

**The Dynamic Interaction  
between  
the Poet and the People in Slam Poetry**

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## Foreword

In the beginning, there were words. And with these words, there was rhythm and meter. Contained in this rhythm and held in this meter, there was meaning and there was magic. There was community and communion. In the beginning, there was poetry. Oral in nature and intimate in delivery, storytelling is likely one of the earliest human art forms. Rising from the tales told around the fire were the epic poems that have entertained, educated, and entranced generations of humans from the shadows of the origin of man until the present day. Contemporary individuals are still aware of the travels of brave Odysseus, the feats of the proud Achilles, the conceit of Gilgamesh, and the travails of Beowulf, thanks to the poets who recited these epic poems until they were, at last, penned. Even the Bible itself, the single work most commonly alluded to in the English language, was passed along orally for generations. However, with time and technology, the oral tradition faded while the written word gained precedence. The slam poetry movement, however, has been revitalizing spoken poetry, restoring the power of language and orality to this ancient art. This thesis explores the phenomenon of slam.

The researching and writing of this thesis has been an honor and a joy. I found the opportunity to delve into the world of slam poetry as well as to explore the influence of this genre on American literature and culture as a whole fascinating and delightful. In exploring this, I took a two-pronged approach. The literary research element of this project allowed me to understand the history and current state of performance poetry in the contemporary United States. Over the course of this, I read numerous articles and books that provided insight into the origins, development, applications, and future of slam poetry. Meanwhile, field research was a particularly valuable element of this project; it enabled me

to see the actualization of the concepts discussed in the aforementioned articles as well as to make my own observations. Over the course of the summer of 2008, I attended seven open microphone events at various venues as well as three poetry slams in Baltimore, two poetry slams in Washington D.C., and five additional slams at the National Poetry Slam. I regularly went to the Baltimore slam team's venue, The Den Lounge, and I followed the team's progress in at the National Poetry Slam in Madison, WI. This gave me insights into both team dynamics and the importance of strategy in the national competition. At the National Poetry Slam, I also had the opportunity to observe a great variety of styles and subject matter, which enabled me to get a better feel for common themes and typical modes of presentation. Attendance at the National Poetry Slam also permitted me to observe several more innovative techniques as well as to get a sense of regional differences in content and presentation. Finally, I also participated in workshops on writing and presenting slam poems, an experience that gave me additional insights into the creative process. I kept a record of the performances and works that I observed in both written and web-based form; I would take notes at each event and then published many of my observations through an online blog (<http://studyslam.blogspot.com/>).

This entire project was challenging and rewarding, and I was only able to do so with the aid and continual support of many people. I would like to take a moment to thank them. First, I would like to express my deep and abiding gratitude to Professor Lesley Wheeler, who introduced me to slam when I was a sophomore and wholeheartedly granted me her support in both my summer research endeavors as well as over the course of this year. I would also like to thank Professor Marc Conner, my other English department advisor, who helped me chose slam as my subject of inquiry, as well as Professor Miranda,

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Finally, this paper would not be possible without the support and generous aid of the various slam poets that I worked with this summer. In particular, I would like to thank the Baltimore Slam family: Chris August, Chris Wilson, Ryan Mergen, Kyle Eichmann, Twain Dooley, Granma Dave, and the other regulars of that venue. I am also truly grateful to Tokia "2 Deep" Carter and Jonathan Tucker from the D.C. 11<sup>th</sup> Hour Slam, Patricia Smith and Taylor Mali for making their acclaimed poetry available for research students, and to all of the poets that I met at the 2008 National Poetry Slam in Madison, Wisconsin. Finally, I am truly appreciative of everyone who visited and/or commented on my poetry blog.

## Introduction

Slam poetry is, at once, a young and an ancient phenomenon. Although it has roots in the very origins of human civilization, slam poetry has only existed in its present form for a few decades. Because of the youth of this genre, there has been relatively little research conducted regarding competitive performance poetry in the contemporary world. However, it prompts many interesting questions. Among the questions raised by this form are the role that the audience plays in the composition of slam poems, the relationship between the poets and modern broadcast technology, and how slam may change the face of poetry in the contemporary United States. This thesis investigates the audience of slam poetry, the manner in which competitive performance poetry may change public attitudes towards art and literacy, and the manner in which the medium itself affects the art. Slam is shaped by the technology and the ethos of the contemporary world, and both the poems and the poets are influenced by the various modern innovations that allow slam poetry to be transmitted to diverse audiences.

Poetry is, at its heart, an acoustic phenomenon. Distinguished from ordinary language through its emphasis on the use of sound, especially its distinctive rhythms, meters, and rhyme schemes, the earliest known poetry was performed in the oral tradition. However, following the spread of literacy, poetry increasingly became a written art form. Poetic movements in the United States during the twentieth century began re-emphasizing the importance of sound and performance. Charles Olson was at the forefront of this movement, and, in his essay "Projective Verse," he declared that much of the meaning of poetry stems from the sound. When describing the creation of a poem, Olson stated that "the two halves are:

The HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

The HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (Olson)

effectively emphasizing the importance of both sound and meaning in the generation and perception of a poem. While the sounds of poetry were highlighted by many poetic movements, like that of the Beat Poets, other poets expanded on the possibilities opened by performance. For instance, the British poet Stevie Smith gained fame for the elaborate and dramatic presentations of her poetry while American poets used public readings and presentations to gain general support for such causes as the women’s liberation movement, the Black Nationalism movement, as well as in protest of the Vietnam War (Brodie).

As of the late twentieth century, at least three distinct styles of poetic performance can be distinguished. First, poetry readings are events in which poets read poems intended for written media. Two forms are strictly intended for performance, the first of these being prepared in advance and the second being developed spontaneously on stage. In recent years, two principal styles of performance poetry have dominated the scene: open microphone events and poetry slams (Gioia 23). Mark Eleveld, the editor of The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & The Poetry of A New Generation, notes that, though there are many facets of the spoken word movement, “they all share a common credo – namely, that their poetry is designed to be performed in front of an audience” (xiii). The precise form aside, “slam, hip hop, and other spoken word styles – the art form is still kicking, breathing, and evolving...spoken word returns to poetry’s roots, and we revel in the opportunity to be a part of today’s revolution” (xiii). Such movements as slam seek to revitalize poetry, embodying it and bringing it back to the people.

In her book, Voicing American Poetry, Lesley Wheeler details the four kinds of poetry readings that she observed at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs 2006 annual conference: group readings, panels, readings hosted outside of the conference hotel sites, and featured readers at the hotel (138-141). "Despite the range of skills and styles," observes Wheeler, "most of the readings I saw there adhered to the norms observable at colleges and universities...Most importantly, poets perform the fact that they are not performers" (140). Emotionally detached and academically dressed, these poets seem separate from the work. They present their poems, but they do not embody their poems, meaning that they do not use their presence to enhance the meaning or interpretation of their works. Instead, they let the words of each poem bear the full weight of conveying the meaning of the poem, though the academic readers at this conference did not take advantage of the medium of performance, the presence of the poet can have a profound effect on the interpretation of his or her work. "By definition, panels that gather authors of one race and/or sex assert that the writer's body affects poetry," notes Wheeler (141), and, in slam, the poets' very identity may alter the manner in which the audience interprets the poem. A poet's ability to orally present his or her work is very valuable because "a poet who succeeds as a performer, whether in slam or in academic circuits...probably reaches far more listeners through readings than readers through book sales," Wheeler observes, "[because] embodied voices attract audiences" (129). Embodied voices also give power to the poets' words, and this power partially accounts for the rise of the slam scene.

Slam poetry is even "becoming an institution in its own right," doing so both despite its goal of "reclaiming poetry from teacher-scholars" as well as because of this



goal (127). Slam poets perform before general audiences, and they deliberately try to make their works accessible. "Slam emerges not as the cure for an academic style of voicing poetry nor as the nemesis of university-sponsored art," writes Wheeler, "but as one manifestation of a recurrent set of questions in American verse culture" (130). Slam is young and vital, a growing movement that not only prompts the audience to consider the various political, social, and other subjects of the poems, it also "compels poets and audiences to consider the boundaries and purposes of poetry" (130). It prompts the audiences and the poets to wonder, "what does a good poem sound like? Is it primarily an oral or a textual event, or both, or something else entirely? Who should voice it, where, to whom, and how? Finally, why should anyone listen?" (130). These questions are important to the analysis of literature, and, through slam, increasingly to the general American public.

Slam poetry, the competitive sport of poetry, was born in the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago, Illinois in 1984. Marc Smith is generally credited with developing the concept of slam. He was inspired to do so by a desire "to breathe life into the open mike format" (Poetry). Two years later, Smith relocated these poetry competitions to the Green Mill Jazz Club. This was followed by the first National Poetry Slam in 1990. The first National Poetry Slam occurred in San Francisco and only involved two teams and an individual poet. National Slams have occurred every year since then, and at the 2008 National Poetry Slam, nearly 80 teams competed. Slam competition has also diversified to include a National Individual Slam as well as a National Women's Poetry Slam. What is more, it has extended beyond the borders of the United States, and now slam may be found in Canada, Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Switzerland, Nepal, the

Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Macedonia (Glazner 11-12).

Winning a poetry slam is a matter of both skill and luck; the responses to any given poem may vary greatly depending on the audience, the judges, and the poet's performance at that particular event (Poetry). Slam poetry has a distinctive format largely determined by the rules governing the delivery and judging; the poems are delivered to an audience that is actively encouraged to engage with the performer. The poetry presented through the Slam format is shaped by the rules of the competition. Gary Mex Glazner, one of the founders of slam poetry, eloquently condenses the rules into four main points. First, slam poems are required to be three minutes or less. Secondly, neither props nor costumes may be used by the performer, except for in special prop or costume slams. Thirdly, the poem must be written by the performer or by a member of that team. Fourth and finally, scoring is done by five judges selected from the audience at random. The judges rank the poem on a scale from 0.0 to 10.0. The top and bottom score are dropped to correct for outliers, and the remaining three scores are summed in order to rank the poem against the others performed in that round (13).

These rules regulate competition at the National Poetry Slam and other slam events supported by Poetry Slam, Inc., the American slam organization. While individual slam venues are allowed to modify these rules, many remain close to them in order to keep their teams competition-worthy. Even while following the above rules, however, every single venue may have an entirely different feel to the competition based on the location itself and the audience that frequents it. Bob Holman describes the various ways that the competition may be structured in his essay "The Room." The physical nature and

features of the room may shape the performances and guide the performers' interactions with the audience. Even more importantly, the crowd that is drawn by the venue will shape the atmosphere and decide the subjects and styles of performance that will be most successful at the venue (Holman 15).

Each competitor will present in a round, and, typically, poetry slams have two or more rounds (Glazner 14). Holman continues to describe the different formats that the competition may take. He first mentions the "All In" competition, in which the top two competitors slam off. He next describes the two round format, in which the poets receive separate scores in each of two rounds, and the performer with the highest combined score wins. Third, there is "Queen of the Hill" competition, in which the winning poet from one week is forced to defend his or her position against competitors the following week. The very name used to describe this form of competition, as opposed to the usual "King of the Hill," illustrates the social awareness of the slam movement as well as its efforts to include the female and minority populations frequently underrepresented in academic poetry. Fourth, there is the best "Two Out of Three" competition, in which poets compete one against one. The winner of two out of the three rounds progresses. Additionally, there is the "Count Down," tournament-style play in which poets compete one-on-one and the winner progresses to the next round. Finally, there is "Invitational Competition." Also known as "Slam Shut" competition, the only poets allowed to compete are the poets invited to the event (Holman 17).

The consequence of the rule governing competition is that, despite variations, slam poems begin to take on a somewhat regularized form. Daniel S. Solis describes poem selection as being "like deciding where to hang a painting in a room for greatest

effect, or what music to play at a party” (Solis 88). Different poems can be performed at a given event or given venue depending on the choice of the poet, and they will have different effects depending on the mood and composition of the audience as well as due to the merit of their own composition and performance. In slam, though, the poet has one particular motivation: “the common goal is to connect with the audience in the deepest possible way” (88). The poets who can do so are successful.

Though poetry slams are competitive, Allan Wolf, a prolific performer at slam events, declared that “the points are not the point; the point is poetry” (Poetry), emphasizing the deeper value of poetry slams. These events are not so much about the short-term goal of winning but about the enduring goal of expanding appreciation for poetry, which slam does by extensively involving the audience. “Slam is designed for the audience to react vocally and openly to all aspects of the show, including the poet's performance, the judges' scores, and the host's banter,” states the Poetry Slam, Inc. website (Poetry). This ability of slams to reinvigorate public appreciation for poetry seems increasingly valuable in light of the contemporary decline in reading and competition from alternative media (Gioia 23). Though Wolf cites increasing the audience of poetry as one of the primary goals of slams, there is a great deal of controversy regarding the literary merit of these performances, and they have been the targets of much criticism (Poetry). However, despite the attention garnered by slam, there remains a dearth of academic work regarding this form, making slam a particularly interesting and fertile field for research.

This thesis explores some of the questions generated by performance poetry in the form of slam. The first chapter focuses on communication. It begins with an

investigation of the very nature of communication itself and a discussion of the role of body language. Subsequently, it considers the influence of the medium used to convey poetry, investigating the impact of the written and the performance aspects of poetry. The first chapter concludes by looking at the role of the audience with respect to the creation and presentation of slam poetry. This chapter is grounded in communication theory.

The second chapter instead relies upon interviews and my own personal experiences as a regular attendee of poetry slams. In particular, this chapter explores the creation of slam poetry from the perspective of the poet. This chapter is built around the personal experiences of four slam poets from the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., metropolitan area: Dave "Granma" Schein, Chris Wilson, Jonathan Tucker, and Tokia "2Deep" Carter. This chapter continues to investigate the dynamic between the poet and the audience through the personal experiences of these poets, considering the role that the audience plays in shaping the creation of the poems. The audience affects the poets' decisions in terms of the complexity of the poem, the emotional content of the poem, and the subject matter discussed in the poem. With the aid of these poets, I will also discuss the influence of performance on the form of slam poems as well as the relationship of the poets to modern technology. Additionally, I analyze two slam poems in performance: "Building Nicole's Mama" by Patricia Smith and "Totally like whatever, you know?" by Taylor Mali. These poems are excellent examples of the dynamic relationship between slam poetry and society; these poems show how slam artists use their work in order to call for social change. These pieces also fully illustrate the power of performance poetry in the hands of expert performers.

Ultimately, slam poetry is a powerful and young movement in American poetry. Billy Collins, a U.S. Poet Laureate, says that, "to hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the prison cell of the page, where silence is enforced, to a freedom dependent only on the ability of the open mouth – that most democratic of instruments – and speak" (quoted in Eleveld 3). In slam, the relationship between the poet and the audience is profound and, in the literary world, unprecedented in modern times. Rather than being unidirectional, as at an academic reading, it allows for a conversation between the audience and the poet. This bidirectional relationship not only permits the audience to enter a discussion on poetry in the contemporary United States, it allows the poets to touch their audience, influencing their hearts and minds, serving as social catalysts and opening important topics for a dynamic conversation.

With that, let us begin our exploration of Slam poetry.

## Chapter 1: Communication Theory

### I. Introduction

Communication is fundamental. John Donne wrote that “No Man is an Island” (Donne 1), but the only bridge that prevents the internal world of each individual from being wholly isolated and incomprehensible to those around him or her is the ability to share ideas. It is the words, the intonations, and the gestures individuals employ that allow others the opportunity to understand their internal state. “Communication is one of our most pervasive, important, and complex clusters of behavior,” writes Stephen Littlejohn in Theories of Human Communication. “The ability to communicate on a higher level separates human beings from other animals” (3). The ability to communicate allows humans to share ideas with others and form interpersonal connections through the written and spoken word.

The importance of communication can be felt all the more palpably when one is faced with its absence. For instance, in On Culture and Communication, Richard Hoggart writes that “living in a foreign country you soon learn how much your ways of being in touch depend upon belonging to a particular society, how much they support both your society’s sense of itself and your own efforts to establish working relationships within it” (13). As Hoggart observes, any given social group has its own norms of communication. Individuals raised within that group are familiar with these norms, and they easily recognize and adapt to the idioms and expressions employed. They are able to detect and interpret the subtleties of the connotations of words and the manner in which these distinguish colloquial uses from the denotations. “Most of the signals,” continues Hoggart, “we pick up, especially when we are in our own society...without

knowing it" (13). Even subtleties as minute as the use of articles, the placement and choice of the "a's, an's, and the's," can distinguish someone as an outsider for a particular language group or culture (Smout). Technology is altering the ways in which Americans share ideas, but communication is crucial, and one's cultural perspective may alter one's fluency.

This chapter of the thesis explores the various elements entailed in the sharing of ideas as described in communication theory, particularly with respect to the elements relevant to slam poetry. This chapter is subdivided into several sections in order to specifically address each of these areas, beginning with the nature of communication itself. A discussion of the importance of body language and its connection to performance poetry follows this. Thirdly, this chapter highlights the influence of the medium used to convey the poetry, whether it be written, recited, or fully performed. Finally, this chapter considers the role that the audience plays in both the creation and the presentation of slam poetry.

## II. Communication

The very concept of communication is complex and nuanced. "The word *communication* is abstract," writes Littlejohn, and, "like all words, possesses multiple meanings" (4). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, communication is "the imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)." This would also include the "Interchange of speech, conversation, conference" and the concepts that are communicated (Communication 1).



Frank Dance notes fifteen components consistently found in the various definitions of communication. Fundamental to communication are the *symbols* used to convey *ideas*, the words and vocabulary employed. The purpose of the transfer of ideas is to convey an *understanding* of the message. Communication could not occur without some form of *interaction* between disparate individuals, and there is a distinct *process of transmission*. Ideas must be *exchanged*, clarified to *reduce uncertainty*, and then these concepts must be *interpreted* by the recipient. Discourse connects distinct elements of the world, and it can be used to *identify commonalities* or connections. For instance, *memories* may be shared or reiterated. According to Dance, communication can be used to prompt a discriminating *response* or modify the behavior of individuals, serving as a *stimulus* to action of some sort. Dance identifies communication as being *deliberate*, a willfully performed action. Fundamental to the nature of discourse is the *medium* used to convey the idea, which is to say the channel, the carrier, or the route of transfer. Of related importance is the *time* and *situation* during which the message is delivered. Finally, the audience plays a crucial role in the reception and response to the message transmitted (204, 208).

Ultimately, Dance argues that individuals are able to exert their *power* through communication (204). Slam poets therefore use their ability to communicate to not only compete and present their work, but also to change the hearts and minds of their listeners. A member of the 2008 Baltimore Slam Team, Ryan Mergen, described slam as a form of “edutainment.” He said that, while poets begin with a goal of winning competitions, they end up realizing that “you will beat everyone and that everyone will beat you.” As the poet matures, he finds that there is a “game within the game,” and the name of that game

is social change. The poet realizes that he has the ability to change people's minds.

Ryan feels that it's the poet's duty to "contribute to the world, to make positive changes" (Mergen). And poets do this by reaching out to the audience and providing them with topics to ponder and issues to mull.

In the process of communication, Dance also identified three critical points for conceptual differentiation. The first is the *level of observation*, which varies depending on the degree of abstraction required. This is typically associated with the terms or symbols used to convey an idea or message, namely how closely the signs are related to the actual concept. Secondly, there is the dimension of *intentionality*, or deliberate effort involved in the transmission of the message. This addresses whether or not the communicator shares the message that he desired to transmit. The third dimension is *judgment*, which is to say the evaluation or interpretation of the message (210). This addresses whether or not the audience properly interprets the message. This final component is highly malleable, and may be shifted by the context, the medium, the target audience, and numerous other factors. Slam poets learn to adjust their works, their words and performances, to accommodate these three levels, utilizing the language, the message, and the audience's interpretation to gain the desired effect.

Language is a crucial component of communication. The symbols used to convey ideas are fundamental to language. Words serve as signs, and "the sign is taken to represent something other than itself, and that representation is the meaning of the sign" (Littlejohn 52). Consequently, words are generally given the greatest recognition and the highest respect of the various elements of discourse specifically because they become the

vehicles of ideas. The very purpose of language is to convey ideas, and words are the tools by which we do so.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structural linguistics, divided language into two components. The first, which he termed *langue*, is formal language. *Langue* is a system with distinct formal components, such as words, grammar, and syntax. *Parole*, the second element, is the use of language in order to communicate. Also known as speech, *parole* is the use of language to accomplish goals. While *parole* utilizes the formal properties of *langue*, it is freer and more subject to change. Saussure termed this property of speech *diachrony* (9), and the fluidity of the spoken word has profound implications for interpretation, implications that are artfully employed by spoken word poets in conjunction with body language and tone in order to incite the desired response from the audiences.

Language is relatively stable, but speech is characterized by a fluidity that allows it to be remolded depending on the given situation. Meanings will vary as different recipients of a message make different associations between the words, the signs or sign systems, and the referents of those signs (Littlejohn 52). Technology is further changing the nature of the exchange of ideas, allowing people to email, send text messages, communicate via online networks, and employ various other means in order to reach each other. Within this fluidity rests the power and ambiguity of language. A single word may conjure an entirely different response in two different individuals depending on their experiences, histories, cultures, and even their moods. However, it is the ability of live performers, such as slam poets, to use their presence and the cues in their tone and physical actions to narrow the interpretation of their language to effect the desired result.

While words are attributed with great value, the precise language used to convey one's meaning is only the least portion of how people convey ideas. Authors and poets play with the significance of words, manipulating meanings in order to create their desired effects, but the words themselves only constitute about seven percent of communication. A far greater proportion of the meaning, 38 percent, comes from *how* the words are said rather than from *what* is actually said (Mehrabian 248-52), which is to say the "matter of pitch, stress, timbre and the like" (Hoggart 14), changing the significance of the signs entirely. According to Hoggart, "It's easy to see that tone is more important than the dictionary-meanings of the words we use" (14), especially in terms of the features in both written and oral communication that permit the writer or speaker to connect with the reader or listener. "Tone," continues Hoggart, "is part of substance; it can make the same words carry wholly opposed meanings" (14). Even more dramatically, non-verbal communication constitutes over half of communication at 55 percent (Mehrabian 248-52.). This means that body language and delivery far outweigh both the way one makes a statement and the precise words that one uses to do so. The power of tone and body language can wholly change one's interpretation of a work. The result of this is that a tremendous amount of the information that could be imparted when presented in first person may be lost when presented through a written source alone. For instance, sarcasm may easily be missed when presented in the written form, an issue that may actually promote miscommunications.

The symbols of speech, the words, are endowed with a great deal of ambiguity, open to multiple potential interpretations. Many words have complex definitions with several parts and distinct connotations, opening them to the possibility of multiple

readings depending on the context. It is also easy for a reader to misconstrue the meaning or interpret the words as he or she sees fit rather than as the writer intended. However, when an individual delivers a statement in person, the ambiguity of interpretation is greatly reduced; the tone and physical gestures and expressions one uses when making a statement, especially when delivering crucial information. This frame for the words has an even more profound influence when an individual is struggling with vocabulary and the local expressions. However, even in everyday conversations, there is a multiplicity of possible interpretations for every statement. It is the presentation of the words, the tonality and the non-verbal cues, that help ensure the appropriate interpretation is made.

Communication is a crucial element of all human interactions, fundamental to the transmission of ideas. Words are greatly valued as the primary vehicles of this transmission. However, despite the value placed on the symbols of the language itself, non-verbal communication is extremely important in actual human interactions. Non-verbal communication can guide and shape the recipient's interpretation in a compelling fashion. Slam poets combine spoken and kinetic communication, employing words, tone, and body language in order to incite the desired response from the audience.

### III. Body Language

Poets and writers master the crafting and shaping of words. They hone the ability to convey their meanings precisely, leaving ambiguity only when they desire to do so and guiding the reader's interpretation competently. However, the lack of accompaniment for the words constrains the poets' ability to reduce ambiguity. What is more, as Hoggart

observes, "sometimes one can communicate effectively through the spaces between words. I don't only mean deliberate silences for effect. I mean pauses, unfinished bits, not used deliberately" (14-15). That which is not stated can be as powerful, or even more powerful, than that which is explicitly stated. While a poet or writer may suggest such pauses through punctuation and white space, as did Ezra Pound and e. e. cummings, this does not compare to the effect aroused by the actual pauses in the delivery of a presented piece. The physical accompaniment of language can change profoundly influence the interpretation.

Communication makes use of all sensory channels, argues Ray Birdwhistell, an anthropologist interested in language. The father of kinesics, he was one of the first, if not *the* first, scholars of body language. Birdwhistell focused his research on the visual channel, but he advised that multiple channels are typically open and active. What is more Birdwhistell attempted to relate his findings regarding the transmission of ideas through visual means to other channels of communication (Littlejohn 62-63). His research is of particular relevance to the study of slam performances because the poets rely heavily on body cues, both visual and audible.

Birdwhistell built his study of body language around the following seven assumptions:

1. Body movements and expressions have meaning in the context in which they appear.
2. Body posture, movement, and facial expressions may be analyzed symbolically because they are patterned behaviors.

3. The systematic physical motion of the members of an organized group are interpreted as a function of the social system that that community comprises.
4. Visible bodily motions and auditory sounds influence the activities of other members of a particular group in a systematic fashion.
5. Such behavior is considered subject to investigation as a communicational function, unless evidence later be found to the contrary.
6. The significance of actions depends on both the action itself and the manner in which it is being studied.
7. Individuals possess idiosyncratic elements in their kinesic systems that stem from their own biological nature and their life experiences. However, even these unusual elements are able to be interpreted in the context of that individual's larger system. (183-184)

These seven assumptions are especially relevant when interpreting the work of slam poets. The precise movements of the poets' bodies, their posture, their expression, and their tones can alter the interpretation of an entire piece. Their body language is chosen deliberately based on the context and the culture in which they are communicating, and it can profoundly influence the response of the audience to the work. Finally, poets tend to develop unique styles or idiosyncratic presentations that make their words memorable to their audiences, distinguishing that poet from the other performers. Such distinctive performances tend to be far stronger when the unique elements of the performance are true to the nature of the poet himself, suiting both the poet's own personality as well as his or her race, gender, and other recognizable features. This

enhances the believability of the performance, which, in turn, enhances the audience's response to the piece.

Slam poets are keenly aware of the powerful influence and the importance of their every action. While working their poems, these performers not only practice the words, but they will rehearse and refine their actions until not only the verbal language but also the physical actions are precisely memorized. Slam poets will modify their actions between performances based on audience responses and the perceived need to either emphasize or de-emphasize specific parts. What is more, slam poets will even help each other perfect their posturing. This summer, for instance, one of the workshops at the 2008 National Poetry Slam was dedicated entirely to the features of performance. At the "Stage Coach" workshop, four slam poets – Alvin from Chicago, Charles from the Bay Area, Sharon from Memphis, and Mona from San Francisco – critiqued the presentation of the first thirty seconds of the work of numerous poets. The experienced performers stressed the importance of body language, of commanding the stage and having a confident demeanor, though this may be tempered to suit the performance. They encouraged the use of the full vocal range and facial expression. The expert performers even critiqued such fine details as the orientation of the body movements with respect to the audience, suggesting that the poets gesture to the side rather than the front to create a bigger profile. Finally, more with respect to content than presentation, the coaches warned that a poem should explain itself rather than relying on the title to do so. This is especially true of slam, in which the title is rarely given.

Birdwhistell would argue that the body language of the performers alone would be enough to convey a message. Words comprise the poem itself, but the accompanying



body movements form the frame and are crucial to the performance piece as a whole.

Through his research regarding communication, Birdwhistell reached the conclusion that

kinesic structure is parallel to language structure. By the study of gestures in context, it became clear that the kinesic system has forms which are astonishingly like words in language...It has become clear that there are body behaviors which function like significant sounds, that combine into simple or relatively complex units like words, which are combined into much longer stretches of structured behavior like sentences or even paragraphs. (80)

Kinesic communication not only can serve as a means of communication in and of itself, it follows a format very similar to that of linguistic communication. Birdwhistell breaks kinesic communication into its components. Kines are series of behaviors interpreted as single actions, and these are analogous to words. These may vary across social or cultural groups. A kineme is a group of kines that display distinct communicative functions, much like sentences. Littlejohn presents the movements of the eyelid as an example. Though twenty-three distinct positions of the eyelid, or kines, have been determined, these can be grouped into four kinemes depending on the desired interpretation. Kinemes, however, must occur in context, and may be combined to form kinemorphs, which are much like the paragraphs of corporeal communication (Littlejohn 63), a complex set of ideas grouped together.

Skilled performers become highly proficient at utilizing kines, kinemes, and kinemorphs, though they may not use these terms. Through practice and observation, they learn exactly how to employ gestures and bodily cues in order not only to guide interpretation, but also to engage the audience and, sometimes, even to provoke the

audience into a desired response. Performance poets “speak” in multiple media. They use words, symbols, to convey their ideas and share their message. However, they supplement the spoken language with the complex framework of body language. These artists employ various modes of communication, relying not only on the power of their verbal words, but also on the physical language to convey their meaning.

#### IV. The Medium

Because words and movements have such wide ranges of meanings, the medium through which a message is delivered can profoundly and deeply alter the meaning of a phrase. Poetry can be presented in several different forms. First, there is print delivery, which is to say the reading of words written on a page. Secondly, there is live performance, which would be listening to a recited or read presentation of a poem in person. Additionally, there may be recorded performance, which exist in audio, visual, or audiovisual form. What is more, a poem may be broadcast to wide audiences, as through televised performance, radio presentation, or through the internet. Finally, a poem can be delivered as a combination of these. For instance, the visible words may be accompanied by a recitation of the poem, as in the case of a video poem. Alternatively, the words may be presented in conjunction with a visual performance that enhances or alters the meaning. Slam poetry relies upon the live performance for its principal delivery. However, this is also often combined with written form; the poets frequently write their poetry down and sell it in the form of chapbooks.

In the contemporary United States, print media is fading as a dominant form of communication. In his 2003 article “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print

Culture,” Dana Gioia offers strong evidence of this. According to the article, “the average American now spends about twenty-four minutes a day reading...with over four hours daily of television and over three hours of radio. Less than half of U.S. households now read daily newspapers” (21). Both the number of people interested in reading and the number of people capable of reading has declined in the past several decades. However, research into the decline of literacy is complicated by the fact that “experts no longer agree on what constitutes literacy” (22); minimal reading abilities may be sufficient to pass through school, but that does not seem to be true literacy. Regardless of literacy rates, the actuality of the situation is that fewer people are reading print sources and the nature of the reading that they do is generally not of significant literary value.

Quite importantly, Gioia notes that “books, magazines, and newspapers are not disappearing, but their position in the culture has changed significantly over the past few decades, even among the educated” (22-23). He cites Jack Foley, a poet-critic, as saying that “at the current moment *writing* is beginning to seem ‘old-fashioned’” (23). For instance, books on tape or disc have been available for decades, and the online retailer Amazon.com recently released the Kindle, a device that allows readers to download and access texts virtually. This changing nature of media can even be observed in the contemporary academic context. Additionally, web-based texts are becoming more prominent. At Washington and Lee University, for instance, Professor Marc Conner has created a web-text regarding the history, culture, literature, and politics of Ireland. This complex multimedia document comprises online text, photographs, and audio-recordings from the Emerald Isle. Some academic institutions are even attempting to become entirely paper free. The University of Central Florida serves as an example of this; its

new medical school is scheduled to open in 2009 and will rely almost entirely on electronic books. Every text available in digital form will be offered to the students in that form alone. Technology has changed the American approach to the written word.

Not only is print culture on the decline, other forms of media are on the rise. A survey conducted in 1999 found that, as of that year,

the average American child lived in a household which owned two television sets, three tape recorders, three radios, two videocassette recorders, two compact disk players, one video game player, and a computer...the child spent 5 hours and 48 minutes each day with electronic media versus 44 minutes with print. It should be noted that the time the child spent with print includes that compulsory activity called homework. (22)

It should also be noted that the majority of these technologies are audio and visual in nature. The effects of this change in medium are profound and wide-reaching, influencing nearly every facet of social and cultural existence from the attention of the populace to marketing to the type of reaction effected. Neil Postman noted that "the shift from print to television 'has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse'" (quoted in Gioia 23) because the message is so profoundly influenced by the medium through which it is presented.

Paralleling the rise of alternative media is a revived interest in the oral character of spoken language. In particular, scholars are becoming increasingly interested in the distinctions between oral culture and print culture (Ong 5). Saussure was particularly curious about the nature of oral speech, viewing it as fundamental to all spoken communication as well as the foundation for written language. "Writing," declared

Saussure, possesses “usefulness, shortcomings and dangers” (23-24). However, despite the nuanced nature and the mixed benefits and drawbacks, Saussure viewed written communication as a complement to spoken language rather than as a new or transformed form of communication (Ong 5). For slam poets, the written word truly is such a companion. Most performance poets write their poems before committing them to memory and preparing their presentation. What is more, many slam poets also reproduce their written works in the form of small chapbooks, which may be sold at their performances or distributed in an effort to increase the poets’ audiences to leave a legacy.

Spoken language is, by nature, “overwhelmingly oral” (7), consisting of the sounds that are made and heard. “Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality” (8), passed on through first-hand learning and exposure to the spoken language. Writing, however, has been so dominant a the primary mode of the transmission of ideas in Western culture that it now even shapes thinking about oral expression. The very term “literature” is derived from the Latin word for letters, and it immediately calls to mind the connotation of heavy tomes and library shelves full of books (11). Despite this writing-bias, “oral art forms were to all intents and purposes simply texts, except for the fact that they were not written down” (10). Verbally presented pieces are still art, and, through their presentation, they may even be more powerful than written pieces. However, the performance pieces are also ephemeral in nature. Once the performance has been completed, it is over, barring any recording devices. This is in direct opposition to the enduring, written work of the literary canon.

With the rise of print culture came a sense of permanence: written poems may be easily preserved and passed between the generations. Orally presented pieces only leave

a residue in the minds of those who hear the work. These poems may be carried through generations, as with the epics of Homer, but this requires those with the mental capacity to recall the text and the desire to preserve and pass them on. "When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it" (11), but the piece itself is not actually in existence as far as the rest of the population is concerned. Oral artwork is ephemeral, transmuting through every presentation and, until recently, impossible to capture between presentations. In the modern era, tape recorders, video cameras, and even YouTube videos enable slam performances to be viewed at leisure. However, even though the performance may be reviewed, the viewer loses the vivacious element added by the fervor and enthusiastic participation of the audience.

Whether it is perceived as a companion to spoken language or a transformer, the written word has changed the nature of poetry. With the ascendancy of print culture came the rise of poetry as a visual rather than an auditory phenomenon. "Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever" (Ong 12), shaping the readers' interpretation more by what is seen than by what would be heard. Poets employing a visual emphasis in their artwork sometimes lost sight of the devices linked to the sound of the words, the meter, rhythm, and beat that guided earlier poetry. Modernist poets, in particular, are known for their obscure and challenging works that seem to bear little meaning for the experience of the average reader. Extrapolating from this, it seems that the medium of print form may have contributed to the decline of poetry, causing poetry to become linked to the academy and removed from the hands of

the populace. Slam poetry seeks to alter this, restoring poetry to the people, and it capitalizes on the immediacy of the performance in order to do so.

Not only is poetry well-suited to adaptation to the new media available, it seems that this shift may actually benefit the poetic form. Gioia argues that the most important trends in poetry will be found in the mass media, namely the “wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry – namely rap, cow-boy poetry, poetry slams, and certain overtly accessible types of what was once a defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry” (25). This movement has grown and “thrived without the support of the university or the literary establishment” (25), instead relying upon the interests of the populace. “Verse has changed into a growth industry,” and “whatever one thinks of the artistic quality of these new poetic forms, one must concede that at the very least, they reassuringly demonstrate the abiding human need for poetry” (Gioia 25). Modern poets are re-learning the art of oral performance, often rediscovering the power of spoken poetry following education in written forms through the typical academic approach to poetry. They are able to use this medium to great effect, reaching wider audiences than they would through published works alone. The connection that the spoken word has to the fundamental biology of humans may further enhance the ability of performance poets to connect to their audiences, reaching and powerfully moving the masses.

Intriguingly, there may be a biological basis beneath these differing thought patterns. Julian Jaynes describes specific neurophysiological changes in the bicameral mind that seems to be associated with the shift from oral description to literary description (Jaynes 29). Ong emphasizes the differences between oral and literate thought by observing that “the effects of oral states of consciousness are bizarre to the

literate mind, and they can invite elaborate explanations which may turn out to be unnecessary. Bicamerality may mean simply orality” (30). In any case, the thought process behind the creation of oral pieces and written pieces is distinct. “Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche” (Ong 14). Those who create poetry with an oral focus are highly attentive to the rhythmic devices that are most fundamentally associated with poetry. They are keenly aware of the meter, the rhythm, the repetition and the sounds of the syllables. Using this awareness, modern performance poets are beginning to recreate some of the beauty and power of the preliterate performers. However, even then, the thought process and approach towards language on the part of these literate poets differs from that of preliterate poets.

Modern technology is changing the way humans connect, communicate, and create art while the poets are returning to the origins of poetry. “It is the unusual mixture of radical innovation and unorthodox traditionalism in the structure of the work itself and the modes of its performance, transmission, and reception” (Gioia 26) that is defining the innovations in contemporary poetry, developments that have led to the rise of slam poetry. Gioia notes three principal manners in which such contemporary poetry “departs from the assumptions of mainstream literary culture” (27). First of all, performance poetry is predominantly oral. Not only is much of the performance poetry never written down, it seems “both strikingly primitive and alarmingly contemporary” (28). Instead, any number of combinations of modern technology may transmit this verse, such as audio and video recordings to online documentation. Not only can electronic media be used to



share poetry, but this medium is reshaping the poetry itself. "As readers turn into viewers and listeners, they naturally approach the new poetry in ways conditioned by television and radio" (29) and other media, expecting performers rather than authors. Secondly, "these new popular forms emerged entirely outside established literary life and were initially developed by individuals marginalized by intellectual and academic society" (29). This expands the audience of poetry by reaching out to groups that might otherwise be uninterested, such as urban youth or middle Americans. Finally, contemporary performance poetry is notable in that "it is overwhelmingly, indeed characteristically, formal" (31). It has defined characteristics to which the performers adhere, characteristics determined by the oral nature of the art as well as by the desires of the audiences. As Mergen observed the crowd "looks for different things in the spoken word than on the page" (Mergen). The medium determines such features of the poetry as form and content, and the crowd grows to expect these characteristics.

An examination of the nature of the acclaimed oral, pre-literate works of the past gives further insight into the distinction between spoken and written works. Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* illustrate the power of oral composition. Widely regarded as "the truest and the most inspired secular poems in the western heritage" (Ong 18), these poems have guided the works of many subsequent artists. According to Milman Parry, "virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition" (Ong 21). These elements include the epithets, which stemmed from the necessity of maintaining the meter rather than from identifying the characters, the standardized themes, and the language used. In an oral culture, poets had to repeat and practice their works in order to preserve them, leading to the value of

clichés and stock phrases (Ong 23-24). Slam poetry, similarly, seems to have evolved a degree of formality in terms of poem length, popular subject matter, and even frequent references to popular culture.

Within the stylization and regularization of performed poems, originality was valued. “The perfect poet should ideally be like God Himself, creating *ex nihilo*: the better he or she was, the less predictable was anything and everything in the poem,” writes Ong of the ancient oral tradition. “Only beginners or permanently poor poets used prefabricated stuff,” but there is also a degree of standardization in the works of slam poets (22). However, despite the shared or typical elements in many performance pieces, originality is greatly valued. Innovation is encouraged, and the audience rewards creative thinking, speaking, and presenting. The poet is a powerful being in the world of slam, but the work is shaped by the medium that he or she uses to present it. Just as powerfully, the slam poet is influenced by the audience to whom he or she presents.

Modern technology has changed the nature of literacy in the contemporary United States. The importance of the written word is on the decline, and, even more notably, so is the value placed on literature. However, this very same technology is changing the nature of the literary canon. It is providing new ways to reach diverse audiences, allowing poets to connect to groups they may not have been able to influence otherwise. Even more notably, the new technology is allowing performance poets to revitalize the power of the spoken word, reviving an ancestral technique that may not only change the nature and format of contemporary poetry, but may also enhance its power and the ability of the poets to touch and influence their audiences.

## V. The Audience

In addition to the newly available media employed by performance poets, one of the most distinguishing features of slam poetry is, ultimately, the immediacy and the intimacy of the relationship between the poet and the audience. Written poetry is conceived, printed, published, and distributed. The author is free to edit and modify his or her work, but that will not change previously published editions. What is more, though the use of computers facilitates the editing process, whatever response, criticism, or interpretations that the readers may have will not affect the author in any direct or immediate fashion.

The traditional conception of the audience is of passive receptacles for performance or information. The etymology of the term "audience" specifically refers to the process of hearing, focusing on a single, passive mode of perception. Similarly, the term "viewer" describes the ability to see to the exclusion of all other channels of perception. Both of these terms imply passivity, and there is no term for an active form of receiving information via television or other broadcast media (Hart 30). These definitions seem suited for traditional audiences and viewers, and readers, who take in a literary work through their eyes and, if they read it aloud, through their ears. However, while these readers are mentally engaged, Hart identifies a "confusion here between imaginative and physiological activity" (30). To draw the contrast, "reading" is an active endeavor (30) that engages the body in a minimal physical activity and the mind in an imaginative effort. In this thesis, the term "audience" will be expanded to encompass any manner of receiving information from auditory and/or visual channels.

At a slam event, the audience is far from passive; they are not only permitted but are actually actively encouraged to engage with the poet. Five judges are selected from the crowd to rate the poem, the poet, and the performance. However, the entire audience is incited to cheer, boo, and participate in the event. With such immediate and powerful influence, the audience becomes key in not only the judgment and performance of slam pieces, but also, ultimately, in the creation of the poems. Slam audiences actually become, in essence, co-creators of the poetry-viewing experience. This role is analogous to the active participation of the audience in such storytelling groups as Native American culture (Miranda). The audience generates the atmosphere, engages with the performing poet, and contributes to the ephemeral art that is a slam performance.

In a poetry slam, the audience not only hears the words of the poet, they also actively interact with the performers. They watch, they participate, they cheer, and they judge. Hart notes the importance of the medium's influence on the audience:

Variations occur in the way a particular medium addresses its audiences, the way audiences react to the medium, and the way audience members interact with each other. There are clearly big differences between live and recorded events, since live audiences can affect performances in real time. Actors in the theater or musicians at concerts can modify their performance according to audience reactions. But this is impossible in film, radio or television, since there can be no direct response from audiences to recorded material. (Hart 36)

A significant portion of the influence of the medium on the audience stems from the amount of attention, or mental engagement, that the medium requires from the audience. Attention can be differentiated into primary and secondary attention. Primary attention

consists of active listening and may be accompanied by either taking notes or the exclusion of all other distractions. Secondary attention is more passive. It involves listening to something while performing another task or having noises in the background (37-38). Devoting one's attention to the material presented in class would be an example of primary attention, when the students are actually paying attention, while listening to the radio while performing chores would be an example of secondary attention. The poetry and the performance at a slam event generally demand primary attention. The performances are usually the focal point at the venue, and are typically further highlighted by an energetic emcee and the fervor of the rest of the audience.

Despite the best efforts of the performer, "interaction between audiences and texts is not straightforward. It is an unpredictable and sometimes surprising process" (61). According to Hall, these interactions can be classified as one of three types: dominance, negotiation, or opposition. In the dominance reaction, there is a typical response expected from the audience. In the negotiation style, the audience of a text may interpret the message differently than is intended. In the opposition reaction, the audience actually subverts the meaning intended by the author (67). The ability of slam poets to interact with their audience, however, enables them to push the audience towards the dominant or intended meaning. The poet can alter his or her presentation, in terms of words and gestures, in response to the perceived interpretation and the responses from the audience. Authors of published texts have no such flexibility.

Through their connection to others via various media, "audiences seek to satisfy particular needs...just as we seek to satisfy our human needs for information or companionship through face-to-face communication" (43). For instance, television may

serve as a substitute for real-life companionship or as an organized communal experience; elements of popular culture are often used to facilitate bonding between individuals from across the country. However, slam performances allow for real human connections to be formed. Audience members have the opportunity to meet and talk with not only each other, but also the staff at any given venue and, even, the poets themselves. This ability to connect, if only briefly, with other people may further enhance the popularity of slam poetry. Not only does it echo the ancient process of oral presentation, it also enables individuals to satisfy their social drives.

The interplay between the audience and the material presented to it is interesting and complex: "In a general sense, texts make the audiences but in a more precise sense, audiences make the text" (44). This is to say that certain types of material attract specific segments of the population. At the same time, however, the material will change in order to suit the audience, to further attract that audience, or to change audiences' perspectives. The mutual exchange can be especially felt in slam poetry, in which the audience has such a profound influence upon the reception and creation of the poetry. The poet can modify his or her poem to suit the audience, or he or she can switch venues in order to suit his or her style. However, Mergen noted that, "it is difficult to be completely innovative in slam," because the audience comes to expect certain patterns or behaviors from the poet. For instance, Mergen observed that first person narrative and storytelling are the most common tropes, which relate directly to the origins of all performance of the spoken word: ancient story-telling (Mergen).

Poets make predictions about the audience. The poet may even select his or her topic in an effort to appeal to a specific audience. To give a particular example, the

Charlotte Slam Team won the 2008 National Poetry Slam, but several of the other teams observed that they did so by performing topics that were likely to appeal to the audience and topics that the judges were unlikely to give low scores due to social pressure, such as writing about rape or homelessness. "It would be impossible for communication to take place at all if it were not possible to predict who media audiences are, what kind of expectations they may have and in what circumstances they are responding," writes Hart (44). In slam poetry, the poets often select the pieces that they will present based on the anticipated audience response, especially in highly competitive circumstances. For instance, going into the semi-finals at the 2008 National Poetry Slam, the Baltimore Slam team had chosen and prepared a particular line-up of poems. However, when as the audience began to file into the venue, the poets observed that the crowd was almost exclusively female and appeared to be well-educated. With this in mind, two of the poets decided to change their pieces. One performed "Nerd Girl," a poem in praise of intelligent women, while the other performed "Virgin Man," a poem that started with a superhero whose mission was to protect hearts and that led into a discussion of the issues involved with teen-pregnancy.

The poets from the Baltimore Team observed a few features of the audience, tailored their performance to suit this, and their ability to do so helped them reach the semi-final round of competition. Part of the power of slam poetry lies in its malleability. There are many variables to consider when judging the composition of the audience, ranging from class and race to gender, age, and location. Each of these will impact the audience's response to a given piece and the performance. An artist can perform a single piece and wholly change the emphasis in order to appeal to the interests and

desires of a given crowd. Or, the performer can change poems altogether if he or she feels that doing so is necessary in order to reach the audience in a moving or meaningful way.

Ultimately, any given performance piece is a composite document dependent upon both its own contents and the audience. "Texts need audiences in order to realise their potential for meaning," writes Hart. "So a text does not have a single meaning but rather a range of possibilities which are defined by both the text and by its audiences" (60). Just as the poet can alter a piece or a performance to suit the audience, the audience's interpretation of the piece enhances the work. "The meaning is not in the text but in the reading," which is to say, in the interpretation. The audience makes the piece its own, and "it is only through the interaction of audiences with texts that any meaning is produced at all. Personal experiences and individual identities are diverse and texts therefore have potential for multiple meanings" (60). Slam poetry, through the intimacy of the poet and the performer, has a heightened connection to the crowds that attend the performances. The audience shapes the piece, but the experiences, preconceptions, and even the mood of the audience also shape their interpretation of the piece.

## VI. Conclusion

Slam poetry is a young and powerful phenomenon in the literary world. However, though this specific form of competitive poetry is under three decades old, it harkens back to the roots of mankind and may gain much of its power from its ability to satisfy fundamental human needs. Communication is one of the most basic elements of human society. Though the symbols used to transmit ideas, the spoken and written word,



have changed, though languages have been born and evolved, poetry has remained an eloquent form through which this objective may be accomplished. However, words that are written and stand alone can maintain a high degree of ambiguity and impersonality that is absent from language presented in person. This is because human discourse relies heavily upon non-verbal cues. Body language is an integral element of communication between people, and slam poets are able to capitalize upon this through their performances. Not only can these poets use their physical cues to guide the audience to the desired interpretation of their words, the poets can employ these signs to take advantage of the nuances and ambiguity of the signs used to transmit ideas. The manner in which the poets convey their poems also influences the interpretation.

The medium through which a message is conveyed to the audience has profound implications in terms of both the population that the message will reach as well as in terms of how the message will affect them. Slam poetry is performance. As such, it is ephemeral and fleeting, but it commands the primary attention of the viewers when it is presented. This makes it powerful and influential during the performance, and the combination of the performance with the emotional and social connections may leave a powerful, lingering influence. However, slam poets also capitalize on the availability of new technology to make their works more enduring and to spread their artwork. While the value placed upon written communication is declining in the modern United States, performance poets utilize television and the internet in order to capture and spread their work. This technology helps them reach a wider audience, which affects not only the popularity of the artwork, but also the artwork itself. Live audiences interact with the poets, engaging in the creative process, becoming integral elements of the atmosphere of

the performance, and, even, of the performance itself. However, slam's employment of broadcast media also allows it to reach audiences other than the crowds that attend actual slam events. This enables slam to spread the awareness and enjoyment of poetry, increasing cultural literacy even if it does not increase literacy with respect to the written word.

Slam is a powerful force in American culture and may change American literature. Though a young movement, it reaches its viewers on multiple levels. First, it echoes the ancient traditions of performance poetry. For centuries, human beings would gather around the fire to listen to the poetic words and stories of bards. As described earlier, there may even be a biological basis for the powerful influence of the spoken word on the brain, especially in pre-literate cultures. However, even in a literate society, the draw of the storyteller-poet remains powerful, and, potentially, necessary. Even as it calls upon ancient traditions, slam poetry capitalizes upon the new medium available. It takes full advantage of the advances of the internet era, and slam poets spread their works through video recordings, MySpace accounts, YouTube videos, and various other means. This enables them to reach wider audiences than poets of the written word alone. It also enables slam poet to capture the essence, if not the entire experience, of the otherwise fleeting performance. Ultimately, slam combines both old techniques with new technology to become a force that will likely influence American culture and poetry in powerful and enduring ways.

## Chapter II: From the Mouths of Poets

Having previously reviewed the theoretical concepts underlying the phenomenon of slam poetry, I will focus on the composition of slam poems based on interviews with several actual slam poets in this chapter. Though from different backgrounds, lines of work, and with different experiences, Granma Dave Schein, Jonathan Tucker, Tokia Carter, and Chris Wilson all expressed a similar comprehension of and similar experiences regarding the nature, writing, and performance of slam poems. Their insights, in conjunction with information gleaned from academic research and personal field experiences, comprise the bulk of this chapter. In this chapter, I also analyze two actual slam poems, “Totally like whatever” by Taylor Mali and “Building Nicole’s Mama” by Patricia Smith, comparing the oral presentations with the versions in print. I focus on the role that the audience plays in creating the poem and how this interaction influences the difficulty, the emotional content, the subject matter, and the meter of each piece.

In order to glean a deeper understanding of these many facets of slam poetry, I interviewed four slam poets from the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas, asking about the nature, composition, and influences on their poetry. Granma Dave was born in New Orleans, though he grew up in Houston and Baltimore. He started writing poetry as a child, and actually self-published a two-collections volume known as Otis and Other Issues. Upon discovering this book in 2000, a few of his co-workers introduced him to slam poetry. “I was hooked,” says Granma Dave. “I started attending the weekly slams in DC, began competing myself, and I drove to Providence that summer to support the team at the National Poetry Slam (Schein). Granma Dave pursued this

passion, and helped restart the Baltimore SLAMicide team; they held their first event on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, 2000.

Chris Wilson was a member of the SLAMicide team that competed at the National Poetry Slam in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2008. A Creative Writing major, Wilson had been writing poetry since middle school. However, he first encountered slam in college when the university invited Reggie Gibson, the then-individual poetry slam world champion, and Sara Holbrook to perform (Wilson). In 2003, Wilson met Gayle Danley, Patrick Washington, Twain Dooley, and Chris August of the Baltimore slam scene, and Wilson invited them to perform for his class in Harford County, Maryland (Slamicide). With the encouragement of his students, Wilson started to compete himself (Wilson).

Representing the Washington, D.C., Eleventh-Hour Slam, Jonathan Tucker is an alumnus from the University of Maryland, where he studied sociology and politics. He was inspired to explore slam poetry by the work of Saul Williams (Tucker). Though he has been writing poetry for years, he only started performing a year or two before being introduced to slam (Tucker). Also from the Washington, D.C., Eleventh-Hour Slam is Tokia "2 Deep" Carter, the eloquent and energetic emcee of the event. Born on the Ramstein Military base in Germany, she received her B.A. in Theater from Auburn and her M.F.A. from The Catholic University of America. 2 Deep has lived in several countries, but she was introduced to slam poetry through HBO's Def Poetry Jam and Black Entertainment Television's Lyric Café. "Those artists had different styles that were direct, to the point, individualistic, and all touched my soul," says 2 Deep. "Up until that point I was only writing 'roses are red, violets are blue,'" but she began writing her own slam pieces after this introduction (Carter). In 2007, 2 Deep made the

D.C./Baltimore Slam team, and, when the team became two separate teams, 2 Deep helped start the D.C. Slam at the Busboys and Poets restaurant.

Slam has been described as the democratization of poetry, and, in the egalitarian and open spirit of slam, I will now explore this art through the experiences and insights of these poets as well as through my own experiences.

### I. An Account of A Slam

The first slam that I ever attended was at Busboys and Poets in Washington, D.C. Describing this slam seems a fitting way in which to introduce the competitive sport of poetry. The Eleventh Hour Poetry Slam occurs in the Langston Hughes Room, also known as the Peace and Justice Room, of the Busboys and Poets restaurant. It is held on the second Friday of every month, beginning near midnight. This Friday just happened to be a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, an interesting date on which to embark on my studies of slam. The restaurant itself was packed, and the slam-goers had to wait until nearly 11 PM before the Langston Hughes room was cleared out enough for the slam to occur. The slam did not end until near 1:30 in the morning.

At the slam, the audience surrendered the spatial requirements usually found in a restaurant; rather than sitting in individual groups at tables, parties mixed and mingled, pulling up chairs and finding space wherever was possible. The room was packed, and, to my surprise, the majority of the audience had never attended a slam event before. The audience was, for the most part, in early adulthood and largely African American, which was unsurprising for an event in Washington, D.C. There was also a fairly large

delegation of relatively young-looking Caucasian students from the University of Maryland.

The emcee was none other than 2 Deep. She immediately struck me as a personable and energetic woman, and she possessed a great stage manner. 2 Deep selected five volunteers from the audience to judge the slam, and she presented each with a dry erase board. She instructed the judges on the scoring system, telling them to rate each poem on a scale of 0.0-10.0, and to express their feelings honestly. She presented this judgment as a favor to the poet; this way, the performer would know if he had a truly awful piece and would not make the mistake of performing it again. 2 Deep cautioned the judges not to let the audience sway them. However, after the judges returned to their seats, she addressed the audience. 2 Deep warmed the crowd up, making them scream with a few games, and then she told them she expected full participation in the slam. The job of the audience, she said, was to sway the judges. This created an interesting, and enjoyable dichotomy, as the judges were supposed to rise above the audience's attempts to influence them. In fact, hosts deliver variations upon this speech at every slam competition.

Since so many of the audience members were entirely new to Slam, 2 Deep gave the crowd a succinct definition. She said that, "Slam is competitive poetry. It is a way for the community to tell the poets what they like, creating a dialogue between the artist and the audience" (Carter). This competitive element, however, distinguishes slam from many traditional oral presentations, such as Native American story-telling. Each poet was given a maximum of 3 minutes and 20 seconds to present their piece before they would start receiving point deductions at half a point per each ten seconds over three

minutes. The competition, at this particular venue, consisted of two rounds; each poet would present twice, and they would be ranked based on their cumulative scores. During the intermission, the featured poet, Jon Sands, a finalist in the 2007 National Slam, would perform.

Ten poets presented their works at this event, though only eight really competed. Lamar Hill was a professional performer with a play coming up the next week, and he was asked to throw his performance because this event was intended for amateur slam poets, which he did in spectacular fashion by running eight minutes over the limit, complete with a plug for his play, CD, and fractions of about 3 different poems. Another poet was absent for the first round, so he performed in the second, but could not compete overall.

The winners, from first to third, were Jon Tucker, Stephen, and Maji. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to talk directly with Jonathan B. Tucker prior to the performance, and he graciously granted an interview for this paper. Tucker was a friendly guy. He said that he first became interested in poetry as a 13 year old writing love poems to girls. He said he stopped writing for a while, but had picked it up again. The appeal of slam to him was that it was a way for the poet to communicate with the community. Rather than writing on his own secret poems of angst and love, he could present and become part of an open dialogue. His first poem played off of the love poem theme, asking a girl to "choose me." This became the refrain of the poem as Tucker progressed through a comical series of metaphors for why his beloved should choose him; "choose me like I'm a midget at a limbo competition, like I'm the only computer at

recess with the Oregon Trail game.” Tucker was particularly successful for the accessibility of his references and his topic, as well as the running joke with dysentery.

The most common artistic elements I noticed from these performers were the use of repetition and refrains. They truly created a beat. Rhyme was used, but only relied upon by Maji and one or two others. These poets tended to have a more rap-like rhythm and cadence. I was surprised by how non-rap-like most of the other performances were. Few of the poets relied upon paper to read, though most had their poems written out for reference. The more successful poets tended to have better stage mannerisms and microphone etiquette. They also tended to present accessible poems. Aside from racially charged poems, topical pieces, such as environmental poems, did not to have any excessive advantage. Many of the poets brought in bits in foreign languages, such as Swahili or Hebrew. Love and religion and human bonds were among the most powerful themes.

Jon Sands, the featured performer, was impressive. He performed 7 original slam poems, one haiku inspired by the city of Washington, D.C., and he read one poem from Michael Sereli, another Slam poet. Sands’ major themes included love, tolerance, and such social issues as war, poverty, and national pride. One of his pieces used the World Cup as a metaphor for how the government is separate from the nation, making the point that people should not reject the United States if they disagree with policy but act out of love of our country to improve it. He also cheered the audience for supporting live art rather than watching reruns and said that the power of slam is that it allows us all to participate in “one long conversation we’ve all been long overdue for.” Not only was Sands’ presentation impressive, so was his message.



## II. The Poet-Audience Dynamic

The competitive format of slam has changed the face of poetry in a number of ways. Most fundamentally, the competitive nature of the sport and the need to consider the audience to whom the poems will be presented influence the very composition of the poems. The poets are keenly aware of this. When comparing a poem composed for slam with a poem composed for written media, Granma Dave notes that, “on the one hand, they need not differ in any way. A poem to be slammed must have the same level of care and talent dedicated to its writing as to its performance. However, it must also be tailored to its audience and the rules of the game” (Schein). This is to say that the poems must be suited to the three-minute format, unless the rules for the event or venue vary. Even more importantly, though, the poet must consider how the audience will respond to the poem in the brief amount of time allotted per piece.

“Poetry is poetry,” says Chris Wilson. “Good slam poems are, at their root, just well-written poems. The only difference is that slam poetry is meant to be performed and heard aloud” (Wilson). However, this performance element of slam poems causes the audience to become a significant consideration for many slam poets during the writing and selection of their works. “I write about my truth and the earth from my [point of view] in efforts of reaching someone else who is connected to me but thought that they were alone until I touched that mic and let them know that we are on what appears to be an island,” says 2 Deep (Carter). She describes how the poet reaches towards the audience, trying to make a connection because, while “people have the tendency to look towards the water, but in reality we are merely on the same peninsula,” connected by the

common sentiments of human existence and shared realities of life in the contemporary United States. This poet-audience dynamic is crucial in slam poetry. While poets express their ideas and experiences truly and artistically, the audience determines the successfulness of a slam poem and, so, plays a role in the aesthetic decisions of slam poets. This is particularly apparent in the choice of topics, the emotional content of the poem, and the degree of nuance in the poem.

“Slam pieces must entertain the audience, in particular the judges, and therefore must have wide appeal. Non-slam pieces need not necessarily entertain or impress anyone” (Tucker). This observation by Jonathan Tucker emphasizes the crucial role that the audience plays, essentially becoming co-creators in the composition of slam poems.

“Things to consider about the audience at a slam include: their politics, their racial/ethnic backgrounds/histories, their time and location, their knowledge base, and their priorities,” advises Tucker, “These all influence how they will judge your piece” (Tucker). These factors often affect not only the types of poems that slam poets write, but also the way they write their poems as well as their performance choices for a any given event. “I started writing for catharsis,” says Baltimore Slam poet Granma Dave. “I wrote because I was in pain and needed to name my demons. I basically said, ‘screw the audience, I’m writing for me!’ That’s a great mentality to have if you want to be stand-offish and never heard from again” (Schein). However, while literary poets have the ability to write according to their own desires and to alienate the present audience, sometimes gaining acclaim through works published years or even decades after their death, the slam poet’s success hinges upon the response of the immediate audience. “If, however, you’re trying to actually compete and win – you need to respect your audience” (Schein), and a great

deal of this respect and awareness for the audience seeps into the very act of creating the piece.

### III. Ease of Interpretation

One of the key features that the slam poet must achieve is the composition of a piece that the audience can hear, digest, and respond to in a brief amount of time. When you are “working in a quick-feedback arena with in-person judges, you must make sure your intentions are communicated in that venue,” says Granma Dave, emphasizing the importance of the ability of the audience to appropriately process a given piece rapidly (Schein). Academic critics may laud a poet who creates complex, nuanced works that required multiple hearings to fully grasp and appreciate. Such works are well suited to the written form, in which a reader can pause in order to look up allusions, references, and esoteric concepts. However, as John Tucker notes, slam poems “have to be immediately understood on the first hearing, for the audience and judges get no second chance to hear it before determining the slammer’s score” (Tucker). This requires that the poet gives priority to the audience’s knowledge-base as well as to common cultural references. A complex and challenging poem would fail in the slam arena. “For example,” offers Granma Dave, “you could conceivably perform Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ at a slam,” provided the venue permits the use of the work of other artists, “but you’d probably get housed because it’s a dense poem. It cannot be digested in the immediate response, so the poem will not percolate by the time the judges are asked to respond” (Schein). Instead, slam poets must present a poem that can easily and rapidly be understood because “the audience and judges get no second chance to hear it before determining the slammer’s score” (Tucker). If the audience cannot make sense of and

relate to the poem in a single listen, the poem will consistently receive low marks and the poet will fail in competition.

An interesting effect of the degree of apparent complexity in a slam piece, however, is that the audience may have an unpredictable gut reaction, which makes the presentation of complex poems even trickier. The audience “may say, ‘I didn’t get it yet, so clearly it’s *deep*. TEN!’ or they may call shenanigans” (Schein) and give the poet a low score. Slam performers often choose the works that they will present by predicting the response of the crowd, and the inability to gauge the likely response can be extremely detrimental to a competitor’s performance. “Like any other competition,” observes 2 Deep, “you need to know your opponents, you need to have backup plans, and you need to be familiar with the rules and the judges,” otherwise you will not succeed with any regularity (Carter). For instance, Granma Dave cautions that, if you write a poem that is “too base,” too crude, you run the risk of turning the audience off and receiving a very low score. The result of the need to balance the audience’s desire for thought-provoking material with the limitations upon the rapidity with which they can interpret material “leads slam poets to write funny, witty pieces, as well as stories in a language that can be understood by the audience” (Tucker). This makes the poetry accessible to wide audiences and accounts for both a significant portion of the popularity of slam poetry as well as its ability to renew public interest in poetry as a form of communication.

Good poetry cuts to the heart of complex issues, and the need to streamline for ease of interpretation may actually strengthen slam poems. “Due to the nature of slam, slam poems have to be good the first time through,” says Chris Wilson. As a result of this, slam poems become powerful yet succinct and direct. “I think slam is better in a way

because you have the original tone there,” says Wilson (Wilson), a realness and immediacy to which the audience can readily relate. In addition to tone, slam poets will often call upon the emotional responses of their audience in order to reach and appeal to their listeners.

#### IV. Emotion

The performance element of the poetry is crucial to the nature and dynamics of slam poetry. It allows for an almost theatrical catharsis, or release of emotion, which is to say an opportunity for the poet to reach out to the audience and draw upon his or her own emotional experiences in order to more fully engage them in the poem. Many successful written poems are able to accomplish this in a powerful fashion. “The words should speak for themselves,” says 2 Deep, but she finds that an excessive focus on the language rather than the emotional underpinning “takes away from my truth” (Carter). The actual, physical presence of the poet allows the performer to influence the audience more directly, swaying the crowd with his or her own expressions and portrayed emotions. “I personally dislike having to read from a sheet of paper when presenting my poems,” says 2 Deep, “because I think that it takes away from my connecting to the audience. Your eyes end up focusing on the paper and not looking directly at the people who you want to reach” (Carter). The performance element of slam poetry is integral to the ability of the poets to relate to and influence their audience.

When relating to their audience, slam poets will often try to conjure the sentiments within the poem in order to fully engage the audience. “I try very hard to focus on achieving the intention of the poem,” says Granma Dave, “that is, if it’s a love poem, I

want the audience to feel love. If it's a bitter break-up poem, I want them to understand my pain and empathize. If it's a poem about poop, I want them to think fondly on the majesty of toilets" (Schein). In addition to the overriding theme or emotional value of the poem, slam poets can strengthen their works through the manner that they use in approaching these. For instance, Jon Tucker says that he focuses on "the climax, or a series of climaxes or deliverables that the audience is supposed to get. I focus on the 'ah-ha' moments that I can create, and try to structure it so that those moments are most powerful" (Tucker). And, by drawing upon the audience's experiences and emotions, the poet is able to more powerfully affect the audience, thereby often earning higher scores, or at least a place in the audience's memory.

For many slam poets, the emotional content of the poem becomes a principal consideration, dominating the formal elements of the piece. "Although I appreciate all of the intellectual aspects of writing, I work from a simpler format, from an emotional foundation," says 2 Deep. "I want everyone to be able to get something from my work rather than the intellectuals dissect my thought simply because I inserted a semi-colon" (Carter), and this desire for accessibility accounts for the colloquial tone and choice of topics found in many slam poems as well as from a rejection and critique of the formal, "academic" responses traditionally given to poetry.

## V. Topics

As Granma Dave observed, certain topics are timeless, occurring throughout the course of human life because they are crucial to human existence. Among these are love, friendship, rivalry, jealousy, and death. These perennial themes reach the audience on a

deep, emotional level, and, therefore, are commonly found among the pieces composed by slam poets. However, slam poets have a profound tendency to select their themes based on topics that they know will appeal to the audience and score highly. "Slam appeals to the lowest common denominator among the audience," notes Jonathan Tucker, "so really deep poetic stuff normally fails at a slam competition, with silly, stupid, and easy to understand pieces that are performed well coming out on top" (Tucker). The audience generally does not have enough time to analyze or comprehend complex material in the allotted three minutes. Additionally, while non-slam poets generally write for distant and educated audiences, slam poets are directly confronted by the direct responses of a physically present, amateur audience. Slam poets who fail to consider the nature and likely reactions of such an audience will not go very far. The poets' "assumptions or knowledge about the audience" will often affect their "work greatly, and more so than the actual audience, if that makes any sense. What I think they will like leads me to write things that I hope will score well" (Tucker). The actual audience will determine the poets' score, but the poets' conception of the audience will influence the poets' choices in terms of both creating and selecting their pieces.

Observations made at the National Poetry Slam 2008 in Madison, Wisconsin, over the course of two rounds on Thursday evening, at the semi-final competition, and at the finals, revealed that the poems generally revolved around topics that the audience was likely to relate to, and, therefore, score highly. Over the course of these three evenings, social issues dominated. Political poems constituted 14 of the 73 poems I observed. Of these 14, three were specifically categorized as social commentary, or poems directly addressing contemporary social concerns, and three were about war, particularly

Operation Iraqi Freedom. Poems about gender relations and women's rights represented 12 out of the 73 poems observed, with an additional two poems beyond these addressing homosexuality. Eleven of the pieces were about race-relations and racial issues. Such large social issues have broad appeal and are easy for wide audiences to appreciate. What is more, the gender and racially charged poems are particularly strong because there is an expected, socially acceptable response to such topics. Judges are unable to give low scores to poems about women's issues or the dilemmas of minority communities out of the fear of seeming ignorant and uncouth or in fear of arousing a hostile response from the audience. Numerous poets take advantage of this, playing the "politically correct" card in their pieces. This does not guarantee a victory, but it does frequently help with the scores. While a non-slam poet is free to make whatever commentary or criticism he or she desires, "if you offend an audience with a slam piece, [the poem] is likely to suffer in scoring" (Tucker). However, this is not to say that the only reason these poets select such subjects is because they would like to score well. One of the strengths of slam poetry is that it enables people outside of the established literary circle to create poetry. The traditional literary elite is still white and male, and the female and minority writers to enter the slam scene are bringing their perspectives – which are characterized, in part, by their identities as women and/or ethnic minorities – into the public discourse.

The slam community is also a community of artists, a community of poets. It seems only appropriate that, their own art is another major focus of their works. Out of the 73 poems observed, eight addressed art. Six of these specifically focused on literature and the process of writing. Another two focused on the performance side of art, one on



music and one on acting or performing. Three of the poems observed addressed issues of regionalism or geography. For instance, one was a poem expressing pride in being a Texan. Another was a poem that both mockingly and lovingly addressed the poet's origins as a "Midwestern gangster." Five poems were love poems, and another five addressed other personal issues. Two of these personal poems specifically explored suicide. One poem addressed religion, one was a "nerd" poem, one was a persona poem, and one described life in poverty. This poem was especially poignant, coming from the mouth of a painfully emaciated poet whose very waif-like appearance lent a disturbing credibility to his account. Finally, an interesting category was the inspirational poetry. Three poems were particularly intended to elevate the spirits of the audience and inspire them towards good deeds and a love of life.

Whether describing a timeless human sentiment or a contemporary political event, all slam poets are confined to the form of their work. All slam poets are bound by the rules of competition, and "the audience affects [this] work in the sense of which poem [the poets] decide to do that night" (Carter). The poet is, in the words of 2 Deep, "like the wedding singer, you have to know your audience and singing a funeral going home song isn't the smart thing to do at a wedding" (Carter). The need to appeal to the audience, or, at least, not to offend them, influences the creation of slam poetry and the poets' selection of the pieces. "I read the energy of the crowd when I enter the room, feel out how the poets before me were received and then I choose my poem," acknowledges Carter. Even more profoundly, she describes a strategic approach to composition: "I realize where the gaps in my repertoire lie and I try to fill in those gaps so I can be equipped to present for any situation" (Carter). Like a football or soccer coach, slam

poets will often have strategies, or poems, to adapt to a variety of situations. However, they are flexible in their use of these works. Slam poets may be confined to the rules of competition, but, within these confines, they have the potential to influence the hearts, minds, and, most powerfully, the actions of their listeners.

#### VI. Building Nicole's Mama

"Building Nicole's Mama," a poem by the nationally recognized slam-poet Patricia Smith, exemplifies a piece intended to promote social awareness. In this brief exploration, I will describe how her careful use of language accompanied by tone and gestures shapes the meaning of her piece. Everything from the stresses she puts on certain syllables to the expression on her face as she addresses the audience shapes the interpretation of her work. Here is the print version of the poem as it appears in Teahouse of the Almighty, a collection of Smith's works.

#### **BUILDING NICOLE'S MAMA**

*for the 6th grade class of Lillie C. Evans School,  
Liberty City, Miami*

I am astonished at their mouthful names--  
Lakinishia, Chevellanie, Delayo, Fumilayo--  
their ragged rebellions and lip-glossed pouts,  
and all those pants drooped as drapery.  
I rejoice when they kiss my face, whisper wet  
and urgent in my ear, make me their obsession  
because I have brought them poetry.

They shout me raw, bruise my wrists with pulling,  
and brashly claim me as mama as they  
cradle my head in their little laps,  
waiting for new words to grow in my mouth.

You.

You.

You.

Angry, jubilant, weeping poets--we are all  
saviors, reluctant hosannas in the limelight,  
but you knew that, didn't you? So let us  
bless this sixth grade class--40 nappy heads,  
40 cracking voices, and all of them  
raise their hands when I ask. They have all seen  
the Reaper, grim in his heavy robe,  
pushing the button for the dead project elevator,  
begging for a break at the corner pawn shop,  
cackling wildly in the back pew of the Baptist church.

I ask the death question and forty fists  
punch the air, me!, me! And O'Neal,  
matchstick crack child, watched his mother's  
body become a claw, and 9-year-old Tiko Jefferson,  
barely big enough to lift the gun, fired a bullet  
into his own throat after Mama bended his back  
with a lead pipe. Tamika cried into a sofa pillow  
when Daddy blasted Mama into the north wall  
of their cluttered one-room apartment,  
Donya's cousin gone in a drive-by. Dark window,  
click, click, gone, says Donya, her tiny finger  
a barrel, the thumb a hammer. I am shocked  
by their losses--and yet when I read a poem  
about my own hard-eyed teenager, Jeffrey asks  
He is dead yet?

It cannot be comprehended,  
my 18-year-old still pushing and pulling  
his own breath. And those 40 faces pity me,  
knowing that I will soon be as they are,  
numb to our bloodied histories,  
favoring the Reaper with a thumbs-up and a wink,  
hearing the question and shouting me, me,  
*Miss Smith, I know somebody dead!*

Can poetry hurt us? they ask me before  
snuggling inside my words to sleep.  
I love you, Nicole says, Nicole wearing my face,  
pimples peppering her nose, and she is as black  
as angels are. Nicole's braids clipped, their ends  
kissed with match flame to seal them,  
and can you teach me to write a poem about my mother?

*I mean, you write about your daddy and he dead,  
can you teach me to remember my mama?*

A teacher tells me this is the first time Nicole  
has admitted that her mother is gone,  
murdered by slim silver needles and a stranger  
rifling through her blood, the virus pushing  
her skeleton through for Nicole to see.  
And now this child with rusty knees  
and mismatched shoes sees poetry as her scream  
and asks me for the words to build her mother again.  
Replacing the voice.  
Stitching on the lost flesh.

So poets,  
as we pick up our pens,  
as we flirt and sin and rejoice behind microphones--  
remember Nicole.  
She knows that we are here now,  
and she is an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

And she is waiting.  
And she  
is  
waiting.  
And she waits.

Patricia Smith's poem "Building Nicole's Mama" is a powerful work of social commentary, as well as a self-aware artistic piece examining the power of poetry. With vibrant imagery and an elegant use of language, Smith conjures the image of a group of lower-income students. In the recorded version, she opens in a powerful voice, delivering the dedication as if it were a part of the poem itself, smoothly transitioning into the opening line (Smith). The reader of the print-form poem may easily become lost in the list of complex names, but this list clearly indicates the class and origin of these students in "their ragged rebellions and lip-glossed pouts, / and all those pants drooped as drapery," but Smith delivers the list of complicated, multi-syllabic names without

stumbling. She tells how the children adore her for her poetry, claiming her as their own “mama,” before progressing to the harsh social critique contained within this piece.

With each successive “you,” she points to a member of the crowd with an almost angry demeanor, meeting his or her eyes and drawing him or her into the performance even as she accuses the “angry, jubilant, weeping poets” in the audience of being “saviors, reluctant hosannas in the limelight,” individuals with the potential to help the struggling, rebellious students listed in the first stanza. Her tone is accusatory and harsh, for they “knew that already.” Smith speaks rapidly of these students, running the “40 nappy heads, 40 cracking voices” voices together, and making her pause before the delivery of the next sentence, a turning point in the poem, all the more powerful. “They have all seen / the Reaper,” she reveals, employing vivid imagery to convey the familiarity of these children with death. Young though they are, they’ve been altered by their premature exposure to mortality.

Smith acts out the part of these sixth-graders, turning her face upwards, eyes closed and face scrunched, hand reaching eagerly towards the sky, almost yelling “me! me!” in response to “the death question.” Smith describes drug abuse, child abuse, suicide, and murders, but, rather than leaving them in the abstract, Smith instead humanizes the experiences that each of these children has had with death. Her use of individual names and vividly described stories further personifies these students and their experiences. Smith tells how Tiko Jefferson, “barely big enough to lift the gun,” committed suicide after his mother abused him. She tells how Tamika saw her own father kill her mother, blasting her “into the north wall / of their cluttered one-room apartment.” Smith tells how Donya’s cousin was killed in a drive-by, illustrating

Donya's story with painful and poignant detail. "Click, click, gone, says Donya, her tiny finger / a barrel, the thumb a hammer," the poetess herself mimicking this gesture. The combination of poignant language, vivid images, and physical representation causes both the reader of the written poem as well as the viewers of the performed piece to identify more closely with the students, sharing in their suffering and strengthening the power of "Building Nicole's Mama" as a work of social critique. However, it also makes this a more powerful slam piece; by calling upon the emotions of her audience, helping them to identify with the student that she is describing, Smith helps ensure that she will leave a lasting impression upon the crowd as well as receive a higher score during the competition.

The poem hits a major turning point when Smith begins discussing her own son, a veritable survivor of childhood. The first question on the lips of the sixth-graders is poignant, powerful, painful. "He is dead yet?" wonders Jeffrey, and Smith raises her voice in imitation of a child, dramatically distinguishing this line from the regular flow of the remainder of the poem. She echoes the repeated "40" from the third stanza, emphasizing both the number of students affected and forcing the audience to recognize how none of them have escaped harsh reality. Smith is surprised to find that the students actually pity her for her innocence towards death, fully expecting that her son will meet the same fate as the others, bringing the Reaper into the poets' world.

Having faced death squarely, being appalled by its prevalence in the lives of these students, Smith shifts towards the powerful ability of poetry to heal. In language as eloquent and beautiful as that penned by many page-poets, Smith continues to tell how she finds the students "snuggling inside my words to sleep," finding a haven safe from

harm. One student, Nicole, even admits to the poet, "I love you." In performance, Smith distinguishes her words, again taking on a child's voice and lengthening the "L" of the word love. Words are powerful, and Smith is powerfully moved by the realization that her language, her poetry can so profoundly touch the lives of these students. Not only does it provide them with an escape from the struggles of their daily existence, it also provides them with a means of commemorating the past and remembering their loved ones. "Can you teach me to write a poem about my mother?" asks Nicole, "*I mean, you write about your daddy and he dead, / can you teach me to remember my mama?*"

Enhancing the dramatic effect of this request, "a teacher tells me this is the first time Nicole / has admitted that her mother is gone," lost to the ravages of AIDS. Smith slowly describes the mother's demise, letting the audience linger on the vivid portrayal. She follows this by telling how Nicole now "asks me for the words to build her mother again. / Replacing the voice. / Stitching on the lost flesh." This stanza pulls powerfully on the heart-strings of the audience, not only helping ensure Smith a higher score, but also, hopefully, moving the crowd with a desire to change the dismal reality described within this poem.

Smith immediately moves on to the next stanza, her tone assuming a harder, accusatory note as she addresses the "poets" who have the opportunity to "rejoice behind this microphone." "Remember Nicole," Smith urges. One among many, Smith cannot change this reality herself. However, by calling upon the audience to act, she may help effect a positive change in the reality of these children. Smith's repetition at the end of the poem, "and she is waiting / And she / is / waiting. / And she waits" emphasizing this point, her lengthy, deliberate pauses heightening the intensity of the moment.

Furthermore, Smith makes it clear that this poem is about the Black community, describing the “40 nappy heads” of children with African-American-sounding names and specifically describing how Nicole is “black / as angels are”. In a call to her audience, specifically to the urban, African-Americans within it, Smith powerfully urges social reform.

Though her subject matter is grim, Smith’s language is eloquent, bringing forth beauty from the pain these children suffer. Her words are powerful, and the text version of her poem can stand alone. This is true of the work of many slam poets. However, the presentation of these pieces heightens the power of these poems. By embodying the students described within the poem, and, more importantly, by bringing the ideas within this poem to the crowd, to the people who can effect change in the real world. This performance element of the poem influences the composition of the work, and, in the following section, I will investigate this.

## VII. Form

In an essay exploring the writing of the oral poem *Beowulf*, John Niles observes that, during a transitional period where a society shifts from orality to literacy – or, analogously, when an individual shifts from primary participation in an oral culture to primary participation in a lettered one – many poets imitate the oral style. They do so naturally and unselfconsciously, for oral modes of expression are a large part of what they know. (Niles 135)

Poets transitioning from oral culture to written culture retain their oral roots. Slam poets, however, transition from written poetry to oral poetry. Though their origins are in the



written word, they must consider the requirements of spoken medium, as well as the influence of their audience and judges.

“Slam pieces are necessarily spoken poetry, which automatically makes them extremely different than page poetry meant to be read, not heard,” says Jon Tucker, “Because they are spoken, or performed, slam pieces often utilize vernacular and rhythmic patterns that the audience can relate with.” The poets must be able to converse in language that, as described previously, is easily understood by the audience. However, it must also be language that engages the audience, capturing their interest and attention. Many poets will “find creative ways to change how their poem sounds, perhaps using vocal percussion (beat-boxing) or song or body movement to add a little special something,” though the poets are generally not permitted to utilize outside accompaniment (Tucker). Some poets use particular rhythmic devices, such as rap-like cadence, “as a way to keep the audience’s attention and make the piece more entertaining by adding a more musical nature to a verse,” giving these pieces a distinctive flavor.

The majority of the poets with whom I spoke proclaimed that they wrote in free verse, rather than carefully considering the formal elements of their work. According to Wilson, “As for rhyme and meter, I don’t care about that stuff. I think it restricts you. I am a free verse poet; I always have been.” Granma Dave is of the same opinion. “I don’t like form poetry, so I avoid writing it myself,” he says. “I tend to focus on flow and a little bit on meter, just in so much as making it aesthetic when it’s spoken or read” (Schein). This free-verse approach seems fitting for two reasons. First, the majority of students raised in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have had significant exposure to free-verse works, and this familiarity may help guide the formation of their own poetry.

Secondly, and possibly more importantly, slam poetry is derived from natural, spoken language, representing a gradual transition back to oral culture. As such, it seems fitting that these poems will follow the freer form of natural speech rather than strict metrical considerations. This is not, however, to belittle or devalue formal poetry. Indeed, traditional poetry and contemporary spoken poetry are intrinsically connected. The majority of spoken-word poets first encounter poetry in the written form. What is more, some spoken-word poets write their works on paper before ever performing them. The majority of the poets with whom I spoke used a combination of composition aloud and work in the written form. Even the poets who exclusively composed out loud typically write their poems afterwards, bearing traces of their literate roots into their oral works.

The poets with whom I spoke instead concentrate on the message within their poem and the overall structure of their poem. "When I write," says Wilson, "I focus on a clear, universal theme with language that is beautiful or witty or whatever it needs to be.

Typically I tend to play with [conventional] manipulation. A lot of my poems often start funny and switch up to serious part of the way through" (Wilson). While his works may not adhere to particular metrical forms, Wilson's poetry does assume a regular form in terms of content, with a comedic introduction followed by a volta to a serious topic.

"When writing a poem, I really don't focus on anything other than my current topic and the emotions that I am writing out of my system," says 2 Deep (Carter). As with Wilson, she concentrates on the message and emotions conveyed rather than on classical rhetorical devices. However, when Carter transcribes her poems, she tries to mimic the patterns of her actual presentation, separating "the words on the page exactly as I would stop, pause, or run them all together" (Carter). She notes the value of doing so in that,

“the presence or absence of punctuation also adds to the emotion of the piece,” aiding the interpretation of the written work and helping it become closer to the performed poem.

Not all slam poets are free-form. Wilson acknowledges that his style is based on his own personal preferences, and that other poets differ. “I think you need a real gift to rhyme well,” says Wilson. “People like Ryan Mergen and Twain have it. I know what I can and can't do, and I don't touch it” (Wilson). Some poets rely heavily upon rhyme, some upon alliteration, and some upon syncopated rhythms. Ultimately, though, the format of a slam poem is determined by its performance nature. “Slam pieces are performed almost as if they are theatrical productions,” says Tucker. Though slam competitions prohibit the use of costumes and props, the poems “sometimes involve a lot more direction, blocking, and role-playing than non-slam pieces. They necessarily involve lots of emotion, and stereotypically are loud, fast, and powerful. They need not be as poetic, and sometimes slam is criticized for this” (Tucker).

This performance element is often felt during the writing process. “Most times you have your own performance in mind when you write it” says Wilson, though he acknowledges that, “sometimes...you are detached from the process. You get a mode and you write the poem that you need to write.” A poet's performance becomes so fundamental to the existence of the poem that, “most times though you can hand off a poem to someone you know and they can't imagine it in anyone else's voice but yours.” Most of the actual performance elements of a poem evolve during the performance itself, but poets will explore various options when delivering their pieces. “I add new stuff from time to time as a way to play,” says Wilson, and he judges the quality of his

alterations based on the response from his viewers, particularly those familiar with his works.

Both the language underlying the poem and the performance itself are crucial elements of slam works. In the next section, this thesis analyzes a second slam poem, "Totally like whatever, you know?", a piece by Taylor Mali that investigates the decline of language in the contemporary United States. As with the Smith poem, this thesis especially focus on the relationship between the written poem and the performance of this piece.

#### VIII. Totally like whatever, you know?

Totally like whatever, you know?

By Taylor Mali

In case you hadn't noticed,  
 it has somehow become uncool  
 to sound like you know what you're talking about?  
 Or believe strongly in what you're saying?  
 Invisible question marks and parenthetical (you know?)'s  
 have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences?  
 Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions? You know?

Declarative sentences - so-called  
 because they used to, like, DECLARE things to be true  
 as opposed to other things which were, like, not -  
 have been infected by a totally hip  
 and tragically cool interrogative tone? You know?  
 Like, don't think I'm uncool just because I've noticed this;  
 this is just like the word on the street, you know?  
 It's like what I've heard?  
 I have nothing personally invested in my own opinions, okay?  
 I'm just inviting you to join me in my uncertainty?

What has happened to our conviction?  
 Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?  
 Have they been, like, chopped down

with the rest of the rain forest?  
 Or do we have, like, nothing to say?  
 Has society become so, like, totally . . .  
 I mean absolutely . . . You know?  
 That we've just gotten to the point where it's just, like . . .  
 whatever!

And so actually our disarticulation . . . ness  
 is just a clever sort of . . . thing  
 to disguise the fact that we've become  
 the most aggressively inarticulate generation  
 to come along since . . .  
 you know, a long, long time ago!

I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you,  
 I challenge you: To speak with conviction.  
 To say what you believe in a manner that bespeaks  
 the determination with which you believe it.  
 Because contrary to the wisdom of the bumper sticker,  
 it is not enough these days to simply QUESTION AUTHORITY.  
 You have to speak with it, too.

This poem, as presented on Mali's own website, [Taylor Mali](#), is an example of slam's intimate relationship with contemporary society and recorded on YouTube. First, Mali makes an observation regarding the contemporary use of language, namely that individuals tend to water their ideas down (to use a colloquial phrase), reaching a point where it is all but impossible to derive any actual meaning from the drivel and the mess of "like's," "umm's," and other filler phrases. This is a subject that colors the very lives of the audience members, and, possibly, their own speech patterns. It riles up the audience's emotions, causing them to laugh and share in the ridiculousness of this inability to truly express ideas, questioning their own manners of speaking, and then it tries to motivate the audience to change. "I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you, / I challenge you: To speak with conviction," says the poet (Mali). Mali's poem is not

addressed to anonymous or unidentified individuals, but to the “you” of the audience. He relates directly to his crowd, calling upon them to “speak with [authority], too.”

Taylor Mali writes his poem in a very straightforward, traditional-appearing manner. A single page long, broken into five stanzas, it appears as though it would be very easy to read this poem from beginning to end almost continuously. The frequent use of question-marks in the first three stanzas and the parenthetical asides, dashes, and ellipses break-up the regular flow. The frequent question-marks and the ends of what would otherwise seem like declarative sentences jar the reader out of the flow of the poem. While this strengthens Mali’s message regarding the inarticulateness of modern individuals, it may also serve to confuse readers of the textual version of this piece. What is more, while the strong satirical tone of “Totally like whatever” comes across clearly in the first three lines, it is easy for a first-time reader to lose sight of the tone in the subsequent, question-riddled lines. If the reader loses sight of the scathing sarcasm in this critique of the contemporary colloquial, the poem loses its power and meaning. However, Mali’s performance not only prohibits any ambiguity of the interpretation, it actually strengthens the power and the satirical value of this poem. It makes what might otherwise be a confusing, even seemingly-poorly contrived, poem a hilarious and insightful criticism of the modern inability to actually make decisive points.

Mali takes the stage with confidence in the YouTube presentation, making eye contact with his audience before he even begins, engaging them in his performance. He maintains this eye contact throughout the performance, ensuring that the audience pays attention to his words and gestures. Mali is not miserly in his use of gestures; instead, he uses his hands to punctuate nearly every sentence that he delivers, sometimes making

slashing motions and other times waving a finger at the audience. However, even more importantly, Mali uses his tone of voice in order to emphasize and clarify his meaning. He begins the poem in an entirely serious, staccato voice that lets the audience know that he is discussing a subject that has greatly distressed him. Mali then promptly introduces his first inflected question when "asking" about how it has become uncool "to sound like you know what you're talking about?" (Mali). He similarly inflects his voice to emphasize each of the subsequent "questions," successfully achieving both a great comedic effect and providing an example of how uncertain of themselves so many individuals are in their delivery. He pauses for emphasis when using such established colloquialisms as "you know...", "like totally," and "whatever," effectively emphasizing these filler phrases, much to the audience's amusement, and successfully critiquing them.

Mali dramatically changes his tone during the third stanza. While he maintains continuity through his series of questions, his tone becomes fully serious when asking, "What has happened to our conviction?" Mali acts out the next several questions, spreading his arms wide and leaning forward when asking, "Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?" He then shifts to create an angular "u" form with his elbows bent and hand pointing skyward only to level his forearms like trees when asking if they have "been, like, chopped down / with the rest of the rain forest?" For the remainder of the stanza, Mali resumes his former satirical tone, only to drive his point home in the final stanzas.

This shift in tone, however, may be lost on a reader until the final two stanzas. While the first three maintain visual continuity through the use of a series of question marks, Mali's final two stanzas lack these. The second-to-last stanza continues to evoke

inarticulate stammerings, but Mali introduces his first powerfully articulate, actual statements in it, telling how contemporary individuals use their colloquial filler-phrases “to disguise the fact that we've become / the most aggressively inarticulate generation” in a great while. The final stanza is a powerful entreaty to the audience, urging them to stand up for their views, to be articulate and to “QUESTION AUTHORITY.” The use of all-capital letters mimics the bumper sticker with the same phrase and emphasizes this point in the reading of the poem, even as the use of declarative sentences free of empty filler phrases, makes the whole, final stanza stand in sharp contrast with the rest of the poem.

Mali's performance of the poem makes this contrast even more dramatic. Shifting from a fluid, playful demeanor, Mali delivers the fourth stanza in an aggressive, staccato voice, riling the audience's emotions and helping them understand his frustration. Upon reaching the fifth and final stanza, though, Mali's entire demeanor changes yet again. He becomes serious, and physically withdraws into himself. While he had previously been making large and sweeping gestures with his arms, he instead folds his hand in front of his chest, the two index fingers raised as he first addresses the audience. After he makes his initial entreaty to the audience, “I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you” (Mali), he begins using his hands in tame, controlled gestures to drive home his point. Mali makes quotations around the phrase “question authority,” and then shifts his hand into fists when telling the audience that they need to “speak with it, too” (Mali). Simple but clear, these gestures allow the audience to focus on the poets' words even as they illustrate the audience's need to think not in quotations but of their own volition.



Modern media, such as television programs, has often been blamed for the decline in the intelligence and motivation of the American public, especially the youth of this country. However, the rise in modern broadcast technology has also changed the ways in which poets are able to interact with and reach their audiences, exposing them to entirely new crowds. Modern technology may have damaged young minds across the country, however, it may also enable the revitalization of these minds and the spread of poetry in a post-literate culture.

#### IX. Technology

As described previously, modern technology, especially broadcast technology, has changed the nature of literacy in the United States, altering the literary canon. Through virtual media, spoken word poets have been able to reach new and wider audiences than have been in the past. Indeed, "technology has changed the delivery medium of the art, but the live-action slam has been impacted very little by *STUFF*," claims Granma Dave (Schein). This technology has altered the audience reached by the poets, but the poets feel that it has had little impact on their work. For instance, Chris Wilson writes that his poetry "hasn't changed much. I love to type my work. I have a hard time handwriting stuff and having my hands keep up with me. It allows me to edit easier too," but it has not changed the caliber, nature, or quality of his poetry. Jon Tucker feels the same way. When asked how modern technology influences his writing, he responded, "Not much. I refuse to read off of anything except a piece of paper or a book." However, some poets have been using laptops, PDA's, and other hand-held, portable devices with increasing frequency, to both write and present their works. Recording technology has also become

helpful to many performers when practicing, and 2 Deep describes her own use of such technology to “record the poem and recite the poem with my voice to see where I mess up so that I can memorize the words verbatim” (Carter). This enables her to see her work from the perspective of a crowd-member and to appropriately modify it. What is more, “I do use my iphone,” says Jon Tucker, “to time myself when practicing and to record myself so that I can hear what I sound like” (Tucker). Modern technology may not have altered the way many poets approach composition, but it has influenced the distribution of slam poetry and the topics discussed in these works.

“I hear poets referencing very NOW things, like cell-phones and MySpace,” observes Granma Dave, “but in 20, 30, 50 years, we’ll be using implanted communicators and Rupert Murdoch will be heads in fluid-filled jars...or something...” (Schein). Granma Dave is aware of the danger of making a poem overly dependent upon contemporary references. In a later period, “the audience then might not get it in quite the same way. For example, who the hell uses (and calls it) a ‘bodkin’ these days?” (Schein). Technology has a powerful influence, but Granma Dave says that he tries “hard not to write about things, but focus on the people, places, and perceptions” (Schein). Such concepts as love, trust, jealousy, war, strife, grief, loyalty, and friendship have been constant themes throughout the human literary tradition, and they remain powerful in the work of slam poets. “I’d like to believe my writing and the spirit of the words has been buffered from temporal shifts of scientific improvement,” says Granma Dave, “I’d like to believe words are timeless. I’d like to believe a love-affair is timeless. I’d like to believe my story about some situation will be as relevant in 20 years as it is right now” (Schein). Grandma Dave is keenly aware of the power of such pervasive human sentiments; poetry

about lasting emotions will endure. While these overriding themes may be timeless, many poets choose to write about contemporary events and political issues, as described previously. What is more, slam poets frequently focus on very contemporary concepts, ideas that may not be relevant or widely known in later decades. Slam, though, is also a very ephemeral phenomenon. While a written piece may endure decades, a slam poem is very much intended for the present audience. Such references as cell-phones or MySpace may be out-dated in twenty years, causing any surviving work alluding to such things to become outmoded and forgotten. However, they may also strike just the right chord with the present audience to gain the poet acclaim in the present; each generation possesses its own key cultural points.

The use of modern technology has made it notably easier to distribute his work. "Technology has allowed me to build my website, [granmadave.com](http://granmadave.com), record and share videos, publish CDs and DVDs and chapbooks," says Granma Dave (Schein). Simple searches through Google, Youtube, or other search engines reveal numerous videographic recordings, blogs, MySpace accounts, and various other outlets for slam poets. Anyone who is interested can easily find competitions, individual artists, and even the entire works of some poets online. What is more, the poets themselves can broaden their fan-base and keep in contact with one another easily through the internet. Modern media has enabled slam poetry to spread across the country, influencing people of all segments of American society. However, modern media have only minimally influenced the content of slam poetry; the poets still often focus on universal experiences, such as love and competition, though popular cultural references may help slam poets shape their works.

## X. Criticism / Conclusion

Slam poetry has been called the democratization of poetry because of its ability to reach a broad audience and to allow individuals outside of the established literary circuit to comment on and evaluate the slam poets' art. However, much of the criticism of slam poetry also centers around the powerful influence that the audience has on the creative process, becoming "a reason some say it is not as good as 'real' poetry" (Tucker). It has been argued that, when slam poets try to "tailor our pieces to the likes of the judges," they surrender their ability to speak "the truth as artists." Instead, their works may be seen as "fluff that poetry heads like to hear, whether it makes sense or not, whether we believe it or not, and whether it is really art or poetry or not." Indeed, as noted earlier, many slam poets openly acknowledge the influence that the audience plays on their work. For instance, Jon Tucker says that,

the audience impacts my work not only before and while I'm writing it, but also while I'm performing it. The energy and instant feedback that the audiences can provide can help or hurt some poets...I really thrive off of constant back and forth, so I love a live audience that is expressing what they like or don't with grunts, shouts, claps, snaps, and the like. I love to hear the "ooh" and "ahh" after a great line. It lets me know what works and gives me encouragement to keep going. To quote a line from a new poem of mine, "silence at a slam is real disrespect." (Tucker)

However, the exchange between the poet and the audience is mutual. The poet has the opportunity to communicate his or her message to a crowd, imparting the concepts and emotions that he or she is interested in conveying. Despite this, the poet is also affected

by the responses of the audience. Most overtly, his or her score depends upon the reactions of the judges. However, as Granma Dave notes, "when I'm ready to learn from an audience, their reaction to my work can propel me into new things" (Schein). The poet is able to grow through his or her willingness to respond to the audience, though the poets must also maintain their own ideals in their works. One of the biggest criticisms of certain performers and teams is that they let the desires of the audience govern the content of the poetry to the point of losing the poets' own views.

According to Chris Wilson, the "the best written slam poems" come full circle with literary poems, capturing the essence of the poets' ideas in such a manner that they can be appreciated by any reader as easily as by any viewer. The best slam poems "are ones that you can hand off to anyone and they will hear it exactly the way you perform it in your head. You have crafted the poem using the elements of poetry to stand on its own legs and exist independent of your performance" (Wilson).

Ultimately, according to Jon Tucker, slam poets need the audience, "for energy. For a show. For judges. For honest (though it is hard to find) feedback" (Tucker). The audience communicates directly with the poets and with each other, giving slam the exciting, competitive atmosphere that draws in many viewers. The audience is highly influential in the aesthetic decisions made by the poets, as it can "play favorites and hype up or downplay certain poets... affect[ing] how the judges will see them and their performance" (Tucker). However, the influence is bidirectional, and the very ability of the audience to interact with the poets causes the audience to become more receptive to the poems. It enables slam poetry to reach broader audiences and to renew public interest in poetry, though sometimes at the expense of artistic vision or originality.

“I have a few pieces that take on slam poets and their poetry for what I would call a lack of quality or realness,” acknowledges Jon Tucker, “In this sense, the community’s wackness leads me to call them out sometimes with such poems” (Tucker). However, while some poets will produce works based on what they expect to do well, slam ultimately allows the poets to attain a new degree of reality through the physical presence of the poets, reaching their audiences by conveying experiences that are directly relevant to both the poet and the crowd. “I answer and present solutions in my pieces, and I think that is what poetry needs in order to move forward instead of being stagnant,” says 2 Deep (Carter). The interaction of the audience and the poet causes the poets to produce works that are easily understood by the audience, in terms of complexity, language, and content. Slam poets try to choose topics to which the audience can relate, and they will often draw upon the emotional responses of the audience in order to make their poetry more accessible. Slam may be critiqued for these very reasons, but these attributes make the poems powerful and dynamic. They enable the poetry of slam artists to reach the listeners both intellectually and emotionally, sometimes making an impact for mere minutes, other times changing lives.

## Afterword

Slam is a revolutionary force in contemporary American poetry, and, increasingly, in global poetry. Much of the power of this movement harkens from its ability to draw upon ancestral memories, restoring poetry to its roots as an oral tradition. Marc Smith, the founder of slam poetry, said that, "When I started, nobody wanted to go to poetry readings...I think when poetry went from the oral tradition to the page, someone should've asked, is that really poetry? I think slam gets poetry back to its roots, breathing life into the words" (quoted in Eleveld 2). Slam allows the audience to appreciate the rhyme, meter, and other acoustic elements of the poem even as the audience is able to appreciate the words themselves. However, at the exact same time, slam poets are taking full advantage of modern broadcast media in order to spread their words as far as possible. A union of primeval human interactions and modern technology, slam is changing the form of American poetry.

Beyond this, slam poetry gives power to the common people; it takes poetry out of the hands of academics, preventing them from having a monopoly on verse, and gives anyone willing to attend a slam the right to judge, or at least try to sway the judging of, the poetry, the performance, and the performers. Smith states that, "slam gave [poetry readings] life...a community where you didn't have to be a special something, feel bad that you weren't educated a special way..." (Eleveld 2). The result is that common people have the ability to comment directly on the poetry, in turn influencing the creation and presentation of these works. Indeed, the dynamics between the audience and the poet are one of the key forces underlying the format and presentation of slam pieces.

The influences of slam on American poetry is interesting. However, slam may have and even broader consequences than this as well, affecting American society as a whole. Slam is a social movement. In a society that increasingly complains of existential angst and isolation, slam performances are occasions at which the masses may assemble. Audience members can mix and mingle with the artists, meeting them first-hand. Audience members can become the artists, crafting their own works. And audience members can interact with each other, sometimes making acquaintances, sometimes forging true friendships. Slam has direct academic applications, and Lindsey Ellis argues for the utility of performance in teaching poetic techniques in her article, "Out Loud: The Common Language of Poetry." Even more dramatically, though, Heather Bruce and Bryan Davis argued that slam poetry could be used in order to reduce crime rates. In their article, "Slam: Hip-Hop Meets Poetry - A Strategy for Violence Intervention," they make the case that the use of performance poetry, in particular Slam poetry, can combat violence in youth culture by allowing young individuals, particularly males, to verbalize their internal states.

So, while slam poetry is merely a few decades old, it is changing the face of American poetry. Even more dramatically, however, it may be altering American society at a fundamental level, restoring interest in poetry, promoting social interactions, and giving the disenfranchised an audible voice. Time will tell, ultimately, what lasting legacy slam poetry leaves.



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