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# Poetry's Outsiders: Why the Academy Should Embrace Poetry Slam and Its Audiences

Jessica G. Simon

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**Poetry's Outsiders:  
Why the Academy Should Embrace Poetry Slam  
and Its Audiences**

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**Candidate for B.A. Degree in Policy Studies with Honors**

**May 2006**

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*Poetry is alive; poetry is allowed. – Bob Holman*

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## Abstract

This thesis addresses the problem of poetry's declining audience in America by investigating the relationship between the academic poetry and poetry slam communities. Primary and secondary research on the history and current state of these two poetry communities reveal that the academic poetry community does not currently embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences. First, an audience survey of the three largest Poetry Slam audiences in New York City and interviews with slam poets who perform for these audiences suggest that Poetry Slam has the ability to cultivate audiences for poetry outside of the academy. Second, the results of an online survey of poetry professors suggest that poets in the academic poetry community currently accept slam but distance themselves from it. Further, case studies of individual poets who cross between the academic and poetry slam communities show that there are positive benefits of collaboration between these two communities. As a result, I argue that the academic poetry community should embrace the poetry slam community for the benefit of all poetry communities in America. At a time when poetry's audiences are declining, the academy must recognize that poetry slams have the potential to cultivate audiences for all poetry communities. Only when the academy has embraced Poetry Slam can poets truly say they have done their best to bring poetry to the largest audience possible.

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## Preface

When I was a junior in high school, I competed in a poetry slam for a spot on the 2001 Washington, D.C. Youth Slam Team whose members would be flown out to Ann Arbor, Michigan to compete in the National Youth Poetry Slam. Before the slam, I practiced endlessly in my room to make sure each piece was the required three minutes or less, and that I could say everything that I wrote down. Although I had written poetry since the age of seven, I had never competed in an official slam before. At the slam, I performed three poems. After the third poem, the audience erupted into applause. I waited nervously for the tallied numbers, and finally, each judge lifted his or her score. Suddenly, there were more cheers. I was on the team! I was beaming when I took my place with the other five members of the team. This was my first real slam and I won! I was going to Ann Arbor, for my poetry!

As the date of the National Youth Slam drew close, my teammates and I practiced regularly with our coaches to prepare for the slam. Finally, at the end of April, we traveled to the National Youth Poetry Slam where 200 talented young people from around the country gather each year to share poetry and have fun. For the four days of the competition, every conversation seemed to carry a charge; the transcendent spirit of art was everywhere. And young poets were everywhere, doing ciphers (when poets stand in a circle to improvise poetry), drawing murals, practicing and reading verse, talking, and discussing art or politics. There was dancing, drumming, music, and poetry, lots and lots of poetry. Our team placed



sixth in the nation. After this experience, I continued to perform in the D.C. area with my team members up until I went to college.

When I enrolled in my first classes at Syracuse University, I immediately signed up for the poetry workshop with the only name I recognized in the creative writing department. I was eager to be serious about my poetry. Although I loved every minute I spent learning about poetry at Syracuse, I found that the poetry professors were not as interested in Slam as I was. The professors I met seemed to dismiss it as a form of music or hip-hop. On the other hand, in clubs on campus and in downtown coffee shops, a Poetry Slam scene was alive and well in Syracuse. I led a dual poetic lifestyle for my freshman and sophomore years of college, all the while asking the question, Why is slam poetry not considered poetry by my professors? After all, I had been involved in so many experiences by that time where slam poetry gave me the same transcendent experience I felt when dissecting a poem in my poetry workshops. Why was one form of poetry rightfully called poetry while the other was lumped with pop culture and loosely with “music”? Then, I started asking myself why slams are so popular in the first place. I decided to pursue a thesis project because I felt compelled to find the answers to these questions.

Originally, I thought I would ask page poets, professors, and performance poets about their definition of poetry, and then I would videotape their answers. This would shed light on the meaning of poetry and on how people defined it as an art form. Some professors encouraged me to try this project, but others were not as supportive. Mainly, professors questioned my ability to conduct such

interviews. Had I taken a class to learn such a skill? Did I know of so-and-so who did eight-hour interviews in order to truly capture his subjects? How did I plan to travel and talk to these poets? How would I record the interviews? How would I find the poets? Why would they talk to me? Had I read this book and that book?

Throughout my thesis process, I sought out several mentors and professors to help me shape my thesis topic. Although many helped to expand and advance my thinking or research on my general thesis topic, most could not seem to help me map out how to actually accomplish any of the projects I had in mind.

During the course of my junior thesis seminar, I chose to focus on the policy side of my topic, and eventually decided that I would research a large event that had recently occurred in the poetry world. I would address my original questions by researching the Poetry Foundation, a new branch of *Poetry Magazine*. A philanthropist named Ruth Lilly had recently donated 100 million dollars to *Poetry Magazine*, rendering it one of the richest poetry organizations in the world. The Poetry Foundation was formed with the exclusive purpose of deciding what to do with this money. My thesis was going to be an investigation into what was being done with this large gift. I would then relate this event to other changes happening in the art world. At the time, the newly appointed National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chairman, Dana Gioia, was attracting recognition for the arts and governmental support for national arts projects at a level the NEA had not seen in decades. Also, the national Poet Laureate, Billy Collins was writing best-selling poetry collections, and he had announced that there was a poetry renaissance happening in the United States. In order to

investigate the Poetry Foundation, I decided that I would intern at the organization. However, certain limitations (such as the fact that no one at the Foundation was willing to talk to me) made this goal unrealistic.

Since this thesis strategy was not succeeding, I had to re-think my topic again. During the second semester of my junior year, I spent a semester in New York City interning at the High School for Leadership and Public Service. At the same time, I tried to expose myself to the large poetry scene, Slam and otherwise, that exists in New York City. Since I was teaching and taking classes, I had little time to write or work on my supposed “thesis,” which so far was nothing but a lot of articles, books, and questions. As the semester came to a close, I felt determined to make something of my thesis.

I stayed in New York City over the summer and dedicated my time to conducting research for my thesis. In May, I had come to the conclusion that I would study the poetry slam community and the academic poetry community as they exist today. Then, I would investigate how these two communities relate to one another. I would conduct a survey of the audiences of poetry slams, and do interviews with slam poets. Then, I would research the literature and survey poetry professors. My current thesis is about these findings.

## Advice to Future Honors Students

This story reveals the source of the questions that inform this thesis. However, it is important to note that these questions did not lead directly to a thesis topic. In reality, I had to pursue and give up two other thesis topics before arriving at my current one. Although I learned something each time a topic failed, it took me longer than I expected to find a focus for my project. What helped is that I started with questions for which I wanted answers. This desire to find the “answers” led me on the intellectual journey that resulted in this paper. My advice for future honors students is that if you feel compelled to do a thesis, start with the questions that seem to keep yelling at you for answers.

## Introduction

Luis J. Rodriguez, in his essay “Crossing Boundaries, Crossing Cultures: Poetry, Performance, and the New American Revolution,” estimates that approximately forty American cities now sponsor poetry slams, and that spoken word performances and “multi-arts collaborations” are happening not only in New York City and Los Angeles but also in such locales as Alaska and the Virgin Islands (Rodriguez 208).

There has been a critical discourse in recent years about the subject of whether or not poetry in America is dead as an art form. The following headlines have appeared from 1993 -2004: “Dead or alive? Poetry at risk,” in *Insight on the News*; “Poetry Is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?” in *Newsweek*; and “Of Lapdogs and Loners: American Poetry Today,” in the *New Criterion*. Columns from the *Boston Herald*, and *The New York Times* have discussed whether or not poetry as an art form has an audience or relevance in modern society.

Additionally, the National Endowment for the Arts recently released a national study that found the percentage of people who read or listen to poetry has decreased substantially in the past two decades. Dana Gioia, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, argued in his essay “Can Poetry Matter?” in 1991 that poetry is centered in the academy and is out of touch with readers outside this community.

On the other hand, Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate, said a “poetry renaissance,” sparked by public poetry readings, has helped to revive public interest in poetry (Collins xxi). A poetry slam is a type of public reading that

emerged in Chicago in the late 1980s. It is a competitive poetry reading where judges chosen from the audience rate poems on a scale of 1-10 based on content and delivery.

Currently, the academic poetry community, which is composed mainly of professors and students in Master of Fine Arts (MFA) or Master of Arts (MA) graduate creative writing programs for poetry, pays little attention to the poetry slam community and its audiences. At the same time, the poetry slam community, which mainly resides in urban centers in cafés, bars or auditoriums, does not interact much with the academic poetry community. Although poets in each community are aware of each other's existence, few collaborate with each other. Nevertheless, many poets in both communities are interested in promoting poetry in the United States. Both communities require audiences; however, "slam poets" I interviewed point out that there are traditional poetry readings where the reader speaks in a monotone and cannot hold the audience's attention. Poetry professors I surveyed expressed disinterest in slams where performance often takes precedence over other poetic aspects.

I argue in this thesis that the academic poetry community should embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences because poetry slams cultivate audiences for poetry outside of the academy. In order to present this argument, I describe the history of these two communities, as well as the way they exist in the United States today. Then, I discuss how the two communities relate to one another. Specifically, I argue that my research shows that those in the academic poetry community currently do not embrace the poetry slam community and its

audiences. And further, that those in the academic poetry community should embrace the poetry slam community and its audiences for the benefit of all poetry communities in the United States. “Embrace,” for the purpose of this thesis, means three specific actions. Examples of poets or programs that exhibit these definitions of “embrace” are on the page numbers listed after each action description. Poets in the academic poetry community should:

- 1) Acknowledge Poetry Slam, and its potential to cultivate audiences for poetry, in discussions, books, and articles on the current state of poetry today. (See What Page 76)
- 2) Organize and support events and field trips that expose members of the academic poetry community to Slam in order to foster communication, education, and collaboration between the two communities. (See Page 84)
- 3) Provide monetary support or volunteers for “poetry-in-the-schools” programs in grade schools that use the strengths of both Poetry Slam and “page poetry” to create audiences for poetry. (See page 87)

In most of the literature I read, writers almost always took on the aesthetic question of whether or not slam poetry is poetry, and whether or not it is good poetry as compared to “academic” poetry. Sometimes, but not always, the writer would also address the social question of Poetry Slam’s role the United States. This social question, namely, What is Poetry Slam’s role as a poetry community that cultivates audiences for poetry, is the question addressed in this thesis. Any attempt to answer the aesthetic question would distract from a true discussion of the way the

academic poetry and poetry slam communities currently exist and function today. Consequently, I will avoid any discussion of aesthetics in this thesis. I will not present arguments about whether the work performed in poetry slams is poetry or whether or not it is good poetry. I will not attempt to define what poetry is or is not. Instead, this thesis will attempt to address a current problem (poetry's decreasing audience) by investigating the academic poetry community's relationship to a poetry community that deliberately attempts to cultivate poetry audiences.



## Chapter 1 — Research Methods

In addition to secondary literature research, I gathered primary research data from the following sources: an audience survey of the three largest poetry slam venues in New York City, interviews with slam poets and nonprofit leaders, and an online survey of poetry professors. This chapter describes the research methods used for my primary research.

### *Audience Survey*

I conducted an informal audience survey at the three largest poetry slam venues in New York City: the Bowery Poetry Club, Nuyorican Poets Café, and louderARTS Bar 13. The goal was to gather statistical information about the audiences of poetry slams in New York City to test the assumptions that poetry slam audiences are composed of (1) all poets, (2) all performance poets, (3) and mostly those who do not read poetry. Also, since there is little information beyond speculation about Slam audiences, I wanted to gather some accurate demographic data about this population. This study has never been conducted before.

The data were gathered from a non-random survey of audience members at four different poetry slam events in New York City in July of 2005. The three venues were chosen because they are the largest and most well-known poetry slam venues in New York City. I distributed the survey to 207 people and received 189 surveys back.

I designed the survey instrument with assistance from my advisor William Coplin in the Public Affairs Department at Syracuse University. I conducted one pilot of the survey by email. This respondent completed the survey in two minutes and did not report any problems or concerns.

The target population is all those who attended the Nuyorican Poets Café Friday Night Slam, Bowery Poetry Club Thursday Night Slam, and the louderARTS LouderMondays poetry slam on the nights that I handed out the survey. My sample is a non-random sample or a convenience sample. The table below shows the details of the survey by venue.

***Survey Details by Venue***

	Date of Survey	Target Population	Sample Size (surveys I got back)	Percentage of Target Population Surveyed
Bowery Poetry Club	7/28/05	85	59	70%
louderARTS Bar 13	7/11/05	51	47	92%
Nuyorican Poets Café	7/22/05 and 7/29/06	120 (manager's estimate)	83	70%
Totals		376	189	

My response rate is high because I handed the surveys out personally to respondents and waited either in the venue or on the street until they were finished completing out the survey. The reasons why I could not have a larger sampling frame at the Nuyorican Poets Café are explained below. At the Bowery Poetry Club and at the louderARTS Slams, I was allowed to make an announcement at the slam and personally hand out the surveys to all those at the event, and to those

who came in the door afterwards.

At the Bowery Poetry Club, the room where the slam takes place is curtained off from the café and a small stage occupies the back wall. In front of the stage, chairs form compact rows all the way to the bar, which takes up the rest of the space near the diagonal curtain. It is possible that some who took the survey at this venue had already taken the survey at a Nuyorican or louderARTS slam, but for the most part, repeats told me they had done the survey already and did not take it again. The hosts and administrators of the slam assisted me with my research. The target audience at this slam was 85, hand-counted. Sixteen poets were excluded from this count and the target population because they were competing in the slam on the poetry slam teams.

At louderARTS, I made an announcement during the open mic before the slam that I would be handing out surveys, and since the venue is small, I was sure I handed a survey to every person in the bar and that I collected them all. Two are missing because one audience member chose to fill out only half of the survey and another chose not to fill it out at all.

However, at the Nuyorican Poets Café, I could not get permission from the manager to administer my survey and thus had to find an alternative way to collect data. When I first asked the host of the slam at the time if I could distribute a survey, she was supportive, but when I spoke with the manager outside of the café the night of the survey, he dismissed me and would not let me hand out the surveys inside the venue. Since the event is so large, it would have been impossible to simply hand them out and collect them myself without his

assistance. I persisted and tried to explain to him that this was for a thesis project that it is for the benefit of the poetry community. He did not want to hear what I had to say and simply asked if I wanted to watch the slam. I paid the cover, went into the slam and considered alternatives. After the show, I pleaded with the manager to let me distribute the surveys and offered to show him a sample of the survey. He briefly looked at it, handed it back, and said nothing.

This was extremely disappointing, but I decided to go back to East 3rd street the next week to hand out surveys to those standing outside in line for the Friday night slam. I had two clipboards, a backpack, and a bunch of pens and a quick explanation of what the survey was about. I handed out the surveys, each on a clipboard, two at a time down the line, until the manager came outside to collect the money, at which point I quickly packed up and left. Since I only received 24 surveys that night, I decided to come back the next week. The next week, I used a different strategy. I forgot about the clipboards and simply handed a survey and pen to as many people as were in line and collected the surveys as they were completed. That night, I collected 59 surveys.

### ***Quality of Data***

First, some of the survey questions may have been problematic. Several comments were written on the surveys that identified limitations of the survey instrument. For example, the possible responses provided for Question #8, “How often do you buy poetry books?” did not include any answers or an additional question about how many people take poetry books from the library, thus ignoring

the way class would affect how a person engages with poetry in their spare time. There are probably many people who cannot afford to buy poetry collections and nevertheless use the library to read poetry in their spare time.

Then, for Question #7 “Do you read poetry?” the survey may have betrayed objectivity and made the test taker feel embarrassed to put “no” for this question as there may be a sort of stigma on responding “no” to this question at some poetry venues. Also, the question may not have been clear enough, because, if someone reads a poem when they see one on a wall or in a newspaper, does that mean they “read” poetry or not? The respondent may have been confused about this. I mention this because there was more than one instance where the respondent crossed out their answer for this question. Some respondents checked “no,” crossed it out, and then checked “yes,” or vice versa.

Then, there were specific problems at each poetry venue that was surveyed. At the Bowery Poetry Club many people were moving in and out of the Café and since I could not really stand at the door after the slam started, it was hard to keep track of newcomers. I couldn’t give the poets a survey because they were performing or waiting to perform, with the exception of some poets who offered to take a survey and complete it. This included the host and the administrative organizer of the slams.

At louderARTS Bar 13, the “slam” was actually a “Queer 2 slam,” which I did not realize prior to the reading. This event is meant to showcase queer writers and to encourage and welcome queer writers or writing about queer topics using

the format of a slam. Additional problems with the survey process at this venue were:

- A couple of those surveyed left before the slam started and thus were not present for the slam.
- Although a slam was supposed to happen, no one wanted to slam, so there was just a performance poetry open mic and because of the theme of the reading, all those reading had to read one queer poet's poem from a book and then their own poem.
- Some people surveyed were poets/louderARTS members and not just audience members.
- This event took place during the summertime "off season" of slam.

Lastly, at the Nuyorican Poets Café, the main problem was that I could not distribute the survey to all those standing in line and definitely not to all those who attended the slam.

The data from the surveys can be generalized to the target population, which consists of the audience members present at each venue on the night I conducted the survey. However, because I used convenience samples, the data cannot be generalized to the entire poetry slam community.

### ***Interviews***

In the course of my research, I interviewed a professor, the executive director of Poetry Slam, Incorporated, and nine slam poets. The table below shows the details of each interview. Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or on the phone. Excerpts are included on the attached audio CD. Short bios of all those interviewed are included after the table.

*Interview Data*

Date of Interview	Name of Interviewee	How Interviewed?	Venue Represented	Length of Interview
	<b>Slam Poets</b>		<b>New York City</b>	
11/17/05	1. Taylor Mali	Phone	Bowery	30 min.
11/17/05	2. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz	Recorded in person	Bowery	30 min.
11/17/05	3. Shappy	Recorded in person	Bowery	10 min.
11/17/05	4. Chad Anderson	Recorded in person	Bowery	20 min.
11/17/05	5. Eliel Lucero	Recorded in person	Bar 13	20 min.
12/10/05	6. Marty McConnell	Phone	Bar 13	30 min.
11/18/05	7. Nathan P.	Recorded in person	Nuyorican	20 min.
11/19/05	8. Lauren Brady	Recorded in person	Nuyorican	60 min.
12/20/05	9. Sonya Renee	In person (notes)	<b>Washington D.C.</b> Individual Slam Champion 2004	30 min.
	<b>Nonprofit Leaders</b>			
12/5/05	Steve Marsh	Phone	Poetry Slam Incorporated	20 min.
12/20/05	Charneice Fox	In person (notes)	<b>Washington, D.C.</b> Genesis Poets Music and Americans for the Arts	30 min.
	<b>Professor</b>		Syracuse University	
12/1/05	Popular Culture Professor Robert Thompson	In person (notes)	Newhouse School of Public Communications	20 min.

### ***Interview Participants***

**Taylor Mali** is a former teacher who now makes his living as a professional poet. One of the original poets to appear on the HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, he is the only person to have won the National Poetry Slam Championship four times. Taylor is also the former executive director of Poetry Slam, Inc. (Mali Email).

**Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz** is a writer living in New York City. “Founder and host of the three-time National Poetry Slam Championship Venue, *Urbana*,” Cristin has currently published three books of poetry and three screenplays. “She recently finished a month-long project / performance with the Sydney Opera House and is currently working on an oral history of the slam movement for Soft Skull Press” (“Bio” Cristin).

**Shappy Seasholtz** “has competed at a National Poetry Slam only once so far for the Mad Bar team in 2000. He made it as far as the individual semis and was asked to perform in Denmark with Beau Sia and Shayne Koyczan. Shappy has had two books published by Kapow! Press, including *Little Book of Ass* which won a Firecracker Award for best poetry in 2000. He also has a CD called *Poet/Comedian/Asshole* available.” (“Shappy’s Bio”).

**Chad Anderson** is a spoken word poet and college professor in New Jersey. A member of the 2005 NYC Urbana slam poetry team, Chad has featured at Javitz Center, Columbia University, and at the Virgin Megastore in New York. He has shared the spotlight with Saul Williams, Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka, and released his second CD this year, *Quo Vadimus* (Anderson Email).



**Marty McConnell** “transplanted herself from Chicago to New York City in 1999, after completing three national tours with the Morrigan, an all-female performance poetry troupe she co-founded. She received her Masters of Fine Arts in creative writing/poetry from Sarah Lawrence College, and competed in the 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 National Poetry Slams with the NYC/Union Square team. She is a member of the louderARTS Project, which runs two reading series, ongoing workshops, and collaborative performances in New York City. She appeared on both the second and fifth season of HBO’s *Def Poetry Jam*” (“Bio”).

**Eliel Lucero** is “a native New Yorker of Dominican descent, who began writing at the age of 14. Eliel decided to read his poetry for the first time, during the summer of 2003, after visiting the Acentos Bronx Poetry Showcase. With the help of his family at Acentos and the louderARTS Project, Eliel has taken his work to heights he never imagined. Eliel has been featured at a number of New York readings, including the Acentos Bronx reading series, where he first read his poetry. He is also the author of a chapbook, *View From the Watchtower*” (Lucero Email)

**Nathan Pearson** “has been a host at the Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe since the fall of 2000, the same year that he was a Grand Slam Finalist. The last five years have seen Wednesday nights take on an upbeat energy that Nathan is now about to bring to the Friday night slam as the new Slam Master. His poetry has taken him across the country, performing at poetry venues, colleges, and universities. He has appeared in two off-Broadway poetic stage plays, as well as authored two chapbooks, *Madness* and *The Colors of My Mind*. The summer of 2005 saw the

completion and release of his CD, *Chalklines on Black Asphalt* (“Nathan Bio”).

**Lauren Brady** is originally from New York and teaches high school math in Harlem. She worked for the Democratic National Committee through the 2004 Presidential Election and performed at the “Code Red: Stop the Bush Agenda” Central Park protest at the Republican National Convention. She read at this year’s New York City World Hunger Year Event, has been recognized as *NY Poet’s* featured poet of the month, and is a 2005 Nuyorican Grand Slam Finalist and Team Member (Brady Email).

**Steve Marsh** is currently “the Executive Director of Poetry Slam, Incorporated, the non-profit organization that administers all the “official” poetry slams in the world and brings the National Poetry Slam, the largest single performance poetry festival, to a new city in North America each year.” He has published many poems, five self-published chapbooks, and one CD of his original work (“Steve”)

**Robert J. Thompson** is “the founding director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University where he is also a Trustee Professor of Television and Popular Culture at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.” Thompson is the author or editor of five books including *Television’s Second Golden Age* (Continuum, 1996) and *Television Studies* (Praeger 1989). Hundreds of radio and TV programs have featured Professor Thompson’s commentary including CBS’s *60 Minutes* and NBC’s *Dateline* (“Robert Thompson”).

**Sonya Renee** is a Washington, D.C.-based performance poet who won the 2004 National CITE Slam and currently performs her work around the country. She has just released a CD of her work, *Thick Girl* (“Sonya”).

**Charneice Fox** is the vice-president of Genesis Poets Music (GPM), Inc. which seeks to “provide a [community and] venue for local poets, story tellers and oral historians.” She is a professional spoken word artist, has published two books of poetry, and produced and written two shorts films. She is currently working on a feature film with her writers group titled *Straight, No Chaser*. In April 2005, Charneice was nominated for the Poetry Foundation’s Ruth D. Lilly Fellowship for Young Writers. (“Charneice”).

### ***Poetry Professor Survey***

With the help of survey expert Carol Dwyer in the Public Affairs program in Maxwell School of Citizenship, I created an anonymous online survey for poetry professors. Professors were contacted by email and I sent the survey link to approximately thirty relevant faculty members, either directly or through administrators in the graduate creative writing programs at six higher education institutions (Syracuse University, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, New York University, New School for Social Research, and Brooklyn College). I received seven responses to this survey. I made it optional for the survey respondents to provide their contact information, but all of the respondents chose not to identify themselves.

## Chapter 2 — History of Poetry Slam

*We disdain/ competition and its ally war/and we are fighting for our lives/ and the spinning/ of poetry's cocoon of action/ in your dailiness. We refuse/ to meld the contradictions but/ will always walk the razor/ for your love.*

- From Bob Holman's "Disclaimer"

When you enter the Nuyorican Poets Café, it feels like a "slam" scene. You pass a bar on your right that opens into the main area. The room is dark, with a small spotlight on the stage, on which one or two mics stand tall. Huge dream-like paintings decorate the brick walls with deep colors. The balcony above juts out into the geographic space of the café. Young people fill this balcony and the floor below crowding the tables, sitting cross-legged in front of the stage, filling the doorway near the exit sign, or packing into a crowd of those who came in too late to get a better spot. Although ages are varied, it seems almost everyone in the place is young and vibrant.

Music beats behind the conversations of high school students, college students, young hipsters, and poets, who talk and carouse until, about an hour or so later than planned, the host calls for the attention of the audience. He greets them, and introduces the slammers, who are a diverse bunch, as usual, representing different backgrounds, races, and economic classes. By now, the host has given small scorecards to five different individuals or groups in the audience, and has instructed them on how to use these tools. The host jumps onto the stage, which is adorned with a rug and a mic. He winks at the judges, greets

the audience, and starts the slam by asking, “Who here has never been to a poetry slam?” A bunch of folks raise their hands, and so the host says, “Okay, well, here’s how it goes.”

A poetry slam is a competitive poetry reading where judges chosen from the audience rate poems on a scale of 1-10 based on content and delivery. The basic rules are that (1) there is a three-minute time limit per poem, (2) no props can be used, and (3) the poems must be original works. As an example of enforcement, Taylor Mali, one of the poets I interviewed, was once disqualified for using his belt during a poem. Although this basic structure applies, some elements of the format vary by venue, region, and level of competition. The number of judges, the scoring point system, the criteria on which poets are judged, the time limit, and the rule requiring that all the poems be original work are all aspects of the slam that may be adjusted by whoever is hosting. For example, in National Poetry Slams, where teams of poets compete against each other, group pieces are allowed. The group pieces, however, still must be original creative works and last no longer than three minutes.

In print and in the slam community, construction worker/poet/performance artist Marc Smith is known as the founder of Slam and the Chicago jazz club called the “Green Mill” is known to be Slam’s birthplace (Glazner 235). Although Smith is called the founder of Slam in *Spoken Word Revolution (SWR)*, a collection of essays and poems about Poetry Slam, this book also describes the multi-faceted Chicago art scene and community out of which slam originated.

### *Origin and Predecessors*

In the introduction to *Spoken Word Revolution (SWR)*, the editor Mark Eleveld essentially argues that Slam draws inspiration from the Beat poets' rebellion against the academic institution. A rejection of entrance into an elite circle of "academic" poets is what, in part, prompted Marc Smith to create an alternative poetry show that shamelessly combined poetry with performance (Eleveld 2). Eleveld expresses his and perhaps Smith's opinion of the academy at the time:

Instead of art being an attempt to change social problems, or to evaluate the realities of existence, as modernism did, the value became the art in and of itself the New Critics were safe and elitist, and they swept into the academy. (Eleveld 11)

The New Criticism was actually created in the academy and then taken up by poets who fled into higher education institutions after World War II, when the academy was expanding significantly, and teachers were in demand. At the same time, the Beats consciously rejected the New Criticism and the academy as an institution in favor of bohemian lifestyles and ideals (Eleveld 12).

Jeffrey McDaniel is an acclaimed performance poet who has competed in many National Poetry Slams (Lux 153). He has also published three collections of poetry, and his poems have appeared in such "academic" publications as *Ploughshares* and *The Best American Poetry, 1994* (Eleveld 234). He is now a poetry professor at Sarah Lawrence's graduate creative writing program and argues in his essay "Slam and the Academy" that comparing "slammers" to the Beats is a flawed analogy because the Beat movement evolved out of a "more

conservative era,” and that the Beats were “more intellectual, more anti-establishment” than contemporary slammers. McDaniel argues that today’s “slammers” pay lip-service to a counter-culture but are “often eager to be assimilated into mainstream culture through MTV, commercials, movies, even electronic poetry billboards on the Sunset Strip” (McDaniel 35). However, McDaniel adds in a counter argument to himself, that “like the Beats, the slammers have provided a necessary breath of fresh air” since slammers are in touch with the “wild, irreverent spirit of poetry so often missing in university workshops, or stuffy more traditional readings” (McDaniel 36).

When I interviewed Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, she expressed a different opinion of Slam’s relationship to the Beats. She explained that Slam was compared to the Beats because there were no terms with which to describe Slam in its infancy. She said, “There was no categorization for Slam when it started, so all the press when it first started, would describe it as ‘the new Beats,’ and no one knew how to define it” (Aptowicz).

Essays in *Spoken Word Revolution* mention two art scenes that contributed to the environment out of which the Slam emerged; the Taos Poetry Circus, and the Chicago performance art scene. Mark Eleveld, the editor of *SWR*, points out that poets who participated in the Beat movement, such as Quincy Troupe, Jr., and Kent Foreman, also participated in the beginning of the Slam movement and influenced the first generation of “slam poets” (Eleveld 12). Specifically, Beat poets participated in “poetry bouts,” or poetry competitions that preceded slams. “Poetry bouts” appeared in 1980, out of a community of poets from the Chicago

area. Al Simmons, a poet, suggested at a bar that two poets who didn't like each other's poetry should battle their disagreement out in a "poetry boxing match" (Jacobus 84). Although this is now a colloquialism for describing slams on websites, these poets at the time meant the term literally. They set up a ring with ring girls and judges. Before they ran the first match, they loosely established the World Poetry Association, a group that would supervise and run the matches. The first "bout" took place in 1981 and drew some Chicago poetry scene press, from which emerged the idea to take the "bout" idea to a new event: a "poetry circus" in Taos, New Mexico. The organizers of the event got together and Terry Jacobus, one of the original creators of the "poetry bouts," gathered the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky to participate in this poetry boxing match (Jacobus 84).

The match took place at the first Taos Poetry Circus in 1986. The organizers noticed that, for the first time, poetry was drawing an audience. The "poetry bout" drew people to the Taos poetry scene that normally did not come out to regular poetry readings. This week-long event was held in Taos every year for the next twenty years. Dubbed the "World Championship Poetry Bout," it yielded winners who eventually became successful "academic" names such as Ntozake Shange, Sherman Alexie, and Andrei Codrescu (Jacobus 88). In descriptions of Taos in *SWR*, Eleveld writes that "leftover from the Beatnick era, high-ranking academic poets and slam poet crossovers were more the norm than the exception [in Taos]" (80). The organizers of the poetry circus noticed that "if you call a poetry reading a 'reading,' you never know how many will show. If



you call a poetry gathering a ‘competition,’ they will come.” Then, Jacobus, himself a three-time poetry bout champion, adds that, “in either case, poetry still breathes, and in either case, poetry wins” (89).

The second Chicago art scene that led to the creation of Slam was the performance art scene. According to performance artist/poet Jean Howard, the performance art scene in Chicago in the early 1980s was flourishing, but poetry readings were drawing small audiences (65). Howard writes that two high-profile performance artists at the time were Chicagoans: Laurie Anderson, a violinist/storyteller, and Karen Finley a.k.a. Annie Sprinkle, a feminist performance artist known mostly for a controversial performance that resulted in the withdrawal of her National Endowment for the Arts funding (65).

During this time, Marc Smith was busy running a poetry series at the Get Me High Lounge that featured performance art mixed with poetry (Howard 65). The performance art community that worked on this series created work that helped to expand the number of venues available for performance art, which in turn encouraged Smith and his fellow poets to continue working on performance pieces that mixed poetry and performance. These performances, they found, drew larger audiences for poetry and/or performance art than events that formally featured either poetry or performance art. Out of these successes, Marc Smith started the Sunday night performance poetry show at the Green Mill (66).

In *SWR*, Marc Smith writes that, “When I started nobody wanted to go to poetry readings. Slam gave it life... a community where you didn’t have to be a special something, feel bad that you weren’t educated a special way.” Although

1986 was the year of the first Taos Poetry Circus, it was also the year when Marc Smith organized what he called “poetry cabarets,” at the Green Mill lounge. At first, there was no competition at the Green Mill, only a three-hour variety show of poetry performance. He and other Chicago poets collaborated to create performance pieces each week. Smith writes that he started the reading to increase the audience for “poetry as a spoken art form.” Smith was sick of the way the general public looked at poetry and blamed what he calls their “disdain” for poetry on the structure of the poetry reading. Smith decided to identify what needed to be changed about the typical reading and try to change it (Smith 117).

One part of this change was the addition of a competition to the Green Mill poetry show. At first, it was a way to fill up time, since Smith’s poetry troupe could not come up with new sketches every week to fill up the whole cabaret time. However, Smith writes that when they did the first competition, “Everyone, even the barflies, listened...” (Eleveld 2). Jeffrey McDaniel notes that “Smith conceived of the slam as an “anti-competition, in that it makes fun of literary mandarins by picking judges randomly from the audience” (McDaniel 36).

Steve Marsh, the Executive Director of Poetry Slam, Incorporated (PSI), says that, after 1986, Slam spread to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Then, in the following two to three years, it traveled to Boston, San Francisco, New York City and Anchorage, Alaska. By 1990, two teams competed in a National Poetry Slam competition (Marsh).

### *1990s — Development*

In 1991, Marc Smith contacted poetry venues all over the country to bring together eight teams at the National Poetry Slam. The final slam at this event was a sold-out show in front of 750 people (Smith 119). In 1995, 27 teams participated. This was when the discussion began about the need for “a permanent structure” for Slam. In August of 1997, Poetry Slam, Incorporated was born, with Marc Smith as President (Marsh). This nonprofit 501(c)(3) was created in 1997 after poets at the National Poetry Slam met and decided that Slam needed a central organizational body (Marsh). The mission of Poetry Slam, Incorporated is “to advocate, promote, support, witness, and/or perpetuate the art of performance poetry” (“About”). In addition to these goals, the organization seeks:

- To enhance the perception of literary merit and legitimacy of performance poetry as an art form.
- To manage the international affairs of the National Poetry Slam community.
- To protect the artistic and financial interests of the National Poetry Slam community.
- To promote and perpetuate the National Poetry Slam.

Also, the organization “registers” slams on an international level as “official Slam venues” if they meet certain requirements, such as an attendance minimum (35 audience members at least once per month, not including poets) and if they follow some basic structural guidelines of a slam as laid out by PSI. When asked about the biggest event in the United States, Marsh estimated that the Los Angeles “Da Poetry Lounge” slam is the largest, with a regular audience of 400 (Marsh).

Smith differentiates poetry slams that happen in hundreds of locales nationwide from the structure of the National Slam competition, which he says was created when the Chicago slam team went to San Francisco in 1989. In the National competition, teams of poets compete in “a four-day tournament consisting of preliminary, semi-final, and final competition nights with five judges selected from the audience” (Smith 119).

### ***The Poetry Slam Community Today***

Marsh said that, in 2005, there were 108 registered slams in the U.S. and one registered slam each in Canada, Germany, France, and Great Britain. Also by that year, the National Poetry Slam featured 72 teams at the event in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Marsh).

### ***Form Versus Format***

Marsh maintained that there are probably four times as many unregistered slams as there are registered ones. When asked whether all of the unregistered slams are, in fact, slams, Marsh said, “Some of them are slams. Slam is a set of rules about how to engage in a competition.” Then, when asked why anyone would want to call something a slam when it isn’t one, he said, “It’s a cool word... makes it sound hip to some people who [want] an edgy poetry reading. They want to associate it more with hip-hop and not old blue-haired ladies....” The significance of this comment is that Marsh described Slam as a set of rules,

which seems to indicate that Slam is a format and not a form of poetry. It is a competition and not a new iambic strategy. Poetry slams evolved out of an attempt to revitalize the poetry reading by emphasizing the importance of performance as well as content.

In his essay on Slam's relationship to the academy, McDaniel also describes poetry slams as a poetry reading format and not as a form of poetry. Jeffrey McDaniel writes that "writing strictly for competition's sake often results in formulaic, predictable pieces, ill-advised re-runs or sequels, in which it seems like the poet is trying to be elected by the judges" (37). "Still," he adds, "even with its shortcomings, most slams are a lot of fun which is more than can be said about some poetry readings" (37). McDaniel makes the distinction that it is the competition aspect of the slam which somewhat encourages "formulaic, predictable pieces," and compares the slam to other poetry readings thereby referencing poetry slam in relation to other poetry reading formats (37). One of Marc Smith's original goals for Slam was to use it to increase the audience for poetry. The next chapter will discuss whether or not Slam has achieved this goal and, if it did, then how.

Below is a time line of the history of Poetry Slam from the anthology *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (235-37). It is supplemented with details I learned from my interview with Steve Marsh, the Executive Director of Poetry Incorporated.

- 1984 —Get Me High Lounge series starts, to “breath life into the open mike poetry format”
- 1986 — Smith starts poetry show at Green Mill. And soon after the competition, Smith “draws on baseball and bridge terminology for the name, and institutes the basic features of the competition, including judges chosen from the audience and cash prizes for the winners.”
- 1987-90 - Ann Arbor, MI begins slams in 1987, New York in 1989, San Francisco and Anchorage, Alaska in 1990. Nuyorican becomes one of the best known venues for Slam.
- 1990 — First ever National Poetry Slam - Chicago and San Francisco
- 1991 — 8 cities compete in the National Slam, “National Poetry Slam” becomes the name of the event, three-minute rule is introduced.
- 1992 — 17 teams from 17 cities compete at National Slam in Boston, includes first ever Native American slam team
- 1995 — 27 teams compete at the National Poetry Slam— computerized scoring is added along with three-team rounds
- 1996 — 27 teams again – *Slamnation* is filmed, and premieres at Sundance Film Festival, generates media for Slam
- 1997 — 33 teams – Poetry Slam Incorporated is born with Marc Smith as President
- 1998 — 45 teams
- 1999 — 10th annual National Slam includes 48 teams
- 2005 — 72 teams participate in Albuquerque, NM National Poetry Slam (Limit for the competition is now 80 teams)

### Chapter 3 — Poetry Slam, Its Audiences, and Its Potential: Audience Survey in New York City

As shown in the previous chapter, Poetry Slam has expanded greatly over the past twenty years. Poetry slams now take place at a wide range of venues all over the country. In a survey of audiences at the three largest poetry slam venues in New York City, I found that venue was the largest contributing factor in determining the kind of audience that showed up for different poetry slams. This chapter includes general findings of the audience survey and a discussion about how poetry slams cultivate audiences.

Across all three poetry venues that I surveyed, audience members overwhelmingly responded that they read poetry. Of the 189 audience members surveyed, 85 percent responded that they read poetry. Sixty-three percent of the audience members overall responded that they do not perform poetry. These findings suggest that most of the audience members surveyed are readers as well as listeners of poetry, and most of them are not performance poets. Since they do not perform poetry, it can be inferred that they do not participate in poetry slams and, thus, are not directly a part of the poetry slam community.

The audience members surveyed were also not participants in the academic poetry community. This is important because, as Dana Gioia previously pointed out, poets in the academic poetry community have trouble cultivating readers outside of their community. Of the 139 audience members who answered the write-in question “Which degree are you working on or have completed?” only one wrote that he or she was studying creative writing as an undergraduate

discipline, and only two wrote in that they were working on a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry. On the contrary, audience members were working on degrees in a wide variety of fields ranging from English to Nursing or Criminology. Regardless of which degree they were working on, audience members at all three venues were highly educated. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed were either in college, had a college degree, were working on an advanced degree, or had an advanced degree. Therefore, the audience members surveyed were overwhelmingly educated, and yet were not members of the academic poetry community.

In terms of age, the largest percentage of audience members was in their twenties. However, for other age groups, there were differences across venues. Of the Nuyorican audience members surveyed, 80 percent were between 20 and 31 years old. However, at the Bowery, although 64 percent of those surveyed were in their 20s, an additional 20 percent were aged 15-19 years old. Then, at louderARTS, there were just as many 20-25 year olds as there were 31-50 year olds.

Across the three venues, the survey revealed that more females than males were present. The audiences were also diverse. At each venue, there was no racial majority. At the Nuyorican Poets Café, black and Latino audience members combined to create a majority. At the two other venues, white audience members composed about a quarter of the audience; as for other racial groups (black, Latino, mixed, Asian) each was represented by approximately ten percent of the audience.



Poet and English Professor at Northwestern, Paul Breslin, wrote in his essay, "The Sign of Democracy and the Terms of Poetry," that he attended a Robert Pinsky reading at Borders Books when Pinsky was Poet Laureate of the United States, and found that the audience was all white, except for one black person and a few Asians and Hispanics (Breslin 178). Then, at a language poet's reading at a hip Chicago club, Breslin found that although there was "more leather, pierced body parts and punk hair," the audience was still overwhelmingly white (178). Lastly, Breslin attended a poetry performance -- not a slam -- that mixed poetry, music, and dance. In that audience, Breslin estimated that about a third of the audience were people of color, and he later found out from an informal survey that these audience members identified as black, Iranian, Hispanic, or Asian (179). Breslin's informal observations about the diversity of audience members at different poetry events support my survey findings that show slams attract diverse audiences (178).

In terms of class, the audience members surveyed were asked to mark one of seven different household income categories. In general, audience members marked middle-class or working class income categories. Forty-one percent of audience members surveyed marked that they had an annual household income within the range \$30,000-\$45,000 or \$45,001-\$60,000.

Jeffrey McDaniel comments on why he believes slams draw more diverse audiences than do the readings in the academic poetry community, when he writes, "You don't need a degree or a letter of recommendation [to compete or

watch Slam], which is why the slam community is far more multicultural than the academy, which is starving for diversity” (McDaniel 36).

### *Differences Across Venues*

Since venue was the single most important factor that determined the type of audience that attended each slam, it is necessary to discuss some of the differences among the three venues surveyed. The mission of the Nuyorican Poets Café is “to create a multicultural venue that both nurtures artists and exhibits a variety of artistic works. Without limitation, we are dedicated to providing a stage for the arts with access for the widest public” (“About”). *Nuyorican* is a slang word for New York Puerto Ricans. The Café was conceived as a home for the oral tradition, or a place that would, as founder Miguel Algarín writes, “reveal poetry as a living art” (Algarín and Holman 8).

Algarín argues that the “importance of the Slam...is rooted in its capacity to draw in audiences ranging from our immediate working-class neighbors out for a beer and some fun to serious poetry lovers willing to engage the new poets at the Café...” (18).

The Friday night poetry slam at the Nuyorican consistently attracts 100-180 people each week. The results of the audience survey reinforced the fact that the Nuyorican does to a degree fulfill the mission of being a venue “with access for the widest public.” The audience is roughly a quarter black (21%) and Latino (16%), with slightly lower percentages for audience members who identified as “mixed,” Asian, or other. A large part of the Nuyorican audience seemed to be

working class or middle-class (43 percent marked that their household income was either \$30,001-45,001 or \$45,001-\$60,001), but 10 percent of the audience members represented each of the upper class and poverty-line income categories. The Nuyorican did not, however, attract the widest range of age groups. The venue was overwhelmingly young. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed (at the Nuyorican poetry slam) were between the ages of 20-25, and 29 percent were between the ages of 26 and 31 years old.

Also, the Nuyorican consistently cultivates new audiences for poetry. Thirty-eight percent of the audience members who took the survey said that it was their first time there. At the same time, only 19 percent of respondents answered that they attend the slam every week. Therefore, it can be inferred from the data that the Nuyorican slam audience includes a significant number of new audience members each week. Overall, the Nuyorican weekly attracts a large, young, and diverse audience, of which, a significant percentage probably have never been to the Nuyorican slam before.

The second venue surveyed was the Bowery Poetry Club where the Urbana reading series and Urbana Slam team competitions started in 1998. The Nuyorican Poets Café has a rule that poets can only compete on the Nuyorican Slam Team once and thus some poets who had been on the Café's team felt that there was nothing more for them to do at the Nuyorican (McConnell). At the time, no city in the U.S. had more than one slam team. But two veteran slam poets/hosts, Taylor Mali and Bob Holman, who no longer felt welcome at the Nuyorican Poets Café, started the Bowery Poetry Club weekly reading in 1997.

The next year, four poets from the Bowery Poetry Club formed a Slam team. Thus, the Bowery Poetry Club became the home of New York City's second slam team. Although there is no clear mission statement on the Bowery's web site, there is a sort of manifesto statement of purpose written by Bob Holman (owner of the Club) in his signature style, which says, "For as language is the Essence of Humanity, so is Poetry, as practiced at the Bowery Poetry Club, the Essence of Language."

In terms of diversity, the Bowery had the highest percentage, but not by much, of white audience members (23%). About the same percentage of audience members at the Bowery identified as "mixed." Also, approximately 20 percent of audience members identified as black or Asian. Therefore, although the Bowery appears to be more "white," as compared to the Nuyorican, it still draws a diverse audience.

In terms of class, the Bowery drew a similar percentage of middle-class audience members as did the Nuyorican. However, the Bowery also drew more upper middle class and wealthy audience members than the Nuyorican. The Bowery had a significant percentage of audience members (29%) who marked the \$90,001 or higher for annual household income, as compared to only 15 percent of the audience members at the Nuyorican who marked this category.

In terms of age groups, the Bowery had more variation than the Nuyorican. The largest group represented at the Bowery was still those in their twenties (32% marked either the 20-25 or the 26-31 age groupings), but the Bowery also had a significant percentage of 15-19 year olds (20%) and about 10

percent of audience members each from the 31-50 and 51-and-up age groups. In contrast to the Nuyorican, the Bowery actually had audience members who were from the 51-and-up age group.

Lastly, the Bowery had a slightly lower percentage of audience members (30%) as compared to the Nuyorican who responded that they had never been to the venue before. Also, 36 percent of those audience members who had been to the Bowery slam before responded that they attend the event twice a month, suggesting that the Bowery seems to have a somewhat more loyal audience than the Nuyorican. This means, however, that fewer audience members at this slam are new each week.

Overall, the Bowery attracts a diverse, young, middle-class, and relatively loyal audience to its slams, an audience that is slightly more “white” than the audience at the Nuyorican. The Bowery audience is more varied in age and has more members of the upper-middle-class or wealthy income groups. The differences between the Nuyorican and the Bowery show that these two Poetry Slam venues succeed in bringing slightly different audiences to poetry, both of which are outside the academic poetry community.

The last poetry slam venue surveyed was Bar 13, where the louderARTS Project started in April of 1998 (McConnell). Since 1999, louderARTS has sent a team to the National Poetry Slam. Marty McConnell, a poet and one of the current board members of louderARTS received her graduate degree in poetry at Sarah Lawrence (McConnell). In an interview with Marty, she said:

Lynne and Roger and another poet, Gina Gonzalez, had all been involved in slams at the Nuyorican Poets Café... they were involved with that scene but they felt they wanted a space that wasn't as slam focused.  
(McConnell)

In an effort to be less “slam focused,” this venue offers several different formats for readings, such as slams or open mics that mix poetry with music and themes, in order to encourage diverse voices to participate in a performance and writing community. This venue not only brings a different audience to poetry, but it has gained somewhat of a reputation among the slam venues for being a more “academic” venue. The “academic” part of its mission appears in a position statement included in its 501(c)(3) application. In this statement, the founders of the louderARTS Project directly confront the relationship between Poetry Slam and the academy:

Outside of traditional universities, there is a dearth of opportunity for individuals to access highly skilled teachers and mentors, or to engage in the kinds of coursework or discussions that would allow them to improve their poetic craft through rigor and study. This results in the general exclusion (with a few notable exceptions) of individuals, who by dint of cultural background or affiliation, lack of formal education, economic under-resourcedness, style of written expression not fitting the current literary canon, or other sources of marginalization, from academia and its attendant opportunities.

In this short description, the founders of the louderARTS Project comment on the lack of access marginalized individuals have to the academic writing community. In response to this lack of access, the founders seek to create a venue outside of the academy that would allow them to create “spaces conducive to excellence in writing, rigor in study, and nurturance of artistic risk and experimentation in the

written and spoken word.” The louderARTS statement essentially argues that there is a divide between the writers in the academy and those outside of the academy because the “outsiders” do not have access to the academy’s creative writing resources, whatever these resources might be (faculty, classrooms).

The louderARTS Project, therefore, strives to offer the “challenges” of the academic writing community at their poetry venue. As shown by their mission, louderARTS actively cultivated their “academic” reputation. In addition to their mission statement, the venue seems to show other signs of being “academic.” Of all three venues surveyed, only louderARTS’ audience included respondents who wrote that they were studying creative writing, either in an undergraduate or in a graduate creative writing program. Only two respondents overall wrote that they were specifically studying poetry in a creative writing program, and both of them were at the louderARTS slam.

This slam venue then attempts to cultivate a different audience for poetry than do the other two venues surveyed, by mixing performance and slam with poetry reading formats. The audience survey demographics for this venue are less important because its mission is not to increase poetry’s audience necessarily, but rather to create a challenging writing community that is accessible to those writers or audience members who do not have access to the academic writing world. Their audience demographics are similar more to those of the Bowery than to those of the Nuyorican. louderARTS had the most loyal audience members from week to week. For additional demographic information about this venue, see Appendix III.

### *How Poetry Slam Cultivates Audiences*

Robert Thompson, popular culture expert at the Newhouse School for Public Communications at Syracuse University, said that “Poetry Slam can give people a poetic sensibility. Maybe you stick with Poetry Slam, maybe you go in a different direction. [But] once you get [people] interested in poetry you open up a treasure trove [of possibilities]” (Thompson).

An example of creating a poetic sensibility in audiences came up in my interview with Slam poet Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz. She spoke about how Slam can increase audience members’ sensibility for poetry.

.... now how many people did Bukowski influence, I know I read Bukowski, I know Beau Sia [a popular slam poet] read Bukowski, because it’s filthy, dirty, it’s like hookers and getting drunk, and vomiting, and... I think he’s respected now for bringing people in... Beau mentions Bukowski in his poetry... When you name drop, people [audience members] might say ‘Langston Hughes!’ I mention Langston Hughes in my poetry, I mention Dorothy Parker in my poetry, and some people who are fans of mine might go ‘Oh wow, I wonder who Dorothy Parker is, and if Cristin likes her,’ and they’ll go out and read Dorothy Parker because That’s how I moved. You know I didn’t connect to the 16th century, to the 17th century, to the 18th century, to the 19th century, none of that stuff, what I connected to was the 20th century and there’s no shame in that. Then [later] I pulled back, and so now I can appreciate it. I feel like, I have the self-esteem, [to think] it could be referencing me, that I’m allowed to read it, as opposed to before when I was like ugggh, this obviously has nothing to do with me, why should I care...

Aptowicz mentions that she “name drop[s]” poets who are not slam poets in her slam poems, such as Dorothy Parker, Langston Hughes, or Charles Bukowski. The practice of name dropping or paying homage to other poets within



poems is common among page poets. Whether or not the poet is seeking to increase poetry's audiences by naming other poets in their poems, "naming" writers subtly introduces audience members or readers to new poets. The idea is that since the audience member or reader has heard of this or that poet's name, they may be more willing to give that new poet a chance. Cristin, by name-dropping, is in a way doing exactly what Dana Gioia calls for in his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" (19). She is recommending or subtly including other poets in reference to herself, in order to be a guide for the audience on where they can go to read more poetry, which could thereby widen their appreciation for the art form. In this way, slam poets who are interested in increasing the audience for poetry, who understand the way slam can function as a game for increasing interest in poetry, can help expand the audience for all poetry through their slam poems.

Marty McConnell speculates on other ways that Poetry Slam cultivates a sensibility or audience for poetry. She says:

Any art form has to cultivate an audience space, there's a reason... that parents are bringing their children to the ballet. You can't just sit back and say we are producing this art and gosh I hope somebody likes it... That's a huge advantage of slam, you can take something that is not terribly accessible, but with how you perform it, you can make it accessible. If you listen to an excellent performer, you can understand the emotions behind it. It's crucial for those of us that care about poetry and [the] ways in which it has the potential to enrich the people's lives, to get out there and do it [performance]. (McConnell)

In the published discussion on poetry and contemporary culture, academic poets have expressed concern that there is currently no audience for poetry

outside of the academic poetry community. Whether or not this is true for the academy, it is not true for the poetry slam community. Poets involved with poetry slams see their audience every week, or month, and they perform for larger audiences every year at the final rounds of slam competitions. And the overwhelming majority of the New York City poetry slam audience members surveyed were outside of the academic poetry community. This suggests that the poetry slam community can actively cultivate audience members for poetry who are not members of the academic poetry community.

## Chapter 4 —To What Extent Has the Academy Failed to Embrace Poetry Slam and Its Audiences?

Although this chapter focuses on the extent to which those in the academic poetry community have failed to embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences, it is necessary first to address how those in the poetry slam community view those in the academic poetry community. After discussing this relationship, I will outline how poetry entered the academy in the form of graduate creative writing programs. Lastly, I will discuss some of the ways those in the academic writing community view those in the poetry slam community and the extent to which the academy has failed to embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences.

### *How Slam Poets View the Academy Today*

If the academic poetry community is ignoring Poetry Slam and its audiences, it would be understandable if poets in the poetry slam community had antagonistic feelings towards graduate creative writing programs and those involved in them. While slam poets may have held these views in the past, most of the poets I interviewed did not harbor these sentiments. Marc Smith argues in *Spoken Word Revolution* that Slam “brings passion back into an art form that was becoming too much of an elite intellectual exercise” (Smith 120). Smith here reinforces his own negative views towards the academic poetry community and reiterates his belief that Slam draws from past anti-academic poetry movements. However, my interviews with eight New York City “slam poets” this past year

revealed diverse viewpoints on the purpose of slam, and most of the slam poets did not express any anti-academic sentiments.

The only one of the poets I interviewed who seemed to express some bitterness towards those in the academic poetry community was a poet and slam host at the Bowery Poetry Club. He said:

I think Slam is really more of a democracy whereas people studying poetry are more in a private club kind of situation. Slam poetry prides itself on being you know... anyone can do it, anyone can sign up, and you know they randomly pick judges out of the audience. A lot of academic poets I think don't like the performance aspect of it and write it off as stand-up comedy or monologues or hip-hop, but you know there's room for everything in the slam[...] (Seashotlz)

Other than this poet's comments about the nature of slam versus the academy, I encountered no antagonistic feelings towards the academy in my interviews. In fact, there was a respectful or appreciative attitude toward graduate creative writing programs. For example, Chad Anderson, another performance poet at the Bowery Poetry Club, answered my question about whether or not he thinks negatively about graduate creative writing programs with, "No, I don't think negatively of them at all." Further, he added that

You can learn through academic programs to be a great writer and to focus on writing. I reward writing programs and literature programs that focus on helping people find their voice and say what they are feeling in metaphorical and poetic ways. This [Slam] is ...a different manifestation of that.

Another example of this respectful attitude towards the academy came from the host of the Nuyorican Poets Café Friday night slam, Nathan Pearson,

who is also a poet. He said something similar to what Anderson said, but with a qualification:

Anything that encourages writing and the arts, I'm all for, because communication is very important. The only thing that always perplexed me with the study of writing or the arts is how sometimes interpretations are forced on you...so encourage the writing, but then encourage people to interpret it their way through their experience and build on that.

When I asked Pearson to speculate about the general perceptions poets in the New York City slam scene have towards the academic poetry community, Nathan responded that

A lot of poets [in Slam] are in education, whether they are students or teachers. They wear both hats. You really don't feel any tension or vibe or acknowledgement [of the academy] in the slam scene. Basically it's about slam...they're more concerned with the performance aspect, but they don't necessarily knock the other...so it's not really that much of an antagonistic thing in the overall scene. It may just come down to that amongst individuals.

Taylor Mali, a veteran of the poetry slam scene, took a Master of Arts in English Literature & Creative Writing at Kansas State University. He had a view similar to Pearson's with regard to New York City slam poets' perceptions of graduate creative writing programs. He said,

They think, "I could go there to be a better writer, but that won't help me in a slam..." I don't think people in the slam world have anything against the MFA programs, I just think they feel that they don't get respect in MFA programs...A few years ago, slam poets used to think that academic poets used to look down on them, but now, I don't think that's the case anymore. It's hard to argue with the audience slam gets.

In another instance, a different Bowery Poetry Club poet, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, who is often the host of Slams at the Bowery, focused more on

identifying what was different about academic and poetry slam communities than about being for or against either one. Aptowicz is currently working on an oral history book about Poetry Slam. She said of Slam and the academy that

Slam poetry allows an integration of different forms in a way that is more organic than you get in a classroom. They're not so separatist. You're not thinking this is a Beat, this is a Romantic, I mean they do that in classrooms, like identify what time frame the poem came from. Well, in Slam, you are just offered it in context of "Do you enjoy it, do you not enjoy it?" which I think the public responds to a little better... you know and that's why there has been such an increase in interest in poetry since Slam began because there's not a judgment call about whether or not you're understanding it, or whether or not you can identify it. It's just face, person, experience, you know, does it connect with you?

In contrast, Jeffrey McDaniel pointed out in his essay "Slam and the Academy" that the two communities might have more in common than they realize. McDaniel writes that both communities involve heavy competition. He points out that "page" poets must engage in "fierce manuscript competitions" that cost money to enter, and compete for creative writing grants which often have a panel of judges to evaluate the applicants (35).

In order to add a wider perspective to these poets' view of the current academic poetry community, it is useful to trace the process by which poetry entered the academy. This will provide a context in which to discuss how academic poets view poets outside of that community.

### ***How Poetry Entered the Academy***

D.G. Myers' in his book, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since the 1880s*, details the history of how creative writing, including poetry, gradually became its own discipline in higher education. In the literature sources reviewed, only Myers' book focused on the history of graduate creative writing programs and highlighted the specific history of how poetry ended up in the academy. Therefore, since this is the only source that focused on this history, it is the main source that informs this narrative. Myers explicitly traces the development of how poetry entered the academy and how it became the large academic community it is today.

According to Myers, the premise for creative writing programs began in the late 1800s. This was the time when English as an academic discipline first appeared at University of California at Berkeley, with the professorship of E.R. Sill, who demanded to study literature as it was. This style of teaching was in opposition to the philological study of English language (the study of research and rhetoric) that was common at the time (36). In the 1880s, various professors believed in including "creative writing" in their courses, although it was not called this at the time. They would assign their students to write stories and poems as a means of fostering the understanding of literature from the practice of it (37).

Barrett Wendell, a professor who joined the Harvard faculty in 1880, was a fiction writer who taught English Composition. His teaching style was a "writer's approach to writing," meaning that he "taught students how to write on the basis of his own ambition to write" (48). Wendell's teaching descendants

integrated this style of teaching into their classes as well. They taught under the heading of English composition and this new practice of teaching writing with writing was a part of an institutional resistance to the philological system (36). This early precedent of including creative writing as a part of English Composition and literary scholarship created space in the university where “literature could be used in the University for some other purpose than scholarly research” (41).

Myers correlates the creation of graduate creative writing programs with the early 1900s development of literature as a big business. As American publishing became a New York-based enterprise, it instituted more business-like practices and in general worried less “about literary merit and more about salability.” At this time, book advertising began to increase dramatically. The first best-seller list was published in 1895, signaling that salability had replaced merit as a “standard of judgment” (58). These changes affected journalism, such that magazines grew increasingly dependent on advertising for income, eventually shifting magazines from a “literary outlet to a business organization” (58).

During 1900-1925, the growth of these two distinct businesses created two distinct markets, writing as “social practice,” or journalism, and writing as art. This business distinction had an effect on the teaching of writing on the college level because, as Myers put it, “creative writing [as an academic discipline] was formed by amputating ‘expression’ from a concern with the communication of ideas and proficiency in usage” (61).

Journalism and creative writing were differentiated to the point that they



were housed in two different places in the university. Creative writing was still under English Composition, while journalism became housed in the recently-created journalism school (61). Myers argues it is no mistake the two flourished at the same time since the two academic disciplines followed the development of two separate business entities. As early as 1903, a novelist called for the creation of the equivalent of the “master’s studio” in the university setting. And in 1907, a prominent journalist called for the postgraduate training of professional writers within the university. By 1908, the first postgraduate “writing school” was created exclusively for journalism (61).

In the course of the early 1900s, writers, as they struggled to make a living, occasionally accepted teaching positions, but the general perception was to “get out if you can,” with many writers leaving as soon as they could support themselves by writing. However, in the 1920’s, Robert Frost served as “poet-in-residence” at Amherst College (1917-1920), and Witter Bynner taught at University of California, Berkeley “for one semester in 1919” (96).

Myers credits Frost with “creating” the poet-in-residence’s role in the university. He says Frost created a theory behind hiring poets to teach writing. Frost’s goal was not to create great writers, but to give students the benefit of learning from someone who was known outside of the university in a specific discipline. He advocated “education by presence” (96).

At the time, the goal of these writer/teachers was not explicitly to turn out writing audiences, writing teachers, or even great writers, but more to mix the teaching of literature with its creation as taught by a creator of it. And thus, the

idea during the 1920s behind the “poet-in-residence” was that the writer teaching writing could foster an appreciation and knowledge about “creative” literature. This had implications for audience because it could produce students who were passionate readers of creative works (Myers).

However, the line between teaching appreciation and teaching writers was blurred with Witter Bynner’s residency at Berkeley. The residency took on a more workshop style, with poets sharing and criticizing each other’s work. Bynner said that he was his students’ “friend and fellow worker.” And, many of those who participated in the program went on to make a name for themselves as writers (98).

Myers makes the point that, in the 1920s, poets were taking jobs in the universities as a means to make a living, but had also finally discovered a reason for being there. Myers writes that they “rediscovered the ancient truth that they had something to teach...all that remained was for someone to give it a name, a method, and a base of operations” (100).

Progressive educator Hughes Mearns provided the name “creative writing.” In 1925, Mearns published *Creative Youth*, which reported on his “experiment” replacing English with creative writing at a junior high school called Lincoln, a progressive laboratory school run by Columbia University’s Teachers College (102). In the book, he uses the phrase “creative writing” to refer to a course of study. Myers writes that, “It was not called creative writing until Mearns called it creative writing. And then it was rarely called anything else” (103).

In his book *Creative Youth*, Mearns mentions Robert Frost and Witter Bynner as “models for teaching creative writing,” and soon after, grammar schools created Robert Frost clubs to replace literature classes. Less than a decade after the media first publicized Mearns’ experiment, “creative writing had become one of the most popular subjects in the curriculum, receiving the official sanction of the National Council of Teachers of English” (104).

At the time of Robert Frost and Witter Bynner, creative writing in the university was still not an end in itself. In the grade schools and in colleges, the democratic spread of creative writing in the classroom, or “creativism,” led to a concern that evaluative criticism was needed in addition to a communal appreciation. Advocates of creativism, such as Mearns, tried to focus on the aesthetic experience rather than the creative results, emphasizing instead the benefit of art. The key was that “wider participation would lead to wider appreciation,” if there was more participating than appreciating. Myers quotes poet James Oppenheim as saying about Mearns’ experiment, “What we can hope for is that ‘audience interminable’ which Walt Whitman prophesied; an America where art is a living thing” (106).

After Mearns introduced the term “creative writing” in his 1925 book, and children in grade schools were encouraged to write poetry and fiction, the practice trickled up to the universities. It was during this time period when some of those in the academy took an interest in creating a business of “professional poets,” and they achieved this by combining criticism with creative writing (106).

Norman Foerster was hired in 1930 to head the Iowa School of Letters at

the University of Iowa. In this position, he created an English program that included creative writing as one track in an English graduate degree program that was centered on the study and practice of criticism (124). Foerster, with the creation of his proposed program of criticism, created a large and viable opponent (the creation and study/criticism of literature) to the philological or old English program structure which centered on research and rhetoric. Ultimately, the battle between the old system, and the new system, would forge the space that would house creative writing in the university in the form of the graduate creative writing program (124).

The idea of a graduate degree in studying literature and criticism spread little by little. In 1938, the University of Michigan created a graduate seminar-like Master's program for creative writing under the heading of English Composition, and in 1939 Harvard began to hire young writers such as poet John Berryman to teach English composition courses. Although these were the seeds of the graduate creative writing programs, these programs as they exist today did not appear until after the Second World War, when writers flooded into the Universities. Because of the G.I. Bill, more than two million veterans took advantage of a government-subsidized education. These students all needed professors, and writers swept into the University to fill these positions (126).

After the war, Iowa's graduate program for writing and criticism was well on its way to becoming the Iowa Writers Workshop. Writing seminars began at Johns Hopkins in 1946; Stanford started its fellowship program in 1947; then the program at the University of Denver and a graduate creative writing program at

Cornell started up in 1948. For two decades, these five programs were the major established graduate creative writing programs. At this time, since more students were piling into the universities, the university started to expand its role in American culture. Graduate creative writing programs were a part of this expansion (128).

In 1965, when English was added to the list of disciplines supported by post-Sputnik federal student aid from the National Defense Education Act, universities had extra motivation to expand (166). They wanted their costs to go up so that they could draw in more federal dollars (166). Iowa had 250 students enrolled in its program by 1965. Creative writing programs (CWPs) were attractive additions for universities because they “drew upon existing resources and were developed within an academic discipline that was already well-established...new facilities were not required and sometimes new faculty were not even needed, at least not immediately” (166). Myers points out that the growth of these programs correlated with the growth of student aid. “Two-and-a-half decades later creative writing had become an industry.” The number of degrees awarded in the field of creative writing more than tripled between 1971 and 1989, from 345 to 1,107. In 1970, there were 44 programs, and by 1980 there were more than one hundred. Currently, there are about 300 graduate creative writing programs and more than 1,000 degrees conferred in creative writing (Fenza).

Another example of the rapid growth of the academic poetry community is the expansion of the Association of Writing Programs (AWP) over a short period of time. The AWP was created in 1967 to help graduates of graduate creative

writing programs find teaching jobs. In 1972, fifty writers sought assistance from the AWP; in 1978, 950 writers were using its placement services. The organization's budget doubled from 1972-1974 and then again from 1974-1978. Consequently, alumni of graduate creative writing programs often helped to found new creative writing programs. Myers cites 32 names of graduates of Iowa's creative writing program along with the 24 creative writing programs these graduates helped to create. What was at work was that "creative writing programs" became a machine for creating more creative writing programs (167).

The almost dialectical relationship between university expansion and graduate creative writing programs resulted in the university's expanded reach into culture, particularly the arts. Myers quotes the Chancellor of the University of California in 1963 as saying essentially that, since universities were taking on a central role in American culture, and since arts are at the center of American culture, then universities should be the center of arts in American culture (148).

Myers concludes that during the post-war expansion of the university, higher education institutions became the "institutional sanctuary for the arts, including literature" (148). They stepped in to become the "permanent center of artistic activity in America" (148). It is possible that this belief is how poets in the academy now think of poetry. If the perception is that poetry is permanently centered in the university, as Dana Gioia argues in "Can Poetry Matter?" then it makes sense why those in the academic poetry community would not care to recognize poetry communities outside of the academy; they believe these peripheral communities do not matter.

By the time poetry slams appeared in Chicago in the late 1980s, there were already hundreds of graduate creative writing programs and the number was growing. The sections below trace how those in the academic poetry community viewed slam during this time of its development (1986-present). At first, those in the academic poetry community paid little to no attention to poetry slam. However, as time went on and poetry slams grew in popularity and scope, those in the academic poetry community moved towards a “guarded acceptance” of the new “outsiders.”

### ***Ignoring Slam***

Dana Gioia’s controversial essay “Can Poetry Matter?” about the state of poetry in American culture, appeared in 1991 in *Atlantic Monthly*. This article received the most mailed responses the magazine had seen in decades (Gioia “Can” xi). Hundreds of people from different disciplines wrote to Gioia to comment on his essay. Gioia says in the introduction to his book of the same name that although many academic poets responded to the article, most of those who contacted him were citizens who felt their voices were unheard in the poetry world (xii). In addition to this private response, the essay spurred a public discussion in the press about poetry’s place in contemporary culture (xii).

Gioia asserts in “Can Poetry Matter?” that there has never been a time when there were

so many books of poetry published, so many ways for poets to earn a living by teaching, so many anthologies and literary magazines being

produced, so many fellowships or scholarships for writers being circulated and so many creative writing programs available for writers who want to get better. (1)

However, Gioia argues that this prolific poetry world exists almost entirely within the academic poetry community, where a professional class composed of “teachers, graduate students, editors, publishers, and administrators...” has become the “primary reader” of contemporary poetry (2). He argues further that this world is cut off from the common reader in America and thus this proliferation only contributes to the creation of a poetry subculture based in higher educational institutions (2). He writes, that as creative writing programs multiplied and professional networks expanded, “the subculture of poetry was born” (11). I would agree, only to add one word: the *academic* subculture was born.

Gioia fails to acknowledge Poetry Slam in his essay. When his book was first published, in 1992, 17 teams were competing in the National Poetry Slam. By the time the second edition was published in 2002, the National Poetry Slam competition included at least 48 teams (11). Gioia’s declaration in his first book that poetry was one subculture ignored the poetry slam community, which was developing outside of the academy.

Gioia comments further, in the essay about the academic poetry subculture, that “outside the classroom-- where society demands the two groups interact- poets and the common reader are no longer on speaking terms” (9). Although this statement does not directly address the academy’s relationship to Slam, it addresses a key misunderstanding within the academic poetry



community. There is the perception that poetry does not have “common readers” anymore. Gioia loosely describes this “common reader” as a person who is a part of a “cultural intelligentsia” whose members do things like attend cultural events and read poetry to their children (19). On the base level, however, Gioia is saying that the “common reader” is an educated person who reads poetry, but who is not a member of the academic poetry community. As shown in the previous chapter, many poetry slam venues cultivate this exact type of person.

Also, Gioia writes that “to the average reader, the proposition that poetry’s audience has declined may seem self-evident” (2). And yet, just recently, I sat in the Nuyorican Poets Café, where 150 people packed uncomfortably close together in order to hear people perform poetry. Why does this not count? During an interview with performance poet Marty McConnell, she said that “the thing that could kill it [poetry] is people sitting in ivory towers [sic] handing [poems] to each other and barely sending them out into the world except in hardcover 25 dollar form.” She then adds, seemingly anticipating what an academic response might be, that “sending your poems to literary magazines is not really sending your poems out into the world.”

Although it would seem Gioia would agree with McConnell’s comments, he would never use these terms. The audience for his book, after all, is mainly academic poets, and he admonishes them at the end of his essay to do things like read other poets’ work during poetry readings. Gioia might gain some tips about audience from Slam, such as the idea to have more than one poet read at a particular reading. Marc Smith, the inventor of Poetry Slam, noticed that one of

the weaknesses of the modern poetry reading is that there is only one reader, who slowly reads his or her poetry into a microphone. Poetry Slam changed that.

It would take until 2004, when Gioia published his second book about poetry and culture *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, for him to directly address the issue of slams. He mentions that they have been ignored in the past when he writes that “popular poetry,” which includes slams, has “garnered relatively little attention from intellectuals and virtually none from established poetry critics” (7).

However, there are exceptions. Poet and Emory University Oxford College’s Associate Professor of English, Lucas Carpenter, included slams in a 1994 article that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Carpenter criticized graduate creative writing programs and professors of creative writing for failing to produce anything else but creative writing teachers. Carpenter argues that the audience for poets in the academy is increasingly other poets in the academy, as evidenced by the bios in anthologies published by university presses. Carpenter puts ‘slams’ as one of the answers to his question, “Is there any alternative to the work of the professor-poets, something that displays a popular vitality and potential for future development? Yes.” Carpenter is the exception at the time of his writing, in that he acknowledges Slam’s existence as a subculture under the umbrella of “poetry” (Carpenter).

Stephen Dobyns, a professor of English and director of the Creative Writing Program at Syracuse University from 1987 to 1995, is quoted in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article in 2000 saying that “when I was teaching

graduate students, if 10 percent of them continued as writers and eventually wrote something worth reading, I felt wildly successful. However, and this is the subversive part, if half of them became passionate readers, I felt triumphant” (Dobyns). Although it is good if Dobyns is able to cultivate poetry readers in the classroom, it is important to recognize that this cultivation is not democratic and that, in the end, the poetry readers he created are actually just more writers in the academic poetry community. This example shows that, however useful it is to cultivate students of poetry to be readers of poetry, this does not substantially or democratically increase the size of poetry’s audience outside of the academy. On the other hand, Poetry Slam has been cultivating audiences outside of the academy since its creation and has done so in a democratic setting.

### ***Guarded Acceptance***

In his second book of essays, *Disappearing Ink*, Gioia claims that media have changed the way Americans live today and that “popular poetry” is a manifestation of these cultural changes. Mainly, he discusses the emergence of four different types of popular poetry, one of which is poetry slams. Gioia writes that “popular poetry,” has experienced a “wide scale” “reemergence” in recent years (7).

Gioia calls the reemergence of popular poetry-- which he describes as including rap, “cowboy poetry,” poetry slams, and performance poetry-- the most unexpected event in American poetry in the past twenty years (6). He writes “In a literary culture that during most of the twentieth century declared verse a dying

technique, no one would have predicted this vastly popular revival” (7). Gioia here makes it seem that there was a literary culture that pronounced poetry “dead” before popular poetry existed. But by the end of the twentieth century, in 1996, Slam had been expanding its reach for 10 years. Twenty-seven teams were competing at the National Poetry Slam. When Gioia asserts that this poetry revival was “unpredicted” after a twentieth century when poetry was called “dead,” he is himself failing to recognize that Slam was already growing into a large movement with large audiences by the end of the twentieth century. Some of the reasons that critics and intellectuals like Gioia may have ignored slam in its early development will be discussed in the next chapter.

Jeffrey McDaniel, one of the growing numbers of “slam poets” to enter the academy, is now a poetry professor in the MFA creative writing program at Sarah Lawrence. In his short essay “Slam and the Academy,” McDaniel writes that academic poets originally spoke out against Slam in the 1990s, when it first gained media attention, saying, “‘That’s not poetry!’ but that over the years that stance has been modified to become a “guarded acceptance” (35).

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz seems to agree with this view when she says, “Slam right now is in a time when it’s gotten popular enough that there has to be response from academia and I don’t think academia’s made up its mind yet” (Aptowicz). However, Aptowicz also pointed out that some academics appear to have made up their minds about slam. She recalled that Harold Bloom wrote in *The Paris Review*, that “Slam is the death of art” (Aptowicz). Then, when Aptowicz asked Bloom for an interview about slam, Bloom admitted he had never

been to a Slam before, and therefore did not feel qualified to talk about it. (Aptowicz). This example shows even as individuals in the academy poetry community make strides towards embracing poetry slam, this progress is tempered by public displays of unfounded rejection of Slam as exemplified in Bloom's comment (Aptowicz).

Drawing on her own experiences with the academy, Marty McConnell did not believe that there was a split between the academy and Poetry Slam, saying,

There is a perception that there is a huge rift, that the academics have a real problem with those who do the slam competitions, and the slammers can't stand academics . . . but I think the vast majority understand that there are roles to be played within poetry and that we are all working to give people access to poetry. I don't think you would find people who have no interest in people coming to poetry, or [no interest in] the idea that there could be a medium out there that brings people to poetry. [This] is appealing to a lot of people. I think people try to make a bigger deal of performance poets versus academics. It gets more and more muddled, as the lines start to cross, and as people who have been in the performance arena, move into the academic circle. It becomes apparent that the divide isn't as wide as people have drawn it to be. (McConnell)

McConnell makes the point that perhaps individuals exacerbate the supposed divide between the academy and Poetry Slam when, in reality, most people, including academics, "are all working to give people access to poetry." It is easy to say that those in both the academic and poetry slam communities both want to increase "access to poetry," but this does not mean the academy acknowledges Poetry Slam's existence or its ability to be a vehicle for increasing poetry's audiences. McConnell is correct in that it is individuals who draw these distinctions and create these "rifts." The problem arises when opinions of a vocal few become the predominant views published, discussed, and circulated in the

academic poetry community.

Another example of “guarded acceptance” and of how an individual can deepen the “rift” between the academy and Poetry Slam appears in another article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Peter Monaghan, the author of the article, praises veteran “stand-up poet” Charles Harper Webb for capturing audiences with his humorous performance poems. In the article, the author attempts to give a short history of Stand-Up Poetry saying that the professor who coined the term Stand-Up Poet has been using the term since the 1960s to describe poets who use “accessible, vernacular style, using straightforward, not poetic, diction” (Monaghan).

Webb himself attempts to widen the scope of his “performance” identity by saying “a lot of the best poets in the country have discovered the uses of performability.” This is particularly appropriate for him to say since he is now a Professor of English at California State University – Long Beach. However, after pronouncing performance as a viable vehicle for poetry, Webb qualifies his statement about his own work by saying that “crafted quality is what differentiates it [stand-up poetry] from the nationally popular poetry ‘slams,’ in which competitors improvise on stage” (Monaghan).

For one thing, this is an exaggerated generalization, since slam poets-- due to such restrictions as the three-minute time limit and the highly competitive nature of many large-scale slams-- often edit, practice, and memorize their poems. It is ironic that a performance poet would condemn a different medium for performance poetry with a sweeping false generalization. One would think that a

stand-up poet who performs in Los Angeles, where a regular audience of 400 flock to the “Da Poetry Lounge,” and where the National Slam has taken place more than once, would know a little more about a movement that celebrates his own poetic tactics. This example is related to “guarded acceptance” because, although Webb shows an acceptance for performance and support for an academic poetry community that embraces performance poetry, he still makes a point to distance himself from the poetry slam community deeming it “improvisational” and thus implying it is lower than his own art (Monaghan).

In order to learn more about the way poets in the academic poetry community feel about poetry slams, I conducted an online survey of poetry professors at Syracuse University, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, New York University, New School for Social Research, and Brooklyn College. The purpose was to see if the poets’ responses would support the argument that poets in the academy have a “guarded acceptance” for Poetry Slam and its audiences. Approximately thirty invitations to the survey were sent out, and seven poets responded. Although the responses featured a range of opinions, the general consensus was that “slam poetry” is “sometimes” poetry, and that it was not something necessarily good or bad.

The survey was designed to illuminate the extent to which those in the academic poetry community either embrace or fail to embrace poetry slams. All seven of the professors who responded to the survey had heard of poetry slams. Five of the seven had attended one, two had participated in one. All of those who responded were from private colleges (only one public institution was contacted).

Five of the respondents identified as men, one as female, and one as “other.” Six respondents identified as white and one as “other.” All of the respondents were over 31-years-old. Six out of seven respondents were over 41-years-old, five were over 51, and one was over 61.

The answers to the open-ended questions in the survey were varied. There were a few trends, such as in responses to the question, “What is your opinion of Poetry Slams?” In all of the responses to this question, the professor would first draw some kind of distinction between the academic poetry community and the poetry slam community. The professors seemed to feel a need to imbue poetry slam with qualities that would distance it from themselves and the academy.

Some responses were:

Slam Poetry is a lively pop genre.

\* \* \* \*

The method and impact of poetry slams are more analogous to that of a preacher and performance artist than to those of the traditional poet.

\* \* \* \*

They substitute volume for skill. They are narcissistic and make the experience primary and the language secondary. They have no room for the meditative or quiet. They make spontaneity the primary cause... There's no room for apprenticeship.

\* \* \* \*

Lots of fun. Not everything I heard was poetry, but it was great entertainment.

Then, after distancing him or herself from slam, the respondent would make a qualifying statement about how Poetry Slam fits in with other arts or in the poetry world.



As in other arts I find that the best of it is a very small percentage of total output. I don't think that it has yet developed into an art as powerful as the blues or Scots border ballads, to name examples of pop forms that have yielded great art. But it's still relatively young.

\* \* \* \*

And while I prefer the work of poets who write for the page, I am not incapable of admiring the talent of people who perform in poetry slams, and I believe myself to have learned from their accomplishments.

\* \* \* \*

Poetry slams are conventional, albeit a different convention. They are all in the same mode without variation. They have become a parody of themselves (but so has academic poetry).

These answers give an idea as to the extent by which the academic poetry community has failed to embrace Poetry Slam. Although some professors were willing to say that Slam has achieved "accomplishments," or that it is a "pop form" with the potential to yield "great art," most professors first felt the need to distance themselves from Poetry Slam by saying things like poetry slams are a "pop genre," that the participants are "analogous to a preacher or performance artist," that "not everything [in the Slam] was poetry" or more harshly that "they [poetry slammers] substitute volume for skill."

The professors seemed to focus on the perceived aesthetic distinctions between Poetry Slam and their own work or the work done within the academic poetry community. For the most part, the professors looked at Poetry Slam in terms of the quality of the poetry done at poetry slams, rather than recognizing it as something that is increasing audiences' sensibility to poetry. There were a couple professors who half-acknowledged poetry slams as a vehicle for increasing

poetry's audiences. When asked about Poetry's Slams' audiences, one professor answered, "I'm glad to see people take an interest in the spoken word. I like it that people are attracted to rhythmic language as an art form separate from singing."

Another professor likened Poetry Slam audiences to those of WWF or Nascar saying that if these audiences lead towards a greater "interest in the word" then he is "for it," meaning Poetry Slam. Although these professors gave these small concessions, other professors did not look at Poetry Slam as a vehicle for increasing poetry's audiences.

When professors were asked to describe the relationship between "slam poets" and poets in universities, the responses were split. Two poets said that there was no relationship and three said either that it depends on the individual or that there is some relationship. (One poet said both.) Those who said there was no relationship said:

It varies, I think, according to the individuals. Most Slam Poetry doesn't go over very well on the page for people accustomed to reading poems. And most academic poetry doesn't make enough sense or have enough energy for a pop audience.

\* \* \* \*

I'm not sure that there is any.

While those who said there was a relationship said:

There's no way to generalize about this relationship. Some slam poets are poets in universities.

\* \* \* \*

Students attend slams and sometimes perform. Some teachers offer classes in which students have the option to do poetry slams.

\* \* \* \*

They have a healthy disdain for one another: See Liam Rector's response. They should hate each other like the Cryps and the Bloods.

When asked to comment on Slam's relationship to their institution, the responses were again split. Two of those who answered that there was no relationship between Slam and the academy also answered that Slam had no relationship to their institution.

I don't know. I can say that I am not aware of the relationship. And I have to say that I don't think of "(my) institution" as one homogenized entity that has relationships in the way your question suggests.

\* \* \* \*

I'm not sure that there is any.

Four of those who expressed that Slam does have a relationship to the academy also said that Slam had a relationship to their particular institution.

We've admitted one committed slam poet to our graduate program. And we've had a few perform as guests. Mostly, we're interested in other genres.

\* \* \* \*

There's no "formal" relationship except that I sponsored a slam team in a recent national competition.

\* \* \* \*

Bob Holman is a frequent adjunct poetry instructor.

\* \* \* \*

When asked if MFA programs stifle poets, Eudora Welty said they don't stifle them enough. We don't stifle slam poets enough.

The results reveal that while most professors showed a "guarded acceptance" of Slam as it is described earlier in the chapter, the professors also made sure to distance themselves from this community by calling it a "pop genre," that is

something closer to T.V. or preaching, or something they know about, but simply “do not prefer.” Then, in terms of the relationship between poetry slams and the academy, professors offered a range of responses from not being aware if there was a relationship, to acknowledging that one class in their program holds poetry slams, to a negative comment of extreme non-acceptance about how slam poets aren’t “stifle[d] enough.” This same professor said that the two subcultures have a “healthy disdain,” for each other, which was shown to be partially untrue from my interviews with slam poets in New York City. Overall, the professor’s responses support the argument that those in the academic poetry community have moved toward a “guarded acceptance” of poetry slam in recent years.

## Chapter 5 —Why is The Academy Reluctant to Embrace Poetry Slam and Its Audiences?

This chapter discusses four possible underlying causes of the academy's reluctance to embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences. These are: (1) a singular value view of poetry, (2) the perception that poetry slam has no relevance for poets in the academy, (3) limited views towards high and low art, and (4) an outsider/insider mentality.

The first possible underlying cause of poets in the academy's reluctance to embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences is the problem of singular value, which is a name for the tendency of those in the academic poetry community to look at poetry as something that is definable. The concept of singular value comes from Steven Connor's discussion of aesthetics in his *Theory and Cultural Value*. Although I stated at the outset of this paper that I would avoid aesthetic discussion, I must address the aesthetic issue in this section because my research suggests aesthetic differences contribute to the academy's reluctance to embrace Slam.

In *Poetry and Contemporary Culture*, the editor Andrew Roberts discusses an example of how singular definitions of poetry can be limiting. Roberts quotes poet Ted Hughes in the introduction as saying that "it's my suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us" (Roberts 5). Then, Roberts makes the observation that

this is evidently a way of describing one sort of poetry, of which Hughes's own mythic, uncanny nature poetry would stand as a prominent example. Rather than seeing other forms of poetry (such as satirical, humorous, political or ironic) as of differing or even less, poetic value, the statement sees them as simply not poetry; as if there can be only one essence of the poetic. (Roberts 5)

This passage dissects one of the key justifications academics use to distance themselves from Poetry Slam. The example above is an instance of "singular value," since Hughes defines poetry as something with a specific definition, rather than as something that could be defined in multiple ways (Roberts 7). In Roberts' commentary on Hughes' statement, he suggests that academic poets may endorse a "singular value" definition of poetry because it helps poets define and market their work. Roberts points out that giving poetry a specific definition that renders one's own poetry a "prominent example" of that definition is ultimately a great way to market one's work. However, Roberts argues that singular value definitions of poetry, or the absence of different aesthetic value systems for different types of poetry, actually reduces poetry's meaning in modern society by constraining its value to whether or not it sells in the marketplace (7). This means that by ignoring Slam and pronouncing the work performed in slams "not poetry," poets in the academic poetry community actually end up reducing poetry's meaning and influence in society.

Another example of a poet who employs a singular value definition of poetry is Robert Pinsky. Pinsky, the United States Poet Laureate from 1997-2000, has published many books of poetry, has taught at Wellesley College and the University of California, Berkeley, and currently teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University ("Robert"). In *Democracy, Culture and the Voice*

*of Poetry*, a small book based on lectures given at Princeton University, Pinsky talks about the place of poetry as something that, for the most part, exists and should exist on the margins of contemporary American culture. Utilizing a singular value of what poetry is and should be, he describes poetry as something with a very specific definition and function:

This medium is different from performance: different from the poet's intonations and personality shining forth at a poetry reading, and different from a skilled actor's gifts... Though in many ways it resembles the performer's art, it is in other ways the opposite of that art, for the voice of poetry, though it may be social — and of course has been gloriously theatrical—ultimately begins as profoundly interior. The theatrical art of performance, manifestly and immediately social, moves inward from without, penetrating toward the interior from the spectacularly audible, visible presence. Poetry proceeds in the opposite direction. (Pinsky 43)

Pinsky is sure to be clear that “performance” is something that diminishes or cheapens the art form of poetry, which he says is inherently, individual, inward, and musical only in one's own head. Pinsky addresses the issue of poetry slams within a response to what he calls the most common question reporters ask about poetry, which is “Shouldn't poetry be part of show business?” In response, Pinsky argues that this question assumes that poetry's absence from show business is its weakness, when it is, in fact, its strength (44). Pinsky mentions poetry slams once in this book to say that they are “probably a good thing for poetry, though as part of the entertainment industry poetry will always be cute and small; as an art it is immense and fundamental” (45). In one sentence, Pinsky manages to relegate poetry slams to the realm of “entertainment” where they are “cute and small,” while lifting “real” poetry onto a pedestal where it remains as “an art” that is “immense and fundamental” (45). But by essentially saying that performance

poetry is not really poetry, Pinsky negates the work poetry slams do to bring new audiences to poetry. According to the description above, Pinsky probably believes Poetry Slam audiences are listening to theater instead of poetry, and thus probably cannot be considered poetry audiences.

After arguing that “real” poetry has little to do with mainstream American culture or entertainment, Pinsky writes that he does not “mean to put popular culture on one side and poetry on another” (17). However, by dismissing performance poetry, and by extension, slams, which mix entertainment with poetry, in favor of a limited definition of poetry, Pinsky does dismiss slam’s audiences. Pinsky further limits his view of poetry by using the words “popular culture” as a huge entity opposed to the existence of “real” poetry. There are different levels of “popular” in the United States. The biggest slam poet will never be known the way Madonna is known. Newhouse School of Communications professor and popular culture expert Robert Thompson says that he would not necessarily label Poetry Slam a part of “popular culture.” Thompson claims “poetry is insular,” in general, though “Poetry Slam has a contemporary vigor.” Thompson differentiates Slam from rap saying that rap is something that is involved with the “mass world.” This is not to say that poetry slams are not popular, but rather that they do not share the same mass audiences of television or rap music.

As shown by his dismissal of performance poetry and Slams, Pinsky views poetry slams as something outside of his singular definition of poetry, which is, in his opinion, an inward exchange between a reader and a page. Pinsky states, in so



many words, that performance poetry is the opposite of what poetry essentially is and thereby negates the possibility that poetry performed in slams is, in any way, poetry. Also, by using a broad notion of “popular culture,” which does not leave room for poetry that exists in the space between popular and insular, Pinsky does not leave room for Poetry Slam’s audiences in his conception of poetry.

Therefore, Pinsky’s singular value definition of poetry renders him unable to embrace poetry slams, let alone its audiences.

Pinsky reinforces his singular value view of poetry when he discusses his “Favorite Poem Project,” a project that involved documenting “ordinary citizens” reading their favorite poems (49). When talking about the project participants, Pinsky says, “this freedom to judge the art of poetry itself as a consumer, intimidated by the art’s difficulty but not by its social prestige or authority, feels American for me, for good or ill (56). Although this view seems more democratic than his definition of poetry, Pinsky once again makes sure to clarify that these readings, or these, “‘performances’ of the poems are not artistic performances” (63).

Pinsky distinguishes between the “performances” of the participants in his “Favorite Poem Project” from the “performances” of performance poets. He implies that performance poetry or oral poetry has nothing to do with his project (66). This constant repetitive aversion to the word “performance,” shows Pinsky’s disapproval of the association of poetry with this word. This is an underlying cause for his rejection of Poetry Slam, which consequently contributes to his failure to view Poetry Slam as a vehicle for increasing interest in poetry.

Finally, a third example of a poet who employs a singular value aesthetic that renders him unable to recognize the potential for Poetry Slam as a vehicle is James Longenbach. Longenbach is the Joseph Henry Gilmore Professor of English at University of Rochester. In his new book, *Resistance to Poetry*, he discusses why poetry must exist on the fringes of society or essentially remain “dead” to general society in order to, in fact, exist as poetry. He writes that

It’s difficult to complain about poetry’s expanding audience, but it’s more difficult to ask what a culture that wants poetry to be popular wants poetry to be. The audience has by and large been purchased at the cost of poetry’s inwardness: its strangeness, its propensity to defeat its own expectations, its freedom to explore new (or old) linguistic avenues without necessarily needing to worry about economic success. (6)

This quotation is an example of singular value because its author implies that “poetry,” is one entity. He argues that there are two options for poetry, that it can be popular and shallow or unpopular and profound. This kind of reasoning ignores the reality that poetry is multiple, that a huge range of poetry is being written today by a diverse array of poets involved in a many different poetry communities. Longenbach, in this passage, cannot see past his own ultimatum that poetry is one definable entity that can only exist in two extreme ways in society, as popular or unpopular. However, as Professor Thompson said, poetry slams exist in between these two cultural markers. Poetry slams are popular, but not as popular as television or rap. Longenbach, however employs a singular value definition of poetry in his book that leaves no middle ground and thus he is unable to embrace Poetry Slam or its audiences.

Longenbach further corners poetry into a limited definition when he writes

that “many other poets might be scrupulous enough to recognize that the usefulness of poetry depends on a frank appraisal of its limitations...” (43). It makes sense that, if poets exist almost exclusively in universities, where publication is for promotion, then poetry’s limitations may appear to be clearly drawn. However, if poets exist in a community and produce work of relevance to that community, then poetry’s limitations may seem less defined. For example, if poets are in schools using poetry to help students not only learn to read, but to like to read (even poetry!), then the call for poets to make an “appraisal” of poetry’s limitations suddenly appears to be a limitation in itself. To watch students’ faces light up as they read poems that speak to their experience would cause any poet to question Longenbach’s statement about poetry’s limitations.

In addition to the three poets discussed above, an online survey of poetry professors in Creative Writing Programs at Syracuse University, Columbia University, New School for Social Research, Sarah Lawrence, Brooklyn College, and New York University yielded some open-ended responses that reveal more poets who use singular value thinking about poetry. When asked if they thought “slam poetry” was poetry, one professor marked “always,” three marked “sometimes,” two marked “possibly,” and one answered “don’t know.” When asked to explain their response, they wrote:

If you call it poetry, in my opinion, it’s poetry for you...

\* \* \* \*

...I consider slam poetry to be something like a subgenre (like procedural poetry) which seems like a hybrid genre. The way a bat is a mammal but seems part bird.

\* \* \* \*

When the readers have written a poem, yes; when they are reading something they just wrote, no.

\* \* \* \*

It intersects with art the way TV sometimes intersects with art.

\* \* \* \*

Obviously this is a subjective opinion, but my feeling was that the language of some of the slam poets was far too clichéd to qualify as poetry. The focus of interest was not so much in the language itself as in the performer, in attitude. The slam poetry I have read written down is often very boring — which is not to detract from its quality or importance as performance.

As shown by these responses, some of the professors have singular value conceptions of poetry. Specifically, five professors did not necessarily consider the poems performed in slams to be poetry. This outcome suggests that the aesthetic argument over what poetry is or is not relates to professors' ability to embrace Poetry Slam as a vehicle for increasing poetry's audiences. The professors' singular value conception of poetry restricts them to an aesthetic debate, in which there is no room to consider Poetry Slam as a cultural tool that can introduce new audiences to poetry.

The second possible underlying cause of academic poets' reluctance to embrace Poetry Slam is that they may feel that Poetry Slam has no relevance for them or their poetry. In *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, Peter Middleton points out that many modernist poets did not like to read their work for an audience. Middleton writes about Williams Carlos Williams who once read poetry at a dinner for a group of fellow doctors and lawyers. Williams was frustrated after this reading because he believed that the dinner guests "laughed at the wrong things." Middleton also

mentions Wallace Stevens' famous refusal of the invitation to read at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, when Stevens said, "I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly" (84). These examples suggest that those in the academic poetry community who embrace modernism may be reluctant to embrace Poetry Slam and its audiences because many of them feel their poetry is not as conducive to performance. Therefore, because they do not feel their poetry is relevant to poetry slams, they may feel poetry slams are not relevant to them.

Another example of the problem of relevance appears in an open-ended response from the online survey of poetry professors. When asked about his opinion of poetry slams, one professor answered that

the poetry presented at a poetry slam is a kind of poetry that finds its fullest expression when spoken, whether it is read from a printed page or composed extemporaneously. The poetry that I am most invested in is poetry which finds its fullest expression on the page, whose words deserve and demand to be savored slowly, incrementally, cautiously, not poetry which works best as oratory or performance.

Here, the professor explains that he is not interested in the poetry performed at poetry slams because he is not "invested" in performance poetry. Therefore, poetry done in the context of a slam is irrelevant for him.

The third possible underlying cause of poets in the academy's reluctance to embrace Poetry Slam is their perceptions of high and low-brow art. This issue is discussed in Dana Gioia's second book, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*. In the title essay, Gioia names poetry slams and performance poetry as two of the new forms of "popular poetry" that have experienced a "wide scale" "reemergence" (7). Gioia talks about how the traditional academic

conception of contemporary poetry uses a “historical or thematic framework” to place printed texts alongside other printed texts. Gioia points out that

no driver can negotiate a sudden turn in the road by looking backward, and neither can a critic accurately see what is most innovative in contemporary poetry through the now-antiquarian assumptions of Modernism and the avant-garde... Even as the academy attacks and rejects Modernism, it remains caught in its conceptual framework, at least in discussing poetry.  
(6)

In this passage, Gioia argues that even as poets in the academy expand the study of poetry to include more than Modernism (one type of “high art” poetry), they still view poetry through a limited lens that polarizes “high art” poetry against everything else, and thus they cannot embrace “popular poetry,” or poetry slams. Further, he adds that “popular poetry” is not what critics have been trained to “consider worthy of study,” that this type of poetry does not offer “a Harold Bloom or Helen Vendler...an opportunity to display their critical chops,” again pointing to why poets in the academy ignore or reject slam on the basis of “high art” perceptions of poetry (7).

An example of a poet in the academy who seems to be “looking backward,” is James Longenbach, who wrote that the popularity of poetry would be purchased at the “cost of poetry’s inwardness.” In this statement, Longenbach is indirectly addressing the issue of high-brow and low-brow art. He warns against the “cost” of popularity because he is wary of its effect on poetry. This reflects the traditional academic notion that popularity means bad art. Professor Thompson said in an interview that the popularity of Poetry Slam may be the reason professors do not want to embrace it. Although Thompson said he would

not classify Poetry Slam as mass art, he said professors may be thinking, “In the end, I can’t take it seriously because too many are consuming it” (Thompson). Further, he says professors may also fear that the opposite of “high tide raises all boats,” will come true meaning that “academics fear if they support slam poetry, which is more accessible,” then interest in the more “difficult” poets “will decrease” (Thompson).

A fourth possible underlying cause for why those in the academy are reluctant to embrace Slam could be that Poetry Slam is composed mostly of academic poetry community outsiders. David Orr wrote a critique of *The Best American Poetry 2004*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, saying that this always anticipated anthology “offers all of the finest poetic moments of the past year, so long as they come in the form of one poem each by around 70 writers of varying skill, as chosen by an editor who is a famous poet with favors to trade and axes to grind” (24).

Orr writes that the title “best” and “American” and “poetry” seems to press the notion that poetry is a democratic endeavor and that anyone could write the best poem for next year’s volume. However, Orr argues that “poetry isn’t really an open system; it’s a combination of odd institutions, personal networks, hoary traditions, talent and blind luck. It’s both an art and a guild....” (24). Therefore, if poets in the academy are busy trying not to be “outsiders” within their own community, they probably do not want to be concerned with embracing Poetry Slam, a community that exists outside of the academy.

Marvin Bell, longtime faculty member at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop,

advocates in *Spoken Word Revolution* that the academic poetry community should embrace Poetry Slam (Bell 130). He argues for a more inclusive attitude towards Slam. Bell, unlike Gioia or Pinsky, ties Poetry Slams to the growth of poetry in America. In his description of poetry's recent increased "cultural presence," he includes the remark that poetry slams spread across the country in the 1990's cultivating an audience that now listens to poetry in bars, coffeehouses, or on city stages (Bell 131). Bell also mentions the "poetry-in-the-schools" program that now exists all over the country, often directly connected to the slam community in areas where slams are prevalent. Despite the aesthetic issues discussed in this chapter, which underlie why some poets in the academy are reluctant to embrace Poetry Slam, Bell is an example of a poet who put aside aesthetic issues to make room for embracing Slam and its audiences. First, Bell chooses not to reject Slam because of a limited definition of poetry. Second, he chooses not to dismiss Slam as entertainment or theater. Third, he chooses not to ignore Slam on the basis that perhaps he does not feel it affects him directly. And finally, he chooses not to ignore Slam even though it is composed of academic "outsiders." Instead of all of these options, Bell decides to recognize Poetry Slam as an alternative poetry community, and further, as a community that cultivates audiences for poetry.



## Chapter 6 — Consequences of Not Embracing Poetry Slam and Its Audiences

Poetry's audiences in the United States are declining. If those in the academy are at all concerned with poetry's reach in American culture, then they must be concerned with the findings of two recent national studies. The National Endowment for the Arts supported a national longitudinal study of the literary reading trends of American adults. The study reveals that Americans are reading less poetry today than they read twenty years ago. Then, a recent study by The Poetry Foundation used interviews with both current and former poetry "users" to determine possible reasons why Americans either read or avoid poetry. The findings of this study suggest that Poetry Slam may be able to attract "former poetry users" back to poetry.

"Reading at Risk," a study sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, traces the literary reading trends of more than 17,000 American adults (Bradshaw and Nichols vii). The survey was conducted in 1982, 1992, and 2002, and the main finding is that Americans are reading less literature (vii). Literature in this study included novels, short stories, poetry, or plays (1). In 2002, fewer than half (47%) of American adults read literature outside of work or school. Specifically, 12 percent of American adults, about 25 million Americans, read poetry that year (3). The percentage of those who had read or listened to poetry in 2002 was slightly higher, 14.3 percent (21). Although the percentage of those who had read or listened to poetry increased slightly from 1982-1992 (19.8% to 20.5%), it decreased significantly from 1992-2002 (20.5% to 14.3%) (21). It is

important to note that the 2002 percentage for this measure is even lower than the percentage in 1982 meaning there was an overall decrease in poetry's audience from 1982-2002 (21).

Since the study did not particularly address Poetry Slam's relationship to the percentage of Americans who read or listened to poetry, there is no way to know how poetry slams fit into these fluctuations. One could speculate that these percentages show that poetry slams did not increase the size of poetry's audience when Slam was developing in the 1990s. But one could also speculate that because of poetry slams, the decline in poetry's audience was less sharp than it could have been. Overall, the findings of the study show that poetry's audience is declining in America. I suggest that embracing Poetry Slam and its audiences are one way to address this problem.

The Poetry Foundation, a nonprofit organization that publishes *Poetry Magazine*, was founded in 2003 after it received 100 million dollars from philanthropist and pharmaceutical heiress, Ruth Lilly. The Foundation's mission is "to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience" ("Poetry Foundation"). After three years of discussion over what should be done with this large gift, The Poetry Foundation decided that one of its goals would be to expand poetry's audience in America.

The Foundation paired up with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) to conduct an in-depth national study called "Poetry in America" (Schwartz et al. 2). The NORC interviewed 1,023 American readers about their use and perceptions of poetry (2). A reader was defined as an individual who read

books, magazines, or newspapers (more than half of which had to be in English) outside of work or school (Schwartz et al. i). The readers interviewed were divided into “poetry users,” or individuals who had read or listened to poetry in the past five years, and “poetry non-users” or individuals who had not read or listened to poetry in the past five years (3). Thirty-two percent of those surveyed were “former poetry users” meaning they had read or listened to poetry more than five years previous to the study (8). When asked why they did not read poetry anymore, 54% of this group said it was because they “don’t like it” or have “no interest” in it (65). However, the authors of the study, Bradburn, Parks and Reynolds, point out that this percentage must be understood in the context of the former readers’ current negative perceptions about poetry (66). More than 80 percent of “former poetry users” said they currently find poetry boring and difficult to understand (66).

Poetry Slam deliberately mixes poetry with performance and competition in order to make poetry more accessible and exciting. Poetry Slams are a format for a poetry reading in which the poetry, by nature of its role in the game, becomes entertaining. Since Poetry Slam addresses the two underlying causes for why the majority of “former poetry users” stopped reading poetry, it is reasonable to conclude that poetry slams have the potential to attract these former poetry readers to poetry again.

As shown by the National Endowment for the Arts’ “Reading at Risk” study, poetry’s audiences are declining. Then, findings from the Poetry Foundation’s “Poetry in America” study show that some Americans stopped

reading poetry because they find it “difficult to understand” and “boring.” Poetry Slams, a tool that can help attract these “former poetry users” back to poetry, are needed now more than ever in the effort to cultivate audiences for poetry in America.

## Chapter 7 — Why the Academy Should Embrace Poetry Slam and Its Audiences

This chapter will discuss individuals and programs that exemplify what “embracing” Poetry Slam means. Many individual poets are currently working to bridge the gap between the academic poetry and poetry slam communities in order to expand poetry’s audience in the United States. In this chapter, I will highlight four poets who have moved from the academy poetry community to the poetry slam community or vice versa, and the effects this move had on the relationship between the two communities. In the first two examples, an academic poet embraced Slam and participated in the poetry slam community, which resulted in widening the possible audience for poetry. In the second two examples, a slam poet who entered the academy worked to introduce Slam to the academic poetry community. In addition, I will discuss poetry programs in middle schools and high schools that are currently combining academic and poetry slam techniques to increase appreciation and audiences for poetry across the nation. Lastly, I will outline specific steps the academy should take in order to “embrace” Poetry Slam and its audiences for the benefit for all poetry communities.

*From the Academy to Slam*

Some examples of poets in the academy who have participated in slams or embraced and commented on slams are:

Yusef Komunyakaa  
Sonia Sanchez  
Edward Hirsch  
Nikki Giovanni  
Marvin Bell  
Billy Collins

One example of when an academic poet “crossed over” into the Poetry Slam community is when Billy Collins, a professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York, performed with Taylor Mali at the Bowery Poetry Club. In an interview, Mali said the event was called “Page vs. Stage” because Billy Collins was primarily a “page” poet and he (Mali) was a “stage” or performance poet. Mali said that the audience enjoyed both Collins and himself, and that the two reading styles complemented each other. However, Mali also said that he thought most in the audience were familiar with both his and Collins’ work prior to the reading. If this is true, then the reading may not have exposed many audience members to a different kind of poetry. But, there is still the possibility that members from both the academic and poetry slam communities were present at the reading, and that members of each community gained some insight into the other community from this reading.

Another example of a crossover is when Yusef Komunyakaa took part in the culminating performance of the Brooklyn Museum of Art (BAM) artists-in-the-schools program. The audience was composed of students from the New York

City high school English classes who participated in the program, which included the school at which I worked as an intern. The event featured poets and actors who worked with the students in the artists-in-residence program as well as “academic” poets like Yusef Komunyakaa. The result was a show that included performances by poets and actors who combined poetry with hip-hop, dance, and theatre alongside a reading by Yusef Komunyakaa. Komunyakaa, however, prepared for his audience. He purposely chose his most musical poems and performed them in a dramatic way. Although the students responded with the loudest cheers when music or hip-hop was involved, they listened attentively to Yusef Komunyakaa and were thus exposed to different kinds of poetry. This event is an instance that shows how all poetry communities can benefit when poets from the academic poetry community collaborate with poets from the poetry slam community. In this case, the mutual benefit was that the collaboration increased a young audiences’ sensibility for different kinds of poetry. Komunyakaa’s poetry was less accessible than some of the other poems in the performance, but the other poems gave students the “poetic sensibility” to be a willing and ready audience for Komunyakaa’s reading. Whether done intentionally or not, this is an example of a single poet in the academy who collaborated with slam poets to help cultivate an audience for different types of poetry in America.

*From Slam to Academy*

Some examples of slam poets who have at some time in their life entered the academic poetry community are:

Taylor Mali  
 Regie Gibson  
 Marty McConnell  
 Tara Betts  
 Saul Williams  
 Ishle Yi Park

On a panel about “Slam and the Academy” at a recent Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference, six slam poets spoke about their experiences participating in both the academic and poetry slam communities. The panelists were: Ed Bok Lee, Cin Salach, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, Eitan Kadosh, Patricia Smith, and Tyehimba Jess.

Tyehimba Jess has competed twice on the Green Mill National Poetry Slam Team and recently published his first poetry collection, *leadbelly*, which has won numerous awards. At the panel, Jess said that he encountered “rancor and disdain for slam poetry” while enrolled at New York University’s graduate creative writing program. He said that the louderARTS Bar 13 slam takes place down the street from NYU’s campus, but that none of the graduate students in his program had ever attended this reading. Tyehimba is now teaching at the University of Illinois at Urbana and said that he plans to take his students to the Green Mill to expose them to poetry slams. He says one of the reasons for this field trip is that “Slam has brought poetry to the masses in a way that no . . . university has ever been able to do.” By teaching and exposing his students in the



academic poetry community to Slam, he is working to bridge the gap between the two communities (Jess).

Another slam poet who helped the academy embrace the poetry slam community is Marty McConnell. While at Sarah Lawrence's graduate creative writing program, Marty worked in Student Affairs; she told the following story:

When I got there, we had had a couple of bad performances [and] the Student Affairs Program said they weren't going to bring any more poets out unless they were academics. And so I said, "Don't do that, I'll bring Roger Bonair-Agard" [a slam poet/published poet] and there was standing room only, and I brought in Staceyann Chin [slam poet] and we built back up the relationship between performance and the academy there... Now it's become more common for colleges to bring in performance poets, but in 1999, schools were just starting to realize that you could bring performance poets in, and those events would not be just little readings in the library. (McConnell)

By inviting performance poets that she admired and respected, Marty was able to nurture a relationship between the academic and poetry slam communities.

### *Poetry in the Schools*

Poets in the poetry slam community have found that the accessibility of performance poetry makes poetry slams an effective tool for teaching poetry in schools, particularly in middle and high schools. This section will briefly discuss some of the educational programs currently happening in schools across the country. Slam poets, page poets, and, nonprofits have teamed up in urban areas and beyond to introduce an accessible and exciting teaching tool into high schools and middle schools.

There are many nonprofits dedicated to providing this type of education.

The Teachers and Writers Collaborative is a New York City nonprofit founded in 1967. This organization “following the example of the late poet Kenneth Koch,” puts writers into the classroom to expose children to “beautifully strange poems by the likes of . . . Lorca, Frank O’Hara, and Vladimir Mayakovsky” (Spayde 44).

Through organizations such as Youth Speaks, a San Francisco-based poetry organization with chapters in New York and Seattle, slam poets and other poets team up with middle schools and high schools to bring poetry slams into the schools. The poets and teachers in these schools use poetry slams as a vehicle to get students excited about poetry, literature, learning, and reading (Elefeld 203). WritersCorps, an organization that uses poetry slams to promote literacy in disadvantaged communities, has branches in San Francisco, New York, and the District of Columbia (“Writerscorps”). Bob Holman writes in *SWR* that “Youth Speaks and the Writers Corps have been able to use Slam to engage high school students in the arts, in self-statement, in a way to bite onto culture with your own culture” (167).

Further, many of the students involved in these programs participate in the Brave New Voices National Youth Poetry Slam Festival that has taken place in a different city each year since 1998. This annual gathering of young poets (participants cannot exceed the age of 19) is the sister festival of the adult National Poetry Slam, and brings together about 200 young poets from around the country. Six hundred to one thousand people will attend the final competition to hear what young people have to say through the medium of poetry. One of the goals of the festival is to change how teenagers “perceive themselves and how the

rest of the society receives them,” by encouraging them to be “cultural participants” (Kass 223).

### ***The Poetry 180 Program***

Billy Collins launched his “Poetry 180” campaign after being appointed the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2001. This project seeks to put contemporary poetry back into high schools. The “Poetry 180” program advocates that one poem a day be read in class or during the school’s daily public announcements for the purpose of introducing poetry into everyday life. Collins created an anthology of poems for the program to make it easier for teachers to choose poems. Collins admits that his anthology is filled partially with poems that he just likes. In addition, he writes that he deliberately chose some poems about topics that might interest the average high school student (basketball, cars). All the poems, he says, were also partially chosen because they are “short clear, contemporary poems which any listener could basically ‘get’ on first hearing -- poems whose injection of pleasure is immediate” (Collins xvi).

If it seems likely that Billy Collins’ program and slam poets would run into each other in the classroom, they do! When I interned at the High School for Leadership and Public Service (HSLAPS), a public high school in Manhattan, a pilot poetry program sponsored by the Brooklyn Academy of Music was being tested in some New York City high schools. HSLAPS was one of the schools involved in the pilot. In this program, a writer-in-residence who combined performance with writing (a poet, playwright, etc.) would lead interactive

workshops in English classes but would incorporate lessons from Billy Collins' *Poetry 180* anthology, a book every student received at the outset of the program. The poems from the *180* anthology supplemented the interactive performance workshops. The rationale behind this decision was that students should engage in performance for the benefits of this exercise, but should also read poems in order to recognize and learn about the different literary layers of contemporary poetic works. This program serves as an example of the way poetry slams can be effectively used as a vehicle to increase interest in poetry. Also, this program is an example of a place where the academic and poetry slam communities work to meet on common ground, a ground where poetry truly succeeds in reaching its largest audience.

The actions of individuals and the programs discussed in this chapter illustrate how poets in the academy can “embrace” Poetry Slam and its audiences. To clarify the steps the academy should take to “embrace” Slam, I outline three specific recommendations below. Poets in the academy poetry community should:

- 1) Include Poetry Slam in discussions, books, and articles on the current state of poetry today. For example, Marvin Bell, a professor at the Iowa Writers Workshop, includes Slam in his essay on the current “poetry scene” in the United States today (See Page 76).
- 2) Organize and support events and field trips that expose members of the academic poetry community to Slam in order to foster communication, education, and collaboration between the two communities. Tyehimba Jess, a performance poet who now teaches at the University of Illinois at

Urbana, said that he will take his students to the Green Mill's slam in Chicago (See Page 84).

3) Provide monetary support or volunteers for "poetry-in-the-schools" programs in grade schools that combine the strengths of Poetry Slam and "page poetry." Brooklyn Academy of Music's poetry program for high schools uses both performance poetry and "page poetry" for the purpose of cultivating audiences for poetry (See Page 87).

I argue that if the academy follows these three recommendations, poetry's audience in America will increase to the benefit of all poetry communities in the United States. At this point, poetry will truly be, as Bob Holman envisioned, "alive and allowed."

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## Appendix I – Recommendations for Further Research

- Publishing American Poetry – Research how and by whom poetry has been published throughout American history and investigate the decentralization of poetry publishing. How do big presses today views poetry publishing? How were poets published in the past? How does this relate to the current state of poetry in the United States? Investigate the hypothesis that the shift to University presses that have small distribution may be related to a shrinking readership for poetry and the isolation of page poetry in the university.

- Conduct a Policy/Cultural analysis of nonprofits as facilitators of collaboration between spoken word and academy. This study would use interview research and field research (including looking at 990s) to investigate nonprofits whose interest is primarily poetry in the United States. A study of what they fund would be useful to see if there is status quo support in the poetry nonprofit world or if these nonprofits are helping to construct bridges across different poetry communities in order to actually increase the popularity of poetry. Basically, a look at the purpose and mission of these organizations to illuminate whether the nature of the nonprofit is elitist or if there is truly a public good in mind. A working list of these organizations is:

- 1) Academy of American Poets
- 2) Poetry Society of America
- 3) American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 4) Teachers and Writer's Collaborative
- 5) Poetry Foundation - Poetry Magazine

- 6) Poets House
- 7) The Loft
- 8) The Writers Voice
- 9) Poets and Writers Inc.
- 10) P.E.N.
- 11) National Writers Union

- How does Race/ethnicity affect how people view poetry and its function in the community? Look at the history of oral poetry and how that relates to the academy's acceptance or non-acceptance of poetry slam and its diverse audiences. Look at poets of color in universities who chose to be community artists. See June Jordan's "Poetry for the People" campaign and Tony Medina's work in Washington, D.C. Then write the book on the disconnection between the American academy and Slam with reference to race and ethnicity. A good related essay is Tony Medina's introduction to *Bum Rush the Page* (Medina).

## Appendix II – Audience Survey Instrument

### Survey

I am a student and this survey is for a thesis project. All responses to this survey are confidential. Please answer all of the questions as honestly as you can. Thank you for your participation!

Have you completed this survey before? If yes, please check the “Yes” box and hand it back to me  
 Yes     No

1. Is this your first time at this poetry event?     Yes     No

**If you answered No for number 1, please answer number 2 and 3**

2. About how often do you come to this event?  
 a) Once a year    b) Once a month    c) Twice a month    d) Every week

3. How often do you expect to attend this event for the rest of the summer?  
 a) Never Again    b) Rarely    c) Sometimes    d) Often

4. Have you attended any other poetry slams in New York City? If so, Where?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you write poetry?     Yes     No

6. Do you perform poetry?     Yes     No

7. Do you read poetry?     Yes     No

**If you answered Yes to number 7, please answer number 8-10**

8. How often do you read poetry?  
 a) Rarely    b) Sometimes    c) Often    d) Very Often

9. Why did you start reading poetry?

10. About how often do you buy a book of poetry?  
 a) Never    b) Rarely    c) Sometimes    d) Often    e) Very Often

11. Why did you start listening to poetry?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

12. Select the highest education level you have completed:  
 a) Some high school    b) High School Diploma    c) Some college  
 d) College degree    e) Some Advanced Degree    f) Advanced Degree

13. If you marked letter c) – f) above, which degree are you working on or have completed? \_\_\_\_\_

14. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

15. What race do you identify with?    White    Black    Latino    Mixed    Asian  
 Native American    Other \_\_\_\_\_

16. Which gender are you?     Male     Female     Other

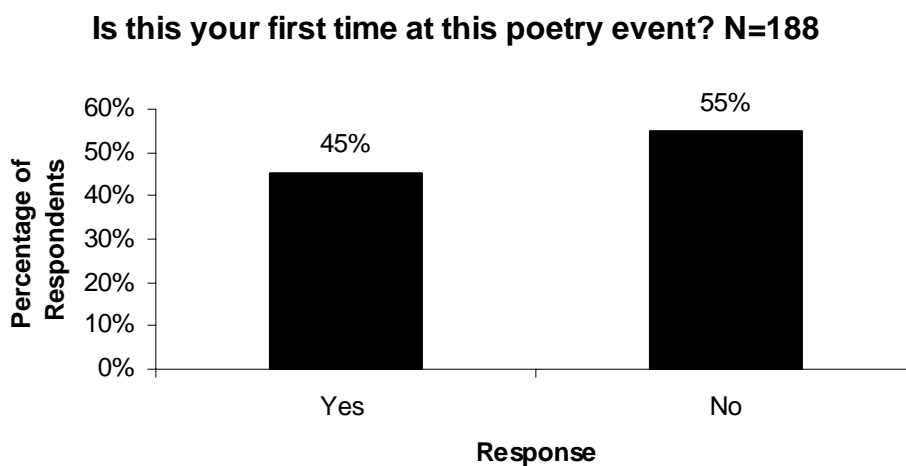


17. Select one of the following ranges which best reflects your annual household income:  
a)Below \$15,000    b)\$15,001-\$30,000    c) \$30,001-\$45,000    d)\$45,000-\$60,000  
e)\$60,001-\$75,000    f)\$75,001-\$90,000    g)\$90,001 or higher

18. What is your sexual orientation?    a)Gay    b)Straight    c)Bisexual    d)Don't Know

## Appendix III –Audience Survey Findings

1. 55% of respondents attended the poetry event where they had attended the poetry event at least one other time.



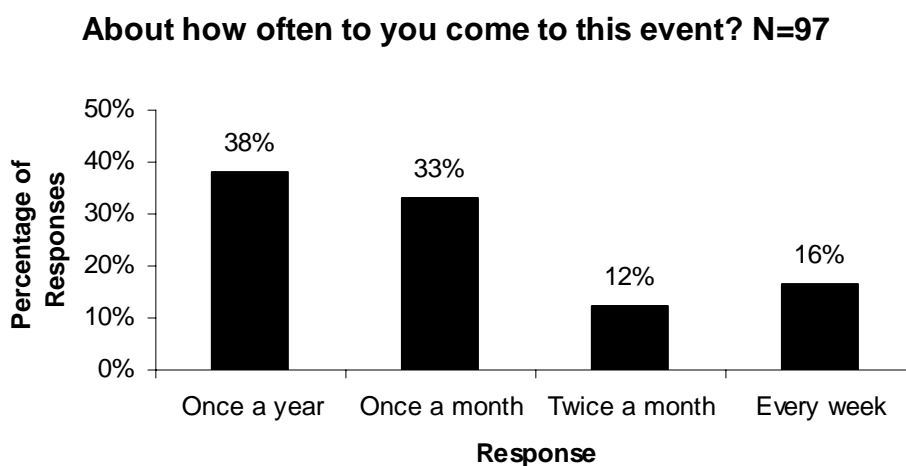
However, when this breaks down by venue, the table below shows that 84% of the audience members at the louderARTS Slam have been to the slam event before. Only 70% of the Bowery audience have been to the Bowery another time. Only 62% of the Nuyorican audience had attended the slam event before. These data suggest that louderARTS has a somewhat more loyal audience base than the other two venues.

Venue	Have you been to this poetry event before?	
	Yes	No
Bowery Poetry Club	30%	70%
Nuyorican Poets Café	38%	62%
louderARTS Bar 13	16%	84%

If the audience member responded that it was their first time at the slam event, that person was more likely to answer that they do not write or perform poetry, but that they do read poetry and read it at least “sometimes.” On the other hand, if the audience member responded that this was not their first time at the slam event, they were more likely to write (but not perform) poetry, read poetry, and read it very often. Also, whether or not this was the first time at the slam event for the audience member, both groups were about equally likely to answer that they buy a book of poetry “sometimes.” Those who had never been to the event before were slightly more likely to say they buy a book of poetry “rarely,” whereas those who had been to the event before were slightly more likely to answer that they buy a poetry book “very often.”

2. 61% attend the slam event at least once a month.

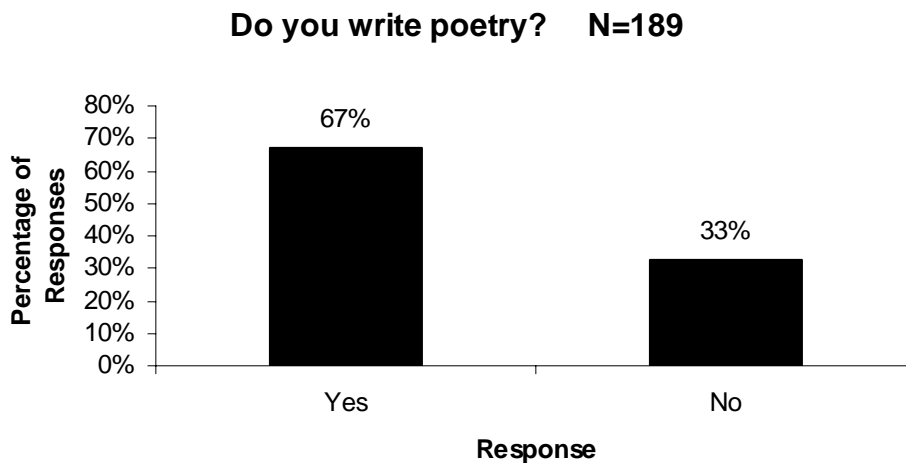
If respondents answered no to question 1, they answered the following:



Although the numbers did differentiate by venue, the louderARTS event had the highest percentage of audience members that attended every week. This is partially irrelevant since the slams at the Bowery were more sporadic at the time I took this survey, as opposed to their regular weekly slams, which happen during the year. This most likely is one of the reasons only 7% of respondents answered that they attended the Bowery slam every week. Still, only 19% of Nuyorican audience members attended that slam every week, which is 11% lower than the percentage of audience members that attends the louderARTS event every week.

Venue	About how often to you come to this event?			
	Once a year	Once a month	Twice a month	Every week
Bowery	29%	28%	36%	7%
Nuyorican	33%	44%	5%	19%
louderARTS	5%	32%	16%	30%

3. 67% of those surveyed responded that they write poetry.



One of the generalizations made about the Slam scene is that it's just a bunch of poets watching other poets. The overall data seem to suggest that, for the most part, it is true that most of the audience members at the three largest venues in New York City are poets.

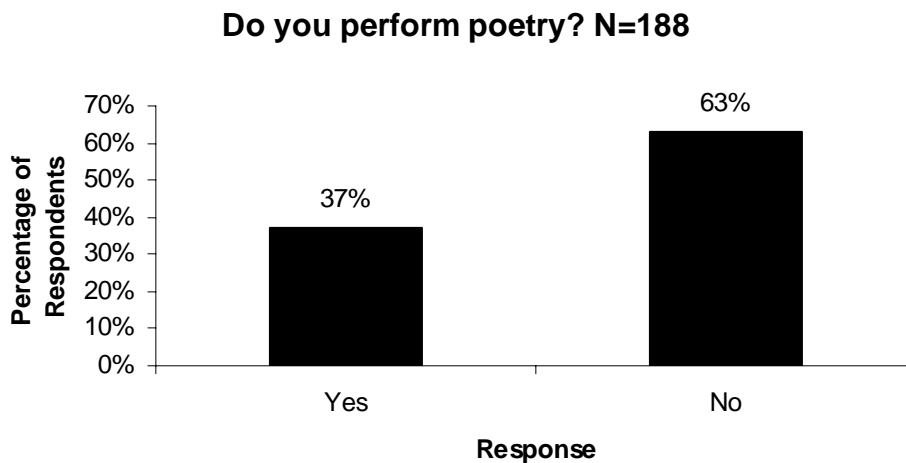
However, broken down by venue, the numbers reveal that this is not consistent across venues. Although the percentage of audience members at the Bowery and louderARTS that write poetry is high (59% and 65% respectively), most audience members at the Nuyorican did not write poetry. Sixty-two percent, the majority of those audience members surveyed at the Nuyorican slam, responded that they did not, in fact write poetry. The Nuyorican has the biggest audience of the three venues and this could be a contributing factor. In addition, I would speculate that a smaller reading would include more poets in the audience since smaller reading series' are more like writing communities, as opposed to weekly shows for

unrelated audiences. The Nuyorican has in the past years received a lot of press and media attention and has grown in popularity to the point where they draw not only poets, but an impressive array of people.

Venue	Do you write poetry? N=189	
	Yes	No
Bowery	59%	41%
Nuyorican	38%	62%
louderARTS	65%	35%

Also, if the audience member responded that they write poetry, then they were much more likely to answer that they read it. Interestingly, if the audience member responded that they do not write poetry, there was about a 50/50 chance that they read poetry.

4. 63% of those surveyed answered that they do not perform poetry.

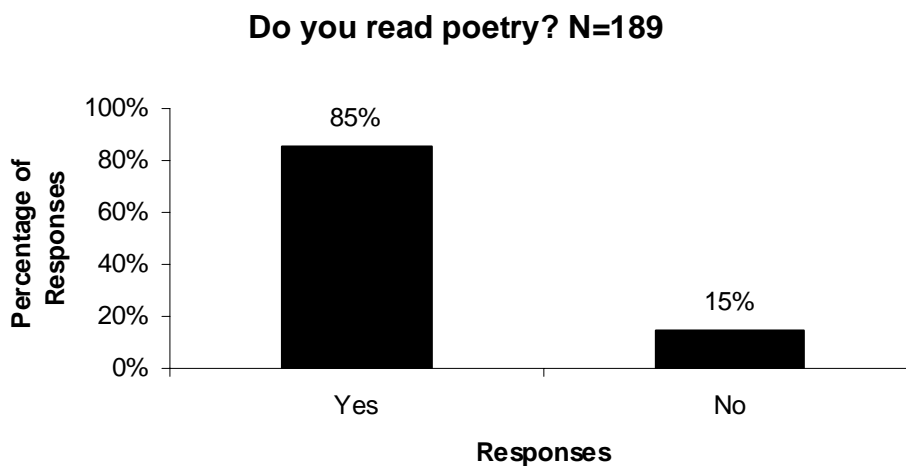


The discrepancy between those who do and do not perform poetry is even higher across venues. Eighty-five percent of the Nuyorican audience members answered that they do not perform poetry, and at louderARTS and Bowery, almost as many, 77% and 76% respectively, answered the same way. The finding is that the majority of the audience members who attend these events do not perform poetry.

	Do you perform poetry? N=188	
Venue	Yes	No
Bowery	24%	76%
Nuyorican	15%	85%
louderARTS	37%	77%

In addition, if the audience member responded that they perform poetry, they were somewhat more likely to say they read poetry than those who responded they did not perform poetry.

5. The overwhelming majority, 85% of the respondents, answered that they read poetry.

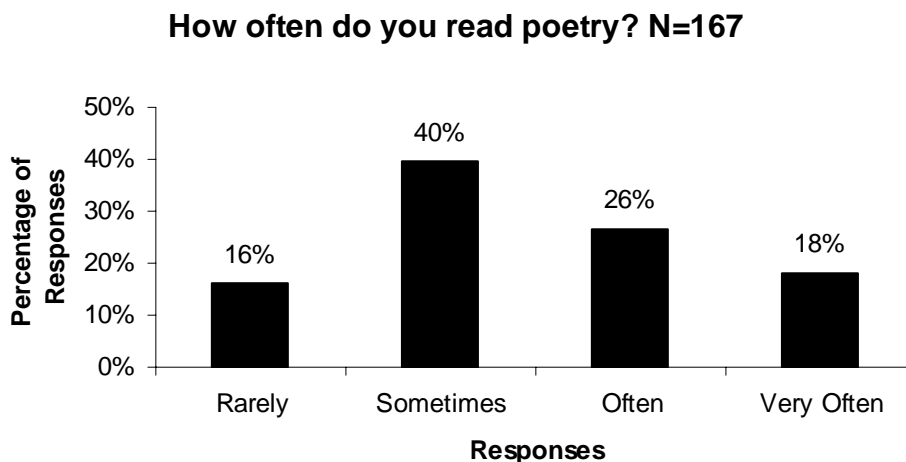


In each venue, the majority of the audience members answered that they read poetry, with the percentage somewhat lower at the Nuyorican, (68%) and somewhat higher at the Bowery and louderARTS (79% and 81%). I would speculate that one reason for this is that the Nuyorican brings in a larger audience, which creates the possibility of attracting those who have never been exposed to poetry before. Also, in my interviews, I was told the Nuyorican has a reputation for being more of an entertainment/performance venue than a venue for writers/poets or those who read poetry normally. Also, from my interviews, the louderARTS slam has a reputation for being the most “academic” of the three slam venues, and this finding seems to support this reputation. The Bowery is somewhere in between the Nuyorican and louderARTS in terms of its reputation.



	Do you read poetry? N=189	
Venue	Yes	No
Bowery	79%	21%
Nuyorican	68%	32%
louderARTS	81%	19%

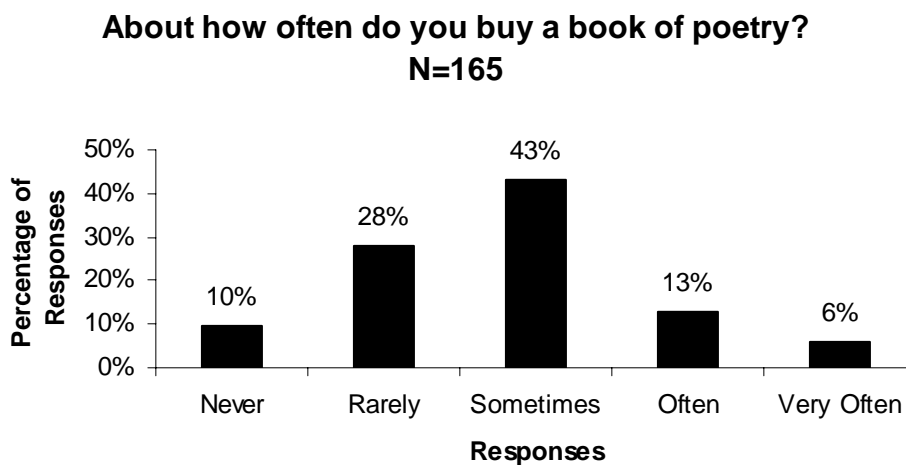
6. 84% of audience members answered that they read poetry at least “sometimes.”



When this question is broken down by venue, there are stark differences. Fifty percent of the audience members at louderARTS answered that they read poetry “very often” while only 25% of the Nuyorican audience, and only 15% of the Bowery audience members answered this way. However, the largest percentage of Bowery audience members (51%), answered that they read poetry “often.” The largest percentage for the Nuyorican (39%) answered they read poetry “sometimes.” In the interviews, I found that this is consistent with each venue’s reputation ranging from louderARTS being the most “academic,” meaning poets who are more focused on the page to Nuyorican, which is more focused on the stage.

How often do you read poetry? N=167				
Venue	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Bowery	7%	27%	51%	15%
Nuyorican	9%	39%	27%	25%
louderARTS	3%	29%	18%	50%

7. 62% of respondents answered they buy a book of poetry at least “sometimes.”



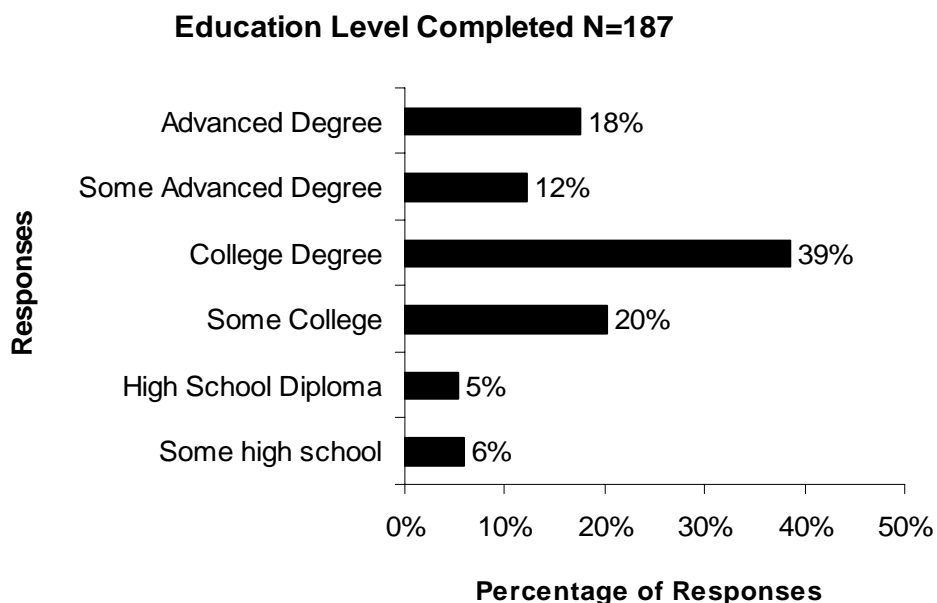
These data only show a majority for those who buy a book “sometimes.” Sixty-two percent of the audience members at the Bowery and 49% at the Nuyorican answered that they buy a book of poetry “sometimes.” At louderARTS, the answers for “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “very often” were close.

However, at louderARTS, I received a written comment by a respondent pointing out that I did not have a question that asked how often audience members check poetry books out the library. This is an important point that limits how much this question can reveal how often audience members consume poetry. This question assumes audience members have the extra money to spend on poetry books, and thus does not take into account alternatives and class differences. Despite these exclusions, it is still interesting to see that the overwhelming majority of audience members at least have bought a book of poetry in their lifetime.

	About how often do buy a book of poetry? N=165				
Venue	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Bowery	3%	15%	62%	17%	3%
Nuyorican	6%	24%	49%	13%	8%
louderARTS	2%	21%	27%	27%	23%

### *Demographics of Audience*

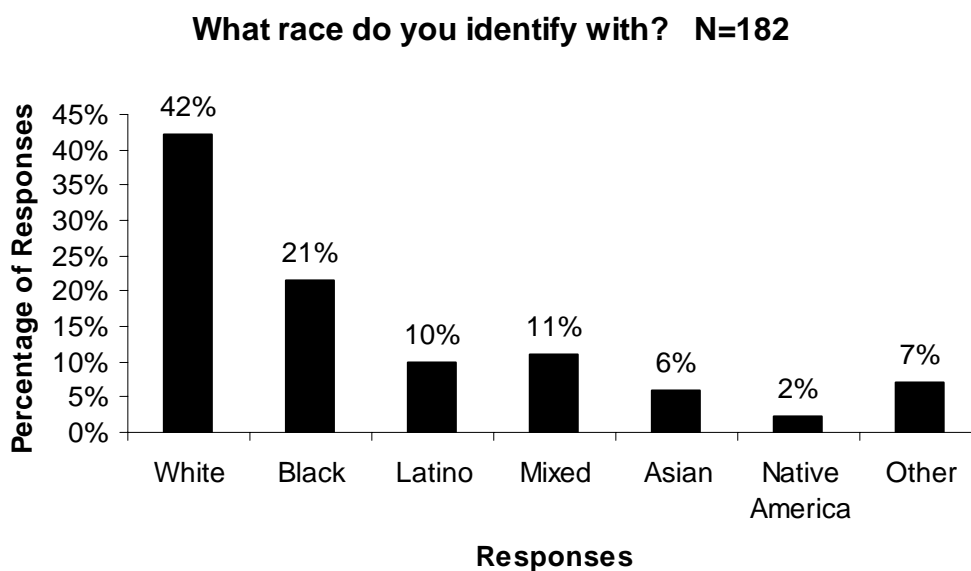
8. 69% of the audience members responded that they have at least a college degree.



While 69% of audience members had achieved at least a college degree, 30% of audience members were in process of completing or had completed an advanced degree. Twenty percent answered that they have completed some college, and thus they could potentially be current college students. And 11% responded that they had achieved a high school diploma, or “some high school.” The numbers that stand out are that 45% of the audience members at louderARTS have advanced degrees, whereas the largest percentage at the Bowery and Nuyorican responded that they have completed a college degree (43% and 46% respectively).

Select the highest education level you have completed N=187						
Venue	Some High School	High School Diploma	Some College	College Degree	Some Advanced Degree	Advanced Degree
Bowery	5%	2%	14%	43%	16%	20%
Nuyorican	0%	2%	17%	46%	15%	20%
louderARTS	0%	5%	13%	22%	15%	45%

9. The data show that these poetry slam venues are overwhelmingly diverse in terms of how audience members identified with race.



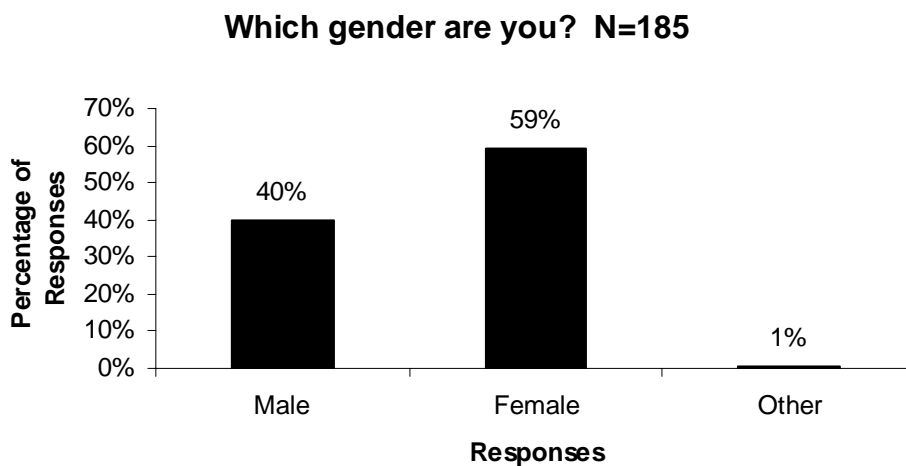
It is worth noting that due to the controversial nature of this question, some respondents protested the question by circling all of the races, writing in a different answer, or by simply responding with negative feedback on the question. These instances could not be included in the totals. If a respondent wrote in another race, their answer was included in the “other” category. This is by no means a perfect question and was not presented in the detail it would need to be in order to help all respondents feel comfortable answering it. However, that said, the degree of diversity is evident at the three slam venues. Broken down by venue, the diversity is still pronounced, with some differences. The Nuyorican had the highest percentage of audience members who identified as black and Latino and

the lowest percentage of audience members who identified as white. The venue that had the most white audience members was the Bowery, followed closely by louderARTS. However, louderARTS had almost as many audience members identify as black, Latino or mixed as they had those who identified as white. But overall, the largest percentage, nearly one-fourth of the audience members at the Bowery and the Nuyorican identified as “Other” (26% and 25% respectively).

	Which race do you identify with? N=182						
Venue	White	Black	Latino	Mixed	Asian	Native American	Other
Bowery	23%	10%	2%	20%	15%	4%	26%
Nuyorican	12%	21%	16%	13%	11%	3%	25%
louderARTS	20%	18%	15%	24%	10%	12%	0%



10. 59% of the respondents answered that they were female while 40% responded that they were male.

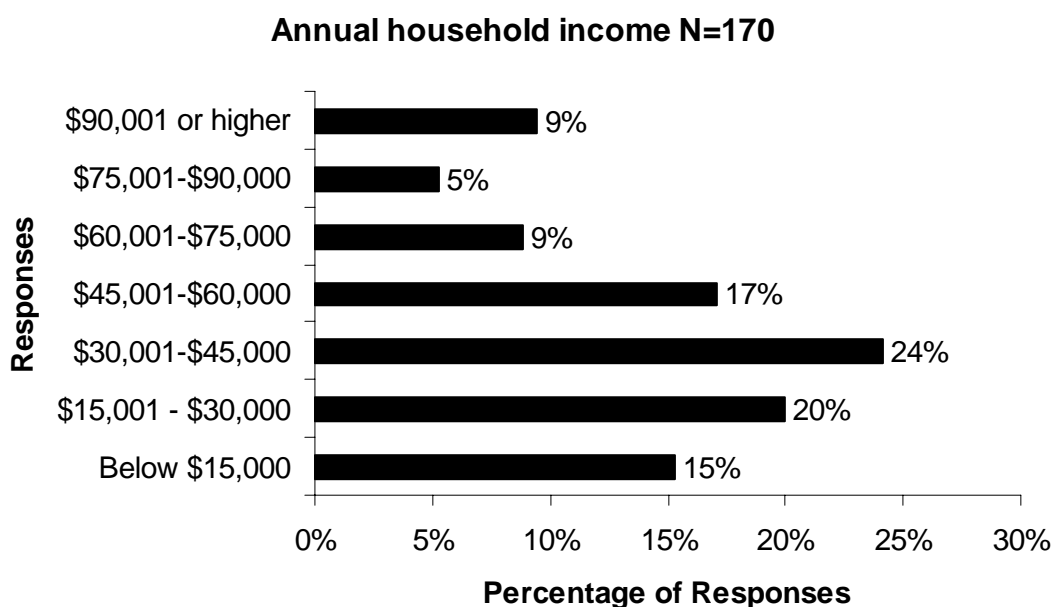


At all three venues, the large majority of the audience members were female.

	Which gender are you? N=185		
Venue	Male	Female	Other
Bowery	24%	72%	3%
Nuyorican	21%	79%	0%
louderARTS	32%	68%	0%

11. 64% of the audience members responded that they have an annual household income of \$30,001 or higher.

Select one of the following ranges which best reflects your annual household income:

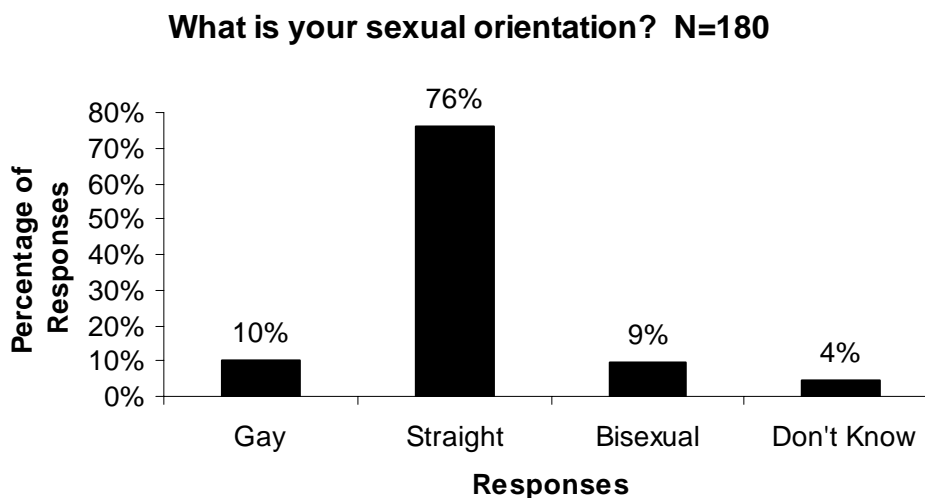


At the Bowery, approximately 30% of audience members answered that they had an annual household income of \$90,001 or higher, and roughly another quarter of the audience surveyed answered that they had an annual household income of \$30,001-\$45,000. At the Nuyorican, almost a quarter of the audience members surveyed were either in the \$30,001-\$45,000 or the \$45,001-\$60,000 ranges. While 28% of louderARTS' audience members had an annual household income in the \$45,001-\$60,000 range, there was also almost 20% of these audience

members who were in the \$15,001-30,000 or \$30,001-\$45,000 ranges. The Bowery did have almost double the percentage of audience members from the highest income bracket.

	Select one of the following ranges which best reflects your annual household income: N=170						
Venue	Below \$15,000	\$15,001-\$30,000	\$30,001-\$45,000	\$45,001-\$60,000	\$60,001-\$75,000	\$75,001-\$90,000	\$90,001 or higher
Bowery	5%	9%	25%	12%	18%	4%	29%
Nuyorican	5%	9%	21%	22%	13%	15%	15%
louderARTS	4%	20%	19%	28%	8%	5%	16%

12. 76% of audience members at all three venues responded that they are “straight” or heterosexual.

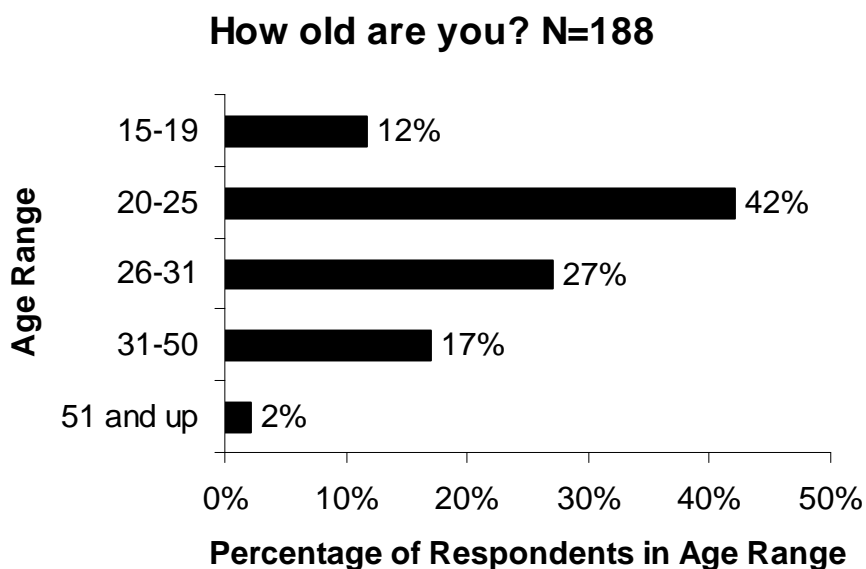


Although the overall numbers show that audience members are overwhelmingly heterosexual, the percentages by venue show that there are differences across the venues. louderARTS, for instance, had the highest percentage of audience members who selected gay (11%), bisexual (16%) and don't know (22%). However, an important contributing factor to this is that the reading at which I collected the survey data was a “Queer 2” themed reading that serves as a slam venue, but also as a community/safe space for GLBTQ people. Therefore, the louderARTS numbers are not necessarily representative of that venue's audience overall and these percentages affected the overall percentage for the three venues. At the other two venues, the audience members identified as overwhelmingly straight (80% for both venues) or as bisexual (13% for both venues).

	What is your sexual orientation? N=180			
Venue	Gay	Straight	Bisexual	Don't Know
Bowery	3%	80%	13%	3%
Nuyorican	2%	80%	13%	5%
louderARTS	11%	52%	16%	22%

### *Open-Ended Answers*

13. 69% of the audience members surveyed were between the ages of 20 and 31.



Audience members surveyed were overwhelmingly in their 20s. However, for the other age groups, there were differences at each venue. Eighty percent of the Nuyorican audience members surveyed were between 20 and 31 years old. However, at the Bowery, although 64% of those surveyed were in their 20s, an additional 20% were 15-19-year-olds. Then, at louderARTS, there were just as many 20-25 year olds as there were 31-50 year olds.

	How old are you? N=188				
Venue	15-19	20-25	26-31	31-50	51 and up
Bowery	20%	32%	32%	8%	7%
Nuyorican	10%	51%	29%	11%	0%
louderARTS	4%	39%	17%	39%	0%

14. Which degree are you working on or have completed? N=139

Of the 139 audience members who answered this question, only one wrote that he or she was studying creative writing as an undergrad and only two wrote in that they were working on a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry or a graduate creative writing degree. Both of these students were at the louderARTS slam. The fact that the only MFA students in poetry were at the louderARTS venue further supports the reputation louderARTS has as a more “academic” venue for poetry.

Overall, the audience members of all three venues were very educated. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed were either in college, had a college degree, were working on an advanced degree, or had an advanced degree. The write-in portion of this question revealed that these degrees were in a wide variety of topics.

Audience members were in the process of or had achieved a Bachelor’s degree in the following disciplines:

English-5  
 English Lit – 2  
 Political Science -3  
 Fine Arts - 5  
 Philosophy  
 Choreography  
 Film  
 Comparative Lit  
 Chinese  
 Psychology  
 Math  
 Finance  
 Creative Writing  
 Anthropology  
 Literature  
 Criminology  
 Accounting

Psychology  
Communications  
Marketing  
Secondary Education  
Biology  
Business  
Avionics  
Journalism and American Studies  
Computer Network

Those who were working on or who had achieved Advanced degrees were also involved in a wide variety of disciplines:

Masters in Education - 9  
Masters of Social Work – 4  
Classical Composition  
M.D.  
JD  
PHD  
English  
International Health and Development  
International Affairs  
Pre-law  
PSN Nursing, Registered Nurse  
Occupational Therapy  
Filmmaking



## Appendix IV – Open-Ended Responses to Audience Survey

### *9. Why did you start reading poetry?*

Because it spoke to me  
 to explore writing and imagination  
 school/fun  
 English Major/ Teacher  
 Parental influence, started reading as kid  
 Studying it in school inspired me  
 to feel words we cannot find  
 to help me think of stuff to write  
 b/c it is deep and for school  
 I wanted to share my perspective with others  
 a need for language skills

15

because I like the way words sound  
 Glory  
 Curiosity Killed My Woman's Dripping Cat  
 I read a Siegfried Sassoon in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade  
 To impress the ladies  
 English class?  
 Fell in love w/ lyrical expression of my soul on paper  
 Cause everyone else was doin' it  
 fun and profit  
 My children perform at Slams in MN.  
 High School  
 rhythm and ideas  
 my ex boyfriend was a poet  
 Taylor Mali  
 Coming to slams and buying chapbooks

16

Because it was easily accessible and my high school teachers made me perform  
 because they like my voice.  
 Fame and Fortune (not) – really I want to produce a book eventually  
 Because I love it  
 The Truth  
 It was there.  
 Compelled to and exposed to it in college  
 Had to. Couldn't help it.  
 Because it's good. lots of access to books from friends.  
 To gain inspiration for my own work.  
 The works of Nikki Giovanni inspire me

For inspiration  
 It's interesting – my interest was started in high school English class.  
 Poetry Jam @ high school  
 Hip Hop  
 School and given poetry books as presents  
 Because it is beautiful and it's all so different  
 As a release  
 I always have  
 I don't know  
 I used to read a lot of poetry  
 high school (5-10 years ago)  
 I've always read it  
 I don't really remember. I think it seemed to fit with my new interest in listening  
 to poetry.  
 An amazing teacher inspired me.  
 When I took a creative writing class in high school  
 School assignment for memorization  
 I started in school  
 middle school  
 Because I liked it  
 August, 2001  
 Suicide wasn't an attractive option  
 Curiosity  
 I read everything. I was introduced to poetry in high school or some such in  
 Trinidad.  
 In college, after hearing it performed  
 I like to read others feelings  
 Because it's beautiful.  
 Because it was like therapy to me.  
 Relaxin, enlightening, expressive, motivation  
 The Pauses.  
 It interests me.  
 To survive  
 My friends were writing it.  
 Exposure to poets  
 College class  
 In high school  
 Good teachers  
 at a young age – teens – self interest  
 Everyone I know is a poet  
 I picked up a book and began reading  
 I write it so it must be read, I like poetry on the ear  
 To learn diverse styles; philosophic enrichment  
 Because I like Hip-Hop  
 Prison  
 I started in high school – I think because I was depressed

My parents were/are wannabee Beatniks  
 At school in class at 10 year old  
 After hearing a reading  
 English classes  
 Early on  
 Love  
 B/C I couldn't stop writing it and Loose Woman by Sandra Cisneros  
 I'm a musician and it's all the same  
 Because I've been writing since I was young. It's something I've always been  
 around.  
 For enlightenment  
 Don't really know. I just read a lot.  
 Academic Purposes  
 Class  
 Because I read.  
 Introduced to it in grade school. I liked it every since.  
 Feels good.  
 It's like listening to music.  
 Because I used to write it  
 Don't remember  
 Because I used to write  
 I've always enjoyed reading  
 I'm a songwriter  
 To find myself  
 Inspired by teacher  
 For knowledge  
 I've always liked it  
 Assigned in school  
 To see how others share feelings with words, to improve my own and my  
 communication with others  
 I started writing poetry as a teenager and became interested in various poets  
 Because it's beautiful  
 To think  
 Because of a class I took  
 School  
 Inspiration, a mechanism to express my voice  
 Need. Soul pain. Memory of verses in the midst of everyday life.  
 Pablo Neruda.  
 English class in school.  
 Long time ago.  
 Introduced to it by a friend  
 I love writing.  
 7<sup>th</sup> grade English  
 Seven  
 Correlated to a lot my experiences and it's a beautiful form of art.  
 Because People magazine just doesn't cut it.

School  
 1999  
 enjoy reading  
 It was available  
 The expression of the ordinary in a different way  
 Its very deep at times  
 Something to do during my free time  
 Fluid transition from years of children's books growing up...I think  
 Age 13  
 Heard snippets of it, wanted the source  
 LIFE  
 interest  
 My love for reading knows no boundaries – for perspective  
 Age 7  
 Age 15  
 Someone gave me a Poetry book  
 Friends wrote poetry  
 To Travel  
 I like it  
 It came my way when I was young  
 Spoken Word in the subway  
 Use of words  
 Pleasure  
 Because I started writing  
 For expression  
 3 yrs. ago

***11. Why did you start listening to poetry?***

Because it's the voice of the soul and we're all soul searching; for our own and  
 visiting everyone else's.  
 to learn more about life  
 to hear how poets and performers deliver their work off the page  
 school/fun  
 cuz it's cool ☺  
 Brings new aspect to the writing  
 Who knows?  
 When I was in college  
 The pleasure, the truth, the passion  
 To inspire me  
 Therapeutic  
 I wanted to understand the deepest parts of people.  
 To be inspired

Free flowing spoken word is a good thing  
 Same as #9 "because I like the way the words sound"  
 relax  
 to check other people's shit out  
 went to Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ....and loved it  
 By default  
 Performance is different than just reading  
 Enjoyable – like music  
 Gets my creative juices flowing  
 When I was 18  
 College poetry slam club  
 1998  
 Friends, Teachers (HS)  
 Taylor Mali  
 I heard Alix Olson at a National NOW event and was hooked. Then I met Stacey  
 Ann Chin, came to Urbana the rest is history.  
 Needed idea for writing  
 Because it moves me and helps me write  
 Loved it from get-go, esp. non-western works.  
 A friend of mine performs/slams  
 Because I started performing it  
 Raised on it  
 It was compelling  
 It makes my toes tingle  
 I heard Nikki Giovanni recite "Nikki Rosa" on "Teen Summit" and wanted more.  
 My friends let me listen to a CD.  
 A friend got me into it  
 Poetry Jam  
 Hip-Hop  
 Heard it on radio and was impressed.  
 Because I write  
 My friends perform and I support them by listening  
 It's fun to hear good poetry, it's creative  
 I was into it  
 Hip Hop  
 The style interests me  
 Bob Dylan influenced me.  
 Because I write it  
 Because it speaks to my experience and the experience of those I love  
 (sometimes)  
 Natural progression  
 I went to a poetry slam that was at @ my school and I was just hooked. ☺  
 A dear friend is a poet  
 It's beautiful and I think it can change the world.  
 My friend  
 fine tune my ear for own revision

I was called/drawn to it  
 Because it's beautiful  
 Work with teen poets as a video mentor and got hooked!  
 Because a friend took me and I liked it.  
 After a friend passed away, I needed a life change.  
 There wasn't anything good on TV that night  
 Friend recommendation  
 I started listening to myself and wondering who else was doing this stuff  
 It's connection to music and the literature I'd been reading.  
 To see if others thought the way I do.  
 Because it tells a sweet story, it's captivating  
 Things that were out there in the world expressed through others eyes.  
 Not sure  
 10 years ago  
 I'm a musical dance with a rhythm addiction  
 I find it compelling and entertaining  
 boredom  
 My friends were performing it  
 Exposure  
 Democratic voice  
 In college  
 because its interesting to see and hear the author's interpretation  
 In an attempt to stimulate my own creativity  
 Everyone I know is a poet.  
 Because I like the music  
 I thought I would be enlighten  
 To gain an understanding about poetry that is elusive in the mere reading of it.  
 It was on a KRS one album I got in 1988  
 Bar 13  
 It felt great to be a part of a community  
 We came here b/c we thought the roof bar was open For Happy Hour and now we  
 feel too guilty to leave b/c the audience is so small  
 Trying to get "Laid"  
 Curiosity  
 Events at college/I like book readings  
 When I turned 19.  
 School Club  
 I just love it and I wish I could do it  
 the effect can be more direct  
 It's interesting and enlightening  
 I like art. I'm a writer.  
 Friends write and I listen to them.  
 Popular form of entertainment  
 My friend invited me, something new.  
 To set a different perspective on what I read  
 To get a better feel.

The performances bring poetry to life.  
 Wanted to try something different; loved the move Love Jones  
 At a friend's request  
 Its almost like a good song, if you don't share the talent, it's fascinating.  
 friends suggestion  
 I've done theatre so I find it to be very similar  
 I like creativity and art of all kinds  
 In college  
 It's interesting  
 Enjoyed hearing people express themselves freely  
 Depressed  
 College course  
 3 years ago  
 maybe for a night  
 friends  
 As something to do for a date  
 I started performing poetry and giving to shows to learn different writers  
 Because its inspiring  
 It spoke  
 The emotion expressed in the Spoken Word is so inspiring!  
 I find poetry inspiring motivation and a creative outlet to express thoughts,  
 feelings, emotions.  
 Better than TV  
 At poetry slams – b/c I was there to perform  
 B/c it gives beauty to otherwise scoured reality  
 Because I love this form of expression  
 College  
 N/A  
 Just thought it would be something different to do  
 The idea was interesting and a friend invited me to a slam  
 I like the sound.  
 I like how the poet sound – the rhythm!  
 Enjoyed rhythm and themes in performance  
 My mother got me hooked  
 Appreciation of the art  
 It's the lyrics of life without the music  
 For fun  
 Opens you go  
 I have no reason  
 Attended event planned through school  
 I enjoy seeing the manifestation of creativity  
 The emotion of it  
 went w/a friend  
 College had events, then Def Poetry  
 Just like it  
 Friend told me about it

Because we had to analyze poetry at school (age 13)  
Don't know  
I have never listened to poetry on a CD  
for the love  
going with friends sounded fun  
Life  
Awareness and appealing  
It's meditative and worthwhile – keeps me outta trouble  
Age 15  
I love artistic expression  
I loved the voices I heard  
It takes you to another realm  
A friend brought me  
Because poetry is meant to be spoken  
It's the only form of lyrics with a purpose left.  
It's amazing, inspiring, educational and entertaining  
The images, artistic beauty in words  
The feeling behind it  
I'm here to support a friend  
Because I started writing  
My H.S. Eng. Poetry teacher  
My friend was interested in poetry so I went with her  
4 yrs. ago



## Appendix 5 – Online Survey Questions

1. Have you heard of Poetry Slams? Yes No Not Sure
2. Have you ever attended a Poetry Slam? Yes No Not Sure
3. What is your opinion of Poetry Slams?
4. Have you ever participated in a Poetry Slam? Yes No Not Sure
5. If yes, what did you think of this experience?
6. In your opinion, is "Slam Poetry" poetry? Never Seldom Sometimes  
Possibly Always Don't Know
7. Please explain your response:
8. What is the relationship between: Slam poets and poets in Universities?
9. Poetry Slam and your institution?
10. Please describe the type of person who generally attends Poetry Slams.
11. What is your opinion of Poetry Slam audiences?
12. Which of the following choices best describes your institution: Public or  
Private
13. With which gender do you identify? Male Female Other
14. With which race do you identify? White Black Latino  
Asian Native American Multiracial Other
15. Please select the range that includes your age: 20-30 31-40 41-50 51-  
60 61+
16. Please fill in your job title:

## Appendix VI – Notes for Attached CD: Clips from Interviews with Slam Poets

NOTE: Although I did not address the aesthetics of Slam in my thesis, the poets I spoke with in New York City did talk about this issue. I included some of their opinions in the clips to inspire future research on the topic.

1. **Chad Anderson** – Chad discusses the aesthetics of poetry in the academy and in Slam. He then identifies differences between Slam and graduate creative writing programs. Lastly, Chad discusses why he performs poetry in slams.
2. **Shappy Seasholtz** – Shappy is a host of the Bowery Poetry Club Urbana slam. He discusses structural differences between the academic poetry community and the poetry slam community. He then speculates about the way poets in the academy view Slam, and gives his opinion of Slam as compared to the academy.
3. **Eliel Lucero** – Eliel works with the louderARTS project at Bar 13. In this recording, he discusses aesthetic preferences of poets in the Slam scene. Then, he discusses what Slam is and how poetry should be related to Slam. He then describes the louderARTS project’s approach to poetry slams. Also, Eliel discusses why “academic” poetry readings can be problematic.
4. **Lauren Brady** – Lauren was on the Nuyorican Poets Café Slam Team in 2005. She discusses the relationship between different poetry slam venues in New York City. She identifies that some venues that are viewed as “academic,” and how this has created rifts in the New York City poetry slam community. She also discusses ways the poetry slam community has addressed this tension.
5. **Nathan Pearson** – Nathan is the host of the Nuyorican Poets Café Friday night slam. On this track, he speculates about how poets in the academic and poetry slam communities might view each other. Then, he expresses his opinions about graduate creative writing programs. Third, he discusses some ways in which Slam collaborates with the academy. Lastly, he gives his view on the difference between slam poetry and “page” poetry.
6. **Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz** – On the first clip, Cristin discusses her personal experiences in the New York City poetry slam scene. She compares poetry slams to the way poetry is taught in the classroom. Secondly, she discusses Slam’s relationship to the poetry “canon.” Third, she discusses how Slam was viewed before the creation of the cable TV show *Def Poetry Jam*. In the second clip, Cristin talks about how Slam was defined in its infancy. In the third clip, she describes an example of a critic’s response to Slam. In the fourth clip, Cristin compares the current situation of poetry to the situation of classical music. Lastly, Cristin talks about how slam poets can help poetry slam audiences broaden their appreciation for poetry as shown by her own growth as a poetry reader.