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Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity

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The practice of poetry slams—competitive versions of poetry readings currently staged in bars, bookstores, coffeehouses, universities, and theaters across the country—can inform the fields of literary studies and performance studies alike. Slams have proven popular among non-academic audiences, and recently they have begun to win attention from scholarly audiences. Poetry slams attract audiences not only in urban centers like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles but also in areas as distant as Sweden and the UK or as remote as Fargo, North Dakota. With poetry slams surfacing in most US states and slam poets performing their work in feature films, in documentaries, on cable television, and even on Broadway stages, slam is a phenomenon that appears to have captured America's popular imagination. As competitions open to and judged by anyone who wishes to participate, slams open the door not only to the sociopolitical issue of who has access to poetry but also to the critical question of what poetry is and how it should be evaluated.

Because poetry slams have flourished nationally and internationally, standardized rules of competition have emerged and a non-profit organization, Poetry Slam Inc. (PSI, formerly headed by inventor of the poetry slam, Marc Smith), has been established to administer them. At PSI-certified slams, poets perform their own work in time slots of three minutes and ten seconds, which is in turn judged by willing members of the audience Olympic-style from zero to ten. Although some slams have improvisational rounds and some slam poets freestyle on stage, most slam poets write, time, rehearse, and memorize their work before performing it. After rounds of elimination, the poet with the highest score is declared the slam winner and is awarded a prize and/or title. Once a year, local poetry slam winners in the US and Canada form four-person teams and compete at the National Poetry Slam (NPS), now in its sixteenth year. In addition to featuring team bouts and titles, the annual competition also awards an individual title. Both titles carry cash awards of up to $5,000 ("NPS Press Release"). The growth of the NPS has increased dramatically during its tenure, growing from a two-team competition with one individual slammer in 1990 ("Poetry Slam" 235) to a 70-team competition with 14 individual slammers in 2004 ("NPS: St. Louis, MO").

The growth of the slam phenomenon has allowed standards of writing, tone, subject matter, and performance style to emerge. Such work can be

recognized generally as "slam poetry"—poetry that is created for performance and with the slam audience in mind. Almost all slam poetry is written in first person, is narrative, and—because it is delivered in a performative format—usually aims to be comprehensible upon a first listen. Devices such as homophonic word play, repetition, singing, call and response, and rhyme are frequently used on the slam stage. A wealth of different performative modes of address are embraced by slam poets, but most of the work performed at slams falls under the categories of comedy, parody, or drama. In terms of tone, protestive and passionate pieces are frequent at a slam, and many poets treat the slam stage as a political soapbox. Some poets do so almost exclusively.

Because most slam poems engage a first-person, narrative mode which encourages a live audience to perceive the performance as a confessional moment, one of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet's performance of identity and identity politics. Although certainly not all works performed at poetry slams are identity poems—poems which directly proclaim the performer's "self"—the performance of such poems has become increasingly common on the National Poetry Slam stage. Indeed, the prevalence of identity poems performed at recent National Poetry Slams caused one veteran of the scene to note the progression of slam "from a lyrical collaborative art to that of an art of self-proclamation" (Van Cleve). A great deal of the work appearing in recent slam and spoken word anthologies and films confirms the trend of proclaiming one's identity for an audience.[1]

Work that finds success on the national level almost always takes this subjective stance. At the same time, it is important to note that although the proclamation of identity seems a key part of a successful slam poem, the craft and execution of that proclamation is just as important as the statement itself. Which is to say that *how* slam poets perform their identities is just as important as *what* they say about their identities. Performance, as one should expect in a genre such as slam, is the instrument that makes the poem ring true or false with any given audience. In this respect, slam poetry has much in common with its theatrical cousins, performance art and dramatic/comedic monologue, because it engages the very same politics of identity that can govern and arise from those expressions. Still, slam poetry is unique in that it is presented in a timed, judged, and competitive format. Thus, although slam poetry certainly falls under the larger umbrellas of performance poetry and performance art, it usually sets itself apart by displaying a keen awareness of its presentation in front of an audience and its public judgment by that audience. Like a forensics meet, there are winners and losers of bouts; poets are eliminated or squeeze into the next round of competition by margins of tenths of points; and trophies and prizes are awarded, not the least of which is adulation from the crowd. Perhaps because of the competitive format, more seems at stake in a poetry slam than in open mics, readings, or performance exhibitions. Slam poets are usually motivated to score as best they can, and slam audiences expect to be both engaged and entertained.

In the "spiel" read before every bout at the National Poetry Slam, judges and audience members are advised to give poems scores based on both text and performance ("The Rules"). However, the subjective process of judging is often guided by a more specific imperative. "Vague as it may sound," Maria Damon writes, "the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of 'realness'—authenticity . . . that effects a 'felt change of consciousness' on the part of the listener" (329-30). This "felt change of consciousness" is indeed a powerful element in any kind of poetry, textual or performed. Ron Silliman notes that a reader/listener's sense of realization "occurs throughout all forms of literature," but that it is most amplified

> through the poem as confession of lived experience, the (mostly) free verse presentation of sincerity and authenticity that for several decades has been a staple of most of the creative writing programs in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than when this mask appears not in print but *in person*, at dozens of open-mike or poetry slam events that occur around the United States every day of the week. . . . In such circumstances, a text *as text* is reduced to its most basic features: perceptible surface characteristics, narrative or expository thread[s] and a sense of 'personality' that is inseparable from the presentation of the reader him- or herself. (362)

Silliman outlines several crucial elements of the work performed at poetry slams. First is the use of live performance to maximize the "authenticity and sincerity" of the first-person voice overwhelmingly used by slam poets. Second is the poem's "sense of 'personality'" which he claims is taken as a reflection of the poet-performer. Marrying these two ideas, I suggest that the authenticity that slam audiences reward is at least in part contingent upon the performance of identity that takes place on slam stages. If poetry slams are events where audiences often take a poet's words at face value, and the identity a poet expresses in performance is taken as the performer's identity in life, then many audience members are evaluating not only the writing and performance of a poem, but also the scripting and performance of identity. If authenticity is, as Damon argues, the criterion for slam success, then convincing audience members of the authenticity of one's identity is a major component of a poet's success in the slam.

And yet, not all identities appear to be created equally authentic in the eyes of slam audiences. More often than not, marginalized gender, class,

sexual, and racial identities are celebrated at poetry slams, and poets performing marginalized racial identities can be especially rewarded. Proclamations of such identities undoubtedly attract slam audiences, who may see poetry slams not only as literary or performative but ultimately as political events. With Damon's observations about authenticity in mind, it seems pertinent to ask: why is marginalized identity so often awarded the badge of authenticity at poetry slams? To fully address this question, one must consider both the specific performative expressions of identity at poetry slams as well as the larger cultural politics of identity that influence slam reception. Doing so can reveal new understandings about the desires enacted between author and audience at poetry slams and about how so-called authentic identity is not only reified but created through slam performance. In this essay, I first discuss how the perceived authenticity of marginalized identity figures as a criterion of slam success. Second, I explore the political ramifications and possibilities of this phenomenon when it occurs between African American slam poets and predominately white, middle-class audiences. Before tackling either issue, however, it is important to discuss the theoretical connections between authenticity and identity.

Authenticity, Identity, and Performance

When used to describe identity, the term "authenticity" is often meant to suggest instances in which subjectivity and identity are generated beyond or without cultural constraints. That is, one's "authentic self" is original, unique, true, existing before and outside of discourse. For a performance of an identity poem to be deemed authentic is to assume there is an original or essential self which one perfectly emulates in performance.[2] This appears to be a criterion at work when slam judges score poems, and indeed might be the primary criterion slam poets have in mind when they write slam poems—to impart some truth about their subjective experiences which reveals an authentic self.[3]

Challenging this concept of the authentic self, theorists have recently argued for understanding the self as a social and cultural construction, i.e., as the product of discourse. For all intents and purposes, identity in this framework is best thought of as a fluid product of both conscious and unconscious performances. Performance studies scholars Erving Goffman and Judith Butler both refer to the presentation of self to others—the expression of identity—as a performative act. Goffman, in his 1959 monograph *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, clearly addresses this issue of the performed self in his concluding comments:

> A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not the *cause* of it. The self, then, as performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location . . . ; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (253)

It is important to note here that Goffman, using theater as a metaphor for social interaction, is talking about the "performed scenes" of everyday life, not just those of the stage proper, and that these performances are sites of identity production. Furthermore, the last phrase of this quotation is crucial to understanding the role an audience plays in constructing identity. Selfhood is constituted by how a performance of identity is received and judged by others. As I will discuss in a moment, the act of crediting or discrediting identities is precisely what occurs at many poetry slams: audiences judge poets, among other things, on the credibility of their performed identities.

Butler's work confirms Goffman's view, suggesting that "subjectivity is itself constituted through compulsory performances of social norms" which she calls "performative" acts (McKenzie 221). The term "performative" was coined by linguist J. L. Austin to describe words that actually do what they say—speech acts such as the vow "I do" uttered at marriage ceremonies. Of late, however, the term "performative" has taken on varied definitions which have earned critical purchase in many disciplines. Generally, most performance studies scholars agree that the term "performance" indicates a real-time theatrical act which reifies or challenges identity and that the term "performativity" indicates the discursive process of how that identity came to be. Judith Butler's scholarship on performativity using frameworks of phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis "has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes" (Parker and Sedgwick 2). However, the performative aspect of identity—the discursive citation of normative behavior—is not always readily apparent to those involved in the transaction that generates such an identity. In fact, performativity seeks to authoritatively conceal the very norms it repeats, making the iteration of identity both novel and law. In Butler's own words,

> Performativity is . . . not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). (12-13)

When thinking of the performativity of identity in the Butlerian sense,

one must always work to consider the invisible history, repetition, and normative value of any given identifying behavior. In comparison to Richard Schechner's definition of performance as "twice-behaved behavior" (Turner 105), Butler uses the term "performativity" to suggest a behavior's infinitely repeated and concealed history (as with her main example of gender). Jon McKenzie sums up this distinction by saying that performativity "refers to a *discursive* compulsion to repeat norms of gender, sexuality, and race, while performance refers to an *embodied* theatricality that conceals its citational aspect under a dissimulating presence" (227). Performance, then, is an instance of identity's performativity, a live embodiment and enactment of an identity in a particular space and time. As discursive practice, performativity is both prior to and a result of any embodied performance: performativity is that normative behavior to which a performance alludes or which it parodies, and it is also a performance's effect in that the normative behavior reflected in a performance is disseminated and eventually incorporated into that behavior's performative history. In short, performativity comprises the discursive elements that inform and are produced by the act of performance.

In light of these theories, I take as my premise that the self is the result of performance, that subjectivities as they are expressed both in the world and on stage (i.e., as performed identities) come into being through social practice. With this view in mind, we must treat the authentic also as a social practice, as something which has no original beyond its own repetition and acceptance over time. A performer's autonomy is not negated by this framework; indeed, she or he can decide when, where, and how to enact (perform) certain identities. However, those identities do have cultural and social histories (i.e., they are performative), and so it is often the negotiation of a performer's free will and the history of an identity which influences how a performance of identity is received by its audience.

This framework has much to offer my discussion of identity poems performed at poetry slams. Audiences cannot deem slam poems about identity "authentic" or "inauthentic" without having a model to which they can compare that identity. If a slam poet performs, for example, a poem about being a black male, those who judge that poem on the criterion of authenticity must compare that identity with other expressions of black masculinity. If slam judges reward poets who are authentic in their performance of an identity—and if we can agree that what is deemed authentic is actually constructed through this process of reward—we may think of the slam itself as a representational practice which *authenticates* certain voices and identities. In short, poetry slams can *generate* the very identities which poets and audiences expect to hear. As authenticating practices, the systems of reward established by slams embody complex

systems of desire and power. Poetry slams are themselves generative sites of social practice from which these identities are performatively cited, recapitulated, and questioned. They prove sites of negotiation between poet and audience where the performance of an identity is judged for its success or failure (its authenticity or inauthenticity) in the world. Such judgments about identity happen every day as one performs his or her identity in any given social situation; the unique aspect of the poetry slam is that identity is judged openly and publicly through competitive scoring. As such, slams have the potential to reveal dissimulated systems of desire and power that underlie the performance of identity in culture.

But exactly which identities are generally authenticated by slam audiences and why? To answer this question, I must consider individual performances of identity exhibited by successful slam poets as well as the composition of their audiences. Due to the proliferation of poetry slams across the country and the variety of work performed in local slam venues, I will limit my analysis of slam poetry to competition at the national level.

Authenticity and Marginalized Identity in Slam Poetry

If the precedents set by National Poetry Slam (NPS) rankings and the attitudes of slam poets are any indication, the performance of certain identities are more successful than the performance of others. Slammer Eirik Ott (a.k.a. Big Poppa E) comments, "I love that . . . someone, anyone can get up on a stage and share their [*sic*] experiences of being gay or straight or black or white or Filipino or Latino or Vietnamese or transgendered or wussy boy or whatever, and folks will just leap to their feet in applause" (Ashe).[4] His comments suggest that what is successful at slams (i.e., what wins an audience's approval) is the expression of identity on stage, but the majority of his examples also suggest that particularly *marginalized* racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identities gain applause. His comments also signal that slam poets and their audiences have, consciously or unconsciously, come to rely on marginalized identities as authentic narratives in and of themselves. That is, a poet performing a poem about a marginalized identity may gain the reward of authenticity from a slam audience not only for his or her writing and performance, but also for the well-executed performance of a marginalized identity itself. Of course, authenticity is not automatically awarded to every performance of marginalized identity; not everyone can write and perform an identity poem well. But for those slam poets who can, the affirmation of marginalized identities along with the sense of political protest that accompanies their performances may be what it takes to put them in the winner's circle.

The most commonly rewarded of these identities at poetry slams, at

least on a national level, is black identity.[5] Much of the popular attention surrounding slam has gone to African American performers. In fact, the mainstream media has often focused solely on the genre's ties to the traditionally black artform of hip-hop. Other recent media projects, such as the feature-length film *Slam* and the current HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, have presented slam poets to mainstream audiences alongside hip-hop artists and against the backdrop of black urban culture. Poetry Slam, Inc.—the national body governing the NPS—has resisted keeping track of its members' ethnicities because its membership is largely (and proudly) liberal, under 35, outspoken, and very politically sensitive. However, it is a safe to say that the poetry slam community not only attracts more poets of color than the academic poetry community, but that these poets are relatively more likely to find success and recognition on the slam scene. A canvas of one New York City slam venue over nine months revealed about 65% participation by poets of color; as the field narrowed to the venue's slam-off to determine a local team, almost 84% of the finalists were of color (Gonzalez). Although these percentages are particular to a specific urban region and venue, poets' participation and success on a national level confirms this trend. Of the twelve individual champions of the National Poetry Slam to date, all but four have been African American ("Poetry Slam" 235-37). Similarly, almost all of the four-person championship teams have included at least one African American member.

Still, the audience for slam poetry on a national level has been and continues to be predominately white, middle-class, and under 40.[6] In an informal survey I conducted of slam poets and organizers across the US, many reported that this group constituted the majority of their audiences on both local and national levels with few exceptions. Michael Brown, Slammaster of the Cantab Lounge in Boston, posits that the audiences of the National Poetry Slam are predominately white because of the location of the competitions[7] and the "greater appeal of slam to white folks" (Brown). The appeal of slam to a white, middle-class demographic probably has several causes, including a greater access to and familiarity with the arts for whites and those who can afford higher education, the location of many slam venues in coffeehouses and bars in white middle-class neighborhoods, and—considering that most slams assess a cover charge to help pay their winners—the economic freedom to pay to see poetry readings. Finally, the rebellious tone that many slam performances take also may appeal more to teens and younger adults; consistently, slams are billed as counter-cultural performances or as literary sporting events. Some poetry slams take on the aesthetics of hip-hop, music traditionally targeted to younger audiences. Furthermore, media featuring slam poets often specifically targets young audiences; for example, Bruce George, an executive co-producer of the HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, reports that the series not only targets a youth market but that it also has sponsored spoken word poetry tours across the nation at college campuses (George). Thus, although poetry slams have always been and continue to be open to anyone, slams have cultivated this more specific audience in practice.

The appeal of slam poetry to a white middle-class audience, as well as its appeal to younger audiences, may help to explain the visibility and relative success of African American poets on the slam scene, especially if the phenomenon of authentic identity is a criterion for success. Just as we have seen in crossover markets for black popular music—particularly in hip-hop where the call to "keep it real" has become virtually cliché—this sense of authentic racial expression has proven popular among a young white middle-class audience at poetry slams. This audience may be equating performances of black identity with what is authentic, on the basis that something so distinctly different from or "other" than white middle-class existence is cool, desirable, and more real or genuine. Furthermore, if audiences have come to hear poetry that is more "hip" than academic verse, they (perhaps unknowingly) seek an aesthetic which has roots in black music and culture.[8]

Finally, the counter-cultural tone adopted by most slam performances encourages political complaint and protest; indeed, many of the poems featured at recent NPS competitions are invectives against social inequities. One of the most common of these narratives is the invective against racial inequities. As popular attention has started to focus in recent decades on issues of racial diversity and race relations, and as black-white relations are often the most "visible" of these in white communities,[9] the slam may serve as a rare opportunity for white middle-class audiences to legitimately support black poets critiquing white positions of privilege. Rewarding African American slam poets may be a way of showing support for anti-racist attitudes, confirming a white audience's own positions as liberal, rebellious, hip, and against the status quo. At best, this process of reward opens doors for interracial dialogues; at worst, it may be a method of assuaging "white liberal guilt." Both of these, along with judges' preferences in writing and performance style, may play a part in determining a slam poet's score.

As an example of an African American identity poem employing protest, consider National Individual Slam Champion Roger Bonair-Agard's "How Do We Spell Freedom," one of the poems he performed to win his 1999 title. The poem is of special interest because it is both a literal performance of black identity and a *reflection* on performances of African American identity in the 1970s and 1980s.

I
In 1970 I learned my alphabet
for the very first time
knew it by heart in 1971
A is for Africa
B is for Black
C is for culture and that's where it's at
my mother taught me that from the Weusi Alphabeti
at a time when A was for apples in a country that
grew mangoes
and X for xylophone when I was learning
how to play the steel pan
black wasn't popular
or even accepted then
but I wore dashikis sent me from Nigeria
super-fly suits; sky blue with the elbow patches
sent me from america
and sandals made by original rastafari before weed &
revolution needed fertilizer to grow
my mother rocked bright saffron saris
we were phat 20 years too early and a thousand miles
removed
my mother preached hard work
knowledge and how not to take shit
D is for Defense
E is for Economics

II
I wrote my first protest letter at the age of 3
to my grandfather
for calling me in out the front yard
spelling fuck you with an
f - o - r - k - U
put it under his pillow in the hope
it would blow up and burn his car off at night
wanted to get started on this revolution thing
F is for Freedom

III
G is for Guns – we gotta get some
Weusi said

evolved into 1979 and a revolution with a changing face
** bang bang boogie to the boogie*
say up jump the boogie – let's rock – yuh don't stop
black folk and brand names became entwined
we re-invented dance and made wheels roll
with a limp
Cuba had just told America he was Africa in Angola
K is for Kings
L is for Land – we gotta get it back

so we lost Jamaica to the IMF
Grenada to the marines
and Panama to Nancy Reagan
jherri curls became high top fades, became gumbies,
became caesars
as Michael Jackson moonwalked his way into a lighter
shade of pale
my mother sent me to america – she said
"Go fix that!"

IV
K is for Kidnap
S is for Slavery - Weusi explained

cool became buttah became phat
we lost our focus and our way
just about the time
black folk outside the nation
discovered the dangers of pork
so fat back became phat blacks
pigtails became dredlocks
and fades faded to bald
as Michael Jordan discovered the magic of a fadeaway
jumper
and endorsements

X is for the niggah who's blind, deaf and dumb
X him out - Weusi said
my mother told me I should re-write that
that X is for the nigga who needs to be re-educated
that a corporate job does not spell freedom
marry white doesn't mean racist flight
a democratic vote is not a revolutionary act
and as long as there's a sweatshop in Jakarta
there is no difference
between Patrick Ewing and OJ Simpson

V
God gave Noah the rainbow sign
- *said no more water; the fire next time*
J is for James Baldwin - next time is now

H is for Huey
N is for Nat Turner
T is for Tubman
M is for Malcolm, Mandela, Marley & Martin got shot
two weeks after he told black folk to boycott Coca-Cola
Jesse Jackson still scared of niggaz with a purpose

- and someone must learn to read the signs with me. (Bonair-Agard 39-43)

Performed in Bonair-Agard's thick Trinidadian accent, the poem takes on a unique cadence and assonance. For an American white middle-class audience, his speech may act as a performative cue for the "exoticness" of his Trinidadian upbringing and his experience as a black man. Furthermore, it can cause the slam audience to conflate his national/cultural identity with the topic of his poem, racial identity. His accent and his subject matter, in this regard, may be the ultimate signifier of an authentic blackness—something which a white audience can locate as "other" than itself.

When I speak of the exchanges between a black slam poet and his or her predominately white audience such as the exchange Bonair-Agard initiates here, I do not mean to advocate the idea of whiteness as the opposite of blackness, although this concept may consciously function in the minds of some slam audience members. For many race scholars such as myself, the concept of blackness as the opposite of whiteness is a troubling construction, one which can occlude the perspectives of other people of color and which falsely places each concept at opposite ends of the spectrum. Still the *contrast* between concepts of whiteness and blackness as played out between slam poets and their audiences is a compelling one. If white bourgeois audiences are judging the performative authenticity of a marginal identity in addition to composition and performance, then the strong advocacy of black identity may be one of the factors that they further reward precisely because black identity is so often portrayed as *the* marginal identity compared to a central white identity.

"How Do We Spell Freedom" is a quintessential identity slam poem. Underscoring this is the refrain that Bonair-Agard usually adds at the end of his performance: "A is for Africa / B is for Black / C is for Culture / and that's where *I'm* at." Thus, although the poem is truly about negotiating the expression of black identity at different periods in time and in different nations, there is also no doubt among Bonair-Agard's audience members that he is anything but authentically black as a result of the poem's assertion of a black self and his confident, assured performance. To underscore this even further, the refrain emphasizes his location firmly inside an authentic blackness by essentializing Africa as the center of black culture and identity. In addition, the poem seems to imply that although representations of blackness and racial protest are fluid, African Americans who had been commodified—"phat blacks," "Michael Jordan," "Michael Jackson," and "black folk" in "brand names"—pale in comparison to the authenticity of his own racial identity. Bonair-Agard offers a definition of blackness which is militant, proactive, revolutionary, and which can transcend commodification—in short, what a white liberal middle-class audience might readily recognize as "authentic" characteristics of black protest. Completing this image of blackness is Bonair-Agard's live presence: he is a tall, muscular man who at the time wore shoulder-length dreadlocks. All of these elements combined with a stellar memorized performance of a well-written poem serve to make the authenticity of Bonair-Agard's identity virtually unassailable.

Slam Poetry and the Politics of the "Other"

Rewarding such writing and performance can benefit a white liberal audience: reward displaces them from being the target of the black poet's protest. That is, in appreciating the work of African American poets who proclaim racial identity, audience members might assuage the "white guilt" associated with such an expression. This is not to say that black slam poets are rewarded solely to assuage white guilt. Such art may in part be appreciated and rewarded for the cultural positions of power that it confirms and denies, or it may serve as an affirmation of the need for cultural redress. Rewarding these poets also helps proclaim a slam audience's liberal political identity: to support black voices and black identities is to try to distance oneself, effectually or ineffectually, from other whites who hold racist attitudes. In the case of "How Do We Spell Freedom," the performance of Pan African blackness may be particularly successful with white audiences because it is expressed through a critique of black culture instead of an attack on white culture. Bonair-Agard's "revolution thing" is not threatening to the slam audience; rather, it invites them to support the "revolution" without implying a need for their own action. White audiences, in this case, can reward a construction of marginal identity without having to recognize their own complicity in that construction.

Still, there exist on the slam stage plenty of direct critiques of white middle-class privilege by African Americans. One such example is Gayle

Danley's "Funeral Like Nixon's" in which she parodically proclaims her desire to be enshrined like the famous politician:

> I want a funeral like Nixon's
> no acne no smell
> no fuck-ups
> Barbara Bush on the front row
>
> No memory
> ass clean
> butt wiped
>
> Let me break this down for you:
> you see
> I just want to die like a white man
>
> blameless
> timeless
> ageless (Glazner 44)

Slam poems such as Danley's may succeed in encouraging white audience members to investigate their own cultural privilege. At the same time, rewarding this poem allows white audience members to positively recognize the author's *critique* of their very own cultural positions, in turn creating a liberal identity for themselves. Such a dynamic confirms that constructions of whiteness/blackness, urban/suburban culture, and ghetto/bourgeois culture are much more intertwined and complex than they are represented to be in popular culture. This dynamic in slam performance and reception is reflective, I believe, of the US white bourgeoisie's general fascination with black culture, as we often see in the cases of rap, blues, jazz, hip-hop, and R&B music. Speaking of this black artist-white audience dynamic in rock 'n' roll, Simon Frith remarks:

> The immediate aesthetic response to a performer is identity, and it is the difficulty of the relationship between black performer and white audience that lies at the heart of American popular culture—rock culture included; sympathy is a way of avoiding the issue. The power of black music is, after all, a form of black power . . . and the attraction of black music . . . lies in its danger, in its very *exclusion* of white fans from its cultural messages. (23)

White culture's fascination with black artists and black expression has a deep-rooted and sordid history dating back, as Frith suggests, to "the relationship between black performance and white pleasure" embodied in

slaves performing songs and dances for their masters, "a pleasure tangled up with guilt" (22, 23). Yet this sense of guilt, however vague or veiled, does not lessen the white pleasure attained from witnessing black performance. Indeed, as one may see in the case of some slam performances, it may be heightened via a complex matrix of desire for, alienation from, and fascination with the "Other."

"Otherness"—a term used to conceptualize difference across the fields of linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and psychology and which has found a home in post-colonial studies—has usually been viewed by critics through a clear-cut binary framework of difference, that of the self or the "Other" (Hall 229, 43). Yet the signification of otherness is not as clearly defined. Its meanings and effects are ultimately ambivalent; otherness can have positive or negative uses and effects. Speaking of otherness and gender, Stuart Hall recognizes that difference "is both necessary for the productions of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as sexed subject—and at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the 'Other'" (238). We can apply this ambivalence similarly to the expression of racial difference in slam poetry.

One way to understand the dynamics of authenticating marginal identity at slams is what Homi Bhabha calls "the articulation of multiple beliefs" via fetishism. Fetishism, according to Bhabha, "is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one the official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division" (377). This concept of ambivalence or "in-between-ness" for which Bhabha is known offers an alternative to the either/or thinking about the complex desires white audiences fulfill by rewarding performers of color. Fetishism "affirms difference while at the same time denying it" (Hall 276), occupying both (and sometimes multiple) desires simultaneously. For example, in an analysis of Robert Mapplethorpe's portraits of black men, Kobena Mercer concludes that the portraits' fetishistic white gaze can be a source of ambivalent possibility in which "blacks are looked down upon and desired as worthless, ugly and ultimately inhuman. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere black bodies, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idealized as the embodiment of its aesthetic ideal" (201). In this case, the fetishization of the "Other" can hold sway as "a deconstructive strategy, which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations" (Mercer 199).

The spectacle of poetry slams often exhibits this fetishization of oth-

erness and the ambivalence of meaning that it conjures. The National Poetry Slam community is overtly concerned with the expression of racial, gender, and sexual difference in its ranks. In fact, the increased presence of organizations (such as Slamsisters, a group dedicated to women's interests in national and local communities) and performance poetry troupes fostered in and around the slam scene (such as Born with Two Tongues, a Pan Asian poetry group) confirms that marginalized identity will continue to influence the life of performance poetry. At the most recent NPS, there were, in addition to the regular bouts and special readings by those in anthologies, readings specifically showcasing Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, women, and gays and lesbians. These were the most well-attended events outside of the competition itself, indicating that the performance of marginalized identities (specifically ones of race, gender, and sexuality) is an important aspect of slam and helps to define the slam's appeal as a popular phenomenon. The liberal and well-meaning political concern with difference represented by these readings unconsciously reifies the positions of whiteness, straightness, and maleness as the norm—as not worthy of attention, investigation, or showcase beyond usual competition. These readings could very well be read as the deployment of "strategic essentialism" (what Gayatri Spivak has outlined as the intentional use of essentialist identities to deconstruct existing systems of power), but the use of this strategy should not preclude its investigation. This strategic essentialism, if that is indeed what it is, shows signs of ambivalence: it is an opportunity for positive political organization while, on the other hand, casting a tokenizing or fetishizing effect upon marginal voices. Like Mapplethorpe's photographs, these featured readings mark these "othered" voices as fetishes, and they embody the fetish's ambivalent political meaning because they are at once deemed outside of the normative realm *and* valorized as ideal. For most slam poets and audiences as it is in culture, the benefits of public recognition and political affirmation outweigh the potential dangers of fetishism and marginality.

Although most identity poems performed at slams seek to confirm the slam poet's identity in sometimes narrow ways, some tap the potential to critically investigate the performance of identity on the slam stage. Bonair-Agard's poem does this partially by questioning the fads that defined blackness in certain eras; others have chosen to parody the rhetoric of conviction that often accompanies identity poems, such as in this piece:

How to Write a Political Poem
by Taylor "Mumia" Mali
for my soon-to-be-former friends at Bar 13

However it begins, it's gotta be loud
and then it's gotta get a little bit louder.
Because this is how you write a political poem
and how you deliver it with power.

Mix current events with platitudes of empowerment.
Wrap up in rhyme or r-r-r-r-rhyme it up in rap until it sounds true.

Glare until it sinks in.

Because somewhere in Florida, votes are still being counted.
I said somewhere in Florida, votes are still being counted!

See, that's the Hook, and you gotta have a Hook.
More than the look, it's the hook that is the most important part.
The hook has to hit and the hook's gotta fit.
Hook's gotta hit hard in the heart.

Because somewhere in Florida, votes are still being counted.

And Dick Cheney is peeing all over himself in spasmodic glee.
See what I did? Make fun of politicians, it's easy,
especially with Republicans
like Rudy Giuliani, Colin Powell, and . . . Al Gore.
Oooh—see what I did? I called Al Gore a Republican!
That must mean that my political sensibilities
are much more finely calibrated than yours.
Create fatuous juxtapositions of personalities and political philosophies
as if communism were the opposite of democracy,
as if we needed Darth Vader, not Ralph Nader.

Peep this: When I say "Call,"
you all say, "Response."

Call! Response! Call! Response! Call!

Amazing Grace, how sweet the—

Stop in the middle of a song that everyone knows and loves.
This will give your poem a sense of urgency.
Because there is always a sense of urgency in a political poem.
There is no time to waste!
Corruption doesn't have a curfew,
greed doesn't care what color you are
and the New York City Police Department
is filled with police officers! Who carry guns on their hips
and metal badges pinned over their hearts.
Injustice isn't injustice it's just in us as we are just in ice. Yeah!
That's the only alienation of this alien nation
in which you either fight for freedom
or else you are free and dumb! Yeah!

And even as I say this somewhere in Florida, votes are still being counted.

And it makes me wanna...[beat boxing]

Because I have seen the disintegration of gentrification
and can speak with great articulation
about cosmic constellations, and atomic radiation.
I've seen D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*
but preferred *101 Dalmations.*
Like a cross examination, I will give you the explanation
of why *Slamnation* is the ultimate manifestation
of poetic masturbation and egotistical ejaculation.

And maybe they are still counting votes somewhere in Florida,
but by the time you get to the end of the poem it won't matter anymore.

Because all you have to do to end a political poem
is to get real quiet, close your eyes,
lower your voice, and end by saying:

the same line three times,
the same line three times,
the same line three times.

Mali makes apparent many of the usual rhetorical techniques slammers use to gain legitimacy and authenticity on stage—including call and response, repetition, sampling, rapping, beat boxing, and effusive rhyme—all of which one can recognize from black popular music. At first glance, the poem may seem cruel or jaded, especially coming from the mouth of a white, upper-middle-class poet; however, when it is performed after an evening of slam poetry proclaiming the very same "platitudes of empowerment" that this poem parodies, it is almost always welcomed with laughter and high scores. Such parodies can enlighten by revealing the rhetorical ways identity and political stances are constructed on the slam stage. Still, few poets make use of this deconstructive potential; examples such as Mali's poem are rare. Most performers rely on the cultural politics of marginal identity and resistance to the status quo in order to further authenticate, not explode, these identities.

Another mode of exploring identity on the slam stage is the persona poem. By taking on the voice of another on stage, a slam poet must focus much more on consciously performing a different identity than his or her own. If the audience is not aware of the persona as distinct from the slam poet, then, as Ron Silliman notes, "the 'I' of the text and the 'I' of the person standing in front of the audience are peculiarly wedded. . . . [T]here is a claim for the equivalence of the two" (362-63). The slam poet in this case comes to embody the narrative "I" of the poem and inhabit the persona's identity. However, if the audience is *aware* of the persona, they also may become aware of the construction of identity undergirding the slam performance. Four-time Individual Slam Champion Patricia Smith has performed several persona poems in National Competition, the most daring of which is "Skinhead," in which she takes on the voice of a white supremacist:

> . . . I sit here and watch niggers take over my TV set,
> walking like kings up and down the sidewalks in my head,
> walking like their fat black mamas *named* them freedom.
> My shoulders tell me that ain't right.
> So I move out into the sun where my beauty makes them lower their heads,
> or into the night
> with a lead pipe up my sleeve, a razor tucked in my boot.
> I was born to make things right. (*Big Towns* 67-68)[10]

Smith reflects on this piece: "I wanted to understand a man who unconditionally hated what I was. . . . [W]hen I perform the poem, audiences are jolted by his voice coming from the mouth of a black woman" ("Persona Poem" 73). Indeed, the obvious contrast between this persona and the slam poet's identity can be shocking, but I would also argue that this difference opens up a space for dialogue about identity. That is, the seemingly competing identities and interests of the persona and the performer create a space for the critique of identity in general. Of course, crossing over from a black female identity to a white male skinhead's is a

unique transmutation; in fact, this exchange would be inappropriate for most others to perform. As such, Smith's performance of "Skinhead" becomes just as much a display and negotiation of her own identity as a black woman as it is the display and negotiation of a white supremacist's identity.

This poem's difference from many other identity pieces is that it makes the slam poet's negotiation of identity *visible*. The end of the poem makes this purpose abundantly clear by asking audience members to consider the nation's support—and perhaps their own implicit support—of the skinhead's views on race:

> I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,
> my face scraped pink and brilliant.
> I'm your baby, America, your boy,
> drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful.
>
> And I was born
>
> and raised
>
> right here. (*Big Towns* 69)

• • • •

As individual political statements, identity poems can often be brave, enlightening, and inspiring. But in a genre where the most "authentic" identities are rewarded, some poets may seek to write and perform poems that display their identities in ways that have proven successful (i.e., as marginal). The overall critique I mean to make here is neither of any one slam poet's expression of politics or lived experience, nor the quality of either. My critique is of a cultural dynamic between white audiences and black performers that rewards the performance of black identities as more authentic than others based solely on its citation of blackness, as well as the fetishistic desires that this dynamic can embody.

The aspect of authenticity with which these audiences reward slam performers seems to veil the real issue at hand: the dynamics of power between poet and audience in the real world. Still, the complexity of the poet-audience relationship precludes the dynamics between poet and audience from being any one thing—fetishistic, revolutionary, essentialist, liberating, entertaining. Instead, the performance of slam poetry is usually a host of these forces working together at a particular moment in history to authenticate one's identity.

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Notes

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1. Recent slam and spoken word anthologies include Algarín and Holman's *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, Anglesey's *Listen Up!: Spoken Word Poetry*, Glazner's *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, Medina and Rivera's *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*, and Eleveld's *Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop, and the Poetry of a New Generation*. Many identity poems included in these anthologies, particularly *Listen Up!* and *Bum Rush*, are written by writers of color and are focused on proclaiming their author's ethnic, gender, and class identities.

2. The one notable exception is the persona piece, which I discuss at the end of this essay.

3. The idea that poetry is the search for the authentic and the true has a longer history than I can discuss here, but it is a recurring theme for poets and performers alike. For example, the anthology *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* takes as its epigraph a quotation from Percy Shelley: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (Glazner 9). Such an allusion brings into focus slam's engagements with literary forebears as well as the attempt to "truly" or "authentically" represent subjective experience.

4. A "Wussy Boy" is Ott's self-crafted and self-proclaimed slam identity and is a masculinity defined by a heightened sensitivity to women's issues and his own self-conscious role as a white male. A "Wussy Boy" might, by traditional gender norms, be considered "sensitive" or "effeminate" for his behaviors.

5. In the last few years, performances of Asian American and Latino/a identity poems have also gained acclaim on the NPS stage—including those of Beau Sia of San Francisco, Thien-bao Thuc Phi of Minneapolis, and 2002 Individual Champion Mayada Del Valle of New York City. These slam performances offer compelling narratives about racial identity and deserve further investigation.

6. The interest of younger poets in slam has been overwhelming. In fact, because the National Poetry Slam often holds preliminary bouts in bars, host cities have had trouble accommodating teams with poets under the age of eighteen or not of legal drinking age. To avoid handicapping teams with minors, legislation was proposed at the 2002 slam family meeting requiring that all competing poets be over eighteen. Although it did not pass, it was determined that NPS host cities can choose not to admit teams with minors on an annual basis, to be determined by the requirements of NPS performance venues. The youngest competing NPS poet to date was fourteen years old.

Recognizing the interest of poets under eighteen in poetry slams, some Bay Area poets banded together to produce the National Youth Poetry Slam (NYPS). Now in its eighth year, the NYPS includes over 200 competing poets and 500-1000 local high school students participating in the Brave New Voices National Youth Poetry Festival. Many of teams competing at the NPS have corresponding youth teams.

7. Recent National Poetry Slams have been held in St. Louis, MO (2004); Chicago, IL (2003, 1999), Minneapolis, MN (2002); Seattle, WA (2001); Providence, RI (2000); and Austin, TX (1998). Many of the slammers surveyed agreed that the Chicago venues had the most racially "mixed" audiences, but they also agreed that in general the NPS audience is overwhelmingly white.

8. The obvious example here is of Norman Mailer's hipster, who took his mantle from 1940's black jazz culture and whom Mailer characterized in a 1957 article "The White Negro." For a compelling history of hip and its ties to black music, see Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

9. By "more visible," I mean that black-white race relations are more commonly discussed by both the media and by many blacks and whites themselves. I do not mean to suggest that this visibility should render relations between people of all colors *invisible*, only that race relations are often thought of in this way by many. Recent high-profile cases such as the beating of Rodney King, the O. J. Simpson trial, the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal, and the shooting of Amadou Diallo have, I believe, helped this duality to proliferate. These cases have been frequently cited by slam poets, as my examples will illustrate.

10. An audio version of Patricia Smith performing this piece can be accessed on the Internet. See "The Book of Voices: Patricia Smith."

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