



## **That Thing Called Love, And the Thing Called Fat Fatness, Love, and Performance**

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### **SPOKEN WORD, PERFORMANCE, AND IDENTITY**

Spoken word poetry is poetry developed to be performed, and hence the aspect of performance is very crucial to the genre. It is a mixture of theatrics, elocution, recitation, and daily life spoken elements, and hence, it makes for a very fertile ground for resistance poetry and prose. Its origins also lie in similar contexts; the history of spoken word poetry shows the informal, free, liberating and subversive element of the genre.

The rise of hip-hop in the late 1970s led to new ways for - wordsmiths to showcase their skills onstage. In response to what he saw as elitist and overly academic approaches to poetry, Chicagoan Marc Smith began hosting open mic nights in 1984, focusing these events on poets performing their work, as opposed to reciting it aloud. The popularity of these events led Smith to host performance poetry competitions, called poetry slams, where competitors were given three minutes to present their work to a set of judges selected from the audience. ("Poetry on Center Stage" 2008)

Performance forms a huge and the most essential part of spoken-word poetry. Along with the content, it is the presence of the poet and their mannerisms, acts, ways of expression which add fodder to the whole presentation. It is not mere recitation of written word, but an ensemble of devices coming together. When these performances are about the person themselves, their struggles, their experiences and their life-stories, it becomes a performance of performativity, of a body narrativising the performance they indulge in the real world (performing oneself in a marginalised racial, sexual, gender, class, ethnic category). Susan B.A Somers-Willett in her essay, *Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity* states:

Performance, then, is an instance of identity's performativity, a live embodiment and enactment of an identity in a particular space and time. As discursive practice, performativity is both prior to and a result of any embodied performance: performativity is that normative behavior to which a performance alludes or which it parodies, and it is also a performance's effect in that the normative behavior reflected in a performance is disseminated and eventually incorporated into that behavior's performative history. (Somers-Willett 56)

To understand the personal narrative in a public performance, one needs to analyse what happens when performativity and performance are coalesced. When a particular identity

is being brought to the fore by the performance, the “stylised repetition of acts” (Butler 520) become more and more apparent. The artifice of the constructed identity is revealed through the act of performance, and the presence of the performer on the stage reinforces this revelation as (...) “the author’s physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body, particularly race and gender but extending to class, sexuality, and even regionality.” (Somers-Willett 68) The presence of a marginalised entity on stage, expressing its self through a medium that brings together words, enactment and voice, renders the artificiality of the exclusion uncomfortably apparent. When an individual whose stories have been misrepresented, under-represented or not represented at all, performs a narrative that thrusts upon the forgotten, ignored and neglected stories-performance becomes a powerful tool for destabilising the dominance of narratives that normalise certain kinds of performativity. Resistance, revolutions, rebellions, all have a strong component of “speaking out” and the notion of getting one’s voices heard. Performativity and performance tend to amalgamate together in spoken word Kristin M Langellier in *Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* comments:

In performativity, narrator and listener(s) are themselves constituted (“I will tell *you* a story”), as is experience (“a *story* about what happened to me”)...Thus, the *personal* in personal narrative implies a performative struggle for agency rather than the expressive act of a pre-existing, autonomous, fixed, unified, or stable self which serves as the origin or accomplishment of experience...performativity articulates and situates personal narrative within the forces of discourse, the institutionalized networks of power relations, such as medicine, the law, the media, and the family, which constitute subject positions and order context; and *performance* implies the transgressive desire of agency and action. (Langellier 129)

Thus, spoken-word poetry is a tool through which a neglected identity brings forth its self through the medium of performing the performativity that has been portrayed in the forms of negations, neglect and negativity. It seeks to change the way we look at certain individuals through the lens of the discourse that has taught us to maintain status quo. Nishalini Michelle Patmanathan in her thesis, *Slam as Methodology: Theory, Performance, Practice*, states:

Slam can also be thought of as a topic of research. For instance, researchers can use the method of conducting a textual analysis from existing slam performance poetry pieces to arrive at conclusions about the nature of cultural production and/or human experience. Slam as a topic of research puts political and sociological imaginations to work in perceiving the politics and practices that form lived experiences (Denzin, 2003). (Patmanathan 66)

Though slam poetry is the competitive form of spoken word poetry, this paper would concentrate on three performances which were staged in various slam festivals. The analysis would be limited to the content and would not take into account the competitive aspect of the performance. Though the element of competition affects performance and even content, due to the lack of background information and to consider the larger issues discussed in the content, the “slam” aspect of spoken-word would not be covered in the paper. We thus, situate the next three poems we look at in this context of assertion of identity through performance. The paper will first discuss the context of fat identities and narrative before attempting a content analysis of the poems.

THE FAT PERSON: FAT IDENTITY, EXPERIENCES, AND NARRATIVE

A fat person is often defined in negation, in terms of what the person is not, and also, what others should not be like. A fat person is not a figure of emulation, of imitation but a figure of perverse imagination, excess, uncontrolled desires, grotesque, and trivialisation. Thus, fat person finds themselves being made a part of the dominant discourse through marginalised categories: the fat friend, the fat nerd, the fat bully, etc. Fatness is to be reviled, corrected, and questioned. Jeannine Gailey in her essay, *Ample Sex* in the book *The Hyper(in)visible Fat Woman*, states: "Fat women are frequently considered deviant because they violate one of the most fundamental gender norms of Western culture: Women should be beautiful, or at least try, and fat is not typically considered beautiful." (110)

What makes fat identity's performance different from the ones of other marginalised categories? What is the essential marker of departure when it comes to a fat person performs on stage about being fat, and about other struggles being narrated by another person? This is where performance and performativity complicate each other. The essential difference of all other identities and fat identity is the very visibility of the fatness being extrapolated, questioned, and made a site of struggle and narration. It is closer to racial identities, when the color of the skin is made the site of contestation. As Petra Kuppers puts it in her essay, *Fatties on Stage*:

The fat performer does not escape her physicality. Since her sign of difference is overpowering, she is in the same position as the woman of color—she cannot jump from discourse to discourse, from passing to being. Her "essence" is always already embodied on stage...The fat woman remains, in all her guises, the fat woman. (Kuppers 281)

But the struggles of the coloured skin still lie outside, even if they delineate from their skin. Whilst a fat body's struggle is simultaneously outside and within the very embodiment of fat: it is embodiment of an anomaly, not difference; it is visibility of a lack, and not only visibility of dissimilarity. Moreover, fat is not considered comparable to issues of class, race, ethnicity, or even gender. Fat is seen as a mere health concern and it may entail health risks, but can its struggles be put on the same plane as the struggles of a black woman? This is what Kathleen LeBesco makes clear in her essay, *Queering Fat Bodies/Politics* and politicises the issue of fat by calling its narrativisation as an act of resistance:

But if we think of *revolting* in terms of overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting, and rejecting, then corpulence carries a whole new weight as a subversive cultural practice that calls into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature. We can recognize fat as a condition not simply aesthetic or medical, but *political*. (75)

The three poems which I would discuss will be in the realm of fat bodies and their experience in romantic and sexual relationships, and how fatness is treated as an anomaly, a digression, and as something to be reviled.

1. FAT PEOPLE HAVE SEX TOO: CHRISTOPHER STANLY'S FAT LOVE

Fat love is like nothing you see  
in magazines on TV or movies, we proudly rip these shirts off and fill the air  
with the skin only we are familiar with,  
Fat love is loud, a moaning metal frame

Knocking against the wall,  
Will make your neighbours check the front door because  
That sound can only mean emergency  
Fat love is an emergency. (quoted in Stanly, 00:01:30)

Christopher Stanly in his poem brings to the fore a discourse that has been deemed absent from reality, or considered unimportant for representation: the possibility of fat people engaging in sexual intercourse. "*Fat love is like nothing you see in magazines on TV or movies*"-Stanly calls into the void that is there in media representations of romance, which excludes people who are fat from its narrative of romance and sex. Stanly in his poem through his effusive, descriptive and explicit narration thrusts upon a story which has been deemed to be non-existent. This trope of discomfiting the audience with what is considered grotesque and showing the existence of such a discourse in words which are familiar, actions which are routine is to show the normalcy of what has hitherto been considered as unusual. Somehow, there is a "thin-gaze" which gets discomfited in such poetry, of listening to notions, and ideas known very well but now their site is on a body hitherto unthinkable. At the beginning of his poem, Stanly presents the idea of sex without naming which kinds of bodies are engaged in the act. But the manner in which he chooses his words, uncovers the stigma attached to talking explicitly about sex on public platforms, and the absurdity of it. He chooses the sardonic phrase "decide to engage in coitus" (00:00:23), somehow revealing the hypocrisy of stigmatisation of sexual intercourse in the public, at the same time harking to the normalcy of it by invoking the simplistic biology of the act. When the poet introduces fat bodies, he even goes further deeper into the stigma and breaks it open. As Samantha Murray comments in her essay, *Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman*:

One only has to reflect on the ways in which we speak about fatness in this historical moment in Western societies ... We talk about fatness as a major health crisis, an epidemic, a drain on resources, a symbol of the failed body, and as an aesthetic affront. We do not talk about fat and sex. (Murray 239)

Media representation works as an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 86), and Stanley in his poem points out how a narrative which is absent from films and other digital platforms, gets translated into a void in material reality as well. Media forms ideologies and is formed on ideologies, and both work in the structural neglect of fat bodies. This he talks through the kind of furnitures that are manufactured, which do not take heavy bodies into account:

If either of these adults are  
over 350 pounds they are thinking of one thing: the bed frame.  
Four pieces of melted steel connected only by slender screws  
are expected to support this fat  
love, this rumbling love, this neither of us ordered the salad love.  
Every fat person is an engineer when it comes to the dynamics of a box spring  
if it's IKEA we aint fuckin on  
that box spring. (quoted in Stanly, 00:00:23-00:00:50)

The society's preoccupation with thinness has normalized a normal human body to be perceived as thin and thus, acceptable. This acceptability in turn runs into the accessibility of certain features of reality which "unacceptable" bodies are victims of. Be it clothing, furniture, or even the discourse of romance and love- fat bodies are one way or another relegated in the background and their existence is considered as a deviation from the normal: they have to bring themselves to the "normal" condition of being thin

so as to have full access to reality. Fat men are considered borderline impotent, or effeminate and fat women are marked as bodies to be made fun of rather than made love to. Fat is an aberration, a threat to status quo, built on thin bodies. As Jeannine A. Gailey comments in her essay, *Transforming the Looking-Glass: Fat Women's Sexual Empowerment through Body Acceptance*:

Fat is perceived as a threat to the heteronormative system because: a) men who are attracted to fat women have failed to embody hegemonic masculinity, and b) fat women who easily find and pursue partners subvert the conventional beauty norms and feminine discourse. (53).

The next two poems would look at two distinctive realms of fat identity and the idea of love.

2. SEX, FAT BODIES AND BODY SHAMING: RACHEL WILEY'S "10 HONEST THOUGHTS ON BEING LOVED BY A SKINNY BOY" AND YESIKA SALGADO'S "HOW NOT TO MAKE LOVE TO A FAT GIRL"

The phrase "Big girls need love too" can die in a fire.  
Fucking me does not require an asterisk.  
Loving me is not a fetish.  
Finding me beautiful is not a novelty.  
I am not a fucking novelty. (quoted in Wiley, 00:02:35- 00k:02:56)

But boys  
make it difficult  
to be a fat girl graceful  
In her body  
often taking  
my size as an invitation  
to be ridiculous  
dismantling my large  
Into body parts  
when questioned  
what they like about me  
as if it were too much to ask  
to find the whole of me desirable  
and if all else fails  
they assume the answer  
"big girls are my thing" is supposed  
To make me want to jump out of my pennies. (quoted in Salgado, 00:01:02-00:01:27)

Both these poems point out to the shaming that comes along with having a fat body. Fat is seen as something that requires a corrective, and often people who are not blatantly antagonistic, tend to be patronising. The whole phenomena of "fat-admirers" show a curious construction of fat as something that is "abnormal" to be liked, and hence it could only be a guilty pleasure, a fetish. Loving a fat person is not seen as a normal process, but as a person having a preference for a "type"- "He likes big women", "She likes bears" is often thrown around for people who happen to engage in relationships with people who are identified as fat. Cat Pause comments in her essay, *Human Nature: Fat Sexual Identity and Agency*:

So we have on the one hand, men who pursue fat women as sexual partners out of deviant desire, and on the other, men who pursue fat women as sexual partners to reinforce their virility." It is quite impossible to find a narrative where a person who is fat is engaged in romance that is conventional, and not spoken of in hushed tones. (40)

There is a danger of immense body shaming even after a relationship is forged, which Salgado in her poem emphasizes upon. It is understandable, as Salgado says, that one is apprehensive in their encounter with another body; but when it comes to a fat body, the apprehension is not limited to the fear of a wrong touch, but it is the infantilisation of the fat body that Salgado points out. This resonates what Pause says through quoting Kerby, "Don't be afraid of touching your fat lover's body. Figure out what you love about the experience. Never, ever say, 'I never thought I could enjoy sex with a fat person.'" (43)

This disbelief is also found in various aspects of a fat person's public life, which Rachel Wiley points out. She talks of "The cute hipster girl at the coffee shop assumes we are just friends and flirts over the counter(Wiley 00:02:08-00:02:09). There is no question of a possibility in our psyche to think of a possibility where a fat person is in a romantic relationship."Their bodies marked them as "not dateable" or undesirable in conventional settings because of the stigma associated with fat." (Gailey 56)

Both the poems point out to how fat bodies have been erased from the cultural psyche of the people when it comes to imagining romantic and sexual encounters. Fat bodies are always unrepresented in imagination for them to be accepted in material reality. This imagination is formed through images which are available through institutions, representations, and other kinds of ideological apparatuses. But their very narrative dismantles this discourse and reveals its construction, the artificiality of what is considered a natural given. As Gailey states:

Due to the tremendous amount of attention in the media and popular culture about the harms of fat, coupled with the constant barrage of highly sexualized images of thin, scantily clad women, we begin to associate sex and sex appeal with a specific body type." (112)

Hence, fat is a threat to masculinity and femininity because fat women who enjoy sex and find and pursue partners demonstrate that the conventional beauty messages are inaccurate or misleading. Their performance of a narrative reveals how they perform quite unknown stylistic acts (borrowing Butler's terms as previously stated), and this becomes an empowering tool to destabilise set notions of body-image and romance.

Patmanathan in her discussion about slam as methodology writes:

Social change begins to occur when the slam performers/subjects are able to re-negotiate a means to create meaning that no longer positions them as a victim. Rather, their re-positioning or re-alignment of their situation alters the social and lived narratives that have been placed on them at least within that transient moment.. Through the development and re-development of subjectivity the performers create new rendering of old oppressive experiences and tell new stories within existing social restrictions. Slam performance offers a mode to be seen and heard for artists whose concerns, lives, and dreams are often not given serious attention. (Patmanathan 84)

Seen through this lens, the three performances disassemble the notion of which kind of bodies could be placed in a cultural imagination of love, romance, and sex. They use their under-represented or misrepresented status and show a different world that exists or can exist, simultaneously prevailing with and challenging the existing notions of love and bodies that take part in the process of love. Which bodies do we think of when we imagine an ideal lover is more to do with media images, stories, myths, traditional knowledge, and little is realised about which bodies get systemically thrown to the periphery. Lea Kent in her essay. *Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women* says:

In presenting fat bodies in sexual acts, fatwomen actively desiring other fat women, fat women in S/M scenarios, *FaT GiRL* appropriates sex as a joyous way of rewriting the fat body. It uses the erotic to envision a good, pleasurable body in which there is an interplay between the body's desires and the self's expressions—the good body is rewritten as the body that can tell the self its desires, act on its desire, provide pleasures. Suddenly the disciplined body, the dieting body, the subject of “self-control,” seems empty and impoverished. (Kent 142)

These performers rewrite the fat body, they perform through their performance different acts that have not found a place in our cultural imagination, our sociological imagination, and reveal the very procedural nature of ideology, and how our world has its roots in narratives of appropriation, and how these narratives could be changed and countered through more narratives. The poems become a tool of rearranging the codes of how we look at the body which is speaking of its own body and its experiences, yet the medium of spoken word makes it an enterprise of exposing the political in the personal. The arena of romance stands questioned, its gendered spaces and notions break down when few identities reveal their invisibility through a medium which renders them, their bodies, and their stories visible. The narratives create a world which may seem new but their idea is to establish their presence in a world where they have been hitherto thought to be non-existent, or irrelevant. Spoken word can be a powerful medium to let loose the narratives of people who have been invisibilised and silenced but at the same time, its embodied nature can open up avenues of discussions and problematization of vulnerable, demonized, and derided bodies.

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