

## ESSAY

# "My Body Is a Temple/I Am the God It Was Built For": An Examination of the Confrontation of Male Entitlement in the Spoken Word Poetry of Savannah Brown and Hollie McNish

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Alternative forms of expression, like spoken word and slam poetry, manifest themselves when conventional representations silence certain groups. These alternative forms, however, also hold the capacity to exclude certain individuals as is illustrated by the objectification of women in many contemporary spoken word forms. While the rising popularity of this genre of poetry reinforces the male gaze, certain female spoken word artists refuse to allow this form to erase their own experiences. This essay therefore brings to the forefront the voices of those who have emerged to confront this silencing and assert a female identity not determined by male fantasies. A strategic focus on the poems 'hi, i'm a slut' by Savannah Brown and 'A Poem on Flo Rida's Blow My Whistle' by Hollie McNish, explores the effectiveness of the techniques used by female spoken word poets to subvert and even ridicule this male-dominated form, which in turn creates a liberating space in which the voices of women are brought to centre stage.

**Keywords:** Spoken Word; Masculinity; Poetry; Feminism

## Introduction

Javon Johnson, notable American spoken word poet, writer, and professor at the University of Nevada, claims that the act of writing and performing poetry is a means by which one can almost paradoxically 'both escape and confront' the realities of societies where inequality and discrimination persist (2010: 402). Spoken word poetry has indeed become a mode of expression for those excluded by dominant discourse and traditional media outlets and some of its forms, like rap and hip hop, emerged to depict black life in the United States, during a century characterised by blatant racism. These forms, however, are not immune to becoming exclusive themselves, as many of them appear as 'boys' clubs' whereby representations of female identity are lacking, and male entitlement is reinforced through the objectification and sexualisation of women's bodies (Johnson, 2010: 404). As a counter to this male gaze, certain female spoken word artists have emerged to assert a female identity not determined by male fantasies. There are several strategic ways in which female poets manipulate form, and, to a lesser extent, other poetic devices, to give voice to a positive female perspective and claim agency in their own representations.

Focusing strategically on the poems 'hi, i'm a slut' by Savannah Brown and 'A Poem on Flo Rida's Blow My

Whistle' by Hollie McNish, this essay explores the techniques used by female spoken word poets to subvert and even ridicule this male-dominated form, creating a space for female voices to be heard.

## Contradictory expressions: The simultaneous empowerment and silencing in spoken word forms

Conventional forms of expression often only convey the experiences of dominant individuals in society. It is therefore important for alternative modes of representation to be accessible to those excluded from popular discourse. Spoken word poetry appears to emerge as one of these liberating spaces. Spoken word forms like rap and hip hop became popular in the 1970s, produced by those on the 'streets of inner-city neighbourhoods' in the United States to reflect the concerns of the urban black youth who are still maligned in popular discourse (Powell, 1991: 245). These forms speak back to a tradition of oral recitation originating in Africa many centuries ago, relying heavily on the rapid verbal skills of the artist (Powell, 1991: 245). The music also appears as a fusion of two other modes of expression – jazz, an earlier African American invention, and poetry – creating a hybrid form of expression to convey the experiences of those who exist in 'in between' spaces or are excluded from dominant representations (Henderson, 1996: 309). This spoken form embodiment is a 'powerful force for identity, solidarity and emotional reinforcement' as those occupying the peripheries of

society, like African Americans in the United States, are provided with a platform where their experiences can occupy centre stage (Powell, 1991: 245).

Despite this liberatory potential, with the rising popularity of hip hop and rap in mainstream media in the twenty first century, these forms have become as much hegemonic, as a result of a highly commercial and misogynistic focus, as they are counter-hegemonic, speaking to those in subaltern spaces (Hobson and Bartlow, 2008: 1). Many mainstream examples of this genre reinforce gender stereotypes as they continue to cast women's images as 'decorative, fetishistic, manipulative, fragile, or in need of rescuing' (Hobson and Bartlow, 2008: 3). Women remain objectified and commodified in this originally emancipatory form – Sheng Kuan Chung, professor in the Art Education programme at the University of Texas, points out that 'almost every hip-hop music video [...] features scantily clad women dancing in bikinis surrounding a chauvinistic male [and who] perform erotic moves as the camera zooms in closer to their hips, buttocks, and breasts' (2007: 35).

While this statement cannot apply to *all* hip hop and rap spoken word forms, one cannot help but be reminded of its sentiment when viewing the official video for 'Whistle' by the successful mainstream hip hop artist, Flo Rida. Not only do the visuals of the video speak directly to Chung's statement but the lyrics of the song itself point to a particular power relation whereby the male artist (Flo Rida) takes on a dominant role, as his lyrics euphemistically serve to teach a sexually inexperienced woman to perform oral sex, a woman who is not given a name but is belittlingly referred to as 'girl' (Jonsson, 2012: 27). This woman, or 'girl' to whom Flo Rida refers, is never really considered human, as Flo Rida compares her body to an inanimate object: he claims she can come to him and 'park close' like his 'Bugatti' (Flo Rida, 2012: 1:55). This image is further reinforced by images of women crawling on all fours, reminding one of a car, or young 'girl', towards the hip hop artist (Flo Rida, 2012: 0:47). The women in this video are made child-like and inanimate, and, as such, are dehumanised and trivialised.

Flo Rida's description of himself, in contrast, is distinctive, assertive and even arrogant – he claims 'there is only one Flo and one Rida,' indicating his own self-importance (Flo Rida, 2012: 0:54). This form therefore reinforces the notion of male entitlement, whereby representations of women are objectified and sexualised for the male gaze, creating the impression that women's bodies exist solely for male pleasure.

This example serves to illustrate the way in which hip hop, even in its role as an alternative mode of representation, silences certain groups. Even today, few female artists have risen to prominence and the 'centre stage is mainly male oriented' (Henderson, 1996: 319). Women remain underrepresented in the genre and, beyond descriptive representation, rap lyrics seem to further the 'objectification of women as bitches and hoers' who exist only to satisfy male whims (Henderson, 1996: 319). Given these characteristics of modern-day rap and spoken word forms, places of spoken word performance become highly

exclusive 'boys' clubs' to which female artists feel they do not belong (Johnson, 2010: 404). Sexism often remains unchecked in this supposedly emancipatory art form.

### **Reclaiming representation: The ridicule of hyper-masculinity in McNish's 'A Poem on Flo Rida's Blow my Whistle'**

As I aim to show, however, in as much as this form can silence certain groups, it has an equal capacity for critique and contestation. In as much as contemporary spoken word forms have been used to objectify women, the female artists who have found their way into mainstream fame have been able to use these spaces as a means to reflect feminist issues (Hobson and Bartlow, 2008: 3). Female rappers like Queen Latifah, Yo-Yo, da Brat, Sista Souljah and Eve have been able to use their music to articulate their own sexual racial and class politics (Hobson and Bartlow, 2008: 4). However, other artists still continue to 'embody tropes of black female hypersexuality' (Hobson and Bartlow, 2008: 4). These examples point to a flawed, and sometimes counterproductive, music form, but one which holds the potential for women to claim a kind of agency in a male-dominated space.

Hollie McNish's spoken word poem 'A Poem on Flo Rida's Blow My Whistle', for example, blatantly subverts the masculine space of Flo Rida's video. McNish's poem should be listened to while watching the music video to Flo Rida's popular song 'Whistle' on silent. In this way, McNish takes on Flo Rida's visual form as her own. These instructions for listening take Flo Rida's video entirely out of context and, without the catchy lyrics, the viewer becomes aware of the absurdity of the video which, although intending to portray Flo Rida as masculine and attractive, instead depicts 'one strange solitary male who's moved his bed onto a beach and sits there singing to himself' (McNish, 2013: 0:44).

McNish's poem, which plays in conjunction with the video, serves not only to ridicule Flo Rida's performance but to deconstruct the female objectification portrayed by the video's seemingly random assortment of images. McNish initially makes the viewer aware of the unequal power relations established in the video as Flo Rida takes the dominant position as the only prominent man on a beach surrounded by women. Furthermore, his initial portrayal is likened to one of a Christ-like figure as he stands on a cliff with his 'arms wide out like Jesus Christ' (McNish, 2013: 0:17). McNish therefore initially presents Flo Rida as the most powerful person in the video, who arrogantly yields an authority somewhat akin to a Christ-like figure. This blatant power hierarchy of Flo Rida over highly sexualised women is soon subverted, however, as McNish points out the absurdity of this portrayal of masculinity, where many females surround Flo Rida, by claiming that she knows of no heterosexual women who 'go and shake their arse at parties with only one guy around' (2013: 0:41). Instead she claims that a more plausible scenario would be that Flo Rida is not the object of these women's desires but could perhaps be an 'instructor' for a new 'Zumba class' (2013: 1:00), or maybe the women are lesbians, not interested in 'one strange, solitary male'

but in each other (2013: 0:42). Most realistically, McNish points out that these women are actually around because they are 'paid to be there' (2013: 1:54).

In this way, McNish's commentary undermines the power hierarchy established by Flo Rida over these nameless women. McNish takes this critique a step further by undermining the phallogocentric discourse upon which the video is based, directly ridiculing the metaphor which likens Flo Rida's penis to a whistle. McNish notes that a whistle is 'a tiny thing' (2013: 2:07), a 'pretty easy blow' (2013: 2:13) and 'hardly sexual' (2013: 2:19). At one point, she claims that if Flo Rida wanted to create an effective sex song, he should 'at least choose a metaphor that doesn't fucking squeak' so that the video might be able to depict more than a man sitting by himself on an empty bed (2013: 2:31). In this way, the hyper-masculine posturing of Flo Rida as well as the sexualisation of women in the video becomes absurd and the viewer is no longer able to consider the video or the song seriously.

### **Subverting the male gaze and defying categorisation in Savannah Brown's 'hi, i'm a slut'**

The second poet considered in this essay, Savannah Brown, is a young American woman poet with a number of her poems on Youtube. Her performance of her poem 'hi, i'm a slut' is a more subtle critique of this phallogocentric discourse. Though not ridiculing a particular instance of masculine performance which undermines women, her poem raises similar concerns to McNish's. Just as Flo Rida has a sexual fantasy where 'one by one, the women come to swim and give him head' (McNish, 2013: 1:11), Brown recounts an incident where, 'in ninth Grade a man told [her she has] good blowjob eyes' (2015: 0:19). Male entitlement towards sexual favours is therefore evident in both poems.

Brown performs this statement, along with the first half of the poem in a cheery, nonchalant tone, despite the serious matter conveyed. This performance is a portrayal of a conventionally 'good woman' – she smiles throughout, and is careful not to convey any anger in her voice, making her appear demure and submissive (Williams and Bennet, 1975: 334). In this way, Brown's performance plays into stereotypical women's gender roles – of domesticity, emotional sensitivity and passivity – which have become the basis for male hegemony and women's subordination (Connell, 1985: 263). Michael Foucault claims that when only one group controls representations, this group is able to position its own experience as the norm or ideal (Wisker, 2007: 55). Since men have historically controlled the majority of representations of women, it is through this gender binary, which positions assertive, strong men as the 'natural' opposite and superior to women, that has justified male domination (Connell, 1985: 263).

Brown, however, comes to disrupt this binary and the power derived from it. In direct contrast to the 'good woman' image Brown initially portrays, the actual words coming from her mouth are sarcastic attacks on the way in which women's bodies are described and policed by men. Halfway through the poem, Brown's tone changes and the stereotype she initially presents is subverted. She

no longer attempts to hide her anger but is blatantly outraged, eventually asserting 'you are damn right/my body is a temple/I am the god it was built for' (2015: 3:21).

Brown therefore shifts from exhibiting conventional feminine characteristics to the conventionally masculine traits of aggressiveness and assertiveness (Williams and Bennet, 1975: 334). Here, Brown is not merely attempting to embody the masculine side of the gender binary but is challenging the notion of such a dichotomy in the first place. By moving between these two roles, Brown indicates that they are not mutually exclusive but that individuals can embody a more complex identity than those determined by reductive stereotypes. Brown thus lays claim to her own individuality and suggests that women's outrage is a legitimate form of expression not to be trivialised or taken less seriously than male aggression. Here, the audience witnesses a refusal to be confined to or silenced by the gender roles which legitimate male power over women.

This shift becomes more evident when compared to the first scene of Flo Rida's video – while the initial images of Flo Rida mean to portray him as a Christ-like figure, Brown directly contests this depiction by claiming that she is the 'god' of her own body, rather than a mere vessel for men to enact their desires (Brown, 2015: 3:21). By choosing the term 'god' rather than 'goddess' to describe herself, Brown again refuses to adhere to conventional gender roles, laying claim to a certain kind of power outside of a gender binary which portrays men and women as opposite or inherently different to one another. Brown's initial portrayal of a good, demure woman is therefore subverted, thus deconstructing the gender dichotomies which portray men as more powerful or entitled. As Brown refuses to be confined to specific gender roles, she comes to assert an identity outside of the sexualised portrayal of women dominating mass media. McNish's poem also confronts gender roles in the last lines of her poem. She claims 'maybe go and eat her fig first, Flo,' indicating that males should consider giving females sexual pleasure before expecting women to 'blow their whistles,' completely overturning traditional expectations with regards to whose sexual pleasure is prioritised (2013: 3:40).

### **The embodiment of identity construction in spoken word performance**

The intimate connection between Brown's words and her subversion of specific gender roles in her performance is an important feature of emerging spoken word forms. Spoken word is more than just poetry – its power lies in its performative aspect, as poets stand on stages before audiences. Brown, for example, claims her work is a slam poem, indicating that it is created for performance with an audience in mind (Somers-Willet, 2005: 52). Just as written poetry is often a representation of the self, the performance of spoken word is often a 'proclamation of identity' (Somers-Willet, 2005: 52). Therefore, spoken word is a site for identity construction and assertion and is well-equipped to reflect identity issues and challenge the female identity defined according to the male gaze (Somers-Willet, 2005: 53). For example, the most overtly per-

formed part of Brown's poem appears to be the repeated refrain 'hi, i'm a slut' which is a blatantly feminine identification as defined by the male gaze. In contrast, her critical analysis of the complex ways in which male stereotyping reduces and undermines every single choice made by individual women, reducing them to 'sluts,' is not socialised as demure femininity.

Therefore, Brown's performance itself affirms an individual identity which does not conform to stereotypes, an identity which is asserted by the performance of spoken word poetry. In this way, Brown's poem marks a shift away from the static and essentialised identities that gender dichotomies enforce but a more complex identity where her humanity is not reduced to a set of characteristics assigned to women (Jacobs, 2008: 4).

The site of the body in spoken word poetry provides another important exploration of identity performance. In her performance of 'hi, i'm a slut,' Brown claims that her body is her own 'temple' (2015: 3: 21). While the term 'temple' is often used to police women's bodies as bodies are objectified as sites that should remain pure and chaste as places of worship, Brown's 'temple' is a sacred space which she asserts exists only to serve her interests, and degradation of this space by others, through labels like 'slut', amounts to blasphemy. This description of the body considers the status quo whereby men police and degrade women's bodies, reducing them to 'sweat and blowjob eyes', a heinous offense (2015: 4:03). Therefore, by using this comparison, Brown expertly indicates that men's objectification of and perceived entitlement to the female body amounts to violation of the sacred and should never be condoned. Brown reclaims her body as part of her identity, refusing to let others claim the space to which only she is entitled.

### **The power of names as acts of identity reclamation**

In a deeper exploration of identity, the form and content of both Brown's and McNish's poem consider the ways in which names act as identity markers. Names are important as they are a form of acknowledging one's humanity. Flo Rida, in referring to the person to which he sings merely as 'girl,' homogenises her, denies her individuality and belittles her by referring to her in the diminutive form (Jonsson, 2012: 27). The ways in which names can harm and dehumanise are also portrayed in Savannah Brown's title 'hi, i'm a slut,' which becomes the poem's first lines and which is repeated throughout the poem (2015). This repetition is an indication of the way in which women are often allocated defining characteristics according to their sexual behaviour whether they are 'slut[s]' (0:23), 'prude[s]' (1:30), 'virgin[s]' (1:36), or 'skank[s]' (2:14). All of these terms define women only as sexual objects for male pleasure rather than as full humans. This dehumanisation is evident by the fact that Brown sees herself not as human but as 'raw meat in a slaughterhouse' (2015: 2:22). In this way, Brown draws attention to the way in which these labels themselves serve to belittle and objectify women.

The subversion of these labels becomes an important act of identity reclamation. Brown strategically chooses to end her poem with the lines 'hi, I'm a slut/and no/that doesn't mean I am nothing' (2015: 4:20). These lines are an assertion of a humanity denied by conventional representations which reduce women's entire personhood to their sexual behaviour and appeal. This act of identity reclamation is further marked by the change in body language between the beginning of the poem and the performance of these lines. Before beginning her poem, Brown looks down at the floor (2015: 0:02). Upon ending her poem, she looks straight at the audience for several seconds (2015: 4:21). These gestures mark a change in the conception of self from one of submission to one of defiance, and Brown's stare causes the audience to question their own culpability in the objectification and sexualisation of women in society. In this way, Brown subverts the derogatory label of 'slut' to define her own identity.

McNish also subverts the labels Flo Rida assigns in his video. Towards the end of the poem, McNish refers to the music artist merely as 'Flo,' instead of using his full name (2013: 3:41). By assigning the self-important artist a nickname without his consent, McNish trivialises him in the same way that he belittles the hypothetical woman he calls 'girl.' Since the name 'Flo Rida' is suggestive of the term 'Flow Rider' – which evokes connotations of poetic prowess and sexual suggestion – McNish's nickname 'Flo,' which sounds more like a girl's name or even a mainstream reference to female menstruation, serves to undermine the hyper masculinity embodied by the hip hop artist. This is another subversion of power hierarchies and an indication of the power of labels in identity formation.

### **Reclaiming representation: An act of liberation**

This exploration of the power of labels and stereotypes indicates the danger of being deprived of voice. When only one group controls representations, this group is able to position its own experience as the norm while erasing the experiences others like in the 'Whistle' music video as Flo Rida controls the entire narrative while the women are, entirely, voiceless (Wisker, 2007: 55). This power dynamic lends itself to the creation of stereotypes of women. The danger of stereotypes is that they deny individual complexity and create rigid identities (Hook, 2005: 5). In reducing individuals' complexity in this way, stereotypes often lead to dehumanisation of the voiceless (Hook, 2005: 28).

In this context, McNish's poem is significant in returning voice to marginalised people. McNish essentially does to Flo Rida what Flo Rida does to the women in his video – she makes him silent as his video is on mute while she is able to control the narrative. By subverting the power hierarchy established by Flo Rida, McNish excellently portrays how Flo Rida's video, without his voice, can be taken out of context and made ridiculous, indicating the danger when certain people are denied the agency to control their own narratives.



McNish's critique of these power systems is not confined to Flo Rida's video but extends to the whole industry which continues to normalise the domination of men over the women as well as the idea that women's bodies exist for male pleasure. McNish's poem is an explicit comment on popular culture forms as a whole as she claims that, 'erotic MTV might have a couple better songs to sing' (2013: 3:33) if it did not always cater to a heterosexual male gaze. In this way, McNish's poem itself is also an act of reclamation – it denies male entitlement of the female body by taking control of women's narratives away from phallogocentric males.

The power McNish claims over her own voice is further reinforced by the fact that her poem is not accessible to the public in written form – it can only be listened to on YouTube. This choice of form means that the only way the poem can be heard is through McNish's voice. This fact is an assertion of self-ownership – just as the poem seeks to restore female body autonomy and representation, McNish's form means that she has full control over the way her poem is meant to be heard. This self-ownership is thus a reflection of the reclamation of the female voice in spaces overrun by hyper-masculinity.

It is interesting to note that male entitlement and female sexualisation is not only reinforced by the mass media critiqued by McNish but also by alternative platforms like YouTube itself. Although the platform is heralded as a space of equal opportunity, its hypocrisy is apparent by the fact that Brown's poem comes with a content warning indicating that the video might be inappropriate for younger viewers while Flo Rida's music video, which blatantly sexualises and objectifies women, does not. In this way, YouTube appears hypocritical in its claim to be an alternative platform accessible and equal to all. It is just as responsible for reinforcing power hierarchies as more mainstream platforms like MTV.

### Conclusion

Although many supposedly emancipatory forms of and platforms for expression remain highly exclusive, both McNish and Brown have paved the way for spoken word poetry to give voice to women who, despite all the advances made by feminism, remain stereotyped, reduced and objectified as tools for sexual pleasure in many contemporary representations. Both of these poets make up part of a mass of artists who refuse to allow these forms of expression to erase their experiences and humanity. The poems explored in this essay not only highlight male entitlement in many manifestations of spoken word poetry, but they act as a means of checking exclusivity and discrimination in this art form. McNish and Brown push the boundaries of spoken word to develop a more self-critical and intersectional mode of representation which evolves to provide a space for all marginalised voices to be heard.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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