

(Re)presenting Ourselves: Art, Identity, and Status in U.K. Poetry Slam

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Introducing Poetry Slam

Poetry slam is a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path, and a gimmick. It is a multi-faced creature that means many different things to many different people. At its simplest, slam is an oral poetry competition in which poets are expected to perform their own work in front of an audience. They are then scored on the quality of their writing and performance by judges who are typically randomly selected members of the audience.

The story of slam reaches across more than two decades and thousands of miles. In 1986, at the helm of “The Chicago Poetry Ensemble,” Marc Smith organized the first official poetry slam at the Green Mill in Chicago under the name of the Uptown Poetry Slam (Heintz 2006; Smith 2004). This weekly event still continues today and the Uptown Poetry Slam has become a place of pilgrimage for slam poets from across the United States and indeed the world.

While it parallels poetry in remaining a somewhat marginal activity, slam has arguably become the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Its popularity is greatest in its home country, where the annual National Poetry Slam (NPS) can attract audiences in the thousands and where it has spawned shows on television and on Broadway. Beyond this, slam has spread across the globe to countries as geographically and culturally diverse as Australia, Singapore, South Africa, Poland, and the U.K. Slam reached England in February 1994, when the first U.K. poetry slam was held in London by Farrago Poetry (2007). Farrago still holds monthly poetry slams today in the foyer bar of the Rada.

Despite the prevalence of slam and the number of intriguing research avenues this phenomenon presents, it has nonetheless received very little attention from academic researchers. Further, the few texts that do exist focus almost entirely on slam as a North American phenomenon.¹ This paper aims to begin to redress this imbalance.

¹ See for example Eleveld 2004 and Smith 2004; Foley 2002; and Glazner 2000. It is worth noting here that Foley considers oral poetry in a range of global and historical contexts, from ancient Greece to South Africa and Tibet. In discussing slam, however, he focuses very much on the North American context.

Method

The idea for this paper arose from an ongoing study into poetry slam, which seeks to analyze the re-creation of slam within local, translocal, and transnational communities. The study takes an interactionist stance and operates on the understanding that art should be viewed not as a disembodied product, but as a collection of dynamic social and interactional processes.² In line with this epistemological position, the research draws on tools of ethnographic inquiry to produce a rich, in-depth account of slam that aims to be sensitive to the situated meanings of participants.

The data on which this paper relies is derived from 44 semi-structured interviews with poets, promoters, event organizers, and educators involved in slams,³ as well as participant observation of 22 slams over the course of 12 months. This is supplemented with participant observation of other poetry events and of workshops geared toward slam, and the analysis of materials used in slams, video and audio recordings, promotional materials, and articles discussing slam published in newspapers, magazines, and on websites.

This paper focuses primarily on data that relates to adult slams in the U.K.; however, research on U.S.-based adult slam will also be referred to at various points in order for certain cross-cultural comparisons to be made. An in-depth exploration of U.S.-based adult slam, and of youth slam in these two countries, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴

There are clearly difficulties in generalizing from observations obtained in just two cities to a country as a whole, and the reader should bear in mind that this paper is based on research largely conducted in London, Bristol, New York, and Chicago. Where slam in the U.K. or the U.S. as a whole is concerned, the discussion reflects the work of other authors or, more commonly, participants' discussion of slam on the national scene. Further, although my research focuses specifically on English sites, I decided to refer to the U.K. rather than to England. This decision echoes the discourse of the research participants, who did not make any explicit distinctions between slam in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, as well as reflecting my own experience of slams in England, where Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Ireland poets often compete alongside English slammers.

Every effort has been made to preserve the distinction between local and national scenes where it was apparent. Since the participants in this research often made observations that were not restricted to the boundaries of their cities, however, it would have been erroneous to redirect their discourse in this way. Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that such generalizations provide an unproblematic representation of U.K.- or U.S.-based slam in a wider sense.

² See for example DeNora 2000:38.

³ Quotes from interviews are presented in this paper in the form of "cleaned-up" speech, which omits the hesitations, overlaps, and repetition of everyday conversation in favor of presenting a more lucid text. See Appendix A for the transcription key.

⁴ See also Gregory 2008 for more on youth slam. Another paper focusing on U.S.-based adult slam is in submission at the time of writing.

Introducing this Paper

What follows explores the discourse that members of U.K. slam communities, based primarily in London and Bristol, weave around slam: its nature, purpose, value, strengths, and limitations. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which these individuals (re)construct their identities in the face of a potentially lucrative cultural import from a more powerful group.

The paper will begin by defining its key terms of reference before going on to explore the ways in which local issues and concerns color the construction of a distinct form of slam in the U.K. The relatively weak position of U.K.-based slam in relation to U.S. slam will then be discussed, with consideration given to the ways in which both U.K.- and U.S.-based slam participants respond to this situation.

The success of slam in the U.S. presents a unique challenge to U.K. participants: How do they take advantage of the potential benefits that slam may bring, particularly in relation to the relatively large and broad audiences it seems to be able to attract, without it swamping a cherished tradition of performance poetry in the U.K.? The remaining sections of this paper will pay close attention to this dilemma, and the ways in which U.K.-based slam participants perform their identities in an attempt to resolve it.

It will be argued that the introduction of slam into the U.K. prompts participants in the performance poetry scene to reassess definitions of performance poetry, slam, and their own identities as artists. In doing so, U.K.-based slam participants strive to define a uniquely British form of slam that enables them to preserve their identities as authentic British artists, while capitalizing on the benefits that this emerging art world may bring them.

Introducing Key Terms: “Slam,” “Spoken Word,” and “Performance Poetry”

Defining key terms is an important foundational task for any emerging academic field. In the context of this discussion, it is particularly important to consider the concepts of “slam,” “spoken word,” and “performance poetry.” These labels are often used interchangeably, as is clear from the titles of books such as *The Spoken Word Revolution* (Eleveld 2004). To a certain extent, this usage is understandable since there are many similarities among the three forms (and forums), and poets often move easily between them. They remain distinct constructs, however, that we should seek to avoid conflating unnecessarily.

In record shops, bookshops, and many other retail outlets, “spoken word” is used to indicate a range of material, from audio recordings of speeches and comedy routines to readings of novels and short stories. When it is used within poetry circles, however, it typically refers to the oral performance of poetry, stories, or other prose pieces. Spoken word poets align themselves more with performance poetry than with traditional poetry recitals, while the term “spoken word” has been used for several decades. It has become more popular with the rise of performance poetry, following the success of slam in the last decades of the twentieth century,

and spoken word is increasingly being associated with performance poetry by individuals outside of the poetry world.⁵

There is some contention around the origins of the term “performance poetry.” Hedwig Gorski is often credited with coining the expression in her column *Litera*, which she wrote for *The Austin Chronicle* in the early 1980s; however, many slam poets also claim the term as their invention.⁶ Gorski used the phrase to distinguish her work—performing poetry over music—from performance art, while slam poets used it to denote poetry performed on slam stages. The label has since been applied to poets like the Beats, whom Lawrence Ferlinghetti dubbed the world’s “first performance poets” (quoted in Morrison 2005).

Much like “spoken word,” the term “performance poetry” is commonly used within poetry communities to refer to work that is performed orally rather than presented on the page, and that allies itself more with the conventions of slam than with those of the “academic” poetry world. In the context of performance poetry, then, “performance” is juxtaposed against “reading,” since it possesses elements of acting and displaying that are often seen as lacking from more traditional poetry readings.

It would be erroneous, however, to imply that performance poetry and slam are interchangeable. Indeed, many performance poets are highly critical of slam, refusing to participate within the confines of the slam format. Slam poets, in contrast, rarely limit their performances to the slam stage, and “performance poet” is a term that many would prefer to that of “slam poet.” In the U.K. especially, where slams are less frequent and lower in profile than they are in the U.S., it is rare for poets to adopt the slam poet label, yet many would happily call themselves performance poets.⁷

Since its inception, slam has attracted controversy; even knowing how to refer to it, for example, is no simple matter. As noted previously, slam means many things to many people. On his website (2007), Marc Smith, the founder of slam, defines it in this way: “Simply put, poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry.” As indicated in the introduction to this paper, slam may also be seen as an event: a performance poetry competition in which poets perform their own work before an audience, some of whom are nominated as official judges. Though some may still contest this definition of slam, I find it to be a clear and explicit categorization that fits well with the phenomenon as I have observed it. As will become clear, the boundaries of slam do not end here, however, and slam is often viewed as giving rise to a particular style of poetry (and performance). Given this reality, the decision was taken to refer to slam throughout this paper as a “for(u)m”: for me, this appropriately captures slam’s dual (and contested) nature as both art form and forum. Thus, this analysis will be based around the definition of slam that has been detailed above. It will also, however, concern itself with the struggle to define and

⁵ See also the *Canadian Theatre Review*’s recent special edition on spoken word performance for several discussions on the nature and relationship of the terms “spoken word” and “performance poetry” (Cowan 2007).

⁶ See Southern Arts Federation 2007.

⁷ This theme will be developed to a much greater extent later on in this analysis. See, in particular, the section on “Slam and Performance Poetry in the U.K.”

(re)construct slam according to the particular concerns of individuals and the specific sociohistorical contexts within which they exist.

Slam and Slam Formulae in the U.K. and the U.S.

This section considers some of the ways in which local concerns have acted on slam in the U.K. to create a distinct art form. U.K. slam has thus come to differ considerably from its U.S. counterpart in ways that its participants are often all too well aware.

Wherever slam has landed in the world, it has found related artistic traditions awaiting it. These art worlds and the specific geographical, historical, and social contexts within which they arose work to reconstruct the form, ensuring that it takes on (subtly or dramatically) different forms in each new context in which it arises. This analysis is supported by the work of authors like Bennett (2000) and Mahtani and Salmon (2001), who suggest that global arts are not merely imported wholesale into new sites, but are re-created to fit with local concerns and existing culturally contextualized art worlds. Given this situation, we would not expect slam in the U.K. to be a carbon copy of its U.S.-based counterpart, and indeed it is not.

In contrast to the U.S., where the “message” of a poem is often key, adult slam in the U.K. is typically viewed as being primarily a form for entertainment. In this connection, adult slam poetry in the U.K. sites of London and Bristol typically leans closer towards light, comic verse than the serious, emotive work that is common among U.S.-based slam poets. In an unpublished interview, stand-up comedian/poet Jude Simpson noted (n.d.):⁸

[Slam is] certainly not where people turn to be informed or challenged. In the States I think it’s more recognized as a way of making your point, whereas here part of the whole thing about it . . . [is] being very much about entertainment and witticisms and stuff.

Although it has precedents in the wider performance poetry scene, the comic poetry that often characterizes U.K.-based slam was viewed by many interviewees as constituting part of a British slam poetry formula. The following excerpt is from an interview with London-based performance poet Nathan Penlington (n.d.):⁹

NP: I think [slam] only allows for a certain kind of poetry the majority of the time.
 HG: Which is?

⁸ Jude Simpson is a “stand-up poet” previously based in London. Interviewees’ real names are used except where indicated. This decision was made following a discussion with participants, many of whom argued that, as writers, they spend much of their time engaged with issues of authorship, and that it would effectively be unethical not to credit them for their statements. While all interviewees were therefore given the option of using a pseudonym, very few decided to do so. The descriptions of interviewees given in this paper are also their own, except in the few cases where this information was not supplied. The term “stand-up poet” references the stand-up comedy tradition, emphasizing the performative and comedic elements of these artists’ poetry. As Jude Simpson remarked: “I describe myself as a ‘stand-up poet’ now, as my act is a fusion of poetry, comedy, and music.”

⁹ Nathan Penlington is also co-organizer of Shortfuse, a regular spoken word night held in London.

NP: Very performance-based. It might move into verse or comedy as such or rap. It's got quite a strong performance-based element. . . . So people tend to write three-minute poems that tick certain boxes sometimes, I think.

While the majority of participants readily identified a style they saw as being prevalent in U.K. slam, it was not unequivocally accepted that this constituted a binding formula. A number of participants were keen to emphasize instead the variety of poetry that is performed in U.K. slams, suggesting that what is often called "slam poetry" is simply that which wins slams more often. Nonetheless, both groups of individuals argued that perceptions of a slam formula acted to restrict the development of performance poetry, slam, and the artists who worked within these for(u)ms. According to Lucy English, Bristol-based performance poet (n.d.),¹⁰

I tended to find that the pieces I wrote for the [Bristol] slams were quite limited. You know, there were some comic pieces. There wasn't a lot of depth in them. I mean, performance poetry to me is any sort of poetry that is presented in front of an audience, and to me the parameters are a lot wider.

Interviewees also identified what was perceived as being a more typically American style of slam poetry. This kind of poem was associated with serious, emotive work, and often focused around the identities of members of oppressed and minority groups. Their observation is echoed by many U.S.-based commentators on the for(u)m. Writer Felice Belle (2003:14), for instance, notes that

the poets there [in the Nuyorican Poets Cafe] speak to social issues including, but not limited to, sexism, racism, police brutality, exploitation, and oppression of the working class. These poets have a sense of urgency about their work and use the stage to speak for those who may lack a public voice.

For U.K.-based slam participants, this American slam style was frequently viewed as being inappropriate for the U.K. context. As performance poet Steve Larkin contended (n.d.), when comparing slam in the two countries,¹¹

people like A. F. Harrold¹² are still winning slams here, and it's not just a showy poem done in an oratory style with some passion about what it's like to be gay, Jewish, black, of mixed heritage

¹⁰ Lucy English is also a lecturer in Creative Studies at Bath Spa University.

¹¹ Steve Larkin is also the former International Slam Champion and co-founder of Hammer and Tongue, a poetry organization based in Oxford.

¹² A. F. Harrold is a performance poet and occasional slam poet based in Reading, England. His style is often humorous and could be labeled eccentrically British. The decision was made, with A. F. Harrold's permission, to leave his name unchanged, since it was felt that altering it would have detracted notably from the import of this participant's statement. Since it was not considered possible to obtain written permission from all persons referred to in participants' discourse, the names of all other individuals referred to in quotations have been changed, unless otherwise noted.

etcetera that will win the day. It's respected, but there's too much desire for your bizarre cabaret or for your intelligent satire for that to take over [slam in the U.K.], I think.

A number of U.K.-based interviewees viewed this difference as indicative of the presence of a more pronounced slam formula in the U.S. than in the U.K. Consider the remarks of Kat Francois.¹³

I think because our slam scene is not as developed as say (if you go to) New York, it doesn't have a specific way in which you have to perform. I think a lot of poets and people over here are really used to listening to poetry. They're really listening to the quality of work, and they're really looking at the quality of your performance. So you don't have to slam in a certain way to win a slam. You know, most of the time, if it's here, the best performer and the best writer walks away with the prize.

This apparent formula for U.S. slam poetry was heavily criticized, being viewed by many as inauthentic and lacking in artistic validity (Sam La-Rose n.d.):¹⁴

A lot of American slam poets that I've seen perform have a consistent style that . . . in an emotive sense, goes from zero to a hundred in like thirty seconds flat, and they start off quite calm, quite stable, quite steady, and then very quickly, within the first couple of sentences, they accelerate to this almost insincere, tearful, pained over-emoting. And the first time or two that you see it, it's like "Wow. Wow. That's really amazing. They really feel what it is that they're doing." And when you've seen it a hundred times you realize it's just a thing. It's just a device.

Positioning U. K. Slam on the Transnational Scene

Slam in America has a clearer identity and more formalized, integrated networks, attracting greater media attention and larger audiences than in the U.K. Members of U.K.-based slam communities were often keenly aware of this disparity and of their less powerful position on the transnational slam scene. Poet Nathan Penlington (n.d.) states:

I think American slams work better somehow. I think their poets are geared to the slam format more, and it's bigger in America than it is here.

And according to poet Lucy English (n.d.),

my understanding of the slam scene in England is that there isn't one; that there are slams, but it's not a scene. In America there is a very highly integrated slam network, linking up major cities, and at The Slam Nationals they get audiences of thousands.

¹³ Kat Francois is a London-based performance poet and promoter of the Word Up poetry slam.

¹⁴ Jacob Sam-La Rose is a poet and the artistic director of the London Teenage Poetry SLAM.

Responses to this situation varied. Some participants viewed slam as an unwelcome cultural import and a negative influence on performance poetry in the U.K., and therefore willingly accepted its relative lack of development in the country. For others, however, the benefits that slam could bring to performance poetry outweighed its limitations. A mixture of these viewpoints was often apparent in a single interview, reflecting the highly ambiguous approach that many members of U.K.-based slam communities have towards slam.

While some participants sought to move away from slam, developing their art works outside of the for(u)m, or were content for British slam to remain in its current state, others discussed the possibility of creating a more integrated, high-profile slam scene in the U.K., and establishing U.K. equivalents to Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSI), the non-profit organization that governs slam in the U.S. According to poet Steve Larkin (n.d.),

I'm trying to join up those dots, so that people can get round more; so that a network can be built. (So Hammer and Tongue in a way will be looking, if the right people get involved, on becoming an equivalent to PSI . . . then we can have an undisputed National Champion as well.

This initiative was seen as being able to provide a more integrated, clearly defined, and well-publicized community, a development that would enable it to act as a more powerful player on the transnational slam scene. Participants were keen to emphasize, however, that such an organization would be specifically British, rather than a mere replica of the U.S. model (Sam-La Rose n.d.):

Gill's talking about putting together a kind of national slam organization, basically a national organization of slam promoters and slam poets that would facilitate some of the communications that exist in the States between different promoters and whatnot. I'm not saying that we're modeling things on the States. It's just [that] there are things that should be in place that aren't at the moment.

U. S. Slam Participants and the Transnational Scene

This power differential between U.K.- and U.S.-based slam was also visible in the discourse of U.S.-based interviewees. In part, it was made apparent by the rather limited amount of talk focusing on U.K. slam and by the manner in which U.S. and U.K. slam poetry was discussed. While a number of the U.S.-based slam participants I encountered during my participant observation work were dismissive, or claimed no knowledge of slam in the U.K., the majority of those I interviewed had performed in the country or encountered British slammers in the States and viewed the U.K. as a valid, if unequal, partner on the transnational slam scene.

Just as in the U.K., these interviewees were aware of the more successful, advanced nature of slam in the U.S., and responded to this distinction in a variety of ways. Some participants emphasized the superiority of the American model, suggesting that adopting this system would be beneficial for the development of U.K.-based slam and for the coherence of the wider transnational slam scene. These interviewees were often reluctant to impose their views on

others, however, balking at the idea that they may be implicated in any form of oppression. According to American slam poet Taylor Mali (n.d.),

there is no PSI in Europe or England or the rest of the world, and we've run into problems, and there have been international slam-masters who have asked for PSI to step in and mediate disputes that have happened in Europe between slams, and we always resisted because we didn't want to look like Americans going in and telling the rest of the world what to do; but I think there needs to be some sort of PSI for other continents.

Others, meanwhile, were more critical of the way in which slam had developed in the U.S., and saw the U.K. situation as offering hope for a different evolutionary course, one that may avoid the apparent formularization of slam and its dominance over the wider performance poetry scene. For some U.S.-based slam participants, then, the U.K.'s divergence from the U.S. slam model means that British slam participants may be able to avoid some of the less "palatable" features that they view as having accompanied the development of slam in the U.S. (Heintz n.d.):¹⁵

The English are struggling towards this [development of slam] in their own sort of anarchic way. Personally I'm relishing the anarchy, because it means that you're all holding on to a little bit of regional diversity and local prerogative in the process, and I hope that survives.

Several U.S.-based interviewees, then, expressed their hope that the U.K., and other countries with less developed slam scenes, may be able to retain some of the regional diversity that they perceive as having been suffocated by slam in the U.S., or, at the very least, offer a national diversity with which to replace it on the transnational slam scene.

Slam and Performance Poetry in the U. K.

Such ambiguity around slam was present in the discourse of both U.S.- and U.K.-based participants; however, it was much more dominant in interviews with the British group. Debates around the validity of slam as an art for(u)m, and whether it was beneficial or detrimental to U.K. performance poetry, were perhaps the most salient feature of these participants' discussion.

On the one hand, slam was generally viewed as a means of attracting broader and larger audiences than were typically drawn to more traditional poetry events. In contrast to poetry recitals, slam was portrayed as being an accessible and entertaining forum that could help overcome the stigma that apparently surrounds poetry in British society. Sara-Jane Arbury (n.d.) states:¹⁶

¹⁵ Kurt Heintz, Chicago-based writer and media artist.

¹⁶ Sara-Jane Arbury, of Spiel Unlimited, is a Cheltenham-based performance poet and slam host; "Spiel Unlimited (Sara-Jane Arbury and Marcus Moore) undertakes all manner of spoken and written word initiatives and

I think what slam does, is it turns the whole idea of a poetry night on its head, which is basically: audience come there with a preconceived idea that a) it's gonna be really boring b) it's gonna be dirgey and difficult to understand and something that's not for them. They come along to see a [slam] night that's in a structure and framework like that, which is very accessible, audience-friendly, and extremely entertaining, and suddenly the whole notion of what a poetry night could be is opened up.

In this sense, U.K.-based slam is defined in opposition to the dominant literary world in much the same way as it is by many members of U.S.-based slam communities.¹⁷ On the other hand, the entertaining nature of slam is portrayed as essentially “cheapening” poetry, encouraging the production of work that lacks depth and has questionable artistic value. Bristol-based performance poet Mike Flint (n.d.)¹⁸ presented this viewpoint when discussing a poem that he had written specifically for slam:

I can remember sitting there at the computer thinking, “What can I do that will be so different and it will also be funny?” But it has no real content. I mean it's got no philosophical argument or political debate or anything like that in it. It's just entertainment.

Slam was not evaluated in isolation, then, but rather in terms of the impact that it has on existing art worlds and on the identities of their participants. Slam's relationship with performance poetry was most salient in this respect. As London-based performance poet Steve Tasane (n.d.) commented, “Slam is there to serve the purpose of the performance poetry community.”

The subservience of U.K.-based slam to performance poetry in its wider sense is reflected in the ways in which poets engage with slam in the U.K. Fewer artists in the U.K. define themselves as “slam poets,” preferring instead to adopt the broader label of “performance poet.” Indeed, the lack of sufficient regular or high-profile slam events in the U.K. means that it is all but impossible for artists to pursue a career in adult slam in the region. Slam is thus seen as playing a very different role in poets' careers than in the U.S., where numerous high-profile slam events, including the annual National Poetry Slam, can confer great kudos on their champions and other participants.

While U.S.-based poets may spend substantial periods of time touring around slam venues, and are able to build a spoken word career on the basis of slam wins, U.K.-based poets more commonly engage with slam for much shorter periods of time. They compete only relatively early on in their careers, then leave the for(u)m behind once they have benefited from the instant audience feedback that slams provide, attracted the attention of event organizers, and/or made

had been hosting slams for over ten years” (Moore and Arbury 2008). See <http://www.thepeoplespoet.com/spiel.htm> for further information.

¹⁷ This topic is beyond the scope of the current paper. I have, however, written elsewhere on the relationship between slam and the academy (see, for example, Gregory 2008).

¹⁸ Name changed on request of interviewee.

contacts within the wider performance poetry community. As performance poet Caroline Jackson notes (n.d.),¹⁹

I think there's a kind of natural progression in most performance poets' careers, as I've experienced the scene. . . you'll go for slam, that's kind of your training ground on what will appeal to a general audience and what won't, and then you might want to move on and mix that [up] a bit more.

The way in which these poets engage with slam over the course of their careers reflects the ambiguity with which the for(u)m is received in the U.K. There is a common perception that, while slam may increase the profile of performance poetry and poets, its influence must be tempered to keep it from swamping performance poetry completely and reducing a rich and varied art form to a much more limited and potentially formulaic model (Francois n.d.):

It's not as serious out here [in the U.K.], so we can be a bit more laid back about it; but out there [in the U.S.] you can make money from it and it's good for your career. You know, you're National Slam Champion or you win these big slams. You make money. You make a name for yourself, and to be recognized as a quality performance poet out there you have to win slams, whereas over here you don't.

U.S. slam is thus perceived by many U.K.-based slam participants as something of a poisoned chalice, providing more substantial rewards for slam winners in terms of money and prestige while simultaneously creating greater pressure to perform in and win slams. Although members of U.K.-based slam communities saw benefits to be reaped from following the American model, there was also often reluctance to encourage the development of slam in the U.K. for fear that it may stifle performance poetry more broadly and limit the forums in which poets may readily perform their work.

Defining an Identity for U.K. Slam

Whether they sought to encourage the development of slam or dismiss it altogether, U.K.-based participants were keen to maintain a uniquely British identity for performance poetry in the country. Slam poet Ian Sills (n.d.) states:²⁰

I think there's an importance of being original. It's the difference I think between being inspired by another style and blatantly trying to impersonate it. As I say, some of the top British poets have an American sort of a style, but they don't want anybody to think they're trying to be American.

¹⁹ Caroline Jackson is also an events organizer, writer, and tutor in Bristol. Her name was changed upon request.

²⁰ Ian Sills is a Bristol-based performance/slam poet and poetry organizer.

Those who wished to see the for(u)m succeed in the U.K. extended this desire to preserve a peculiarly British artistic identity into the realm of slam, as poet Joelle Taylor (n.d.) notes:²¹

So we came up with the idea of slam, which, as you will know, is an American idea; but I'm very proud of the fact that I think we've really changed it. We've changed its meaning and its function in London.

Members of slam communities in the U.K. often reacted against what they saw as being an element of American cultural imperialism. Thus they critiqued the idea that slam is necessarily defined by the U.S. model, and that slam in the U.K. is merely a diluted version of that model. This perspective is apparent in my own work as well. As an English performance poet and researcher, I have been keen to emphasize throughout my research that slam in the U.K. has a valid identity in its own right.

The risk that U.K. slam could become Americanized was not perceived simply as being imposed from the outside, however. Rather, the actions of U.K. slam participants themselves were seen as something that must potentially be guarded against. Organizers may (perhaps inadvertently) promote American poets over those based in the U.K.; for example, according to Larkin (n.d.),

because of the people we've chosen for big events, slam poetry has become synonymous with American performers. So now I could put on an American performer; just because they're American they'll get a good crowd. I put on a really top British performer who's been performing for years, who I think is better quality, and I'll get a low turn-out.

Similarly, U.K.-based slam participants may adopt a performance/writing style that is associated more with American slammers. These individuals were decried by many U.K.-based performance poets as being inauthentic, striving simply to achieve success rather than to create high-quality, original art. Those who maintained a style that was viewed as true to their identities as British artists, however, were often depicted by interviewees here as being authentic and innovative (Larkin n.d.):

At no point in Joan Calden's set will you hear an Americanism. . . . You will hear a London accent and a strong London accent, and near rhymes based on that particular accent as well, which if delivered in a New York or an L.A. accent just would not work at all, and that's a strong theme of her work, and that's why I think she's such a strong artist, because she is somebody who is authentic.

Thus these interviewees were concerned that slam performances should represent original work that does not seek to artificially re-create an American style of poetry simply to win slams, and, in the process, undermine a strong British tradition of performance poetry. London-based poet John Paul O'Neill (n.d.) concludes:

²¹ Joelle Taylor is a performance poet based in London.

I think that, as U.K. poetry people, we need to look at the organization, look at the professionalism of their set-up [in America], look at the format; but what we mustn't do is what hip hop did when it first came to the U.K., you know, having U.K. rappers who would be rapping in American accents. I think that we need to use the kind of professionalism, use the kind of structure, but look at the structures that they've set up, and apply them to the U.K. where it's appropriate; adapt them where it's appropriate; but always be performing U.K. poetry, and not trying to be second-rate copies of Americans.

U.K.-based slam participants thus strive to maintain a delicate balancing act; seeking to capitalize on the many benefits that slam may bring to the performance poetry world—such as greater media coverage, a recognized career path, more substantial financial rewards, and attracting new and larger audiences to the genre—yet without allowing slam to swamp performance poetry completely and thus restrict the career paths that performance poets may follow and the kinds of poetry that they may readily perform. The introduction of slam into the U.K., then, may be seen as a disruption to the wider performance poetry community, prompting poets to redefine both the art form within which they work and their own identities as artists.

Power in Performance: Negotiating Identity through Everyday Interaction

In a Goffmanian context,²² the discourse of U.K.-based slam participants may be viewed as representing the means through which they seek to perform their identities in such a way that their integrity as British artists and their control over U.K. performance poetry is preserved intact. Further, these participants strive to preserve a “line” within which the ability to master (and indeed reconstruct) what is often perceived as being a cultural import heightens, rather than detracts from, their identities as skilled, authentic British artists.

Something of the opposite process is apparent in the discourse of U.S.-based slam participants as they seek to retain their control over slam and their status as more powerful and skilled slam poets, without appearing to be (or indeed becoming) domineering cultural imperialists. Thus this analysis may be used to illuminate the construction and maintenance of preferred identities within both U.K.- and U.S.-based slam, and to explore the links between the ways in which slam participants perform their identities and the complex power relations through which they seek to navigate during the course of their everyday interactions. As Peter Middleton (2005:24) notes in his discussion of the contemporary poetry reading, identity is “closely bound up” with authority.

Slam is typically viewed by poets based in U.K. cities like Bristol and London as being subservient to performance poetry; yet its impact on this genre is difficult to ignore. This is particularly true for those who have chosen to engage with rather than dismiss slam. These individuals must walk a precarious line, maintaining their localized artistic (and personal) identities, while drawing on a global artistic for(u)m.

For many U.K.-based slam participants, it would seem that the issues of artistic identity that slam introduces remain unresolved. Because of this situation, the process of negotiation

²² See Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) for further explanation.

through which identity is constructed is particularly visible in the discourse of these participants. Interviewees often supplied more questions than answers to questions such as the following: Do the benefits of slam outweigh its negative impact on performance poetry? Can the development of slam be encouraged in the U.K. without its taking over the performance poetry scene? Is it possible (or desirable) to label oneself a “slam poet” in the U.K.? How can U.K. slam be constructed in such a way that it possesses unique national and local identities? And what is the extent to which the American slam model may be implemented in the U.K. without detracting from these identities?

While resistance to a perceived American cultural hegemony affects how many U.K.-based performance poets seek to (re)define their identities (and that of U.K. slam itself), it is important not to overemphasize the role that the power relations between these two countries play in the performance and (re)construction of slam participants’ identities. The majority of the U.K.-based participants I interviewed had performed in U.S. slams or seen American slam poets in the U.K. and were well aware of slam’s American roots and of the thriving slam scene there. Yet this is not necessarily the case for all those who participate in U.K.-based slams. Indeed, many individuals who take part in U.K. slams have only a sparse knowledge of slam outside of their local area. One schoolteacher and youth slam participant with whom I spoke, for instance, had no idea that slam existed in an adult context. Similarly, one Bristol-based interviewee insisted that slams, typically run on a first-come, first-served basis, were often invitational events, since this was her only experience of the for(u)m.

These participants are largely unaware of slam’s status as an American cultural import and have not participated on the transnational slam scene. Thus they can hardly be considered to be fighting against the American domination of slam. Because such individuals formed only a small part of the sample, however, drawing any substantial conclusions about this group is problematic. Instead, we must content ourselves, for now at least, with the observation that there is a range of power relations that affect slam participants’ performances of identity, and that these vary, depending on the nature of the actors involved and their position in local, translocal, and transnational slam communities.

Conclusions

The nature of slam varies according to the geographical contexts within which it is realized. Slam in the U.K. is influenced by artistic traditions and cultures distinct from those that affect the for(u)m in the U.S. and is thus (re)constructed very differently. For many U.K.-based slam participants, the introduction of slam casts into question their artistic identity, as they seek to define both slam itself and their own position in relation to the for(u)m. They thus strive to construct a uniquely British identity for slam that aids, rather than threatens, U.K. performance poetry and their own identities as authentic British artists. The recognition that slam is a U.S. cultural import, which is much more developed in its home country, plays a major role in shaping this discourse.

Many U.S.-based slam participants are also aware of the power differential between U.K.- and U.S.-based slam, yet it presents them with a very different dilemma. If they wish to

influence slam in other countries, they must do so with great subtlety or risk being portrayed as the kind of domineering exploiters who are frequently derided on U.S. slam stages. Conversely, for those who critique the development of slam in the U.S., slam in other countries offers the possibility of a different and more favorable path of evolution.

This analysis can help us to understand more about the localization of global artistic phenomena, the ways in which artists may respond to the perceived cultural hegemony of the U.S., and how they seek to redefine their identities in the light of changing art worlds. We could argue that

Globalization
pens America's shadow
on local art worlds.²³

This is no one-way transmission, however, but an interactive process. Thus this paper suggests that, rather than unquestioningly accepting cultural imports that derive from more powerful groups on the global stage, art world participants strive to reconstruct them in line with local concerns.²⁴ In doing so, they seek to perform their identities in such a way that they stand to gain, not lose, status from the influence of these new and constantly evolving art for(u)ms.

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²³ This haiku is written by the author for the present article.

²⁴ The term "art world" is taken from Becker's (1982) insightful analysis of the ways in which artworks are created through the interaction of groups of individuals.

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Appendix A: Transcription Key

- “ “ Reported speech
 ... Missing text
 [] My words
 () Transcription doubt