

Scholarly Article

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AUTHENTICATING VOICES: SLAM POETRY, POLITICS, AND PERFORMANCES OF BLACK IDENTITY

One of the things that struck me when I came out of the construction worker mode into the poetry scene was the falseness of a lot of the work because it had nothing to do with what everyday people do.

—Marc Smith, originator of the poetry slam as quoted in *Slamnation*

As competitions open to and judged by anyone who wishes to participate, poetry 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.¹ The type of work performed at poetry slams often speaks to issues of the poet-performer's identity through expressions of race, class, sexuality, gender, or regionalism. As a result, slam poets and audience members often deem the work performed at poetry slams more "authentic" or "real" expressions than

¹ At poetry slams—competitive versions of poetry readings—poets perform their own work in time slots of three minutes and ten seconds, which is in turn judged by randomly-chosen 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/or 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 form four-person teams and traverse the country to compete at the National Poetry Slam (NPS), now in its thirteenth year. In addition to team bouts and titles, the annual competition also awards an individual title. Both titles carry cash awards of up to \$2,000. The growth of the NPS has increased dramatically during its tenure, growing from a two-team competition with one individual slammer in 1990 to a 56-team competition with 11 individual slammers in 2002. The most recent NPS has been billed in promotional materials as "a poet-vs.-poet, high-noon, verb-slingin' showdown" and as an "in-your-face, smack-talkin' war of the words" (see Figures 1 and 2, reproduced on pages 38 and 40).

those of academic verse.² Slam poets who perform identity pieces almost always use the first-person pronoun to affirm and proclaim their identities; indeed, almost all slam poetry is organized by personal narrative. The use of the first person, as well as the element of live performance, builds a sense of intimacy and confessionalism between poet and their audience and is one vehicle through which slam performances gain "authenticity." Another vehicle of "authenticity" is the performance of identity often featured on slam stages, a complex phenomenon which is my topic here.

In the "spiel" read before every bout at the National Poetry Slam, judges and audience members are advised to give poems scores based both on text and performance (*The Rules*). However, the subjective process of judging often is 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 in 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 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. Second is the poem's "sense of 'personality'" which he claims is taken as a reflection of poet-performer him/herself. Marrying these two ideas, I want to suggest that the "authenticity" that slam audiences reward is at least in part contingent upon the performance of the self that takes place on slam stages. If slam audiences often take a poet's words at face value, and the identities poets express in performance are taken as their identities in life, then many audience members are not only evaluating their writing and performance of a poem, but also the scripting and performance of

² I use the term "authenticity" in quotation marks to reflect its use by slam poets/audiences and, for reasons I describe later, to question the concept of "authenticity" itself.

their identities. If "authenticity" is the criterion of slam success, then convincing audience members of the "authenticity" of one's identity is a major component determining a poet's success in the slam.

Many scholars have discussed the oral and performative qualities of poetry in various eras (Bernstein, Engler, Nagy, Ong, Zumthor). Others have taken on the fraught task of evaluating slam poetry as a genre. Harold Bloom, for example, remarked of slam poetry's popularity:

. . . of course, now it's all gone to hell. I can't bear these accounts I read in the *Times* and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art. (379)

In a similar vein, Amiri Baraka has argued that poetry slams "make the poetry a carnival—the equivalent of a strong-man act. They will do to the poetry movement what they did to rap: give it a quick shot in the butt and elevate it to commercial showiness, emphasizing the most backward elements" (Gates 40). What Bloom and Baraka argue about slam poetry is debatable: the future of slam poetry and the impact slam poetry has upon literature remains to be seen. But rather than debate slam poetry's overall quality and future (although these are indeed worthy topics), I wish to discuss slam poetry as a cultural phenomenon, as a flashpoint which has in a few short years broadened the relationship between American poetry and its audience through performance. More specifically, I am interested in what sort of work gains audience approval at poetry slams, and how the cultural politics of identity expressed by many slam poets influence that approval. May we think of slam poets' performances—and their approval or disapproval by audiences—not only as poetic expressions, but as a way of expressing the self in culture? What are the criteria for success at poetry slams, and what desires might these criteria reveal? I address these questions by first discussing how the "authenticity" of 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.

When used to describe identity, the term "authenticity" is often used in everyday culture to suggest the place where 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.³ I believe this is 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.⁴

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 my 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 self-as-performative "character" 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)

The act of crediting or discrediting identities is precisely what I believe occurs at many poetry slams.

Butler's work confirms Goffman's view, suggesting, as Jon McKenzie puts it, that "subjectivity is itself constituted through compulsory performances of social norms" (McKenzie 221). When thinking of the performativity of identity in the Butlerian sense, we must

³ With the notable exception of the persona poem, which I discuss at the end of this essay.

⁴ 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 forbears as well as the attempt to "truly" or "authentically" represent subjective experience.

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" (as quoted by Turner 105), Butler uses the term *performativity* to suggest a behavior's infinitely repeated and concealed history (as with her main example of gender). McKenzie sums up this distinction by saying 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 is a result of any embodied performance: performativity is that normative behavior to which a performance alludes to or 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 is comprised of the discursive elements that inform and that 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. Since the term "authentic" is often used to insinuate an original self, I use it in quotation marks to emphasize the "authentic self" (and indeed "authenticity" itself) as a construction. A performer's autonomy is not negated by this framework; indeed, s/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.

Audiences cannot judge the "authenticity" of a slam poem about identity without having something 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 as "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 *generate* the very identities which

poets and audiences expect to hear. As an authenticating practice, then, 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, questioned. They prove to be 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.

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 what has been performed at the national level of competition.

Although certainly not all work performed at poetry slams are identity poems — poems which directly or indirectly proclaim the performer's "self" — the performance of such poems have become more and more common to the National Poetry Slam (NPS) stage. Indeed, the prevalence of identity poems performed at recent National Poetry Slams caused one veteran of the scene to note the



Figure 1. "You Talkin' to Me?": Official Promotional Poster, National Poetry Slam 2002. Designed by Eric

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.⁵ If the precedents set by NPS individual winners and the attitudes of slam poets are any indication, the convincing performance of certain identities on stage are more successful than others. Slammer Big Poppa E comments, "I love that ... someone, anyone can get up on a stage and share their [sic] experiences 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).⁶ His comments suggest that what is successful at slams (i.e., what wins an audience's approval) is the expression of *marginalized* racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identities. His comments also signal that slam poets and their audiences have, consciously or unconsciously, come to rely on particular 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" by a slam audience not only for his/her poem's writing and performance, but for the well-executed performance of a marginal identity itself. Of course, the reward of "authenticity" is not automatic to the performance of marginal identities; not everyone can write and perform an identity poem well. But for those slam poets who can, the affirmation of marginal 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.⁷

⁵ Including Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, eds., *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (New York: Owl Books/Holt and Co., 1994), Gary Mex Glazner, ed., *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2000), Zoë Anglesey, ed., *Listen Up!: Spoken Word Poetry* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 1999), and, most recently, a book which proclaims to be anti-slam: Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera, eds., *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). Many identity poems included in these anthologies, particularly *Listen Up!* and *Bum Rush*, are focused on proclaiming non-white identities.

⁶ A "Wussy Boy" is Big Poppa E's self-crafted and self-proclaimed slam identity and is a masculinity defined by a heightened sensitivity to women's issues and his own gender role as a white male. A "Wussy Boy" might, by traditional gender norms, be considered "sensitive" or "effeminate" for his behavior.

⁷ In the last few years, performances of Asian American and Latina 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

Black Poets, White Audiences

*You will not hear highbrow poetic structure over here
I do not proscribe to nor do I give a fuck about iambic
pentameter
I laugh at the alphabetical order of the Shakespearean sonnet
A sestina?
Is a bitch I used to date
I write what I feel and I spit what I know
I am the rose bloomed fresh in the midst of ghetto confusion
I am ghetto angst personified
I am a street poet
— from "Street Poet" by GNO,
a slam poet from Dallas, TX*

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 art forms of rap and 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 poetry 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 safe to say that the poetry slam community not only attracts more non-whites 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%



Figure 2. "Them's Fightin' Words": Official Promotional Poster, National Poetry Slam 2002. Designed by Eric Dunn.

of one New York City slam venue over nine months revealed about 65%

Champion Mayada Del Valle of New York City. These slam performances offer compelling narratives about racial identity and deserve further investigation.

non-white participation; as the field narrowed to the venue's slam-off to determine a local team, almost 84% of the finalists were non-white (Gonzalez). Although these percentages are particular to a specific urban region and venue, participation and success on a national level confirms this trend. Of the ten individual champions of the National Poetry Slam to date, all but three 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. In an informal survey I conducted of slam poets and organizers across the U.S., many reported that this group comprised 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 and the "greater appeal of slam to white folks" (Brown).⁸ The appeal of slam to this audience probably has several causes, including better access to/familiarity with poetry and the arts, the location of many slam venues in coffeehouses and bars in white middle-class neighborhoods, and — considering 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 "not your grandma's poetry" or as literary sporting events. Some poetry slams take on the aesthetics of rap and hip hop — music traditionally targeted to audiences in their teens, twenties, and thirties. Furthermore, media featuring slam poets often specifically targets young audiences; for example, Bruce George, an Executive Co-Producer of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, reports that his series not only targets a youth market on HBO but that it also has sponsored spoken word poetry tours across the nation at college campuses to seek this audience (George). Thus, although poetry slams have always been open to anyone, slam as a phenomenon has cultivated this more specific audience.

The appeal of slam poetry to a white bourgeois 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

⁸ Recent National Poetry Slams have been held in Minneapolis, MN (2002); Seattle, WA (2001); Providence, RI (2000); Chicago, IL (1999); Austin, TX (1998); and Middletown, CT (1997). Many of the slammers surveyed agreed that the 1999 Chicago competition had the most racially "mixed" audience, but they also agreed that in general, the NPS audience is overwhelmingly white.

scene, especially if "authenticity" of 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 – the sense of "authentic" racial expression has proven popular amongst a young white middle-class audience at poetry slams. This audience may confuse the performance of black identities on stage to be a citation of "authenticity" itself – that is, what is different or "other" than white middle-class existence is cool, desirable, more "real" or "genuine." Furthermore, if audiences have come to hear poetry which is more "hip" than academic verse, they (perhaps unknowingly) seek an aesthetic which has roots in black music and culture.⁹ Finally, the counter-cultural tone most poetry slams impart encourages political complaint and protest; indeed, many of the poems featured at recent national slams are invectives against social inequities. One of the most common of these narratives is the invective against racial inequity. As popular attention has started to focus more and more on issues of racial diversity and race relations, and as black-white relations are often the most "visible" of these in white communities, the slam may serve as a rare opportunity for white middle-class audiences to legitimately support black poets criticizing their own positions of privilege.¹⁰ 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, 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

⁹ The obvious example here is of Norman Mailer's hipster, who took his name 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).

¹⁰ 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 by use of the term "visibility" that relations between people of all colors should be *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 OJ Simpson trial, the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal, and the shooting of Amadou Diallo have, I believe, helped this duality to proliferate. They are also frequently cited by slam poets, as my examples will illustrate.

Bonair-Agard's "How Do We Spell Freedom," which was 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
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 ear 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 dreadlocks

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 a 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/her predominately white audience such as the one 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 occludes 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 predominately white bourgeois audiences are judging

the "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.

That said, "How Do We Spell Freedom" is a quintessential example of an identity 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 amongst Bonair-Agard's audience 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, the racial identities of commodified African Americans — "phat blacks," "Michael Jordan," "Michael Jackson," and "black folk" in "brand names" — are less "authentic" than his own. Bonair-Agard offers a definition of blackness which is militant, pro-active, revolutionary, and which can transcend commodification — in short, what a white liberal, middle-class audience might readily recognize or project as "authentic" characteristics of black protest. Completing this image of blackness is Bonair-Agard's live presence: he is a tall, muscular male 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.

To reward such writing and performance has benefits for a white liberal audience: it 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, they assuage the "white guilt" associated with such an expression. Rewarding these poets also helps form/proclaim this audience's liberal political identity: to support black voices and black identities is to in turn try to distance oneself, effectually or ineffectually, from other whites who hold racist attitudes. Thus, black art can be — and often is — appreciated and rewarded for the cultural positions of power that it confirms and denies. This is not to say that such work is less artful, but that it additionally and often directly addresses these issues. 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. This "revolution thing" is not threatening to a white 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. 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 U.S. white bourgeoisie's general fascination with black popular culture, as we often see in the cases of rap, blues, jazz, hip hop, and R&B music. This is a fascination with the "Other," which, as I've tried to show, is also always a way to affirm the centrality of one's own identity.

"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 (Hall 229, 43). Yet the signification of otherness is not as clearly defined. I contend that its meanings and effects are ultimately ambivalent; otherness can have positive or negative uses and effects. Speaking of otherness and gender, Stuart Hall recognizes 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 reward of "authenticity" between slam poets and their audiences is what Homi Bhabha calls "the articulation of multiple belief" via fetishism. Fetishism, according to Bhabha, "is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one 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 identificatory dyad. It "affirms difference while at the same time denying it" (Hall 276), occupying both (and sometimes multiple) desires simultaneously. For example, in an analysis of 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 otherness and the ambivalence in meaning that it conjures. The National Poetry Slam community is overtly concerned with the expression of racial, gender, and sexual difference in its ranks (Ashe). 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) confirm that 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 marginalized identities (specifically ones of race, gender, and sexuality) are an important aspect of slam and help to define the slam's identity 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, it casts a tokenizing or fetishizing effect upon marginal voices. Like Mapplethorpe's photographs, these featured readings mark these "othered" voices as fetishized, and they embody the fetish's ambivalence by placing them both "outside" of the normative realm and valorizing them. For most slam poets and audiences, as it often is in cultural practice, the benefits of political organization and affirmation outweigh the 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 investigate identity through parody, 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-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 tuned 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 people who wear guns on their hips
and carry 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!

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 other things that rhyme like -ation
with Haitian and this nation.

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, NYC *Urbana*)

Mali makes apparent many of the usual rhetorical techniques slammers use to gain legitimacy and "authenticity" on stage—including call and response, repetition, sampling, rap, 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 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" this poem parodies, it is almost always welcomed with laughter and high scores. Such parodies can be enlightening 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 politics of marginal identity and resistance to the status quo in order to authenticate, not explode, these identities.

Another mode of exploring identity on the slam stage is through 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/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 . . . there 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, 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)¹¹

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" 73). Indeed, the obvious contrast between this persona and the slam poet's identity can be shocking, but I would argue that this contrast also opens up a space for dialogue about identity. That is, the seemingly competing identities and interests of the persona and the performer herself create a space for the critique of identity in general. Of course, crossing from a black female identity to a white male skinhead identity 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. Its 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 the audience 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, inspiring. But in a genre where the most "authentic" identities are rewarded and those that are just not resistant

¹¹ An audio version of Patricia Smith performing this piece can be accessed on the Internet at The E-Poet Network's *Book of Voices*: <<http://voices.e-poets.net/SmithP/>>.

enough are effectively silenced through the elimination that takes place in slam poetry, some poets may seek to write and perform poems that display their identities in ways that have proven successful (i.e., quintessentially "other"). The overall critique I mean to make here is neither of individual slam poets' expressions of politics or lived experiences, nor of 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 of the fetishistic desires that this dynamic can embody. The aspect of "authenticity" with which these audiences reward slam performers seems to stand in for 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 usually involves a host of these dynamics that work together at a particular moment in history to authenticate identity.

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