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Spoken Word Poetry on the Housing Crisis as a Vehicle of Social Justice Activism in Ireland

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of spoken word poetry as a vehicle of social justice activism within the context of Ireland's housing crisis. Spoken word poetry has proven to be an effective medium for engaging in political discourse and participating in social justice activism. In response to the rising number of spoken word poems addressing the crisis, this thesis explores whether and how such poems can be understood within the framework of spoken word activism, and more broadly, social justice activism. This study presents a thematic and a critical discourse analysis of eight spoken word poems on Ireland's housing crisis to reveal activist elements within the poems. In addition, a performance analysis is conducted on four of these poems that exist as recordings of live performances, while a multimodal analysis is applied on the remaining four, which are categorised as poetry films. Drawing on the theory of spoken word activism, the study examines how these poems utilise a variety of activist methods, such as the use of persuasion, experiential knowledge or the generation of empathic transcendence. The results indicate that the poems can be clearly situated within the context of social justice activism and employ a range of activist methods to expose systemic injustice, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for social change. The thematic analysis reveals four central themes: the exposure of systemic oppression and the reframing of responsibility, the human impact of the housing crisis, the importance of community and collective solidarity, and visions of a socially just future achieved through resistance and action. The critical discourse analysis shows that conceptual metaphors frame the crisis as structurally and morally unjust, make political and economic responsibility tangible, and centre the representation of suffering as well as the call for solidarity and action. The performance analysis demonstrates that embodied delivery through voice, gesture, facial expression, and audience interaction strengthens the emotional and persuasive potential of the poem. The multimodal analysis reveals that the interaction of spoken word with audiovisual elements in the poetry films enhances counter-storytelling, makes marginalised experiences more visible, and positions viewers as emotionally and morally implicated in the call for social change. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the potential of spoken word poetry not only as an artistic medium, but also as a tool for political participation and social justice activism.

Abstrakt

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Rolle von Spoken Word als Form des Aktivismus für soziale Gerechtigkeit im Kontext der irischen Wohnungskrise. Spoken Word hat sich als effektives Medium erwiesen, um gesellschaftspolitische Themen aufzugreifen und sich an Diskursen zu beteiligen. Um der Frage nachzugehen, ob und inwiefern solche Gedichte als Formen sozialen Gerechtigkeitsaktivismus verstanden werden können, kombiniert diese Arbeit eine thematische Analyse und eine kritische Diskursanalyse von acht Spoken Word Gedichten. Vier dieser Gedichte liegen als Aufzeichnungen von Live-Performances vor und werden im Rahmen einer Performance-Analyse untersucht. Bei den übrigen vier handelt es sich um Poetry Filme, die mithilfe einer multimodalen Analyse genauer beleuchtet werden. Auf Grundlage der Theorie des Spoken Word Aktivismus analysiert diese Arbeit, wie die Gedichte unterschiedliche aktivistische Methoden einsetzen, darunter das Hervorrufen empathischer Transzendenz. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die analysierten Gedichte verschiedene aktivistische Methoden nutzen, um strukturelle Ungerechtigkeiten sichtbar zu machen, dominante Narrative infrage zu stellen und gesellschaftliche Veränderung einzufordern. Die thematische Analyse identifiziert vier zentrale Themen: die Sichtbarmachung systemischer Unterdrückung und die Neuverortung von Verantwortung, die menschlichen Folgen der Wohnungskrise, die Bedeutung von Gemeinschaft und kollektiver Solidarität sowie Vorstellungen einer gerechteren Zukunft, die durch Widerstand und gemeinsames Handeln erreicht werden kann. Die kritische Diskursanalyse zeigt, dass konzeptuelle Metaphern dazu beitragen, die Krise als strukturell und moralisch ungerecht darzustellen, politische und ökonomische Verantwortung greifbar zu machen und sowohl Leid als auch Solidarität und Handlungsbedarf in den Mittelpunkt zu stellen. Die Performance-Analyse zeigt, dass die performative Darbietung durch Stimme, Gestik, Mimik und Publikumsinteraktion die emotionale Wirkung und Überzeugungskraft verstärkt. Die multimodale Analyse verdeutlicht, dass das Zusammenspiel von Spoken Word und audiovisuellen Elementen in den Poetry Filmen Formen des Counter-Storytelling ermöglicht, marginalisierte Erfahrungen sichtbar macht und das Publikum emotional und moralisch in den Aufruf nach soziopolitischen Veränderungen einbezieht. Insgesamt zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass Spoken Word nicht nur als künstlerische Ausdrucksform, sondern auch als Mittel politischer Partizipation und sozialer Gerechtigkeitsarbeit positioniert werden kann.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Spoken word poetry has been widely recognised as an established literary and performative practice in Europe and the United States. Numerous events and competitions dedicated to poetry slams or open mics have gained popularity (Novak 11). The perception and interpretation of spoken word poetry extend beyond the spoken text, as the genre incorporates performative elements such as setting, vocal delivery, body communication, facial expressions, and, in live performances, the interaction between performer and audience.

The political potential of spoken word poetry has been recognised for decades, particularly in the context of social justice activism. Slave narratives within the abolitionist movement used spoken word to give voices, faces and bodies to lived experiences of oppression. Second wave feminists declared the body a political site and used personal oral narratives to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights (Chepp, "Activating Politics" 45). Scholars have identified several reasons for the effectiveness of spoken word poetry as a vehicle of social justice activism. The poetry is often deeply personal and employs storytelling to illustrate experiences of injustice, thereby offering these experiences in a tangible, emotional form. Audiences witness lived experiences expressed through performance, frequently those of marginalised individuals, and are encouraged to connect personal narratives to broader structural issues and inequalities. This level of emotional engagement can inspire moral reflection, as well as resistance, action and social change.

The term "spoken word activism" refers to the capacity of spoken word poetry to function as a medium of social justice activism, in which the personal narrative becomes political. Spoken word poetry, as a means of political participation, is valuable as it enables individuals, particularly marginalised groups, to challenge dominant narratives, share personal insights and advocate for social change. A form of participatory politics emerges, defined as an intersection of political engagement and cultural participation (Jenkins 2), which provides opportunities to participate in social justice activism through live performances and digital platforms.

Social media has further expanded the reach and accessibility of spoken word activism by providing new modes of sharing, interacting and network-building. Platforms such as YouTube can provide opportunities to share recordings of live performances, to increase exposure and to broaden audiences, which constitutes an

important component of building social activist movements. In addition to spoken word performances, poetry films have emerged as a distinct art form designed for digital consumption. Unlike live performances, poetry films transform poems into short audiovisual films that use multimodal layers of soundscape, voice, images and camera angles to shape meaning. These developments expand the opportunities for participation in spoken word activism and provide accessible means for individuals to share their work.

Ireland has a strong historical connection to spoken word traditions. The traditional role of the storyteller, or seanchaithe, historically involved the oral distribution of news and stories to working-class communities and was regarded as a trusted and respected occupation (Mercer 23). The tradition persists in contemporary Irish culture and spoken word poetry and spoken word activism have regained prominence in recent years. Through live performances and digital media, artists increasingly combine art and activism to address social issues in Ireland such as heritage, race, gender, Irishness or motherhood (Swanepoel 193).

In present-day Ireland, one of the most pressing socioeconomic issues is the housing and homelessness crisis caused by housing policies that prioritise profit and privatisation. The crisis has resulted in rising homelessness, housing inequality, high rents, declining home ownership, poor housing conditions and fear of eviction (Hearne 1-7). The Irish population is suffering as the crisis has detrimental effects on physical and mental well-being. Thousands of people are directly affected by policies surrounding housing, forcing an increasing number into homelessness. Due to this nation-wide emergency and its urgency, there has been a substantial amount of social justice activism targeting the housing crisis in Ireland (Hearne 191). Housing organisations and movements have emphasised the importance of being led by people affected by the crisis, placing personal experiences and narratives at the forefront (Lima 38). The mobilisation of individuals affected the most has become an important driving factor for social justice activists to encourage engagement in political discourse concerning housing insecurity. Spoken word activism has been utilised as a tool for social justice activism on the Irish housing crisis. For example, initiatives such as Home Sweet Home, an alliance organised by Irish Housing activists, have collaborated with spoken word artists to spread awareness concerning housing injustice.

This thesis investigates how spoken word artists utilise spoken word poetry as a form of social justice activism. As social justice activism increasingly takes place

online, providing broader access to individuals who may not be able to attend live performances, this thesis examines both live spoken word performances and poetry films. While existing research has examined textual political discourse and linguistic techniques used to persuade and mobilise spectators, this study focuses specifically on spoken word activism and the ways in which textual features, performative elements, and multimodality contribute to its activist potential. Performed poetry cannot be adequately analysed through the spoken text alone. A comprehensive understanding of meaning-making requires consideration of performance and embodiment. Similarly, poetry films utilise multiple interacting modes that may add or alter layers of meaning. Thus, a purely textual or linguistic analysis is insufficient to capture the full activist potential of spoken word poetry. The aim of this thesis is to identify the mechanisms through which spoken word poetry achieves its social justice activist impact by adopting a holistic analytical approach that considers text, performance and multimodality.

The primary objective of this thesis is to demonstrate how spoken word poetry on the Irish housing crisis can function as a vehicle of social justice activism. While the focus lies on the Irish housing crisis, the study attempts to develop a broader understanding of textual, performative and multimodal features contributing to social justice activism that can be adopted across different contexts of injustice. At the same time, this thesis acknowledges that meaning-making is shaped by cultural and historical circumstances. In the Irish context, references to national history, cultural identity and housing policies may resonate strongly with local audiences while producing different effects elsewhere. Although this thesis provides a general framework of techniques and methods of spoken word activism, the application is highly context-depended. For this thesis, the historical and cultural background of the Irish housing crisis is essential to understanding the reception and interpretation of the poems. This thesis aims to uncover how spoken word activism challenges dominant sociopolitical narratives and power structures in Ireland, presents alternative perspectives and advocates for social change, resistance and action. Another objective of this study is to demonstrate the potential of spoken word poetry for future activism, particularly in light of the ongoing housing crisis. Due to the accessibility of spoken word poetry as an instrument for political participation, this thesis aims to highlight how individuals can engage in social justice movements through artistic practices that require few resources and no pre-existing networks.

To analyse how spoken word poetry on the Irish housing crisis acts as a vehicle of social justice activism, the thesis is guided by several research questions. First, the study investigates how methods and techniques of social justice activism are utilised in spoken word poetry on the Irish housing crisis. Second, it examines how the spoken word and performative elements interact in live performances to enhance activist potential. Third, considering the importance of digital media in contemporary spoken word activism, the thesis explores how spoken word and multimodality in poetry films contribute to sociopolitical discourse surrounding the Irish housing crisis. Fourth, the thesis examines how the social and historical context of Ireland shapes the meaning and reception of the poems through textual, performative or multimodal elements. Finally, the question is raised as to how spoken word activism on the Irish housing crisis reflects or resists dominant narratives surrounding housing.

To address these research questions, a framework is constructed by combining theories and findings of scholars who have examined the methods and techniques of social justice activism and spoken word activism. This framework guides the analytical and interpretational process. To capture the full spectrum of spoken word activism, the analysis is conducted from multiple perspectives: textual, performative and multimodal. Eight spoken word poems were selected through an exploratory search on YouTube and Facebook using keywords such as Irish housing crisis, spoken word poetry, Ireland, poetry film. The corpus consists of four recordings of live performances and four poetry films. To analyse how the spoken word itself contributes to social justice activism, a thematic analysis is conducted, with themes examined in relation to the framework and their activist functions. In addition, a critical discourse analysis of conceptual metaphors is carried out, as metaphors play a central role in framing abstract social issues with tangible, accessible concepts. These metaphors are analysed within the historical and cultural context of Ireland and the Irish housing crisis to examine how the poems construct, maintain or challenge dominant ideologies and narratives. To explore the role of embodiment in live performances, a performance analysis is conducted. Elements such as vocal delivery, body communication or facial expressions are analysed in relation to the spoken word to assess how they contribute to social justice activism. For the four poetry films, a multimodal analysis is conducted to explore how audiovisual semiotic choices interact and add or alter layers of meaning and enhance activist potential.

The structure of this thesis is organised to systematically address the research questions and objectives. The second chapter presents a review of relevant literature and definitions of key concepts. First, terms relevant to this study such as social justice activism and social movements are defined and discussed. This section examines how social injustices emerge, why social justice activism is necessary within democratic societies and how activist movements address structural inequalities. Second, the chapter explores the cultural and political practices of spoken word poetry in both a historical and contemporary context. This includes a short overview of the development of spoken word poetry and its political potentials. It is also examined how spoken word poetry can provide benefits to individuals and communities. In addition, poetry film as a distinct artistic medium is introduced. Third, the concept of spoken word activism is further examined, particularly in relation to digital media and social media to identify new possibilities for artistic expression and political engagement. Finally, the chapter focuses on the role of spoken word poetry in Ireland by providing an overview of its historical and cultural significance and examining how spoken word activism has been used within the Irish context. In addition, the Irish housing and homelessness crisis is discussed. The historical developments that led to the crisis and the social and cultural implications, its human impact and the ways the Irish population has responded through activism and movements are outlined.

The third chapter introduces the theoretical framework that guides the analysis of this thesis. This framework constitutes theories and findings from various scholars on social justice activism and spoken word activism. The chapter outlines key methods and elements of social justice activism and spoken word activism that are relevant to the analysis. In addition, this chapter presents theories on performative elements, such as vocal delivery or body communication, that can be linked to activist strategies and guides the performance analysis. This chapter also reviews relevant theories of multimodality in poetry film and discusses how multimodal semiotic choices may contribute to the social activist potential of spoken word poetry.

The fourth chapter presents the methodology of this thesis. The research design and approach are outlined and the rationale behind the chosen methods explained. This chapter introduces the corpus of eight spoken word poems and describes the selection process, including the criteria used and the exploratory nature of the selection process. Each poem is briefly contextualised by providing information about the performer, the context of the creation or performance, and the mode of presentation.

Chapter four also defines the analytical tools used in this thesis, including thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, performance analysis and multimodal analysis. The procedures and purposes of the analytical methods are explained, and key concepts such as conceptual metaphors, experiential meaning potential or semiotic choices are defined.

The fifth chapter presents and discusses the findings of the analyses. First, recurring themes identified in the context of the Irish housing crisis are presented. Each theme is discussed in detail and examined in relation to methods of spoken word activism demonstrating how spoken word poetry raises awareness, articulates injustices, resists dominant narratives and advocates for social change and resistance. Second, the findings of the conceptual metaphors are presented and recurring source domains and conceptual patterns identified and discussed. These metaphors are analysed in terms of how they frame the housing crisis and contribute to social justice activism. Third, each spoken word poem is analysed in depth in individual subchapters. The first four subchapters focus on the recordings of live performances and examine how performative elements interact with the spoken text to shape meaning, perception and activist impact. The other four subchapters analyse the poetry films and investigate how multimodality adds or alters layers of meaning and enhances the social justice activist potential of the poems.

The sixth chapter provides the conclusion of the thesis. This chapter summarises the most important research findings and situates them within the context of existing literature and theories. This chapter presents a reflection on whether the findings align with initial expectations regarding the activist potential of spoken word poetry and offers potential explanations for these outcomes. In addition, this chapter critically examines limitations of the study and proposes directions for future research on spoken word activism addressing the Irish housing crisis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Justice Activism and Social Movements

This chapter aims to present a brief overview of relevant definitions and central driving forces of social justice activism and social movements to frame this thesis. Although this thesis focuses on social justice activism, understanding the definition of social movements is crucial to situating activists' actions and motivations in a wider context.

“Social justice activism refers to efforts aimed at promoting a more equitable society that challenges domination and oppression and values diversity” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 14). The term entails actions or direct initiatives committed to social change. The term social movement refers to shifts in belief systems occurring over time (Atkinson 18) with the goal of bringing about long-term alterations of existing social dynamics and structures (Lucas 261). Social movements can be shaped by internal, activist initiatives or actions, as well as external elements such as shifts in meaning or ideology (Atkinson 18). In summary, “activists and their actions are seen as the engines that drive changes in meaning structures in society” (Atkinson 19) and thus contribute to the development of social movements.

Generally, social justice activism occurs in response to social injustice. Social injustice exists due to common and widespread social behaviours, including those enforced by laws. Therefore, to research the mechanisms underlying social justice activism it is first necessary to understand how societal norms and practices operate and how they can lead to social injustice. In Temitayo Ogunye’s (37) theoretical outline of social justice activism he introduces three categories of social behaviour that potentially lead to social injustice: stereotypes, social norms and laws. The first category, stereotypes, refers to widely held, oversimplified and often negative or unfair beliefs and generalisations about a social group (Ogunye 39). Studies have shown that prevalent stereotypes can directly lead to discrimination in various areas of life, such as limited opportunities on the job market (Ogunye 40). Therefore, stereotypes often bring about social injustice. The second category, social norms, are informal rules that guide behaviour in society and are followed by individuals as they perceive them to be common practice and socially expected behaviour (Ogunye 42). Social injustice can occur when people follow false or unexamined social norms that reinforce harmful, unequal treatment and social practices. The third category, laws, “are social rules that are part of a network that includes secondary rules about how the rules of that network are identified, created, modified, applied, interpreted, and enforced” (Ogunye 55). Social injustice can arise when laws, reinforced by those who hold power and authority, are used to suppress, harm or exclude certain groups.

While social justice movements may not influence politics directly, they are significant contributors to the social and political landscape as they can shape and guide discourse by altering cultural, social and communal orders, norms, attitudes or beliefs. Social justice movements do not exist at a static point in space and time; they

are accumulations of evolving, dynamic human behaviour and discourse (Lucas 261-262). Individual voices merge into a collective political identity that constitutes the foundational pillars of democracy. Social justice activists engage in discussions, debating current issues and raising opposition to political bodies or institutions. “Essentially, activists stage events in which certain ideological assumptions are upheld or reinforced, while others are challenged” (Atkinson 20). Activists present curated information on issues which can be employed in political discourse by their audiences (Atkinson 8). These insights can also influence individuals’ “worldviews and interpretive frameworks to understand political issues and events” (Atkinson 8).

Media power plays a crucial part in the distribution and progression of political discourse. Over the course of globalisation, there has been a rise in economically and profit-driven control and commercialisation of media resources by a few corporate powers. This development contributed to a depoliticisation of the public, as Robert McChesney argues (48-56). Coverage of social justice activism by mainstream media can have detrimental effects on the movement’s growth, as mainstream media may aim to dismantle opposition to the centralised political and economic power (Atkinson 15-16). The emergence of the internet, when utilised as a form of alternative media, has enabled social justice movements to resist this concentration of corporate media power (Bennett 19-20). Exposure through the internet, such as social media, has accelerated the distribution of information from social justice activists at low costs. Social media specifically, can create a feeling of unity among activists which in turn strengthens political involvement in a movement (Dhiraj 2)[1].

Kevin DeLuca outlines strategic use of media to attract media attention within social justice activism as a significant force in social movements. These images should address widely recognised social ideologies, while at the same time challenge other dominant beliefs and assumptions. This distribution of imagery through media outlets can stimulate political discourse among audiences. Audiences may identify with certain ideologies, while simultaneously experiencing a cognitive conflict with another set of

[1] While the internet has created new opportunities of visibility and connection for social justice movements, it has also enabled new forms of injustices, harassment, misinformation, and surveillance that can harm social justice activist endeavours as power imbalances are often strengthened rather than challenged (Powell et al. 3). Nevertheless, new forms of social justice engagement have emerged where marginalised groups can now record and distribute footage of abuse, expose systemic violence or organise protests on- and offline. Therefore, the increased accessability of the internet has benefited social justice movements as well. To understand how digital inequalities and activism interact, digital criminology has emerged as an important research area (Powell et al.10).

beliefs. This sort of activism contributes to the reshaping of ideology and meaning as it may give rise to initial reflection and further involvement among audiences (Atkinson 20). DeLuca's framework of image politics can also be applied to the distribution of activist content on social media, as (moving) imagery is a key component of certain social media networks such as YouTube. Spoken word poetry, which is often shared online or produced for online consumption, can act as a form of activist media which challenges predominant beliefs while encouraging reflection and eliciting emotional reactions.

In conclusion, social justice activism functions through a combination of individual and collective actions that challenge stereotypes, social norms or unjust laws and strategically employ media to reshape dominant discourse and prevailing ideologies.

2.2. Spoken Word Poetry as a Cultural and Political Practice

In recent years, the number of events dedicated to spoken word poetry, especially live poetry events such as poetry slams or open mics, has increased notably (Novak 11). Spoken word poetry refers to a piece of poetry that was created with the intention of oral performance. The main interest of the performance does not lie in the scripted text, but in the situational, audio-vocal performance of the piece (Benthien and Prange 517). The oral language and delivery in live poetry are "characterised by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of the poet with a live audience" (Novak 62). The artistic execution of the poem goes beyond a simple oral rendering of a written piece. Susan Weinstein (89) identifies two other dimensions, or texts, apart from the written text of the poem. These are the physical text, which refers to the poet's bodily communication, and the vocal text, which involves the poet's voice in delivering the poem. Julia Novak (11-12) highlights the importance of, for example, paralanguage, body communication and the context of the live performance when engaging with live poetry.

Scholars often associate contemporary spoken word poetry with a range of earlier oral and performance-based traditions, many of which have had cultural and

political significance[2]. As Wendy R. Williams (4) points out, spoken word poems can engage with current political issues, which makes the form particularly relevant to activism around the Irish housing crisis. Numerous organisations and clubs across Europe and the United States have specialised in the art of spoken word poetry, encouraging people, specifically young people, to participate in political discourse and speak out against social injustice through this art form. A closer look at the topics addressed in, for example, one of the most renowned youth poetry competitions, Brave New Voices, reveals the personal, cultural and political concerns that spoken word poetry can encompass: “gender, race, sexuality, class, family, education, beauty, love, loss, religion, discrimination, abuse, etc.” (Williams 6-7).

Through performance and community, spoken word poetry provides a powerful platform for social justice activism by giving a voice to marginalised people and inspiring collective resistance and action. U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins calls the mouth “the most democratic instrument” as spoken words can escape the rigid borders of written text “where silence is enforced” (3). Spoken word poetry can, for example, leave room for spontaneity and improvisation (Williams 4). Collins (4-5) stresses that participating in spoken word poetry events, whether as poet or audience, can help to escape the solitude of the written word and deeper feelings of estrangement in society. He argues that this can be linked to visibility through physical proximity and the co-constructed relationship between the audience and the poet (Collins 4-5). The experience of the performance is not solely shaped by the individual, but through collective presence and engagement. The performance acts as an affirmative communal practice that encourages audiences to reflect, learn and challenge existing views. It provides space for experiences that have been marginalised or omitted from mainstream discourse. The relationships and alliances formed through spoken word communities can lay the basis for broader independent, self-organised and self-maintained networks or infrastructures. These may aim to promote and organise cultural or political events and publications. Community can therefore be seen as the

[2] Scholars have pointed to contemporary spoken word poetry's ties, or resonances, with historical currents of political poetry, such as slave narratives and abolitionist testimony, second-wave feminist storytelling, Beat performance poetry, the Black Arts movement, Jamaican dub poetry and slam poetry, all of which used oral performance to narrate lived experiences, comment on current issues, and mobilise political awareness and collective engagement (Prince 141; Chepp, “Activating Politics” 45; Benthien and Prange 517; Novak 16).

key factor in sustaining spoken word poetry as a cultural and political practice (Chepp, “Activating Politics” 44-46).

Poets often ascribe therapeutic effects to spoken word poetry and claim their art has supported them on their healing journey through past hardships or trauma. This is partially due to artists frequently using spoken word to challenge forms of structural oppression that can lead to trauma and shame. While poets may draw from different personal narratives in which they have encountered social injustice, they can use spoken word poetry to connect individual trauma to structural violence and oppression as part of a healing process (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 93). The “radical” idea of loving and accepting oneself is seen as the ultimate act of resistance against systems that rely on shame, restraint and withdrawal (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 87-88). Spoken word spaces may reduce the sense of institutional authority governing what is said and how it is communicated. Instead, “a listening community serves as a witness to the performing poet’s testimony” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 97) affirming the lived realities and acknowledging the experiences expressed. Valeria Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 88) highlights that while poets are aware of the relevance of individual health, there is a consensus that healthy individuals are necessary for healthy communities. From the poets’ perspective, political and cultural engagement “can occur only when individuals are healthy, are self-fulfilled, and have access to expressive, supportive outlets” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 88). The cultural and political practice of spoken word poetry, therefore, extends beyond artistic expression, as it can function as a therapeutic process that fosters collective healing within a community.

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (“Slam Politics” 53-54) points to the relationship between identity and authenticity in slam poets and poet-performers and how this can affect social justice outcomes. The identity on stage is often perceived as the poet’s identity in day-to-day life. The expression and development of identity on stage have become a tool for spoken word artists to create authenticity. In slam poetry “marginalized gender, class, sexual and racial identities can be especially rewarded” (Somers-Willett, “Slam Politics” 53-54), as the audience may be able to identify with shared experiences. Somers-Willett (*Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 69-70) noted that recent slam poetry, for example, focuses on personal identity which draws attention to various, diverse voices and reflects a rejection of academic objectivity. As spoken word poetry entails embodied performance by the poet, certain physical aspects, such as race or gender, become visible, which can shape the audience’s perception and

interpretation of the poem. The embodied performance of identity contributes to a frequently stated goal of spoken word poetry: authenticity. “In striving for an intimate, authentic connection with an audience, slam poets lay themselves bare, writing personally empowering declarations” (Somers-Willett, *Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 70). The delivery of the poem, or how identity is performed, is just as crucial as the message, or what is communicating about identity, to create an impression of authenticity. It must be noted that authenticity is ultimately an illusion and is shaped by social and cultural expectations over time. However, the impression of authenticity still leads to practical and tangible results in events such as poetry slams, where the audience judges the lyrical expression of identity on stage (Somers-Willett, *Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 70). Therefore, spoken word poetry has the potential to engage in identity politics as the audience tends to perceive the poet’s embodied experiential knowledge as authentic and legitimate.

A further variety of spoken word poetry has arisen in the past century, called poetry film, utilising digital media and electronic devices such as smartphones to create a visual and acoustic accompaniment for the poem. Poetry film reimagines poems through a personal lens, frequently as a short film. This allows artists to add new or additional layers of meaning and encourages viewers to see the poem from a new perspective. The focus is placed on a multisensory experience -- blending words, sounds and (moving) images (Iribarren 319-320). Poetry films provide a new approach to meaning-making by exploring the combinations and relationships between different multimodal channels. As Zata Banks states: “Poetry films open up new methods of engagement, new audiences, and new means of self-expression, and also provide rich potential for the creation, perception and experience of emotion and meaning” (29). Generally, poetry film features a visually compelling storyline paired with the spoken delivery of the poem. Nissmah Roshdy (16) captures in her essay what she understands to be the essence of poetry film, that is the visual realisation of the imaginative process while reading a poem. A key point is to accept a poetry film as one possible visual and acoustic interpretation of the poem, just as words of poetry take different shapes within each reader’s imagination. The realisation of poetry film and the relationship between the poem and the filmmaker are widely varied. For example, a filmmaker might work with a pre-existing poem, or poets might actively search for a fitting visualisation of their poem, as Sarah Tremlett (40) points out. The exploration of innovative semiotic channels to create a multimodal poetry film experience can also

be embraced by spoken word poets to spread their ideas and messages beyond the performance. Therefore, artists may reach new audiences and explore additional modes to generate meaning within their work.

In conclusion, spoken word poetry is a performative or multimodal art form with strong cultural, historical, political and social significance in Europe and the United States. Poets generate meaning, identity and perceived authenticity through voice, body and audience interaction while frequently giving visibility to marginalised experiences. The emergence of poetry film has offered new multimodal means of meaning-making for spoken word artists. Through its performative and interactive nature, spoken word poetry can bring about social change and strengthen community through individual and collective healing, storytelling and empowerment.

2.3. Spoken Word Activism and Social Media

Spoken word poetry can be utilised as a powerful tool for social justice activism as it can challenge dominant narratives and promote a socially just society. Spoken word artist Crystal Leigh Endsley (“Poetry is my Politics”) highlights:

> The performance of spoken word creates a way for us to explore our own identity and how that identity impacts our relationships. Using it as pedagogy—the art of teaching and learning—the spoken word performance in a very short amount of time and with concentrated energy slices through and remixes both teaching and learning, challenging dominant power relationships and discourses. The artist and the audience have to negotiate new meanings for old concepts. (67)

Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 8) coined the term spoken word activism in her research, which examines the social justice activist potential of spoken word poetry and how it is realised in practice. Frequently, poets refer to their spoken word poetry as a tool for political participation and social justice activism (Chepp, “Activating Politics” 44). Endsley (“Poetry is my Politics” 68) concludes that the powerful potential of spoken word activism is due to language, culture and artistic expression and its close ties with young people who are frequently left out of political discourse or spaces. Moreover, spoken word poetry can act as a link between the poet’s activism and current and future allies. Thus, poetry may potentially help to grow activist networks (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 108). Spoken word performances are interactive in nature; they invite engagement and the co-construction and mediation of narratives between audiences and poet-performers. The space created and the stories shared may inspire the

audience to participate in political discourse and ignite change. Language can act as a tool to reveal and resist prevailing power structures within society. A performance can function as social justice activism insofar as language operates as a tool for reshaping political discourse (Endsley, “Poetry is my Politics” 68). In addition to spoken word itself, body communication can be utilised as an activist instrument. According to Endsley (“Poetry is my Politics” 68-69) the poet-performer can turn their body into a site of political resistance on stage. They can challenge stereotypes, expectations and assumptions attached to the embodied expression of lived experiences. This creates a space that encourages new perspectives and social change.

Chepp ("Activating Politics" 45) highlights the benefits of utilising a storytelling or narrative structure in spoken word activism. Storytelling aims to include personal, subjective anecdotes. The messages or information conveyed in poems can become more accessible and comprehensible to a wider audience when structured as personal narratives. Personal stories help to break down highly complex theoretical concepts into transparent and understandable structures. In other words, poets “testify” (Williams 5) their personal experiences by speaking to or for the broader public. Emmet Kirwan’s poem “Heartbreak”, for example, is a feminist-activist piece that addresses the treatment of women in Irish society. The poem is constructed as a narrative, following the life of an Irish girl/woman from childhood to adulthood where she unintentionally falls pregnant. By presenting wider institutional and social injustices through the experiences of one individual, the poem makes these issues more immediate and easier for an audience to understand. The poem can be considered an act of spoken word activism addressing the stigmatisation of women in Ireland on an individual and institutional level. The activist nature of the poem becomes apparent considering that Kirwan performed it at a rally for the Together for the Yes campaign in 2018 which was defending female reproductive rights (Swanepoel 204-205).

Activists need access to platforms to share and distribute their ideas or messages. Spoken word activism frequently occurs in spaces beyond official governmental or political establishments. According to Chepp (“Activating Politics”) spoken word poetry grants “unique access to on- and offline political spaces and activist opportunities” (47). Spoken word activism can take place in person in local, social or cultural spaces with audiences present. Generally, these spaces are not primarily designed for political activism but for informal, casual encounters. A form of pragmatic everyday politics can happen that is based on communal exchange,

involvement and equity (Boyte 4). Henry Jenkins (2) refers to this intersection of political engagement and cultural participation as participatory politics. Instead of relying on traditional political establishments, individuals encourage change through social and cultural processes, frequently by creating and sharing media such as spoken word poetry. Generally, this form of everyday participatory politics and activism has experienced a rise online, for example, on social media networks such as YouTube. According to Jenkins (24) everyday politics that takes place online can play a significant part among marginalised groups for developing political awareness, strengthening shared values and creating alternative views on their identity and interests.

When focusing on spoken word poetry in recent years, it becomes apparent that poets have started utilising social media platforms to share their art due to its accessibility and visibility. Social media grants poets the opportunity to self-publish and self-promote their work. This allows a degree of independence in a highly competitive and monopolised publishing market (Iribarren 321-323). Whether it is poetry film or recordings of live performances, social media has enabled wider access to the public and, increasingly, “spoken word videos are going viral online” (Williams 7). Spoken word activists have started utilising this phenomenon through platforms like YouTube and Facebook to attract initial forms of activist engagement (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 106). Poets frequently upload recordings of their performances, aware that a viral post can significantly expand their social media reach and bring attention to their activist-artistic content. Furthermore, social media provides a space to connect with other poets and activists (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 110). Jenkins (7-11) also emphasises the potential of activist engagement through social media among young people who would otherwise not have access to political participation and agency or feel excluded from decision-making processes.

Spoken word activism in online spaces can provide unique opportunities to foster engagement and interaction, which may help to promote and spread social justice goals. Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 106-107) argues that spoken word activism in online environments strengthens a process-oriented understanding that activism should spread enthusiasm for the craft and encourage new voices and forms of engagement in the artistic community through processes of teaching and learning. Online settings may offer new, creative and engaging features for spoken word activism. The strong communal and social elements of social media can provide

spaces that encourage engagement and interaction which can motivate artists and viewers to learn from each other. Spoken word activism online can also entail a unique temporal element of sustainability. “Through passion-driven intergenerational outreach, poets aim to make spoken word activism sustainable and enduring” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 106). Charika Swanepoel (197) argues that the elements of interaction and social exchange on social media also amplify activist elements of the shared spoken word poetry. Through commenting, sharing or using hashtags, users can express their personal experiences or opinions related to the issues which would have otherwise been repressed or concealed. For example, the online release of Dublin poet Stephen James Smith’s spoken word poem “Dublin You Are” started a widespread hashtag trend. The poem calls for inclusiveness and addresses how Dublin is home to individuals from different countries and how this shapes Dublin’s identity. Users started using the hashtag #DublinYouAre to express their personal account of what they consider key contributions to Dublin’s identity (Swanepoel 196-197). Therefore, spoken word activism in online spaces provides unique and innovative ways to engage and promote social justice.

To conclude, spoken word poetry, both in live performances and online, provides a powerful tool for social justice activism by amplifying marginalised voices and narratives and strengthening communal engagement while challenging dominant discourse and social injustices. Spoken word activism in digital spaces can increase reach, interaction and sustainability which enables poets and audiences to co-create meaning, inspire reflection, engagement and resistance, and promote social justice.

2.4. Spoken Word Poetry in Ireland as an Act of Resistance

In Ireland, oral poetry has historically been considered one of the most valued forms of discourse. Traditionally, Irish poetry was created not to be read but to be recited orally (Ó hÓgáin 50). Spoken word artists have often been held in high regard. The public ascribed almost otherworldly powers to Irish oral poets and their art, and their social role was in some respects comparable to that of historians or publicists today. In Gaelic Ireland, poetic art was viewed as a craft beyond human nature; a divine source of wisdom and knowledge that only some were blessed with. Thus, poets generally attracted a large audience who placed great importance on the words they spoke (Ó hÓgáin 44). The traditional Irish occupation of the seanchaithe is a testimony to the value that was placed on spoken poetry or storytelling. The seanchaithe spread

news, stories and historical anecdotes to the public. They were considered trustworthy sources placing great importance on sharing truthful information (Mercer 23). Spoken word poetry in Ireland has traditionally not only been seen as an art form, but also as an opportunity to transfer opinions of lower social classes. Jim Kelly points out that generally, oral tradition can be considered “the method of transmission of practices and beliefs of the (predominantly rural) lower-classes” (62). The brief historical overview highlights Ireland’s longstanding connection to spoken word poetry which may continue to shape its modern-day perception.

Today, spoken word poetry is experiencing a renaissance in Ireland. The article “Spoken Word Poets and Rappers Inject New Energy into an Irish Tradition” (Carroll) in The Guardian explores how spoken word poetry as artistic medium has regained popularity in Ireland. The article points out how poets make use of the potential activist elements of spoken word poetry, specifically to challenge social injustice and to resist dominant power structures within Ireland. Poet Emmet Kirwan, for example, stated that spoken word poetry has become increasingly popular since it gives people the opportunity to contribute to political discourse and express discontent to a greater audience. He highlights that spoken word poetry has increasingly taken on a political character, addressing issues such as inequality and systemic neglect. Kirwan himself challenges authority and traditional institutions in Ireland which according to him, continue to prioritise bankers and tech companies and abandon citizens with rising housing costs and a strained health system. Charika Swanepoel (192-193) points out that spoken word poetry in Ireland today regularly takes place through digital technology and social media which, unlike the practice of the seanchaithe, can give performances a degree of longevity. Furthermore, media enables the poet to reach a broader audience regardless of geographical conditions potentially drawing global attention. Swanepoel (193) argues that digital media provides optimal conditions for the combination of art and activism which has already been utilised by Irish spoken word poets to speak on social issues such as heritage, race, gender, Irishness or motherhood. For example, Irish Sudanese poet Adam Mohamed addresses questions of identity politics in a video performance of his spoken word poem “Untitled”. In his poem, he challenges political narratives that made him question what it means to be Irish and calls for inclusiveness and unity (Swanepoel 197-199). Overall, contemporary Irish spoken word poetry frequently combines art and activism, using both live performances and online spaces to address social justice issues.

In conclusion, contemporary spoken word poetry in Ireland continues the Irish tradition of oral poetry. Today, Irish poets frequently utilise artistic expression to address social injustices. Spoken word activism in Ireland today takes place both in live performances and in digital media which can foster audience engagement and encourage forms of resistance, challenge predominant narratives and in some cases rework oral storytelling traditions in ways that amplify marginalised voices and extend their reach to groups excluded from political discourse.

2.5. The Housing Crisis in Ireland

This chapter aims to give a brief overview of one of the most evident sociopolitical issues in Ireland today, the housing and homelessness crisis. Stephen E. Lucas argues, research on social justice activism must "study the processes through which beliefs are generated, articulated, promulgated, and come to be accepted (or rejected) by groups in society" (262). To contextualise spoken word activism around housing, this chapter first outlines the historical developments that produced the current housing crisis. Furthermore, the social and cultural implications of the Irish housing crisis will be examined.

2.5.1. Historical Developments

Ireland currently experiences a housing and homelessness crisis which is likely due to the Irish government's continued prioritisation of profit and privatisation. Since 2013 family homelessness has increased dramatically, that is by 344% over the first five years (Hearne 1-7). The effects of the crisis become visible through the exclusion and inequality in the housing market, drastically increased rents, a decline in homeownership, the constant fear of eviction, overcrowded and poor-quality rental units, mortgage arrears and property repossessions (Hearne 1-7). After becoming an independent country, Ireland's government placed great importance on home ownership. By 1991, 80% of households were homeowners. A shift occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, as it became increasingly easier to obtain credit and pass the decreasing standards of mortgage checks. These conditions, that is easy mortgages, higher demand and less supply, led to a 300% rise in housing prices between the years 1996 and 2006. As home ownership rates dropped due to high costs, private renting became the more affordable option. The financial crash of 2008 led to a further gap

between individuals able to afford home ownership and people being forced into private renting. In the following years, strict mortgage standards made it difficult to obtain and afford home ownership (Waldron 188-189). Moreover, government spending on social housing has been drastically reduced, increasingly forcing low-income families into private renting. In the 2010s, housing availability remained limited while demand and prices continued to rise (Healy and Goldrick-Kelly 38-41). Today, the main issue remains the ongoing privatisation and financialisaton of the housing market which places Irish housing in the hands of wealthy global private investors. International landlords are building rental units and renting them for exceptionally high market prices while already existing housing is vacant or in substandard conditions (Hearne 1-8). Subsequently, wealth can be accumulated by property owners and policy makers at the expense of Irish citizens. This structural housing crisis has given rise to two new terms in Ireland: “Generation Home” and “Generation Stuck at Home” (Hearne 1). Hearne (9-10) draws attention to the rise of a small number of millionaires in Ireland who could accumulate their wealth through building and renting property. Eviction due to turning long-term rentals into short-term tourist accommodation, such as Airbnb, has forced numerous families into homelessness in the past decade. Housing remains a contentious issue, unaffordable and unstable, especially in relation to long-term security of tenure.

In conclusion, Ireland’s housing crisis is the result of decades of policy decisions that prioritise privatisation, financialisaton and profit over social welfare which becomes visible through soaring prices, declining home-ownership rates and a shortage of affordable housing. The housing system in Ireland as it is arranged today is a profitable market for affluent elites but leaves Irish citizens behind and pushes an ever-increasing number of people into homelessness (Hearne 8).

2.5.2. Social and Cultural Implications

The Irish housing crisis leads to an ongoing worsening of social injustice, has detrimental effects on mental health, and restricts access to fundamental human rights. Rory Hearne argues that the housing crisis in Ireland will affect even larger numbers than expected in the future and will be “playing a major role in three of the greatest challenges facing our societies – rising inequality, climate change and the lack of environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive economies and cities” (4). The crisis may increase social division, distrust in governments and disconnection of citizens on

a communal and global level. Hearne points out that the crisis already causes mental health issues related to stress over housing or financial insecurity, including in meeting food and medical costs. The Generation Home might have detrimental effects on families and could delay independence in adulthood and contribute to “overcrowding and intergenerational family stress” (Hearne 4). In 2018, the Irish Bishops’ Conference published a letter addressing the housing struggles. This letter contributed significantly to political and social discourse on the crisis. In the letter, the government’s duty to prioritise protection of Irish citizens before profit on the market was emphasised. Furthermore, housing was highlighted to be vital for accessing other fundamental rights, including personal privacy, mobility, safety, mental well-being, education, a liveable environment and protection against discrimination. The contents of this letter influenced, for example, a report to the UN addressing the housing emergency in Ireland (Mulligan 526-527).

Over the past years numerous movements and campaigns targeting the housing crisis have emerged in Ireland resisting the financialisaton of the housing market and the growing number of homeless people. Generally, Ireland has taken a leading role in the recent rise of housing activism and campaigns on a global scale (Hearne 191). The financial crash of 2008 led to a first wave of widespread local and communal campaigns and protests followed by formations of alliances on a nationwide level, generally as a response to displacements. The increasing number of homeless people led to a second wave of activism and movements prioritising direct actions, such as squatting (Hearne et al. 159). The Irish Housing Network was established as a response to local campaigns and acts as a coordinating alliance between them. The organisation stresses the relevance of its activist-led structure and direct actions to strengthen affected communities and present alternative narratives around the crisis (Hearne 200). One of the most prominent direct actions was the occupation of the Apollo House in Dublin in 2016 by Home Sweet Home, an alliance organised by Irish Housing Network activists, artists and trade unionists. The Apollo House, a formerly vacant building, was turned into a homelessness shelter and supported by thousands of volunteers and donations from across the country. Home Sweet Home succeeded in raising public awareness and in pushing the homelessness and housing crisis into the political sphere (Hearne 203-204). Research that has already been conducted on these collectively organised groups found that they can not only create pathways that empower individuals to challenge housing inequality, but also pressure policymakers

to enact change. “Part of this social movement research on housing has noted the meaning construction, utilized by movement participants adherents via narratives and discourse created to mobilize people around a specific issue, which are key communication tools for advancing social change” (Lima 38). Research on a campaign by RTR, a union-led campaign network, revealed that activists strategically employ narratives to mobilise people and inspire political change. Generally, three narrative strategies were found in the campaigns by RTR. Firstly, the campaign exposed the housing issue through narratives about personal experiences, factual evidence of its causes, and projections of its future consequences. This was put into action with, for example, debates and discussions. Secondly, the campaign focused on proposing possible solutions to the crisis through, for instance, position reports. Thirdly, there was a politicisation of housing rights which intended to mobilise affected people to participate in protests and to encourage political parties to support the campaign’s cause (Lima 46).

In conclusion, the Irish housing crisis reveals how systemic inequalities deepen social injustice and lead to long-term generational impacts. The crisis has consequences for physical and mental well-being and further restricts access to fundamental rights. Numerous grassroots movements and activist networks have mobilised in response to the ongoing housing crisis in Ireland, strategically challenging housing inequality through collective solidarity, resistance, action, storytelling and efforts to influence political discourse. Within this context, spoken word poetry emerges as a tool for social justice activism, drawing on historical oral traditions to share personal narratives, challenge dominant discourse and foster engagement through community and collective solidarity. By strategically giving voice to those most affected by the housing crisis, spoken word activism can contribute to resisting and challenging ongoing social inequalities and advocate for change.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides an overview of the relevant theories and frameworks that guide the analysis of spoken word poetry as a vehicle of social justice activism in relation to the housing crisis in Ireland. The analysis adopts a multidimensional lens, combining theories of spoken word activism, performance or live poetry and multimodality in spoken word poetry. These frameworks will provide a theoretical outline to analyse how

poets utilise language, voice, body communication, digital media and multimodality to challenge the housing crisis and encourage collective solidarity, mobilisation and political engagement. First, key theoretical frameworks on social justice activism, particularly spoken word activism, will be outlined to establish criteria for identifying social justice activism in spoken word poetry. Theories on performance or live poetry and poetry film will be examined and situated within the framework of spoken word activism to clarify the analytical focus of the thesis on elements such as body communication, voice and multimodality.

3.1. Elements of Spoken Word Activism

Temitayo Ogunye (103-104) points out that persuasion is a key element of challenging unjust social norms and motivating non-activists to reject dominant societal standards and embrace alternative and equitable ones. Persuasion in social justice activism is the presentation of coherent and comprehensible reasons that aim to influence or encourage people outside the movement to adopt new opinions. Ogunye also considers pathos to be an important element of persuasion in social justice discourse. Furthermore, he coined the term epistemic disruption (105) as an influential element utilised to persuade non-activists. The term refers to the use of disruptive actions, such as sit-ins, to draw attention to power structures and forms of discrimination that are otherwise ignored or avoided. A form of persuasion is the act of price-setting. Generally, this method proposes a positive outcome attached to an action or belief and a negative outcome if an action is not taken or if a belief is not adopted. Outcomes or consequences may vary depending on the issues addressed but “the most commonly deployed are social approval and disapproval” (Ogunye 106). Therefore, persuasion can be considered a significant element when engaging in social justice activism.

Ron Eyerman (196-197) argues that emotional transference, where individuals’ experiences are presented in such a moving or emotional manner that they inspire a “collective emotional energy, a sense of belonging to some force greater than oneself” (Eyerman 196), is a key contributor to the success of social movements. He highlights the importance of “cognitive framing and ritual performances” (Eyerman 195) in social justice activism. The former refers to narrative structures or storytelling which utilise literary devices such as metaphors to strengthen the emotional impact on audiences and strategically guide emotions towards a particular action. The latter refers to displays of collective solidarity and unity to connect individuals, build relationships and

unify and mobilise participants within social movements. Lima also emphasises that narratives are a key component of social justice activism, as they “can help movements spark public interest, gain support, possibly even convert opponents” (39). Activists can construct alternative narratives that find resonance with the public and challenge dominant discourse on the issue. Through storytelling, activists can question ideological assumptions and policies that sustain them. Lima (43) identifies that narratives surrounding the housing crisis in Ireland can be found in three main discourse dimensions. First, activists use storytelling to reveal and explain the causes of the crisis. Second, narratives are used to propose solutions to these structural problems. Third, the stories constructed appeal to moral principles such as solidarity and empathy, framing housing as a fundamental human right that must be protected. Thus, storytelling serves as an essential strategy in social justice activism to raise awareness, challenge dominant narratives and strengthen collective solidarity.

Chepp (*Speaking Truths*) outlines certain methods and elements that are frequently used in spoken word activism. Chepp argues that spoken word poetry can help to “unlock” certain empathic reactions of the audience that are similarly used in social justice activism. Empathic transcendence is a desired outcome of spoken word activism that refers to compassion beyond personal relationships and the feeling of interconnectedness of people, systems and experiences “across time and space” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 67). Empathic transcendence entails understanding how our actions and experiences are intertwined with broader social powers, how we influence and are influenced by each other’s lives. Experiential knowledge is a common foundation in spoken word activism that generates empathic transcendence. “Poets refer to their personal and subjective experience as their *truth*” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 45). Spoken word poetry is deeply rooted in personal experiences, but activists regularly embed their narratives within wider societal issues. The focus on authenticity and identity in spoken word activism is relevant to the reception and acceptance of truth. Poets are generally believed to speak truthfully of their own experiences within prevailing and discriminatory social structures. Storytelling is one approach to create empathic transcendence through experiential knowledge. Chepp ("Activating Politics") highlights that “poems contain a plot, a moral (or “message”), and various points of view (e.g., narrator, protagonist, antagonist) held together by a narrative structure. […] The message often has a social justice focus” (45). This form of storytelling aims to include personal, subjective anecdotes; the poets “testify” by speaking to or for the

broader public. Through narratives, activists first share their experiences, second deconstruct dominant narratives, and third place their personal accounts of injustice and discrimination into broader social structures (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 69-73). Robert Zussman (821) emphasises the necessity of narrative freedom to connect personal storytelling to activism. Activists freely choose and connect categories and actions they relate to and reshape how these identities are viewed in society while generating a subjective morality of the story (Zussman 808). Frequently, a form of counter-storytelling takes place. Marginalised groups question and examine dominant narratives by sharing their own experiences of oppression and resistance from their perspective (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 58). Activists also make use of pathos in their narrations. The intentional appeal to the audience's emotions can be an effective tool of spoken word activism as it can help to raise empathic transcendence. Literary devices such as imagery or metaphors can also help to amplify empathic transcendence, as they frequently appeal to cultural knowledge, stories or symbols to create additional layers of meaning in the activists' poems (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 73).

Furthermore, spoken word activists intentionally use the method of framing. Poets may adapt their performances to the given context, switching names or locations to frame their message according to their audience. Generally, framing a performance can raise awareness and engagement by drawing on the emotional significance of cultural symbols and narratives. Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 76-77) argues that to raise empathic transcendence, spoken word activists also employ a process Erving Goffman termed "keying" (43-44): a framing or rebranding of personal experiences as universal ones by drawing on widely known or shared concepts. Thus, in spoken word activism, the goal of generating empathic transcendence is achieved using personal narratives or counter-storytelling, emotional appeal, and strategic framing, guiding the audience to connect individual experiences to broader societal issues.

Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 79) points out that the creative and artistic practice of spoken word poetry is action- and process-oriented by nature. "The commitment to process above product and a long-game perspective that is nurtured by poets' creative artistic practice is similar to the commitment and perspective required for their activist practice as well" (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 79). Social justice is not a product to be achieved overnight, but rather an ongoing process that is always taking place. Artistic

and creative crafts such as spoken word poetry can thus cultivate a practice vital to social justice activism, namely visionary thinking.

In conclusion, social justice activism in spoken word poetry can be categorised by a variety of interwoven strategies to raise awareness, challenge dominant narratives and strengthen collective solidarity, resistance and action against injustices. The main aim of spoken word activism is to generate empathic transcendence among the audience which raises compassion and awareness of how individual experiences connect to broader structural issues to then resist, mobilise and engage in action. To achieve the generation of empathic transcendence, activists use personal narratives, counter-storytelling, persuasion, visionary thinking, emotional appeal, framing and literary devices. In combination, these strategies in spoken word activism transform individual experiential knowledge into an interconnected and collective understanding of the need for an equitable society that resists and challenges dominant and oppressive systems.

3.2. Activist Elements in Performance Poetry

Spoken word activism is not limited to words when employing activist elements and techniques. Artists can use voice, tempo, body communication, rhythm, space, silence and intonation intentionally to intensify the activist nature of their poem. According to Endsley (“Poetry is my Politics” 68), live performances locate the body of the poet activist in a political sphere where it embodies and represents the sociopolitical issues raised in their poem. Visual and acoustic body communication can be purposefully used to encourage mobilisation, raise awareness and reject dominant power structures. Live performances let the audience see and hear the artist’s physical embodiment of lived experiences. The words are communicated through the performer’s body. The body communication and vocal delivery influence the reception and interpretation of the poem and whether the performance will be met with approval or reluctance (Endsley, “Poetry is my Politics” 69). Thus, to determine how spoken word poetry acts as a vehicle of social justice activism, the interplay between acoustic and visual body communication and the spoken word in live performances is essential. In the context of spoken word activism, it is necessary to analyse how artists use their body and voice to potentially generate empathic transcendence through persuasion, storytelling, emotional appeal or framing.

A live performance may add additional layers of meaning to the text by entailing specific features that complement or potentially contradict the content of the poem (Novak 71). The non-verbal audiotext describes acoustic features apart from the language system (Novak 76). Julia Novak differentiates between non-verbal sounds such as sighs, moans, intentional breathing and silence, or laughter and articulatory parameters, for example speed, rhythm, volume and intonation. The former generally adds meaning to a single word or phrase, whereas the latter can alter larger segments of the poem (85-86). Non-verbal sounds and articulatory parameters may be intentionally utilised to convey emotions and attitudes or add emotional intensity and stress to the spoken word. In live performances, the paratext, that is words spoken by the poet on stage apart from the poem such as an introduction, can add to the process of framing (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 76-77) the poem. The paratext needs to be considered as it can influence the audience's expectations and reactions (Novak 141). This is particularly important because the paratext may form a direct connection to social justice activism by addressing the "motive or manner of composition, explaining certain references, or providing an interpretation" (Novak 141). Furthermore, the context in which the performance takes place needs to be investigated. As Julia Novak highlights, a performance "occurs in a specific spatio-temporal situation" (73), which can modify the interaction and relationship between the performer and the audience. Therefore, non-verbal sounds, articulatory parameters, paratext, and the context of the performance need to be considered, as they can reinforce elements in spoken word poetry that can be understood as social justice activism.

Visual body communication refers to body behaviour or movements that accompany the verbal audiotext. Generally, "body communication is meaningful in live poetry only in its verbal and paralinguistic context" (Novak 174) and requires that context to be analysed. Body behaviour is highly influenced by cultural and social norms. Certain body behaviours can be culturally or socially linked to locations or communities and bring forth the audience's perceptions and ideas of that location or group (Novak 150). In the context of this thesis the question arises whether this cultural connection of body communication can potentially be utilised for social justice activism as it may represent, display or challenge notions of class or prevailing power structures. Body behaviour can also display "interpersonal attitudes and relationships" (Novak 156). The relationship between the poet and the audience can be established through specific visual modes of communication which may contribute to raising

empathic transcendence. Posture and gestures may intentionally express certain attitudes or emotions to the audience (Novak 158). Motor gestures, for example, are repetitive movements that accompany speech. While they do not necessarily convey meaning on their own, they can add emphasis and emotional intensity to the words (Novak 161-162). A further contributor to the communication of emotional states and personal beliefs is the use of facial expressions (Novak 165). Eye behaviour can establish a relationship between poet and audience or signal a wish or reluctance for interaction and engagement (Novak 167). Thus, body communication and facial expressions can support the spoken poem in generating empathic transcendence and influence social justice activist outcomes.

In conclusion, visual and acoustic body communication as well as the contextualisation of the performance can alter or intensify the emotional reception of the content presented (Novak 78), which in spoken word activism is an essential contributor to the desired generation of empathic transcendence. Thus, to gain an overarching understanding of how performed spoken word poetry can function as a vehicle of social justice activism, performative elements and spoken word must be considered in combination.

3.3. Multimodality and Activism in Poetry Film

Unlike live spoken word poetry performances where an interaction between an in-person audience and the performer takes place, poetry film entails a process similar to filmmaking. According to Tremlett poetry film can be defined as the following:

> Poetry films are a genre of short film, usually combining the three main elements of the poem as: verbal message – voice-over or on-screen narration – or subtitles (repeating or replacing voice), and as visual text-on-screen; the moving film image (and diegetic sounds); and additional non-diegetic sounds/music to create soundscape. The often complex interweaving of the elements could be said to give poetry films their uniquely associative character. (22-23)

The multimodal relationship between text, image and sound may add new or alternative layers of meaning or alter the perception and interpretation of the poem. No live performance of the spoken word poem takes place and poetry film generally entails scripting and directing.

In poetry film, both the voice itself and its interaction with visual imagery can contribute to the activist nature of the poem. Voice can convey meaning beyond the

spoken words themselves, transferring assumptions and indications about gender, accents, mood etc. (Tremlett 60). While this is also central to live performance poetry, in poetry film voice is further shaped by recording, editing, and its interaction with visual imagery. In the context of social justice activism, the voice may accentuate empathic transcendence by intentionally using pitch, volume, pace or tone to express attitudes towards social issues. Apart from the vocal delivery, poets may also play with sound design to add layers of meaning to their work. The soundscape of poetry films may shape the plot or story and mirror, for example, the emotional world of the narrator or character or the unfolding of the storyline (Tremlett 151). Poetry films can use melodic music (Tremlett 162) or minimal, ambient music (Tremlett 166) to add emotional intensity. Soundscapes that mirror certain environments may be used and can locate the poetry film in a particular place or add additional layers of meaning (Tremlett 165-166).

Poetry film requires making intentional decisions about what and whom to depict, along with the temporal and spatial setting, to visually represent ideas, beliefs, or values of the poem (Höglund 62). These aspects must be considered when examining potential social activist outcomes. The poet on screen in poetry film needs to be investigated as the reception and interpretation of the poem may differ depending on whether they appear as "'being themselves; enacting a role as a 'performer' or created persona; or as on-screen narrator" (Tremlett 177). The perception of the poet or other characters on screen also depends on directorial decisions, such as camera angle and distance, gaze direction and movement. Moreover, like in spoken word performances, gestures and posture of the people displayed can be of interest as they may express certain emotions, attitudes or beliefs about the topic addressed (Novak 158). Visual components such as light and colour need to be considered for this thesis, as they can add layers of meaning or heighten an emotional response from the audience. For example, light can play an important part in the realisation of poetry film to communicate mood (Tremlett 113) and the intentional use of colour can carry meaning such as metaphorical connotations ascribed to specific colours (Tremlett 118). Thus, it is necessary to question what is shown, but also how it is depicted in poetry film to create meaning in a multimodal context. The utilisation of stylistic devices can extend beyond spoken words in poems. In poetry film, visual metaphors can amplify or contradict the meaning of the poem (Tremlett 52-53). Visual metaphors can be a significant contributor to the activist nature of spoken word poetry as metaphors

regularly draw upon cultural symbols or narratives. Consequently, visual metaphors may contribute to the process of framing in spoken word activism.

To conclude, spoken word activist outcomes such as empathic transcendence in poetry film emerge from the interaction of text, voice, sound and image. Vocal delivery, sound and soundscape design, visual representation and directorial choices such as camera work, light, colour or visual metaphors construct and alter meaning. To identify the activist potential of raising empathic transcendence through storytelling, emotional appeal, persuasion, framing or stylistic devices, poetry film must therefore be examined through a multimodal lens in which meaning is created through the interplay of elements, rather than through spoken words alone.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Approach

For this thesis, I analyse eight spoken word poems on the Irish housing crisis. The analysis of the poems will be rooted in the perspective of cultural studies. To analyse whether the poetry films and performances can be categorised as a form of social justice activism the following analyses are conducted: thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, and performance analysis.
The thematic analysis enables the categorisation of predominant themes. These are placed within the political and cultural context of the housing crisis in Ireland. The thematic analysis assesses how elements of spoken word activism that point towards social justice activism are used in the context of recurring themes. This investigation reveals how the predominant themes in the poems generate empathic transcendence through narrative structures, persuasion, visionary thinking or emotional appeal. The analysis of recurring themes further demonstrates how the poems challenge dominant narratives surrounding the housing crisis and advocate for a socially just society, as thematic patterns help to outline and contextualise the central messages of the poems. The critical discourse analysis scrutinises the linguistic aspects of the poem. This is done to draw connections to elements of social justice activism and to display how activists use linguistic strategies to challenge dominant narratives and create emotional engagement, resistance and potential mobilisation against social injustices among their audience. The linguistic findings must be placed in the sociocultural context of Ireland’s housing crisis to connect them to broader ideologies or power

structures. The question must be raised why certain linguistic choices were made and how assumptions about the world, power and control are reinforced or challenged. For this thesis, the critical discourse analysis focuses on conceptual metaphors.

Four spoken word poems are recordings of live performances. The performance analysis aims to identify performative elements that contribute to the activist potential of the poems. Elements such as vocal delivery, body communication or facial expressions are examined in relation to the spoken word itself, as they may generate additional meaning or alter the reception and interpretation of the poem. This analysis demonstrates how the interplay of performance and spoken language can support social justice activism through the generation of empathic transcendence.

The other four poems are considered poetry films. The poems are realised through audiovisual short films published on YouTube and Facebook. The multimodal analysis is employed to identify the techniques and strategies through which visual and auditory modes interact with the spoken word to create additional layers of meaning or modify the interpretation of the poem. This investigation examines how multimodal elements used in poetry film support or generate potential social justice activist outcomes. The multimodal analysis provides an overarching idea of how the poetry films challenge dominant narratives and prevailing power structures and encourage resistance and viewer engagement.

4.2. Data Selection and Corpus Description

The poem selection process was exploratory in nature. Keywords guided the search on publicly accessible digital platforms, primarily YouTube. Keywords included: spoken word poetry, Ireland, housing crisis, homelessness and poetry film. The poems chosen were selected according to the predefined criteria that four are recordings of live performances and four are poetry films. Furthermore, the videos had to be of relevance to the housing crisis as it appears in Ireland today. Thus, no poems were chosen that were published before the year 2016, in which the occupation of the Apollo House took place, one of the first major social justice actions addressing the housing crisis in Ireland. The selected poems either centre on the housing crisis in Ireland as their primary topic or address it in relation to another overarching subject.

The poem “Sarah” was written by the Dublin poet, rapper and actor Paul Alwright. According to his agency’s website, MPIArtists, Alwright has released four hip

hop albums and is working on a fifth one. The poetry film was released on YouTube in 2017 and according to the description, features Alwright himself as the speaker or performer in the video. The video was released in collaboration with Home Sweet Home and released on their official YouTube channel. Home Sweet Home was a campaign initiated to bring awareness to the housing and homelessness crisis and to pressure the government to act (Hearne 203-204). The campaign gained nationwide attention in 2016-2017 as “artists, housing activists and trade union officials took over a vacant Dublin city centre building to house homeless people” (Fitzgerald), the Apollo House.

The poem “This is Our Ireland” written by Irish director, actor, writer and producer Terry McMahon is a recording of a live performance of his poem. The video was published in 2016 in collaboration with Home Sweet Home. The recording has been uploaded by both McMahon himself and the official Home Sweet Home YouTube channel. According to the Irish Examiner, McMahon wrote what the article describes as a “speech”, in response to the occupation of the Apollo House, at a time when the occupation was still ongoing. According to McMahon’s description in the video upload, he was personally involved in the planning and execution of the occupation. The performance of his poem took place at a comedy show at the Axis Theatre in Dublin. Although McMahon initially considered the location an unusual fit for such a topic, the performance ultimately received a standing ovation.

The poetry film “Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep” by Dublin hip hop artist, lyricist and poet Mikey Cullen (Poetry Ireland) was found on Facebook, uploaded by 1916 Societies in 2024. According to the video description, the video was created in collaboration with 1916 Societies, an Irish separatist movement founded in 2009. The poetry film was filmed in Peadar Browns, a pub in Dublin with support from creative workers and the freelance videographer Jack Molloy. In the Facebook video description, Cullen states that the poem was written as “a call for unity; for all the people of Ireland to reject the division […] and to direct the justifiable anger […] towards those who are actually responsible - Fianna Fáil , Fine Gael and the corporate, financial and land-owning interests that they represent”.

“The Apology” is a poetry film released on YouTube in 2022 by the channel Multi-Story Project. According to the description of the video, the poetry film is the first official release of the project Multi-Story - Creative Engagement for Housing Change started by Fiona Whelan, Feidlim Cannon and Housing Action Now. The poetry film emerged

through artistic online collaborations and investigates experiences during the housing crisis “through collective writing and performative story-telling”. The poetry film addresses Irish government failures concerning housing. The speaker of the poem, Paula Kearney, does not necessarily correspond to the poem’s original writer. According to the description, the script was compiled by the creators of the project suggesting a collection of contributions.

The recording of a live performance of Natalya O’Flaherty’s poem “Brass Tax” was published on YouTube in 2019 and uploaded on the official channel of The Late Late Show. The Irish talk show airs every Friday on RTÉ, Ireland’s national television and radio broadcaster. According to her management’s website, Word Up Collective, Natalya O’Flaherty is a Dublin poet and performer and her appearances on the popular talk show are considered particularly noteworthy in her career.

Stephen James Smith’s performance of his poem “Dublin You Are” was published by the YouTube channel of Other Voices Live in 2017. According to Smith’s website, he is a Dublin poet, writer, playwright, performer and educator. His work has been published nationally and internationally, translated into several languages, and recognised with various awards. Smith also performs regularly in Ireland and abroad. His poem “Dublin You Are” has been performed extensively and also been adapted as a poetry film. Other Voices is a music television series that celebrates global culture and is regularly broadcast on RTÉ.

Smith’s poetry film of his poem “What If” was published in 2019 on his own YouTube channel. According to the YouTube description, he wrote the poem and created the poetry film in collaboration with Focus Ireland, a Dublin based non-profit organisation with the goal of preventing and ending homelessness in Ireland by providing services for people in need. He wrote the poem for the campaign Couches Don’t Count that targets youth homelessness. The poetry film was also created in association with Body & Soul, an Irish music and arts festival. Smith explicitly mentions the rising number of youth homelessness in Ireland in the video’s description with a link to a petition.

The recording of the performance of the poem “I Can’t Afford to Live Here” was published on YouTube in 2022 by the YouTube channel The Poetry’s Dead Podcast. The performance took place in the International Bar in Dublin. According to the pub’s website, the bar regularly organises live music or comedy events and artistic shows such as spoken word poetry nights. No information on the poet-performer is revealed.

The Poetry's Dead Podcast is an Irish poetry podcast "exploring the work of poets old and new, with a little bit of craic mixed in" (Dunne & Duggins).

4.3. Analytical Tools

4.3.1. Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that aims to identify, categorise and interpret patterns or themes in selected data (Naeem et al. 2). For this research, the spoken words of the poems analysed were first transcribed into written form. The process of pattern identification was of an exploratory nature. The poems were read closely, and keywords related to recurring themes were noted. Based on these keywords, the coding process was conducted where "short phrases or words, known as codes, are assigned to segments of data that capture the data's core message, significance, or theme" (Naeem et al. 4). Through deductive coding, the data is presented in a simplified form that is meaningful to the research questions. Codes are the smallest elements of the analysis and constitute the basis for the identification of themes. At this point it must be mentioned that coding is an ongoing process and liable to subjectivity of the researcher. Codes might change depending on the development of knowledge and comprehension of the data. This allows an organic process to unfold, labelling and relabelling code blocks and an evolving understanding of the texts. The recognition of differences but also patterns between codes is placed into the foreground (Braun and Clarke 52-58). The codes were then grouped into relevant and related patterns or themes. This step of the thematic analysis intends to identify meaningful connections or relationships that link the research data to the research questions (Naeem et al. 4). To summarise, the coding process utilises close reading on a micro scale, whereas grouping into themes requires a macro lens, pointing towards wider patterns (Braun and Clarke 74). The thematic patterns were subsequently examined in terms of how they contribute to social justice activism by drawing on Chepp's (*Speaking Truths)* framework on what constitutes spoken word activism, in connection to Ogunye's theory of persuasion in social justice activism, Eyerman's description of successful social movements and Lima's analysis on housing crisis narratives in Ireland.

4.3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

A critical discourse analysis can reveal prevailing power dynamics in a text by analysing how language challenges or reinforces dominant narratives (Dahlborg 178). In this thesis, the formal linguistic features of the poems are analysed. Machin and Mayr summarise that “underpinning this close attention to language is the assumption that it is intertwined with power, ideology and control over how we create our societies” (9). So far in this thesis, existing hegemony in Ireland concerning the housing crisis and its cultural and historical implications have been explored. An understanding of the socio-cultural domains in which a text and its language is embedded becomes crucial when conducting a critical discourse analysis (Dahlborg 178).

Norman Fairclough (98) describes three dimensions of discourse that need to be considered when conducting a critical discourse analysis. First, a descriptive analysis that focuses on the formal features of the text requires a close reading. Considering the research question of this thesis, the linguistic and stylistic elements analysed were narrowed down to conceptual metaphors. This aspect of formal language reveals how activists frame the housing crisis in their spoken word poems. In this thesis the theory of conceptual metaphors developed by Lakoff and Johnson was employed. According to Lakoff and Johnson (3-9), metaphors are fundamental to human thought, as they shape how we understand and reason about concepts by mapping familiar experiences (source domains) onto abstract, intangible ideas (target domains). As conceptual metaphors reveal how abstract concepts are understood through personal experiences, they can give insights into how spoken word activists frame the housing crisis to challenge and resist dominant discourse and strengthen collective solidarity. Fairclough’s second dimension targets interpretation in form of a process analysis, that is how the text was produced, distributed and consumed. The corpus description gives an overview of this aspect, as it outlines the contexts to the poems and the modes of production and consumption namely live performances and poetry film. The second dimension examines the processes of production, distribution and reception and how these processes influence the social justice activist outcomes. The third dimension of the critical discourse analysis critically examines how a text exists and operates within social boundaries and can influence and shape social practices. The focus lies on revealing underlying power structures and dominant ideologies. For this thesis, the formal findings are situated within the context of the Irish housing crisis and its cultural, social and economic implications, revealing how activists utilise elements of spoken

word activism to challenge dominant narratives, redirect responsibility and engage audiences to resist and act.

4.3.3. Experiential Meaning Potential and Semiotics in Performance and Multimodal Analysis

Both the performance and multimodal analysis in this thesis are grounded in the principles of semiotics and experiential meaning potential. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (10), signifiers derive their meaning based on how they are produced, how physical actions are interpreted as meaningful, how experiences are extended metaphorically, and how such extensions are recognised by others. Experiential meaning potential refers to the way the physical act of doing translates into an understanding of meaning. This concept is relevant for the analysis of live performances and for the multimodal analysis of poetry film. The relation between articulatory parameters and the physical actions of the spoken word poets influences interpretation and meaning-making processes. For example, the emotion anger can be interpreted through experiential meaning potential: “the accumulated physical energy that anger produces is vented through speech, where it is manifest in a higher pitch, increased volume etc.” (Novak 78). The communication of experience through the body and the resulting experiential meaning potential is based on the principle of empathy (Novak 78).

Within social semiotics, signs are broken down into individual components and analysed to identify “more direct meanings in terms of what they connote or signify” (Machin and Ledin 5). In the performance and multimodal analysis, the visual and auditory semiotic choices and their meaning potentials are examined to gain insight into how meaning is constructed, how sociocultural contexts are reflected and how communicative goals, such as spoken word activism, are achieved (Machin and Ledin 15). The concept of affordances examines how signifiers make interpretations of actions available to viewers or listeners, shaped by socially and culturally embedded assumptions and conventions (Machin and Ledin 18). Through visual semiotic resources, or visual grammar, and the choices they afford, artists select the most suitable forms to visualise intended meaning, shaped by their personal focus and by societal constraints or conventions (Kress and Van Leeuwen 13). In multimodal analysis, the relationships and interconnections between visual and auditory semiotic choices and their affordances are analysed to demonstrate how meaning is created

through the interaction of multiple modes. Consequently, in poetry film, the semiotic choices of sound also need to be put into relation with the semiotic choices of (moving) images.

The performance analysis follows Novak's guidelines for analysing live performances which draw on Kress and Van Leeuwen's experiential meaning potential and Leeuwen's semiotics of sound. Rather than relying on a definite "code book" (Van Leeuwen 6), the analysis prioritises the meaning potential of semiotic resources and the choices they afford. Kress and Van Leeuwen's theories of visual grammar and semiotics of sound guide the multimodal analysis by exploring how semiotic choices across different modes interact and shape the meaning and interpretation of the poem.

5. Findings

5.1. Themes Framing the Housing Crisis in Ireland

The thematic analysis reveals four main themes in spoken word poetry on the housing crisis in Ireland. The following subchapters each provide an overview of one prominent theme with examples from the corpus. Moreover, this chapter places these themes in the context of social justice activism, as this is the primary aim of this thesis. Therefore, only themes relevant to the research questions were taken into consideration.

5.1.1. Exposing Systemic Oppression and Reframing Dominant Narratives of Responsibility

The spoken word poems on the housing crisis in Ireland criticise prevailing power dynamics and expose systemic oppression caused by institutions and parties in power. Several poems include criticism of capitalist structures and the systemic inequality and oppression they cause.

The poet activists identify the housing and homelessness crisis as the result of a power imbalance in Ireland that needs to be addressed at its root. Specifically, real estate corporations, the government and the elite are criticised in the poems analysed. Terry McMahon exclaims in his poem "This is Our Ireland":

> This is our Ireland.
> Where corporations can operate tax-free with impunity.
> Where natural resources can be purchased for a song.
> Where our national leaders lie on the world stage about our recovery.
> Where the protected banks can rip people from their homes

and vulture funds can peck at the carcasses.

The poets especially criticise that profit is considered more valuable than people in Ireland. Several poet activists point to corruption and greed as the main drivers of the housing crisis. MacMahon says, “People are profit margins now”, which offers a precise critique of the greed of corporations placing profit over people. The prevailing power structures in Ireland are framed as causing systemic oppression and inequality such as class division and exploitation of young people. Natalya O’Flaherty, for instance, speaks in her poem “Brass Tax” of young Irish people carrying the load of the corruption and greed in her country:

> And there’s nothing else out there,
> or at least that’s the fear
> seeded in the minds of the youth
> since the big boy bankers burst the bubble
> and left us in the rubble.

Several poet activists confront the institutional violence and discrimination in the housing sector caused by power imbalances in Ireland. Paul Alwright, for instance, proclaims in his poem “Sarah”: “So a high court can tell us to vacate a premises housing homeless residents or be removed by force?”. The Multi-Story Project confronts racist forms of discrimination in their poem “The Apology”: “Landlords being more interested in the fact that he is black, rather than the fact that he is a health care worker”. In his poem, Alwright names banks and bureaucrats as being responsible for the suffering of Irish people: “Imagine Sarah was no longer a victim of circumstance or certain banks. Now imagine bureaucrats converging to take it back”. Mikey Cullen confronts the unjustified blaming of minorities for the housing crisis and instead holds those in power accountable:

> This town is burning.
> And some can’t see it
> from atop their castle turrets.
> Those in the fire can’t see the light
> and those in high sky light don’t see the fire.
> Though they fan the flames in many ways
> it’s others that they blame.

The poet activists not only expose the systemic oppression within the housing system in Ireland but also reframe prevailing narratives that blame individuals or minorities for the crisis and shift responsibility towards those in power. The poet activists clearly name the parties who they believe are at fault or need to be held

accountable for the housing crisis in Ireland. Banks, real estate corporations, landlords, and the government are framed as failing Irish citizens. The poet activists place the blame for the housing crisis and the resulting suffering towards bigger structures and resulting power imbalances rather than individuals. By intentionally redirecting responsibility, the poet activists introduce a new approach to understanding the housing crisis and its sociocultural implications. This reframing creates possibilities for social justice and change (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 47). By its nature, social justice activism aims to reveal current political and social issues. Through their work, the poet activists communicate the causes and consequences of the housing crisis to their audience. Endsley ("Poetry is my Politics") highlights that spoken word activism acts as a "method of conscious-changing, knowledge-producing, creative power" (70) and that frequently an unaware audience is turned into active participants in a process of learning. The theme of exposing systemic oppression within Ireland's housing system aligns with Lima's (43-44) first category of activist narrative strategies. Activists expose underlying causes and identify responsible actors to raise awareness and mobilise spectators to resist such injustices.

To deflect blame from individuals or minorities, several poet activists employ a storytelling structure in their poems. They give names to individuals whose stories they tell and who are suffering from the housing crisis in one way or another. While challenging unjustified narratives of blaming individuals or minorities as a means of diverting responsibility, the poets demonstrate that those blamed by those in power are often the most vulnerable and subjected to the greatest consequences of the crisis. The poets emphasise how those individuals are also victims of the housing crisis and systemically neglected and oppressed. The poets construct an alternative narrative in opposition to those spread by powerful institutions, exposing how those in power divert blame and avoid accountability (Atkinson 5). This new perspective on the housing crisis can help bring about change in cultural and communal spheres, challenging "persuasively prevailing thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and values" (Lucas 261). Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 13) found that poet activists ascribe the poetry's activist potential to its ability to express an accumulation of diverse experiences and narratives. The Multi-Story Project centres its poem "The Apology" around personal narratives to expose how systemic injustice shapes different lived realities during the housing crisis. By foregrounding the voices of those most affected, the poem challenges dominant narratives and reclaims the authority to share their own experiences. At the same time,

this extract already begins to illustrate how spoken word poetry captures the human impact and consequences of the housing crisis, a point that will be developed further in the following subchapter:

> To Claire,
> who has spent so much time scanning ads online for apartments
> that claim to be accessible
> but only allow a wheelchair user in the door
> and don't consider the need to move around inside, or to have a shower.
> […]
> But now all she feels is stress
> as she pays her rent but can't move in
> because there is no personal assistance support available to her.
> Claire can't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

Scholars such as Chepp ("Activating Politics" 45) argue that a storytelling structure can be used for social justice activism, as it articulates and delivers different perspectives and morals in a comprehensible form. Chepp (*Speaking Truths*) highlights that "poets refer to their personal and subjective experience as their *truth*" (45). Considering that dominant narratives, for example in mainstream media, are shaped by those in power (McChesney 48-56), the realities of those affected by the housing crisis can be dismissed. Lack of awareness can lead to policies that disregard systematic issues (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 56). Challenging prevailing narratives pushed by institutions or corporations in power is a key feature of social justice activism (Bell 2-5). Personal narratives in spoken word poetry can help to spread awareness and encourage the audience to create "political meaning" (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 45) by connecting individual stories to broader sociopolitical issues and can raise empathic transcendence (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 69-73).

In conclusion, one of the four principal themes identified in this analysis is the exposure of systemic oppression alongside the reframing of narratives of responsibility. This theme aims to raise awareness, advocate for social justice and potentially mobilise audiences to resist and act against systemic injustices. To achieve this, the poets include personal narratives to generate empathic transcendence while clearly naming root causes and culprits.

5.1.2. Human Impact and Consequences of the Housing Crisis

In their poems, the poets capture the impact the housing crisis has on people and the resulting consequences for people living in Ireland. The spoken word artists address

the lived realities of housing insecurity including the mental and physical toll. As previously suggested, “The Apology” illustrates different ways in which the housing crisis affects people. The poem presents the consequences of the crisis through a series of narratives, each story depicting a different form of its impact. For example, the poem addresses poor housing conditions due to the crisis and competition in the rental sector:

> To Brendan,
> who feels like he is living on a trapdoor
> with a rope around his neck
> at the mercy of landlords who ignore complaints about
> filthy carpets, and a broken showers, cold water and cold air howling through cracked windows.

Other stories depict poverty, forced emigration, debt or children growing up in emergency accommodation due to the crisis. In his poem “I Can’t Afford to Live Here”, the poet draws attention to the Generation Stuck at Home:

> But the making of memories hit a wall
> when the kids stopped pretending
> that they were too small.
> Stayed at home through the college years
> and hid in their rooms.
> That drove Margaret to tears.

Several poets highlight the mental health struggles and potential physical harm resulting from these lived realities. The artists confront the mental exhaustion that grows among people as a response to the housing crisis in its most severe forms, including depression and suicide. The present mental health crisis is recurrently addressed in the poems analysed, such as in McMahon’s poem “This is Our Ireland”: “In the last 8 years of austerity more people have committed suicide than died in 30 years of the Northern Irish Troubles”. The Multi-Story Project also draws attention to the mental toll these experiences take on individuals, such as: “To Kevin, who was living in a hub and planning to kill himself, no longer able to cope with the size of the room” or “Lonely and isolated Mary feels like she has been dumped in hell and forgotten”. Natalya O’Flaherty addresses the problem of alcoholism in her poem “Brass Tax” as a coping mechanism in response to mental health struggles caused by Ireland’s socioeconomic conditions: “Because you see, there’s no thinking when you’re drinking”.

Several poems depict homelessness as the most severe consequence of housing insecurity. Stephen James Smith, for instance, speaks up about the mental toll of being homeless in his poem “What If”:

> Here at the corner of Back Lane
> there’s some shelter for now
> allowing you to be
> philosophical with the pain
> by blocking it out and makin’ a vow
> to survive this city.

Central to the theme of human impact is also the marginalisation and dehumanisation of vulnerable or marginalised groups, including homeless people, migrants or others who face systemic discrimination and exclusion. In his poem “Sarah” Paul Alwright confronts the ostracism that homeless people are met with:

> Where occasional passersby might disturb her from a nap
> to either empty purse and pocket or to hurl hurtful words.
> Words that made her feel like the worlds scourge.
> No worse than that,
> they made her feel like the rats would be more welcome there.

In his poem “What If”, Stephen James Smith attempts to break down an us-versus-them narrative that marginalised groups affected by the housing crisis often must face. He emphasises that housing insecurity can affect anyone, regardless of background and circumstances. By doing so, he addresses several consequences of the crisis, a growing disdain for vulnerable people, a lack of empathy and the indifference of people who have not yet experienced an acute impact of the housing crisis:

> What if?
> I don’t get a bed tonight?
> What if?
> I can’t sleep again?
> Why is this my life?
> When it could be yours?

According to John Rawls’ (136-142) veil of ignorance, privileged people who are unaware of their status in society need to make decisions that benefit disadvantaged or marginalised groups, as if they themselves are in that position. Although a thought experiment, it encourages people to imagine themselves as part of various social groups to foster empathy and to come to socially just conclusions or decisions. Patricia Hill Collins (42) emphasises in her work on intersectionality that social change and empathy begin with individual responsibility. She highlights that while individuals may not be responsible for the issue at hand, every person must decide which aspects of

social oppression and discrimination to accept or to challenge. Developing empathy for marginalised groups and their experiences and understanding one's own privileges are key elements of social change. For socially advantaged groups this demands intentional and active efforts. In the context of the housing crisis, poets such as Stephen James Smith use their art to foster empathy by highlighting experiences of the socially disadvantaged and focusing on individual choice and moral agency to strengthen collective responsibility for social change. By presenting the devastating consequences of the crisis and the marginalisation and discrimination against those most affected through storytelling, the poems enable audiences to develop empathy across time and space. Thus, the appeal to emotions generates empathic transcendence and emotional transference (Eyerman 196-197). The latter refers to the presentation of individuals' experiences in such an emotional manner that such representations generate a shared emotional response and a feeling of belonging to something larger than oneself. Moreover, the theme of human impact entails an element of persuasion which, as Ogunye (103-104) argues, aims to present coherent arguments for why people should join a social justice movement. By using pathos and applying the principle of price-setting (Ogunye's 106), the poets highlight the negative human cost caused by indifference or inaction. In contrast, as noted in subchapter 5.1.4., positive visions are associated with actions taken against the housing crisis. The audience may therefore be persuaded to engage in social justice activism against the housing crisis.

In conclusion, the second theme analysed highlights the human impact of the housing crisis in Ireland. Storytelling and pathos may generate empathic transcendence and emotional transference in the audience, allowing the audience members to connect with the experiences of marginalised and vulnerable groups. Combined with the persuasive element of price-setting, these techniques demonstrate how the poets engage in social justice activism to advocate for housing justice and engage their audiences to resist and mobilise against systemic injustices.

5.1.3. Community and Collective Solidarity

In the poems analysed, the poets emphasise the necessity of community and collective solidarity to face, resist and mobilise against the systemic oppression and inequality caused by the housing crisis.

Several poems emphasise the potential strength of a community standing together and that collective resistance is more powerful than individual actions taken. In her poem “Brass Tax”, Natalya O’Flaherty stresses the importance and beauty of community in difficult times as it unites and provides a sense of meaning and belonging: “And yous know if it weren’t for to each other, there’d be nowhere else to go”. A call for empathy and support in times of the housing crisis is expressed through the poems. In Paul Alwright’s poem “Sarah”, he criticises indifference and lack of empathy for marginalised people: “The tactless words of those bureaucrats, now bridge the gap between her and those who turned their backs”. He concludes in his poem: “When will we learn that by doubting our power the only thing we actually do is empower our doubts”. He emphasises the need for empathy and a collective reclamation of resistance in a climate where apprehension and uncertainty are cultivated by those in power. In his poem “This is Our Ireland”, McMahon stresses the power of collective resistance within a community characterised by reliance and mutual care: “As long as a quarter of a million properties lie empty and our government continues to do nothing, we will fight to ensure nobody, nobody else dies in a doorway”. Furthermore, by repeatedly proclaiming, “This is our Ireland”, he emphasises a call for communal solidarity and reclamation of the country through resistance and mobilisation.

By drawing attention to shared struggles, several artists attempt to point out that hatred and discrimination against marginalised groups are often manufactured by dominant power structures attempting to weaken resistance and divert blame for the crisis. Thus, the poet activists call for unity and solidarity across cultural, social or economic differences to act against the real causes of the housing crisis. Several poets highlight that true community and solidarity should ensure that no person is left behind or treated as a second-class citizen. Stephen James Smith remarks in his poem “Dublin You Are”: “Dublin. Baile Átha Cliath and other tongues your citizens are using to name you”. By speaking Irish, he evokes a sense of unity and solidarity while simultaneously acknowledging the diversity of languages and people in Ireland. He continues to declare, “But I’m happy to share you, Dublin” and “Dublin, you are all of us and all who are to come”, emphasising his vision of inclusivity and community where people from different cultural, social or economic backgrounds are welcome. The denunciation of marginalisation and discrimination can also be found in Smith’s poem “What If”. He encourages community and empathy while simultaneously calling out the

alienation of homeless people: “What if it was us, not otherness”. Smith also expresses the need for empathy in times of the housing crisis: “What if I don’t get a bed tonight? What if I can’t sleep again? Why is this my life when it could be yours?”. He bridges the gap between those most severely affected by the crisis and those who are not yet affected in the same way. He encourages reflection among the audience on their position relative to others experiencing hardship. The call for collective solidarity and community can be considered an attempt to remind the people of Ireland of the power that lies in community and to invite the audience to mobilise as a collective and participate in the movement. According to Chepp (*Speaking Truths*) not only promoting awareness, but also “building community are necessary building blocks for the realization of larger social justice goals aimed at eradicating institutionalized oppression and domination” (14). Further aims of spoken word activism are to build healthy and supportive relationships, communities and networks based on shared experiences that sustain spoken word art, amplify marginalised voices and strengthen collective efforts for social change (Chepp, “Activating Politics” 46). Through emotional appeal of community and solidarity, the poems generate empathic transcendence. Eyerman (195) notes that displays of collective solidarity and unity, particularly in combination with emotional appeal, can connect individuals to the greater cause and help to unify and mobilise social justice movements. Lima notes that social justice activist narratives around the Irish housing crisis regularly “appeal to the common values of solidarity” (43). Moreover, as Lima (43) notes, the call for solidarity regularly aligns with a call for action, which emphasises the social justice activist purpose of mobilisation and resistance.

The analysis also reveals that several poet activists draw on historical events or cultural references of Ireland to evoke a sense of unity. The poets draw connections to Ireland’s revolutionary past and strong Irish cultural identity to inspire community and solidarity. Several poet activists link Irish history and culture to the housing crisis to inspire reclamation of Irish ideals of equality, solidarity and care and justice for all. For example, Alwright questions in his poem “Sarah”: “So this is what the sons of Róisín died for. So a high court can tell us to vacate premises housing homeless residents or be removed by force?” The reference to a political song about national identity and resistance (Coleman 166) can be seen as a call for action as well as for collective solidarity. In “The Apology”, the Multi-Story Project draws on cultural representations of Ireland to question the current lack of solidarity and justice in the country during the

housing crisis: “Brendan questions his decision to have come back from his life abroad, to bring his partner and children to the city he grew up in, in the country of one hundred thousand welcomes”. Poet activists such as O’Flaherty refer to cultural symbols connected to Irishness, such as stout, to embrace unity and solidarity:

> The brain drain might’ve left us in drought
> but there’s no doubt
> that the stout and cider’s rains
> still a-falling
> like the good times never left.

In “This is Our Ireland”, McMahon confronts how the current housing crisis has cost more lives than the revolutionary past of Ireland: “In this one year, the centenary of 1916, more people have died by their own hand than were killed in the entire Easter Rising”. Moreover, he draws historical connections to call out the lack of resistance and solidarity while emphasising the power of Irish unity from the past:

> A hundred years ago, men and women fought a bloody war for our Ireland.
> The most idealistic among us, the bravest among us, the best among us
> from every rung of society
> put everything on the line for our Ireland.
> They are the forefathers of our revolution
> and we are the sons and daughters of their sacrifice.
> And we have failed them.

According to sociologist Ann Swidler, culture can act as a “toolkit” (273). Individuals use culture to accomplish certain aims; in this case social justice activism. In her framework, culture represents an accumulation of “symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler 273). In other words, “social actors strategically draw upon or use elements of culture to engage in various types of activity, including political activity” (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 13). Contextualised by individual experiences, the audience can find familiarity and representation within cultural symbols that are accessible and meaningful to them (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 75). Particularly, cherished and respected cultural symbols or references evoke emotional resonance in the audience and inspire involvement and mobilisation within the movement. Through pathos, emotional transference can take place where such a strong emotional reaction is produced that it creates a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself (Eyerman 196-197). By drawing on valued historical and cultural symbols or events, the poems link Irish identity directly to solidarity and empathy. The poems demonstrate how these shared symbols connect Irish people across time and place. This can generate empathic

transcendence which may inspire collective mobilisation, motivation to resist and act out of pride, loyalty and a desire to honour the past.

To conclude, the recurring theme of community and collective solidarity is central to social justice activism as it raises engagement and mobilisation through resistance and action. By appealing to emotions and empathy and drawing on shared cultural and historical Irish symbols or events, the poems generate empathic transcendence. This can encourage the audience to reclaim Irish ideals of solidarity and care, and to collectively take action against housing injustices.

5.1.4. Visions of a Better Future through Resistance and Action

The fourth theme captures how the spoken word artists envision a future without social injustice and inequality reinforced by the housing crisis. The poets attempt to mobilise audiences to act and resist through their visions of a better future. The poet activists present alternatives to the Irish housing crisis and the injustices intensified by the housing crisis and call for action to achieve a socially just future. In his poem “Sarah”, Paul Alwright encourages the audience to imagine a different future where homelessness and housing insecurity were no longer the reality:

> Imagine people had to act to ensure Sarah’s survival.
> Imagine Sarah had a home sweet home where to relax.
> Imagine Sarah was no longer a victim of circumstance.

Stephen James Smith reflects in his poem “What If” on his hope for a future beyond the suffering caused by the housing crisis: “What if life begins on the other side of despair? That’s where I’m reaching for not much more”. Smith encourages his audience to resist and mobilise against injustices of the housing crisis by linking the possibility of a better future to taking responsibility and action in the present: “To stay still is to lose ground and any real generosity towards the future lies in giving all to the present”. In his poem “Dublin You Are”, Smith raises the question: “Dublin, where the power is held by too few in the Dáil, when will you revolt again?”. He indirectly calls for resistance and revolution to overcome injustices of the housing crisis. In “Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep”, Mikey Cullen urges, “Fight the real enemy!”, after condemning institutions and the government for their role in the housing crisis and drawing attention to the suffering they have caused. As the title “Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep” suggests, Cullen frames the housing crisis through the language of class conflict. By describing ordinary people as peasants and the ruling elite as

occupying the keep, he presents the future as one of collective resistance against the corporate and political powers responsible for housing injustice.

In her research on spoken word activism, Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 79) points out that social justice is an ongoing process that unfolds over time. She points out that artistic and creative forms such as spoken word poetry can cultivate a practice vital to social justice activism, namely visionary thinking. In the poems analysed, this practice of visionary thinking is evident, as the poets envision a final objective in their activist work that does not yet exist but is believed to be attainable in the future (Chepp, Speaking Truths 79). On the one hand, the poets' vision of the future demands resistance and action against dominant structures. On the other hand, the poets envision a future in which the process of social change is already taking shape, presenting a vision where justice and equality are taking root. This form of visionary thinking is crucial to social justice activism as sociologist Allan Johnson (2006) argues. The practice can uproot two common misconceptions about social change and the individual's role in it, namely that society as a system cannot be changed and that individuals cannot contribute to change effectively. The creative and artistic aspect of spoken word poetry can foster the ability to envision alternative arrangements of society (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 80). Thus, the audience may find it easier to imagine the poets' visions through creativity and engagement. The artists use persuasive strategies by presenting coherent arguments namely visions of a future beyond the crisis, demonstrating why people should challenge existing housing injustices. The poets draw on the principle of price-setting (Ogunye's 106), linking positive outcomes to resistance and mobilisation in the present.

To conclude, the poems explore the theme of envisioning a better future beyond the housing crisis through resistance and action. The poets use the concepts of visionary thinking and persuasion to depict the future possibilities of a socially just housing system if concrete measures are taken in the present. On the one hand, the audience is invited to reflect and imagine a socially just future. On the other hand, the audience is called to resistance and mobilisation as these visions can only be achieved through action.

5.2. Framing the Irish Housing Crisis through Conceptual Metaphors

The following section provides an analysis of the most frequently used conceptual metaphors in the spoken word poems. The poets intentionally build upon familiar, emotionally loaded source domains to depict the structural housing injustices and to advocate for resistance and a socially just future.

The poets draw from the source domain of religion, aristocratic power and machinery, mapping the concepts onto the target domain of capitalist structures to criticise capitalism and its role in the housing crisis in Ireland. Alwright, for instance, takes the concept of holiness from the source domain of religion in his poem “Sarah” to call out the prioritisation and glorification of profit: “What can we lose attacking their most sacred of cows?”. Drawing on the source domain of religion, the poet activists expose the ideological underpinnings by reframing capitalism not as an economic system but as a belief system. The poets question the moral legitimacy of this seemingly untouchable system that puts profit over people by framing it in religious language associated with morality. “Ireland’s Catholic history […] has been rooted in the social as well as the political, framed by the numerous histories of the devastation of the famine, of the devotional revolution, and of a dynamic Irish diaspora” (Mangion and O’Brien 8). The use of culturally accessible metaphors such as religion allows the audience to morally engage with a historically significant source domain. In Ireland, religion has been linked to revolutions, resistance and national pride and has withstood past troubles (Rafferty 244). Thus, particularly in the Irish context, Catholicism or religion can be framed as a stable, seemingly untouchable and enduring system. Metaphorically framing capitalism as a false religion calls for a re-evaluation of moral and societal values. Cullen takes concepts from the source domain of aristocratic power and maps them onto capitalist power and governance: “This town is burning and some can’t see it from atop their castle turrets”. By drawing on the source domain of aristocratic power, the poets frame the housing crisis as structural and deliberately maintained through protection, exclusion and elitism. Moreover, the poet activists utilise the source domain of machinery to point towards the faults of capitalist systems particularly in the context of the housing crisis. In her poem “Brass Tax”, O’Flaherty highlights the exploitation of individuals in present-day Ireland under capitalism: “The working class is just a working machine”. Humans, especially working-class citizens,

are objectified and dehumanised, framed as machinery with no agency. These metaphors expose how predominant narratives have normalised the treatment of labourers as a resource to keep the capitalist system intact. It also points towards a hierarchical order of Ireland with the working class as a means to sustain capitalist systems without receiving the benefits of their labour, such as safe housing. By framing capitalism as a religion or an aristocratic institution and the labourers as inanimate machinery, the poet activists reveal systemic inequality that causes issues such as the housing crisis. These metaphors can be seen as an attempt to disrupt dominant narratives that praise capitalist structures and conceal human exploitation. By drawing on the source domains of religion, aristocratic power and machinery to criticise capitalist structures, the poets frame the housing crisis as the result of a structurally and morally unjust system. The metaphors encourage moral and critical reflection on the current economic and political system in Ireland and raise awareness of its sacrosanct status, human exploitation, exclusion and elitism.

The poems draw on the source domains of natural disasters, destruction, war, death, sickness or pain, mapping their concepts onto the target domain of human suffering caused by corporate greed and exploitation. In “This is Our Ireland”, McMahon exclaims: “Where protected banks can rip people from their homes, and vulture funds can peck at the carcasses”. The source domain behind vulture funds is that of scavengers feeding on dead bodies. The target domain is investment funds that exploit individuals during economic hardships for profit. The metaphor illustrates how corporations and agents in power profit from feeding off people’s suffering, thus putting profit over people. In “Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep”, Cullen says, “and burn ourselves while the castle stands tall”, utilising the source domain of physical pain through burning to map onto the target domain of human suffering. Moreover, he uses a contrast to indicate the privilege that people or corporations in power have over individuals who must face the consequences of government failings. The beginning of his poem, “This town is burning”, draws from the source domain of destruction through fire and maps onto the target domain of Ireland’s current crisis and state of anger. As fire spreads quickly, hurting those who come into contact with it, the housing crisis affects an increasing number of people, leaving behind widespread suffering and anger. In their poem “The Apology”, the Multi-Story Project presents a metaphor that demonstrates the alarming rise of substandard living conditions, the helplessness of tenants and the resulting exploitation by landlords: “Landlords who hike up the rent

when they are challenged about the mould that has grown as fast as his children". The source domain in this metaphor is the rapidly growing fungus, while the target domain is the swift deterioration of housing conditions and the vulnerability of tenants. On the one hand, this metaphor paints a picture of mould that grows quickly, is infectious, and leads to damages. This maps onto the neglect of property and the rapidly worsening housing conditions. Thus, the spreading fungus represents the neglect of landlords and the prioritisation of profit over peoples' rights to safe, habitable homes. On the other hand, by comparing the mould's growth to that of a child, the metaphor emphasises both the speed of the deterioration in housing conditions and the fact that families continue to live in these conditions, remaining exposed and vulnerable to the landlord's greed. In "This is Our Ireland", McMahon draws from the source domain of war to map onto the target domain of human suffering caused by corporate greed. For instance, he says: "This is our Ireland, and it's a different war now. […] Bullets are banks. Bombs are big business". The metaphor frames corporate greed as equivalent to war, emphasising the destructive and harmful effects and the human suffering it causes. In "Brass Tax", O'Flaherty draws on the source domain of natural disaster to map onto the target domain of the housing crisis in Ireland: "Why don't you battle the landslide of trying to buy your own home". The metaphor emphasises the collapsing state of the housing system, showing how it metaphorically crushes those trying to buy a house and how it fails to provide safe and adequate housing. The poet activists use the source domain of physical weight and map onto the target domain of the mental toll the crisis has on people. The concepts of pain, crushing pressure, and the exhaustion of carrying something heavy are mapped onto the mental health impacts. O'Flaherty conceptualises the toll the crisis has on mental health by drawing from the source domain of heavy weights: "And he knows there's nothing else he can do but to ease your burden by a few brass tacks". In his poem "What If", Smith asks, "But who can carry that truth?", questioning who can be burdened with the weight of knowledge about the unjust suffering.

Using metaphors from the source domains of disasters, death, destruction and war reframes the housing crisis as structural violence, rather than individual hardship. Lima (40) points out that current housing activism prioritises the mobilisation of tenants who are facing housing inequality, which goes hand in hand with the "narrative they create to achieve their goals, fighting for use values against exchange values; residential interests against the interests of landlords, banks, developers and

investors" (Lima 40). The metaphors analysed construct a narrative out of multiple interconnected institutional injustices that position the poet activists as advocates for those who were wronged. The negative connotations associated with the source domains, such as war or destruction, map these negative concepts onto the target domain of human suffering through structural inequality and hardship. The use of these affective metaphors can generate empathic transcendence, encouraging the audience to morally and emotionally engage with the issue beyond mere awareness. Particularly, metaphors of war or destruction reframe the housing crisis as a collective issue that affects Ireland as a whole. Thus, the poet activists call for resistance and action to "defeat the common enemy".

The poet activists draw on the source domain of attire or physical height to indicate power imbalances and privilege caused by greed and to shift the responsibility towards those in power. In his poem "Sarah", Alwright says: "They don't cut slack, cause the colour of the collar of their shirts doesn't match". The source domain is clothing attire, whereas the target domain is social rank or class. He criticises how class rank seems to justify unjust behaviour and highlights the power imbalance caused by social status in the housing crisis. In his poem "What If", Smith criticises the failings by those in power, dismissing blame or responsibility for their role in the housing crisis. He utilises the source domain of clothing as he says, "Hide the dirty laundry. It's not good for Big Business", indicating that corporations or people in power prioritise profit before acknowledging their failings. In "I Can't Afford to Live Here", the poet activist says, "Taoiseach meets with a suited pack", drawing from the source domain of formal attire to indicate corporate power. Moreover, the artist uses the source domain of a predatory animal group to map onto the target domain of corporations or people in power, portraying them as aggressive and threatening. MacMahon exclaims in his poem "This is Our Ireland": "elected and non-elected scum in three-piece suits protect the criminally corrupt". In "Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep", Cullen also condemns the ruling class's refusal to accept blame, saying: "See it suits the suits who have the power for us to blame those coming from outside the walls". The repetition of "suits" connects formal attire with political and corporate elites, showing how those in power redirect blame onto outsiders to preserve their own position. The poet activists, furthermore, use the source domain of physical height to map onto the target domain of power imbalance and unjust distribution of wealth. For instance, Cullen says: "They laugh at us, the plebs below forgotten long ago. Yet their castle of cards kept stacked

by our tax". This conceptual metaphor points towards a physical space between those suffering under the system upheld by those in power who remain untouched by the socioeconomic crisis. In "What If", Smith also draws from the source domain of physical height, exclaiming: "as weary eyes stare out above a paper cup, into the abyss". He maps this onto the target domain of hopelessness, highlighting the depth and seeming endlessness that homeless people must face. By using metaphors of attire and physical height, the poet activists humanise abstract ideas and systems such as class hierarchy and institutional power, privilege or oppression. Systemic structures become visible and tangible to the audience and the poets expose deceptions of competence and blame. The poet activists illustrate how predominant, ideological narratives avert responsibility. Utilising physical height as a metaphor visualises systemic inequality and social hierarchies. The disparity between the formal, respectable, heightened appearance and the moral reprehensibility it conceals invites the audience to critically engage with the question of blame and responsibility. These metaphors fall under a category that Lima (43-44) describes as a key element in social justice activism when framing the Irish housing crisis namely the exposure of those responsible.

The poet activists frequently draw from the source domain of historical, cultural or political Irish symbols and institutions to map onto the target domain of solidarity and resistance. For example, O'Flaherty exclaims, "But there's no doubt that the stout and cider rain's still a-falling", utilising the cultural symbol of Guinness stout to evoke a sense of common and collective solidarity among Irish citizens. In "Dublin You Are", Smith draws on an Irish sport to question the lack of resistance: "Dublin, you brought back Sam again, but when did you go from clash of the ash to exchanging goals for cash?". Moreover, he calls for collective resistance by exclaiming, "Oh, Dublin, where the power is held by too few in the Dáil, when will you revolt again?", drawing a connection between power imbalances of the present and the revolutionary Irish past to mobilise solidarity and action. McMahon criticises the lack of resistance drawing on the source domain of historical revolutions in Ireland: "They are the forefathers of our revolution and we are the sons and daughters of their sacrifice. And we have failed them". He draws on the source domain of revolutionary resistance and heroic sacrifices and maps the concepts onto modern Irish society, highlighting the failure or indifference to challenge systemic injustice. The poet activists reframe Irish identity, distancing it from capitalism and economic growth and instead associating it with community, collective solidarity, courage and resistance. The metaphors act as reminders of how

the country of Ireland has persisted through its revolutionary history that demanded unity and courage. The poet activists call for collective action, resisting the injustice and economic oppression Ireland is facing today. The poems redefine Irishness as collective agency or responsibility, rather than passive acknowledgement of Irish culture and history. By linking past resistance to present-day issues, they offer inspiration for action and empathy. Culture is a powerful tool (Swidler 273) and can be strategically used to engage in social justice activism, as the audience can identify familiar symbols which are meaningful to them (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 75). By drawing on historical revolutions in Ireland which can be associated with emotions of pride, courage or hope, the poems can generate emotional transference (Eyerman 196-197). Moreover, the historical and cultural metaphors can generate empathic transcendence, connecting the audience to Irish people across time and place, evoking a sense of moral obligation. The poets create a form of persuasion by appealing to emotion and reason (Ogunye 103-104) and demonstrate how the historical past and cultural identity make housing justice worth fighting for.

The poets map the source domain of natural resources, such as flowers, onto the target domain of change and healing. In Smith's "What If", he says: "I pick flowers and make a bouquet for myself. I tell myself I'm OK, I'm OK, OK. I'd like to give these petals away". The concept of picking and arranging flowers maps onto the act of self-care and attempts at healing. His willingness of giving away petals from the flowers he has picked symbolises his eagerness to share this healing which demonstrates empathy and prioritisation of people over selfish greed. The metaphor stands in stark contrast to the previous representations of those in power, who are depicted as insistently prioritising profit and corporate greed over people. Therefore, the metaphor emphasises the power of the people and advocates for communal healing. In Alwright's poem "Sarah", he says: "Our leaders? They're not planting seeds for the future. They want to see all the seeds that they're sowing flowering now". In this example, the source domain of flower seeds represents the target domain of change and economic healing. However, this desire contrasts with those in power who prioritise immediate results like profit over the long-term economic healing and the well-being of Irish citizens. Thus, the metaphor represents the failure of those in power and the prevention of sustainable change. By using the source domain of natural resources to map onto the target domain of healing and change, the poems can generate empathic transcendence. Natural resources require long-term protection and care to remain

sustainable for human use. On the one hand, the metaphors suggest that those in power do not see the value in sustainable natural resources, just as they disregard sustainable economic change or healing. On the other hand, the metaphors imply that natural resources as well as communal and economic healing should be valued and protected, requiring care to ensure a long-term socially just future.

In conclusion, the poet activists strategically use metaphors to illustrate the structural, moral and emotional dimensions of the housing crisis. To depict the structural injustice and exploitation under capitalism, the poets draw from familiar source domains of religion, aristocratic power and machinery which attempt to raise awareness of the systemic power imbalances. By drawing on negatively connoted source domains of war, pain or natural disasters and mapping the concepts onto the target domain of human suffering, the metaphors can generate empathic transcendence and evoke collective mobilisation and resistance. The poet activists humanise the abstract target domain of economic power structures by drawing on the source domain of attire, exposing those responsible for the crisis in a relatable and accessible manner. By metaphorically connecting Ireland's revolutionary past and cultural identity to present struggles, the poets call for collective solidarity, framing resistance and social justice as a shared Irish ideal. Metaphors of healing and change that draw on the source domain of natural resources highlight the necessity of sustainable economic and communal healing. Overall, the metaphors frame the Irish housing crisis as a structural and morally unjust issue that causes human suffering and that requires collective solidarity, resistance and long-term communal healing to be addressed.

Through the thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis, the preceding sections have demonstrated how the spoken words of spoken word poetry on the Irish housing crisis acts as a vehicle of social justice activism. The poems frame housing injustice as a structural and moral issue, expose unequal power relations and human suffering, challenge dominant narratives of responsibility, and articulate calls for solidarity, resistance, and social change. At the same time, the analyses have shown how the spoken word renders these issues emotionally and culturally accessible through recurring themes, activist framings, and metaphorical patterns. Building on these findings, the following section shifts attention from what is expressed in the words to the performative and multimodal elements that also constitute spoken word poetry as an art form.

5.3. Performance Analysis of Selected Live Performance Recordings

The following section begins with the analysis of live performances to examine more closely how spoken word poetry acts as a vehicle of social justice activism in relation to the housing crisis in Ireland beyond the spoken word itself. In live performance, activist potential is shaped not only through words, but also through paratext, vocal delivery, pacing, body communication, facial expression, audience interaction, and the embodied presence of the performer. Analysing these performative features reveals how live performances of spoken word poetry act as social justice activism by strengthening collective solidarity, generating empathic transcendence and convincing an audience to resist and act against housing injustices.

5.3.1. This is Our Ireland

Terry McMahon's performance of his poem "This is Our Ireland" uses performative strategies that situate it within social justice activism. He provides paratext that positions the poem within the Home Sweet Home movement, noting that the building they were in was also used for meetings of Home Sweet Home activists, to plan and organise the Apollo House occupation. McMahon explains that he wrote the poem in response to this act of resistance, reflecting his respect for the people involved and his love for Ireland. This framing positions the performance as an explicitly activist action grounded in collective solidarity, which is further amplified through McMahon's use of performative strategies to engage the audience.

McMahon's restrained vocal delivery, facial expressions, and non-verbal sounds function as a key activist strategy as they foreground the gravity and his personal consternation. McMahon displays a posture of relaxation combined with a relatively low pitch and volume throughout the first half of his performance. This creates a feeling of defiance and sadness. Moreover, his tone of voice can be associated with emotions such as sadness, grief and disappointment. Throughout the performance, his face expresses sobriety, realised by a relaxed face and a slightly downturned mouth. While he recites the devastating facts about the housing crisis, he continuously takes short breaks and lets out audible sighs. His facial expression changes to a slight frown, with his eyebrows drawn together. These moments communicate restrained contemplation, signalling how he is emotionally involved and devastated by the human impact of the

housing crisis. The effectiveness of this performative strategy becomes particularly evident when he delivers the lines comparing suicide rates to the Easter Rising and the Northern Irish Troubles (1:55–2:17). He lowers his pitch and volume, slows his tempo, and stresses the word “suicide” with a quivering, breathless voice. While communicating these effects of the housing crisis, McMahon looks directly at the audience, his gaze wandering along the people in front of him. The combination of defiance in his voice and eye behaviour draws attention to the gravity of the uttered statistics. Similarly, the line “and the homeless can fuck off and die” (3:10-3:13) is delivered in a breathy whisper. McMahon’s restrained vocal delivery shows high levels of emotional distress and grief but also anger. The contrast between the severity of the words and the restrained delivery intensifies their emotional impact.

The urgency and importance of collective resistance and action become particularly apparent in moments of deliberate emphasis or intensification through vocal delivery and the use of motor gestures, which invite the audience to reflect and resist systemic housing injustices. Throughout his performance, McMahon frequently uses motor gestures to emphasise key lines. For instance, he moves his stretched-out index finger slightly up and down, utilising his body communication to highlight messages such as: “We are the sons and daughters of their sacrifice” (1:15-1:17). During the line “and still we wait” (4:22-4:27), he accompanies it with regular downward movements to stress every word individually and to highlight his disbelief. These motor gestures draw attention to the severity and importance of the spoken word. As McMahon exposes the violation of human rights taking place, his voice gains tension realised through a raised pitch, volume and a faster pace as he concludes: “and still we wait” (3:30-3:33). His pitch rises at “wait” as if imposing a question rather than an observation. The delivery of this line communicates his confusion and disbelief. As he directly looks at the audience, the line appears to be an invitation for moral reflection directed towards the people in front of him. Moreover, his pace and volume increase between 3:55 and 4:15, during which he lists the various effects the crisis has on Irish citizens. The faster tempo combined with a slight rise in volume and pitch communicates anger and tension to the audience. The combination of vocal stress through raised pitch and volume places particular emphasis on words such as “nobody” in “we will fight to ensure that nobody, nobody else dies in a doorway” (4:47-4:50). The sudden increase in volume intensifies the dramatic effect and underlines the emotional load carried in these statements. The emphasis expresses his anger and personal

involvement regarding the homelessness crisis as he seemingly yells the word. At the very end of the poem McMahon utters, “This is our Ireland”, placing particular emphasis on “this” through raised pitch and volume to emphasise the absoluteness of what he believes actually constitutes Ireland apart from corporate greed. The intentional use of vocal emphasis throughout the rather restrained performance draws attention to particularly important moments, stressing the need for collective resistance and shared responsibility to act.

McMahon uses deictic gestures and heightened vocal delivery to construct a sense of collective responsibility, transforming the audience from passive observers into implicated participants. For example, he uses a deictic gesture to indicate towards the abstract concept of a collectively shared Ireland when exclaiming, “This is our Ireland” (2:20), using his index finger to point to the floor, while maintaining eye contact with the audience. Between 3:13 and 3:17, McMahon looks at the audience and stretches his hand out, palm facing up. His body behaviour signals disbelief and a loss for words as he continues to draw swift circles with his hand in front of him. This gesture eventually turns into a deictic gesture, moving the palm of his hand towards his heart as he says: “This is our Ireland” (3:15). As McMahon significantly raises his pitch in the second half of the poem (5:00 and onwards) while expressing the positive and beautiful sides he sees in Ireland and its citizens, his tone of voice switches to one of hope, pride and compassion. This allows his affection towards Ireland, his pride and joy about being Irish to become visible. In contrast to the low pitch and the conveyed disappointment when addressing the injustices and systemic violence caused by the crisis, the shift to a higher pitch evokes feelings of hope and encouragement to resist and mobilise. When saying, “the change we yearned for” (5:13-5:16), he uses a deictic gesture pointing his hand, palm forward, towards his heart as if to signify that change is within the people. He continues to exclaim once again, “This is our Ireland” (5:27-5:28), using a deictic gesture to point towards himself. Moreover, he increases the tempo significantly while expressing who he thinks Ireland really belongs to (5:33-6:02). McMahon places stress while raising his pitch when naming “and his audience” as one of the groups Ireland belongs to. While exclaiming the line he uses a deictic gesture to point his hand, palm upwards, towards the audience. The direct eye contact and the gesture establish a relationship between him, his poem and the audience, expressing his gratitude and the importance of the people who are willing to listen, reflect and resist.

In conclusion, McMahon's performance of his poem "This is Our Ireland" functions as an act of spoken word activism that intends to mobilise the audience to resist and act against housing injustices. His initial restrained vocal delivery foregrounds the severity and devastation of the housing crisis, conveying grief, anger, and disbelief. By deliberately breaking the restraint of his performance with vocal emphasis and motor gestures on key lines and words, he emphasises the severity and urgency of the housing crisis. This creates moments of empathic transcendence where the audience is invited to reflect on housing injustices and emotionally identify with those most affected. His use of deictic gestures, eye contact, and heightened vocal delivery constructs a sense of community and collective solidarity, inviting the audience to engage and act. Overall, these performative strategies move the audience from passive observation to active moral and emotional involvement and demonstrate how spoken word poetry can persuade, create pathos, raise awareness and inspire collective action.

5.3.2. I Can't Afford to Live Here

The live performance of "I Can't Afford to Live Here" illustrates how the poet uses vocal delivery and body communication to embody the lived realities of the housing crisis, making abstract social issues emotionally tangible. Through pitch variation, tempo changes, volume, gestures, and posture, the poet conveys the hopes, anxieties, and disillusionments of each character in his poem while inviting the audience to moral reflection.

The performer uses vocal delivery to communicate emotional states, from excitement to disbelief to resignation, which enhances the emotional appeal of the narrations. While reciting the first character's story, a Polish man who moved to Dublin with visions of a better salary, his pitch remains consistently high, rather than dropping at the end of the lines. The vocal delivery conveys a feeling of excitement and anticipation for the next line mirroring the character's emotions of anticipation and hope about moving abroad. While exclaiming the character's realisation upon arriving in Ireland, "I can't afford to live here" (0:57-0:60), the poet performer conveys clear surprise with his pitch raising on the word "live". Similarly, when the poet recites the second character's story, his pitch rises on "home" during the line "Niamh came home" (1:02–1:04), adding an element of surprise. His pitch stays high and alert with a loud volume and fast tempo, again mirroring the excitement of the character for the new

journey awaiting before being met with the harsh truth: “Got out a taxi in Mullingar, realises its either rent or the car” (1:13-1:18). While uttering the line, the poet performer lowers his pitch and volume and decreases the tempo, mirroring the character’s moment of realisation and perplexity. As the poet performer recites the story of the poem’s third character his tone of voice is calmer, affectionate and tender which is realised through a lower volume and a high pitch. As the poet recites, “but they’re still there resenting their own mom and dad” (1:59-2:03), his pitch signals surprise as he slightly raises it on “there”. The vocal delivery creates a picture of disbelief. He places stress on “resenting” drawing attention to the mental health implications for the Generation Stuck at Home. While he refers to the Taoiseach, the head of Irish government, meeting with corporations, his speech tempo increases significantly creating a feeling of tension or excitement. While saying, “They’ll have my name in lights” (2:24-2:27), his pitch is raised and his volume and tempo increase slightly, mirroring confidence. As the poet recites the last character’s story, feelings of hope and calmness become apparent. During “This is it, this is home” (2:48-2:51), he lowers the volume and tempo. His pitch increases and he places stress on “home”, indicating contentment. This feeling of happiness is abruptly interrupted by him slowing the tempo of his speech and continuously lowering his pitch, volume and tempo while uttering, “Looks up the price for a two-bedroom flat” (2:59-3:03), suggesting a sudden realisation that he cannot afford the kind of housing he longs for.

The poet uses gestures to physically embody and visualise the characters’ experiences and emotions, which strengthens the storytelling quality of the performance and fosters empathic transcendence. During the first character’s story, the poet performer uses a spatial gesture, stretching his arm out in front of him (0:39-0:42) to indicate the long journey the character endured to look for opportunities in Ireland. He follows with a kinetograph (0:41-0:43), placing his hand first over his mouth and then extending it again, as if kissing farewell, to emphasise the emotional act of saying goodbye before setting off on the journey. He continues with another kinetograph, imitating the movement of signing a work contract with his hand (0:50-0:53), which emphasises the many steps the character had to go through to make his way to Ireland. As the poet performer starts to recite the second character’s story, he makes use of a deictic gesture, pointing his thumb behind his back to emphasise, “Niamh came home” (1:02-1:04), and shows a symbolic gesture of holding up five fingers when saying: “after five years on her own” (1:03- 1:05). While reciting the story

of the Taoiseach he extends his arms out on both sides of his body into a spatial gesture, signalling the desired and vast possibilities of wealth and power. The last character in the poem does not have a name. While uttering, “a bloke in his thirties”, the poet performer uses a deictic gesture pointing at himself with his index finger, signalling that this story is about himself. When uttering, “where the jobs were zero” (2:42-2:44), he makes use of a symbolic gesture, holding up his hand to form a zero which draws attention to the despondency of his situation before moving to the city of Dublin. He ends his performance with the question: “What was the point of that?”. He uses a deictic gesture with his outstretched arm, palm facing upwards to point towards the imaginary, abstract idea of the past which emphasises the sadness and resignation of trying to live during the housing crisis.

In conclusion, the performance of “I Can’t Afford to Live Here” functions as social justice activism by transforming the lived realities of the housing crisis into emotionally charged, tangible narratives through vocal delivery and body communication. Through variations in pitch, tempo, and volume, the poet conveys the full range of his characters’ emotional experiences, such as excitement, disbelief, frustration, and resignation. His use of gestures further emphasises the lived experiences and emotions of each character. By including himself among the characters, the poet creates a sense of shared experience, moral responsibility, and collective engagement. In combination, the vocal delivery and physical performance work to generate emotional transference and empathic transcendence through storytelling, exposing the audience to a variety of lived realities during the housing crisis. The performance demonstrates how storytelling through vocal delivery and body communication can encourage moral reflection and mobilisation against social injustices.

5.3.3. Brass Tax

Natalya O’Flaherty’s poem “Brass Tax” critiques Ireland’s socioeconomic inequalities such as the housing crisis and the struggles of young people. As O’Flaherty is introduced as an eighteen-year-old herself, the performance transforms these issues into an embodied narrative.

O’Flaherty employs sarcasm within a serious and urgent context, using vocal delivery and body communication to intensify her critique. She begins her performance with a raised pitch and high volume, signalling alertness and urgency. She shows a posture of immediacy, standing upright, chin slightly raised upwards, indicating

urgency and importance. She conveys her disdain for this system through sarcasm when she exclaims, “but legally it’s all G” (0:28-0:30), raising her pitch and lowering her volume slightly. This gives her voice a calm and reassuring tone. She also shows a slight shrug, extending her hands, palms facing upward. The symbolic gesture functions as a display of indifference or ignorance. She then turns her hands with her palms facing downward and moves her hands gently up and down, a symbolic gesture typically associated with reassurance. Within the context of her criticism, this sequence of gestures combined with her calming voice produces a sarcastic effect, mirroring superficial reassurance given by those in power. She uses sarcasm again when saying, “sure it’s only for the minute, ah there’s nothing in it” (0:32-0:35), expressing yet another example of the self-deception young people like herself tell themselves to cope with narrow prospects. The sarcastic tone becomes evident as the inner corners of her eyebrows draw together during “sure it’s only for a minute” (0:32-0:33), conveying dismissal and disregard. She then raises her eyebrows while saying, “ah there’s nothing in it” (0:33-0:35), a facial expression that communicates exaggerated confidence and false reassurance. Additionally, she stresses the “ah”, raising her pitch, which emphasises the impression of deliberate downplaying.

O’Flaherty uses facial expressions to convey emotions and evoke moral reflection among the audience. While reciting the sentiments older generations repeatedly tell younger ones, O’Flaherty first closes her eyes, then reopens them, subtly raising the inner corners of her eyebrows, when confronting the impossibility of owning a home (0:47-0:55). This sequence of facial expressions conveys a sense of sorrow, frustration and concern. Considering that O’Flaherty herself is 18 years old at the time of this performance, the worries she expresses through her facial expressions become more tangible and urgent. While praising the reliance on communal care and support along with cultural metaphors that express shared Irish pride, such as “stout and cider rain’s a-falling”, O’Flaherty shows a hint of a smile (1:24-1:31) indicating pride and joy in her heritage. While criticising the issue of alcoholism as a coping mechanism, O’Flaherty closes her eyes, presses them together as if in pain to then open them and raise the inner corners of her eyebrows again (1:40-1:44). The sequence resembles facial expressions of physical pain, generating a feeling of compassion but also pity for people affected by alcoholism. O’Flaherty’s facial expressions appeal to the audience’s emotions by adding emotional depth to her words and evoking moral reflection.

O’Flaherty uses deictic gestures to physically include both herself and the audience in the social and emotional realities she describes, which strengthens collective solidarity. When saying, “and left us in the rubble” (0:42-0:44), she uses a deictic gesture pointing towards herself. This gesture intensifies the collective first-person plural pronoun indicating that she is also affected by the socioeconomic state of Ireland. As she refers to familiarity within the community, she uses a deictic gesture pointing towards the audience with her index finger while saying: “the locals still are calling your name” (1:32-1:33). In doing so, O’Flaherty seemingly includes the audience in the topic of Irish community and solidarity. While saying, “cause what’s true for me isn’t true for you” (2:05-2:08), O’Flaherty employs a deictic gesture, slightly directing her folded hands towards herself and then towards the audience. The coordinated use of deictic gestures indicates personal and emotional investment, as if O’Flaherty is inviting the audience to recognise and reflect on the injustices and struggles described, enhancing the feeling of community and collective solidarity.

In conclusion, Natalya O’Flaherty’s performance of her poem “Brass Tax” can be categorised as social justice activism, as she transforms abstract struggles of her generation into an embodied narrative while inviting the audience to reflect and engage. Through strategic vocal delivery she conveys urgency and sarcasm to highlight the absurdity of the injustices her generation must face. O’Flaherty extensively uses facial expressions to make the emotional weight of her and her generation’s experiences immediately visible and tangible to the audience. Deictic gestures are a key element of her performance as they situate both herself and the audience within the realities she describes, strengthening personal investment and collective responsibility. By combining these elements, O’Flaherty fosters empathic transcendence, inviting the audience to feel the emotional severity of socioeconomic inequality such as the housing crisis, recognise shared experiences and reflect on solidarity and engagement.

5.3.4. Dublin You Are

Stephen James Smith’s performance of his poem “Dublin You Are” shows how the interplay of vocal delivery, gesture and posture can mobilise social responsibility, collective solidarity and empathy.

Smith expresses anger, sorrow and frustration through performative elements, mobilising the audience to confront social injustices. Stephen James Smith’s upright

posture, upward-tilted head, and initially closed eyes establish immediacy, signalling to the audience that the performance is urgent and serious. During the line “you always proclaim to cherish all” (0:20-0:22), Smith shakes his head in a symbolic gesture of negation while simultaneously using a motor gesture of his hand moving back and forth to emphasise the utterance. The head movement appears to express disappointment or disbelief in the lines he is saying. When delivering the line, “but Dublin, when did you go from the clash of the ash to exchanging gold for cash?” (0:38-0:41), Smith increases both his pitch and volume. This change in voice is accompanied by a continuous acceleration of the speech tempo which contributes to an increasingly angry and confrontational tone. A similar amplification occurs during “where the power is held by too few in the Dail” (0:48-0:50), which is performed with a heightened pitch and volume. Throughout these lines, Smith keeps his eyes closed and tilts his head further upwards. He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head in a symbolic gesture of negation or disagreement, communicating a sense of disgust as he states his critical stance on the issue of unjust, predominant power dynamics in Dublin. While exclaiming, “Dublin look at yourself” (1:16-1:17), Smith employs a deictic gesture by pointing his hand towards the floor while also directing his gaze downwards to where he is pointing. The gesture suggests a position of judgement, as if looking down upon the city with an accusatory tone in his voice. He resumes tilting his head upward and closes his eyes once more, increasing pitch, volume and tempo as he continues to criticise corporate power and political elites. The combination of a fast tempo and heightened pitch produces an angry, frustrated expression in his voice. While listing negative aspects that he observes in Dublin such as homelessness, the tendency to glamourise the city and hide the lived reality of Irish people, his facial expression shifts into a grimace, his eyes closed, while shaking his head in a symbolic gesture that can be interpreted as disbelief (2:52-2:54). His voice adopts a pitiful, plaintive tone, emphasised by a voice crack at 2:52. There appears to be heightened emotional investment in the issues expressed which emotionally appeals to the audience, fostering pathos and moral reflection.

Through shifts in vocal delivery and facial expressions when reminiscing about positive aspects of Dublin, Smith expresses vulnerability and emotional attachment, enabling empathic transcendence as a central mechanism to engage the audience. As Smith lists places, people and characteristics that define Dublin, the anger in his voice shifts towards expressions of adoration. Although his pitch remains relatively high, the

reduced volume and breathier voice express vulnerability and emotional investment. This is particularly evident during the line “Snow falling slowly on The Dead in Glasnevin” (1:54-1:57), during which he draws his eyebrows together with his voice being soft, almost whimpering. As Smith proceeds to recite positive aspects that constitute Dublin, such as its diversity and its prominent writers, his voice remains calm but determined. As Smith utters, “Dublin come here” (4:02-4:03), his voice cracks, evoking the impression of a cry. He continues to reflect on the city’s beautiful aspects, his voice adopting a gentler tone, with reduced pitch and volume. He closes his eyes, adding emotional depth to his delivery, and he occasionally raises his eyebrows, as if recalling good memories. When he questions whether Dublin is capable of change, his voice becomes breathier, mimicking the sound of crying with his pitch increasing and his volume decreasing. During the final lines of the poem, Smith raises both pitch and volume to emphasise the words “friend” and “home” in “My friend. My home.” (4:42-4:45) expressing a personal emotional attachment to the city. He grimaces, tightly closing his eyes and drawing his eyebrows together, appearing on the verge of tears. This emotional tension releases as he says, “I love you” (4:50-4:51), delivered in a breathy, raspy voice with his eyes closed. These moments of vulnerability signal his emotional attachment and investment to bring about change, enabling the audience to generate empathic transcendence and to mobilise and act.

Smith directly addresses the audience through eye contact and gaze shifts which transforms the performance into a call for collective solidarity and action. When Smith exclaims, “Dublin when will you revolt again” (0:51-0:53), he opens his eyes, straightens his head and directs his gaze towards the audience. The line appears to be directly addressed to the audience, seemingly challenging the perceived indifference or acceptance of the unjust system. While Smith articulates this criticism of Dublin, a tension which becomes particularly evident when he states: “yet you have my attention” (2:55-2:56). At this moment he abruptly opens his eyes and looks directly at the audience. His voice stabilises and appears strong and determined. The shift implies that, despite his criticism, he has not abandoned hope for Dublin and wants the audience to do the same. In the line “changing for us” (2:27-2:29), Smith also opens his eyes and re-establishes eye contact with the audience. He seems to directly include the audience in his reflection on Dublin. As he exclaims, “Don’t be scared to change” (2:31-2:33), he scans the audience with his eyes, reinforcing his invitation to become active and participate in bringing about change. In the final line Smith declares: “Dublin,

you are me” (4:55-4:57). At this moment he opens his eyes once again addressing the audience directly, reinforcing a sense of community, belonging, and solidarity.

In conclusion, Stephen James Smith’s performance of “Dublin You Are” demonstrates how distinct performative strategies work together to act as social justice activism. His use of intensified vocal delivery, posture, and gesture constructs anger as he exposes structural inequalities and invites the audience to confront Dublin’s social realities. This frustration stands in stark contrast to his shifts in vocal tone, tempo, and facial expression, which highlight vulnerability and emotional attachment when reminiscing about positive aspects of the city. The strong emotional appeal creates empathic transcendence as it brings the audience along on an emotional journey through Dublin’s struggles, strengths and potentials. Finally, Smith’s use of direct address through eye contact transforms the performance into a collective appeal, positioning the audience as active participants and strengthening a sense of collective responsibility. The performance invites the audience not only to reflect on social injustice but also to engage with it, to resist and to act.

5.4. Multimodal Analysis of Selected Poetry Films

Following the analysis of live performances, the focus now shifts to poetry films, which communicate activist messages differently namely through multimodality. While live performances rely primarily on the poet’s embodied presence, vocal delivery, and immediate interaction with an audience, poetry films expand this range through camera work, editing, sound, lighting, and spatial composition. Poetry films allow the poems to construct meaning not only through spoken language, but also through visual and auditory framing. The following analyses therefore examine how poetry films on the Irish housing crisis act as vehicles of social justice activism by employing multimodal strategies to raise awareness, evoke empathic transcendence, encourage reflection, and engage viewers to resist and act against housing injustices.

5.4.1. Sarah

The poetry film “Sarah” constructs an immersive experience that positions the viewer within the urban reality of the Irish housing crisis and raises awareness of homelessness. The poetry film opens with various shots of the city of Dublin at night during Christmastime (0:21), locating the viewer within an urban setting before

introducing the speaker. At 0:08, the viewer seemingly joins the poet Paul Alwright, who is shown walking along a pavement, as he enters the frame. The impression of a handheld camera creates a slightly shaky recording and a sense of movement. The video creates the impression that the viewer is walking alongside Alwright, creating a high level of modality, as the depiction makes it appear as though the viewer is present within the scene. At first, the viewer seems to passively observe Alwright walking silently and facing forward while the camera captures him from a side angle (Machin and Ledin 82). The absence of background music reinforces a realistic effect, leaving only the city's soundscape, which contributes to a high level of naturalistic modality (Van Leeuwen 179). Alwright is dressed in warm winter clothes, a black jumper and a grey winter jacket, emphasising low temperatures and strengthening the atmosphere of a cold, winter night. Within the context of the poem addressing the lived experience of homelessness caused by the housing crisis, the choice of Dublin as a setting draws attention to the urban concentration of the crisis. The winter and nighttime setting further amplifies the visibility and severity of homelessness, emphasising the suffering that often remains unseen during daytime or in the countryside. Throughout the video, it becomes apparent that the background visuals of the cityscape act as an integral part of the poem. There is a lack of dramatic lighting, strong colour contrasts or visual emphasis through sharpness of the speaker, suggesting the urban environment is equally significant. Although Alwright is frequently centred in the frame, the surrounding setting of Dublin remains visually important, reinforcing the idea that the topic of the poem emerges from and belongs to this urban place.

The poetry film establishes intimacy and direct address to raise awareness through creating an equal, dialogic relationship between speaker and viewer. At 0:11, Alwright begins reciting the poem while simultaneously directing his gaze into the camera. This moment marks a shift from observation towards direct address, signalling that the viewer is now being personally addressed, demanding attention (Machin and Ledin 81). By presenting only one speaker, the poetry film immediately establishes an individualised relationship between the poet and the viewer. The vertical angle of the video meets the viewer on eye level with Alwright, creating an equal power relationship between poet and viewer as neither appears dominant (looked up at) or subordinate (looked down on) (Van Leeuwen 13). The apparent interaction is further shaped through the use of close personal distance (Van Leeuwen 15), which according to Van Leeuwen allows the sharing of confidential content, thus establishing a more intimate

relationship (Kress and Van Leeuwen 125). The intimacy is reinforced “by a soft, relaxed voice at a low pitch and volume” (Van Leeuwen 27). Such vocal qualities suggest equality, sincerity and emotional vulnerability, rather than authority or dominance, which are more commonly associated with louder voices (Van Leeuwen 140). As Van Leeuwen notes (24), a voice outdoors, even at proximity, will appear fuller while sharing personal details than it would in an indoor setting. The speaker’s voice remains slightly foregrounded within the perspective of sound (Van Leeuwen 23), drawing attention to his words while maintaining the sense of a realistic walk through the city. Visually, the impression of a handheld camera and continuous movement throughout the city enhances the feeling of the viewer accompanying the poet on a walk while listening to him and being informed. Alwright frequently directs his gaze towards the camera, explicitly addressing the audience and, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (117) word it, suggesting an offer of valuable information to the viewer. More specifically, the passive viewer steps into the position of the “subject of the look” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 117) who is lectured and informed about the subject matter. The speaker continuously turns his body away while maintaining eye contact. This posture creates an invitation for involvement but also slight detachment, suggesting that the viewer is invited to listen and reflect but remains in an position external to the experience being portrayed (Kress and Van Leeuwen 138).

The combination of emotional delivery and visual framing foregrounds the systemic nature of the housing crisis and appeals to the viewer’s moral and collective responsibility. Throughout the poetry film, Alwright maintains a serious facial expression, communicating emotions of sadness, concern and urgency. The sustained seriousness, which is also realised through his vocal qualities, namely low pitch and volume, demands attentive listening and empathy. He says, “So this is what the sons of Róisín died for” (1:39-1:42), placing stress on “this” before gesturing with a head movement towards a homeless person sleeping on the street. The camera shifts away from the speaker and centres a homeless individual curled up on the side of the street, emphasising their presence in this urban landscape. Here, the absence of sharp cuts suggests a shared reality, strengthening a sense of communal identity and proximity (Kress and Van Leeuwen 203). The anonymisation of the homeless person positions them as a representative of a broader issue rather than an individual case in Dublin (Machin and Ledin 52). He continues to criticise those in power, establishing a direct link between those affected most severely by the crisis and those responsible for it. His

disdain for those in power becomes apparent as he exclaims, “A premises?” (1:52-1:53) with a laugh before shifting back to a serious facial expression and voice while saying: “A fucking eye sore!“ (1:53-1:55). At moments, his facial expression shifts into a questioning look as he raises his inner eyebrows, suggesting an appeal for reflection or even accountability from the viewer. For example, when saying, “When will we learn that by doubting our power, the only thing we actually do is empower our doubts!” (2:00-2:06), his facial expression combined with the line demands that the viewer takes responsibility for change. At the end of the video, as the poem concludes, Alwright walks away from the camera, leaving the viewer behind. This gesture leaves the impression of closure, as though the walk and the lesson taught have come to an end. The camera tilts slightly upwards towards a building, mirroring a look of contemplation and reflection (Kress and Van Leeuwen 114).

Overall, the poetry film functions as an intimate and immersive commentary on the detrimental effects of the housing crisis by positioning the viewer directly within the urban setting it depicts. Through its multimodal composition, which combines movement, gaze, sound and spatial relations, it invites the viewer into a shared experience of a friendly walk to listen, witness and reflect. This impression of walking alongside the poet situates the audience within the lived experience of homelessness, transforming passive observation into active engagement. At the same time, the use of direct address, eye-level perspective, and close personal distance fosters intimacy and reinforces a sense of equality and shared experience. Moreover, Alwright’s serious facial expression, vocal delivery and direct address function as an emotional appeal. The speaker’s clothing and overall appearance suggest socioeconomic relatability rather than authority. Considering that within his poem, Alwright criticises people in power, this presentation puts him in the position of an “ordinary” individual who is equally vulnerable to the housing crisis. This strengthens a sense of shared experience, equal footing, and solidarity with the viewer, distancing him from those in power whom he blames for the crisis. There appears to be no hierarchy between speaker and viewer, creating the impression of equality and approachability. This framing also presents the whole poetry film as a friendly conversation, rather than an authoritative address, and frames it as a call for resistance and change as a collective moral responsibility rather than an imposed demand. The poetry film frames the walk as a guided journey through the lived realities of homelessness which intends to raise

awareness, evoke empathic transcendence and encourage moral reflection and social responsibility.

5.4.2. The Apology

The poetry film “The Apology” establishes a formal, institutional frame that reimagines the apology as a personally addressed political act, raising awareness of the government’s lack of responsibility and therefor challenging dominant discourse on the housing crisis. The poetry film begins by displaying the title of the poem, “The Apology”, followed by a shot of a podium with a microphone placed at its centre in an otherwise empty room. Shortly after, a woman enters the frame. She is dressed formally in a white shirt and tie, her hair tied back. As she buttons her shirt and adjusts her tie, she introduces herself as Paula and explains that she spent years on a housing list. She states that the purpose of the poem is to offer an apology to Irish citizens who deserve one and that it was never delivered by those in power despite the devastating consequences of the housing crisis they caused. The setting and introduction of the speaker combined with the visual composition of the video establish a formal and official tone. The frontal perspective and horizontal camera angle position the speaker directly in front of the viewer and combined with the direct gaze into the camera, create the impression of being explicitly addressed as a viewer. The visual composition establishes what Kress and Van Leeuwen (118) describe as an image of demand, where the viewer is encouraged to engage with the message, in this case to accept the apology, rather than passively observe. The medium close shot at the beginning of the video, showing the speaker from the waist up, signals formality rather than intimacy while still allowing enough proximity to create a personal address (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124), also realised through the speaker’s voice which is slightly raised in volume but remains in a soft tone (Van Leeuwen 15). The speaker’s serious facial expression, controlled posture and direct gaze throughout the video combined with a relatively stable pitch, slightly raised volume and slow tempo signal emotional weight and sincerity (Machin and Ledin 85). The setting strengthens the image of importance by conveying impressions of an official government address. The room appears as if it was set up for the purpose of recording this message, with no furniture except the podium being visible. The lighting is bright and artificial, illuminating the speaker’s face and leaving no shadows, which according to Machin and Ledin (71) may communicate sincerity and transparency. The absence of background music at the start of the video

increases the level of naturalistic modality, creating the impression as if the viewer was present in the room at the time of the recording (Van Leeuwen 179). Moreover, the named speaker remains the only figure in the video, strengthening a personalised address (Machin and Ledin 37). The realistic setting may reinforce the credibility of the speaker's message, highlighting that there has not been an apology from the side responsible yet.

The poetry film balances authority and vulnerability to centre accountability rather than political authority, creating a powerful counter-narrative on responsibility in regards to housing injustices. Although the speaker stands in a formal posture, upright with her hands resting on the podium, her presence does not appear authoritarian or particularly dominant. The eye-level angle of the frame creates an equal power relationship between speaker and viewer, placing her in a position of accountability rather than superiority. As the speaker represents those in power throughout the poem, the vocal and visual composition signal remorse and responsibility rather than dominance. Her use of the first-person plural "we" when listing governmental failures that led to the housing crisis reinforces this impression that she speaks from within these power structures as she acknowledges mistakes and failures. Thus, the multimodal realisation of the poem disrupts dominant political narratives by taking responsibility and accountability rather than redirecting or denying blame. As the video progresses, the speaker displays emotional investment in her message by raising pitch and volume to emphasise important parts. Particularly whenever stressing that the housing crisis is not the fault of individuals despite the framing efforts of dominant narratives, the vocal stress emphasises emotional urgency to set it right. Moreover, the vocal shifts of emphasis such as increased pitch and volume can communicate elevated status and thus lead to credibility and moral importance (Van Leeuwen 141). Although these moments momentarily increase the speaker's perceived authority, no feeling of complete dominance is established as the camera angle continues to signal equality by remaining on eye-level between the speaker and viewer.

The introduction of sound and the growing sense of intimacy between speaker and viewer transform the poetry film into an emotional appeal and moral confrontation. Throughout the poetry film the camera gradually zooms in on the speaker, transitioning from a medium close to a close personal distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124). The increasing proximity creates a sense of growing intimacy by reducing the social distance and symbolically breaking down "invisible boundaries" (Kress and Van

Leeuwen 124). The proximity communicates closeness and intimacy and thus, encourages emotional investment and empathy, suggesting that the speaker becomes personally and emotionally engaged with the message. At 2:45 an atmospheric sound starts to play in the background. The sound consists of continuous, non-melodic tones that gradually increase in volume throughout the video. The layer of tones and lack of melodies amplify the emotional gravity of the message by creating tension and a sense of unease as there is no audible beginning or end. The eerie and tense atmosphere emphasises the seriousness, the devastation and suffering caused by the housing crisis. As the sound progresses, the poetry film shifts from a naturalistic modality towards a sensory coding orientation where emotive impact overtakes perceived realism (Van Leeuwen 179). Despite the increasing volume of the background sound, the speaker's voice remains in the foreground (Van Leeuwen 23), ensuring the importance and urgency of the message. The poetry film concludes with the speaker apologising twice while maintaining direct eye contact with the camera before it fades to black. The proximity and gaze intensify the perceived sincerity and emotional impact of the apology which seems urgent and unavoidable. The apology appears to be not offered but almost imposed upon the viewer (Kress and Van Leeuwen 118), creating a feeling of moral confrontation as the speaker's visual and vocal assertiveness strengthens authority while simultaneously signalling vulnerability and accountability.

In conclusion, the poetry film functions as a counter-narrative to prevailing, dominant narratives surrounding the housing crisis. By adopting visual and vocal conventions of political authorities while simultaneously delivering an apology, accountability and empathy, the poetry film disrupts dominant discourse around the housing crisis and creates an alternative reality (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 58). The multimodal realisation, through sound, frame, lighting, voice and camera work, creates an emotional piece that redirects responsibility to those in power while acknowledging the lived experiences of those affected by the housing crisis. The poetry film turns the idea of an apology into a political act and demands recognition and accountability by those in power. Through employing a counter-narrative, the viewer is invited to question their own perceptions of the causes and consequences of the crisis and encouraged to re-evaluate what they believe. Thus, the poetry film can be considered a powerful piece of social justice activism that aims to challenge dominant discourse, spread socially just narratives and raise awareness among viewers through the method of counter-storytelling.

5.4.3. Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep

The poetry film “Let Us Peasants Burn All but the Keep” constructs poet Mikey Cullen as a morally authoritative yet non-authoritarian spokesperson, using vocal delivery and visual framing to communicate urgency and leadership while raising awareness. Cullen is shown wearing a black shirt and standing inside a room in the Dublin pub Peadar Browns. He is positioned upright with his head slightly tilted upwards. His facial expression is serious, and his vocal delivery assertive, realised by a low pitch but a slightly raised volume. The combination of posture and voice expresses a sense of urgency and emotional intensity. At moments throughout the poem, Cullen increases the tempo and volume while maintaining a low pitch, which creates tension in his voice that mirrors repressed anger. The medium distance between Cullen and the camera, which cuts off below his waist, creates a relatively far personal distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124-125), signalling formality and personal distance between speaker and viewer. At the same time, the vertical frame and low camera angle place Cullen visually in a position of dominance. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (140), low angle shots can ascribe symbolic power or authority as they mirror the physical height difference of being taller or higher up. The visual positioning of Cullen therefore places him in a role of perceived authority. However, this authority does not appear authoritarian. Cullen does not look down on the viewer. At the start of the poem, his gaze is mostly directed past the camera, creating the impression that he is addressing a wider audience rather than asserting his dominance over the viewer by looking down on them. The image of authority thus shifts and creates the image of a leader that guides rather than commands. His slightly turned posture and indirect gaze reinforce a sense of distance, positioning the viewer as an observer of a powerful speaker who shares his insights and projects moral credibility. The visual presentation of Cullen encourages the viewer to listen, reflect and align with the message of a trustworthy spokesperson rather than submit to it forcibly through institutional power.

Lighting, sound and setting position Cullen within the metaphorical conditions of the housing crisis, strengthening a sense of alignment with those affected while appealing to the viewer’s emotions. The lowered degree of illumination produces shadows and dark areas, generating a moody and tense atmosphere. According to Machin and Ledin (71), such lighting conditions can signal danger or concealment. It appears as if there is open fire burning in front of Cullen, visible through moving shadows on his face, which emphasises the metaphorical meaning of the poem of

people “burning” while those in power and their interests remain protected. The absence of background music at the beginning of the poem, combined with the sound of crackling fire, intensifies this impression. This visual and audible emphasis positions Cullen close to the metaphorical fire, suggesting that he speaks from within the environment of suffering rather than from a detached position of safety and power. This reinforces the impression of a spokesperson for those affected by the housing crisis rather than a figure of authority and dominance. As the video progresses, an atmospheric sound emerges in the background. The non-melodic, tonal layers gradually increase in volume and produce an eerie and tense mood. Through a sensory coding orientation (Van Leeuwen 179), the poetry film prioritises emotional engagement and impact. This emphasises the emotional weight of the by creating tension and unease.

The poetry film uses distance and address to move the viewer from passive observation towards active engagement and resistance. The perceived relationship between Cullen and the viewer shifts through changes in distance throughout the film. For example, at 0:16, the distance moves from a medium to a medium close shot, showing his head and shoulders, and at 1:03 to a close personal shot, as the viewer only sees his face (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124). These changes reduce social distance and establish a sense of intimacy. At times, his eyes move and seemingly scan the space across the camera as if addressing an audience. Several times throughout the video, Cullen looks directly into the camera, regularly while the distance is reduced as well. In these instances, a demand is created, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (118) point out. The viewer is directly addressed, which encourages engagement, reflection and mobilisation.

Cullen repeatedly uses gestures to emphasise words and phrases throughout his poem reinforcing a sense of collective solidarity, resistance and responsibility. At 1:34, Cullen makes use of a deictic gesture, pointing towards himself with his hand as he states: “We burn ourselves”. At this moment, the camera only shows his torso and hand, anonymising him partially. In the context of the spoken line, the camera angle places him into the position of a representative for a collective rather than implying himself as an individual person, acknowledging the vastness of the suffering. At 1:35 he forms a fist and moves it up and down while criticising historical uprisings in the name of Irish people whose ideals are incompatible with the current political climate in Ireland. The gesture communicates anger and frustration and signals deep emotional

investment in his message. At 2:05-2:07, Cullen performs a symbolic gesture of pleading by pressing his palms together in front of his body, mirroring the act of praying or begging while emphasising the need for unity rather than the division fostered by those in power to tackle the socioeconomic issues in Ireland. He follows with a motor gesture of a raised scolding finger while warning the audience not to allow those in power to distract and redirect blame towards vulnerable groups which communicates moral urgency.

The integration of real-life footage explicitly constructs a counter-narrative that redirects blame. In between the shots of Cullen, video clips of real-life incidents and people are inserted that contextualise his poem and message and thus contribute to the construction of multimodal meaning making. Footage of far-right political uprisings that burn Irish asylum shelters for refugees is shown as he states that Ireland is metaphorically burning. There are clips of prominent Irish far-right activists, Richard Barrett, Gavin Pepper and Philip Dwyer, that contrast with footage of refugees, families and individuals fleeing from instability as he exposes the mechanism of scapegoating and deflecting blame from those in power, which leads to hatred. Therefore, he challenges dominant narratives that portray immigrants as threats and responsible for socioeconomic hardships in Ireland by framing refugees as vulnerable people who deserve empathy and protection. While naming the actual reasons that led to the housing crisis, namely corporate greed, putting profit over people and systematic failure on an institutional and political level, the poetry film shows clips of former Irish leading politicians Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen, Enda Kenny, Leo Varadkar, Micheál Martin and Simon Harris. Again, Cullen challenges dominant narratives with counter-narratives by explicitly and visually naming individuals in power and redirecting accountability and blame towards them.

The final sequence transforms his critique into a direct call for action and resistance. Towards the end of the poem, at 3:15, the camera returns to a medium shot while maintaining a low angle. This reestablishes the perception of power and leadership while he explicitly names power structures responsible for the housing and health care crisis, namely government institutions, political elites and the capitalist system. In the final line he raises his fist while exclaiming: “Fight the real enemy” (3:24-3:25). This symbolic gesture combined with Cullen’s direct gaze into the camera and the spoken imperative functions as a call for collective resistance, mobilisation and action which addresses the viewer as an active participant in this call.

In conclusion, the poetry film positions Cullen as a morally trustworthy spokesperson that demands resistance from the viewer through its multimodal use of vocal delivery, visual framing and spatial relations. By integrating real-life video clips, the poetry film constructs a counter-narrative that exposes how refugees and marginalised groups are falsely framed as threats while redirecting responsibility towards political elites and corporate greed. The poetry film actively reveals and exposes causes and culprits of the housing crisis which is a key dimension of social justice activism and Irish housing narratives (Lima 43). The framing of Cullen as a spokesperson creates a persuasive effect and establishes a call for solidarity, positioning the speaker, the viewer and marginalised groups as victims of the same social injustices. Overall, the multimodality of the poetry film does not only display social injustices, but it also frames them as a shared responsibility by encouraging resistance and collective action.

5.4.4. What If

Stephen James Smith's poetry film "What If" establishes initial distance and detachment, positioning the viewer as an observer and raising awareness of homelessness in Dublin. The poetry film begins with Stephen James Smith sitting alone in a coffee shop writing the first line of the poem on a piece of paper before holding it up to the camera. Immediately, a sense of address to the viewer is established as he gazes directly into the camera (Kress and Van Leeuwen 118). The medium long shot creates a far personal distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124). This distance prevents the feeling of intimacy or personal relationship and places the viewer into the position of a distant observer who, through eye contact, is invited to pay attention. This invitation to listen sets the tone for the following narrative. The scene transitions to dusky footage of Dublin with the sound of sirens and a bluish tint that can be categorised as "sad and depressing" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 269). Together with the depiction of empty streets this creates a feeling of isolation and unease. The viewer then observes individuals walking through the city, shown from behind or shown only partially, such as through shots of their legs. Through this visual anonymisation these people appear as "generic types and become carriers of meaning" (Machin and Ledin 53) in the context of the poem's topic, homelessness. The relationship between viewer and the people depicted appears detached as they have their backs turned to the camera and are filmed walking away. As Smith calls out the struggles to survive in

Dublin during the housing crisis, these people become faceless representatives of these hardships. At the same time, the exposure of one's back implies vulnerability and a need for trust, despite the emotional distance created (Kress and Van Leeuwen 138). As the video progresses, these clips function as a visual metaphor aligning with the poem's critique of how homelessness is depersonalised through abstract numbers and statistics which can lead to public indifference towards the issue.

The poetry film strengthens the generation of empathic transcendence by visualising the lived experiences of homelessness and connecting abstract facts to personal realities. As the poetry film continues, scenes of everyday life in daytime Dublin are shown, highlighting how homelessness can remain socially normalised and invisible during the day, and often becomes more visible at night. The poetry film depicts people moving through the busy city, emphasising that homelessness remains unnoticed but exists also within everyday routines. At 0:32-0:37, a woman writes lines of the poem in chalk on the pavement while passers-by walk over them without noticing, visually reinforcing Smith's commentary on the invisibility, indifference and lack of empathy towards homeless people. When Smith states, "Things aren't all statistics" (0:37), the camera stays on this woman, giving a face to the issue, emphasising that homelessness affects real individuals rather than abstract numbers. The themes of vulnerability and invisibility are further developed as the poetry film continues to follow a young man walking alone through Dublin at night. He rubs his hands, suggesting cold and discomfort. He briefly establishes eye contact with the viewer as he gazes directly into the camera (0:55). The long shot, where his whole body is visible creates a far personal distance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124) and the impression of him standing on the other side of the street. This visual composition reinforces his marginalisation while directly addressing the viewer, as if demanding to be visible. At the same moment, Smith exclaims, "What if you could save a life" (0:54-0:56), which places moral responsibility on the viewer. In the following sequence, the poetry film reveals the man observing himself from that distance, suggesting that the viewer has temporarily assumed his embodied perspective. This visual metaphor also emphasises how abruptly and unexpectedly homelessness can occur, implying that the viewer is in the same vulnerable position. Through these techniques, the film connects the abstract numbers of homelessness with individual human experience, encouraging reflection and empathy.

The poetry film increasingly builds intimacy, hope and emotional appeal using framing, sound and visual metaphors to guide the viewer towards resistance and solidarity. The background music initially consists of a continuous layer of tones that create tension and unease. The auditory elements contribute to a sensory coding orientation (Van Leeuwen 179), in which the viewer is directed towards emotional engagement with the topic of homelessness. As the poetry film transitions into daytime and depicts Smith in a medium close shot at a flower market between 1:03 and 1:28, he looks at the camera from a frontal angle. The direct address through gaze and angle combined with the closer personal distance signals a sense of intimacy and trust but also urgency and a demand to pay attention. The intercut shots of flower bouquets create a visual metaphor of empathy and self-care which aligns with Smith's spoken linguistic metaphor of giving petals away from the bouquet he made himself. The brightness of the daytime contrasts with nighttime clips encountered in the poetry film, again signalling how suffering can remain hidden when people choose to remain indifferent instead of expressing empathy and communal healing. A shift in the emotional perception of visibility emerges after 2:45 as the poem's message moves towards hope, solidarity and collective resistance. While Smith calls to action, the film shows the individuals who appeared anonymised at the beginning of the video poem. They are now shown from the front or the side, at a medium close distance, which establishes emotional and personal proximity. Although they do not directly gaze into the camera, their visibility encourages empathic and moral engagement. The music gradually shifts from a minor-key to a major-key, reinforcing a sense of hope and change. The poetry film displays a strong visual metaphor that criticises systemic failure. As Smith says, "Hide the dirty laundry, it's not good for big business" (2:07-2:09), the camera shows a locked gate, symbolising institutional concealment over accountability, and the prioritisation of economic interests over human well-being. Footage of empty Dublin streets during nighttime reinforces a feeling of institutional abandonment and neglect. At 3:20, Smith exclaims, "This is a call to action", accompanied by frontal, eye-level shots of individuals framed at a close personal distance looking directly into the camera. The visual composition addresses the viewer directly, emphasising equality (Van Leeuwen 13), unity and collective solidarity. The viewer is no longer in the position of a distant observer but part of a collective that is being called to action. The increase in daylight during these clips symbolises visibility, change and hope. As Smith calls for empathy and kindness towards each other the

poetry film shows one individual changing his facial expression into a smile (3:30), followed by a clip of a smiling child. Smith's visionary thinking becomes visible, as these images metaphorically depict positive change through empathy and solidarity as a means of tackling the housing crisis. Towards the end of the poetry film, the scene returns to Smith sitting in the coffee shop, visually referring to the opening scene and creating a circular narrative structure. Smith is now placed at a close medium distance and looks directly into the camera, addressing the viewer. The camera moves slowly towards him, breaking through invisible boundaries, establishing a more personal and intimate relationship. As Smith utters his final line, "What if you could save a life, but you didn't even try" (3:56-4:00), he is shown with a sad and serious facial expression. His gaze slightly shifts away from the camera, conveying a sense of reflection and emotional weight. The appearance of the hashtag #endyouthhomelessness (4:08) transforms the emotional appeal into a direct call for action.

Overall, the poetry film functions as social justice activism by guiding the viewer from detached observation of homelessness towards empathy, solidarity and action. The multimodal composition presents the crisis both as a structural issue and a human experience, connecting abstract statistics to lived realities. The movement from distance to intimacy, anonymity to individuality, and abandonment to hope creates a strong emotional appeal and positions the viewer as morally implicated and responsible. Visual metaphors are central to this process. Nighttime streets, empty pavements, and partial views of people convey isolation and vulnerability, while bright daytime scenes and flowers symbolise hope, solidarity, and the potential for social change. These metaphors translate critique into emotional images, inviting the viewer to engage with both the suffering caused by social injustice and the possibilities for communal healing and collective action. The combination of multimodal strategies reinforces the generation of empathic transcendence and encourages the viewer to reflect and mobilise. Ultimately, through visionary thinking, the poetry film proposes solutions and imagines a socially just future through empathy, communal healing and collective resistance.

6. Conclusion

The Irish housing crisis is a pressing socioeconomic issue caused by successive governmental failures that appear to prioritise profit over people's well-being. The crisis

has had severe effects across Ireland, with homelessness continuing to rise. The spoken word poems analysed in this thesis can be considered vehicles of social justice activism as they contribute to raising awareness of the Irish housing crisis, criticise the systemic violence and oppression it creates, and advocate for social change through collective resistance and action. The thesis shows that poets transform spoken word poetry into a vehicle for social justice activism through emotional appeal, counter-storytelling, conceptual metaphors, embodied performance, and multimodal framing.

The analysis draws on eight spoken word poems addressing the Irish housing crisis, which were selected through an exploratory approach on YouTube and Facebook. The poems, released between 2016 and 2024, constitute four recordings of live performances and four poetry films. Taken together, the live performances and poetry films show how activist meaning can be shaped both through embodiment and through multimodality.

The analysis identifies the key methods through which spoken word functions as social justice activism, particularly in the context of spoken word performance. This thesis draws on the following theoretical frameworks to construct an analytical approach to methods of social justice activism: Chepp's (*Speaking Truths*) research on spoken word activism, Ogunye's theory on persuasion, Eyerman's conclusions on successful social movements and Lima's findings on activist narratives surrounding the Irish housing crisis. The analysis focuses on several methods of social justice activism namely the generation of emotional transference and empathic transcendence through visionary thinking, emotional appeal, framing through metaphors and (counter-)storytelling that conveys lived realities as experiential truth. Moreover, defining elements of social justice activism comprise persuasion and narratives that expose root causes and culprits, propose solutions, and/or appeal to solidarity or unity through empathy by emphasising housing as a human right.

The analysis shows that spoken word poetry on the Irish housing crisis, in written, performed or multimodal form, strategically employs methods of social justice activism that mobilise audiences through emotional engagement, narrative framing and appeals to collective resistance and action. The poems expose the systemic and structural nature of the crisis, challenge dominant narratives of responsibility and advocate for resistance, solidarity and social change.

The thematic analysis reveals four key themes: the exposure of systemic oppression and reframing of responsibility, the human impact of the housing crisis,

community and collective solidarity, and visions for a better future through resistance and action. The artists expose root causes and culprits to raise awareness about systemic violence and oppression and redirect blame and responsibility towards those in power namely governmental institutions, politicians, international corporations and landowners. The poet activists utilise personal narratives and storytelling presented as experiential truth to demonstrate the mental and physical toll of the crisis and the need for solidarity. The emotional appeal and persuasive framing of these narratives such as price-setting, enable the generation of empathic transcendence and encourage audiences to connect with those affected. The poems appeal to solidarity and unity, particularly strengthened through shared cultural and historical Irish symbols or events. Visionary thinking invites the audience to imagine a socially just future realised through collective resistance and action in the present.

The critical discourse analysis of conceptual metaphors identifies how the poet activists strategically frame the Irish housing crisis as systemically and morally unjust. By drawing on source domains such as religion, aristocratic power and machinery the poets depict the socioeconomic exploitation under capitalist structures as structurally and morally reprehensible, and they link this exploitation to those in power. Concepts of source domains such as pain, war, and natural disasters are mapped onto human impact, illustrating the systemic and collective suffering and mental and physical toll the crisis has on people. Metaphors that draw from the source domain of clothing represent those responsible for the housing crisis, which humanises abstract ideas of political and economic powers and make responsibility more concrete and tangible. These conceptual metaphors not only expose responsibility but also generate empathic transcendence through emotional appeal by drawing on source domains associated with strong negative emotions and connotations, which intensify the representation of human suffering. Metaphors connecting to Ireland's revolutionary past or cultural symbols frame resistance and solidarity as shared national ideals, thus acting as a form of persuasion and appealing to empathic transcendence. Metaphors drawing on source domains of natural resources emphasise the necessity of sustainable, social and economic change through collective care and healing. As a form of visionary thinking, these metaphors inspire mobilisation and resistance to reach a socially just future.

The performance analysis of the live performance recordings shows that the embodied delivery enhances the activist potential of the poems. Through voice, body

communication, facial expressions and audience interaction, the poets turn their spoken word into emotionally charged calls for empathy, resistance and mobilisation. The poet activists guide audiences through emotional journeys, conveying anger, grief, hope, and pride with their vocal delivery and gesture. By drawing on the assumption of experiential knowledge and directly addressing the audience through eye behaviour or gestures, the performances can generate empathic transcendence and move audiences beyond passive observation towards moral reflection and mobilisation. By presenting themselves as part of the collective experience, the performers create shared responsibility, strengthen solidarity and frame resistance as a collective obligation to advocate against these injustices and for a social change.

The multimodal analysis of the poetry films reveals how the interplay of sound, visuals, spatial relations, gaze and spoken word constructs an engaging experience that challenges dominant narratives surrounding the housing crisis. The films function as counter-storytelling that exposes structural injustice, redirects responsibility towards political and corporate elites, and highlights the lived realities of homelessness and marginalised groups that often remain invisible or concealed. The multimodal elements and their interaction within the poetry films position the viewer as morally and emotionally implicated through direct address and perceived intimacy to the speaker. The poetry films frame collective resistance, solidarity and action as shared responsibilities thereby fostering empathic transcendence through emotional appeal, persuasion, visionary thinking and (counter-)narratives. The visual and auditory experience not only criticises injustices and the displacement of responsibility but also imagines the pathway to a socially just future through resistance, communal healing and care. Overall, the findings demonstrate that spoken word poems on the Irish housing crisis act as vehicles of social justice activism by exposing systemic injustice, reframing narratives of responsibility and advocating for solidarity and collective resistance. The poems prioritise showing the human impact through (counter-) storytelling, performance and multimodal elements to generate empathic transcendence. Through calls for solidarity, mobilisation and visionary thinking, the poems move audiences beyond awareness towards moral reflection and action.

The findings align with the research conducted on spoken word activism. Chepp (*Speaking Truths*) states: “The creative, beautiful, and emotional features of spoken word are essential to its political nature” (68). The generation of empathic transcendence is necessary for mobilisation, as it enables the spectator to experience

the interconnectedness of systems across time and space and to recognise their own participation in shaping these systems and social outcomes. In performances, Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 73-75) recognises the activist potential of vocal delivery and body communication and shows how live settings enable emotional and empathic pathways between audience and poet. The poems analysed in this thesis employ numerous conceptual metaphors, attaching negative connotations to human impact and systemic injustice and positive emotional concepts to solidarity and social change. Eyerman (196-197) emphasises emotional transference as the feeling of belonging to something greater than oneself. He stresses how metaphors are necessary for mobilisation as they present widely known, accessible, emotionally charged language. This shared understanding and perception can enable group formation, despite individual differences in experiences. Lima (43) identifies three narrative dimensions that successfully bring the Irish housing crisis into public and political discourse. All three dimensions, exposing causes and culprits, proposing solutions and appealing to solidarity, have been analysed extensively within the spoken texts, performances, and multimodal realisation of the poems. The findings reveal a frequent use of (counter-) storytelling, realised through spoken word, performance and multimodality, which is considered a key method in social justice activism to raise awareness and generate empathic transcendence. Scholars have recognised narratives as powerful tools in spoken word activism (Chepp, “Activating Politics” 45). Aligning with previous findings from scholars (Chepp, *Speaking Truths* 58), the analysis shows that counter-storytelling acts as a political tool of reframing dominant narratives around the housing crisis, creating an alternative perspective on the issue at hand. The poet activists challenge prevailing discourse on responsibility and reveal the method of scapegoating, that is, shifting responsibility onto vulnerable groups. Through emotional appeal to solidarity and visionary thinking of a socially just future, the poet activists inspire individual and communal healing.

Scholars such as Chepp (*Speaking Truths* 55) or Endsley (“Poetry is my Politics” 68-69) highlight the potential of spoken word activism for marginalised groups to speak their truth and narrate their lived experiences, turning their embodied performance into a political site. The poets of the poems analysed are personally affected by the crisis, as they address their own experiences with housing insecurity. However, no poet included belongs to groups most marginalised by the housing crisis, such as refugees or people experiencing homelessness. Rather, the poet activists assumed the

positions of spokespeople for those most affected by the crisis, narrating their stories and locating responsibility with those in power. Considering the activist potential of embodied experiences in spoken word activism, this positioning creates tension between representation and advocacy. While the poets draw on their own experiences and tell the stories of those most affected, the absence of voices from the most marginalised groups highlights the limits of speaking for others, as direct embodied testimony from these groups might foster empathic transcendence even more strongly. The power of representation becomes visible in the poetry films. Although it is not the poets speaking from the marginalised position, the films show images of people representing those affected most severely. These individuals may not themselves belong to those groups, but they visually represent them. The emotional appeal when visually confronting the viewer with these lived realities creates an immersive narrative experience that helps generate empathic transcendence. Poets combine empathic storytelling, emotional appeal through spoken word and performative or multimodal elements, which still amplify the lived realities of those affected which would remain hidden otherwise.

There are several factors that can explain the relatively limited, embodied representation within the corpus selected. First, the corpus was small which raises the question of whether a more extensive selection would have revealed poets representing marginalised groups. Second, those most affected by the crisis, may encounter significant barriers that prevent them from engaging in creative or artistic expression as a means of social justice activism. Limited access to resources or performance opportunities may further restrict the access to producing and sharing spoken word poetry. Venues or events may also favour established poets. However, projects like the Multi-Story Project have attempted to address this by collaborating directly with those most affected and providing a platform to share their stories. Third, this thesis has only considered poetry films or recordings of live performances. Fieldwork in Ireland, including attendance of spoken word events, rallies, or protests with artistic contributions, could offer more opportunities to assess the representation of marginalised groups. Fourth, the poets may intentionally assume the role of the spokesperson due their greater experience, resources, and access to platforms from which they can advocate for those most affected. Taken together, these four factors likely help explain the limited representation of marginalised groups within the corpus, though additional reasons may exist. A further limitation of this thesis is that the

performance analysis was based on recordings. The perspective of the recording is limited, at times failing to capture the whole body of the poet-performer or being too distant to reveal relevant facial expressions or eye behaviour. The audience and their reactions are not visible, and the general atmosphere is not tangible. As Julia Novak states: “the performance and its recordings are never the same thing” (64).

The findings reveal the potential of using spoken word poetry as a vehicle of social justice activism. Given the visibility of spoken word as a political and cultural form in contemporary Ireland, activist movements can benefit from spoken word activism to raise awareness and advocate for social justice. Particularly, performance poetry does not require extensive resources, which may be especially valuable for grass root movements. Poetry films can be further utilised as they add powerful layers of meaning to the spoken word and amplify the social justice activist outcomes however, they demand more equipment and time for production. Future spoken word activism could build on the insights from existing research that demonstrate the activist potentials when representing the embodied experience of marginalised groups. The intentional inclusion of marginalised people in spoken word activism would expand the representation of embodied experience and offer an important direction for future research and activism. It would be of value to further investigate spoken word activism on the Irish housing crisis created and performed by marginalised groups, such as refugees and homeless people, particularly in person in Ireland to further expand on preexisting research on how embodiment functions as a tool for social justice activism. As the Irish housing crisis remains an ongoing issue, research into future spoken word activism, particularly in comparison with work from the 2010s would be valuable to examine how activist strategies, themes and modes of expression evolve over time.

Democracy and political participation are essential to the pursuit of a socially just society. Creative and participatory political practices such as spoken word activism create spaces for voices and experiences that are silenced by dominant narratives to be heard. Overall, this thesis shows that spoken word becomes a powerful form of social justice activism when it combines storytelling, metaphor, embodied performance, and multimodal design to make structural injustice emotionally accessible, and to turn awareness into solidarity and resistance.

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