
Julad [Julad]
Hashim [Hashim]
Hashim [Hashim]
Hashim [Hashim]
Hashim. [Hashim]

This excerpt shows three ways in which, for a moment at least, Bashar unfurled the slam’s
normalized terms of engagement in a way that compelled discomfort: (1) he built long,
uncomfortable silences into the room; (2) he used applause within the poem, from the wrong
place (the stage) and at the wrong time (during the poem); and (3) he made the audience speak at
the wrong time and not within the comfortable scripted idioms of slam.

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21 Bashar Lulu Jabbour, transcribed excerpt from their performance at the EIDN Slam, November 2016. A tension
that I still hold is that, though we spoke these names, I did not feel any confidence in writing them correctly. I
thought about omitting their names, but Bashar’s plea – “You don’t need to say them right, you just try. Ok?” –
made me reconsider.
By speaking from painful and difficult experiences and calling out white settler Canadian privilege, Bashar’s words explicitly disrupted whiteness and its colonial power over ‘Other’ bodies, but by disrupting the ritualized practices of the space in this way, he also conjured a deeply unsettling and pedagogical space of discomfort which also enacted intended decolonial counternorms (Regan 2010; D. Lee 2011). In his analysis, Bashar flipped the gaze onto white silence and white noise, but he also materially exposed white silence/noise in the room by making uncomfortable one of the typical practices of audience noisemaking (applause), and by forcing the audience out of silence by drawing our voices out to wrap our clumsy English-speaking tongues around the names of his loved ones who are displaced around the world. He crafted very long silences and then called the audience out to speak: hesitant, uneasy voices (mine included) desiring to hold onto the same comfortable silence that silences others. He flipped the power of that silence in the room and turned it onto complicity, making it uncomfortable instead of placating. He called on audience members to speak not well-known slam-chants, but unfamiliar names of those whose bodies and voices could not be in that room. Bodies who do not have access to that space. Resonating with Melo (2010), he made the power, privilege, and complicity in that room not only hypervisible, but also hyperaudible, and he did this by perverting the normative terms of engagement and by flipping the expectations of ritualized practices. Rather than “making [whiteness] strange” by spectacularizing white bodies (Ibid.), he made the space and its practices strange in a way that exposed privilege and complicity. Like Chávez’s

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22 Not all audience members present were white or first language English speakers, but many were and these were the voices he was calling out of complicit silence.

23 Silence is often used for dramatic effect, though because of the three minute time limits often imposed on poets, these silences are brief in comparison to Bashar’s performance. One exception would be in a performance that K described to me. At nationals one year, a woman of colour poet decided to opt out of the competition to protest the organizing committee’s complicit support of a man who had abused her. Her team mates, also in protest, performed a team piece that comprised three minutes of absolute, unflinching silence.
“ecstatic space,” Bashar challenged some of the norms of the space, but challenging those norms actually allowed him to produce some of the intended counternorms of the space. When the piece finally broke, after he held us all for so long, the audience still applauded and cheered, but there was a self-consciousness to it. I felt uneasiness in clapping, in my white body, my settler-citizen applause. In certain ways, for those who hold certain marginalized social locations to assert their survival and even raise their voices inherently threatens the comfort and security of those in more privileged locations whose ignorance is structured and whose privileges are invisibilized by workings of power (Leonardo and Porter 2010). This threat to comfort can be productive as a politicizing tension can consolidate the space as one of resistance, as one that challenges power. At the same time, this politicizing discomfort works against “safe space,” especially since audiences are not ‘set up’ to receive these performances.

In the first feature example, appeals to decolonial space were challenged not only in the poet’s performance, but also in the audience’s participation in the ritualized practices of the space. In the second, appeals to decolonial space and counternorms of creating space for marginalized voices were re-produced and consolidated by upsetting the ritualized practices of the space. These examples show how certain practices and claims to space are not always compatible, and how the space is made, unmade, and remade in complex ways. Notably, neither of these two feature sets felt comfortable or, as such, particularly “safe” – in the following chapter I explore some of the other ways in which, against intentions of safety, discomfort is productive.

Consolidating/challenging safe(r) space: Trauma/resilience

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24 Much like the poets do, I include a content warning: this section includes excerpts of poems that speak about sexual and gender-based violence, attempted suicide, eating disorders, and other experiences of trauma with evocative language.
This section explores some of the complexities in how appeals to safety are consolidated and challenged through performances of trauma and resilience. Participants described performances of trauma as making both emotional and safe space: these performances reinscribe the slam as a space which values and welcomes open expression, and where people can feel safe and uncensored in expressing that which would be silenced in most public forums. At the same time, these expressions reinforce graphic illustrations of trauma. Resilience poetry, on the other hand, is not well acknowledged or celebrated as part of doing safe(r) space, and yet it can work to nourish comfort and confidence in listeners. This section introduces these conflicting practices by examining how performances of trauma and care work in space-making. In Chapter 6, I further interrogate the practice of trauma poetry by considering how listeners experience it.

**Trauma**

This poem is for all of the people that have lived through abuse
This poem is dedicated to those of us that have had a piece of us taken without consent
This poem is for those of us who are still fighting every day
To take it back
To take back the touch that haunts us
to take back the vote that silenced us
To take back the time that our flesh and bone was torn in broad daylight
with watchful eyes [...]  
This poem is for those who did not survive
For those of us whose names we remember in the middle of the night
Names soaked by sweat
Names that are untouchable
Names that are now safe

- Sally Goodwin, poem (unknown title)\(^{25}\)

Sally’s poem, excerpted above, is an illustrative example of a “trauma poem”: a poem which refers to experiences of trauma, but also evokes that trauma by curating uncomfortable

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\(^{25}\) Sally’s poem actually straddles trauma and care. The poem continues: “This poem is for those who remain nameless / But never forgotten / I say to you this: I love you / I am here / You are here / And I hear you.”
language and imagery. Trauma poems draw on and depict experiences that are stigmatized, usually speaking about sexual violence, domestic abuse, eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, and more. Sharing these poems is a regular practice at the Peterborough slam, and giving voice to these oft silenced experiences is considered as part of what makes the slam space radical. But what most poets described as trauma poems do not simply engage with or draw on experiences of trauma; they also depict this trauma vividly, bare it incisively and in detail, or illustrate it viscerally through disturbing metaphors. By speaking trauma explicitly like this, poets make it unavoidable. Sharp, distressing illustrations of experience saturate the space; poets spit bright and harsh imagery into the microphone; couplets of blood and death, bones and flesh, survival and suffering reverberate through the small space, propelled by the Spill’s mighty sound system. These foster a different kind of affective environment and these affects manufacture discomfort in the space, discomfort which may or may not be pedagogically productive, as in the example of Bashar’s poetry (Boler 1999; Regan 2010).

Participants were of two minds as they spoke of this slam idiom of trauma poetry. Several suggested that making it possible to voice such highly stigmatized and silenced experiences is part of the radical potential of the space-making. But many participants also held some uncertainty around these kinds of poems, around how they shape the space, and around the motivations for speaking these words repeatedly into the mic. Jon described the idiom of trauma poems as crucial possibility that the slam spatializes: “You hear people very eloquently and beautifully describing tragic and horrible and dark things … The fact that the community holds space for that where other places don’t […] there’s something special about that I think.” Here, Jon speaks about how critical it is that the slam “holds space” for this kind of expression, however
dark it may be. Almost all participants – Jon, Niambi, K, Bennett, Tammy, Beth, Sally – specifically mentioned trauma poetry, questioning how it shapes the space at poetry slams.\textsuperscript{26}

One particular trauma poem filled my participant observation notes and was brought up by several participants. A poet shared this poem at slam after slam throughout 2015 and 2016. The poem repeats a particularly graphic line\textsuperscript{27} about sexual violence throughout the poem along with other vividly painful descriptions, elaborations, and metaphors of horrific sexual violence. Since mid-2016, this poet has stopped sharing this poem, but for many consecutive months they repeatedly uttered those words from the stage. I return to this poem in Chapter 6, but here this poem offers just one illustration of the many ways in which trauma and violence are conjured monthly on stage, normalizing expressions of personal trauma and violence in ways that can be freeing for ‘survivor’ poets while also normalizing and perpetuating violent depictions.

While the above example illustrates the repetition of performances of trauma, this following example indicates the prominence of such performances of pain in space-making. The following poems were all shared at a Week Without Violence open mic that the Collective held in October 2016. The team for that year – Jasher Guiel, Niambi, and EJ – were collectively the feature set for the evening. The table show an excerpt from one of each of their poems shared that evening.

\begin{table}[h]
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Jasher Guiel:} \\
I would carve into the coffin that he had fashioned for me \\
and I found these words would leap and break \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{26} Tammy has even written and performed a poem called “I don’t want to write trauma poems anymore.” She described how she needed that outlet at first, and how her pieces kept “resonating” with trauma even when she did not want them to. Since, though, she has shifted and grown as a poet and a person, and has decidedly moved away from depicting trauma.

\textsuperscript{27} In order to not reproduce the violence of this poem, I do not repeat the line here.
would heal the feeling parts of me that felt my trachea being pressed inside
wrote terrors where I predicted a ditch ending
or a swamp burial
would be the finale to the silent film that I was in.

**Niambi Leigh:**

This is for all the times I did nothing but eat.
Desperately trying to fill the empty inside of me,
I am running out of ways to convince myself I actually want to be here […]
You’d say it was a lie if I ever told you *how* many times I tried,
How many nights I took too many pills when sleep wouldn’t sit still
Wine glasses didn’t fill fast enough to flood the cracks, the cold seeped in.

**EJ:**

So he bought this fucking slaughterhouse, and we moved in
spread our love around bloody tables, decorated hooks
moved our bed around to find just the right spot
The killroom floor became our nest.

We slumbered under the hooks that once hung beasts for draining. […]
I tried to warn him that I was a slaughterhouse parading around as a bungalow
I show him small pieces of the past
I showed him where the blood ran, where it drained

These three segments are hardly the most explicit of the trauma poetry that I have heard at the slam, but they showcase certain aspects of the practice of trauma poetry. Each of these three poets have been “successful” at slams: they have each won slams and earned the points necessary to represent Peterborough on the team more than once. Two of those poets, Jasher and EJ, have shared at least one ’trauma poem’ each of the many times that I have observed them at a slam. I also witnessed both of their very first performances on the slam stage, and each performed graphic poems about sexual violence. Scoring tends to entrench this kind of poetry by perpetuating its performance – poets repeat these poems again and again to hone their performance or to gain access to more spaces to share these poems by making the team – but also the prevalence and repetition of uncensored trauma poems normalizes and consolidates violent, explicit expressions in the space.
The trend of high scoring for trauma poetry could have something to do with the limits for audience engagement outside of practices of scoring, cheering, and snapping: given that options for audibly/visibly validating poet’s experiences confine the audience to cheering, snapping, or scoring, judges might give high scores to express support (it is not necessarily comfortable to hoot for someone’s experience of violence). Relatedly, judges might offer high scores because they fear that lower scores might invalidate or even revictimize the poet. Judges also might offer high scores because these kinds of expressions of pain hold deep resonance with their own experiences. Regardless of the motivations, the high scoring of trauma is somewhat of a phenomenon in the slam.

Trauma poetry is not an explicitly named practice of the slam, though the trigger warning does imply it; it is not directly mediated through the rules or the structure, though the audience’s reception of trauma is suggested in the host’s announcements of “poetry brings the feels” and “do what you need to do to take care of yourself.” Though it is not a formal practice, in its repetition and in the ways that scoring reproduces this kind of performance, trauma poetry becomes a ritualized part of space-making. It becomes a genre of performance that new poets take on and one that is tacitly understood as a part of the slam. Opening space to expressing trauma, in some ways, is possibly transformative in creating space to voice the unvoiceable. At the same time, the high scoring of trauma poems not only reproduces the sharing of ever more graphic and personal experiences, but also normalizes and celebrates this kind of engagement in the space. This in turn

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28 This phenomenon is heightened at national competitions, where the level of competition, and thus theatricality, is amplified. Beth spoke to this phenomenon, raising questions about the motivations of certain performances of trauma poems: “At the national level ... the competition stopped being about poetry itself. It was more of, how traumatizing is your story? How dramatic did you say it? ... It’s very theatrical. ... Because you want the points, you know that this is what will get me the points. Especially in a national competition, half of the time you are just listening to trauma, trauma stories.” As with political poems getting ever more radical, trauma poems in the slam space often seem to get more and more explicit, more and more gruesome or violent or painful.
produces a space where it is safe for the poet to share *anything* without fear of ridicule, stigma, or censorship, but also produces norms of violent expression. I come back to these questions in the following chapter, where I engage with some of the implications of this poetry for listeners. In what follows, I consider this practice of trauma poems against another idiom of poetry at the slam, looking further to what these each produce.

**Resilience**

Inhale deep. Slowly. Breathe. [...] Take a deep breath because death has missed you. Take a deep breath because the sun will kiss you in the morning. The little stray rays of sunlight are performing for you. A symphony, literally, just listen and breathe. [...] You have the power to keep thriving because you have been surviving And you are here. You made it! So why are you not elated? Revel in your triumph. [...] Inhale deep because you, are doing just fine. So inhale deep. slowly. breathe.

- Niambi Leigh, excerpts from “Breathe,” from *NiambiTree*

Sharing resilience poems is a partnered though less acknowledged practice in the Peterborough slam. Participants did not speak of caring or resilience poems, like Niambi’s above, as an almost-genre in the same way as trauma poems; instead, I have grouped and named them as such and they are not a part of the vernacular of the Peterborough slam. Though they were not recognized in the same way, resilience poems were prominent in my observations and in my conversations with poets such as Niambi and Frankie. These are poems that speak love to trauma, that “remind you that breathing is an act of resilience,”[29] that seek to restore bodies, spirit, space, that validate and fill up, that give pause, that work to offer a bit of healing to the tone of the room.

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[29] This quote is from Niambi’s short biography in their chapbook *NiambiTree.*
One poet in particular, Frankie McGee – the “coziest poet in town” who is no longer in town\(^{30}\) – is gifted at offering the room “what it needs” through this kind of poetry. As Jon said, unlike many other poets, Frankie is almost never “swayed” to perform poems that will score best.

Instead, he said that Frankie is “often very tuned into ‘what does the audience need right now?’” in a very admirable way that holds the needs of others over the drive to compete. Frankie, and other poets like Niambi, Sasha, and Ziy, often offer these kinds of critical and (self)caring interventions into space-making. At one slam in 2015, a series of poets had hit the stage with waves of dark and difficult trauma poems. When Frankie stepped up to the stage, poised themselves gently behind the mic, and paused in front of the audience, they offered these words:

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you
are changing the lives of people around you
more than you know
more than you will ever know.
just by existing
you are changing the course of lives
just by persisting through struggle
you are opening up people’s eyes
to the strength of the human spirit
inspiring resilience in the people around you
you see yourself as small and insignificant,
but you are so bright [...] your very existence
is inspiring. Is opening people’s hearts up
is opening people’s eyes
to see themselves more clearly
those nameless faces in the crowd
at a poetry event just like this one
[...] take in what you feel most deeply
and leave behind what you do not
leave this behind if you like
but know you are amazing
and beautiful
and so loved.
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\(^{30}\) Ziy described Frankie in this way at an evening of spoken word and music at the Spill to celebrate Frankie before they moved to Vancouver.
This poem shines a light on the people who feel they are not seen, on the important ways of being that are often invisible. It celebrates and encourages resilience (a favoured word among the Collective), validates struggle, and encourages self-love. With so much poetry about pain, violence, low self-worth, depression, and self-harm, this kind of poem brings a different affect into the space. It speaks not to an audience of slam attendees with score cards and expectations for entertaining rhymes, but to each human in room who is mucking through the uneasy adventure of living, and who will continue moving through the world once they leave. When Frankie and others share these poems, the collective exhale of the room is palpable. In a sense, this kind poetry spatializes safety by reminding us that we have bodies and emotions to tend to, and, simply, that we are each important, beautiful, and worthy of life.

Frankie spoke about sharing this kind of poetry in Peterborough and at National competitions. They explained how it often feels “really important for [them] to share” these words and that they often feel “people really connecting to the work … and responding to it.” They described how many people speak to them in person about how important this kind of poetry is. When I have seen Frankie performing resilience poems, the audience always receives them with many snaps and “hmms” of thought. Yet, as Frankie said, “when I do slam, I don’t score well.” Though Frankie assured that they do not need high scores to know that their work is valued, they questioned why judges do not always reflect this kind of poetry as valuable in their scores. When they competed nationally, many poets personally thanked them for their words, but they came “40th out of 40 poets in the entire competition.” So Frankie’s resilience art is seen and

31 Frankie is also a self-identified soft-spoken poet: another poet said that Frankie is “living proof that you don’t have to shout in order to have something to say.” So, it could be that their quiet way is not seen as competitive.
felt as important to space-making and their words are valued, but scoring practices do not reflect this. This shows an imbalance in the scoring which privileges “theatrical” poetry over poetry “that is needed.” Perhaps more saliently, it shows how the practice of scoring does not necessarily circumscribe or determine the poetry that gets shared, because poets like Frankie resist being controlled by or catering to these practices. Frankie’s subtle refusal to be swayed by scores is not unlike Bashar’s more explicit challenge to the practices of the space: both thwart scripting practices in order to consolidate counternorms of safety/support and decoloniality/anti-oppression, respectively. Though they undermine these routinized practices of the slam, they contribute to the resistant goals of its space-making. They also speak to a more fluid conception of how relations of power and resistance work through these spatializing practices to produce, challenge, and consolidate these counternorms and the larger norms they refute.

The slam scene, then, does not value the practice of resilience poetry, though it might enact intentions of safe space, in the same way as the more enthralling trauma poetry. Performances that elicit discomfort (unsettling depictions of trauma) scores better than those that nourish comfort (resilience poems); this scoring reinforces productions of trauma poetry in the space. Yet, trauma poetry, in certain ways, can work to undermine safe space, while care poetry might work to reproduce or momentarily evoke the space as safe. Again, ritualized practices – trauma poetry, care poetry, and scoring – can both undermine and produce the space as safe, as open, as emotional. These contrasting expressions confront ideas of the slam as safe(r) space by exposing inconsistencies and tensions, but also by revealing the how safe space-making is reproduced and confronted through interrelational performances. I engage further with related tensions in Chapter 6.

**Conclusion:**
In this chapter, I looked closely at performances and audience responses during the slam and the way participants understood these in order to explore how the counternorms of the slam space are reproduced, consolidated, and challenged. Several complexities of the space’s performance emerged from my analysis. First, several of these counternorms are actually conditional: slam-goers might retract their support if performers violate the values of the space, the Collective might impose conditions on the openness of the stage in order to celebrate certain voices. Second, several of these counternorms come into conflict with one another: open expression might confront safety, decolonial performances might disrupt safety. Third, performances that might be understood to reproduce resistant counternorms might also undermine those same counternorms: poets can perform politics to score points in ways that undermine those same politics by reinforcing relations of power, performances of trauma might create a safe space for voicing but also might spatialize violent depictions. Finally, though the “scene” might intend to make resistant counternorms, individuals engaging in space-making can hold conflicting values that challenge these counternorms: audience members might dismiss certain politics by giving low scores, feature poets might reproduce colonialism in their performances, white men might ‘take up space’ on a stage that is not meant for their overrepresented voices thus ‘taking’ that stage from marginalized voices. Overall, and as these contingencies, conflicts, and complexities illustrate, the same set of practices produce and undermine the counternorms of the slam. These practices shape what and how poets and audience members perform (through complicit applause, through supportive or disapproving scoring) in ways that can also consolidate and challenge these counternorms. Different performances, too, can undermine these practices while also consolidating counternorms, or vice-versa. As such, while ritualized, scripted practices and intended counternorms can and do
discipline “on stage” performances, performers’ agency is also tied to the instability of these space-specific norms as much as it is to the broader norms these resist (Chazan 2015), as in the examples of performers manipulating or circumventing practices. Also, I have explored how space-making performances are not simply resistant but can be made as such through specific performances and from different social locations, locations which are significant to how individuals make meaning of the slam space and in turn contribute to its making. Thus, because the slam is animated by such creative performances of subversion, it opens up different possibilities – not necessarily because of the content of these poems (though that is important) but also because of the creative and situated subversion of the space and its norms through the acts of performing poetry, of judging, of applauding, snapping, cheering. In the following chapter, I look at how off-stage space making differently exposes tensions between counternorms, and also at how these tensions themselves can be productive in resistant space-making.
CHAPTER 6

Off stage: Tension and possibility between the rhymes

Each moment presents an opportunity
For honesty that sparks reflection
Honesty that lets us see ourselves better

Be a trendsetter
Say things you mean and see what happens
Unleash kindness on the world
And the ripples of your actions will never end
Lend your voice to others for a moment,
Until they find their own
Send honest words out into the world
Find the honest words of others
Take in what you feel most deeply
And leave behind what you do not

- Frankie McGee, excerpt from “so loved”

Frankie’s excerpted poem above reflects many of the sentiments that I present in this chapter: Frankie connects performance – sharing words, disclosing honestly, lending voice – to ways of relating to others and ways of seeing the world. Frankie’s poem evokes the idea that sharing words thoughtfully reverberates out into the world through relationships and through the ways in which others receive these words. In this chapter, I consider these co-facets to slam performance: how listeners receive words, how people relate to each other during and outside of events, how people carry space-making outside of the slam. I explore how what happens “off stage” – these less visible dimensions that are not expressed through the slam’s structure – also make this space and produce, challenge, and consolidate its norms, further complicating the idea that the host/Collective holds power to intentionally script a certain kind of practice, or that performances of resistance through spoken word can be read outside of their spatial and relational production. By considering the “off stage,” I challenge where performance, or indeed space-making, might end or what its boundaries might be in order to interrogate operations and complexities of power and performance in the social relations surrounding the slam (Gregson and Rose 2000). While in the last chapter I teased out some of the ways in which performances on
stage and by the audience constitute relational consolidating/challenging of counternormative space, here I am interested in the relational space-making that is less apparent during the event. What do these off stage dynamics produce? What does this tell us about power and resistance?

Looking at the off stage as integral to space-making also exposes both workings of power and productive possibilities for resistance. I argue that some of the most resistant possibilities of space-making arise from tension between reputations/appeals to space and individuals’ situated experiences of the slam. Sometimes, these tensions are counterproductive because they drive people to stop attending slams, but they can also spur changes in the slam’s practices, enrich relationships, extend critical perspectives on power and space-making, and encourage poets to create more counternormative spaces. Importantly, poets and audience members articulate these spatialized possibilities outside of the slam’s ritualized practices: as such, a bounded focus on the possibilities of spoken word performances would miss how these space-making practices also challenge/consolidate norms, how spoken word performances are inextricable from and extended within social relations, and what possibilities are carried out from space-making. Thinking spatially and thinking expansively about all of these processes and performances as space-making, then, opens up different considerations of the workings of power and possibility. This space-making produces resistant possibilities – though not all the appeals to the slam space can be ascribed to a static space, they can be made, reproduce, consolidated, reimagined, and challenged through this dynamic, relational space-making.

This chapter draws primarily on participants’ narratives of their personal experiences of the slam, on their narratives of the organizing and relationships surrounding space-making, and also on my observations of my own experiences. I begin by setting the parameters of what I take as the “off stage,” how the slam’s structure mediates what is kept to the off stage, and why
examining the off stage is important to thinking about how the space is made, consolidated, and challenged. Following this, I consider the different tensions that participants described in their (or others’) sense of safety as listeners. Next, I illustrate some of the possibilities that emerge when audience members draw from such experiences of dissonance to kindle dialogue with the Collective. Finally, I examine participants’ narratives of their shifting roles and perspectives of space-making, looking at how, as they become more engaged in organizing, their own experiences of tension enhance and refine their critical perspectives on power and resistance in space-making. As part of this, I look to how both the tensions and possibilities of slam encourage poets to carry their voices, critical perspectives, and resistant space-making out from the slam.

The “off stage”

As I explained, the ways of engaging during the slam are quite scripted: apart from the times when the mics are off, when one is in that space their expressions are organized by structure (through the host’s script), are timed (for open mic-ers and slammers), and/or are scripted through ritualized and accepted audience engagement (chants, cheers, snaps, and scores). Within this structure and at the time of research, the Collective has not created formal opportunities to consider or discuss with audience members how the space is working for them, and those who choose not to share poetry are limited to chants and break-time conversations. Outside of the physical/temporal moment of the slam, the Collective members participate in space-making by organizing events, making decisions about how to run the slam, and more. These are the off-stage components of space-making: the experiences of the slam that cannot be expressed during the event; the organizing that might take place elsewhere but that determines the structure, practices, and scripts of the slam; the relationships that run through space-making but might only be
explicitly picked up at the break or over email days later; and the other events, workshops, and spaces that poets animate and that are intricately tied to the slam.

Here, I elaborate a bit more in thinking about who is and is not heard at the slam, how silence is structured, and how silence might confront the space’s counternorms before delving into the arguments of the chapter. Recalling a line from Ziy’s poem excerpted in Chapter 1 – “the most radical thing we could do tonight / is bend our ears toward the mic / and listen” – listeners are a key part of making resistant or “radical” space. K, too, described listening as the most important part of what the slam makes possible: “More than performing, more than anything it’s about the listening. And the listening together. Coming back around from the active forms of resistance versus passive forms of resistance, is that listening is one of the most underrated forms of political resistance. And that’s almost more than the poetry itself, the people listening to poetry.” Yet, the structure of the space does not facilitate being heard in the experience of listening; that is, there is no public dialogue about how listeners experience the space and its poetry. In considering a space that is focused on being heard and using voice, it is worthwhile to think more about those who never set foot on stage. Two participants – Christine and Bennett – and I have never shared poetry at a slam. I return to some of the ways Christine and Bennett spoke to their experiences throughout this chapter, but here, I reflect on my own position and silence in that space as my role shifted from regular audience member to researcher. These reflections complicate thinking about the workings of power and silence in the space, and also about how position, role, social location, and relationships shape how different people experience and participate in space-making.

At first, I thought there was a relatively simple relationship (positive correlation) between who is more audible and who has more power in defining the slam space. This, of course, was a
much too simplistic (and structural) reading of how power is at work in relational space-making, and this early reading was challenged for me personally in several ways. Well before any thought of engaging in research with this community entered my mind, I was a regular attendee of slams. I was enthralled by the slam, but had no interest in sharing on stage: I marvelled at the courage and openness of slammers and balked at the vulnerability and exposure of the stage. Sharing my voice, for me, would have been disempowering – my comfort and composure lay in quiet, off-stage appreciation and raucous cheering.¹ This opted-for silence was an expression of agency on my part. Later, when I first began observing slams as part of this research, my access to power shifted and my silence expressed a different agency. My silence became linked to my position as a researcher who entered that space in order to observe it.

Two interactions with Collective members raised these layers of my silence in different ways. First, at one slam Ziy told me that the Collective had had trouble finding a host for that night. Ziy had suggested to Jon that he ask me, but Jon replied that such participation might disrupt the “objectivity” of my research. Ziy replied to Jon that there is no objectivity in slam, that you can only consider slam by being in it, and that the slam is “all relationships” anyway.² As Ziy jokingly relayed this exchange to me, I thought about how Jon, and possibly others, understood my silence and my distance from the stage as a move to some sort of objective investigation of the slam or to some search for pristine knowledge and data. Another moment came when I

¹ Ziy questioned whether “introverts” would feel comfortable about certain slam elements: “I’m an extrovert. So I feel comfortable because... people are coming up to me and talking to me, or they want me to speak. They ask me to do things. But, if you’re an introvert [...] and people are, like, asking you to be a judge that might not make you feel comfortable.”

² As discussed in Chapter 2, Ziy regularly subverted such perceptions of my ‘authority’ and ‘objective distance’ as a researcher by pulling me up on stage to join in group performances, playfully flipping language of objectivity and such on me in our interview and in conversations, and in other subtle ways. Ziy’s irreverence for objectivity was a persistent, lighthearted reminder of my own biases, power, and interpersonal dynamics that shape this work.
arrived at a different slam and a Collective member (who did not do an interview) was sitting at the table. Without waiting a beat, the poet asked me, “Are you going to share something with us tonight?” I politely evaded the question, muttering something about how I had been trying to work on something to share about the research, but it was not ready yet. The poet jumped in, “You can share anything; it doesn’t have to be finished.” I declined again. Joking with a dash of seriousness, the poet said, “Ok, well if you’re going to be doing all this research you’d better put out for us too.” I found my seat and very self-consciously scribbled down the exchange in my research journal. Here, this Collective member perceived my choice not to share as a power move, as a refusal to make myself vulnerable. In many ways my silence was a refusal, though one motivated not by a pursuit of “objective research,” but rather by my own general discomfort with sharing. My motivation, though, does not negate the power I do hold as a researcher, and my ongoing decision not to share entrenches this power. This very work enables me to have a “voice” in how the space is made without sharing in the vulnerability of slamming.³

My position of course is an unusual one, but there are many others who participate in the slam without ever having their voices amplified (and without the outlet of research).⁴ Even poets have to address concerns about space-making through their poetry or become a Collective member to have an influence on the slam’s structures and practices. While there have been some attempts to shift practices in order to make space for feedback (the Collective had planned a “talk

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³ I later went to a workshop led by the same Collective member, which was very vulnerable making for me, since it involved sharing my own writing, though in a smaller group. The Collective member was supportive of my discomfort, while also pushing me to share.

⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, my research largely reproduces this imbalance of who is heard since I mostly interviewed poets.
back” session for August 2016), such plans for feedback fell by the wayside.\(^5\) Sasha spoke about how dialogue with audience members is crucial to organizing, yet previous efforts to open this kind of dialogue have met resistance from other Collective members in the past. Sasha explained:

> You can ask your audience what they need and what they want and I think that’s where we’re moving towards. But it’s taken a lot, a lot, of nudging and poking and a lot of people leaving the Collective and stopping to organize for that to happen…. That’s part of what an accountable space is. Asking everyone involved what they need to feel safe or what could be done.\(^6\)

According to Sasha, without information from and dialogue with the audience about how the space is working, any attempts to enact counternormative space are fairly superficial. The Collective recognizes, then, that facilitating dialogue with the audience around how listeners experience the space could nourish more meaningful space-making, yet the structure nevertheless inhibits this dialogue.

The structure of the slam constructs and reproduces silences around audience experience, and it is only those who have found comfort in sharing on stage who become Collective members, organize slams, and directly shape this structure. Niambi spoke about how the slam structure specifically inhibits dialogue around the politics, experiences of oppression, and other issues that poets raise through poetry. They described a disconnect between the sharing on stage and the listeners in the audience:

> I feel like a lot of issues and conversation are broached on or brought up in poems and then are just left at that. There isn’t space for those conversations to be had or those issues to be addressed or really for people to come together and be more of a community aside from being encouraged to get up on stage and share.

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\(^5\) At the time of research, the Collective was working towards hosting this “talk back session” to account for this gap. For many reasons (some which are not known to me) this session has yet to take place. K described how this kind of session was a regular part of the slam in the early years, so that making of the slam space used to be regularly democratized through these kinds of gatherings.

\(^6\) Change stalled by certain collective members, recalling the discussion of changing practices around feature poets. Add methodology note about how explicit interpersonal politics were often talked around, and I did not pry.
And that’s another thing, it’s like the only way we have of doing that is to encourage somebody to … write a response poem and do it at the next slam, but that’s like a month later.

For Niambi, the structure of the slam generates this division, which also works to close off possible conversations that could be politically generative. They explained how the way of responding that the structure does allow – sharing a response poem at the next slam – is a limited option that does not easily facilitate dialogue. So, audience members can evaluate poetry through applause and scoring, but the structure does not facilitate engagement with the ideas and feelings that the poetry evokes. In these ways, the practices that structure ways of relating in the space and the artificial division between stage and audience inhibit relational structures that might better facilitate space-making that considers many ways of experiencing the slam.

These persistent, structured silences around audience experience also raise questions about how productive resistant space-making might be. In reflecting on the unknowns around audience reception beyond scores and cheers, Frankie and Christine wondered about the actual impacts of intentions towards politicized and decolonial space. They both spoke about how not hearing from the audience means that the assumed effects of these space-making practices for most slam-goers are largely unknowable. Frankie wondered about the audience’s reception of resistance poems. Though these tend to score well, it is hard to know what audience members take away from those words:

Using spoken word as a tool to share with the community, ‘this is what is happening in our community and it’s really unjust and there needs to be action taken now.’ It’s hard to say how many people listen to that and then go home and

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7 Niambi went on to describe how poets have to take responsibility for what they raise with their poetry and how they raise it: “I also think it’s the poet’s job to be careful about what they are bringing to their audience. If you know you’re going to say something that’s going to trigger or make an audience member feel a certain way, you should be willing to make space for them to have conversations with you about it or to acknowledge the feelings that you’ve stirred up with them.”
research it, or take any sort of action, but the fact that those stories are being shared is really important I think.

From Frankie’s perspective, the unknown reception does not make these spoken politics less important, but it does raise a curiosity about what these poems produce among the listeners.

Christine expressed similar uncertainty about what the land acknowledgement does for slam-goers: “I always wondered about the introduction around indigeneity, and really how far does that go with people and what does that really mean? Especially to the audience. What does that mean to the audience?” These discursive practices certainly “have affect,” as Jon argued, but what that affect does and what it looks like for attendees is not very knowable as the slam is currently organized. When these unknowns hang in the air, appeals to space and counternorms cannot necessarily reflect what is produced relationally. The naming of the space, then, in some ways is disconnected from the people that animate space-making.

The gap in hearing from most attendees who never cross the stage is curious, particularly since, as discussed in Chapter 5, several poets tied their own feelings of safety in the space to feeling heard, and also since audience participation is integral to producing the slam and its experience. How might audience members (and even poets) be heard in the making of the space? What might unheard audience members’ accounts challenge about space-making? How can the space be named as safe(r), supportive, anti-oppressive, etc. without knowing how most actually experience that space? Everyone experiences the slam differently and from different positions, and slam-goers reflect this in their poetry and their scoring and cheering, but how could the community bring these different experiences into shaping and democratizing the structure of slam and not just its poetry?

**Revealing tension: Audience experiences of safety**
social conventions hold sway, but beyond
not wanting to over-step the boundaries of consent
wanting to stay respectfully in place
behind the line of others’ discomfort
social conventions seem silly, and hey
consent isn’t built into our social conventions anyway
what about building new ones
what about asking first
making space for people to keep their space
hoping this will help people feel safe to say no
help those who need to not be touched
keep boundaries drawn
stay safely within comfort

- Frankie McGee, excerpt from “bodies,” in *Love on Fire*

This excerpt from Frankie’s poem recalls the subjectivity and ever-uneasiness of safety, of comfort, and how different people hold their own boundaries. It recalls that there is no uniform recipe for crafting safety, and that comfort is inextricable from relationships and interpersonal exchanges. In this section I tease out some of the tensions around “safety” that listeners’ experiences expose – how practices meant to promote safety can be inaccessible, how safety can be threatened by making the slam an uncensored space – while also considering what audience silence around such tensions might produce. I draw here on Kafer’s (2016) thoughts on “un/safe disclosure.” Kafer argues that disclosure of trauma is always “un/safe” because of the conflict between the safety possibly produced for the discloser and the violation of safety possibly produced for the listener. As such, Kafer contends that “safety is precisely the wrong frame” for these conversations because safety’s impossibility produces vulnerabilities, and instead frames trauma disclosures and trigger warnings as accessibility issues (Ibid., 12). Much in the way that Kafer argues claims to safety elide the potential hazards of disclosure, the silence around slam-listeners’ experiences of receiving “un/safe disclosures” along with reputations of safe space can reproduce vulnerabilities.
The practices that the host’s script opens up as ways for the audience to exert agency over their safety – trigger warnings, coping practices (“do what you need to do”) – are not necessarily viable or effective for everyone. Despite the Collective’s intention to normalize these different ways of managing disclosures of trauma, several participants raised concerns about whether people could really feel comfortable practicing these and, as such, whether they could feel safe at the slam. Sasha explained that how the venue is physically organized might inhibit audience members from taking up the host’s offer to “leave if they need to.” Sasha pointed out how the positioning of the Spill’s only exit right by the stage makes people highly exposed if people do choose to leave. This “makes it hard, if you are having a hard time, to leave, because our events usually have a lot of audience, have a lot of people attending them, it makes it even more difficult.” This tension in the unease of leaving is not made explicit in the host’s script. While the physical organization of the venue plays a part, normalizing ways of moving through that space might require more than naming them as possible (for example, to my memory I have never witnessed a Collective member leave during a poem and it is rare for anyone else in that space to leave mid-poem). Bennett spoke about how, as an employee of the venue, he does not have the same access to these coping practices and thus to “safety,” especially since “everybody in the room except for [him] is there by their own choice.” He went on to describe how coping practices are not available to him, which fundamentally disrupts claims to a safe space. Frankie also explained how audience members do not take up individual conversations with Collective members around safety: “We always say at slams, ‘if you ever need to talk to somebody afterwards, here’s the collective and you can talk to us,’ or whatever, but I feel like people don’t often take us up on that. … It’s hard to say what the reason for that is.” Though the host’s script names and condones these coping practices, their naming does not make them available,
comfortable, or easy. Personally, I would not feel comfortable leaving or even looking at my phone during a poem, particularly since apt attentiveness is part of the expected performance of that space. By dubbing these as acceptable coping practices without either accounting for the discomfort of engaging in them or modeling them, these practices are not normalized or made tenable, and the discomfort of engaging in them is obscured.

In the context of the questionable comfort of coping at slams, I take up how the uncensored space for open expression that the slam produces, and the repeated expressions of trauma this space normalizes, can also produce discomfort and unsafety. While safety for one might be to share experiences of trauma that are elsewhere silenced, these expressions—especially when detailed and graphic—can render the space untenable for others. This raises the question of what happens when what is ‘safe’ for one person violates the ‘safety’ of another, a tension which fundamentally unsettles the notion of a safe space (or even safer space) by begging the question ‘safe for whom’? (Leonardo and Porter 2010; D. Lee 2011). Complexities of safe space are acknowledged off stage in Collective meetings and other conversations, but this particular question of safeties being in conflict with one another has not been prominent in the narratives shared with me. Recalling Leonardo and Porter (2010) and D. Lee (2011), naming the space as safe without contending with these conflicting safeties might produce vulnerabilities and even violence in the space, while, recalling Kafer, such disclosures can never be “safe,” though this does not mean that disclosure should be stymied.

One example starkly exposes the vulnerabilities that un/safe disclosure in the slam can produce. K, one of the founders of the Peterborough slam, has only been to two or three spoken word events since 2010. After a moment of hesitation, with decided resolve, K told me why they have not been attending slams. They explained candidly that since their own experience of sexual
violence, it has become too difficult to attend spoken word events. In 2010, they tried to attend part of a provincial team competition hosted by the Peterborough Collective, but they could not stay: “There’s always poems about sexual violence, etcetera, but there was one specific poem that was a team piece that [pause] I just, I had to leave.” K emphasized their own desire to support the voices of those who have lived through sexual violence and impressed upon me the importance of a space in which people can speak about these experiences without shame, but K themself, as someone who has also lived through sexual violence, could not be a part of such spaces as a listener. They explained: “It’s the sensory overload… that’s why I couldn’t go to slams anymore, because I wasn’t able to be open, I wasn’t able to listen.” K told me, too, that other Collective members are unaware that K has kept away from slams because, for these reasons, the space is untenable.

K’s story exposes the vulnerabilities of being emotionally exposed or raw in a space that condones and often celebrates visceral portrayals of sexual violence, suicide, eating disorders, and other trauma. In seeking to make the slam a safe (or safer) space, there is an unresolved tension between creating a space to listen to ‘survivors’ (those who have lived through trauma) and creating a space in which ‘survivors’ might feel some safety in listening. An expression of safety for one (sharing, vividly, their story) can confront and possibly preclude the safety of another (listeners, especially those who might be negatively impacted by portrayals of violence).

Though K was the only participant to speak in such explicit terms about being unable to be at slams,8 several others also spoke of the tolls of free expression as listeners and how these are

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8 It is worth noting that K was also one of only three participants who did not attend slams at least semi-regularly at the time of research. There may be other former Collective members with similar experiences, but they are not reflected here.
untenable for certain ways of participating in space-making. It is worth returning to the particularly graphic poem I noted in Chapter 5, which was repeated at many slams over several months, in order to think about the lack of practices or protocols to account for how this graphic poetry affects listeners. Bennett spoke about how he witnessed one table of “regulars” stop coming to the slam because of this poem. As he explained, “You can only listen to trauma for so long … and that [poem] alone has caused people to leave.” According to Bennett, one of the regular audience members spoke to a Collective member at the break, saying, “You gave a trigger warning at the beginning, but no trigger warning prepares anybody for this.” I personally took this poem in multiple times and, resonating with Bennett’s account of how these poems “wear you down,” each time I felt less and less comfortable as my mind anticipated the harsh phrases and gruesome imagery. This poem seems to be designed to unsettle listeners and draw us into the poet’s pain and violation. The poem itself – its words, phrases, and arc – feels violating, even though it also narrates the poet’s partial reclamation of self and agency. There are no practices (outside of the coping mechanisms discussed above) to facilitate processing or speaking back to this kind of expression. With no practice to debrief or process that poem, at the end of the night, attendees might still carry that feeling, those words, with them out into the night. More importantly, the Collective has no way of knowing how audience members carry those poems out from space-making, and whether these performances provoke vulnerability or harm.

This poem, and this audience member’s response, reinvigorated questions among the Collective about the conflict between creating a counternorm of welcoming uncensored expressions of trauma and making the space safer for listeners. Several Collective members expressed apprehension around engaging poets in any way that might close off the free expression of the space or thwart someone’s need for a ‘safe’ space to express that which they
feel unsafe to express in other contexts. The confrontation of those counternorms dissuaded
certain Collective members from responding to this poem earlier, though they have since
encouraged this poet to stop sharing that poem. Being supportive of that poet sharing their story
and using their voice was in tension with the safety of the space, but also any possible
intervention was perceived as prohibiting that poet’s expression rather than contributing to their
learning/growth as a poet while maintaining some expectations for unharmful expression.

These expressions of trauma might produce discomfort, vulnerability, and even harm for
listeners, and as the slam is currently structured, the Collective can only know about these
experiences if audience members are courageous enough to open up those conversations
themselves. Appeals to the slam as a safe(r) space, moreover, tend to collapse or obscure how
destabilizing performances produce such vulnerability and harm (Melo 2009; D. Lee 2011).

Spatializing possibility through off stage dialogue and relations

our intertwined lives are pasted onto this place
the thousands of interactions
that make up our small lives here,
one of peacemaking, kindness
hurt, support, encouragement
and revelation
move with unplanned urgency
at an unpredictable pace
between faces
and hearts
and bodies
we explain the language of our faces, hearts and bodies
to those for whom this doesn’t come easily
and in the process learn more about the language of our hearts
learn better how to speak with kindness
learn better how to see with understanding

- Frankie McGee, excerpt from “our intertwined lives//summer,” in Seasons

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9 At a slam in June 2017, the poet in question shared a poem that they have since written about censorship and
being asked/told to not share their story – a creative way of continuing dialogue and publicly exposing conflict
around these questions.
Audience experiences of discomfort do not take place outside of the “intertwined” social relations that saturate the slam; Frankie’s excerpted poem above captures the depth and delicacy of these relations in the context of disclosure. When audience members do open dialogue, as in the brief example above, they can compel and equip the Collective to shift the slam’s practices. In this section, I look to examples of how Christine, as an audience member, worked around the slam structure and through her own creative outlets and her existing relationships with some Collective members to break these silences around audience experience. She mobilized her experiences of tensions and discomfort to shift the power in behind-the-scenes organizing and to catalyze change, dialogue, and possibility. I also consider two contrasting examples of how feature poets conducted themselves off stage at the slam, and how their ways of relating upheld and undermined the counternorms of the slam.

Before discussing how Christine brought her experiences of tension forward, I want to take a moment to note how participants described the Collective’s processes around managing tensions they perceive in space-making. Collective members recognize different tensions and contradictions of space-making and consider these in their off stage organizing, but they rarely contend with and expose these complexities at slam events. Sasha spoke about how establishing appeals to the slam space (naming it as safe(r), anti-oppressive, welcoming, inclusive etc.) can work against making such a resistant space by “blinding” the Collective and others to such dissonances:

I think that as much as we’ve sort of built that up [safe, no-nonsense space], so now that’s the impression that it gives. That’s what is expected, but it’s not always followed through I don’t think… There’s not always a good sense of what needs to happen for it to be a more accountable space. Because it sort of has a reputation of being an accountable space, I think that gives way to get away with things and not be accountable in certain respects.
Sasha’s words capture how appeals to space, the production and maintenance of the corresponding counternorms, and being accountable to the resistant reputations of the slam are not always aligned. They also express that naming space might contaminate its making: that assuming that a space can simply be safe or anti-oppressive, instead of understanding space as always becoming and created through performance, might obscure workings of power and possibilities for challenging norms. Jon contemplated how the slam is necessarily rife with tension, describing how he feels that contradictions are saturated with possibilities: “Our world is so full of contradiction. I think our work is best when we’re living in those contradictions, you know? And I think it’s most honest when we’re living in those contradictions.” Yet, non-Collective audience members are disconnected from organizing-level conversations around contradictions within the slam. While tensions may be productive, and while the Collective contends with some of these tensions off stage, the silence around them within the slam closes off productive possibilities. But, these possibilities can be reanimated when audience members bring their experiences of contradiction to the attention of Collective members in order to confront the discomfort and dissonance that space-making practices and counternorms can produce. Each example that follows considers how the slam practices produce relationships (or inhibit them) in very specific ways, and also produce space in ways that both challenge and uphold norms. When these audience experiences can be shared (confidently and brilliantly) with Collective members they can be productive in making the space resistant, especially since Collective members are also often steeped in the norms of the space and in their stage-rooted experience and can be disconnected from listener experiences.

Some of the Collective spoke of the discomfort that arises for them when performances confront or transgress the spatialized counternorms. This discomfort is productive because it can
compel changes to how the Collective mediates and carries out the on and off stage practices of the slam. In the example of the appropriative feature poet discussed in Chapter 5, a shift in practice arose from a chain of discomfort and through relationships. In Chapter 5, I drew on Christine’s words to describe what the feature poet performed on stage; here I focus on how Christine narrated her own experiences of that performance, and her interactions with that poet at the end of the slam. The poet’s performance made Christine uncomfortable and she was able to direct her discomfort with that transgression of space-making through her own creative outlet, a blog post, which was then taken up through her established relationships with some Collective members. In our interview, Christine described her first response to the poet’s appropriative performance: “Just, the way it felt, was so… It was shocking, it was confusing. It was like, ‘is this really happening?’” Christine went on to explain how she did not expect this kind of performance from the slam space: “Does this person know where they are?” Christine often encounters this kind of appropriation, but because this performance was part of a space-making that is otherwise comfortable for her and otherwise works towards decolonization, she was both more destabilized and more invested in starting a conversation, so she wrote the piece.

One Collective member saw the post and shared it among other members, influencing a change in practices around inviting feature poets. Jon spoke about how Christine’s piece confronted him with the realization of failure, which was uncomfortable: “It was very beautiful, and it’s very humbling to be told that because we are trying to be better we are, in some respects, better…. Sometimes because we are trying so hard to be better, I think we are more shocked when we fail … to be as good as we want the world to be.” While it was not the first time that a feature poet shared in a way that did not jibe with the politics or expectations of the slam, and not the first time that individual Collective members sought to address concerns around feature poets,
Christine’s piece incited a shift to these practices. It was her discomfort, and her raising of discomfort, alongside the discomfort of Collective members that fed the change. Sasha explained how Christine’s piece supported them in advocating to change this practice:

“It’s setting up that stuff beforehand… We started to do this. I actually wrote a thing that we’re going to send to features before they come saying, “This is our space, this is what we hold in value in our space, and we hope that… your set reflects this and if it doesn’t, we’re going to give you feedback on it!” [laughter]. But it took that audience member writing that letter for some of the folks on the organizing committee to finally get it.

Though, gladly, Christine’s brilliant post and the Collective’s thoughtful receptiveness spurred a shift in the off stage practice of inviting feature poets, it is worth thinking more how the Collective responded to Christine’s blog and the feature set that spurred it. The conversations that flowed from Christine’s piece occurred among the Collective, away from slams, and out of earshot of audience members. There was no engagement with the tensions of that performance at the slams, or on public forums (i.e. the Collective’s social media accounts and website), or any other engagement accessible to the community. There was no statement about that performance or its implicit colonial violence. The Collective responded to Christine’s piece by changing practices for future feature sets, but not by accounting to the community for what had passed. In this way, the Collective kept the messiness of that evening, the messiness of the colonial dynamics subtly and explicitly at play in space-making, to the off stage in a way that eclipsed these tensions from public discussion or indeed from democratization. Yet, these colonial dynamics were not an isolated moment; the feature poet’s performance and Christine’s analysis made these dynamics explicit, but colonial tensions are always already present in space-making on stolen lands. By keeping this dialogue off stage, the Collective lost an opportunity to engage the broader community in uprooting and deconstructing the ways in which colonial dynamics
work through our daily relations, and even through spaces that are meant to resist them. Nonetheless, the shift in practice around feature poets, and indeed all of the related off stage conversations leading to this shift, were generative in further working towards and interrogating decolonial space-making.

This example brings forward the importance of relationships and thoughtful ways of relating to resistant space-making. Interpersonal relationships and relating enhance these possibilities even further, but power is also at work in these relationships. In the fairly small but fluid network of those engaging in the arts and/or activist scenes in this small city, the space of the slam is often saturated with existing relationships, with complex interpersonal dynamics at play among those in the Spill on a slam night. Relationships are not made very evident within the structure of the slam, but they are a dynamic and productive part of (re)forming the space.

This productive possibility of relationships came out particularly in my interview with Christine. In her narrative, Christine did not idealize the slam’s space and indeed raised several questions about its limits, but she did express that she felt enough accountability that feels like a worthwhile and comfortable space-making in which to participate. She explained:

It’s always been a good space for me at the Spill and in that particular community … Anything can happen, but I always certainly felt safe. … I was comfortable because I know so many of the people, kind of the anchors, you know? … So I do feel safe and I feel there’s a measure of accountability.

Christine connected the space’s counternorms (of decoloniality, safety, support) to the ways in which certain people engage in relationship. She spoke about a particular moment at her first slam and the relationship building that followed:
The first time I went to one was, I heard … Ziysah. And she\textsuperscript{10} used … Anishinaabemowin and she made reference to Anishinaabe teachers in her, in her piece. And it was really interesting because I didn’t know how I felt about that. I really struggle with that, and I spent a lot of time thinking it through, all the different pathways that legitimate doing that, or rationalize that, or all the wonderful things that can come from it, or maybe the not so wonderful things when non-Indigenous people use Indigenous language, right?

Though this reflection recalls Christine’s initial unease with how the feature poet appropriated songchant in their performance, Christine explained how this experience with Ziy contrasts\textsuperscript{11} sharply not only because Ziy’s use of Anishinaabemowin was not clearly appropriative, but especially because their dialogue centred on building and deepening relationship. Christine spoke of this dialogue with Ziy as a generative and positive experience:

\begin{quote}
What kind of was so wonderful to me is Ziysah contacted me after. … It’s like she knew, right? … She was like, ‘what did you think about that? I don’t know how that was going to land. I don’t know, I’m still thinking about it myself.’ And she just was wanting to have a conversation with me, not as I’m the expert … but she knew that I was there and she knew – We have a relationship, right?
\end{quote}

For Christine, the conversation with Ziy about their use of Anishinaabemowin was meaningful because of the existing relationship that was nourished and deepened through their dialogue. In this way, making resistant space cannot be abstracted from the social relations within and through which it is enacted. Christine spoke of how that moment with Ziy reflects her broader understanding of the ways in which relationships are key to what the slam generates: “I think that’s what was really important about that poetry community is that it feels like if there’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{10} I left Christine’s words verbatim, though Ziy does not use she/her/hers pronouns.
\item \textsuperscript{11} This contrast lies in Christine’s experience with the feature poet. As Christine described in her blog post, certain members engaged accountably: “About a day and a half after posting this blog, a member of the Peterborough Poetry Collective contacted me via messenger. As suspected, their community is engaged in on-going processes to be and do better in terms of decolonization (my word to describe their work; it may not be the word they use to describe their work). They were thankful for this post and take these matters seriously. I was invited to share any ideas regarding how to attend to some of these issues. I did. I was told that this post and these ideas will be included in their on-going discussions on the work they are doing. So, today, the good, nice relationships continue, the dialogue remains open, and the work, having always been done, shifts ever so slightly. And, so, of course, does poetry” (Sy 2016).
\end{footnotes}
relationships going in, then you can carry whatever happens there out afterwards and you can continue those conversations. And then, it will feed the next slam, or the next six, or whatever, right?” Christine saw her own relationship with Ziy and the broader matrix of relationships enmeshing the slam space as generative and essential to how space is made and to what the space can produce. The shortfalls that Niambi perceived in dialogue being stunted through the structure of the slam, then, are circumvented in these kinds of relationships.

These ways of relating do not manifest only through conversations about poetry, but also through the more subtle ways people conduct themselves in the slam. Speaking again about her first slam, Christine described how her positive feelings of the space were associated with body language and nonverbal cues of respect and kindness: “Just facial expressions, the way people carry themselves, the way people came and talked to me and my friend. Just really engaged in meaningful conversation, eye-contact, right? Like, kindness, right?” Christine not only connected this kindness to her own comfort and enjoyment, but also linked this subtle conduct to intentions of a decolonizing space: “I felt love and caring there! Just, in general. You know, I watched people: I didn’t feel like this is a white space. I felt like, this is a space where decolonization is happening, where people are trying.” For Christine, these subtle ways of relating in space-making were as much a part of what works towards decolonial counternorms as the explicitly decolonial poetry of people like Ziy, and as such both off stage conduct and on stage poetry are inextricable to space-making.

Other participants did not often or directly discuss this kind of subtle conduct with respect to the slam’s resistant space-making, but conduct can reflect, subvert, or contaminate these expectations of the space. Looking again briefly to the examples of the two feature poets discussed in Chapter 5 offers two contrasting examples of how subtle off stage conduct can
consolidate and challenge resistant space-making. Christine spoke about how the appropriating feature poet showed great disrespect when Christine approached them after their set: “I decided to walk up to her after, just to give it one final thing. And then I knew. Just the way she was with me was like, ‘you’re celebrating this Hawaiian chant person, this Elder … but you’ve got no time for me?’ Just the coldness, right?”

For Christine this poet’s off-stage engagement entrenched the coloniality of the poet’s performance. Tammy also remarked on this poet’s disrespectful and flippant attitude, depicting this as one of her more memorable experiences at the slam:

This particular feature poet… [their] behaviour offstage when other poets were up there was very disheartening to me. On [their] cell phone, and talking and going out for cigarettes and that sort of thing, and sort of being loud. … If you’re such an established, distinguished literary artist or whatever, then maybe you should be a little more respectful of your peers. … I really had a higher level of expectation, especially from a paid feature poet that was coming to our Collective.

Tammy described how this poet’s body language displayed disrespect for the other people at the slam and a lack of interest in listening to the words of others. This poet’s off stage conduct, then, also worked to violate expectations of the slam as a space of respect and as a space where voices are heard.

By contrast, Bashar’s off stage conduct presented an unflinching enthusiasm and support for the other voices that shared on the stage that evening. In particular, my observations from that slam captured a tender moment when a young, queer, migrant of colour poet was slamming for the first time. I had noticed Bashar’s body language throughout the evening as he listened attentively to each poet. When this young poet took to the stage and started speaking, Bashar

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12 Christine also described this interaction in her blog post: “when non-Indigenous poets exoticize, make mysterious, make inaccessible, and use Indigenous cultural forms and knowledges to advance their own art or use tropes to veil their own identity but remain aloof when an Indigenous person stands before them / (at this point, i think i may be exhausted with trying to find evidence that proves colonization is not happening here)” (Sy 2016).
snapped throughout the performance, brimming with what seemed to be genuine enthusiasm. At the break, Bashar sought out the young poet, exchanging what I perceived to be praise, encouragement, and solidarity. Bashar likely did not intend for his conduct to be observed – he was perched at the back of the bar off to the side, eagerly taking in each performance; this conduct was not a part of his on stage performance that evening. Yet, his demonstrations of intent, respect, and validation reinforced the counternorms of the space as one which supports voices, one which makes poets feel heard, and in particular as one which supports marginalized voices.

The slam’s space-making comprises many ways of relating, and many more which I could not capture in this research project. These relations work to contribute to the feelings and reputations of the space, they produce possibilities for space-making, but they also bring attention to tensions in doing relationship which can confront counternorms. Appeals to resistant space might be ascribed to an assumed static space, but this space and its counternorms are enacted through the vibrant, messy, and fluid social relations surrounding its production, which resonates with both Abu-Lughod’s (1986) discussion of the relational production of poetry and Gregson and Rose’s (2000) discussion of the relational performance of space. Ascribing resistant intentions to a static and abstracted conception of space obscures how relationships are pivotal to how the space is formed, what the space produces, how space-making is experienced, and what might be carried out from the slam. At the same time, subversions of the slam’s structured silence around audience experience can spatialize possibility and challenge the ways in which appeals to static space eschew how slam-goers’ performances, conduct, relationships, and experiences all contribute to making space. Relationships and relating are, then, a source of instability, possibility, and contradiction for resistant space-making.
Shifting experiences, critical perspectives

Finally, I turn to how Collective member participants explained their experiences of the slam, and how their perspectives on and approaches to space-making have changed through their own experiences of tension and contradiction. I explore how participants described their perspectives shifting from early idealization of the slam to an increasingly sophisticated awareness of power. Then I note some of the ways in which poet-participants carry these learnings out from the slam.

In order to examine Collective members’ shifting perspectives, it is worth thinking about the dynamic between the slam’s impermanence and subjectivity in terms of individuals’ experiences and its persistence as a performed space. While the slam’s performance perpetuates the space and its rituals, participants spoke about their own experiences of the space as always changing. Most participants described how their own experiences of the slam as safe, welcoming, politicized, etc. did not last, especially as they became critically attuned to the tensions of appeals to space and to the ongoing workings of power in space-making. At first, I read this ‘fading magic,’ as Frankie called it, as jaded disillusionment or the slam’s own brand of “activist burnout.” But, more critically, these shifting perspectives can also be read as developing a critical view of space-making not unlike what I have sought to develop in this thesis. Participants described these fading feelings manifesting in disillusionment, dispassion, drained energy, or, sometimes, total discomfort (as with K), but also how these compel them to better make the slam space, or even to make other spaces. This temporariness, or fluidity of individual experiences of the slam, exposes certain ways in which the space is performative since, as Gregson and Rose argue, performance-animated spaces like the slam “can never be thought of as fixed” (2000, 442).
In the narratives shared with me, the most prominent way that temporariness came through was in expressions of a growing critical understanding of how their space-making is imperfect and not simply resistant. Many of the elements that drew participants into the slam—safe, welcoming, politicized space, feeling heard—have faded with time, perspective, and with taking on different roles in space-making. To demonstrate how Collective members adopt less romanticized and more discerning conceptions of space-making as they get more involved in organizing, I describe how the dynamic between critiques of power and easy romanticization came to the fore in the first meeting I held with the Collective. When first proposing the idea of undertaking this research, I sat around a table with five Collective members. Though I was tentative at first to engage critically with the tensions I had already perceived in space-making (and was thus interested in), the longer-standing Collective members almost immediately asked for an inquiry into the ‘safety’ of the space, readily voicing concerns and shortcomings. Tammy, who had just become a Collective member that month, was overcome with emotion. She was still very much swept up in the ‘magic’ of the space, and was devastated to have her idyllic view fractured and complicated by the critical dialogue. Tammy was moved to tears; the other Collective members measured their comments, softening their critiques and offering more context. They explained that, because the space is somewhat ‘better’ than most, it is vital to remain critical. Months later, Tammy spoke about this moment in our interview:

Tammy: Remember when we had that first meeting when we all first met you and I was highly emotional and some of the other poets were really, sort of, talking about how they were just…

Melissa: jaded!

Tammy: Yeah, and slammed out. I was really upset because I was like, “no! This is amazing!” and they’re just in a different place in the scene than I am. So at first, I was really sort of emotionally attached to their responses and I was … especially for these people that I’m looking up to and something I’m newly
getting into, I’m like, ‘what the hell? I thought this was the frigging best thing ever!’

The disconnect between Tammy’s early romanticized experiences and the longer-standing member’s ready analyses punctuates how organizers develop critical analyses of the space, but also how these critiques are born out of enthusiasm about, need for, and investment in the counternorms of the space that, at first, seem unproblematically resistant. Even after those few months between this meeting and our interview, Tammy was offering her own critiques of the space and how it operates. Tammy might not have invested herself in the slam, developed confidence in her voice, and continued to this level of organizing had it not been for her early euphoric experiences; yet, her critical lens has brought her a more sophisticated view of how spaces are made, and also of what possibilities their making holds.

These ways in which Collective members build an understanding of the complexities of power through organizing came through most clearly in the personal accounts of several longer-standing Collective members who also move through the world in queered and/or racialized bodies. Sasha was initially drawn in by the ‘magic’ of counternormative space: “I don’t know if I would think this now, but what drew me into it was people being really genuine with each other and really trustworthy with each other in a public space, which I had not ever really seen or felt before, and when you go into a slam you sort of feel that.” These feelings that drew Sasha in to the slam were critical to their development as a poet, but have since become complicated, though the space is still a “comfortable” one for them. Niambi also qualified their early experiences as impermanent. They explained that the space, at first, offered them sanctuary; then, laughing lightly, they immediately qualified this statement: “maybe not lasting sanctuary.” For Niambi, too, the very pivotal initial experiences of space-making have shifted over the past three years of their involvement with an increasing understanding that any ‘space’ does not exist outside of
relations of power, and that a space cannot simply or unequivocally be safe. Frankie spoke about their experience of slams in several stages of transition and of fading senses and growing responsibility, and connected these changes to the different roles they have held. Initially, they were drawn in by the support they felt and the ways in which their voice as a poet was valued. As they became more confident in their voice, this shifted into a different experience of, and way of engaging in, space-making: Frankie became more focused on how others experienced the space, hoping to make it as welcoming as they felt that it was for them. Frankie loosely linked their perspective on the changes in slam organizing over time to their now mixed feelings of the space:

I think that there have been definitely ebbs and flows in the way that that space has operated… Then I feel like now … the space has sort of lost its magic for me to a certain extent. … It’s really hard to say whether that’s because the way that space operates has shifted, or if it’s the way that I operate in that space and my connections to it that have shifted, or both, or what. For Frankie, the ‘magic’ was not sustainable, but in tandem with it fading they also became more and more thoughtful about how they personally and the Collective shape the space’s making.

Niambi and Frankie, in part, tied their fading feelings and their critical view of the slam to their own experiences of contradiction between feeling heard on and off stage as their roles changed. Frankie talked about the shift of no longer feeling heard as an organizer, and how this made them reflect on how power is still at work in making resistant space. For Frankie, as for most others, feeling heard on stage was not only a huge draw to return to the slam, but also fostered important personal growth and confidence. As Frankie took on an off stage role in organizing, though, the terms of engagement shifted: “I think, probably part of it [the magic fading] has to do with stepping back from the organizing and stepping back for reasons of not feeling like my voice is particularly valued all of the time in the organizing.” From Frankie’s experience, then, making people feel heard did not seem to be a priority among organizers, and
their experience of this contradiction came with a recognition that power and silence can still tarnish and shape that space-making. Niambi similarly described how they felt like their voice was no longer heard or valued in the same way once they first succeeded in becoming a member of the nationally competing Peterborough team:

After I came back from CFSW [Canadian Festival of Spoken Word] last year, I personally didn’t feel like I was represented that well… I was feeling icky about that. Because, to go all that way and only get to do one poem, and a poem that doesn’t even encompass who you are as a poet, I felt like I did all that work for nothing, and I felt like I was really underestimated by my team and by my community.

Niambi and Frankie’s stories expose the impermanence of being heard, but also reveal how certain counternorms do not necessarily translate to off stage ways of relating, to the between-the-rhymes space-making. Though the off stage is as much a part of making space and it is in the off-stage engagements that the intended counternorms and protocols for space-making are set, these counternorms (e.g. of making people feel heard, of democratizing, of safety) are not being as meaningfully enacted in those off-stage relationships and roles. As such, the counternorm of politicized listening falters off stage, and power still works to make some feel that their voices are not valued. This raises the question of whether hearing in the space is more of a performance (as in an appearance) than a practice, and also about what a sustained practice of hearing each other on and off stage might look like and might produce. In what follows, I look to how these poets translate their feelings of contradiction into working towards creating more resistant spaces for spoken word.

The slam space, as a regularly enacted space that has maintained culture and rituals over time, is somewhere between fixed and transitory: its feeling as an ecstatic space is temporary for

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13 Despite these tensions, most Collective member participants nonetheless spoke of other Collective members as dear, lifelong friends.
individuals, but, as participant narratives illuminated, new attendees can still be captured by similar sets of feelings, even when these feelings may have faded for the others enacting that space, or even when an entirely new set of people is facilitating the space. More saliently, poets’ faltering romanticized views of the space indicate a kind of criticality among poets that is important to making and sustaining this counter-normative space in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough). They become engaged in a process of trying to understand power and of recognizing that spaces cannot be created outside of power. They continue space-making nonetheless because they recognize that this space and its counternormativity matter, especially in the context of a town with overt racism, colonialism, and homophobia. They recognize that appeals to space cannot simply be declared, but that resistant spaces are an ongoing process of becoming that can be disrupted and furthered through performances, relationships, and dynamics of power and resistance. They know from personal experience what the slam space can nourish, develop, heal, and grow, but also have come to recognize its contradictions, so they resiliently continue to work towards a space that is “a little bit more beautiful than the world around it.”

Before closing this chapter, I want to point to some of the ways in which poet-participants mobilized their own experiences of contradiction outside of the slam. So many of the resistant possibilities of the slam’s space-making manifest and are carried out from those ritualized events, though these are no less facilitated by the spatialized possibility and counternormative culture that the slam’s practices produce and maintain. Though materially the slam space is enacted and experienced during enclosed frame of time each month and, as Bennett described, the counternorms of the space “only stand for the two hours that they [the Collective] want to be there,” the slam’s space-making has lasting effects. Each poet-participant spoke about the deep personal growth, confidence-building, voice-curating, sense-of-self-nourishing that they
have gained through the slam and that they carry out into their other work and relationships. Frankie described wonderfully how this confidence is made through the slam space but not bounded within the slam context: “As I spent more time doing it [spoken word], I became more confident in my voice and in my body on stage and becoming more confident performing also translated into becoming more confident in my voice and my person in the rest of my life.” Ziy described this confidence too, but also described nourishing this in others, especially their children: “I think it [spoken word] gives me confidence in my voice … it’s just really entrenched in me, the importance of voice. So, in my role as a parent with my kids, I just try to create so much space for their self-expression.” With this confidence in their own voices, poets share their potent words at activist events, film festivals, folk festivals, farmers’ markets; they carry this dedication to building up others’ voices and critical perspectives of the world into running workshops in schools, university classrooms, community centres, shelters. They bring their words to the places where their “voices are needed,” such as Black Lives Matter rallies, Take Back the Night marches, workshops for survivors, and they also take their poetic political analyses to places where “people need to listen,” such as public events that reach the broader Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) population beyond the already politicized arts community.

Jon carries the critical consciousness that he has gained from destabilizing political performances that have challenged his privilege, much like Bashar’s, into his regular work. Jon spoke at length about the repeated learning and unsettling of his privileges as a white, cisgendered, straight man that he has gratefully taken in over the years. He spoke about how so many poems he has received within the space, bolstered by conversations and relationships with differently situated poets, have “regularly and repeatedly” unsettled his assumptions and
confronted his privileges. The discomfort and tension of having his privilege regularly challenged through poetry, but also through his friendships with poets like Sasha, have been productive in shaping and politicizing his daily life:

Not just being informed, being made to feel some of those things – I carry that into my work! I’d like to think that I have a deeper sensitivity to gender for example when I’m working with my clients than I did five years ago, I have a deeper sensitivity to race, I have a deeper sensitivity to forms of oppression, to systemic—I’ve always been conscious of these things, but [sigh] we’re told to intellectually understand these things, especially we’re not told to feel them.

The ecstatic emotional space of poetry events regularly unsettles Jon’s complicity and challenges his politics. Though Leonardo and Porter argue that white people and people of colour enter safe spaces “from radically different locations – intellectual for the former, lived for the latter” (2010, 151), for Jon, taking in disruptions of privilege through spoken word might draw together these locations. Jon takes these perspectives into his work as a job developer and employment counsellor, into his film projects (such as Pushback, a documentary about poverty and homelessness in Peterborough), into his relationships, and into his parenting.

With the confidence that the slam space builds, poets like Frankie and Niambi have also mobilized their experiences of tension at the slam to create more resistant spaces. The experience of having their expectations of the slam space confronted also cultivates their critical brilliance around space-making, drawing attention to their own practices and ways of relating. Frankie

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14 Though, in part, his “conversion” to “these kinds of politics” is nourished/compelled through his relationships with other poets who hold different politics and social locations, Jon also admitted how he sometimes cannot or will not hear things deeply unless he is confronted with them through poetry: “I think it’s one of the great frustrations some of my friends have with the me is ... people like Sasha and Frankie ... will tell me things, and I will hear them, but sometimes it takes going to a festival and being confronted by new poetry that – and sometimes they’ll confront me with these things in poetry. But sometimes it just takes the onslaught of a festival that has really opened me to some of these things, you know?” It is worth noting that it is the affective performances of struggle, particularly as these are heightened in national competitions, and not just personal conversations or relationships that challenge Jon in such a way as to uproot his assumptions. For Jon, it is “being made to feel” and not to just intellectually consider how his privilege confers him a certain access to power that shifts his own politics.

15 Pushback was directed by Matthew Hayes. See https://pushbackfilm.com/
spoke about how their experience with the slam deeply informs how they approach making any space, whether at summer camps or in spoken word workshops: “The way that I approached those [other] spaces is definitely affected by the type of space that slams are. Because I’ve been so much a part of a space that is created every month, where we try to make people feel comfortable to share their stories and to really value people’s lived experiences, means that when I’m creating other spaces I’m trying to do the same thing.” Frankie connects the ritualization of the slam and its resistant possibilities to creating other spaces that value voices. Frankie is also motivated to create other spaces (such as spoken word spaces that are specifically for queer/trans voices) in part by the imperfections of the slam space: “I think there’s always going to be a role for the slam and it’s always going to be important, but I think that I maybe value creating other spaces. … this [slam] space is really great, but I think we need to move beyond it and create other spaces because this is not the be all and end all.” Niambi also talked about how their experiences of tension at the slam have motivated them to create spaces specifically for Black voices, such as the Celebrating Black Arts Showcase and Open Mic they organized in February 2017 (Sadek 2017). Ziy talked about the magic of encouraging new voices to use spoken word as a tool to express their lives freely and politically, describing the moment when the participants in youth workshops “realize that they can use their words to be part of change – resistance, if you call it that.” These other spaces are deeply and relationally connected to the slam (Gregson and Rose 2000), and grow from its ritualization, its counternorms, its faults, its instability.

The early ‘magic’ of the slam, then, might not last in a romanticized form, but it is reproduced and transformed through voice building, through fine-tuning critical perspectives of power, through relationships. The early feelings of magic are important for making the impossible possible, but this magic fading contributes to poets’ sophisticated analyses of how
power operates, how their practices are imperfect, how space-making is always in motion and not under their control. They recognize that the romanticization of slams as resistance, as safe, as a perfectly counternormative space can impede understanding what the slams actually do and how, how power operates, or how they can improve their practices. These participants do not uphold this kind of romanticization, but rather they challenge simplistic understandings (at least off stage) while still understanding the norm-challenging potential or the politics of possibility that the slam spatializes. Their shifting experiences of the slam also prompt poets to carry the slam’s possibility out of the space with their skilled confident voices, their discomfort-spurred learnings, and their investment in and understanding of counternormative spaces. Overall, alongside tensions in their own experiences and perceptions of the slam, poet-participants acknowledge how the slam space has been important in offering sanctuary and supporting them to find their voices, but also they recognize the importance of this counternormative space, this space that celebrates marginalized voices, existing in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough).

**Conclusion**

This chapter spoke back to the intentions, practices, and performances of the slam and what they enable, inhibit, reshape, and obscure. It shifted the gaze away from the hypervisible practices of the slam in order to also examine these less visible experiences and relationships at work in space-making. Looking at the off stage exposes different questions about how the space is made, challenged, and consolidated, and what it produces.

For instance, the off stage exposes how the namings of the space, or the expectations that these namings provoke, can actually produce certain vulnerabilities or even certain harm. Christine, who spoke about being prepared for “uneas[iness] in white spaces,” had different expectations in the slam space. Because she felt a level of safety, comfort, and accountability at
the space, the colonial transgression of that space sideswiped her in a way that was more disruptive than the routine colonial violence she experiences in more normative spaces. Christine’s expectations of the space as decolonial, safe, accountable, made the violation of safety, accountability, and decoloniality unexpected and, as such, more violating. But, through relationships, Christine was able to bring these experiences forward in order to shift slam practices. Niambi’s early experiences of the slam built up their expectation for their voice to be supported, yet when they changed roles the drop in support meant that they felt the community no longer valued their voice, a shift that was all the more abrupt because of these expectations. At the same time, this destabilizing shift has encouraged Niambi to think ever more critically about the slam space, and also to create other spaces for voices like theirs. In these ways, the slam’s appeals to space can work to undo the same counternorms that they are meant to promote. Public narratives of the slam ascribe discourses of safety, anti-oppression to the space as though it is fixed, as though spatializing this language is enough to bring safety, support, welcoming, decoloniality, politicization etc. into being at the slam. The space, though, is not fixed but rather is a fluid making; as such, intentions for the space must be built into not only the host’s script, or the poetic performances, but also into the structure, into the ways of relating, and into all the behind the scenes organizing. Collective members have gained critical insight into how space-making is not simply articulated through practices, but is also always mediated by the relations that surround, produce, project, and refract the space. At the same time, the relations that surround the space are ripe with possibilities to enact the space’s resistant possibilities in more meaningful ways.

There is, too, a dissonance between, on the one hand, ‘feeling heard’ and ‘hearing’ as radical measures of the space that are tied to resistance, and, on the other hand the lack of hearing
(audience, organizers, team members) in the offstage workings of the space. It is through relationships and intentional ways of relating that this kind of hearing and resistant space-making can and does happen, even though the production of practices and counternorms can be disconnected from these small, interpersonal, social relations that make, consolidate, and challenge the space as resistant.

Finally, the slam space might be temporary, in that it is made through practices, so it comes into being for a few hours each month. At the same time, the possibility of producing counter-normative space, even if it is complicated and not without dynamics of power and resistance, is something that remains and is carried away with poets and carried to other spaces. This counternormative space has then been productive itself in a way: it has produced a sanctuary for some to become poets, to find their voices, to become politicized, to understand their privilege, to feel valued. The slam’s implications, then, are lasting.
CHAPTER 7 || Conclusion

For me, poetry now is a way to deal with, to disrupt these hegemonic ways of knowing the world through written text … [and] to disrupt capitalism’s invasion into my own life, like the routine and rigour of capitalism. I love just being in the world and then moving that into a poem. And so, I think poetry and the poetry slam community can be that space: … you’re actually forced to leave the dominant world and go into another world in another way, and be another way. … So here you have this beautiful little space where there can be accountability, people are striving for safety, and you can actually engage in these really important matters in this really creative, embodied way. So I think, it’s this little consolation, right, that’s happening and being born. … I don’t know that I would want to measure the social change, but you just, you have to know it’s happening, you know? I just think it is.
– Christine.

In this thesis, I have explored how, why, and to what effect the poetry slam in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough) is trying to create resistant space or, as Jon said, to “hold this space that is a little more beautiful, hopefully, than the space around it sometimes.” I have shown that the space of the Peterborough Poetry Slam is a making – a relational performance of counternormative space animated and reiterated through not only spoken word performances, but also rituals and relationships. I have also traced how relations of power and resistance shape this making, producing and undermining different resistant counternorms and dominant societal norms. Ultimately, though the slam space is not an uncontentious one, examining space-making with a critical gaze to power exposes a spatialized politics of possibility, and impossibility, at work in the Peterborough slam. As Christine said above, through the slam a different kind of world is brought into becoming; a space is produced and producing. Christine does not say that the space is necessarily accountable or safe; rather, she notes how the space’s performance, and the intentions behind its organization and surrounding its performances, produces possibilities for different terms of engagement, for different ways of relating, for manifesting social change. In
this conclusion, I draw out three learnings about resistant space-making and close by reflecting on the broader implications of these insights.

**Spatializing resistance, spatializing power**

Thinking spatially exposes different workings of power and resistance: examining the Peterborough slam as a performed space reveals how power and resistance shape space-making, but also what is produced through their spatial workings and contradictions. With this spatial lens, I could take up the more unseen or silent moments of the slam, those ways of relating that might not be legible within a rubric of resistance, or a rubric of either subverting or reproducing social norms (Mahmood 2004). Soft-spoken couplets of resilience, gently snapping to a poet’s celebrations of another day lived, post-slam conversations between friends, taking to the mic with a voice that would typically be silenced, taking to the stage in a body that is often restricted from other spaces – not only do these small acts implicitly destabilize dominant norms, but also their repetition shapes the space into one which normalizes, expects, and celebrates these expressions. In this way, the space is resistant to the structures that seek to silence and regulate such voices. At the same time, power is also at work in these small moments – audience members politely clap for the straight man who ‘took up space’ at the Pride open mic, Collective members no longer hear each other in off-stage organizing, hosts forget to acknowledge the land at the beginning of a slam – these small performances can re-entrench relations of power and undermine the resistant norms of the slam space. Moreover, moments that might be read as resistant or political – such as the team in Guelph mentioning Black Lives Matter, or the appropriative feature poet mentioning the colonial history of Hawaii – can also reproduce dynamics of power, privilege, and entitlement. Thinking about the *space* of the Peterborough slam as a constant making lends to thinking about the complex, multiplicitous, and messy ways in which power and resistance are at
work, are performed, unsettled, reproduced, implicated, and refashioned through performances and relations. As such, to think of resistant space-making is to also recognize that violence, colonization, sexism, homophobia, etc. are necessarily part of this making and cannot be completely precluded from a space. The slam normalizes and celebrates creative challenges to existing power structures. Moreover, the friction between workings of power and resistance in the space, and the friction between appeals to and experiences of the space, can be productive. Though workings of power are not always acknowledged within the slam, they are often recognized by those shaping the space.

**Contesting, de-romanticizing space**

Examining the workings of power in such an exceptional space does not preclude resistant possibilities, as romanticizing discourses might suggest. Rather, examining power and its attendant tensions exposes more about what is and could be possible through resistant space-making, and the tensions of power in the space can be productive. These tensions do not foreclose the possibilities of the slam’s space-making, but rather might extend them, so it is worth looking at tension not as failure but for what else it can produce. For example, poet participants described a sense of the ‘magic’ of the space fading over time, but this transition out of a romanticized experience did not inhibit ‘resistance;’ rather, it was tied to poets’ critical assessments of how the slam space was and was not working. Personal discomforts in space-making spurred poets not only to shift their practices in the slam, but also to generate other alternative spaces for raising voices and being heard. While public discourse surrounding the Peterborough slam is predominantly romanticizing, poets are also shifting their public narratives to complicate and deepen this rosy picture (see Pollock 2017). Moreover, participants’ critical and continued investment in the slam space extended to this research: poets were unafraid to question my
framings of the slam in interviews, to push me to take a more critical stance in framing my research question, and to disrupt my position as a researcher and a listener. Both my examinations and participants’ critical perceptions of power in the space fed back into space-making practices. Like Bashar’s subversive upturning of expectations around audience engagement, or Christine’s poetic deconstruction of the appropriative feature poet, or Frankie investing in creating other spaces, participants and performers mobilize tension in order to question space-making and the relations of power that the space can both disrupt and reify. As such, this research not only complicates the romanticization of resistant spaces, but also exposes what can be generated when these spaces are *made* critically in ways that mobilize instead of bury tension.

**Tenable space-making**

The slam cannot be neatly declared a space of resistance, but the doing of the space makes resistant performances tenable. Appeals to the slam space are necessarily complicated, contested, and unattainable since space is not static; at the same time, the doing of the space can produce possibilities for *moments* of decoloniality, of safety, of politicization. In these ways, the slam’s space-making makes impossibilities tenable, even if these cannot be sustained or might be transgressed through other performances of the space. This idea of *tenable* space – as opposed to safe space or other claims/reputations – is one that Christine shared with me in talking about a different context, but it resonates well here. Christine said: “I do feel a really strong commitment to making sure that places are safe, or are *tenable* for anybody.”¹ Christine’s self-amendment from safe to tenable captured my attention and influenced my conceptualization of space-making.

¹ This is one of many examples in which Christine’s intelligence, far beyond specific discussions of the slam, but throughout my engagement with her over the past year, have shaped so much of my thinking.
Thinking of the slam as *tenable* space-making helped to account for, or at least to not obscure, the tensions and conflicts in appeals to static space, while also recognizing the slam’s spatialized possibilities. The slam cannot uniformly be a decolonial space and the land acknowledgement practice does not simply manifest decolonial space, because colonial relations are inevitably present in space-making; in a settler colonial context, colonial violence and transgressions of decoloniality cannot be warded off by naming space. Yet – as with the space Bashar conjured through his performance, or Christine’s experience of the space through relationship-building dialogue with Ziy – it *can* be conjured into a decolonial space temporarily through performance and in relations (Simpson 2011). The slam cannot be sustained as a safe space, or even a safer space, and the practices of trigger warnings and coping strategies cannot manifest safe space, because violations of safety are inevitable in a space of open expression, and transgressions of a space expected to be safe can possibly produce greater or less prepared for vulnerabilities. Yet, the space can evoke safety in moments of sharing one’s story on the mic, or in receiving resilience poems, or in the comfort of familiar faces, or in stepping off the stage to a raucous cheer. The slam is not uniformly an anti-oppressive or politicizing space, since space intended for marginalized voices can be taken up by entitlement and activist language can be appropriated for selfish reasons. Yet, certain performances can conjure a temporarily politicizing space; space-makers can denounce oppression not just through cleverly knitted couplets, but also by certain bodies taking to the stage, they can re-articulate the anti-oppressive values of the scene through scoring and enthusiastic applause, they can encourage new politicized voices through subtle body language and break-time conversations. The spatialization of the slam and its performances makes *tenable* these temporary manifestations of spaces of resistance, and, though temporarily, these spaces reverberate.
The slam is a process of tenable space-making, but particularly one of making a space that can render the impossible both possible and celebrated, even if only for a few moments once a month. This space is brought into being through specific performances and in turn makes expressions of resistance tenable and relations of power questionable. This space is neither exempt from relations of power nor simply enacted by unproblematic resistance; rather, the complexities and tensions around relations of power and resistance are productive. Claims to resistant space might be contentious and might obscure contradictions and produce vulnerabilities; yet space-making does make performances of impossibility possible, make moments of conjuring decolonial space tenable, and make resistant voicing viable.

**Limitations**

This research examined a specific period of time of space-making in the Peterborough slam. Already, in the few months since I finished generating data, there has been a significant turnover in audience members, slammers, and Collective members. This research also drew largely on my own particularly situated experience, and on narratives that were shared with me by particular people. There is so much richness to this space, so many complex relations and performances and experiences that were not captured in this research. The intersubjectivities of the many complex spatialized meanings of the slam warrant deeper consideration, but this was beyond the scope of this project. Lastly, this project looked at only one such resistant space-making. Further research examining multiple different and differently situated iterations of resistant space could extend some of the ideas presented here.

**Resistant space-making**

This research on the Peterborough slam, then, offers two things. First, it offers an in-depth scholarly consideration of resistant space-making. I have explored not only power but also
resistance as imbricated and spatial performances, considering the possibilities and productive tensions that such space-making can produce. Moreover, I explored how examining the workings of power in producing space does not foreclose the possibilities of resistance, but rather exposes how the frictions of power and resistance can be productive in the project of making resistant space.

Second and perhaps most saliently, this thesis has drawn out questions about how space-making might be a resistant process. In a context where high-profile political resistance is dismissed and silenced (Wong and Levin 2016), making spaces for listening to non-dominant voices is a disruption. In a context where certain bodies are both the targets of violent hate crimes (L. Young 2016; Rudin 2017) and also deemed unworthy of justice (Tough 2016), occupying a stage with those bodies and listening to these voices is a disruption. In a context where the Prime Minister of this nation state can garner votes with false promises and then continue to erase the histories of these lands through every action (Palmater 2017), space-making through land acknowledgements, decolonial poetry, and thoughtful relationships is a disruption. In a context where words are manipulated for political gain and protection (Harkinson 2017), thinking what naming spaces produces and about how spaces are made can nourish different spatial visions for disrupting power. Moreover, in such political contexts of silencing and disciplining dissent, the impulse for activist group to further romanticize, to sweep power and contradiction under the carpet, to make ever sharper distinctions between activist and oppressive can be harmful (F. Lee 2017); yet it is precisely the contradictions between power and resistance within space-making - and precisely their exposure – that produces and spatializes resistant possibilities. Space is always intertwined with power (Massey 1993), but also with resistance, and these workings cannot be isolated from one another. Not despite but precisely because power is necessarily at work in the
Peterborough slam, its space-making renders possibilities and impossibilities for disruption tenable. Thinking about resistant space-making in a way that considers power alongside resistance, that honours the creativity, resilience, and brilliance of those involved without collapsing the realities of power’s workings, can open up different possibilities of making space.
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Appendix A – Questions for poet interviews

[Begin by going over the consent form together]

I will guide us through a conversation about your experiences with and perceptions of spoken word and poetry slams in Peterborough, but feel free to interject with additional information or stories as we go. This interview is intended to be a semi-formal conversation and should take approximately an hour and a half of your time. Please feel free to skip any portion of the interview. Are you ready?

Introduction

⇒ Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself?
  o How long have you been in Peterborough? What brought/keeps you here?
  o What sorts of communities/initiatives/organizations are you involved with in Peterborough?

Motivations and experience

⇒ When and how did you get involved in spoken word and poetry slams?
  o Was your first experience with spoken word in Peterborough? If not, where?
⇒ What drew you to spoken word? What has kept you involved?
  o Can you tell me a little bit about how spoken word and/or poetry slams have affected you?
⇒ Do you see spoken word as a form of resistance? In what ways? What are you resisting?

Role of poetry slams and spoken word in Peterborough

⇒ What role do you see poetry slam events and spoken word practices playing in Peterborough? What do you think the space created at slams offers to the local community?
⇒ Do you see poetry slams and spoken word communities in Peterborough as different from those in other places? If so, how? Why do you think that might be?
⇒ Do you have other roles in the local community (e.g. through employment, activism, other art forms)? How do these connect to your role as a poet?

Practices of poetry slam

⇒ Can you tell me about how you experience slam events? What kind of atmosphere or space is created at slams? What kind of space are you hoping to create at slams?
⇒ Do you think the various practices surrounding slam events contribute to the space that is created at those events? How and why?
⇒ Can you tell me about your own practices around spoken word poetry? How would you describe your own poetry?

Connections to community

⇒ Can you tell me about a few memorable performances of your poetry outside of slams in the past two years or so?
  o What was the performance for? Who attended? Why did you do the performance? Why is it memorable for you?
⇒ Do you see your own spoken word practices as connected to the local community? If so, in what ways?
⇒ Do you see connections between spoken word and other aspects of social change in Peterborough?
⇒ What do you think poetry slams in Peterborough could offer to the local community or to local social justice struggles that they don’t currently?

Thank you so much for sharing your reflections with me. Do you have any questions? Is there anything you would like to add?
Appendix B – Questions for listener interviews (bartenders, audience)

[Begin by going over the consent form together]

I will guide us through a conversation about your experiences with and perceptions of poetry slams in Peterborough, but feel free to interject with additional information or stories as we go. This interview is intended to be a semi-formal conversation. Please feel free to skip any portion of the interview. Are you ready?

Introduction
⇒ Can you briefly tell me a bit about yourself?
  ○ How long have you been working at the Spill?
⇒ Can you think of roughly how many slams you have worked?

Practices of poetry slam
⇒ Can you describe your experiences at slam events? What kind of atmosphere or space do you see created at slams?
⇒ Can you think of an experience you’ve had at a slam that was memorable for you? Tell me about it. Why is it memorable?
⇒ What kinds of practices do you see at slam events? Do you see these as contributing to the atmosphere?
⇒ In terms of audience, atmosphere, and personal experiences, how do you think slams compare to other events held at this venue?
⇒ How do you think poetry slams contribute to this venue as a community space?

Connections to community
⇒ What role do you think poetry slams play in the local community?
⇒ Have you experienced spoken word outside of the slams in Peterborough? If so, can you tell me about your experiences?
⇒ Do you think that poetry slams (or spoken word) have impacted you personally? If so, how and why?

Thank you so much for sharing your reflections with me. Do you have any questions? Is there anything you would like to add?
Appendix C – Informed consent script for participant observation
[Carried out during preliminary meeting with the Peterborough Poetry Collective and subsequently distributed via email]

Thank you for inviting me to give this short presentation about what I am hoping to do in this project. At the end, I will summarize what this research entails and what it would mean for your group to participate. You will then have the opportunity to think about it and discuss it as a group at your next meeting. I will ask [group contact] to get back to me by email if you would like to participate.

PRESENTATION GIVEN AND QUESTIONS ANSWERED THROUGHOUT

Before I leave today, I would like to briefly summarize what it would mean for your group to participate in this research. I’ll ask you to discuss this as a group at your convenience, and to get back to me with your thoughts and whether your group would like to participate by [XX date]. I’ll also put this in an email to [group contact] and ask that you get back to me via email once you have had the chance to discuss it.

The purpose of this project, tentatively titled “The Poetic Resistance of Slamming: Considering the Role of Spoken Word in Peterborough, ON,” is to gain a better understanding of the role that spoken word plays in the local community and social justice struggles. The research will involve five parts:

(a) Observing poetry slam events and other public spoken word performances in Peterborough;
(b) Interviewing spoken word poets in Peterborough, particularly present and past members of the Peterborough Poetry Collective;
(c) Interviewing community activists who are not poets, but who are otherwise connected to slams or spoken word performances;
(d) Interviewing the employees at the Spill who have worked during poetry slam events; and
(e) Holding a focus group with interested past and present members of the Collective;

Right now, I am asking whether your group would be interested in being involved in the first of these: for permission to attend some of your poetry slams and other spoken word events. Observing poetry events will give me a better sense of what you do and how you do it. Agreeing to be part of this part of the research does not mean that all group members have to commit to being interviewed individually; whether you want to participate in an individual interview will be up to each of you to decide for yourselves. What it means is that I will attend some of your events; I will observe and keep notes on what I witness at these events, which will become part of my research findings. I will also bring an audio recorder to these events with the possibility of creating high-quality audio recordings of spoken word performances. Recording performances would be strictly optional and any interested poets would receive a copy to keep for their own records, share, or publish as they chose.

I am seeking your consent as a collective, since you organize and perform in these events. I will also make a sign to post at the entrance of the Spill so that audience members are aware that I will be observing them. The sign will be accompanied by a letter explaining the project and a card so that any interested audience members can reach me. I will share these documents with you well before observing any slam events.

This research will span the next year, but will be focused over the summer and early fall (2016). I am asking for permission to observe your group at these events and consult with you over this time. This does not mean an open invitation for me to attend any meeting or event that I choose; I will ask your permission each time, and you will always be free to decline. Also, if there are meetings or events you think would be particularly worthwhile for me to attend, I will ask you to let me know in advance and I will try my best to be there.

Your group’s participation is strictly voluntary. It is important that you discuss this as a group, without me present, and that you accept only if each member of the group expresses their consent. You can choose to
withdraw your group from the research at any time. If you do withdraw, you can decide whether the information provided to me to that point can be used in this research. You can also provide information that is “off the record,” which means that this information will never be used in any way that can be attributed to your group.

Eventually, the research findings will be published in my Master’s thesis and possibly published in academic journals and/or presented at academic conferences. It will also be made available to your group, the local community, and any other interested groups by way of community presentations, accessible reports, and/ or short articles. My hope is ultimately to provide new insights into how spoken word practices might contribute to a local community and local social justice struggles.

I will email what I have just outlined to [group contact] along with my address, phone number, and email. Feel free to get in touch with questions. If the group is interested in being part of this research, and each group member has given consent, I’ll ask that [group contact] email me back stating that:

(a) you have all been fully informed and that each group member consents to participating in the part of the research that involves me observing your events and holding, at a future meeting, at least one focus group; and

(b) that our email exchange will be kept in your group archive or minutes for future reference.

Thank you.
Appendix D – Consent form for interviews (Trent letterhead to be added)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project, tentatively titled “The Poetic Resistance of Slamming: Considering the Role of Spoken Word in Peterborough, ON.” The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how and why spoken word might cultivate resistance in the local community and contribute to local social justice struggles. The research will involve interviews and group discussions with poets, observing and documenting slams and other spoken word performances, and interviewing community members who have been involved in slam in various ways. The findings will be written up into my Master’s thesis and possibly published in academic journals and/or presented at academic conferences. The research will also be made available to the Collective in the form of community presentations and/or accessible reports. This project aims to provide new insights into what role spoken word and poetry slams play in Peterborough and bring visibility to the political practices of spoken word in our community.

At this time, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview that will last approximately an hour and a half. You will be asked questions pertaining to your experiences of poetry slam and spoken word in Peterborough. Your participation in this interview is strictly voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question or end the interview at any time. If you do choose to end the interview, you can decide whether the information provided can be used in this research. You can also, at any time, provide information that is “off the record,” which means that this information will never be used in any way that can be attributed to you.

With your permission, I will audio-record and also transcribe this interview. You will be given a copy of your transcript for your own use; it will be your choice whether you wish to share this with your group or network. All audio-recordings and transcripts will be encrypted and kept securely on my password-encrypted computer, on my encrypted external hard drive, and/or in my locked filing cabinet. These will be destroyed two years following the ending of this project, which is anticipated to be approximately three years from now.

There is minimal risk to you in participating in this research. Because you are part of a relatively small community, and you hold a relatively high profile within this community, I will be identifying you by name in this research. This means that any information you provide may be attributed to you personally in any publications or presentations related to this research. It is important that you understand that when you discuss personal information or political views and opinions, these may be attributed to you in the future. You can, however, ask to have parts of the interview remain “off the record,” in which case I will not attribute the information to you at any time in the future.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board. It conforms to the standards set out in the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If, at any time, you have any concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Karen Mauro in the Office of Research at 705-748-1011 ext. 7050. This MA research is supervised by Dr. May Chazan, who can be reached by email at maychazan@trentu.ca or by phone at 705-748-1011 ext. 7739.

If you have any questions or suggestions for the research project, you are welcome to contact me at the address, phone number, or email provided below. Please keep a copy of this form for your personal records.

Thank you for your time and participation,

Melissa Baldwin
Principal Investigator
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Please sign below if you agree with the following:

I, ____________________________ (participant’s name),

1. have been fully informed and freely give my consent to participate in this research;
2. have been given a copy of this letter and consent form for my own records; and
3. understand that this research has been reviewed and approved by Trent University’s Research Ethics Board.

___________________________ (Signature)   _________________________ (Date)
Appendix E – Letter of Introduction (Trent letterhead to be added)

[Sent via email in making contact with the Peterborough Poetry Collective]

Dear Peterborough Poetry Collective,

I am a Master’s student at the Frost Centre for Canadian and Indigenous Studies at Trent University and a long-time audience member at the Peterborough Poetry Slams. I am interested in developing my Masters research around poetry slam and spoken word in Peterborough. I am intrigued by the role that slam poetry and spoken word play in the local community and in local social justice struggles.

Slam poetry was introduced into academic conversations about fifteen years ago, but, even now, there is limited scholarship. What does exist tends to focus on analyzing specific poems or individual performances as forms of resistance, however these scholars have yet to adequately analyze how poets, audience members, and the space created at slams are also integral to that resistance. There is a valuable conversation missing about how poetry slams and spoken word reverberate beyond the actual “slam” and ripple through the community.

I am writing to ask whether your Collective would be interested in meeting with me, with the possibility of becoming part of this project. This would be a chance to meet and talk about the possibilities of the research, but it would not commit your collective (or any individual member) to being part of my envisioned project. I would really love to get your input into the broader questions I am asking and I would value your insights into my current vision, which would involve interviews and group discussions with poets, observing and documenting slams and other spoken word performances, and talking with community members who have been involved in slam in various ways. All of these pieces of research, which would happen over the course of the coming summer and fall (2016), would help me bring together different stories about and experiences of performance poetry in Peterborough. Importantly, I would not only be telling a story of spoken word in Peterborough, but I will also be offering my own critical analysis of what I observe. In terms of possible outcomes, I would write this into my Master’s thesis next spring/summer (2017), but I would also look into accessible forms of getting the research out into the community. This could include journal articles, media pieces, or other creative projects that would support and amplify local spoken word.

I would gladly to meet with those of you who are interested during one of your already scheduled meetings or at another time that would be convenient for you. I could join you wherever you hold your regular meetings. The meeting should take no more than 45 minutes of your time. I would be happy to answer your questions by email (melissabaldwin@trentu.ca) or by phone (613-315-3451). If your group is interested in meeting with me to hear more, please get in touch before XX date.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmly,
Melissa Baldwin
MA Candidate in Canadian and Indigenous Studies, Trent University

Appendix F – Announcement at slam events

There is some research happening on spoken word in Peterborough. Melissa Baldwin is a student at Trent whose Master’s research looks at how and why spoken word might be connected to resistance and social justice struggles in this community. If you want to learn more about this research or if you are interested in participating, you can talk to Melissa (point me out) or grab a flier off the table.
RESEARCH ON SPOKEN WORD IN NOGO/PTBO

DEAR SLAM-GOER,

I AM A MASTER’S STUDENT AT THE FROST CENTRE FOR CANADIAN & INDIGENOUS STUDIES AT TRENT UNIVERSITY. MY RESEARCH, ENTITLED "THE POETIC RESISTANCE OF SLAMMING: CONSIDERING SPOKEN WORD IN PETERBOROUGH, ON," CONSIDERS THE ROLE THAT POETRY SLAMS AND SPOKEN WORD PLAY IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH IS TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW AND WHY SPOKEN WORD MIGHT BE CONNECTED TO RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES IN THIS COMMUNITY.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT, I WOULD BE HAPPY TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS BY EMAIL (MELISSABALDWINTRENTU.CA) OR BY PHONE (613-315-3451). I LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU.

WARMLY,

MELISSA BALDWIN
MA CANDIDATE IN CANADIAN & INDIGENOUS STUDIES, TRENT UNIVERSITY