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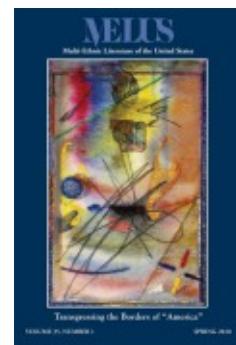
The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America

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The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. 208 pages. \$65.00 Cloth; \$22.95 paper.

What can slam poetry contribute to multi-ethnic writing and storytelling? What can multi-ethnic writing and storytelling offer the vibrant and complex poetry slam community? How does one determine which is a facet of the other and whose individual achievements merit recognition? In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett offers both insight into slam poetry method and culture and a respectful yet critical analysis of the functions of slam poetry in the performance, commercial, and sociopolitical arenas. The book begins by identifying slam poetry's audience and its reasons for and methods of listening; it then discusses how that audience has morphed over time from a group of passive listeners to one of active participants. While the general idea of audience as witness to poetic process has not altered, Somers-Willett notes that the method of witnessing slam poetry has adapted to changes in poetic style, type of venue, and the open invitation to assess and critique both poetic content and authenticity. She discusses the origin and history of the first poetry slam and the art form's evolution from its white, blue-collar roots in Chicago into the richly diverse socioeconomic and multi-ethnic expression of experience that now reaches well beyond American borders into Canada, Germany, Sweden, Nepal, South Korea, India, France, Macedonia, and other countries.

As a veteran slam poet in the national arena, Somers-Willett is able to interchangeably challenge and defend multiple aspects of slam poetry. She cites instances where the role, technique, delivery, or content of the slam poet's performance challenged an audience and lays substantial groundwork for a multifaceted discussion of slam poetry's role in both a larger literary picture and in various multi-ethnic and marginalized cultures. The book presents compelling ideas from various sources about what defines individual authenticity, performance success or identity, and cultural representation in slam performance. It also addresses how these topics are navigated and negotiated by spoken word performers, audience judges, the commercial spoken word industry, and the "upper management" in the

slam poetry community, including the SlamMasters, the National Poetry Slam Code of Honor, and The Official Rules of the National Poetry Slam Competition. Somers-Willett observes that most slam competitions are won by members of marginalized communities, whose experiences are often perceived by audiences to be most authentic and culturally representative and to most effectively snub dominant culture. Her critique of the dynamic between poet and audience is a driving force throughout the book, but the larger dynamic between the poet and the world comes into play in historical and current commercial contexts. Over time, the poet becomes the persona, which, if commercially successful, becomes the product. The commercialization of spoken word material has taken on new meaning with hip-hop, rap, dub poetry, slam poetry, and several other oral art forms. The text discusses a range of ideas: the product is produced at the expense of art; the ingredients for commercial success have become more important than the poet or the poetry; the artistic process detracts from the fluidity of identity; and the artistic process is its own reward.

The book also analyzes the roles and forms of literary caricature, black-face minstrelsy, Beat poetry, cowboy poetry, political or protest poetry, hip-hop spoken word, and rap. Both individual context and representative performance are used to explore the co-optation of cultural identity versus authenticity. Somers-Willett addresses the pervasive misogyny and assumptive prejudices and phobias in many of these poetic forms while analyzing selectively pilfered and often commercially successful versions of them. Chapters Two and Four turn to race relations in the spoken word and slam poetry communities, performances of blackness, and how and why race relations and individual identity manifest on stage and screen. These chapters touch on the inaccessibility of certain poetic styles to the general public and the culturally intimidating “ivory tower” of academia that seemingly keeps poetry and other literary forms out of reach. Somers-Willett mentions several ethnicities and demographics but focuses primarily on African American performers, their relative success level in slam competitions, and their overall reception and inclusion by the larger poetry audience. She also charts the onset of African American interest in commercial spoken word performance in the United States, how and when those performance styles and themes were “borrowed” or usurped by mainstream culture, and the success (or failure) of several of those co-opted ventures.

Perhaps this book will launch a wave of culturally, socioeconomically, and racially diverse analyses of the poetry slam. Future projects might consider the implications of open versus invitation-only slams; triathlon slams where a poet, a musician, and a dancer all take the stage at once;

and theme slams versus island-style slams, where poetry is written on the spot. It may also pave the way for a heated debate on poetry slam rules in both educational settings and public venues. Considering the relationship between poetry, ethnicity, and poetic forms, it is likely that slam poetry and spoken word can expect to gain as much as they offer by celebrating individuality, ethnic identity, and as Somers-Willett puts it, the “shared value of difference” (10) onstage, backstage, and in the poetry community at large.

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