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Contemporary Feminist Performance Poetry and the Female Body

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“A man does something, it’s strategic. A
woman does the same thing, it’s
calculated. A man is allowed to react. A
woman can only overreact”
– Taylor Swift

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1. INTRODUCTION:

In a report on domestic violence from 2011, statistics show that approximately 20 people per minute become victims of domestic violence in the United States of America. While these statistics include both male and female victim numbers, and the fact that men are also victims of domestic violence should not be pushed under the rug, women make up the majority of victims in these statistics. As the report states further, “1 in 4 women [...] have been victims of severe physical violence (e.g. beating, burning, strangling) by an intimate partner in their lifetime (see NCADV homepage). These statistics only focus on domestic violence in the U. S.; however, the numbers do not differ massively when compared to other Western countries such as Austria, for example.

In recent decades, more awareness was shed on the issue of violence against women, with campaigns providing more information for victims and their next of kin. However, the increase of awareness does not mean that the numbers of female victims magically decreased. In Austria, the opposite was the case, with official statistics showing the number of female homicide victims doubling from 19 in 2014 to 41 in 2018. (see AOEf homepage) Furthermore, the majority of these deaths were the result of a dispute between intimate partners, especially spouses. Although shocking, these numbers come as no surprise, not even in modern society. Until 1989, it was legal in Austria for a husband to rape his wife without facing any legal consequences – in some U.S. states this is still the case (Lumetsberger).

What comes to show is that women have been at the centre of violence at the hands of men for centuries, being vulnerable and at their mercy in both a metaphorical and literal sense. In a patriarchal society, women have fought to find their voices and keep them heard, constantly fighting for equality and their own rights to be acknowledged. They utilised a variety of methods to bring awareness to their struggles, one of them being literature. Published female

authors used to be a rarity at the beginning of the last century, but through the help of feminist movements women inhabited different genres and used them to express themselves and their problems openly within a male constructed society. One of those genres was poetry, which has become an instrument for feminist causes, by combining art and politics. As Stein and Spillman have explained, “[p]oetry is, among other things, the art of [...] expressing thoughts and feelings in terms that are unusual – delicate, sweet, provocative, intense” (22). T.V. Reed concurs with Stein and Spillman in terms of poetry being a powerful instrument of expressing thoughts and feelings by stating “if the goal is to change the world, there is reason to believe that publicly performed or privately read poems have been a force as powerful as any other” (86). The written word of poetry may be expressive on its own accord; however, some women poets have chosen to take their expression a step further by including performance into their poetic works. Performance poetry has experienced a new level of popularity within the last years with young poets in general, but especially young female poets have started to utilise this sub-genre of poetry to express their feminist opinions to a broader main-stream audience.

The range of topics these poets address in their poetry varies depending on their own experiences and interests. Still, the female body can be seen as a centre piece in all of their works – understandably so, since it seems to be the main point of discussion in a patriarchal society. In her article, Barbara Creed discloses this (male) fear of the female body: “the woman’s body signifies the human potential to return to a more primitive state of being, her image is accordingly manipulated, shaped, altered, stereotyped to point to the dangers that threaten civilization from all sides” (112). What this means is that the female body has always been seen as property for men and this translated into politics – the female body was established as a public concern rather than a private matter. By finding their voices and uttering these issues in a public setting, women poets take back their self-determination and

force the public to listen to their struggles. The diverse range of topics feminist performance poets have chosen as well as their way of expression will be examined within this thesis.

1.1. Aims of Thesis

This diploma thesis focuses on themes and topics in performance poetry written and performed by a selection of female poets from the UK as well as the US. These authors use the instrument of performance to highlight important feminist issues, in connection with the female body and female sexuality. The method of performance in the context of feminist poetry engages hereby on multiple levels: on the one hand, the act of performance pushes private matters into a public sphere, therefore working as instrument of consciousness-raising. On the other hand, the performance of feminist poetry utilises the female body by engaging it in ways that are not typically seen in a patriarchal society; meaning that the female body leaves behind the typical role of the object in order to become an instrument of female empowerment.

The aim of this thesis is to look closely at a selection of performances and analyse the texts performed, as well as the appearance, body communication and voice of the performers themselves, since these factors are often employed to foreground the content of their poetry. The medium of performance poems I have selected for my thesis is video; they have been published on the social media platform YouTube and other performance poetry sites on the internet, such as the poets' own homepages. The easy international access to performance work these days and the resulting cross-national influences are the reason why this thesis will discuss feminist performances from the US and the UK together. My selection of texts includes both white women as well as women of colour; however, I am very aware of the different levels of discrimination women of colour experience and I will point this out in the course of my analyses. The general aim of this diploma thesis is to establish the most common themes and topics addressed in contemporary feminist performance poetry. I will historicise

these themes with reference to earlier women poets and furthermore highlight the specificity of the contemporary performances in terms of the poets work with appearance, body communication and voice.

For this purpose, a theoretical basis will be provided through the analysis and inclusion of works by feminist theorists (e.g. Barbara Creed and Lynda Birke), as well as performance poetry related works (e.g. by Dana Gioia and Julia Novak) in order to cover each part of the spectrum that is feminist performance poetry. Furthermore, theoretical texts which concern themselves specifically with feminist topics within (performance) poetry will also be included into the theory part of the thesis (e.g. Vicky Bertram and Laura Severin). On the basis of this theory provided, a selection of performances will be analysed; with a specific focus on the female body as well as the feminist topics included and discussed in the poems portrayed.

1.2. Literature Review

In recent years, the distribution of poetry performances on various social media platforms (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) has not only attracted increasing interest in contemporary performance poetry among a younger generation but has also affected “poetry’s formal possibilities and the ways it can reach audiences” (Wheeler 2). However, although contemporary performance poetry has received considerable attention in literature (see Gioia, Severin), few scholars have addressed the specific genre of feminist performance poetry.

Despite this lack of theoretical engagement from literary critics, I made an attempt to establish a theoretical background of feminist performance poetry. In particular, the literature review will focus on works revolving around the terms “body”, “performance” and “poetry” as well as their combined meaning. These closely intertwined concepts are essential to this thesis and the analysis of selected performances of female poet-performers and will thus form the basis of the analyses conducted in the second part of this thesis.

The female body has been a topic of discussion in both a literal and metaphorical sense for centuries, whether in a religious or governmental context, to only name two examples, and, as highlighted by Riley, “becomes visible [...] only under some particular gaze” (224). In patriarchal society, women are being restricted in the power they have over their own bodies. In contemporary western culture, the beauty industry as well as social media “influencers” provide society with an *ideal* depiction of the female body, which is often combined with unrealistic beauty standards and profitable advertisements for fitness and beauty product companies. To sustain these unrealistically high standards of *perfection*, women are often told how they are supposed to use and treat their bodies and are urged to sculpt them to match standards imposed by society. . Barbara Creed describes the struggle of women adapting their appearances to externally established standards by stating that “[u]nlike man’s body, the

female body is frequently depicted within patriarchal cultural discourse as fluid, unstable, chameleon-like” (Creed 111).

So how do feminist theorists define the female body as entity? In order to answer this question, it is essential to understand different aspects of the female body that have been relevant to feminist theory. While the biological aspect of the female body is still part of the discourse in feminist theory, Lynda Birke claims that “biological sex [and] the biological body remain problematic concepts for feminist theory” (42) and therefore receive “rather little consideration” (44). Conflicting Birke’s argument, many other feminist theorists have worked extensively on the biological aspects of the female body and the distinctive role it plays in feminist studies. Shildrick and Price, for example, argue that the biological body has been put forward as the reason why women have been seen as inferior on a rational level for many centuries which is reflected in the following statement:

The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason. (3)

The assumption of women lacking the ability to think rationally due to their physical body reaches back to ancient Greece. The philosopher Plato saw the body as “the source of all undesirable traits a human being could have” (Spelman 39), since it signified being an earth-bound human being, slave to its bodily desires and therefore incapable of higher thoughts and rationality. Reducing women to their biology, Plato concluded that their “lives are spent manifesting those [undesirable] traits” (Spelman 39) and therefore excluded them from being able to reach a superior state of mind. Creed further analyses this perception by claiming that “the woman’s body signifies the human potential to return to a more primitive state of being, her image is accordingly manipulated, shaped, altered, stereotyped to point to the dangers that threaten civilization from all sides” (112). The reason why feminist critics have been concerned with the portrayal of the female body in a historical context is their aim to

deconstruct a gender order founded on presumed essential characteristics of women's nature that are presumably rooted in their body.

Apart from its biological form, scholars have been concerned with the female body in a metaphorical sense as well. To contextualise this, a statement by Christine Battersby will be used as point of reference. She states that, "[w]oman is both the boundary/the Other against which identity is constructed" (348). This concept of the female body as being "the Other" is also examined by authors Shildrick and Price, who explain that, in a patriarchal society, in which men are perceived as the dominant entity, the female body "occupies the place of the excluded other" (2). Historically speaking, women have always taken up the place of the opposite, with the male perspective and body acting "as both norm and ideal for what it is to count as an entity, a self or a person" (Battersby 349). This isolation of women from normative standards has, for example, come to be reflected in language. While sports played by men do not contain an explicit mention of male gender, women are constantly separated due to their sex by mainstream media calling their disciplines "Women's Football" or "Women's Basketball," which reinforces a stereotype of female inferiority.

This marginalisation of women can be observed in all aspects of life, with literary works being no exception. As Bertram explains, "[i]n studies on contemporary poetry published over the last two decades, the women are often grouped together in a chapter of their own" (1). As with other areas of life, isolating women from mainstream poetry production and putting them into their own group puts them into the position of "the Other" and prevents them from being taken seriously in their craft. As Gatens points out, "[i]t is important to create the means of articulating the historical realities of sexual differences without thereby reifying these differences" (228).

Consequently, inflicting this concept of "the Other" on women has led to certain tendencies in female identity and behaviours of certain cultural background and those tendencies can be

observed in all aspects of human life. “There is a good deal of work [...] that shows females in our society employ space differently – even whilst young – and that this can be detected by [...] their bodily movements and the projects that they devise for themselves” (Battersby 346), which might refer, for example, to the fact that women are taught to cross their legs when sitting down. The fact that there is a direct correlation between female behaviour and normative constraints is further affirmed by Judith Butler, who explains that:

acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (417)

In her quote, Butler deals with “performativity”, which appears to be a very abstract concept in itself. However, a relation between her concept of performativity and actual stage performances, which are analysed in this thesis, can be drawn by looking at the notion of identity. Interestingly, identity in general and gender identity specifically are often connected to notions of performance. “[I]dentity is an effect of performance in the world”, says Susan B. Somers-Willett (8). The significance of performance in sculpting female identity and building resistance against normative male concepts, performance poetry will be included in this discussion, as Severin explains that “[p]erformance poetry accomplishes its destabilization of the cultural category of woman through its uniquely flexible properties” (6). Performance therefore establishes itself as a method of releasing women from the position of “the other” by using the disguise of performative acts to generate “provocative content in a social setting,” as Severin concludes (7-8).

Women have utilised the method of performance and, similar to the genre of poetry, have adapted it to serve their concept of feminist antagonism. Reed points to the importance of poetry in resistance movements, stating that “poems [...] are more effective in conveying movement ideology than are manifestos and other directly political forms” (90). She justifies

her assumption by claiming that “poetry is economical not only in terms of expression but also in terms of the material support needed to produce it” (90). Reed’s statements on the accessibility and effectivity of poetry certainly relate to contemporary feminist performance poetry, since nowadays the internet and social media provide a possibility for easy distribution of performances in forms of videos. Another assumption about poetry produced by women is made by Severin, who explains the resilience of female poets by explaining, “where patriarchal metaphysics privileges mind and spirit over the body, women poets accept no such hierarchy [...] [, rather] challenging the values they have been supposed to embody, rejecting public/private distinction they espouse” (14). This resilience of women against the status quo of male dominance is what makes feminist theory so engaging and interesting to work with. The different terms (body, performance) discussed in the course of this literature review by a variety of scholars of feminist theory will come to play a significant role in the following chapters, since critic’s opinions on those concepts pose the base of any theoretical analysis.

In how far contemporary women poets utilise their poetry in connection with performative techniques will be further discussed in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, the content women poet-performers choose to discuss in their poems will be explored in later sections as means of a theoretical preparation for the analysis in the second part of this thesis.

1.3. Outline of Thesis

The following section is going to provide a deeper insight into the decisions made to properly choose and further contextualise the poems used in this diploma thesis. The poems depicted and analysed within this thesis have been selected depending mostly on the topics and the themes mentioned in them. I wanted to include a variety of (feminist) topics that are not only of interest to me on a personal level, but also seem to be essential themes to talk about within our contemporary society, since they link up to contemporary feminist discourses. Furthermore, I tried to avoid having multiple poems of the same female poet presented in my thesis; however, it was not possible to stay true to this self-made promise on one occasion, due to the overall pertinence of Olivia Gatwood's single and group performances in terms of the themes they address.

Most of the selected and analysed poems were found on social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube. As the content of the poems is the main basis for their analysis, this was also made the focus of the decision-making process while browsing for ideas to write this thesis. Thus, no filter was created to pick specific nationalities of performers and poets which in turn provided a broad discourse and allowed for a richer analysis. To justify this approach of no filter, it is important to keep in mind the global accessibility and the resulting cross-national lines of influence of web performances, which would render a selection by nationality rather artificial.

The aspect of social media platforms as a source is also of relevance when situating these performances within a certain context: most of them were videotaped in the course of poetry competitions, also known as "poetry slam". Therefore, reactions from audience members are oftentimes audible as background noise. Nevertheless, these performances will only be categorised individually as "performance poetry" rather than as a part of "poetry slam". The reason for this is that the majority of these performances happened at live events and

analysing them in the context of their “liveness” factor such as visual audience reaction, event location, and voting system, would oftentimes not be possible due to the limited representation of these aspects in the given videos. Therefore, I will be sticking to what the recordings are giving me.

Returning to the themes and topics of the poems, which have been discussed previously I wanted to present a broad variety of themes that address issues especially important to women; some of which could be described as “feminist” issues. For a better understanding, a system of categorisation has been developed to organise the issues presented by the poets. As a key concept, “female body” was chosen which consists of various sub-categories such as “female sexuality” and “women’s rights”. These sub-headings in turn include different categories of their own, which are then reflected in the topics of the poems analysed within the course of this thesis. The reason for choosing “female body” as a main point in this categorisation is the fact that this term itself is significant within a variety of contexts, including not only biological but also philosophical aspects. The female body is such a central concept of this thesis due to multiple factors. On the one hand, it has been placed at the centre of all sorts of gender discourses (sexist as well as feminist). On the other hand, the female body is important to female performers of poetry because they are aware of its central position and utilise this position to pose their own bodies in interesting ways.

The present thesis is divided into two main parts: the first part will make up the theoretical framework by outlining the historical background to topics presented in feminist poetry, comparing topics chosen in women’s poetry of the last century (mainly at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the so-called Second Wave of feminism in the 1970s) with the most prominent themes in contemporary feminist poetry. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to put forward appropriate definitions of performance poetry as well as feminist poetry, since these are the most relevant terms used in this thesis. A reflection on the difference

between written and oral poetry will also be included in the first part of this paper, as this distinction has divided literary critics since the genre of performance poetry gained increasing popularity. The last chapter of the theoretical framework of this thesis will provide a description of the methodology used in order to accomplish a satisfying analysis. This also includes definitions of verbal and non-verbal aspects of performance as their effect will be a focus of the analysis.

The second part of the thesis will feature detailed analyses of a selection of female poetry performances, taking into consideration the previously manifested methods of performance research. Furthermore, the poem's themes will be closely evaluated on the spectrum of commonly used topics presented in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

2. THEORY SECTION

2.1. Terminology

Despite the fact that the genre of poetry has accomplished its revival through the popularity of Spoken Word Poetry and its appeal to a mass audience, oral poetry is not seen as a legitimate form of the genre. As Gioia claims in his book *Disappearing Ink*, “[w]hile the new popular poetry has received immense coverage from electronic media and general press, it has garnered relatively little attention from intellectuals and virtually none from established poetry critics” (7). Especially the sub-genre of performance poetry has been rather overlooked by literary theory, since critics have equated oral works, which are sometimes specifically written with the intention to be performed rather than read, to badly *written* poetry. Since performance poetry “uses the apparatus of the musical entertainment world” (Gioia 10), which refers to an interactive relationship with the audience, including humorous elements as well as possible stage props in their performance and therefore making it entertaining, critics have never fully recognised the theoretical depth of the format. Julia Novak presents a possible reason for the theorists turning a blind eye to this popular sub-genre of classic poetry:

The bias against the oral realisation mode arguably applies to performance poetry more than works labelled as ‘spoken word’ [...] because it contains the word ‘poetry’ and thus easily provokes judgement based on the criteria applied to poetry books. (33)

Personally, I would categorise performance poetry as part of spoken word, with the simple distinction of performance not being a necessary part of the latter term. Spoken word might as well be a simple reading of any literary text; meanwhile, performance poetry includes performing a poem with additional non-verbal techniques to elevate the communication of the poem’s meaning.

This lack of work on performance poetry affects the establishment of clear definitions, which will play a reasonably important part in the later analyses of selected performance poems

written by female poets. Therefore, I will attempt to find appropriate definitions for the two main terminology used in this thesis, “performance poetry” as well as “feminist poetry”.

2.1.1. Defining Performance Poetry

As already stated before, performance poetry has been a sub-genre of poetry that has been both overlooked by literary theorists and simultaneously being criticised for not being ‘poetic’ enough to be part of the discourse of ‘serious’ poetic work. This phenomenon is especially confusing considering that the genre of poetry “is experiencing a renaissance through the spoken word” (Novak 29). In order to define performance poetry as a whole, it is important to look closely at the concept that sets this sub-genre of live poetry¹ apart: the aspect of “performance”. Stephen Wade, in his book on the production of performance poetry, claims that “there has been performance poetry ever since there was poetry itself” (11), referring to the oral distribution of poetry in a pre-literary society. In terms of performance in the context of poetry presentation, Julia Novak’s definition is going to be the centre piece for the further use of the term “performance poetry” in the upcoming thesis: “a variety of live poetry at the extreme end of its spectrum which, as the name indicates is entirely conceived in relation to oral performance” (29).

Although poets might draw their inspiration for the production of a poem from their own experience, this does not necessarily have to be the case all the time. Similar to actors on stage or in movies, performing poets are often able to convey certain emotions during their performance, while simultaneously compartmentalising their own feelings and personality, therefore creating a “performance self” or “persona”. In her work on live poetry, Novak references Anthony Howell, who states that performers are

¹ “[L]ive poetry is characterised by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of the poet with a live audience” (Novak 62).

projecting a self or persona through posture, through body language and through their clothes. They are acting as themselves, or, to put it another way, constructing a *performance self* (qtd. in Novak 187).

Therefore, it is of importance to assume that most of their body communication on stage is part of their performance and not simply an outburst of emotion.

2.1.2. *Defining Feminist Poetry*

The second term essential for building a terminology framework for the benefit of this thesis, is “feminist poetry”. As Wheeler states, “[f]eminist studies, then and now, is as riven with fault lines as any other discipline, but it remains more interested than most in the possibilities of collective voice” (34). This collective voice, in the case of this thesis paper, would be poetry concerning female issues in a patriarchal society. Bertram, however, claims that “few poets have ever been happy with the description [of] feminist poet” (19), since “the ‘aims’ of feminism are clearcut in a way that the ‘aims’ of a poem rarely are” (19). What Bertram means by that is the danger of reducing female poets to creating content concerning their ‘womanhood’ and nothing else. She concludes her discussion by stating that “[g]ender does not unlock the meaning of all poems, male or female-authored; but it is an important, and neglected, aspect of the interaction” (30).

So what can one consider “feminist poetry” then? The information received from multiple sources leaves the definition of the term quite ambiguous, depending on the personal opinion on feminism by the individual authors. For the purpose of this thesis, I will define “feminist poetry” as poetry produced by a feminist poet about topics relevant to the issues and struggles they experience. Although I am aware of the fact that men can be feminists, I am going to focus on women poets simply due to the fact that they use their body and identity in support of their feminist message. As Jo Gill explains,

[t]hese women poets’ understanding and acceptance or manipulation of their position may vary from period to period, from culture to culture and, most importantly, from

individual to individual. Nevertheless, it is this sense of writing from a position outside or beyond the mainstream, which, arguably, all share. (8)

2.2. Feminist Themes – Then and Now

Seen as women were generally considered as a “sexual subset of their race” (Schiebinger 28), published and *esteemed* literary content by female poets was still a rarity at the beginning of the last century. Even when they produced works of their own, it was overlooked or downright ignored, since men were not interested in reading about women’s opinions. Moreover, as stated by Bertram, “until the twentieth century, women were permitted to write on certain acceptable subjects – namely love and religion” (10). This lack of writings published by women is mirrored in historical writings and social studies, as Millman and Kanter claim in their book, “most of what we have formerly known as the study of society is only the male study of male society” (30). It truly was a men’s world and it was noticeable in every aspect of life.

Historically speaking, as already mentioned above, women have oftentimes been reduced to their bodies, as Shildrick and Price observe: “supposedly, the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive. Not surprisingly, then, the ability to effect transcendence and exercise rationality has been gender marked as an attribute to men alone [...] – such that women remain rooted within their bodies, held back by their supposedly natural biological processes” (2). Apparently, having the ability to bear children eliminates the competence of writing relevant literary works, or so the patriarchal society assumed (and to some extent, still does). However, female writers were persistent, and by the time the second feminist wave washed over the Western world during the 1960s and 70s, women had adopted literary genres for their intentions to draw attention to inequality between men and women and to inflict change within society.

One problem with the Second Wave of feminism in the 70s was its nature of being “largely white, middle class, educated, and embedded in the ideologies of a dominant culture” and

therefore this movement has been criticised by “women of colour, lesbians, working class women, poor women, and others” (Olson xvi). However, this imbalance has been redressed since the 1980s, in order to focus more on “diversity in women’s studies in relation to race, ethnicity, sexuality and other factors” (Olson xix). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of diversity to be observed in feminist studies, and different groups have experienced different phases of feminism outside of the standard periodization process (Felski 3).

Still, while feminism at the beginning of the 20th century ebbed the way of utilising literature for their purpose of consciousness-raising, the Second Wave of feminism during the 1970s manifested poetry as the genre most useful to raise awareness of female issues. As Reed states, “[c]onsciousness-raising, while not the only women’s movement method, touched all realms of feminist action” (85). Women have long realised that being persistent and loud was the only way to make themselves heard, and by using poetry, they had acquired one of the most effective utensils to make the private public. Reed actually compares consciousness-raising and writing poetry, claiming that both “make the subjective objective, make the inner world of “personal” experience available for public “political discussion” (86). By doing this, poetry allowed women to share their private struggles with the outside world, which resulted in poems being distributed by the hundreds in the late 1960s (Reed 88).

Women’s perceptions of the world were shared, which often differed immensely from those of their male counterparts. In her book about female construction of knowledge, Lorraine Code explains that “[c]laims that there are specifically female or feminine ways of knowing often find support in the contention that women’s significantly different experiences [...] lead them to know ‘the world’ differently” (13). But what were the topics that women were concerned with in the midst of what became to be known as the Second Wave of Feminism?

Shared stories moved women from isolation of battering to a collective analysis of domestic violence, from a personal sense of sexual inadequacy to calls for equal sexual pleasure for women, [...] from personal fears about pregnancy or forced

sterilization to calls for reproductive rights, [...] from personal experiences of intimidation by the boss to the concept of sexual harassment, and so on for dozens of issues that were moved from the personal to the political through collective dialogue, discussion, and debate. (Reed 87)

The main point to take from this statement made by Reed is the fact that women started to shift their personal experiences into a public sphere in order to elicit attention from society and form a unity of womanhood. “The Personal is Political” has often been highlighted as the main slogan of the feminist movement, the reason behind it being “that many issues that historically have been deemed ‘personal’ [...] are actually deeply political issues” (Thompson 64). Limitations on reproductive rights, part of women’s health, is one of these issues that have been deemed “taboo” to talk about in public and should therefore be dealt with in private, or rather not at all. However, through influences of the legal system, which might either be enabling these rights or hindering them, the matter has become political. Correa and Petchesky agree by claiming that “enabling conditions, or social rights, are integral to reproductive and sexual rights and directly entail the responsibility of states and mediating institutions [...] for their implementations” (138).

In view of the physical violence, inequality in salary pay and overall social injustices women still experience today – even in the allegedly progressive ‘Western world’, feminist performance poetry can be considered a form of political agitation that harks back to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The reason for choosing (performance) poetry as a tool to distribute women’s ideas and opinions “[was] not because poetry ‘reflected’ feminist issues, but because poetry was one of the main tools used to identify, name, formulate, and disseminate those issues” (Reed 89). Furthermore, as Severin exclaims in her work on women and performance poetry, “[b]y generating provocative content in a social setting, [...] performance poetry becomes a medium that has the power to reconstitute knowledge, in the process changing poetry from a private act to a public one with larger

implications” (7-8), a statement that correlates almost identically to the goals of feminist movements.

In recent years, topics and themes of performance poetry produced by female poets have not fundamentally changed, but rather adapted to contemporary circumstances. The female body still represents the centre of discussion; however, the issues it might represent have shifted. The depiction of women in media, unrealistic beauty standards inflicted by society and resulting eating disorders and body dysmorphia disorders are now the dominating issues contemporary female performance poets concern themselves with. Themes of feminist movements are ever-changing, depending on the issues women are most affected by.

2.3. The Difference between the Page and the Stage

The decreasing relevance of printed works in a literary context has been a burning topic between scholars for decades now, with a decline in printed books being purchased and printed newspapers as just two of many examples that come to mind. As Dana Gioia states in his book with the fitting name of *Disappearing Ink*, “print has lost its primacy in communication” (3).

In search for a reason for this steady decline of printed media, we have to look no further than to our own electronic devices: the wide availability of internet resources has long played a major role in the decline of printed works. However, not only print but also written works in general have experienced the lack of interest from readers of especially younger generations. Gioia explains that “[y]ounger adults (ages eighteen to thirty) read significantly less than older groups” (3-4). Again, these developments have come from the impact of new types of media that are consumed on a daily basis. However, Gioia’s book has been published before social media gained the social impact it has today, so some phenomena like *Insta-Poetry*, which is read and shared by millions of people, did not exist when Gioia articulated his arguments.

The decline of print as our culture’s primary means of codifying, presenting, and preserving information isn’t merely a methodological change; it is an epistemological transformation. (Gioia 5)

This statement by Gioia implies that the impact of the decrease of printed works has a far wider impact on the “way we perceive language and ideas”; it does not only shift our priorities of communication but also has an enormous impact on how we take in our surroundings and ourselves (Gioia 3). Furthermore, no genre within literature has been spared from this cultural shift. One genre, however, has started this development way before the introduction of new media outlets.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the literary genre of poetry has first experienced a secession of sorts by reintroducing performance into the audible reading of poetry, including a sense of entertainment into the reading. While the reading of poetry has long been a private matter reserved only for academics and the avant-garde, the change of act made poetry more accessible to a broader audience at the beginning of the 20th century. Live poetry readings were a given before this change as well, but the work itself was mostly presented by a performer rather than the poet herself/himself. As a possible reason, Lesley Wheeler² states that it was a common “presumption that the poet would rarely be the best oral interpreter of her own poetry, and that superior recitation required unusual skill and sensitivity in the performer” (4). However, this assumption changed at the start of the new century, due to “an increasing trend during the modernist period to conflate the performer of poetry with the poet herself – figures that were mainly separate in the nineteenth-century United States” (4). Before that, Wheeler claims, there was no pre-existing relationship between the poet and the performer of her/his work. (5)

It is certainly no coincidence that the beginning of the 20th century is also marked by the emergence of the radio, and its accessibility for broader communities. This assumption is also shared by Gioia, who remarks that “[...] [oral poetry] hearkens back to poetry’s origins as an oral art form in preliterate cultures, and it suggests how television, [...] recording and radio have brought most Americans [...] into a new form of oral culture” (9-10).

Wheeler considers this move in poetry of the early 20th century towards a unity of author and performers as the beginning of performance poetry, stating: “[f]or these poets, words were utterly grounded in bodies and hence in culture and politics; their self-presentations emphasised these connections” (8). By this, she means that the act of performing itself was granted more and more importance in order to deliver the full meaning of the poem. In later

² It is notable that Wheeler’s observations pertain specifically to the US-American poetry scene.

years, starting during the 1960s, a revolutionary shift happened in the writing of poetry, which has been created “for voice rather than for academic, fixed in the page reading” (Wade 12). Certainly, traditional written poetry has not lost its superior status yet, especially in an academic setting. However, poetry in performance meanwhile established its own following, which has grown exponentially over the years. One reason for this increasing interest in performed poetry is the inclusion of the audience. While poetry readings previously held two different entities, the poet (or performer) reading on the one side and the audience on the other, performance poetry allows a more fluent relationship between the two. As Somers-Willett states: “With the usual expectations of reverence and silence thrown out the window, a different type of relationship between poets and audiences became possible [...] – one that was highly interactive, theatrical, physical, and immediate” (4). This feeling of being included makes poetry more accessible for ‘common’ people, who would otherwise not have gotten into contact with this literary genre at all.

The attraction towards performed poetry in contrast to written works is clearly visible in the fact that “[p]oets of every school now reach more people through oral performance [...] than they generally do through print” (Gioia 20). Another reason for this rise in popularity, apart from the interactive relationship between performer and audience, is the fact that performance poetry “represents the merger of certain poetic techniques with forms of drama and live entertainment” (Gioia 23). Performing poetry, as stated before, makes poems more accessible to a broader audience, irrespective of their educational background. From the performer’s perspective, performing poetry opens up new ways of expressing ideas and shedding light on issues they want to be heard; this can be done on different levels apart from straight-forward words in the act of performing. In her book, *Live Poetry*, Julia Novak provides a summary of what performance might add to the delivery of meaning in poetry:

The physical co-presence of poet and audience in a live poetry performance allows for a range of other sense perceptions (facial expression, body communication, audience interaction, etc.) that considerably impact on the impression the audience has of the performance and thus on the meaning-making process. (55)

These techniques performers use to manipulate audience perception, whether they are a conscious or unconscious part of the performance, play an important role in highlighting the poem's meaning, and will be crucial in the later analysis of the selected feminist performance poems in Chapter 3.

In her book on live poetry, Novak has also included a selection of characteristics that reveal differences between the written and the oral poetic work. Since this chapter tries to identify the aspects which differentiate print and performance, these characteristics are useful for exemplification. As the first difference of the written poem in comparison to its performed counterpart, Novak states that written works mostly do not provide any indication about the oral execution. She states, that “[a]ny juxtaposition of a poem in print and a live performance will yield instances of contrast and surprise”, because if this was not the case, “it should be possible to predict from the written text exactly what an oral performance would sound like” (68). Novak refers to the possibility of poet-performers adding “distinct acoustic elements” (71) such as sighs or grunts, or “a change of word order” (71) or even a complete change of terms, in order to adapt the meaning of the poem for a certain setting. To summarize this, Novak fittingly explains that “[t]he audiotext opens up possibilities which have no correspondence in the written text” (71).

Performance has ebbed the way for poetry to regain relevance, not only in an academic context, but also in popular culture. Somer-Willett, for example, has claimed that “America is in the midst of an explosion of verse in popular culture, one facilitated by the performance of poetry in live and recorded media”, which can be affirmed by the wide-spread popularity of slam poetry events. However, the author also explains that the rise in popularity of verse is also due to the fact that verse opens up possibilities, like in the case of rap to only name one

example, to express “identity, particularly of race and class” (6). Somer-Willett’s claim can be interpreted as performance poetry giving a voice to people, in order to communicate their issues and ideas on a broad level.

As stated in the previous chapter, the power of poetry to give voice to marginalised people has long made it an attractive genre for voicing feminist concerns. As Wheeler states, “[t]he goal of ‘giving voice’ to silent and oppressed multitudes motivates a great deal of feminist poetry” (33), indicating that women have started to use poetry in order to protest against a patriarchal society that excludes women and overlooks their concerns. Significantly, the feminist women movement turned not only to written poetry to communicate their resentment towards the exclusion of women from political affairs, but author Rita Felski even claims that “[n]o group developed this return to poetry as performance [...] more powerfully than feminist poets who fostered hundreds of public readings” (93). Performance was key in the distribution of poetry for the feminist movement, since it included the factor of entertainment which called for attention, in ways that were not possible in written form. Felski further states that “spoken word performance is an important site of feminist consciousness-raising” (96). Another perspective, similar to Felski’s, is brought up by Bertram, who states that “[p]erformance also enables an integrated presentation of poetry as coming out of, delivered through the body,” (40) which the author might not directly relate to feminist poetry performance, but this perspective can be related towards it. Bertram’s mention of the use of the body in the public presentation of poetry is a crucial factor of feminist performance poetry. As already explained in Chapter 2, most poetry written and/or performed by women revolve around the topic of the female body, since this is something feminist movements are intensely involved with. Therefore, the presentation of poetry via the body can be seen as an important instrument to further highlight the theme of feminist poetry. Apart from verbal techniques, non-verbal techniques play an important role in the delivery of feminist performance poetry.

These previously mentioned techniques of audience' perception manipulation will be discussed in the next chapter.

2.4. Methodology

Before diving into the analysis of the selection of contemporary feminist poetry performances, the approach towards these analyses needs to be discussed in greater detail. For though the main focus certainly lies on the content of these feminist poems, additional aspects have been included in the analysis. As discussed in the previous chapter, the factor of performance plays an important role in analysing oral poetry, since the performer might either intentionally or unintentionally add certain significant elements in the form of their body communication, gestures and even their outfits. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a more detailed description of these features, which will happen in the course of this chapter. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the components of visual recordings and availability of contextual information about these performances. Where available and deemed significant, such information will be included in the analysis. These limitations will also be part of the discussion in the following paragraphs.

2.4.1. Audiotext and Body Communication

As already mentioned before, performance tends to add a variety of aspects to the message of the poem – some of these aspects are added intentionally, some unintentionally. In her book, Julia Novak states that “poet-performers bring forth their audiotext through (mostly) vocal production at a specific time and space” (75). Somer-Willett, who sees performance as “an expression of the poet's identities” (7), goes even more into detail with her description, stating that “poets perform their identities, [...] through voice, gesture, dress, and physical appearance even when they are not doing so through their words” (71). These factors of performance are crucial when it comes to interpreting the meaning of poems, as behaviour of poets on stage might affect the transmission of their poems' meaning. Since the main focus of this thesis lies on the content of women's performance poetry, the following descriptions

provide merely an overview of the topic, since an in-depth discussion would exceed the frame of this thesis.

Novak describes these features as “instruments a poet-performer has at his/her disposal to give shape to the poetic text in an audio-visual performance” (73). In order to provide a clear framework for the following descriptions, the terms used by different authors have been compressed into the terms of “paratext”, “body communication”, appearance” and “voice”.

2.4.1.1. Paratext

Contextualising recorded performances of poems can propose a variety of difficulties. Since the analyst was never present at the actual event of the performance, one is dependent on the information given by the uploader of the video and/or the poets themselves. Deciphering the possible setting of the performances without any given information is nearly impossible, so that limits an in-depth contextualisation of the performance setting.

Another type of contextualisation is the poem itself. This refers to the background information relating to the content of the poem, which might provide the audience with more insight into the poet’s motivation of composition. Novak uses the term of “paratext” in her book, explaining it by stating that “poet-performers will often introduce their poems, or themselves, at the beginning of a performance and explain the origin of a piece or certain allusions for instance, during or after a performance” (138). At the beginning of my research, I chose to use the term “context” for both the description of setting of the performance, as well as the setting of the poem itself. By adopting the term “paratext”, however, an easier distinction between the settings of the performance and the setting of the poem is possible, which impacts the clarity of the analysis immensely.

2.4.1.2. Body Communication

A second term, which has been adopted from Novak’s work on live poetry, is “body communication”. Oftentimes, the terminus is more commonly known as “body language”, in

order to describe non-verbal techniques to convey certain messages. Novak, however, defends her refusal of the term by stating that “the common term ‘body language’ has been avoided [...] as it falsely implies the possibility of a ‘dictionary’ or ‘grammar’ of body communication” (149), referring to the unfeasible task of manifesting a sufficient translation of most non-verbal communication independently of the words.

The use of the female body in women’s performance poetry poses an important aspect in terms of visibility. Vicky Bertram, in her book “Gendering Poetry”, proposes an interesting assumption about the female body in performance:

A woman poet has to confront the implications of being a female on public display, with the connotations of sexual objectification, in a context that traditionally disregards the body. This may be why many of today’s women poets have been most successful as performers of their work: the theatricality of the event is upfront, thus releasing the body from the stasis of a conventional reading. (40)

Bertram indicates that women poets can utilise their bodies in a way that would convey their meaning rather than objectifying them, further stating that “[t]he performers can use their bodies and their sexuality, avoiding the passivity of objectification” (40). By acknowledging their bodies and their non-verbal communication instruments, female performers are able to use them to convey an even deeper meaning of their poetry. However, the question of what encompasses the term “body communication” has yet to be answered. Again, Novak provides a good definition, saying that “body communication comprises movements as well as still positions and may occur in isolation or in combination with verbal language” (147). In the context of the analysis in this thesis, I chose to include posture, facial expression as well as gestures into the term of “body communication”, since these are the techniques which occurred the most in the selected performances and had the most impact on the way the content of the poems performed might be conceived by the audience. These elements sometimes enhanced the message the poet tried to convey to their listeners, and in rare instances, they even introduced counter-discourse juxtapositions to the verbal utterances.

In live performances, these tools are essential to understand the deeper meaning of poems. As Novak states, “the live presentation of poetry involves the physical co-presence of performer and audience, which entails an additional visual level of communication” (145). Body communication can be named as one of those levels, whereat this type of communication might be expressed in different ways. Movements as well as expressions can influence the perception of a poem, highlighting the message of the performance as well as contradicting it. Essential for the correct interpretation of body communication is the “verbal and paralinguistic context” (Novak 147).

2.4.1.3. Appearance

A lesser known, but still relevant factor of meaning-making is the appearance of the performer. Recognising a deeper intention behind the clothing or make-up (or lack thereof) of a female performer might influence the perception we have of the performance. Novak explains that emotions might not only be expressed through body communication, “but also through her/his attitude towards the addressee or topic of speech” (152), and appearance might intertwine with attitude. If a female performer intentionally wears clothes that make her feel comfortable and/or empowering, her attitude on stage might be affected by this. Furthermore, clothes may accentuate the content by being intentionally provocative, therefore playing into stereotypes of promiscuity, to name only one example.

2.4.1.4. Voice

The aspect of “voice” in poetry, especially in the context of feminist poetry, has to be reviewed on multiple levels. Apart from the literal concept of “voice”, which encompasses the making of sounds in a meaningful manner, there is also a second variety that requires notice, namely the metaphorical sense of “voice”.

Lesley Wheeler engages with both the literal and the metaphorical concept of “voice” in her book *Voicing American Poetry* and outlines the numerous obstacles in defining these concepts. Her main focus is the voicing of poetry in terms of using poetry to voice opinions

and draw attention to those opinions, Wheeler claiming that “voiced texts are as important as textual voices” (3). She continues by saying that:

Voices in a political sense, as the right or ability to speak or write, also intersect with literary studies, particularly through the fields of compositions and feminist studies. The word voice encapsulates these poetic conflicts but also suggests the common interests underlying them. (3)

With this statement, Wheeler relates the concept of “having a voice” to the feminist poetry movement, and stresses the importance of voice in feminist studies in general. She continues by stating “[t]he meaning of voice for feminist studies is very like the meaning of voice in composition studies: it signifies both rhetorical and political power” (32) and finishes her observation by claiming that “voice is an important concept for many women” (33). What this implies is the metaphorical concept of “voice” might be as important to the feminist movement, especially the feminist poetry movement, as is the literal sense of voice. Since women’s opinions and struggles have been silenced by a patriarchal society for centuries, even only the symbolic concept of being able to voice these problems is of essence. The female poets which will be analysed later on are practicing the metaphorical concept of “voice” by publicly expressing their opinions and sharing their experiences.

The second concept, which Wheeler also broaches in her work, is the literal sense of “voice”, claiming that “[p]hysical voice and auditory processing are important to poetry’s composition, circulation, and reception” (23). The author draws a correlation between the symbolic voice and the physical production of sound by utilising speech as a way to achieve the concept of “voice” as a metaphor. In other words, women can physically raise their voices to make their issues heard and noticed.

Julia Novak also discusses “voice” in her work, but focusing only on the literal sense. Novak ties voice in with the previously explained aspects of sense perceptions, stating that:

One single aspect of sound by itself rarely carries enough information to allow for a well-founded interpretation of a speaker's meaning: vocalic outbursts of energy may [...] be taken to express extreme joy, for instance. Only in connection with the "harsh and tense voice" it is possible to ascertain the emotional quality and aim of an utterance, whose meaning potential is further narrowed down by the body's communication through gesture, posture and facial expression, and, of course, by its verbal content. (78)

With this statement, Novak points out the difficulty of analysing these sense perceptions individually, without any regards to the other performance techniques. Moreover, it is unrealistic to achieve individual analyses of "paratext", "body communication", "appearance" and "voice", since their effects are often intertwined. Therefore, it is important to mention that even though these terms are described in different paragraphs, there will be overlaps.

2.4.2. Limits and Advances of Recorded Performances

The digital age brought a lot of advances for the distribution of poetry performances. As Gioia predicted in his book, "performance poetry will probably find its ideal medium not on the page or even the podium but in the more malleable forms of video and audio recording" (23). These forms of media support the availability for a broader range of performances in different settings, and make the genre of poetry, in this case performed poetry, more accessible to a wider range of audiences. The distribution of these recordings happens mostly on different internet platforms today, especially on YouTube. Therefore, I was able to choose from a variety of performances and was able to select a range of performances that would permit me to highlight a variety of different aspects of feminist performance work.

Recorded videos bear the convenience of being able to re-watch performances multiple times, making it easier to focus on individual aspects of the poem as well as the performer, such as content and body communication. This possibility of shifting perception to different aspects brings more depth to the analysis of the poem and the performance.

However, using recorded performances for analysis also carries some disadvantages. Defining performance poetry, Gioia claims that it "recognizes and exploits the physical presence of the

performer, the audience, and the performance space” (23). While the performer is a definite given in visual recordings, the audience as well as the performance space is rarely visible, depending on the camera angle. Therefore, the reaction of the audience is only partly accessible, mostly through sound; and deciphering performance space is often a guessing-game. In some performance recordings the camera is badly positioned so that even a clear perception of the performer is limited. Since the surrounding aspects of the performances are not the main focus of the thesis, but rather the content of the poems, it does not impair the analyses in a crucial way. Still, these limitations had to be acknowledged in order to guarantee a level of authenticity.

3. ANALAYSIS OF CONTEMPARY FEMINIST PERFORMANCE POETRY: MOST COMMON THEMES AND TOPICS IN SELECTED PERFORMANCES

3.1. The Period Poem – Dominique Christina

“[W]omen know how to let things go; how to let it die and then leave the body”

The first poem that has been selected for this analysis was performed by poet-performer Dominique Christina. In the biographical information section on her homepage, Christina describes herself as “writer, performer, educator, and activist.” She has been successful in both the performance sphere of poetry, winning several slam poetry titles, as well as in written form, having her work published in several journals, magazines and books. Her bio further states her close relationship with the Civil Rights Movement and the influence she draws from it because of her family’s legacy. As Petra Brits explains, black women have been left out of historical description, resulting in the disappearance of “strong women characters” (131) and Dominique Christina is certainly in a position where she can be characterised as such, paving the way for other strong women of colour finding their voices.

Dominique Christina has chosen the theme of women’s health and sexuality for her performance poem, provoked by an experience her daughter had. The poet-performer addresses the problem of acceptance of reproductive female health within society, especially concerning the topic of menstruation. The stigma surrounding menstruation is still one of shame, often perpetuated by women themselves and passed down through generations, resulting in also men perceiving menstruation as something to be ashamed of. With her poem, Christina wants to eliminate this stigma and redirect the opinion on female health to something positive and empowering. The origin behind her poem, as already stated, is an encounter the poet’s daughter had on the social media platform ‘Twitter’, where a man

expressed his disgust about periods publicly. “[My daughter] sent me a screenshot of a tweet and in a hundred and forty characters, this dummy [...] damn near undermined my legacy.” Christina addresses two main audiences in her performances directly, the anonymous man, who posted the tweet, as well as her own daughter.

Dominique Christina begins her performance with a brief introduction of her poem, relating the struggle she had with building her daughter’s confidence after she had her first period, due to the negative prejudice surrounding the topic. “[My daughter] starts her period and she’s stricken and walks out the bathroom looking like she’s died or something. And I wanted to undermine that, so I threw her a period party.” Christina thereby showed her daughter how to celebrate the changes of her body instead of rejecting them. However, it was the post made by this anonymous man on ‘Twitter’ that nearly eliminated all of Christina’s progress, compelling her to write the poem as a response to both the man as well as her daughter.

After her short introduction about the context of the poem, Christina takes on her ‘performance self’, therefore taking on a certain stage persona to convey her poem in the most convincing way possible. This shift in personas is mostly visible through her change of voice and her straighter posture. Christina tenses, as to appear taller and more resilient, portraying the anger she feels towards the addressee of her words. She directly addresses the author of the tweet, criticising his misogynistic attitude towards the female body and its reproductive organs, which she sees as the insecurity within young girls especially, “you’re the reason my daughter cried funeral tears when she started her period; the sudden grief all young girls feel after the matriculation from childhood”. The poet-performer therefore assigns this “Nameless Dummy on Twitter” an “anatomy lesson infused with feminist politics”, where she describes the workings of the uterus of a woman in an almost patronising way, as if to make sure that even the most unintelligent individual can follow her explanations. “There is a thing called the uterus”, Christina states matter-of-factly, combining her patronising voice with her facial

expression of mock shock, as if to indicate that the ‘twitter dummy’ might hear these anatomical facts for the first time. She concludes her ‘anatomy lesson’ by explaining that her body does not menstruate the same way other women might experience, since “[she has] always been a rule breaker”. The poet-performer might share this personal information about her body to indicate that each body functions in its own individual way. On the other hand, she might intend to *shock* the man she addresses with her openness, and the way she casually talks about private things in a very public setting.

Dominique Christina then continues to address the “feminist politics part”, exclaiming that “women know how to let things go”, meaning that the body of a woman is construed to renew itself and knows “how to regenerate”, bearing the metaphor of women being able to embrace change. Furthermore, Christina praises the ability of female bodies to feel such close emotional bonds that “our menstrual cycles will actually synch the fuck up”. The usage of the swear word in combination with her casual stance and loose facial expression correlate to the attitude of pride and casualness she conveys in the sense of “What? Your body cannot do that?”

Moving on, the poet criticises the fact that the man has the audacity to mock a woman’s body on social media when it was one of those bodies who provided him with his own existence in the first place, “without which you wouldn’t have no twitter account after all”. Furthermore, the unpredictability of a woman’s body is the reason why “[women] know the world better [...] and when you deal in blood over and over again [...] well, that makes you a warrior”, Christina exclaims and again proposes the heightened emotional awareness women possess.

Aside from metaphors, Christina also uses one specific word repeatedly in her performance, which poses an interesting point both content- and stylistic-wise. In order to conclude some of her arguments, the poet chose to use the word “period” at the end of each sentence. The double-meaning of the word is evident through linguistic analysis: on the one hand, “period”

is used to indicate the end of a sentence through a “full stop”, indicating that the poet leaves no room for challenging her arguments. On the other hand, the term “period” is obviously the main topic of the poem. By putting those two concepts on par, Christina made a clever move of giving the term “period” (in the sense of menstruation) an even more powerful meaning within her performance.

Lastly, the poet wishes her male addressee to be “blessed with daughters” one day, so that he will be able to experience first-hand how irrepressible the female body is, because “women [...] will make you know the blood. We’re gonna get it all over the sheets and car seats”. Hence, having daughters will get any man in contact with menstruation, and the workings of a woman’s body, whether men like it or not.

After ending her response to the anonymous man on twitter, Christina shifts her attention towards her daughter, whom she now addresses directly. The change of addressee is visible by the adjustment of the poet’s voice, which becomes both calmer and more soothing, compared to the forcefulness she spoke with previously. Still, the poet’s stance is straight and there is the undertone of resilience present in her voice, which corresponds perfectly with the tenor of this part of her poem. Christina encourages her daughter to embrace her body and biology it comes with, furthermore, she should be open about her reproductive health in order to bring awareness to the topic.

3.2. First Period – Blythe Baird

“[E]ven then, I understood the unspoken sentiment; it would be gross and inappropriate for my father or brother to ever see the messy truth of my body”

Despite her young age of twenty-three, poet Blythe Baird has already made a name for herself in the American slam poetry community. On her homepage, in the biographical section, the accomplishments of her career as a performance poet have been listed, also including some written work that has been published in printed magazines. Moreover, Baird recently released a collection of her work in collaboration with Button Poetry. The following poem has been performed by the poet-performer in what appears to be a setting of slam poetry event, however, the exact date of the performance could not be discovered due to limited information by the channel it was published on.

Blythe Baird has chosen a topic similar to the one of Dominique Christina, whose poem had been analysed in the previous chapter. Baird’s poem concerns itself with women’s health and reproductive system, or menstruation to be exact. The poet chooses to share her personal experience of being a young woman having her period for the first time. While Christina approached the topic from the point of a mother trying to pass down her own experiences to her child, Baird looks at the topic of menstruation from the point of the young girl, who is overwhelmed with this unfamiliar situation and the change her body endures. Furthermore, the mode of her performance resembles a narration rather than a “classic” poetry performance. This might have been a deliberate decision of the poet since the content of the poem appears to be written from autobiographic experience. Baird’s facial expressions as well as her gestures differ a lot compared to other performances. Reason for that difference is the restriction the poet has put upon herself by keeping notes in her right hand which she repeatedly glances down at, seemingly out of security. Therefore, she is not as present in her

performance as she might have been without notes, but considering the way of recitation of the poem itself, the performance might not be of importance for Baird, since she portrays it more as a story. No distinctive changes in voice can be detected within the performance, again supporting the assumption that the poet herself chose a narrating style to highlight the biographical context of her poem. Her voice in combination with the content makes it seem like the poet audio visualises a diary entry from her teenage years.

The poet starts her performance by sharing the memory of her first period, which had happened in the middle of a theatre performance, combining the uncomfortable memory of having your period for the first time with the embarrassment of experiencing it in a public setting, filling the whole situation with even more trauma. This memory emphasises the unpredictability of the female body and portrays the helplessness young girls have to deal with in this moment. This helplessness is further accentuated in the next lines of Baird's poem, where she states that since the topic of menstruation was seen as "taboo topic" in her family: "[M]ortified I go home, but at home there is no-one to talk to about periods". Hence, she slowly embodied the feeling of shame for her bodily fluids and dealt with the issue on her own, since she did not feel comfortable enough to ask her mother and sister about this topic. This secrecy is described by the poet in terms of hiding her used female hygiene products under "layers and layers of toilet paper and bury it in the trash like a cadaver" in order to shield her male family members from "the messy truth of [her] body". When I first heard Baird say those words I was flabbergasted, since *I* have been hiding my own used hygiene products under layers of trash as to not burden my family members with the sight of my body fluids. The reason for my astonishment was the fact that nobody ever told me to do so, but rather I unintentionally felt like I had to hide this part of my body. This behaviour shows that women are unintentionally more concerned with the way they are perceived by the people around them and therefore try to hide parts of themselves that might make others feel

uncomfortable. Returning to Baird's poem, instead of consulting female members of her family, Baird admits that she searched the internet for help and answers to the change her body went through at the time because she was taught not to speak about it. A significant quote from her performance can be heard in this section, because the poet asks herself, whether "being a woman has always been associated with hiding pain". With this sentence, Baird refers to the fact that women have always been associated with being "of emotional nature" and their bodies being "the embodiment of temptation and sexual desire", which has resulted in women increasingly hiding their emotions as well as their biology from the eyes of society (and mainly men) to be seen as more equal to their "more rational" male counterparts.

In the next section of her poem, Baird expresses her struggles within her peers in terms of the topic of menstruation. Due to her ignorance of female hygiene products she recoiled to using basic pads during her menstruation instead of tampons, which lead to her being ridiculed in school by her female classmates, who mocked her for not knowing how to use a tampon correctly. "[H]ow could you possibly not know this?", is the sentence the poet ends her performance with and in combination with the patronising voice she uses to imitate her peers it expresses her personal struggle of dealing with her first menstruation in a suiting manner. Furthermore, it shows the problems of an individual stuck in between two different generational ways of handling the topic of female sexuality and the female body. On the one hand, she is confronted with the stigma of her parental generation, which has taught her to keep her bodily functions to herself and "deal with it" in private. On the other hand, the poet was also part of a newer movement of her own generation that has been exposed to (female) sexuality and the human body through information provided by different sources, such as the internet. Therefore, the poet is put in a discrepancy between her private and her public surroundings: she is expected to have a certain amount of knowledge on the topic of her body and sexuality, even though she has no possibility of obtaining this knowledge due to the

conservative attitude of her personal surroundings. For this reason, Blythe Baird speaks for an entire generation when she expresses her helplessness in terms of knowledge about her own female body and sexuality and the struggle of coming to terms with it in her performance.

3.3. I Think She Was a She – Leyla Josephine

“[T]his is my body and I don’t care about your ignorant views; when I become a mother, it will be
when I choose”

The poem “I Think She Was a She” was written and performed by Scottish poet Leyla Josephine. On her homepage she describes herself as “award-winning poet and theatre maker”. Apart from being a successful performance poet, touring the UK with her spoken word show, Josephine’s work has also been published multiple times in different print media. Her poem, which will be the topic of analysis, can be differentiated from all other performances chosen for analysis in this thesis in terms of the setting of the performance itself. Unlike all other poems, Josephine does not perform this particular poem in front of a live audience within the setting of a poetry event. Furthermore, she speaks her words directly into the camera, which gives technology a different significance in her performance, since it features more like a substitution for an actual audience rather than merely a recording device of the performance. These aspects of setting need to be kept in consideration when looking at other factors surrounding the poet’s performance, such as voice and body communication.

As stated before, the poet is speaking directly into the camera as if it was a live audience. Therefore, the camera equipment is placed in front of Josephine within a short distance, focusing in on her upper body and face and cutting off everything underneath her chest. Because of this angle, not a lot of body communication can be depicted during the performance, since the poet does keep her hands below her upper torso. The performer also does not allow a lot of facial expression and mostly keeps a straight face, looking into the camera without averting her eyes elsewhere.

In her poem, Leyla Josephine has chosen to talk about one of the most controversial topics related to the female body and female sexuality: the right of women making decisions about their own bodies. She specifically talks about abortion and *possibly* her own experience with it; however, since the poet-performer never explicitly states her personal connection to the topic, she might as well have created a performance self to portray a woman with this experience. When analysing Josephine's voice in this performance, it is important to keep the setting of said performance in mind, since it might have an impact on certain aspects of voice, such as volume. Since the poet performs outside on the streets, she has to use an increase of volume in her voice to compensate for the background noises surrounding her. Furthermore, the setting impacts the performer's appearance, since she would probably not wear a thick winter coat at an indoor event.

Josephine starts her performance with the title of her poem, making it both the title as well as the first line. She continues to paint the image of how she would have raised her child, who she thought of as a daughter, and what kind of mother she would have been to this child. Especially when I listened to this performance the first time it was tough to fully understand Josephine's accent, since she speaks faster at the beginning of the performance compared to the rest. She further states that she would have educated her daughter on a set of morals, which would include the right to make a decision about her own body, saying "[I] would have died for that right like she died for mine". Through that statement, the poet made it clear that this mentioned child has never been born and that her previous descriptions of how she would have raised her child were only imaginative due to her having an abortion.

The next section of Josephine's performance starts with her stating that she was "not ashamed" of her decision to terminate the pregnancy; her statement obtains even more significance as the poet chooses to repeat this sentence three times before moving on. The poet-performer then provides the audience with a short explanation on her decision, giving up

information about being a teenager with a certain naiveté and not enough knowledge about birth control. She then again repeats her statement “[I] am not ashamed” before handing the audience a twist in her attitude and changing the direction of the performance by stating that “she was not a girl and she was not a boy, that is just the bullshit you receive to keep you out of Parliament and stuck on maternity leave”. This quote from Josephine’s performance deserves a more in depth explanation, since this line shifts the theme of the poem from the story of a woman who decided to terminate her pregnancy towards a more political context of the topic of abortion and a woman’s right over her own body. In the previously mentioned line, Josephine contradicts her prior made statement where she proclaimed that she knew that her unborn baby was a girl. Now, she completely distances herself from personifying an unborn foetus, claiming that this personification is simply a method of ‘pro-life’ supporters to keep women from terminating their pregnancies.

However, these scare tactics of anti-abortion supporters do not actually keep women from terminating their pregnancies, but rather force them into potentially dangerous alternatives to official medical procedures. Elaborating this point, Josephine states the high number of 70.000 women per year, who die from self-inflicted abortions, using utensils such as “coat hangers [and] pain killers”. Women die, according to the poet, in back alleys in order to hide their pain and their shame of having an abortion, stating that young women worldwide are “performing abortion like homework, looking for the answers in the grooves of our palms, the bulges of our bellies, the whispers in our ears only to be confronted with question marks”. Josephine criticises these practices and claims that the ignorance of people in power is the cause of these deaths. This ignorance, however, will not hinder the poet from spreading her story and bringing awareness on the topic, as she announces in the last few lines of her poem: “[A]fter all it’s her story [...], our story, goddammit this is my story and it will not be written in pencil and erased with guilt” where she makes a strong and defiant statement for legal

abortion. Lastly, she proclaims again that this is *her* body, while the camera angle changes down towards her abdomen, putting even more emphasis on the topic at hand.

3.4. Pretty – Katie Makkai

“[T]his is about the self-mutilating circus we have painted ourselves clowns in”

The following recording of the poem “Pretty”, which was written and performed by Katie Makkai, was taped at the 2002 National Poetry Slam event in the U.S. and gathered viral attention through the distribution through social media networks. The topic of her work often features her own experience with a lack of self-worth and existence within a superficial-based society. Her biographical information further suggests that Makkai has performed her poetry since the early 2000s and even co-founded the Denver Poetry Slam.

Katie Makkai’s poem is immensely interesting to analyse content-wise, as she uses song lyrics and cultural references to contextualise the meaning of her work. The song the poet uses in her performance is Doris Day’s famous song “Che Sera Sera”; more specifically the first few lines, in which the protagonist of the song asks her mother the question “[W]ill I be pretty?” Makkai cleverly uses the content and context of Day’s song to contextualise her poem for the audience: she puts herself in the position of the girl in the song, projecting her relationship with her own mother into her performance. However, instead of a light-hearted and cheeky conversation between mother and daughter, as it is portrayed in the original song, Makkai shifts the atmosphere of the song to something way more sinister and dark, using repetition to ask her mother the same question over and over again, while changing her voice from a beautiful singing voice to a horrifying shout with each repetition. Furthermore, Makkai purposely uses her body communication to tell her struggle in a non-verbal way, making the performance itself an essential part of the transmission of the content of her poem. One example would be the way the poet twists and turns her own head with her hands when talking about how her mother used to do the exact same thing to her when she was looking for

more imperfections – “[G]rasping my face, twisting it this way, then that as if I were a cabbage she might buy”.

The poet continues to explain her complicated relationship with her parent when growing up, since her mother used to point out her every imperfection, such as her crooked nose and teeth and how she would “fix it” in order to make her daughter more beautiful: “[W]ill I be wanted? Worthy? Pretty?” Susan Bordo sees this behaviour of adapting to beauty standards as contribution “to the perpetuation of female subordination” (253) but Makkai counters this argument in the course of her performance by claiming that her mother was just as much of a victim of society’s standards as she was. In these first few moments of the performance, the main topic of the poem, female beauty standards, becomes very obvious. Makkai expresses her struggles of being brought up in a surrounding where socially accepted beauty standards are perceived as desirable. She explains how her mother herself has been a victim of this kind of society (“[S]he too was raised to believe that the greatest asset she could bestow upon her awkward little girl was a marketable façade”) and that outer appearances have often been given a more prominent position than inner qualities of a person. Makkai’s voice is harsher and filled with frustration as well as anger at her mother for not accepting her like she was as a child, but also directed at herself for letting people influence her in this direction of self-loathing. Furthermore, within a patriarchal society, Makkai explains that often the main concern of her mother was whether men feel attracted to her. With a defeated voice, Makkai reveals the trauma all these operations her mother bought for her left on her psyche, “now I haven’t seen my own face in ten years”.

In the course of her performance, Makkai shifts her focus from blaming her own mother for her past trauma towards criticising society for its current morals and fixation on outer appearances. The poet states that fitting within these socially accepted beauty standards is oftentimes more important than the well-being of women, explaining complications that

occurred during her own beauty operations, “belly gorged on two pints of my own blood I had swallowed under anaesthesia and [...] my body screaming from the inside out ‘What did you let them do to you?’” The technique of voice changes is especially audible in this phrase, conveying frustration and almost defeat and experiencing the change into anger. It is evident that these issues have been traumatising for the performance self of the poet and have had a massive negative impact on her self-image for the majority of her life, as she expresses her criticism with a passion and desperation only someone who has experienced the struggle with body image and beauty standards first hand. Makkai shows the audience a forceful, yet vulnerable side of her performance persona, which requires a massive level of emotional strength and craftswoman shift.

In the last part of her performance, the poet creates a hypothetical scenario in bringing a possible future daughter into the picture, who she addresses directly. Makkai turns to this possible future daughter of hers and expresses her will to deny her the attribute of being “just pretty”. The poet vows instead that the word “pretty” will only be used as an adverb, rather than an adjective, stating that “the word pretty is unworthy of everything you will be”.

3.5. 10 Honest Thoughts on Being Loved by a Skinny Boy – Rachel Wiley

“I say ‘I am fat’; he says ‘no, you’re beautiful’; I am wondering why I cannot be both?”

In the featured section on the official Button Poetry Homepage, Rachel Wiley is described as “a performer, poet, feminist, and fat positive activist”. This description is very fitting when thinking about the content of her performance, which will be analysed in this part. Furthermore, Wiley has been able to tour America, performing at different venues and distributing her poems in printed publishing. This following performance was recorded in 2013, in the course of a National Poetry Slam event in Boston.

Rachel Wiley has chosen a very intimate and personal topic for her poem, one that commonly known by women across the globe – female body confidence issues. In her poem, she discusses the problems of loving your own body while simultaneously having a partner that might not understand your self-confidence problems, because they do not share the same body type. Although Wiley titled her poem in a way that would assume her relationship might be the sole topic of her performance, she also addresses issues from her past that led her to have body confidence issues. Rachel Wiley’s stage outfit might not be relevant to the straightforward content of her poem, but it still is worth mentioning in a wider context. Within so-called Western beauty standards, women with bigger bodies are often shunned for wearing body-fitting outfits and bright colours, since these are said to accentuate parts of women’s body that are not to be seen in public. By wearing a bright green dress and a big flower pin in her hair, Wiley (consciously or unconsciously) challenges these stereotypes and shows her audience that she is not afraid to be seen.

Wiley’s first thought includes an exchange with her boyfriend, in which he corrects her about being beautiful rather than fat, “I wonder why I cannot be both?”, she asks in a soft and

insecure voice. The thought process behind her question might be to indicate that women with bigger bodies can still be beautiful and that the form of bigger women tends to be seen as being in the way of their beauty.

The poet's second thought includes the statement of a previous teacher of hers, who claimed that people with bigger body types would never be casted in a leading role in romantic theatre performances, which is rightfully questioned by the performer, who states that plays are written with animals in leading roles but "apparently no-one has enough willing suspension of disbelief to buy anyone loving a fat girl". The fact that Wiley chose to include this encounter in her performance shows the long-lasting negative impact one statement can have on the self-confidence of a person.

The following few points can be summarized as a various flickers into Wiley's relationship with her significant other, always under the light of her self-confidence issues, which mostly include her own body. Gestures play an important role in this part of the performance, where the poet mostly uses her hands to indicate her own thickness or her boyfriend's skinniness. In moments of self-doubt, she admits to searching his belongings for evidence of adultery and explains her uneasiness when holding hands in public, because she feels like people are staring at their unlike body types - "I wonder if he notices the stares, like he is handling a parade balloon down a crowded sidewalk".

However, despite her self-doubts and abandonment fears, Wiley shows small glimpses of resilience against female beauty standards. The poet does that by explicitly calling out a popular women's magazine called "Cosmopolitan", which is known for promoting skinny body types, explaining that she "will not take [Cosmopolitan's] sex tips on how to please a man that you do not think my body will ever be worthy of". Furthermore, she forcefully speaks out against the trend of "big girls need loving too", stating that her body type does not only exist as fetish tool for men. In a twist of perspectives, Wiley then explains that her

partner is often in doubt about his attractiveness as well and she tries to provide him with validation to make him feel beautiful, while simultaneously fearing the day he believes her “is the day he leaves”.

As one of her last thoughts, she provides the listener with an experience she had when out with her boyfriend, which made her doubt her value in her own relationship – “I spend the next two weeks replacing my face with [the face of the girl who flirted with her boyfriend]”. The reaction of her significant other towards her doubt and her acts of self-deprecation (“[W]e spend the whole night taking new pictures”) shows his personal growth in terms of being in a relationship with a person with a body type deemed not normal by general societal beauty standards: he makes the poet feel loved despite her apparent imperfections. While he had previously indicated that the poet was not “fat” but rather “beautiful”, he now accepts the fact that her body type does not interfere with her beauty.

With her poem, Wiley points out one of the most problematic issues within the topic of female body types: stereotypes of unrealistic beauty standards created by society, which are influenced by the fashion industry. Within modern society standards, only certain body types are considered “beautiful”, excluding the majority of women, whose shapes do not conform to these standards. By acknowledging these problems Rachel Wiley brings attention to the repercussions of prefaced expectation towards the ideal female body and the long-lasting psychological trauma it can cause in women.

3.6. How Not to Make Love to a Fat Girl – Yesika Salgado

“[S]ex with someone new when things about your body often frighten you is nerve-wrecking”

Yesika Salgado, described on her homepage as “Los Angeles based Salvadoran poet” is a performance and published poet, whose work brought her to the 2017 and 2018 finals of the National Poetry Slam. Evident from not only the layout of her homepage, which is titled “Fat, Fly and Brown” but also from her choice of topics for her poetry: “writes about her family, her culture, her city, and her fat brown body.” Embracing her body and connecting it to female sexuality is therefore the main theme of her next poem, which has been chosen for this analysis. Aside from the content of the poem itself, manner of deliverance played an important part in choosing this performance for analysis. Although Salgado chose a serious topic she still uses humour to make her statement.

Similar to previously analysed poet Rachel Wiley, Yesika Salgado has chosen to talk about the topic of the female body issues based on the struggle to fit into standard beauty requirements, possibly drawing from her own experience with her larger body type. Opposite to Wiley, however, Salgado addresses the struggles of women of bigger body types in combination with female sexuality and the issue of personal insecurities in a sexual relationship.

At the beginning of the performance, Yesika Salgado sets the scene of her poem with a sensual description of a sexual interaction with her partner, explaining how she submits herself and her body completely to her lover and using an almost sultry voice to do so. Suddenly, the mood changes when her partner starts to focus on her stomach, eliciting a feeling of insecurity within the poet, who states that the action made the situation “weird and totally not sexy”. The poet-performer introduces this abrupt change of mood with a change of voice, abandoning the sultry undertone in her voice and adapting a more conversational way

of speaking. She further acknowledges her larger body and expresses her understanding for her lover's need of appreciation for her "extra around [her] abdomen", simultaneously challenging them to create newer, less awkward ways to do so, "be creative, teach me something new; but whatever you do don't sit there and rub my belly like a genie lamp for fifteen minutes".

Salgado points out the fact that sexual interactions with a new partner might be embarrassing at the beginning anyway, adding that "sex with someone new when things about your body often frighten you is nerve-wrecking". By stating this, Salgado expresses insecurities concerning her own body and its appearance, especially when she is baring it all during sexual intercourse. The feeling of not being enough of a lover due to her bigger body type is a constant fear embedded in the performer's mind, which she elaborates by giving the example of not being able to perform sex in a sports car, claiming that "it is fucking physically impossible and says nothing about my self-esteem". Salgado also states that men "make it difficult to be a fat girl graceful in her own body", since they often fail to show appreciation for her as a whole, but rather reduce her to her bodily flaws and fetishize her appearance, "as if it were too much to ask to find the whole of me desirable". Salgado admits to allowing the insecurities about her own body to take over her thoughts ("I am larger than most women and sometimes I care about this more than who I am sleeping with does") and often bearing the fear of "not being enough" beyond sexual interactions.

Her stance on this changes, however, in the last section of her performance, in which she explains to her new partner (and the rest of the audience) how her standards have changed, expressing her new found confidence. Due to a sexual encounter she had with a previous partner, proofing to her that there is no shame in having a bigger body type and still be in touch with their own sexuality. Salgado internalised this pride and sexual self-confidence,

inviting her partner to adapt to her high sexual standards (“Trust me; you’ll get luckier this way”).

3.7. A Wasted Ass Shave – Raych Jackson

“[A]ll for some fucking orgasm I wrote on my to-do list that day”

Raych Jackson’s performance of her auto-biographic poem “A Wasted Ass Shave” was the last one to be chosen for this analysis, simply for the fact that the content at first did not seem very appropriate for an academic thesis. However, Jackson performs her poem with a lot of humour, which, in the context of feminist performance poetry and its typical themes, could be seen as a slightly different approach to previously analysed performers. The poem concerns itself with the topic of female sexuality, specifically with a woman being confident in her sexuality and sexual needs, who does not shy away from pursuing her own sexual pleasure.

Jackson does not provide the audience with any background information concerning her poem before starting her performance; however, her poem includes so much experience from her own personal perspective that a distinctively set context is not necessary for understanding the poem itself. The poet also embeds various intersections in her performance, where she goes “off script”, breaking her on-stage persona and sharing some more information about the sexual experience she speaks about.

In the past, women’s preferred attributes were mostly seen as “passive” and “coy”, whether that related to public or private affairs. Their emotional and sexual needs were always seen secondary to their male companions up until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, where female sexual health slowly surfaced as a public topic. Still, women who express their sexual desires and demands are rare and often labelled promiscuous. Therefore, Raych Jackson’s performance (and those of other poets discussed in other chapters) is seen as especially impactful in terms of openly discussing female sexuality and sexual confidence.

In her poem, Jackson describes a sexual encounter she had in the past, which did not turn out as planned. She starts by explaining that this encounter happened with only the second sexual partner she has ever had at this point, however, she had already enough confidence in her own sexuality and needs that she knew exactly how to get her own pleasure. What makes Jackson's performance special is her use of humour to describe her awkward experience. Her humorous approach towards this topic loosens up the intimacy of the exchange and makes it more accessible to a public audience. Jackson's performance shows that feminist issues can be humorous and still shine a light on an important issue, such as sexual confidence of women and their wrongful perception within society. Her voice is strong and loud, starting out the same way as it comes across in the end, not wavering in the process of her performance. The poet has chosen a narrative way of performing, telling the audience about this intimate exchange with a sexual partner in a casual way, as if she was telling a close friend about it. The use of her voice in combination with her body communication, however, bring so much humour into her performance that there is no room for any kind of second-hand embarrassment.

With regards to content, Jackson begins her poem by explicitly stating her experience with this sexual partner, especially foreplay and the partner's skills in terms of oral sex. During this part, Jackson's facial expressions make up a tremendous amount of her body communication: eyes narrowing and mouth twitching in comical confidence about her awkward sexual encounter. The word 'confidence' surely comes to mind when watching this performance, expressed through the poet's casual stance and usage of her body to show the audience exactly how her companion's tongue worked on her neither regions. "[He] gave me head, like a shy frog trying to catch a fly", she states, before pushing her tongue out, bored look in her eyes. By doing this, she includes a comedic pause into her performance, giving the audience time to react to her bold statement. She details the whole encounter and setting in the

following lines, explaining the less than romantic circumstances – “[he] let me turn on [TV] during”. After illustrating her meagre sexual encounter in great detail, Jackson expresses her frustration about this experience by stating the hardship of shaving her bum in preparation for it, “all for some fucking orgasm I wrote on my to-do list that day”. By equalising the female orgasm to everyday activities like grocery shopping lists, Jackson normalises the topic and shows an implicitness of female pleasure, which has previously been something only discussed in private. Dragging her own sexuality and pleasure in the open, the poet shows a great level of confidence in herself and her personal needs, not shying away from publicly talking about an unsatisfying experience. In the end, she suggests to “end this dick appointment” and openly stops the intercourse instead of silently sitting through it, out of fake emotional awareness of her partner’s ego. By doing this, she puts her own pleasure in front and shows strong female sexual confidence. Centralised, it can be said that Raych Jackson’s sexual confidence, which makes up the main content of her poem, is perfectly reflected in and illustrated by her confidence portrayed in her body communication.

3.8. Slut – GiGi Bella

“I am straight-up Carrie Bradshaw but this country treats me like I’m sixteen and pregnant”

Gigi Bella is the next female poet whose performance of her poem “Slut” will be analysed in the course of this thesis. Bella describes herself as “as an award-winning performance poet, artist and social justice advocate” in the “About” section of her homepage. The young poet gained success at various slam poetry events all over the U.S. and further is involved in other projects such as directing and teaching. The first factor of why Bella’s poem has been selected was the boldness of the title of the poem, instantly providing the audience with a possible image of the content without even seeing the performance, since the slur “slut” has such a negative connotation within contemporary society, especially in regards to women. Combined with the message of the poem as well as the poet’s performance provided enough reason for the decision to include this performance in this analysis.

The portrayal and verbalisation of the message of the poem shows that this poem might be written from personal experience. Furthermore, the poet sets a coming of age setting, where she expresses her experiences from high school to now as a young adult. Similar to the previously discussed performance of Raych Jackson, Gigi Bella has also chosen the topic of female sexuality and sexual confidence for her poem. In contrast to the former poet, Bella has chosen a different and more direct approach towards the topic, including a greater part of society’s perception and prejudice towards sexually confident women in her performance. While most of the analysed performances do not require an in debt description of the performer’s appearance, since it is not relevant to the content itself, Bella’s performance provides the exception. Although it cannot be said for sure, there is a strong assumption that the poet’s outfit is part of the performance itself and shows a further statement made by Bella

and the sexual confidence she wants to exude. She is dressed in a long dress, which shows off her curves and is low cut at the front, making it quite revealing. Bella also wears heels and some accessories, which seems as if she does not shy away from attention but rather wants to be seen. Confidence is a prominent term that comes to mind when watching this performance, the poet portraying a confident demeanour from the moment she steps on stage until the end of her performance. This confidence can also be observed in Bella's use of body communication: her posture is straight, which is also supported by the fact that she is wearing high heels, and her shoulders are square.

In similar fashion to her revealing outfit, Bella does not hesitate to openly express her opinions concerning "slut shaming" and female sexuality. She starts by criticising the sexual education, or lack thereof, she received in school, having the feeling that teachers and adults in general tried to scare young people into abstinence rather than educating them on the matter. Instead of explaining ways of safe sex, adults were using horror stories of STDs as scare tactics. Despite these first experiences with sexual education, Bella still grew up to feel comfortable within her sexuality. Defying the classical passive role women are often assigned to within society, Bella expresses her confidence in her body and sexuality openly in her performance. She refuses to be lectured by people "afraid of their own sexuality" and furthermore criticises the juxtaposition of men being praised for having an active sex life and bragging about it while women get villainised for doing the same.

One product of this misogynistic inequality between the sexes in terms of sexual openness is reflected in the use of language. While straight men are being praised for having multiple sexual partners, women are being called "easy", "promiscuous" or even worse, "slut". In her performance, Bella acknowledges and criticises this double standard, but instead of being ashamed of this branding, she embraces the slur and makes it her own. By calling herself a "slut" and holding her sexuality up with pride, the poet erases the negative connotation of the

word. A similar reclaim has previously occurred in the LGBTQ+ community, who slowly took on the slur of “queer” and adapted it towards a more positive meaning.

A further point of critique made by Bella in her performance is the involvement of the American government in female health and sexuality. Since the poet is American, it was obvious even without context which kind of government she referred to in her speech, however, her key statements could certainly also apply to other countries. Women being in charge of their own bodies have been a topic of discussion for a long period of time, with the U.S. being one of the developed countries where in some states anti-abortion laws are still in effect. Bella criticises this interference of the government with such a private manner such as female sexuality: “I am entitled to my own choices, and yet the government wants to march into my downstairs and make me listen to their damn voices”. Referring back to her criticism of sexual education, Bella states that female “promiscuity” is generally connected to sexual diseases and unwanted pregnancies. “[D]on’t try to tell me that my precautions aren’t good enough, because birth control is my best friend. So if pills are for sluts then call me slut”, she states in regards to these claims.

In her performance, Gigi Bella makes a lot of statements concerning female sexuality and female body, learning about self-acceptance and being comfortable enough in your own body, so that you can enjoy every aspect of it without having to give up sexual safety precautions. The most memorable quote of her performance, however, occurs in the last few phrases of her poem, and is something that sets a statement to misogynistic people, who are villainising women for being sexually confident: “[J]ust because I like sex doesn’t mean I am having it with everything with a dick, dick”. The confidence of the performer is clearly reflected in the way she uses her voice to present herself and the content of her performance. Bella expresses sexual confidence by flirting with the audience and using seductive undertones in her speech,

being forward in her (sexual) demands and therefore challenging stereotypical depictions of female courtship; the idea of women being passive and coy in terms of romantic affairs.

3.9. “9 Things I Would Like to Tell to Every Teenage Girl” – Melissa Newman-Evans

“[S]omeday someone is going to call you a woman; it’s going to be the most terrifying thing to think about yourself; but recognize it for the medal of honour that it is”

Similar to other performances analysed in this segment, Melissa Newman-Evans’ poem “9 Things I Would Like to Tell to Every Teenage Girl” addresses a variety of feminist issues in one performance, directing it towards a female teenage audience. A quick browser search did reveal a homepage of the poet; however, it was under construction at the time of this writing, so no personal information about her background was available. Still, Newman-Evans’ poem, which is featured in this upcoming analysis was portrayed on multiple platforms, praising her for her boldness. Unfortunately, there is no overall information available concerning the setting of the performance or the writing motivation of the poet.

The topics of body issues and female beauty standards unfortunately are very all-encompassing in the lives of women living in modern societies. While these topics have been damaging to the female psyche for decades, the distribution of *ideal* body images has increased indefinitely through the instalment of the internet. Throwing the struggles of puberty into the mix which often includes having an identity crisis without the added pressure of fitting into society’s standards, teenage girls are one of the most vulnerable female age-groups in this day and age. Apparently, Melissa Newman-Evans has a similar opinion towards the struggles of teenage girls and body images, so she chose to write a poem about it, serving as some kind of guardian for a younger generation and giving positive advice to her intended

audience. The poet has gathered nine advices and statements she wants teenage girls to know about.

Newman-Evans starts her performance by declaring that “the world is trying to kill you”, which does not refer to the literal sense, but rather refers to the suppression of women and their public voices. While some might say that equality of men and women has increased within the last few decades, today’s society is still very much based around the same patriarchal values from a hundred years ago. Newman-Evans therefore encourages girls to stand up for themselves and find their voices, although she does not specify whether this should happen in a specific context.

The poet further dives into the issues of female appearance and body image by declaring that her intended audience, meaning teenage girls, are always the best thing in the room rather than the prettiest, “but that shit doesn’t matter, that shit is the world trying to kill you”. There is a noticeable similarity between Newman-Evans’ statement and Katie Makkai’s poem, in which she also states that her future daughter will never be reduced to the adjective “pretty”. The reason behind this might be the intention to open up the linguistic spectrum for female attributes, which appear to be restricted to outer appearance in most cases. Concurrently, Newman-Evans also points out that the issue of body image will be something a young woman has to deal with inevitably; however, she encourages her audience to be critical of these images and develop their own way of coping with them. One coping mechanism the poet suggests is to “wear whatever you want, look however you want”, without respect for anyone else they might offend with their look. This suggestion plays into her previous statement of girls finding their own voices, by expressing themselves in any way they see fit – “[Y]ou know who can fuck themselves if they don’t like it? Everyone!” When speaking about defying standard beauty standards, a topic Newman-Evans is visibly passionate about, her facial features become very “loud”, eyebrows almost reaching her hairline, mouth widening

with every spoken word. She slips into a performance persona, exaggerating her facial expressions in combination with the use of her voice to highlight her advice. Lastly, Newman-Evans returns to her claim about the world wanting to kill teenage girls, though this time, she takes this statement in a literal sense. The poet, however, does not specify why and how these girls might be in mortal danger; she leaves that open for interpretation. Still, there are enough examples of society posing a mortal danger for women and girls alike: from eating disorders and other mental health problems due to exposure to unrealistic beauty standards, to insufficient female health care and mutilation of sexual organs, to rape-culture and domestic abuse. Due to these threats, Newman-Evans finally states the importance of unity and support between women and girls alike. She stresses that although there might be differences in appearances, sexuality or gender-identity, women and girls are still the same internally – “the girl with the jacked-up teeth and the thrift store jeans [...], the girl who fucks girls [...], the girl who used to be called Jake but is now called Jane [...], the cheerleaders who are trying so hard to kill you are still your sisters”. The importance of unity has been highlighted by feminist theorists before, as example Simone de Beauvoir might be named, who criticised the lack of close entity of women from all social-economic spheres and portrayed it as the reason for gender equality. Similar to Beauvoir, Newman-Evans encourages teenage girls to look past all their differences and embrace the sisterhood community in order to stand united in front of the world, “the world is trying to kill each and every one of you, and if you do not hold each other up, no one else will”.

In her poem, Melissa Newman-Evans expresses her support for young women and girls, providing encouragement and giving advice for a younger generation who might struggle with growing up in a society that might not want them to succeed. Still, the poet tries to give her audience hope and confidence while stressing the need for a female community working together at the same time. This approach of female unity makes Newman-Evans a “woman-

identified-woman” in the eyes of Charlotte Bunch, who explains that “[a] woman-identified-woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support.” (129) In my personal opinion, this approach of women empowering women needs to be imprinted more clearly into the minds of girls and women worldwide, since tearing each other apart will not get us anywhere.

3.10. Heels – Imani Cezanne

“I wear heels because I’m grown. Period”

Describing herself as “a highly acclaimed writer, performer, teaching artist, and poetry slam coach”, Cezanne draws her poetic inspiration from her experience as a Black woman in order to write about topics such as “race, gender, sexuality and privilege to become a catalyst for social justice and change”. She has been a successful touring performance artist in the last few years, besides also teaching Creative Writing and Spoken Word. The following poem was performed by the poet-performer at a slam event in 2014, in California.

One of the reasons of modern day misogyny has its roots in the out-dated assumption that men have to be the strong and masculine counterparts to weak and feminine women. This image of male superiority is woven through all the aspects of life, starting with physical strength to even height. Poet Imani Cezanne has taken on the topic of toxic masculinity in her poem “Heels” in which she takes up the topic of her height and in how far it has influenced some of her relationships with men. Cezanne uses an interesting approach of providing the audience with a certain context for her poem by making it a mixture between stating it before the start of her performance and integrating her background information into it. She does that by stating that her poem is a response to men that have criticised her decision to wear heels as a tall woman in the past and including this statement in the first few lines, crossing smoothly

into the actual poem. However, she has already taken on her 'performance self' when giving this information to her audience.

As already stated, Cezanne establishes her poem as a response to certain men in her past that made negative comments about her height, and how her height made them uncomfortable in their position as masculine individuals. She has been asked multiple times why she was wearing heels when she is already taller than the average woman, making it obvious that most men have a problem with her being taller than them. Unimpressed about those questions, Cezanne criticises their attitude towards not only tall but also emancipated women, who do not shy away from standing up to men. Challenging the men who wanted to undermine her self-confidence, she bluntly asks, "Who told you that standing next to a tall woman would make your dick shrink?" The confidence reflected in the performer's posture is also tangible in the usage of her voice while she confidently asks this off-handed question.

Apart from calling out men directly about feeling emasculated by the literal height of a woman they are with, Cezanne also criticises the concept of toxic masculinity that is so deeply rooted within society. Prohibiting men to show their emotions and weaknesses has created this illusion of vulnerability as infirmity, putting pressure on, especially straight men to keep up a superior stance towards women.

After expressing her resentment towards the concept of toxic masculinity and its effects on male/female relationships, the poet moves on to explain her reasons for wearing heels, although her natural height is already above average. "I wear heels because I am grown. Period", Cezanne states, referring to a certain level of maturity one needs to be as emotionally confident as she is. Speaking of confidence, she furthermore explains that she wears heels because, "it is useless to cater to the insecure", implying that men who feel emasculated by her height do not deserve her attention anyway. She expresses such boldness with not only her

words but also her facial expression, wearing an almost bored looking expression and talking in a patronising voice.

In the last part of her performance, Cezanne again addresses issues of masculinity created by modern day society. However, she now challenges the men who previously discriminated her to stand up against the concept of toxic masculinity. She claims that “those same people told me big girls [...] aren’t feminine enough” and that the importance of working against these stereotypes would make it possible to completely erase them in the future. Though she has been trying to fit into socially accepted stereotypes, she never succeeded since “shrinking don’t [sic] come easy to us giants, right?” Combined with the poet’s strong and powerful voice, she perfectly portrays a woman that is patronizing men that think being shorter than their women takes away their masculinity.

3.11. Shrinking Woman – Lily Myers

“[A]nd I wonder if my lineage is one of women shrinking, making space for the entrance of men into their lives, not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave”

Lily Myers’ description of her profession as “author, poet, tarot reader, & witch scholar” provides a stark contrast to female poets that have been introduced in the course of this analysis. She puts more emphasis on being an author, rather than a performer, which is also mirrored in the fact that the actual “About” page does not feature the term anymore. Her fascination with witchcraft in combination with gender studies makes up a great space in her biographic description. Myers’ poem “Shrinking Woman” was performed in 2013 in the setting of a College National Poetry Slam in New York City and has reached viral popularity due to Myers’ performance and its distribution on internet platforms, with almost six million views on YouTube since its upload.

Similar to the poet of the previous performance, Lily Myers has also chosen to talk about toxic masculinity and its impact on women, which she has also related to the phenomenon of ‘taking up space’. In comparison to Cezanne, however, Myers did not choose to approach the topic from a literal angle, but relates the topic to a figurative “shrinking” of women, rather than the actual space they draw upon. She looks at the phenomenon of “shrinking women” in terms of the receding female space in a patriarchal world, combining it with undertones of possible eating disorders. At the beginning of the poem, Myers uses a method to get herself focused and bring attention to her performance by closing her eyes and keeping quiet until the audience quiets down and focuses on her. She does not, however, give any background information on the origin of her poem and whether the silence on her part at the beginning of her performance was part of it or merely a way to centre herself and sliding into her stage persona. The voice of the performer is mostly levelled during her performance, which Myers

might have done purposefully to indicate her “shrinking” personality by being calm, timid and coy.

Myers starts her performance by describing an exchange she had with her mother at the dinner table, where she noticed that her mother deprived herself in order to provide Myers with untouched food on her plate. This occurrence of self-deprivation threatens itself through every aspect of her mother’s life, as the poet explains, “she wanes while my father waxes”. Returning to the illustration of food, Myers states that while the women in her family become fragile figures, the men increase in size. She explains that phenomenon as “making space for the entrance of men into their lives, not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave”. As already discussed in previous chapters of analysis, women were historically pushed into a passive position, only set as a side-piece to men instead of individual entities. They were taught to be the weaker complement to strong masculinity, accommodating male temperament and balancing it out with their containment.

In the course of her performance, Myers also criticises the difference in upbringing of men and women, stating that “my brother never thinks before he speaks, I have been taught to filter”. She further explains that this has caused her to inhabit some of her mother’s behaviour, unintentionally confining herself and trying not to be any trouble for her surroundings. Myers illustrates this adapted behaviourism by saying that whenever she asks question in her university courses, she apologizes beforehand. She has started to resent her mother for subconsciously teaching her these manners, although the poet acknowledges that this was never her mother’s fault, since women in her family have created space for men “for generations”.

The concept of “creating space” in Myers’ poem is very ambivalent in terms of interpretation, meaning that she combines the literal shrinking with metaphorical shrinking of women in a patriarchal society. The metaphorical phenomenon of “women creating space for men” has

already been discussed in length in previous paragraphs, signifying the different ways of upbringing of men and women, women being taught to restrict themselves while men are allowed to have expressive temperaments. However, Myers also addresses the literal sense of shrinking women in her performance, indicating the complicated and often toxic relationship with food that most women are taught from a very young age. She explains that this behaviour was part of what she has unintentionally been picking up from her mother, restricting herself from food in order to be attractive to men. She explains this further by giving the example of her father's new girlfriend, who "was overweight as a teenager [...] but now she's 'crazy about fruit'", implying the girlfriend has changed her body in order to appeal to Myers' father or men in general. Interestingly, Myers never directly accuses men of forcing these behaviours on women, but rather criticises women for letting themselves being pushed into these behaviours. "[T]hat's why women in my family have been shrinking for generations", she concludes.

3.12. Ode to My Bitch Face – Olivia Gatwood

“‘[R]esting bitch face’, they call you; but there is nothing restful about you, no”

Olivia Gatwood is a young American poet, who started writing and performing her own poetry when she was still in High School. At her young age, she is currently a “full-time touring artist” and has gained popularity through her performances of poems about puberty, relationships as well as sexual assault. Furthermore, Gatwood works as an “educator in sexual assault prevention and recovery”. Her performances have been featured in visual as well as print media. This specific poem has been chosen for analysis due to the fact that “Resting Bitch Face” has been developed in contemporary youth culture to mock women of their unapproachableness in public places, and Gatwood takes on the task of looking behind the façade to discover the real reason behind some women’s stoic expressions in public spheres. The exact setting of the performance cannot be determined due to lack of information; however, it appears to be a slam poetry event in the U.S.

In order to understand Gatwood’s poem, one must be familiar with the terms she is using in her performance. Since the term of “resting bitch face” has only recently surfaced, many might not know the exact meaning of it, which might result in a short “Google” search. The phenomenon appears to be such a point of interest that, apart from urban dictionary entries, even news outlets like CNN have written articles about the topic. Since the cultural importance of the “resting bitch face” has apparently sky-rocketed in recent times, so much in fact that even scientists have conducted research on the topic, Gatwood’s choice of topic seems reasonable. However, her approach is different; instead of conducting surveys into the biological effects of having a “RBF” (acronym for “resting bitch face”), the poet looks into the social reasons for women wearing a permanent frown on their faces. Gatwood also states

the reason why she produced this poem, which is her personal project of writing about aspects of her appearance or personality she is supposed to feel ashamed about by societal standards.

As already mentioned in a previous paragraph, Gatwood begins her performance by providing her audience with a certain context, including a crude description of what it means to have a “RBF”. In the poet’s own words, it is a “term coined by someone who is just generally unhappy with the fact that women aren’t smiling like literally all the time”. In fact, most of the definitions found on the term are referring to women rather than men, especially female celebrities are mostly attributed with this feature. However, while scientists are trying to find reasoning in genetics in combination with gravity, Gatwood sees the “RBF” as a way for women to close themselves off for their own safety. For the poet, the lack of facial expression is a safe-zone to avoid looking appealing to men, who might harass her. Beside a lack of facial expressions, the main factors contributing to this safe-zone for women are the avoidance of eye-contact and making one look busy, for example wearing headphones without any music on. The importance of pretending to be unavailable for outside influences while still being aware of your surroundings is stressed by the poet in potentially dangerous situations for women, which could range from “trying to do your laundry” to “trying to dance at the party”.

Some people might accuse Gatwood of exaggerating the danger women could find themselves in, but this is another point of criticism brought up in the poet’s performance; Gatwood heavily criticises the fact that every type of expression will be seen as prompt for men to approach women. Therefore, she sees the “resting bitch face” as female armour against male predators. Interestingly, Gatwood’s face is almost completely devoid of any expression throughout her performance, contributing to the theme of her performance. The poet further accuses society of turning women towards these kinds of self-preserving behaviour, allowing

men to treat women like lesser people, cat-calling after them in the streets and generally calling them all kinds of names if they do not respond to their advances.

The term of “resting bitch face” has adapted a widely negative connotation, branding women as cold-hearted individuals incapable of showing emotions in public. Gatwood also addresses this in her performance; however, she mentions it before the actual presentation of her poem. She explains that women are often taught to be ashamed of who they are, how they dress or behave, because it does not appeal to male standards. Women, for example, refuse to smile for strangers in public and are therefore branded with a “resting bitch face” in order to evoke shame from them. Concerning the feeling of shame, Gatewood states that “we think we’re supposed to feel it, we are told to feel it, about the way that we live and act and walk and speak and dress and are, [...] it’s not an organic feeling”. So similar to previously analysed poet Gigi Bella, Gatwood takes on the term of “RBF” and makes it her own, therefore adapting it to something powerful instead of shameful.

3.13. Fantastic Breasts and Where to Find Them – Brenna Twohy

“I am whole; I exist when you are not fucking me and I will not be cut into pieces anymore”

Brenna Twohy, unlike other previously discussed poets, does not have an academic background in the field of writing poetry. Instead, she currently finalises her law school studies, with intend of becoming a public defender in the future. Nonetheless, her body of work is extensive, with her last performance being uploaded to YouTube just two weeks ago. Twohy’s poem, which has been chosen for the sake of this analysis, was recorded in 2014 in the setting of a National Poetry Slam event. The primary reason for considering the performance for analysis in the first place was in fact the title of the poem and its reference to contemporary pop-culture. However, the content of the poem – the portrayal of women in pornographic media - settled the decision to include this performance in this thesis.

The perception of women in media has been an increasing topic of discussion within feminist issues in recent years, thanks to the availability of different outlets of media through the commercial instalment of the internet. One type of media, which has experienced a push in the course of this period of digitalisation, is internet porn. Porn has risen from its secretive spot in society to something that is available for free and can be watched by every age-group. Whether this development can be seen as positive is up for another discussion. Fact is that more people have access to porn and with non-sufficient sexual education in schools especially young people often turn to porn to make up for their lack of knowledge. However, porn videos and their content mainly play into male fantasies of dominating women and using them for their pleasure alone, not mirroring reality in the slightest. Still, many young men and also women get the impression from these videos that this is the correct way to treat or be treated by a partner. With her poem, Brenna Twohy has chosen to point out the problems of

female depiction in pornography and how it affects real life relationships in a patriarchal society.

Twohy starts her performance by explaining her passion for the Harry Potter series and what fans have done with it, especially referring to fan fiction that has been created by them. She further explains the criticism she has received for reading fan fiction containing sexual content, as it is branded “unrealistic” by her peers. Twohy challenges this assumption by stating that these fictions are bound to a bigger story and not just some one-dimensional characters as they can be found in modern day porn.

Since the poem generally is concerned with the topic of the female body, the poet chooses specific hand movements to accentuate this theme, always keeping the serious message of her poem in the back of her mind, changing her movements in different segments. One example would be the way her hands run along her body almost sensually at times but changing it to harsher movements the next second. Not only does Twohy use gestures to accentuate her performance, she also lets her facial expression play a major role in the delivery of her poem. This is most obvious in the fact that the mimic of her face increasingly transforms from soft features into a grimace, expressing her frustration and rejecting the beauty of her own body and face. As example one might focus on the poet’s mouth, which she keeps open wide in an almost comical way.

The poet goes on to further criticising pornos and their content, claiming that men get away with fantasising about barely legal girls and turning lesbians straight, while her erotica “isn’t quite lifelike”. Twohy compares the porn industry to a slaughterhouse, where women are degraded to their physical attributes and solely perceived as objects of male fantasies. She explains the struggle of watching these videos and getting the impression of this being the reality of a male/female sexual relationship, “reminding me that men are going to fuck me whether I like it or not, that there is one use for my mouth and it’s not speaking”.

The impact of female deception in pornography on reality is another point addressed by Twohy in her performance, claiming that objectifying women to sexual objects enables a more affirmative attitude towards a so-called “rape culture”. However, not only in pornos are women depicted as objects for male fantasies, also in movies this proves to be a major problem, as Twohy claims; “the first time a man I loved called me a whore, I thought ‘This is just like the movies’”. Furthermore, the poet points out the problematics for young people in general by sexualising every aspect of a relationship between men and women, assailing the fact that this results in “15-year-old boys [being] bullied for being virgins”. Twohy hereby addresses the problem of young people getting pressured into sex at an age where they might not be emotionally developed enough to deal with the consequences of sexual activeness.

In a last point of discussion made by the poet, Twohy excoriates the fact that society has done little to nothing to stop this trend of teaching young people about sex and relationships through pornography. She complains that the general attitude is to look the other way instead of facing the problem, “if you play-act at butchery long enough, you grow used to the sounds of screaming”. Reason for this is the profit made from movies and media induced with sexual content, making the marketing of women more important than their perception and well-being. Working against this, she vows not to be reduced to her sexuality alone and states, “my sex cannot be packaged, [...] I am whole”.

3.14. Princess Peach Speaks – Megan Falley, Olivia Gatwood

“[C]an a woman get some alone-time in here to deal with her shit? What shit you ask? I don’t know, body image, rape culture, motherhood, gender roles; the fact that no-one will let her wear anything but a pink dress?”

Even though I set myself the rule of not repeating a performer in this analysis at the beginning of this thesis, it was nearly impossible not to include Gatwood again, this time in collaboration with fellow poet Megan Falley. This pair of poet-performers have collaborated a number of times together, with Falley matching Gatwood’s success in terms of publications and award-winning performances. The appeal of this performance, apart from the obvious group dynamic between the two performers, is the implementation of references from popular culture. The poem is based on references from the popular video game “Super Mario” but uses metaphors to build a relevance to contemporary female issues. The individual poets complement each other by mostly reciting the same lines at the same time, bringing more power to the aspect of voice.

Male heroes have been part of literature and popular culture for centuries, starting out in folk lore, evolving towards written literature and movies until they even reached the genre of video games in the last decades. Fighting beasts and going on adventures, these heroes are often rewarded with the love of a ‘fair maiden’ at the end of their quest, after having just rescued their helpless lover out of the hands of lethal enemies. For generations, these heroes have been celebrated but in retrospective not a lot has changed in terms of storyline or protagonists over time. Seldom, women have taken on the role of the heroine in an adventure story; even less often it was their quest to rescue a male love-interest. In their poem “Princess Peach Speaks”, poets Megan Falley and Olivia Gatwood challenge the traditional perception of heroes by taking on the role of the princess in the video game series “Super Mario”. Responding to the

protagonist Mario's attempts to rescue the princess, the two women give an insight into the thoughts of the fictional character.

The two poets structure their poem as a direct response to the protagonist of the game, Mario, finally reaching the castle of princess Peach and finally saving her from her apparent imprisonment. They start by thanking him for risking his 99 lives (the maximum number of lives one could achieve in the game) and for fighting all the enemies to get to them. Their 'thank you' is however delivered in a very sarcastic manner, indicating their real thoughts about being "saved" – "from my corner of the castle, it looked a lot like adventure, but what do I know?" the two performers question in a high-pitched voice, portraying the dense ignorance of a stereotypical female character. The women continue to express their distaste for Mario, still staying in character, challenging the outdated view on female protagonists only existing for being saved by the hero. Princess Peach, they claim, has more important issues to attend to than waiting the whole day for Mario to arrive, "Princess Peach got work to do".

Further into the performance, the poets completely change up the original storyline of "Super Mario" by indicating that Princess Peach was never trapped in the castle in the first place, but rather hired Mario's arch-enemy "Bowser" as a bodyguard to insure that Mario could not get to her. It paints the picture of Mario being a man who does not accept a rejection from the princess, continuously trying to 'save' and thereby harassing her. Falley and Gatwood depict the male protagonist as personified toxic masculinity and misogyny, feeling entitled to female affection by fulfilling the minimum level of politeness, seeing him as a man, "who thinks human decency is foreplay". The depiction of Mario as the hero, who wins the affection of the princess by saving her is representative for the concept of objectifying women and reducing them to their physical attributes. The two poets describe in detail the problems these concepts bring in modern day society, supporting rape culture in the U.S., "[Mario is representative for]

all the states in America where it is legal to rape your wife”. By responding to these social concepts of objectification of women, Falley and Gatwood call the attention of their audiences towards the topic of female depiction in popular culture and the negative influence it can have on real life.

3.15. A Rape Poem to End all Rape Poems – Hehir, Thomas, Williams, Hannon

“[W]e wouldn’t need so many damn rape poems if America had listened the first time”

The last poem to analysis in this part of the thesis is also the second group performance chosen for analysis. The poetry group consists of four young poets, Justice Hehir, Lindsey Michelle Williams, Kate Thomas, and Lillie Hannon. All four poet-performers were students of Rutgers University, taking studies in their individual fields (Hehir became a playwright, Williams took on photography) and part of the slam team there. The video of the performance was posted by Williams on her YouTube channel under her full name. The performance itself took place at a College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational event in 2014 and has gathered almost two million views. The group dynamic between these four poets make the performance special, since they take up individual places in a choreographed performance, which makes each person stand out but still feels like a collective performance altogether.

Compared to the other poems included in this analysis, this performance is the only one where more than two poets take part in. This group of poets consists of four women, who appear to be part of their University poetry slam group. No uniformity within the members in terms of clothing can be detected, since they all chose to wear very different outfits. Whether this is on purpose or not cannot be determined within the available resources. However, the four poets do show a certain level of unity, incorporating a semi-consistent “choreography” into their performance, synching some of their gestures. Sometimes, this “choreography” includes taking on certain “personas” to illustrate the statements made by the other poets. One of these scenes can be seen in the first few seconds of the performance, where one of the poets describes an incident in which she was pressured to be intimate with a man, her colleagues taking on the part of the offender, imitating his words in the background as silent whispers.

Each speaker is assigned a certain passage, where she is talking individually while her fellow poets form almost “background vocals” to accentuate the individual speaker’s phrases. In general, it can be said that the group dynamic within this collective of performers appears to be very organic, their voices enhancing individual points and highlighting certain passages within the poem.

The performance starts by Hehir setting the scene by describing an interaction after a party, where she was pressured by a man into unwanted sexual actions while being intoxicated. Before she can expatiate on this interaction though, the collective exclaim of “warning” interrupts her story-telling, similar to a “freeze-frame” scene in a 90s teenage movie. The poet-performers have chosen specific passages within their poem where they chose to speak in unity, enhancing the volume and stress of their speech. To exemplify this assumption, the word “warning” can be taken: here, all four poets collectively use their voices to raise the audience attention and bring their focus to the subsequent verse. Afterwards, they resume their performance with each poet speaking single lines of the poem, before they repeat their action of collective voicing for the next important phrasing. This method is extremely effective on multiple levels: firstly, it keeps the audience’s attention in trying to follow the message of the poem. Secondly, it raises the volume of their voices and therefore puts a verbal stress on certain passages, which would be more difficult in a single poet performance. They further anticipate the reaction of their audience after the reveal of their poem’s topic, mocking their audience’s annoyance about other female poets repeatedly mentioning sexual assault in their performances. When mocking audience reactions about “another rape poem”, the performers raise their pitch to a mocking tone, while exclaiming “didn’t I just hear three of these?” Vindicating the reoccurrence of this topic, Hannon states that it is “unsurprising in a country, where someone is sexually assaulted every two minutes”. Williams continues by denouncing the concept of “victim blaming”, which is an issue often discussed by feminist

activists. Blaming the victim of sexual assault often happens in the context of intoxication and (especially in women's cases) revealing clothing that might "provoke male attention".

Hehir further states that the use of poetry is a method used by women to "beat the fucking odds in this country", referring to consciousness-making by creating feminist poetry and performing it to express their opinions on the topic of rape culture in America. In the course of the performance, the group of poets hold society and politics accountable for the lack of action in sexual assault cases, claiming "we wouldn't need so many damn rape poems, if our bodies were ours alone", hereby referring to reproductive and health rights that are denied to women in many states in the U.S. by means of government laws. As already mentioned before, the group has involved parts of choreography into their performance, mainly to further enhance the points they are making in their poem and therefore including a certain dynamic in their presentation. As example, in the line "if America had listened the first time", all four poets raise their fingers to illustrate the word 'first'. Another prominent gesture is featured at the end of the performance, complementing the phrase "until no means no" with a stomp of their right feet, which could be identified as an illustration of their frustration with the current circumstances. Apart from the loss of reproductive rights, the poet-performers call out society for teaching men to condone consent and creating a culture where women are accused of provoking assaults with the way they dress or act in public. Lastly, Hehir ends the group's performance with the statement that "the rape poems will continue, until there is no damn material left", stressing the fact that women will always find ways to speak up about their issues as long as these problems have not been addressed and resolved.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Analysis of Findings

This last part of the thesis serves the purpose of summarizing the main findings of the analyses of performances in the previous chapter, as well as providing an outlook on future developments in the context of feminist performance poetry.

What became apparent in the course of the research and compilation of this thesis paper was the fact of increasing numbers of female performance artists in a previously male dominated genre of literature. The amount of content produced and performed by female poet-performers would be enough to write several volumes of books dedicated to this topic. The performative art of poetry provides women with a “voice” (not only metaphorically speaking) and grants them an outlet to transform their private struggles into a public matter, and establishing consciousness-making in the process. The method of performance further adds a wide range of techniques to gain the attention of the audience and raising awareness to their problems of inequality in a patriarchal society. They exploit the one thing they have always been reduced to – their bodies – without the aspect of objectification. Meaning, these performers use their bodies to accentuate their meaning making while simultaneously not putting the sole focus on their bodies. Furthermore, the use of personal presence in poetry performances provides the poets with additional tools for delivering their message to their audience, such as sense perception techniques.

Content-wise, a clear shift in priorities in terms of feminist topics was able to distinguish: contemporary poet-performers adjusted their themes to match the current feminist discourse. While many young poets of the Second Feminist Waves might have described the struggles of domestic life and motherhood in their poetry, contemporary female poets are more concerned with issues such as rape culture, body image, reproductive rights and sexual health, female sexual pleasure and the portrayal of women in modern media.

4.2. Outlook on Future Developments

Judging from recent developments in terms of increase in interest in performance poetry throughout all age groups, a further rise of popularity is certainly in the cards for this reimagined genre of literature; it is already reflected in the numbers of views on some performances. Due to the easy and wide-spread distribution of audio-visual performances over social media platforms and video pages, performance poetry is made more accessible for potential new audience members or even producers of poetry. These recordings might spark motivation to attend a performance poetry event in person and become part of this interesting community.

In the specific case of feminist performance poetry, or rather feminist literature (oral and written) in general, one thing will be certain: as long as there is inequality based on gender, sexuality or race, women will write and talk about it – sharing their stories and struggles with the rest of the world to pave the way for future generations of women. Even though there is still a long way towards equality for white, middle-class women of western cultures, it is also important to keep in mind the greater level of limitations women of colour, women with disabilities, poor women and others face every day. Unless there is equality for women as a united entity, female performance poets will continue fighting for their voices.

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6. APPENDIX

6.1. Abstract

Performance poetry is a concept that has not received a lot of attention within the literature theory discourse until now, although it was the approach of spoken word that has brought a renewed interest in the verse in popular culture. Through the distribution of recorded performances on internet platforms such as YouTube, a variety of movements have found a method to raise their voices on topics close to them – with the feminist movement not being an exception. This paper will conduct a thematic and media-specific analysis of the work of female contemporary performance poets from the UK and US, investigating the most common topics chosen by this selected number of poet-performers. Furthermore, an analysis of performative techniques most commonly used by female performers will be deducted, exploring the possibilities these techniques add to the delivery of meaning and message of feminist poetry.

6.2. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

„Performance Poetry“ ist ein Konzept, welches bis jetzt recht wenig Aufmerksamkeit im theoretischen Literatur Diskurs erhalten hat, obwohl es dieser Ansatz des „spoken word“ war, das das erneute Interesse von Poesie in der Populärkultur erweckte. Durch die Distribution von aufgezeichneten Darbietungen auf Internet Plattformen wie beispielsweise YouTube haben einige verschiedene Bewegungen eine Methode gefunden ihren Stimmen Gehör zu verschaffen - die Feministische Bewegung stellt hierbei keine Ausnahme dar. Diese Arbeit wird sowohl eine thematische, als auch medien-spezifische Analyse von weiblichen „Performance Poets“ aus Großbritannien und den USA durchführen, um die meist-gewählten Themen der einzelnen Künstlerinnen herausfinden zu können. Ein weiterer Punkt dieser Arbeit wird es sein, die Techniken näher zu analysieren, die den Künstlerinnen Möglichkeiten bieten, die Bedeutung und Botschaft ihrer feministischen Gedichte noch effektiver zu überbringen.