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In Poetry We Trust

"The notion of a slam is to return poetry to the people."

By: Colin Fanning

As Alix Olson and Amy Neevel tell it above, the spoken-word-political-activism-performance-art phenomenon we call slam poetry is a democratic and egalitarian effort to tear poetry down from its cold and academic pedestal and, through accessible language and the communicative power of performance, put it in the hands of a public that has shown an increasing distaste for the language arts.

But there is also a more subtle (and occasionally not-so-subtle) side to slam poetry's resistance of the establishment: one based in a cultural resistance to the mainstream, one that gives a voice to oppressed groups, one that attempts to redefine the ways in which people take part in the "production" of a particular culture, and, perhaps above all, gives slam poetry its own culture—or, rather, subculture. This side of the slam both contributes to its critical reception by the mainstream, given its inherently oppositional nature, and, simultaneously, is often overlooked in discussions of slam poetry's validity. These are all issues I will examine; but first, a brief history of the slam.

Marc Smith, the founder of slam, offers a timeline of the events leading up to and following its establishment on his website (appropriately titled "SlamPapi.com"). Slam poetry's official inception was in 1986, when construction-worker-cum-poet Smith approached the owner of a Chicago jazz club—The Green Mill—with a proposal for a weekly poetry competition to occur on Sunday nights. Smith called the competition the Uptown

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Poetry Slam, using the terminology found in baseball and bridge, and the basic tenets that guide the competition today (such as the rule that judges be chosen from the audience) were already in place. The following year, other slam series opened elsewhere—Michigan, New York, California, Alaska—and in 1990, the first national competition was held in San Francisco (SlamPapi.com).

The term itself may not have existed until the mid-eighties, but slam poetry is grounded in cultural movements beyond just the open-mic night, or even the Chicago "boxing-ring" style poetry readings Kurt Heintz describes in "An Incomplete History of Slam" from earlier in the decade. The slam has its roots in the long-standing tradition of activist poetry, which has historically been put to some of same purposes. In fact, there are striking similarities between certain lesbian feminist slam poets and what Smith calls "establishment poets." Feminist theorist Katie King examines the written and spoken word of poet Audre Lorde: "[a] powerful speaker and reader of poetry, she mobilizes audiences beyond aesthetic appreciation into political action through her performances" (52). Although Lorde worked within a more formal genre, contemporary slam poets like Alix Olson and StaceyAnn Chin put the slam to the same purposes. Olson often uses her poetry, for example, as a conduit for frank political messages: "And we're exiting this poll booth, now, self-satisfied patriots, grinning cheshire cats / as this empirial wonderland is spinning off its evil axis. / And I am pissed off" (Clash). The performance aspect of the slam, then, is simply another vehicle for the same ideas with which activist poets have worked in the past.

Photo Courtesy http://folkitup.net

If we look back even further, it becomes apparent that slam poetry also rises out of the ancient tradition of the spoken word—sermons, speeches, stories. In particular, it owes much of its character to the African "nommo," a cultural belief in the power of words and a rhetorical device that encompasses many of the expression styles of slam poetry. In a study of the influence of nommo upon *Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry* (a television program

emerging from slam poetry's increasing popularity), Viece Kyukendall and Felicia R. Walker find that "[t]he presence of nommo gives life to the word, and the poets help the audience feel the breath and heartbeat of their poems" (232). Because of its basis in this ancient rhetorical, cultural tradition, the modern phenomenon of slam poetry is—through spoken devices (and, as Alix Olson demonstrates at left, forceful performances)—able to draw upon some fundamental aspect of the human psyche for its power. This is the same reason storytelling and oration have historically been so significant.

However, the study of *Def Poetry* falls short. Although the researchers attempt to examine the performance phenomenon through the lens of nommo and Afrocentricity, they do so in a mostly technical manner. It seems even that Kyukendall and Walker created a checklist of nommo characteristics and simply ran each poem through that series of criteria. What the study primarily overlooks is the cultural, human importance of nommo to a modern development like the slam. Nommo came out of Africa—a continent long oppressed by the political and economic pressures—and especially out of colonization; of rich, white European nations. It is thus significant that slam poets today speak out against social and political injustices, repression and marginalization. They are often members of groups that experience firsthand these wrongs, using a technique with a strong tradition of such protest. Slam poets have—perhaps even unconsciously—recycled and recontextualized nommo; it grounds them in the past, but does not prevent their own moving forward.

Placing the slam in a historical context is undoubtedly useful, but the more important question to ask is *why*. Why did slam poetry develop as such a favorite of activists? Why do the poets have such passion for their art? Alix Olson and Amy Neevel (her activist partner) offer the following: "[slam poetry] is coalition building in its most useful form, suspending culturally enforced fear of, and alienation from, one another, and prodding connection from its lonely hiding place" (*Curve Magazine*). That "coalition building," that emphasis on the community—interestingly, a community of difference—is what sets slam poetry apart from many other performance art forms. Also, the solidarity Olson and Neevel claim that slam poetry generates has a distinctly underground tone, and allows for us to begin a discussion of slam poetry as subculture.

In an e-mail interview, Marc Smith states that "from the onset, [slam poetry] was in opposition to the traditional style of presenting poetry in a public forum. It continues to challenge the establishment sectors of the literary arts world." By the most fundamental definition of subculture—that is, a group that challenges an aspect or aspects of the mainstream culture

within which it resides—slam seems to fit the bill nicely. Slam poetry is a conscious challenge to the written page, and is viewed by many establishment poets as a deviant, lesser cousin to traditional poetry. He says of these poets: "[t]o protect their reputations and keep their credibility [sic] intact they resort to discrediting the quality and craft of performance poets from their lofty (and arbitrary) positions as the 'know alls' of the poetry domain." Although it is perhaps a less-than-balanced take on the matter, Smith's perspective does indicate much of the tension surrounding the establishment-versus-slam debate.

Examining the common criticisms of slam poetry can, in fact, lead to a rather generative discussion. In the appropriately titled "Criticizing the Poetry Slam," John Brady offers up many of the typical reasons slam poetry is denounced as trivial. Brady was, at the time his article was published, a political-science graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. One wonders why, precisely, he was so concerned with slam poetry, but his criticism nonetheless reflects common negative attitudes toward the phenomenon. He argues that slam poetry and open-mic nights serve only a limited function for a small segment of the population:

"Insofar as these events simply adjust to the exclusionary cultural system and indeed depend on it for their own 'bohemian' and 'alternative' allure, they function as conservative social devices. They simply make a bad situation bearable. In a society in which all had a stake in cultural production would poetry slams and open-mics even exist?" (Brady)

There are several problematic elements to Brady's statement. Firstly, he neglects to define what he means by "conservative social devices." Also, his grouping of poetry slams and open-mic nights is questionable (the two are categorically different affairs), and his argument that slam poetry is an insular phenomenon is blindingly false. But primarily, I would like to draw the focus to his last question: would slam poetry exist in a society in which everyone is a cultural producer? Perhaps not, but that is only because that is the sort of society slam poets are *trying to create*.

Brady's criticism, ironically enough, contradicts itself (and actually raises points that are helpful to the discussion of slam as subculture). In his article, he finds it "significant that many slams and open-mic nights are held . . . outside of socially-sanctioned locations for the presentation of art . . . This combination of populism and 'outsider' status represents a critical commentary on the dominant way cultural and aesthetic meaning is produced in society" (Brady). Is this an effort toward the egalitarian cultural production

Photo Courtesy http://onlineathens.com/images/060505/18664_512.jpg

that Brady claims will render the slam obsolete? Subcultural theorists have identified a similar challenging of mainstream values in the production modes of other subcultures. In an essay on the do-it-yourself nature of feminist cultural production, Doreen Piano cites Thomas McLaughlin's idea of "vernacular cultural criticism." Piano believes that feminist zines "[create] 'a space in which fundamental theoretical questioning of cultural systems manages . . . to occur'" (256). Together, McLaughlin and Piano's concepts can be applied to the slam. Just as riot-grrrl zines provide an outlet for the critique of mainstream culture, so too does the slam allow—and even encourage—this questioning.

I would argue, however, that slam poetry is not merely a commentary on cultural production—it instead takes the conventions of that commercialized, mass, popular production and warps them completely, to the point where they exist even beyond the conventions of subcultural production. In slam poetry, the line between cultural consumer and cultural producer is heavily blurred. The poets are not the *only* producers, just as the audience does not *always* only consume. The interactive format of the slam competition itself—with judges chosen at random from the audience and a constant and vibrant dynamic between the speakers and listeners—allows everyone to take part, even if in small ways, in the cultural production of the slam. The photograph above indicates the sort of interaction that is likely to take place at the slam, whether it is a small competition like the one shown or a large, national-level one. The audience is not expected to sit quietly until the poet is finished—in fact, they are encouraged by the nature of the event itself to laugh, to cheer, to *respond* to the poetry and especially to the person performing it. Jane Cassady, a local performance

poet in Syracuse, New York, has observed from her own experience in slams that "the audience is more engaged; there's a higher energy [level]." With such a degree of audience investment, Piano's point that "'doing' . . . rather than 'being'" (254) is what distinguishes members from non-members of a subculture is no longer quite so crucial a distinction. Although the audience may not be actual members of the slam poetry subculture, they are still a key element in it.

Critics of slam poetry too often point out its amateur, informal nature and underestimate what it is actually doing as a cultural (or dare I say subcultural) phenomenon. Literary activist and slam poet Guy LeCharles Gonzalez states that "[s]lam has opened poetry to an entire generation that had no use for it thanks to our educational system . . . It has provided a forum for those who have no home in the ivory towers of academia and an alternate outlet for those that do." Although the ivory-tower metaphor is quickly becoming a cliché in discussions about slam, it is this egalitarian, populist slant—that Brady is so quick to condemn—that is perhaps the most powerful aspect of slam poetry. Cassady says that the slam "took poetry way beyond the hipster kids in the coffee shop; it made it more accessible." Although some subcultures are based on exclusivity as a way of keeping mainstream outsiders from penetrating the spaces the subcultures had claimed as their own, the slam's openness and accessibility are in the same spirit of direct opposition to the mainstream (in this case, the "ivory tower") that typifies many other subcultures.

In the same breath as his statement above, Gonzales explains that the slam "is slowly and subversively creating a more enlightened society." While the goal of creating that "enlightened society" may not generally be included as a common characteristic of subcultures, the defiant, screw-convention attitudes of many slam poets are. He recalls the CCCS' definition—although perhaps an oversimplified one—of subcultures as uniformly deviant and in direct opposition to mainstream culture.

Perhaps the slam's crusade for enlightenment is a form of deviance in its own way. Many slam poems unabashedly confront the systems that exploit the poor and downtrodden, the racially marginalized, the politically exploited. Through their very effort to open the public's eyes, they resist the cultural institutions against which they are speaking. StaceyAnn Chin's poem "Open Letter to CNN, FOX NEWS," in response to the media's coverage of the Iraqi war, displays this quite clearly:

if you were to summon me

for 15 minutes of on air conversation
on any topic of your choosing
I would arrive on time
in my most revolutionary gear
because a few seconds of fame is a lot of power
in these times of digitally altered truths
we underground runners flirting seductive with the mainstream
have long since known the value of your coveted reviews.

This poem is valuable to this discussion on multiple levels. Firstly, it demonstrates slam poetry's need for currency. It exists very much within the socio-political world, and is responsive to the events that occur within it; a firsthand admission that those who slam are, on some level, "underground runners," and subcultural insurgents in a mainstream culture. Also, Chin's words soundly refute Brady's claim that "[t]hese events [poetry slams] are A-political because they do not point to anything consciously beyond themselves; that is, they do not engage the social relationships supporting a culture of exclusion and passivity." Slams do nothing but engage the relationships, social or otherwise, and exclusions that their poets witness on a daily basis; they provide a breeding ground for alternatives to the dominant paradigms and systems that perpetuate marginalization and oppression.

Photo Courtesy http://www.nyu.edu/nyutoday/archives/16/04/Images/Def-Poetry.jpg

As such, slam poetry is also a lead-by-example revolution in matters of diversity. Kyukendall and Walker noted with interest in their rhetorical study of *Def Poetry* "that nommo surpassed the lines of color and culture. On stage, poets became people who stood for a cause, had a sense of humor, or wanted to open the minds of others" (245). While this indicates that the slam is color- and culture-blind, and instead purpose-driven, there is also an element of the intentional rather than coincidental widening of the slam's social environment. Judith Halberstam points out that "queer poets of color like [StaceyAnn] Chin and Sri Lankan slam poet D'Lo have made the slam a forum for very different messages about love, race, and poetry" (168). This sort of diversity seems inbuilt to the slam, and that's where it differs from many other subcultures. Historically, they tend to be

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arranged along lines of race, class, and gender, but these barriers are much more malleable in slam poetry. This can be seen in the photograph at left, of the members and producers of the Broadway production of *Def Poetry Jam*. Poets and producers (and audience) alike constitute a mix of races, generations, and backgrounds—an appropriate representation for one of slam poetry's most defining elements.

The message slam poetry tries to send regarding diversity is also an invitation to consider the debate over slam poetry's validity with a more open mind. Jane Cassady offers an alternative to the usual binary of slam-versus-establishment poetry. She says that, in reality, there is a considerable amount of overlap between all the genres included under the blanket term of poetry. "You shouldn't have to decide whether you're a slam poet or an academic poet." Cassady calls herself a "performance poet" and moves between the written and spoken formats with relative ease. Other slam poets have attempted (and continue to attempt) to resolve this division: for example, four-time national slam winner Patricia Smith, in the early days of the slam, "squarely reconciled both [written and spoken poetry] with strength and finesse . . . she made it clear that performance has an absolute relationship to text" (Heintz). Poets like Smith encourage us to consider that the art forms are, although in some ways contradictory, perhaps not so different than they appear.

Indeed, slam poetry seems to be a natural incubator for this sort of paradox. On one hand, it defies all the conventions of "normal" poetry to the point of some very biting criticism, but on the other it has garnered a huge mainstream following through outlets like *Def Poetry* on HBO—and even Alix Olson, one of the more outspoken and politically active slam poets, has drawn audiences outside the typical demographic for slams. As StaceyAnn Chin wrote, the poets are "flirting seductive with the mainstream" ("Open Letter to CNN, FOX NEWS"). This nebulous definition of slam poetry's relationship to mass culture is not a new concept to the study of subcultures, long known to be an amorphous entity of its own. Vagueness aside, it is undeniable that the slam serves the important purpose of questioning our deep-seated cultural assumptions—but how it goes about that challenging is what makes it unique.

A review in *Girlfriends Magazine* states that Olson "prefers disruption to cynicism … this poetry packs some deft punches" (alixolson.com). Or as Canadian spoken-word poet Lisa B. says, "every piece I perform is a healing poem, whether I speak from a place of rage, arousal, grief, celebration,

or quiet reflection. To speak healing truth is a subversive act; this is why all of my poetry is political" (luckygoat.org). Slam poets are not content to sit back and provide commentary on what they observe, but instead "make poetry into the language of riot and change" (Halberstam 169). This active-over-passive purpose, often taken to extremes within the language of the slam, may be what makes establishment poets uncomfortable, but perhaps, quite simply, slam poetry is a *valid but different* art form.

Ultimately, the slam's intent is not to create a long-running debate over what constitutes "real" poetry, but to provide an alternative outlet for those who have been pushed aside by the mainstream, to create a place of support and solidarity for the oppressed, and to invite the rest of us to consider the valid-but-different. As Olson and Neevel urge:

"We need a common vocabulary, a shared poetry . . . we queers need to speak to each other: intergenerationally, trans-inclusively, race-consciously, sensitive to varying abilities, and sharply attentive to class politics. About our individual lives. About our possibilities for a common direction" (*Curve Magazine*).

Although they are speaking specifically to queer cultures here, the "shared poetry" Olson and Neevel call for is already, in some measure, present in the slam itself. "Intergenerationally," slam poets are of all ages, and those who are considered the "best" are from widely different generations. "Race-consciously," the slam—through the poetry and the nature of the event itself—is a deliberate discussion of race and diversity. "Sensitive to varying abilities," there are many different levels of writing ability within the slam, but it is often the passion that makes the poet. The slam, above all, is a place where marginalized groups and individuals can stand up and speak their minds. And, as a subculture, it provides the community with strength in numbers to make those messages heard. Slam poetry works on a very simple principle: If someone has something to say, he or she will not stand to be ignored for long. §

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