

Introduction

Slam and the Search for Poetry's Great Audience

To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.

—Walt Whitman, “Ventures, on an Old Theme,” 1892

Anyone who hopes to broaden poetry's audience—critic, teacher, librarian, poet, or lonely literary amateur—faces a daunting challenge. How does one persuade justly skeptical readers, in terms they can understand and appreciate, that poetry still matters?

—Dana Gioia, “Can Poetry Matter?” 1992

On or about August 1988, contemporary American poetry changed. The relations between poetry and its audience—between academics and their venerated tomes, MFA students and their assigned readings, rappers and the rhymes they busted—shifted. The catalyst for this shift was the claim that poetry and the intellectual culture it inspired was dead.

In August 1988, *Commentary* published Joseph Epstein's editorial “Who Killed Poetry?” which made the familiar claim that poetry was rarely enjoyed outside of a small subculture of readers. The cause for this “vacuum,” Epstein posited, was the vast and growing number of academic creative writing programs in the United States and the poets firmly ensconced there as teachers.¹ The following year, the *Writer's Chronicle*, a trade magazine published by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, reprinted Epstein's essay along with responses from 101 writers over the span of three issues. One of those writers was the poet-critic Dana Gioia (now chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts), who published an extended version of this response entitled “Can Poetry Matter?” in the April 1991 *Atlantic*. He collected this and other essays about poetry in an eponymous book in 1992.

In this title essay, Gioia furthered Epstein's argument, claiming that Americans lived within a “divided literary culture,” one that had a “superabundance of poetry within a small class and [an] impoverishment outside it. One might even say that outside the classroom—where soci-

2 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

ety demands that the two groups interact—poets and the common reader are no longer on speaking terms.” Poetry, he argued, had lost its larger nonacademic audience, which “cut across lines of race, class, age, and occupation” and was “poetry’s bridge to the general culture.” Gioia placed the onus of poetry’s subcultural status on poets who had abandoned working-class bohemia for academic careers.² The dire situation of verse was only to be remedied, he argued, by seeking an audience for poetry outside of the academy.

The volume of responses to Gioia’s essay was overwhelming—the *Atlantic* received more letters about it than any other article in decades. Reactions were also severe—especially, as one might expect, from poets teaching in academic writing programs. The essay’s popularity inspired a wave of criticism for those waging the debate as well. Donald Hall’s 1989 essay in *Harper’s* magazine, “Death to the Death of Poetry,” accused poets of such navel gazing: “While most readers and poets agree that ‘nobody reads poetry’—and we warm ourselves by the gregarious fires of our solitary art—maybe a multitude of nobodies assembles the great audience Whitman looked for.”³ Similarly, the poet Richard Tillinghast speculated in the *Writer’s Chronicle*, “Perhaps the crisis of confidence among poets, the unseemly hand-wringing, reveals that many of us really are afflicted with Nielsen Ratings syndrome, that we are not writing for the work’s sake but from a desire to be noticed.”⁴

Both authors were quite right. In essence, what these critics debated was not the state or quality of poetry itself but the urgency with which poetry needed to seek public attention. Without a relationship with popular audiences—or at the very least a relationship with a small intelligentsia outside of the academy—poetry, Gioia and others claimed, was doomed to a dinosaur’s fate. Engaging a classic tension between the academy and the public and the verse produced within these spheres, the argument was a fresh iteration of what Walt Whitman had been concerned with a century earlier: finding poetry’s great audience. Part of this resurgence of interest in poetry’s popularity resulted in anthologies such as *The Best American Poetry* series edited by David Lehman, which was itself initiated in 1988. The concern for poetry’s livelihood carried on through the 1990s. In 1996, the Academy of American Poets—a long-standing nonprofit organization supporting American poets and poetry—proclaimed April National Poetry Month. One of its first projects was to hand out thousands of copies of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* to those in line at the Houston post office on tax day (because

April is the cruelest month). For the first time in decades, revitalized interest bloomed not just in poetry but in the audience for poetry. Poets and critics openly asked, “Who is reading poetry? For whom is it being written? Has poetry’s spirit of necessity and urgency died—not for its practitioners but for its readers?” At once, American poets began to investigate the relationships poetry had with the American people with renewed zeal.

In the midst of these years of artistic anxiety, Marc Smith, a white Chicago construction worker turned poet, tested another venue for verse that sought an audience outside of the sanctioned space of the academy. Smith had attended readings where performances consisted “mostly of poets reading to poets. . . . If you ever wanted to read your poetry anywhere, almost always an academic set it up.”⁵ To boot, Smith remarks, attendance at these readings was almost always poor and audiences tended to view such events with disdain. “I knew that the public scorn for poetry readings was an outcome of how it was being presented: a lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or the pacing of the event—let the words do the work, the poets would declare, mumbling to a dribble of friends, wondering why no one else had come to listen.”⁶ Setting his sights on larger popular audiences for poetry, Smith turned to the bars and cabarets of Chicago’s white, working-class neighborhoods.

In collaboration with other local artists, Smith instigated a wild variety show of Dadaist poetry, cabaret, musical experimentation, and performance art—all performed in blue-collar venues where locals were usually looking to watch a game over a couple of brews. The result was incongruous to say the least. The performance artist Jean Howard described this early performance poetry scene as barely controlled chaos in an audience of Joe six-packs.

One of the earliest, most primitive nightspots was the Get Me High Lounge located in a north side, blue collar Chicago neighborhood. This small, dark, graffiti-walled bar offered a stage with the bathroom located in the back, so patrons had to walk on stage during performances to gain access to it. Marc Smith had secured Monday nights, a traditionally dead night at the bar, to showcase the handful of poets exploring performance art. Local neighborhood patrons trying to watch a Cubs game and down a beer would find themselves being assaulted by poets utilizing wild gestures,

4 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

musical instruments, boom boxes, costuming, and theatrical makeup.⁷

Smith, who also organized performances at the Déjà Vu and Green Mill Bars, experimented with many modes of performance in tandem with his poetry, including vaudeville, ensemble work, and open mic readings. In the summer of 1986, when he ran out of material to complete a set during an ensemble show at the Green Mill, Smith stumbled on a format that stuck. He held a mock competition in the show's final set, letting the audience judge the poems performed onstage—first with boos and applause and later with numeric scores.⁸ The audience was compelled by this format and Smith soon made the competition a regular attraction on Sunday nights at the Green Mill. It was there, among the clinking tumblers of whiskey and wafts of cigarette smoke, that the Uptown Poetry Slam was born.

It was more than fortuitous that while Gioia and Hall were duking it out over poetry's audience in the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* Smith found a nontraditional audience for poetry in Chicago's working-class barrooms. Slam poets' frustration over the academic monopoly on poetry readings and the attending highbrow airs of these events helped fuel a rowdy, countercultural atmosphere at slams, one that persists at many venues today. Audiences at the Green Mill were and are encouraged to boo or applaud the poet onstage, a far cry from the quiet attentiveness expected of audiences at the typical poetry reading. With the usual expectations of reverence and silence thrown out the window, a different type of relationship between poets and audiences became possible at a slam—one that was highly interactive, theatrical, physical, and immediate. "The traditional stagnant reading of a poem was no match for the level of audience engagement possible when poetry was presented as a physical/full sensory experience," Howard remarks. "For a few experimenting poets, like myself, there was no turning back."⁹

The poetry slam soon gained loyal followings beyond Chicago. Poets and fans spread the contest to other urban centers such as San Francisco and New York, meriting the first National Poetry Slam (NPS) in 1990 with poets from each of these cities. Since then, the slam has experienced exponential growth. Poetry slams now attract audiences not only in metropolitan cities but also in places as distant as Sweden and the United Kingdom or as remote as Fargo, North Dakota, and Anchorage, Alaska. They are held in bars, bookstores, coffeehouses, and the-

aters. Today, the National Poetry Slam hosts teams from over seventy cities across the United States, Canada, and France, and a nonprofit organization, Poetry Slam, Incorporated (PSI), was formed to oversee the competition and enforce its rules. The competition has become so popular that a waiting list is necessary to accommodate teams wanting to participate. Other national competitions have surfaced under PSI's governance: the Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) and the Women of the World Poetry Slam.¹⁰ With slams surfacing in the vast majority of American states and slam poets performing their work in feature films, in documentaries, on cable television, and on Broadway, the slam is a phenomenon that appears to have captured our national imagination. In 2004, slam poetry even garnered the dubious honor of becoming the subject of a book in the Complete Idiot's Guide series coauthored by Marc Smith himself.¹¹

In addition to fostering a countercultural atmosphere and disseminating poetry in unconventional venues, the slam has thrived through the exercise of certain democratic ideals meant to contrast with exclusive academic conventions. Slams are rowdy yet welcoming events on the whole. From its beginnings, the poetry slam has adopted an open-door policy: anyone can sign up to slam, and anyone in the audience is qualified to judge. This, of course, also means that there is usually great variety in the quality of the work performed at slams. A visit to one's own local poetry slam will most likely entail witnessing a mix of impressive and trite poems delivered both as powerfully or poorly. As the event progresses, poets are eliminated and rewarded based on the judges' scores—effectively putting the audience in the seat of critical power. Such an emphasis on the audience as critic stands apart from more traditional readings that celebrate or revere authors already deemed worthy by literary authorities. The poetry slam was founded on the tenets that the audience is not obligated to listen to the poet, that the poet should compel the audience to listen to him or her, that anyone may judge a competition, and that the competition should be open to all people and all forms of poetry.¹² Slam poetry is verse to which, at least theoretically, anyone can have access and whose worth anyone can determine. The accessibility of slam poetry is facilitated and perhaps demanded by the medium of performance, which is bounded by time, space, and—perhaps most important—an audience's attention span. In nationally certified slam competitions, poems are limited to an approximate three-minute window, which poet and showman Bob Hol-

6 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

man notes is the length of a pop song.¹³ The main motivation for this time limit was to keep certified slams within reasonable time frames, as audiences were proving restless during competitions that lasted longer than a couple of hours.

Poetry slams, because of their dedication to accessibility and increasing the numbers of poetry practitioners and fans outside of the academy, appeared to be a tailor-made solution to Epstein's and Gioia's trouble with contemporary poetry. Poetry slams deliberately took verse outside of the academy, taking evaluative power away from academic critics and giving it to popular audiences. In a recent essay, Gioia calls performance poetry's reemergence into popular culture "without a doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry."¹⁴ The combined practices of poetry slams, rap performances, and other types of poetry transmitted and consumed through performance have, he argues, been the primary forces leading poetry into the twenty-first century, in large part igniting the renaissance contemporary American poetry is currently enjoying.

Perhaps most surprising is that this renaissance is being celebrated particularly by American youth, one of poetry's most unlikely audiences twenty years ago. Indeed, poetry in performance has become so popular in youth culture that verse has penetrated mainstream commercial markets, finding its way into McDonald's advertisements, Partnership for a Drug-Free America public service announcements, *MTV News*, and episodes of *The Simpsons*. In the music industry, some socially conscious hip-hop artists are now rebranding themselves as spoken word poets, whereas twenty years ago the title was, as rapper LL Cool J put it, "financial poison" for a hip-hop artist's career.¹⁵ These examples suggest that America is in the midst of an explosion of verse in popular culture, one facilitated by the performance of poetry in live and recorded media but, like hip-hop, one also facilitated by expressions of identity, particularly of race and class.

Slam's emphases on diversity, inclusion, and democracy have resulted in a "pluralism" among its poets; on the national level, slammers hold a bevy of readings outside of the national competition celebrating marginalized racial, sexual, and gender identities. Such pluralism, the scholar Tyler Hoffman remarks, "points to the fact that the spoken word in the U.S. in recent decades is tied up in powerful social movements that reframed—and validated—cultural identities of minorities."¹⁶ Slam's openness to all people and all types of poetry suggests a specific

political inquiry in its practice, one that slam poets make explicit in their work about identity: a challenge to the relative lack of diversity they feel is represented in the academy, the canon, and dominant culture. For many of these poets, the debate over poetry's popularity was not only about the survival of the genre in the public sphere but also about how poetry reflected cultural privilege and institutional power. In slams, poets rallied against the literary canon's lack of diversity. Poets in the film *Slamnation* describe the poetry slam as "a representative democracy," a "level playing field" in which equal access is granted to those denied more traditional poetic recognition such as publication by esteemed presses and participation in academic writing communities.¹⁷ In the 2007 NPS *Poet's Guide*, slam champion Roger Bonair-Agard remarks, "We know 'canon' is narrow-minded and for all its beauty needs to be sacked and overturned if it is to be made more expansive."¹⁸ Poet Jeffrey McDaniel comments that to slam poets "don't need a degree or a letter of recommendation, which is why the slam community is far more multicultural than the academy."¹⁹ These poets suggest that the popularity of slam poetry has meaning beyond the spheres of literature and performance, yielding cultural and political ramifications. As it explores the political possibilities of identity, slam poetry begs to be regarded not only as a performance poetry movement but also—as Marc Smith once suggested—as a social movement.²⁰

Slam's commitment to plurality and diversity has led slam poets to linger on personal and political themes, the most common of them being the expression of marginalized identity. The vast majority of work performed at poetry slams is an expression of the poets' identities; these recent trends compelled one veteran poet from its ranks, Genevieve Van Cleve, to call slam poetry "an art of self-proclamation."²¹ The poetry rewarded at slams has been praised as a more "authentic" variety of verse by many sources, including the poets themselves. "Vague as it may sound," Maria Damon writes,

the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of "realness"—authenticity at the physical/sonic and metaphysical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels. This is why close listening is crucial; you're not just listening for technique, or "original imagery," or raw emotion, but for some transmission/recognition of resonant difference . . . a gestalt that effects a "felt change of consciousness" on the part of the listener.²²

8 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

Damon's description suggests that the practice of rewarding performances for their "authenticity" or the "transmission of resonant difference" is a performative effect (as opposed to a textual effect). If Damon is correct, then, in the case of slam poetry about identity, reward stems not just from the expression of marginalized identity but from the way that identity is performed onstage. That is, poems deemed the most authentic by slam audiences depend at least in part on the complex dynamics of identity exchanged between poets and audiences. Considering that of the fifteen individual champions of the National Poetry Slam all but six have been African American, this practice also seems to pose specific questions about authenticity and marginalized identity.

The overarching questions compelling this project are those of how and why marginalized voices—and in particular African American voices—are received as more authentic or real than other voices at poetry slams. Slams are places where all types of marginalized identities are celebrated and expressed, and yet when it comes to rewarding these expressions those of black identity are consistently more rewarded by audiences at the national level. Exactly why this dynamic exists is at the heart of this project, for it reveals not only how identity is performed and received at a slam but how identity can operate in American culture.

The identities expressed by slam poets are performative—that is, they are performed consciously or unconsciously for audiences to certain ends. Because identity is an effect of performance in the world, just as it is at a poetry slam, what is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain behaviors and characteristics over time. That is, what is often deemed authentic by an audience is actually a norm of tried identity behavior. Poetry slams, as laboratories for identity expression and performance, present unique opportunities to witness this exchange between poet and audience in action. Slams prove cultural stages where poets perform identities and their audiences confirm or deny them as "authentic" via scoring.

This is not to say that authenticity does not exist, only to say that authenticity exists as a performance in which a subject and his or her audience agree that an identity is successfully and convincingly portrayed. It is when we forget that authenticity is such a performance—when, at a poetry slam, authenticity and marginalized identity are equated without keeping in mind the performative dynam-

ics of such an exchange—that it can prove problematic. This is most likely to occur in the commercial genre of spoken word poetry (which I separate from slam poetry because of its noncompetitive and commercial focus), where poets of color are often marketed to young multiethnic and white middle-class audiences, sometimes in ghettocentric ways. Still, there is also room for political activism in such an exchange, especially when parody or a persona is used to investigate identity in critical ways, and so even commercial venues for performance poetry can be places of serious thought and change. Socially conscious poets know they must skillfully negotiate their participation in commercial ventures, and debate within the slam community has been waged for years about the pros and cons of “selling out” to reach mainstream audiences.

Acknowledging that what passes as authentic behavior is a symptom of larger systems of meaning and power does not mean that identities performed at slams are doomed to confirm the status quo. Rather, as places where identities are newly authenticated, poetry slams are places of possibility, insight, and connection. They are places where the possibilities of identity are explored, and their study contributes understandings about the complex interactions and desires between poets and their audiences. Instead of being windows on culture, poetry slams *are* culture; they are places where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured.

Of course, there is some contention within the slam community about whether or not one can refer to “slam poetry” at all; some embrace the mantle while others deny that slam is any different from other types of poetry. The key to understanding slam poetry as a body of work has little to do with form or style. Instead, because a range of forms, tones, and modes of address exist in slam practice, such poetry is best understood by what it means to achieve or effect: a more intimate and authentic connection to its audience. To do this, slam poetry aims to entertain its audience and be competitive yet inventive within the structure of official rules. Because these rules dictate that the performer of a slam poem must also be its author, authorship itself becomes a self-conscious performance at a slam, achieving a hyperawareness of self and identity. In their focus on celebrating diversity and liberal politics, slam aesthetics frequently correspond to performing marginalized identity in order to engage (and at times exploit) a slam audience’s

10 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

shared value of difference. Because local slam venues vary so much in tenor and audience, I limit my discussion here to poetry performed at the national level of competition and in nationally distributed media. For the same reason, I selected the poets and poems represented in this book for their iconic status within the NPS and spoken word communities. Almost all of the poems here have been performed on at least one NPS finals stage, and many of the poets are national champions. Limiting my discussion to the national context can, I believe, give a broader perspective on how slam poetry engages the cultural politics of difference in America even as it may give short shrift to the more unique aspects of local communities.²³

This book is informed by my position as someone who has, for more than a decade, participated in the National Poetry Slam community as a competitor, team member, coach, volunteer, and audience member. As a participant-observer, witnessing the slam grow and change over time has allowed me unique access to the strategies slam poets use in competition and the challenges they (we) face as the slam has gained the national spotlight. My experiences in the national slam community have no doubt influenced my analysis here, as have my own poetic and performative sensibilities. As a participant who has seen reporters reductively praise the slam for its “fresh urban vibe” and an equal number of critics pan it for its “ranting pedanticism,” I have longed for a more accurate, serious, and nuanced picture of what slam poets do and how their audiences receive them. My response is this book.

I am also acutely aware of my position as a white woman writing a book that takes a critical look at performances of race. Rather than be hindered by my position—or worse, rendering it invisible—I write with it at the forefront of my mind. Although I acknowledge that I do not have access to all of the personal experiences of my diverse subjects, I believe that investigating the interactions between poets of color and white, middle-class audiences (and by proxy my own subject position) is of great value. The performance of identity across race and class divides poses both possibilities and limitations for slam poets, and I wish to consider all of the pros and cons of performing these identities in competitive and commercial contexts, even as they may trouble my own roles as a poet, performer, and scholarly interlocutor.

Slam poetry, using the cultural rubrics of race and identity, has undeniably and fundamentally changed the relationship between American popular audiences and poetry; in tandem with other popular man-

ifestations of the lyric in mass media such as hip-hop and spoken word, one could even argue that it has broken that relationship wide open. Still, this project does not intend to be a celebration of slam poetry's popularity, nor does it attempt to defend slam poetry from its critics. Rather, it is concerned with what slam poetry's reception can tell us about race and identity in American culture and how poetry slams encourage popular audiences to seek a broader relationship with American verse. I consider myself neither a champion of the slam genre nor a detractor of it but rather a poet who is interested in how performance can inform her writing and a critic interested in how poetry slams generate new avenues of public discourse for poets and audiences. As a writer who wears the many hats of slam poet, academic poet, critic, and scholar, I hope the perspective of my experience proves enlightening not limiting.

In focusing on the reception of African American slam poets and the ideas of blackness and authenticity that circulate in performance poetry, I do not intend to frame the slam as an entirely black phenomenon, nor do I mean to give undue stress to racial difference in slam poetry. Rather, I mean to reflect the overwhelming attention that marginalized identity in general and racial difference in particular are given in slam circles. Although slam poetry is open to and includes people of all cultural orientations and persuasions, the focus is often on poets of color, working-class poets, women, and other culturally marginalized groups. This focus reflects, I believe, a more general trend in contemporary American poetry toward recognizing and nurturing more authors of traditionally marginalized social groups (in some places almost exclusively). Some may argue that this trend has gone too far, making political correctness the ruler of poetic taste, while others may feel it has not gone far enough, signaling a sincere wish for the inclusion of diverse voices. I believe that both desires operate consciously or unconsciously among critics, writers, and audiences of poetry and that both sentiments are important to the kind of intercultural exchange that can happen in venues such as poetry slams. The fact remains that, for better or worse, audiences of poetry today are being exposed to many more non-white, nontraditional voices than they ever have before, and at poetry slams that difference is celebrated and rewarded.

The National Poetry Slam community is at a crucial juncture at this time as its artists and organizers decide individually and collectively how to negotiate mainstream interest in the genre. For some poets, tour-

12 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

ing on the college circuit, recording spoken word albums, and making mainstream media appearances are ultimate career goals. Others prefer performing at and organizing poetry slams in their local communities. Although many poets agree that the slam should persist and grow, they are divided about how to negotiate the commercial interests that come with such growth. Currently, Poetry Slam, Incorporated has discouraged widespread commercial involvement with the National Poetry Slam, and commercial ventures such as *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* have begun to flourish outside of the NPS community. Entering poet-performers, however, are starting to skate between the competitive (slam) and commercial (spoken word) arenas, and the market continues to broaden for versifiers billing themselves as spoken word poets. Although the term *spoken word poetry* can be used to designate a number of different types of verse, in this book I use it to connote performance poetry through which one can witness competing commercial and artistic interests, especially as they play out in contemporary media and through associations with hip-hop culture.

As it has grown, the slam has seen an infusion of hip-hop-inspired performance, so much so that newcomers may mistakenly assume that the competition grew out of African American hip-hop culture as opposed to its white, working-class roots. Still, even when considering this history and the vast range of poetry performed at slams, it is clear that hip-hop is an important influence on many slam poets today. Poets commonly employ the hip-hop idiom on the slam stage, and some of them use the same material in both ciphers and slams. Slam poetry and hip-hop also engage similar issues of authenticity and identity, especially as they intersect with African American cultural production and address a call to “realness.” The popularity of hip-hop music and culture has helped funnel poets and audiences into the slam, and this may be one reason why African American identity is so often articulated and rewarded on the national slam scene. However, the complex exchange of desires between slam poets and audiences are more than the product of hip-hop’s influence. The preponderance of and anxieties over black expression in slam suggests a pattern of identity performance and reception—especially as it occurs between African American artists and white, middle-class audiences—that is at the foundation of American popular culture.

Among slam poets, it is generally agreed that one’s involvement with poetry slams, at least as a competitor, has a shelf life. Although some

veteran poets have competed in the NPS over several years, most poets leave the competitive arena after one or two years on national teams. However, most also continue their pursuits in poetry and performance. The slam has proven a laboratory for a new generation of artists fusing genres who are now finding success in American theater, literature, music, and the academy. Some slam poets, like Saul Williams or Sage Francis, move on to become recording artists, fusing hip-hop and music in new ways. Others, like Mayda del Valle and Roger Bonair-Agard, go on to perform one-person shows that grow from their slam material. Still more enroll in prestigious MFA programs after their tenure in the slam community, and others, like this author, pursue scholarship in the fields of English or theater. Some go on to publish their poetry with well-known journals and presses; former slammers Patricia Smith and Tyehimba Jess, for example, both recently wrote books selected for the National Poetry Series. Still others go on to teach literature or performance at colleges and public schools; slam poetry veterans now teach at institutions such as Sarah Lawrence College, the University of Chicago, and the University of Southern California, Long Beach. For poets such as Tracie Morris, Derrick Brown, C. R. Avery, or Cin Salach, the slam has led them to avant-garde experiments in poetry and sound, while the slam itself remains popular and populist. This cross section of artists proves that, although one may compete in the slam only briefly, the influence of its marriage of verse and performance is wide and profound. It also proves that, although the slam may be limited by certain rules of competition, its fusion of genres inspires work that goes far beyond those boundaries and in many directions.

What has been missing from the criticism of slam poetry is its consideration on its own terms. Literary scholars have considered slam poetry haphazardly from perspectives of textual craft and orality. Some performance scholars and theater reviewers have tried to chronicle commonalities of slam delivery or have taken an ethnographic approach to describing a handful of poets' performance styles. But no one has yet considered slam poetry from the full range of disciplines and traditions it engages, and its criticism has been the poorer for it. Slam poetry is performed poetry, but it is also much more than conventional text put into performance. Its native venue is live performance, but it also is created and appreciated in print, through audio recordings, on video, and in broadcasts. What has perhaps been missing most markedly from criticism of slam poetry is serious consideration of the

14 / THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

issues of identity and cultural politics that infuse its every aspect from the page to the stage, from composition to performance. My approach to the topic of slam poetry is to consider it as its own genre of work that combines literary, theatrical, political, and cultural influences and traditions. Only by contemplating it from these many perspectives will one get a clear idea of why artists and audiences find the slam so compelling—and also why, even after years of success and creative production, the vast majority of poets involved with the slam end up leaving the competition for other pursuits.

With these perspectives in mind, I outline slam poetry in chapter 1 as its own hybrid genre of verse, one that negotiates the possibilities and problems of text, performance, orality, and politics. Slam poetry is verse that exists most richly in a live dynamic between authors and audiences, and it displays the qualities of popular entertainment, adaptability across media and performance contexts, competitive argumentation, and self-conscious performances of the author's identity alongside narratives of marginalization. The topic of authenticity of the author's identity, especially racial identity, has been a theme in other performance poetry-cum-social movements including the Beat and Black Arts movements and even dating back to antebellum blackface performances enacting verse through recitation and song. In chapter 2, I consider these movements as precursors to the slam poetry movement, and taken together they suggest a link between authenticity and performances of blackness lying at the heart of American popular culture. Recognizing that identity is both performed and performative, I look to poetry slams in chapter 3 as sites where poets claim, negotiate, and sometimes refigure marginalized identities through performance. Many slam poets performing narratives about marginalized identities do little beyond expressing a sense of oppression, thereby reifying their positions as marginal, but some poets use parody and persona to inventively flip the script of marginality itself, and these performances signal the social and political possibilities of slam performance. In chapter 4, I consider the impact of slam poetry's commercial foil, spoken word poetry, and its associations with hip-hop music and performances of urban underclass blackness through mainstream media projects such as the film *Slam* and *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. Participating in these projects allows African American artists an opportunity to reach larger mainstream audiences while simultaneously

making them a spectacle for consumption by predominantly white, middle class audiences—a position that has obvious pros and cons.

As one of the first scholarly works to explore the politics of identity in slam poetry, a genre that is itself just gaining scholarly attention, this book aims to be suggestive, not definitive. It will take time to determine whether slam poetry will render Whitman's great audience as it will take time for scholars to situate it in literary and theatrical traditions. It is quite possible that, like Beat and Black Arts poetry, slam poetry will be defined by the cultural-historical moment in which it was produced—destined to fail outside of its moment but also influencing work beyond its current purview to push American poetry in new directions. It is also quite possible that, like these movements, slam poetry will be subsumed into the academy, the institution to which it was first built in opposition. Even as poets continue to characterize a classic tension between the academy and popular culture, slam poetry might be, in the end, about building bridges, not walls, between these two audiences for poetry. This book is one step in that direction.