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Honors Project Proposal Revision
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Creative Writing Honors Project Proposal

Overview:

For my honors project, I will write a collection of 25-30 poems that contribute to the genre of slam poetry by questioning and disrupting the authenticity of the poetic speaker. In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett argues that through its emphasis on first-person composition and authors performing their own work, “slam poetry entails not only an admission of authorial self but an outright proclamation of authorial self through performance. In this way, the identity of the author is inextricably linked to the slam poem” (35). She goes on to describe this link between author and text—however “constructed and patently false” it may be—as a kind of authenticity (161). While she maintains that slam poets almost universally construct authenticity, there are also slam poets who are working to complicate it as well.

Some contemporary slam poets, such as Buddy Wakefield, extend Somers-Willett’s notion of authenticity beyond the stage, and into the realm of textual performance. In his collection *Live for a Living*, Wakefield alternates between poems and journal entries. The journal entries function as a strategy of documentation that cements narrative authenticity: they are relatively unstructured musings or stories that are meant to be experienced as “real.” These journals give the artificially constructed “I” of his poems a greater sense of authenticity, as he is claiming them as part of the same sequence.

Other slam poets, however, question this paradigm of authenticity, such as Sam Cook in his poem “Max”. Through the use of surrealism and second-person persona, Cook crafts a non-linear narrative about familial abuse that leaves the audience unsure of what is meant to be taken as real or unreal, and of the very nature and reality of the speaker. As another example, Anis Mojgani problematizes the notion of authenticity in his poem “Sock Hop” through the ways in which he navigates the space between the lyric and the narrative. Mojgani uses multiple unfinished narratives interrupted by lyric passages to construct a polyphonic speaker.

With my collection, I intend to enter into this discussion by furthering the tradition of poets such as Cook and Mojgani. By investigating the way other poets, both in slam and in academia, complicate authenticity, I will attempt to expand the possibilities of my genre.

Sources:

In addition to Somers-Willet and the slam poets mentioned above, my reading list includes a number of critical and creative sources that contribute to this discussion of performance and authenticity. *After Confession: poetry as autobiography* is a collection of essays by contemporary poets that examines the relationship between the author and her/his work. *Orality and Literacy*, by Walter Ong, dissects the complex relationship between oral and literary cultures and forms. In addition, I will seek out some theoretical analyses of authorship, such as Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?”

Because page poets have already extensively engaged in this discussion of authenticity, I will also study a variety of academic poets who have modeled different ways of disrupting the authenticity and authority of the poetic speaker. In *Alibi School* and *The Forgiveness Parade*, Jeffrey McDaniel mixes seemingly straightforward autobiographical poetry with extensive surrealism, casting doubt on the authenticity of his narrative. Even on a small scale, he uses humor and satire to undercut the authenticity of his extended metaphors. Karyna McGlynn's first collection of poetry, *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*, intentionally misleads the reader through a series of shifting narratives and speakers. In this way, she destabilizes the reader's attempts at a static interpretation of poetic voice. Anne Carson, a poet who utilizes a wide variety of forms and genres, frequently disrupts traditional interpretations of narrative. In her book *Nox*, Carson writes a tangled and often fabricated epitaph for her brother, who she barely knew. Due to the nature of my project, some of my resources, such as Kyle Myhre's "Love Story in Eight Slices", do not exist as published works. I will, however, procure written copies of these works.

Description:

I have chosen to focus on questions of authenticity because I have found those questions, in my own reading and writing, to be some of the most interesting to explore. Even in genres other than poetry, I have always been fascinated by unreliable narrators, or any literary speaker that intentionally casts doubt on the authenticity of his/her voice and story. These speakers encourage the reader to experience poetry and literature in a

complex manner, and to question assumptions (both conscious and unconscious) about the deeper nature of the work.

Over the course of my project, I intend to execute a variety of poetic experiments aimed at complicating the notion of authenticity in the tradition of slam poetry. My poems will primarily be free verse or prose poems, as these forms lend themselves well to the rhythms and structures of slam. Some of the poems will have multiple speakers, or speakers that directly contradict each other. Others will have no clear “I” or consistent speaker at all. Some poems will be in narrative sequences from the same speaker, that initially make claims of authenticity only to later deconstruct them, and create doubt about the reality of the entire narrative. Through this series of experiments, I hope to learn about and expand the possibilities of my genre, as well as improving and exploring the range of my own work. Marlon James has agreed to be my advisor for this project.

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