

POETRY AND COMMUNITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ABERDEEN'S SPOKEN WORD SCENE

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Introduction

Spoken word, stylistically influenced by rap, hip-hop, theatre and storytelling, is a genre of poetry written for performance. It originated in the underground black communities of 1960s America as part of the civil rights struggle. Since then, the genre has migrated to cities all over the world, providing a popular form of self-expression and activism in many urban communities (Xuan 2018). Spoken word poems frequently present issues of social justice, politics, race and community (Poetry Foundation 2019). As an aspiring spoken word artist and anthropology undergraduate, I carried out fieldwork over a period of one month in Aberdeen's blossoming spoken word scene. I attended, watched, listened and performed in the hope of understanding the significance of local poetry event *Speakin' Weird* for the poets and audience members who go every month.

A safe space

Speakin' Weird is a monthly spoken word night held at *Spin*, a cosy bar in Aberdeen's city centre. It is hosted by Orla, a local comedian and poet, who introduces each open-mic performer with a warm and encouraging invitation to the stage. Each performer has five minutes in which to address the audience, who sit around tables placed intimately close to one another and clap and cheer supportively as each person takes to the stage.

One poet, Sofia, is celebrating a year since her debut performance at *Speakin' Weird*, where she read a poem about the #metoo movement. Tonight, she reads last year's poem followed by a new piece in which she addresses the same themes. The continuity between the two pieces reveal a dialogue between herself one year ago and now. Watching Sofia onstage, I feel the boundaries between performer and audience blur. She writes and speaks about sexual violence in a way that empowers herself and seeks to invoke that sense of empowerment in her audience. After the performance, I approach her to offer congratulations and ask if she will participate in my research.

As the evening draws to a close, I find Orla and ask if she has time to tell me a little more about *Speakin' Weird* and its beginnings.

After moving to the city, Orla noticed Aberdeen was lacking any open mic nights solely for spoken word. Identifying a gap in the city's creative scene, she launched *Speakin' Weird* in May 2017 with help of funding from Aberdeen city council. When introducing herself at the beginning of the night, Orla says she started *Speakin' Weird* because she's nosy and likes to see what people write in their notebooks. Offstage, she elaborates.

"People talk about sensitive issues like mental health, eating disorders, rape and abuse - things you don't normally hear about people unless you're their close friend."

Orla talks about the responsibility she feels to create a safe space where difficult topics can be freely discussed, but she also recognises that it is up to the audience to carry the burden of what they hear. The onus is not only on her, as the organiser, to provide that space. She feels empowered watching people share their stories and proud that the space she has made

facilitates this freedom of expression. I recall a collective sense of engagement, of held breath and attention fully paid, and understand the responsibility placed on the audience to bear witness to these revelations. I consider the experience of performance and the risk in putting yourself out there in the way that Orla, Sofia, and all the other poets had done that night. With a less supportive audience, a less encouraging host, perhaps the dynamic wouldn't permit a sense of community to evolve in the way it can at Speakin' Weird, where a solitary performer or audience member can quickly feel enmeshed in the collective spirit of the spoken word scene.

A sense of belonging

A week after the performance I met Sofia to discuss her journey as a performance poet. Sofia's first time seeing spoken word performed in Aberdeen was in January 2017 and she described this as a powerful, life changing event. Witnessing one local performer recite a piece about sexual violence, she was simultaneously starstruck, inspired and triggered. This performance marked a turning point for Sofia and that summer she began to write. She told me "At the back of my mind I was hoping that one day I could perform too. My problem was always that I didn't know how to make myself heard."

I asked about her early experiences as an audience member. First and foremost, other performers inspired her. But perhaps more importantly, bearing witness to the kind of revelations performers make on stage at events like Speakin' Weird made her feel less alone with her experiences, and exposed her to a community she hoped to become part of.

"I wanted that sense of belonging, to not feel like an outsider. I would take my notebook, I was always taking notes when other people performed, I was so inspired. And

then, when the #metoo movement kicked off, that was my motivation to perform. I wanted to give #metoo one more platform in Aberdeen. So why not put myself on that stage and have a go? I was scared, but I was mostly empowered."

Reflecting on the past year, Sofia tells me she realises her identity has started to shape because she is finding her voice. "I have a voice," she says, "And people have to listen to me."

Before I leave, we talk about Speakin' Weird and the community space Orla has created here in Aberdeen. Reflecting on Sofia's story and our shared experience at Speakin' Weird the week before, I consider the unique interplay between audience and performance artist wherein each is equally responsible for maintaining the safety of that space. A performer's freedom to bare their soul is contingent on being confident that the audience can hold open the space for them to do so. I recall the cosy bar, audience members sitting on the floor, the unspoken agreement to wait until the break to smoke or go to the bar, and I smile.

"These are my people."

A week after my conversation with Sofia, I make plans to meet another member of the spoken word community in a local coffee shop. As I explain my research project to Jo, I realise two things. Firstly, I no longer know what direction my research is going in. My original aim of investigating how spoken word is used as a tool of empowerment and activism by marginalised people in Aberdeen has been eclipsed by another interest: how the physical and mental space within which these events take place serves as a community hub for those who attend. The second thing I realise is that I do not view my conversation with Jo as a "chat with a local poet" as I had originally thought. I am simply having coffee with someone from a close-knit community

of which I too am becoming a part. In approaching individuals, speaking openly about my interest in the community and in them, in hearing their poems and stories, and joining them for cigarettes during the breaks between acts, I am no longer simply a participant observer. You cannot stay a solitary audience member or awkward first-time performer for long at an Aberdeen spoken word night.

Jo is another poet whose spoken word journey began at Speakin' Weird. Although she had always written, she did not have the confidence to show anybody her work. Jo is a commanding, striking performer who was introduced to the stage as a "3 X poetry slam winner." It would never have occurred to me that she once felt the same trepidation I did at the thought of performing.

Jo tells me about her first time reading poetry in public: her first time sharing words, thoughts and feelings with a room full of people, and her nervousness at that particular self-exposure. Her nerves intermingled with admiration for those poets who were already experienced performers, for whom sharing their work seemed to come naturally. I asked Jo what inspired her most at that first Speakin' Weird.

"I'm still finding my feet with baring my soul. That's what I admired in everybody the most."

Jo started out performing poems that tackled difficult issues with humour, as it gave her a mask to hide behind. Recently she has begun performing more serious

poetry as she grows into herself as a poet. Reflecting on early experience, Jo describes the feeling of community, the support and solidarity she felt after attending just a couple of events.

"I remember thinking, these are my people!"

Reflections

Although I have performed poetry, attended Speakin' Weird and been an audience member at several venues across the city, I always felt like an outsider. I was an anthropology student who occasionally wrote poetry, a shaky and stuttering first-time performer, not a real part of the Aberdeen scene. However, in piecing together this report I understand the ways in which I have become part of the Aberdeen spoken word community. I have come to know all the regular performers, have listened to their stories through conversation and poetry, have joined the mix of audience members and poets milling around in the bar after the night has ended. And I too am known, my overlapping interest in writing poetry and ethnography an interesting point of conversation. At events like Speakin' Weird, an unspoken exchange takes place between audience and performer that permits entry into the community. Performers share, inspire, provoke and entertain, while the audience supports, nurtures and provides a safe space in which a person can grow into an inspiring and accomplished spoken word performer. After their turn on stage, poet becomes audience member and then poet again, re-inspired, while audience members are often poets who have yet to take to the stage. And nobody stays an outsider for long.

REFERENCES

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