

ARTISTS, ARTISTIC CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY:
A MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY OF MEANING-MAKING
WITHIN THREE ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This multi-sited ethnography of artists, artistic culture, and community aimed to understand the meaning-making activities of artistic producers (poets) and consumers (audiences) within three artistic communities across the Southwest Region of the U.S. Participant observations, situational interviews, 30 participant interviews, and field notes were collected over a three year period.

Throughout the study, data were analyzed using an adapted version of the constant comparative method. Themes and subthemes constructed from the analysis were organized into two sections: Artists and Artistic Production focused on the meanings of slam poetry from the perspective of poets; and Audience, Community and Participation, which focused on the meanings held by various audiences who attend slam poetry events.

From the perspective of poets, slam poetry was meaningful because it provided opportunities to create work within an artistic community. Working collaboratively increased artistic production, while also allowing poets to learn from one another. For many poets writing and performing slam poetry was a therapeutic outlet, a way to process life and challenging experiences. To varying degrees, nearly all poets utilized the format of slam poetry to construct and perform aspects of their identity they are unable to express in other arenas. By rendering the self-explicit, a process of bringing “backstage” discourses to the “front stage,” poets were able to recall, reframe, and retell

challenging experiences in a way that was meaningful and personally enriching.

Whether for self-reflexive purposes, speaking to collective representations, engaging in political speech, or for pedagogical reasons, rendering the self-explicit was a form of identity and boundary work for many poets.

From the perspective of audiences, slam poetry events were a place where they were able to share similar interests with a supportive group of people. Many participants developed and maintained close friendships with fellow members of the community, some describing their relationships as family. Additionally, many attended slam poetry events because discourse within the space resonated with their experiences and challenged their thinking. Indeed, many viewed slam poetry events as one of the few public spaces where they were able to engage in meaningful discourse relating to marginalized experiences and issues of social justice.

For poets and audiences alike, slam poetry communities provided a space that encouraged meaningful communication. The intersection of contexts, where interactions between front stage/backstage discourses occurred, created a transitional space which prompted moments of shared intimacy and understanding between participants. Some participants described these moments as transformational experiences that lead to new understandings of self and society, and encouraged a shared sense of community and belonging.

DEDICATION

To the communities and participants who shared your lives and experiences throughout this study and beyond. Your generosity and support made this study possible.

I am deeply grateful. Thank you!

NOMENCLATURE

APS	Austin Poetry Slam
B/CS	Bryan/College Station
BNV	Brave New Voices
CD	Compact Disc
DIY	Do It Yourself
DJ	Disc Jockey
MC	Master of Ceremony
Mic	Microphone
NATS	National Poetry Slam Competition
NPS	National Poetry Slam Competition
OGAPS	Office of Graduate and Professional Studies
PA	Public Announcement System
PoC	Production of Culture Perspective
PSI	Poetry Slam, Inc.
Revs	Revolution Café and Bar
TGS	Texas Grand Slam Poetry Festival
UGK	Underground Kingz
VIP	Houston VIP
WOWPS	Women of the World Poetry Slam

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Go in, Poet!¹

Poetry is dead!?! According to a number of critics, poetry is dead, dying, or obsolete (Gioia 1991; Wexler 2003; Petri 2013; Ingraham 2015). These critiques of poetry's significance to contemporary culture, however, remain fixed to aesthetics of poetry that once was, rather than focusing on how the meanings of production and consumption have changed alongside culture. While readership of page poetry² may be on the decline (NEA 2015) as some critics note, the viewership of performance poetry is on the rise—slam poetry in particular. To be sure, the increasing significance of slam poetry is demonstrated by: the growing number of communities dedicated to slam poetry; the wide spread social media distribution and consumption of poetry performances (e.g., BuzzFeed, Facebook, Huffington Post, Upworthy, YouTube); the emergence of organizations dedicated to the documentation and distribution of performance poetry (e.g., Button Poetry, Write About Now Poetry); and the increasing support of cultural and social institutions (e.g., schools, grant funding agencies, etc.).

Contrary to the abovementioned critics, poetry as an art form is not only alive, but doing well. With an emphasis on slam poetry, this study attempts to understand the social aspects of the art form by focusing on the interactions between poets and their

¹ Go in, Poet is a popular saying within slam poetry communities. The phrase refers to the total commitment of oneself to a performance—living within the performance so to speak (see p. 90 for additional context).

² Page poetry refers to poetry that is produced with the intention to be read.

audiences. Questions that guided this study included: How is writing and performing slam poetry meaningful for the artists who create such work? How does one become a creator of slam poetry? Who are the audiences for slam poetry? This dissertation engages these questions by exploring the meaning-making activities of artistic cultural production and consumption within the art world of slam poetry.

Slam Poetry

Slam poetry is a unique form of artistic expression that blurs the boundaries of literary and performance art worlds. In this respect, slam poetry is a hybrid form of artistic expression comprised of spoken word poetry, performance, and a competition format. Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI)³ defines slam poetry as “the art of competitive performance poetry” (NPS 2013). Whereas the term slam poetry is often an umbrella term to describe a range of activities such as spoken word poetry⁴, poetry readings, performance poetry, and many other oral or performed dialogs. While the term has attained broad usage in popular culture, slam poetry specifically refers to the performance art that takes place during a poetry slam competition. Thus, a poetry slam is a competition where a poet performs poetry against other poets.

³ PSI is a non-profit 501(c)(3) international governing body which oversees the rules, growth, and development of slam poetry. Two communities included in this study are PSI affiliated (APS and Houston VIP), while Mic Check remains an independent poetry slam community.

⁴ A distinction between different types of poetry is whether the writer wrote the poem for the page or for the stage. There is a debate about whether there is a difference between page poetry and stage poetry, which is beyond the scope of this study. For reference spoken word poetry, performance poetry, or slam poetry are poems written for the stage. Poetry readings generally feature page poetry that is read aloud to an audience.

As a hybrid art form, slam poetry is a product of a time where everything appears to be in the process of becoming a competition – singing in *American Idol*, modeling in *America's Next Top Model*, weight loss in *The Biggest Loser*, and finding a significant other in *The Bachelor*). It may seem curious why anyone would write about their most intimate thoughts and feelings and then voluntarily subject them to a critical panel of judges selected from the audience that just witnessed the performance. But participants consider slam poetry as something more than the mere spectacle of a competition—many view the art form as an artistic and literary social movement.

As an artistic movement, slam poetry began in a working class neighborhood in Chicago during the mid-1980s and was created by construction worker Marc Kelly Smith (so, what!!!⁵). Known as the “Slam Papi,” of slam poetry, Smith believed that academics and educational institutions made poetry irrelevant to the majority of the culture. According to Smith,

The very word “poetry” repels people. Why is that? Because of what schools have done to it. The slam gives it back to the people.... We need people to talk poetry to each other. That's how we communicate our values, our hearts, the things that we've learned that make us who we are. (Conniff and Gross 1992:77)

Dissatisfied with the lack of connection between poetry and the experiences of everyday life, Smith began holding poetry readings in publically-accessible settings, mainly local working class bars in Chicago. Smith’s sentiments about poetry’s status within

⁵It is a ritual within the slam poetry art world to respond with “so what!!!” when Marc Kelly Smith’s name is mentioned. This sets the tone for the interactive audience performance dynamic.

contemporary culture parallel Dewey's (1934/2005) argument about the institutionalization of art made five decades earlier:

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operations in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with that materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. (P. 2)

The idea for holding public readings was to take poetry off the academic pedestal and make it accessible to the community by reconnecting it with everyday lived experiences. Smith's efforts were immediately met with challenges, however. The patrons of the spaces where poetry readings were held were primarily interested in unwinding after work, socializing, and having a good time. Most patrons were not seeking out a poetry reading. In many instances the crowds were unresponsive to the poetry readings, at best, and hostile, at worst. Thus, even before Smith developed the idea of transforming poetry readings into a competition, his desire for poetry in a public space was competing with locals for their attention and for the legitimate usage of the same space.

As an art form, slam poetry has its share of critics and supporters. Herein, I leave those debates to the boundary-crusading critics and focus instead upon what is happening with this particular form of personal and cultural expression. Assuming Smith is correct when he describes slam poetry as a grassroots movement, I turn my attention away from the sky and focus on the soil. The emphasis here is not the quality of the lawn

that is slam poetry; rather, this dissertation seeks to ascertain the social meanings inherent in the activities that establish that “lawn”: how the soil (the context) is attended to, how the seeds (slam poets and their poetry) are selected, nurtured, and grown, and how the lawn (slam poetry community) is maintained over time.

While aesthetically similar, every lawn has its own unique characteristics: different soils, seeds, resources, and landscapers. To gain a deeper understanding of the numerous ways in which slam poetry communities may be shaped and maintained, I frequently visited different landscapes in the course of my three-year multi-sited ethnographic study of three interconnected slam poetry communities located in the southwestern region of the United States. During this time, I actively participated across these landscapes, assuming roles ranging from audience member, occasional performer, community leader, and researcher—often occupying several roles at the same time.

Art Worlds and Artistic Production

Framing this research is my interest in the relationship between artistic cultural production and consumption, and the construction, performance, and maintenance of individual and community identities. In *Art Worlds*, Becker (1982) challenged the conventional wisdom of the time that artists are the exclusive creators of their own work. Rather, than viewing art as a product of artistic genius working in isolation, Becker demonstrated how artistic production is the result of collective activity. Artists do not invent artistic mediums and processes every time anew; rather, they interact within a cultural system identified by its own history, collective representations, and divisions of labor. While Becker does not suggest new artistic movements, genres, medium, and

processes are not possible, he does emphasize that new artistic innovations would not be possible without the context of the art world.

Becker's (1982) contribution was fundamental to the study of cultural artifacts and cultural production. This study engages with Becker's efforts by focusing on different communities that participate in an art world (artworlds within artworlds), and by focusing on the meaning-making activities of artistic cultural production and consumption. This moves the analysis from how cultural production is made possible within an art world to how cultural production and consumption together produce meaning, individually and collectively.

The purpose of the study is to explore the social aspects of slam poetry. Working toward this endeavor this study focuses on meaning-making activities of artistic cultural production and consumption within the intersecting art worlds of slam poetry. Describing slam poetry as an intersection of art worlds is appropriate because of its hybridity—an amalgamation of literary arts, performance arts, and an aesthetic competition. The intersection of these different art worlds forms what I refer to as the artworld of slam poetry, which is made possible due to the existence of smaller artistic communities emerging from specific local contexts practicing slam poetry.

Summary

This chapter provides an introduction to this three-year multi-sited ethnographic study by exploring the meaning-making activities of artistic cultural production and consumption within the art world of slam poetry. Chapter II reviews the symbolic interactionist perspective that frames this study. Chapter III provides the methodological

considerations and the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm of the study.

Chapter IV introduces the art world of slam poetry and the three artistic communities that are the focus of this study. Chapter V presents the analysis of data. Chapter VI provides a discussion of the results of this study, the implications for creative producers and artistic communities, and recommendations for further research in the area cultural production and consumption.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study of artistic cultural production and consumption within the art world of slam poetry is informed by symbolic interactionism. This chapter provides a review of the symbolic interactionist perspective as it relates to meaning-making activities of cultural production and consumption. An alternative approach to the study of cultural production, the production of culture perspective (Peterson and Anand, 2004) is also discussed.

Symbolic Interactionism

The symbolic interactionist perspective primarily focuses on how meaning, the self and identity, and action are socially constructed through interaction between individuals and groups. With a meaning and interaction as foundational premises, the historical antecedents of symbolic interactionism may be found in the philosophical pragmatism, particularly the work of William James and George Herbert Mead.

At least since William James, the concept of an individual self has not been considered as singular. Rather, James (1890) argues, there are multiple dimensions of self,

a man's self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his

ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. (P. 291)⁶

James (1890) believed there were at least four dimensions to the self: the material self; the social self; the spiritual self; and the pure ego. It is the idea of the social self that is of interest for this study. According to James (1890),

Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares. (P. 294)

For James the individual is not static, but rather is changing and dynamic; influenced by the external environment. Expanding upon James's constituents of self, more specifically, the social self, Cooley (1902) adds a self-reflective dimension wherein the individual's conception of self is shaped by the way they imagine another individual, or group, views them. This self-reflective concept is referred to as the looking-glass self;

“Each to each a looking-glass.

Reflects the other the doth passes.”

⁶ For a discussion regarding James' gendered description of the self, see Seigfried, Charlene. H. 1996. *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (Cooley 1902:152)

According to Cooley (1902:152), the looking glass self has three components: (1) the imagination of our appearance in the mind of another; (2) the imagination of another's judgment upon our appearances; and (3) the self-feeling we received from our imagining of another's judgment of our appearance.

Cooley (1902) indicates the imagined judgment is essential to understanding the looking-glass self, "We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind" (p. 153). Imagined judgment moves us to have an emotional response, which in turn has an influence over the way we perceived our appearance. The internalization of an imagined response of our appearance may influence the way in which we attempt to appear in the future, "Directly or indirectly the imagination of how we appear to others is a controlling force in all normal minds" (1902:172).

Since the imagined judgment of others influences individual perception, it raises the question of whose judgment is being imagined. Although Cooley doesn't connect his concepts of primary and secondary groups directly to the looking-glass self, they are useful for understanding how internal judgments are influenced by different group

settings. In Cooley's (1909) second book, *Social Organization*, he distinguishes between different types of groups,

By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities into a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes, at least, is the common life and expression of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a "we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling. (P. 23)

For Cooley (1909) primary groups are groups that share close bonds, a shared sense of identity, and are generally cooperative and enduring relationships. Examples of primary groups include family, close friendships, and intimate relationships. The connecting link between individuals, primary groups, and the larger collective are what Cooley refers to as secondary groups. Cooley argued that society, beyond the close relationships of primary groups, was composed many less personal secondary groups. Cooley viewed secondary groups as collectives engaged in activity to pursue specific goals. Examples of a secondary group include colleagues at work, an athletic team, or classmates at school.

Cooley's concepts of the looking glass self and primary and secondary groups are useful for studying participants of slam poetry because they illustrate how individuals create meaning in relation to the different groups of people they associate with.

George Herbert Mead (1934) extends Cooley's (1902) notion of the looking-glass self to show individuals not a passive recipient of the process, but rather are the result of an interactive self. Mead described different components of the self, which he called the "I", and "Me". For Mead the I of the self are spontaneous interactions within an individual. For Mead the I is not something that is pre-thought and then enacted, but rather is discovered in the process of acting. The Me on the other hand is the perceived or actual response of another to the imagined judgment of appearance and actions. According to Mead (1934) the I and the Me interact process with one another. The actions of the individual call out a response in another, which calls out our response to response of the other.

To contextualize the I and the Me, a discussion of Mead's (1934) notion of play, the game, and the generalized other is useful for this study as it illustrates how individuals begin to develop a sense of self, which also presupposes the development of meaning, through interaction. In play, individuals begin developing a self by taking different roles they've observed in others and acting them out. An example of this is when a children engage in play which imitates roles they've seen others enact—roles such as a parent, teacher, and super hero. Mead (1934) specifies, "in the play period the child utilizes his own responses to these stimuli which makes use of in building a self"

(p. 150). That is, if the child were pretending to be a police officer issuing someone a ticket, the child would also respond as the individual receiving the citation. Next, the child begins to organize these responses, which can be drawn upon in future conversations with the self. Mead calls this the conversation of gestures, “which is the simplest form of being another to one’s self” (1934:151).

Next, Mead (1934) distinguishes play from the game, by indicating in play the individual only needs the attitude of themselves, where as in the game the individual must have the attitude of all those participating within the game. In other words, in order for the individual to know their role in the game, s/he must know what everyone else is going to do, as they must know what s/he is going to do. “In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of others” (Mead 1934:151).

Enactment of the organized responses, which calls out an appropriate response in others, is another way of saying there are rules of the game that each participant must learn and follow. “The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘the generalized other.’ The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (Mead 1934:154).

In an individual’s ability to take on the attitude of the generalized other, the individual develops a self that is oriented to that particular generalized other. Accordingly, there may be as many selves as there are generalized others the individual is capable of carrying the attitude of. This is consistent with James’ (1890) statement

above “we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of opinions he cares,” only with more specificity (p. 294).

Mead extends the self through interactive discussion by introducing several elements: the idea of the I, the me, and the generalized other. Cooley (1902) conceived of the self, imagining how another self imagines them to be; that is the interaction process takes place largely within the mind. Mead (1934) extends this idea and explains that it is not only in the imagination of another, but also in our experience where the self is an object to itself. In other words, the self does not only image another’s imagining, it also imagines oneself: it is self-aware.

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved. (Mead 1934:138)

Mead’s (1934) conception of the self includes: (a) to take the attitude of the other; (b) to take the role of the other; and (c) reflecting upon the self with reference to the reactions of others within the community or group one is a part of. This illustrates an

interactive process between an individual and other individuals within the social world they inhabit; facilitated by a system of communication and shared symbols.

Mead's insights provide the foundation for the symbolic interactionist perspective, although he never used the term (1934). Symbolic interactionism is a term coined by Mead's student Herbert Blumer, who provided a detailed statement of the perspective. According to Blumer (1969), the symbolic interactionist perspective rests upon three premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... The second premise is that the meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

The premises as discussed by Blumer (1969) illustrate how meaning is a key feature of the symbolic interactionist perspective. The emphasis on how meaning is interpreted, created, and adapted over time is important to understanding the activities of artists and their audiences.

Art Worlds

In *Art Worlds*, Becker (1982) uses a symbolic interactionist approach to provide an alternative approach to understanding how cultural artifacts are produced. Becker demonstrated that artistic production is the result of collective activity as artists do not invent artistic mediums and processes every time anew; rather, they interact within a

cultural system identified by its own history, collective representations, and divisions of labor.

Prior to Becker's (1982) art world approach, sociological analysis of the production of cultural artifacts primarily employed critical or functionalist approaches. Critical approaches argued social behavior is shaped through the cultural production and distribution of cultural artifacts, the culture industry, all of which represent the ideological interests of the dominant class (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Functionalist approaches viewed cultural artifacts as a reflection of cultural values, social norms, and the social structure. The former is a top down, cultural injection model of culture production, and the latter views production as a mirror of society.

In contrast to macro approaches to understanding how cultural artifacts came into being, Becker (1982) emphasizes networks of interactions between participants within an art world. Becker indicates,

The idea of an art world forms the backbone of my analysis. "Art world" is commonly used by writers on the arts in a loose and metaphoric way, mostly to refer to the most fashionable people associated with those newsworthy objects and events that command astronomical prices. I have used the term in a more technical way, to denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce the kind of art works that art world is noted for. This tautological definition mirrors the analysis, which is less a logically organized sociological theory of art than an exploration of the potential of the idea of an art world for

increasing our understanding how people produce and consume art works.

(1982:X)

Becker (1982) understands the production of cultural artifacts as a result of collective activity; “all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the artwork we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be” (p. 1).

Becker continues his emphasis on collective activity by indicating,

Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, ‘artists’ who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, the joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic convention to bring art works like that into existence. Artists are some subgroup of the world’s participants who, by common agreement, possess a special gift, therefore make a unique and indispensable contribution to the work, and thereby make it art.

(1982:35).

Decentering the analysis of artistic production and consumption away from individual artists and works of art allows Becker to position the collective activity of the art world, the division of labor, as the object of study—this is a focus on process rather than product. As Becker notes, what he has “done is not the sociology of art at all, but rather the sociology of occupations applied to artistic work” (1982:xi).

Production of Culture Perspective

While Becker was developing his art worlds approach, another perspective for analyzing cultural production began taking shape. In what would later be termed the

production of culture perspective (PofC), Richard Peterson applied insights from industrial sociology to the analysis of cultural production. Peterson's approach differed from Becker by orienting the study of cultural production toward organizations and institutions. According to Peterson and Anand (2004), "the production of culture perspective focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved" (p. 311). In a synthesis of PofC, Peterson and Anand (2004) argue for a faceted model of cultural production, which includes technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organization structure, occupational careers, and the market. Any change in one of the facets would have an effect on other facets within the model.

In 2000, the interdisciplinary journal *Poetics* featured a special issue dedicated to PofC. The special issue illustrated how influential the PofC has been for the sociological analysis of culture. Despite its influence for the study of cultural production, PofC is not without its critics. According to Santoral (2008), there are two major objections to the production of culture perspective: "first, a theoretical-epistemological critique, to the effect that PofC neglects cultural meanings and processes of interpretation; and second, a political critique, to the effect that PofC lacks a critical stance toward culture, the economy and culture industries" (p. 17).

The macro-to-meso focus of the PofC perspective illuminates how organizational and institutional systems shape culture, with respect to production and consumption. Given this emphasis, it is not clear how micro-interactions between producers and consumers also shape cultural production and consumption—particularly when these

activities are not recognized or represented within the systems that are the focus of PofC. It is not clear how producers and consumers are motivated to engage in forms of production and consumption that does not yield economic returns on the investment of time and attention. Many forms of production and consumption persist even when organizational and institutional arrangements fail to recognize, or even reject, their presence. Addressing these questions by focusing on cultural meaning-making activities of producers and consumers is where this study differs from the PofC perspective.

To explore the meaning making activities of participants within the art world of slam poetry I utilize Becker's (1982) approach as a point of departure. This study moves the analysis from how artwork is made possible by collective activity, to the meanings of such activity held by participants of an art world.

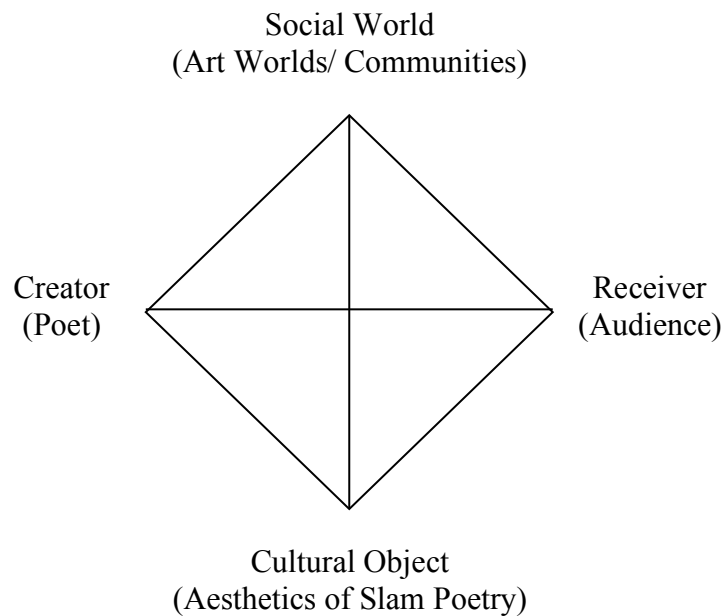
Cultural Diamond

To navigate the meaning-making activities of participants of the slam poetry art world, Griswold's (2013) cultural diamond is useful. The use of the cultural diamond is not indeed for cultural explanation, but rather as cultural description through the interpretation of meaning making activities in a manner similar to Geertz (1973).

According to Griswold (2013), the cultural diamond refers to the following four interlinked areas of analysis: the creator of a cultural object (poet(s)); the cultural object (slam poetry); the spatial-temporal social environment within which an object was created (social context); and the receiver of the object (audience)—see Figure 1 below. Griswold (2013) indicates,

[the] cultural diamond features four points and six links. We cannot call it a theory of culture, because it says nothing about how the points relate. Nor can we call it a model of culture in the strict sense, because it does not indicate cause and effect....Instead, the cultural diamond is an accounting device intended to encourage a fuller understanding of any cultural object's relationship to the social world. It does not say what the relationship between any of the points should be, only that there is a relationship. Moreover, the texture of that relationship lies as much in the links as in the four points. (p. 16)

Figure 1. The Cultural Diamond (Griswold, 2013).



Griswold (1986) argues, “cultural analysis demands the investigation of the four points and six connecting lines of this diamond; studies that neglect some points or connections are incomplete” (p. 8). The cultural diamond is useful because it provides a

framework for considering slam poetry as a cultural object. According to Griswold (2013),

a cultural object may be defined as shared significance embodied in form...In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, or visible, or tangible, or can be articulated. A cultural object, moreover, tells a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body. (p. 11)

As a cultural object, slam poetry is the product of multifaceted interactions between poets, audiences, the art form of slam poetry, and the social worlds slam poetry embodies. Each aspect of the cultural diamond is important for a more detailed understanding of slam poetry because as noted above, art works are the result of collective activity. Below is a discussion how each aspect of the cultural diamond is considered within this study.

Social World (Art Worlds/Communities)

The social world is a wide-ranging concept used to describe a plethora of social phenomena. Griswold (2013) describes the social world as

both cultural objects and the people who create and receive them are not floating freely but are anchored in a particular context. We call this the social world, by which we mean the economic, political, social, and cultural patterns and exigencies that occur at any particular point in time. (p. 14)

The social world encompasses the following levels: micro-level interactions, such as those occurring between individuals, peers, and families; meso-level influences, such as communities, subcultures, or formal organizations; and macro-level factors, such as

economic systems, nations, or cultures. While each level interacts and influences one another, it is helpful to specify which aspect of the social world is featured as the analytic focus.

This study focuses on the meaning-making activities of slam poetry at the intersection of micro and meso levels. To understand how larger collective representations (culture at large and slam poetry as an art world) vary in form and meaning within smaller groups, Eliasoph and Lichterman's (2003) concept of "group style" is useful for exploring how slam poetry varies within different community contexts (p. 737). Group Style is defined as

recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group's shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting. Group style is not just a neutral medium for communicating meanings that are already fully formed before their practical enactment. Group styles, like collective representations, are elements of culture. Groups do not create them from scratch; they are patterned and relatively durable. (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003:737)

Group style provides a lens for observing how larger elements of culture are enacted, defused, ignored, or reappropriated within meso- and micro-level contexts. In other words, group style illustrates how larger collective representations are filtered through small groups or communities and are given meaning within the particular context of the group. According to Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), group style refers to the following elements,

(1) "Group boundaries" put into practice a group's assumptions about what the group's relationship (imagined and real) to the wider world should be while in the group context.

(2) "Group bonds" put into practice a group's assumptions about what members' mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context.

(3) "Speech norms" put into practice a group's assumptions about what speech is appropriate in the group context. (P. 739)

Attention to the group style of slam poetry communities helps provide an understanding of how each community makes sense of their social worlds as it relates to cultural production and consumption. Additionally, group style illustrates how members of slam poetry communities organize their lives according to what is deemed to be "... 'real,' what is useful, and what has meaning..." within the context of their community (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2011:116; see also Guba and Lincoln 2005:197).

Group style also provides a way to compare the meaning-making activities in and between slam poetry communities to illustrate how slam poetry as an art form takes on different meanings with different contexts. For example, some communities focus more on the competitive aspects of slam, while others are oriented toward the development of writers and performers.

Creator (Poets)

How is slam poetry meaningful for poets? Much of what poets write about and perform on stage reflects lived experiences, social and philosophical musings, life struggles, turning points of consciousness, and personal triumphs. In this way, slam

poetry performances are “mystories.” Denzin (2003) defines mystories as “...reflexive, critical, multimedia tales and tellings. Each mystory begins with the writer's biography and body; mystories relate epiphanic moments, turning point experiences, and times of personal trouble and turmoil...” (p. 26).

Mystories are texts and performances that locate their producer's subjectivity within the social worlds they inhabit (Denzin 2003). In other words, the process of writing and performing from the personal are identity constructions, which become identity performances when shared on stage with an audience. This parallels Somers-Willet's (2009) observations that slam poets utilize the format of slam poetry as an artistic medium to perform an aspect of their identity often going unrepresented in their everyday lives. Somers-Willet utilizes a literary analysis of slam poets' work and identity performances. Toward this endeavor, Somers-Willet is an astute critic. What is still needed is a discussion of the meanings poets and audiences have for slam poetry from their own words outside of the immediate context of a poem or performance.

Receiver (Audiences)

How is slam poetry meaningful for the audiences or consumers of slam poetry? In one of the few studies that have assessed the audience-performer dynamic of slam poetry events, Somers-Willet (2009) notes that audiences are predominately white and middle class, while performers are primarily individuals expressing marginalized identities:

The appeal of slam to a white, middle-class demographic probably has several causes, including a greater access to and familiarity with the arts for whites and

those who can afford higher education, the location of many slam venues in coffeehouses and bars in white middle-class neighborhoods, and—considering that most slams assess a cover charge to help pay their winners—the economic freedom to pay to see poetry readings. Finally, the rebellious tone that many slam performances take also may appeal more to teens and younger adults; consistently, slams are billed as counter-cultural performances or as literary sporting events. (P. 79)

Somers-Willet's position derives from her observations of the National Poetry Slam (NPS)⁷ over several years. It is pertinent to ask whether these observations are characteristic of NPS during the time period of her observation or if similar dynamics occur within smaller poetry communities.

While there are similarities, each of the three communities included in this study has a unique demographic composition. Only one of the communities included in this analysis resembles Somers-Willet's observations. Within the scope of this study, it is difficult to make demographic generalizations across communities. Additionally, it is inaccurate to assume audiences within a slam poetry community are singular or agreeable.

While “official” assessments of a slam poet's performance are made by a panel of five judges selected from an audience attending a poetry slam, there is often disagreement over the scores given by the judges, the audience at large, and other poets

⁷ The National Poetry Slam (NPS) is annual slam poetry competition held by Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI). NPS is the premiere competition in the slam poetry art world, attracting competitors from all over the world.

attending the poetry slam. Indeed, audience members are encouraged to influence the judges when their scores don't match their own assessments. Even within a single community, there are several different audiences attending a poetry slam. These include the general audience, other poets, and friends or family members of poets.

Assessments of slam poetry audiences must also consider how the boundaries between audience and performer are often blurred. Some audience members begin writing and performing their own poetry after attending poetry slams for a period of time. Open access to the stage illustrates the fluid boundaries between performer and audience as well as highlights a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) cultural aspect of slam poetry. Many slam poetry communities encourage audience members to write and perform their own poetry. This aspect of slam poetry may be a motivating factor for some audience members who are encouraged to develop their own artistic voice by observing the performances of poets.

Cultural Object (Aesthetics of Slam Poetry)

How is slam poetry meaningful as an aesthetic cultural object? As a hybrid art form, slam poetry occupies a unique cultural space. Slam poetry emerged as a proletarian aesthetic aimed at resuscitating “poetry” from the asphyxiating hands of hegemonic gatekeepers and breathing new life into the art form by reconnecting it with everyday lived experiences and community. Despite unsuccessful early efforts to market slam poetry to a mainstream audience and academia's rejection of the art form as a legitimate literary and artistic social movement, the growing influence of this form of artistic expression is undeniable. This study forgoes the aesthetic judgment of the artistic

production of slam poets and instead focuses on how slam poetry is a boundary-making cultural object (perhaps boundary re-mixing is a better description) around which artists, artistic culture, and artistic communities are organized.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the symbolic interactionist perspective as it relates to this study. Using Becker's art world approach as a point of departure, this study uses Griswold's (2013) cultural diamond to explore the meaning-making activities of slam poets and audiences within three slam poetry communities. Chapter III discusses the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm, multi-sited ethnographic methodological strategy, and the content analytical approach employed within this study. Chapter IV introduces the art world of slam poetry and the three artistic communities that are the focus of this study. Chapter V presents an analysis of data. Chapter VI provides a discussion of the study, how the findings contribute to cultural sociology, limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and reflections on the study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides the research paradigm, methodological strategy, and analytical approach for this study of artists, artistic culture, and community. I provide an extended discussion of the constructivist inquiry paradigm, formerly called naturalist inquiry,⁸ orienting this research. The reader familiar with constructivist inquiry, will notice that much of the following is framed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Guba and Lincoln, (1994; 2005), and Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011). While constructivist inquiry is not presented here in all of its detail, this chapter will acquaint the reader unfamiliar with this research orientation. First, constructivist inquiry is discussed within the context of alternative research paradigms. Second, the rationale for a qualitative multi-sited ethnographic research strategy and ethical considerations are provided. Third, data analysis procedures informed by Guba and Lincoln's (1985) adaptation of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory approach is specified. Finally, a discussion of trustworthiness criteria for evaluating the quality of this research concludes the chapter.

Research Paradigm

This section discusses the constructivist paradigm underlying this research. To provide justification for the use of the constructivist paradigm, constructivism is

⁸ Addressing emergent critical and postmodern concerns regarding the implications of a "naturalist" paradigm, naturalistic inquiry is redefined as constructivist inquiry (Guba and Lincoln 1989), later referred to as constructivism (1994; 2005), and more recently is considered analogous with interpretivist approaches (Lincoln et al. 2011).

discussed within the context of alternative inquiry paradigms. Lincoln et al. (2011) contend, all research paradigms are differentiated by: the basic beliefs those committed to inquiry; the stance of inquirers on practical issues relating to all paradigms; and critical issues of the time. These areas are addressed below as they relate to this research.

Paradigms

A paradigm may be understood as an orientation toward inquiry that is based upon ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, which, together, form a basic system of beliefs (Guba 1990; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Accordingly,

a paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the “world,” the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do. (Guba and Lincoln 1994:107)

Since paradigms represent a researcher’s worldview, questions of paradigm usage are of primary importance as they fundamentally shape all aspects of a research endeavor. This includes, but is not limited to: the selection of a research topic; the formulation of research questions; the method of inquiry; what counts as evidence; how to collect evidence; the range of what may be known; how what is known maybe known; the range of uses research findings may be transferred; and the ethics issues underlying each of these.

In *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide the underlying axioms, or basic beliefs relating to all paradigms. Basic beliefs include:

- “the nature of reality (ontology);”
- “the relationship of knower to known (epistemology);”
- “the possibility of generalization;”
- “the possibility of causal linkages;” and
- “the role of values in inquiry (axiology)” (Lincoln and Guba 1985:37).

More recent statements on paradigm dynamics reconfigure the original axioms of contending paradigms into new categories while introducing additional criteria for consideration (1994; 2005; Lincoln et al. 2011). These new categories include: “Basic Beliefs (Metaphysics) of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms;” “Paradigm Positions on Selected Practical Issues;” and “Critical Issues of the Time” (Lincoln et al. 2011:102-115).

Basic Beliefs (Metaphysics) of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms

Originally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) juxtaposed positivism and the naturalist approach to illustrate the differences between paradigmatic orientations. Additional inquiry paradigms have since been considered including: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and more recently the emergent participatory cooperative paradigm (Guba and Lincoln 1994; 2005; Lincoln et al. 2011). To provide context for my use of constructivist inquiry for this research, I discuss the ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions of constructivism vis-à-vis positivism. For a summary of all alternative inquiry paradigms refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Beliefs of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba. 2011).

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>	<i>Participatory</i>
Ontology	Naïve realism—“real” reality but apprehensible	Critical realism—“real” reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible	Historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, values; crystallized over time.	Relativism—local and specific co-constructed realities	Participative reality—subjective-objective reality, co-created by mind and given cosmos
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist/ objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	Transactional/ subjectivist; value-mediated findings	Transactional/ subjectivist; co-created findings	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional, and practical knowing; co-created findings
Methodology	Experimental/ manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/ manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic/dialectical	Hermeneutical/ dialectical	Political participation is collaborative action inquiry; primacy of the practical; use of language grounded in shared experiential context

Ontology. The first basic belief of alternative inquiry paradigms addresses a belief about reality (ontology). The positivist paradigm assumes an ontological position of naïve realism, believing in an intelligible real-reality undergirding nature (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Positivism assumes truth is singular and knowable. As such, truth and reality can be measured and analyzed for the purposes of predicting and controlling nature (Lincoln et al. 2011). Conversely, constructivism assumes a relativist ontological position, believing “that reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al. 2011:103). Constructivism does not subscribe to absolutist principles; “rather [reality and validity] are derived from community consensus regarding what is ‘real,’ what is useful, and what has meaning (especially meaning for action and further steps)” (Guba and Lincoln 2005:197). In other words, what is considered to be real, useful, and has meaning is situated within particular spatial-temporal contexts.

Epistemology. The second basic belief of inquiry paradigms addresses the question, “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” (Guba and Lincoln 1994:108). Positivism assumes a “dualist and objectivist” epistemological position (p. 108). This position specifies an object of inquiry must remain independent of a researcher’s subjectivity in order to maintain the “objectivity” of the research. When values and biases influence the objectivity of the researcher, the validity of the research inquiry is threatened. Thus, in

order to maximize research validity, adherence to precise guidelines and procedures are believed to ensure objectivity (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Constructivism assumes a “transactional and subjectivist” epistemological position (Guba and Lincoln 1994:111). Rather than attempting to construct an untenable subjectivist/objectivist division, “The investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (p. 111). The results of a research inquiry are co-created by the interactions between the researcher and the researched.

Methodology. The third basic belief of alternative inquiry paradigms addresses the question, “How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (Guba and Lincoln 1994:108). Positivism takes an “experimental and manipulative” methodological position (p. 110). This position entails an “objectivist” application of the scientific method in which procedure is believed to maximize research validity. Researchers remain neutral and unobtrusive observers as not to influence the results of the research process. Research questions undergo empirical testing for the verification or falsification of hypotheses. This process generally takes employees experimentation, survey methods, or other procedures that produce data that are measurable, testable, and replicable.

Constructivism’s position toward methodology is “hermeneutical and dialectical” (Guba and Lincoln 1994:111). Constructivism assumes a subjectivist posture believing the research process is always value-laden. Research inquiry entails the co-construction knowledge by way of interaction between researchers and the researched. The “varying

constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange” (p. 111).

Paradigm Position on Selected Practical Issues

Lincoln et al. (2011) argue there are currently seven critical issues that all research paradigms must address. These issues include: Inquiry aim; Nature of knowledge; Knowledge accumulation; Goodness or quality criteria; Goodness or quality criteria (pp. 109-111). Below I discuss each of these critical issues and how they are addressed in this study.

Inquiry aim. The inquiry aim refers to “the goals of research and the reason why inquiry is conducted. What are the goals and the knowledge we seek” (Lincoln, et al. 2011:106)? The focus of this study was to understand the meaning-making activities of slam poetry communities.

Nature of knowledge. The nature of knowledge refers to “how researchers view the knowledge that is generated through inquiry research” (Lincoln et al. 2011:106). This study viewed the nature of knowledge as a co-construction resulting from the interaction between research participants and myself. The co-construction of knowledge as it relates to this study discussed in more detail in the interview section below.

Knowledge accumulation. The issue of knowledge accumulation refers to, “how does knowledge build off prior knowledge to develop a better understanding of the subject or field” (Lincoln et al. 2011:108). Positivism assumes it is possible to predict effects from a cause or set of causes. An example of a positivist approach would be the implementation of quantitative linear regression models for the purposes of prediction.

The results of research become building blocks for future inquiry to build upon.

Constructivist inquiry does not share these assumptions. Rather, constructivism assumed that “all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects” (Lincoln and Guba 1985:37).

Goodness or quality criteria. Goodness or quality criteria refers to how the quality of the research is to be evaluated. Positivism uses evaluative criteria such as validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivities. The quality of this research was assessed with four evaluations of trustworthiness including: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Trustworthiness is discussed in more detail following the data analysis section below.

Addressing the critical issues of the time. Recently, Lincoln et al. (2011) argue there are seven critical issues that all research paradigms must address. These issues include: axiology, accommodation and commensurability, action, control, foundations of truth and knowledge, validity, and voice, reflexivity, and postmodern textual representation (pp. 111-115). These issues are discussed below as they relate to this research.

Axiology. Axiology refers to “how researchers act based on the research they produce—also the criteria of values and value judgments especially in ethics” (Lincoln et al. 2011:111). The constructivist position recognizes that research is not value-free; rather, inquiry is always value-laden. That is, when a researcher engages in inquiry, they bring all their prior experiences with them. While these experiences may not be at the forefront of the investigator’s imagination, they do, however, shape the individual’s

world-view (descriptively and normatively). Value enters at every stage of a research inquiry: the selection of a research paradigm, the application of a theoretical framework, the analysis of data, and the selection of a research topic are all “value-bound” (Lincoln and Guba 1985:37).

Guba and Lincoln (2005) reconsider axiology suggesting values are more important for paradigm orientation than they originally thought. Rather than a critical issue, they suggest axiology is better understood as a basic belief. While they indicate their position has changed, it still remains categorized as a critical issue of the time in their most recent paradigm update (Lincoln et al. 2011). While this move seems intuitively correct, expanding the argument for a reconfiguration of basic beliefs is beyond the particular scope of this study. Thus, I consider axiology as a critical issue of the time for the purposes of this study.

Accommodation and commensurability. The question of whether paradigms are mutually exclusive, or whether they can: “accommodate other types of inquiry;” be “merged together to make an overarching paradigm;” or whether “the results of inquiry can accommodate each other” remains a contentious issue (Lincoln et al. 2011:112). The boundaries of paradigms are not so rigidly constructed that boundary blurring is not possible (Geertz 1973). While positivist and post-positivist paradigms are commensurable with one another, they are not interchangeable with non-positivist forms. Critical, constructivist-interpretive, and participatory paradigms may have some areas of accommodation and commensurability within certain contexts (Lincoln et al. 2011).

Action. Action addresses fundamental questions of “What is produced as a result of the inquiry process beyond the data,” and “How does society use the knowledge that is generated” (Lincoln et al. 2011:113)? While positivist oriented researchers seek to remain objective by not engaging in action based upon their research, critical, constructivist-interpretive, and participatory paradigms advocate for varying degrees of action. The aim this research includes engaging participants as co-contributors within the research process so they may decide what action, if any, is to be taken from results of inquiry.

Control. Control addresses questions regarding who is able to make decisions about how research is conducted and what how the findings of inquiry will be used. Constructivist oriented research shares the decision-making responsibility between researchers and participants. While participants did not share the decision-making for the multi-sited ethnographic research design for this study, their input was sought out for possible avenues for exploration at various stages throughout the research process.

Relationships to foundation of truth and knowledge. Similar to ontology, the foundation of truth and knowledge refers to a basic belief about reality. Positivism assumes a single reality that is apprehensible. Constructivists assume realities are multiple and are constructed by community consensus—that is they are knowable, or situated within a particular spatial-temporal context.

Extended consideration of validity. Citing an expansive body of research, Guba and Lincoln (2005) indicate, “Nowhere can the conversation about paradigm differences be more fertile than in the extended controversy about validity” (p. 205). Positivists and

post-positivists seek validity through a rigorous and replicable methodological process. This entails procedures for increasing internal and external validity. Constructivists seek validity as a mutual construction between the researcher and participants. A more detailed discussion regarding how the co-construction of validity or rather mutuality was sought is considered in the interview section below.

Voice, reflexivity, and postmodern textual representation. Voice refers to who is actively present in the text: the researcher or researchers; the participants; or a combination of researcher(s) and participant(s). For positivism, voice is generally unilateral: representing the voice of the researcher, as inclusion of participants is believed to have a consequence on objectivity (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Lincoln et al. 2011). Representation from critical, constructivist/ interpretivist, and participatory perspectives presents voices of participants and those who initiate the research inquiry.

Consistent with the constructivist orientation of this study, the voices actively present in this text are those of participants and my own: sometimes participants voices are dominant, other times my own voice takes the lead. Participant voices had opportunities to rise to the fore throughout the research process. Such opportunities included: open-ended interviews in which participants were provided the space to steer the interview in the direction of their preference.

Researcher reflexivity is an important aspect of the study as “Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Guba and Lincoln 1981, 2005; Lincoln et al. 2011). As the discussion of self and identity in Chapter II illustrates, there are multiple selves and aspects of identity that are

contextually based. Locating the self within the research translates to identifying and reflecting upon the fluidity of self navigated throughout the research process. Lincoln and Guba (2005) resonate Shulamit Reinharz's suggestion that "although we all have many selves we bring with us, those selves fall into three categories: research-based selves, brought selves (the selves historically, socially and personally create our standpoints), and situationally created selves" (p. 124). Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal to detail my thoughts, insights, feelings, and reflections on all aspects of this study, including the multiple facets of self.

Traditional forms of textual representation for research findings are problematic, often reducing the fluidity of social phenomenon by presenting it as much less messy than experienced. In general, textual representations of research are standardized adhering to established norms of inquiry. These standards are enforced at varying levels including: sources for research funding; avenues for research publication; professional or disciplinary standards; and other organizational bodies, such as degree granting institutions. Such is the case of this research, which must conform to certain guidelines established by the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies (OGAPS) at Texas A&M University.

Recognizing the issues standardized textual representation creates, Guba and Lincoln (2005) and Lincoln et al. (2011) suggest,

One way to confront the dangerous illusions (and their underlying ideologies) that texts may foster is through the creation of new texts that break boundaries; that move from the center to the margins to comment on and decenter the center;

that forgo closed, bounded worlds for those more open-ended and less conveniently encompassed; that transgress the boundaries of conventional social science; and that seek to create a social science about human life rather than on subjects. (P. 124)

While this research must adhere to certain guidelines in order to be processed through OGAPS, I recognize the inherent factors associated with the standardizing of textual representation. Thus, I attempt to breach boundaries of conventional inquiry by de-centering my voice as an inquirer and participant, and focusing on multi-vocal co-representation.

Appropriateness of Paradigm Use

This research examines cultural production within several slam poetry communities located throughout the state of Texas. Framing my research is an interest in artistic cultural production and consumption. Within this framework, I considered three meaning-making aspects of slam poetry. First, I focused on the meaning of slam poetry from the perspectives of the poets and audience members who routinely attend poetry slam events. One interesting aspect of slam poetry is the boundaries between performers and audiences are blurred. After attending poetry slams, some audience members begin writing and performing their own poetry. Occasionally poets take time off from performing and become members of the audience or leave the community all together. Since the boundaries between performers and audiences are in flux, the meaning-making activities of slam poetry communities are fluid.

Second, I examined how poets utilize the format of slam poetry to construct performances for the stage. The perspectives of the poets are compared with the meanings audience members have for a performance as well as the criteria that is used to evaluate poetic performances more generally. This is particularly important aspect slam poetry because these venues are known as places open to the expression of marginalized identities and social critique. Performers are able to use the slam poetry stage to communicate an aspect of their identity they are unable to express in daily life. The ways in which identity performances are received by other slam poets and audience members has an immense influence upon the construction of performances in the future: both in the poetry slam community and in daily life.

The third area of inquiry focused on the social worlds that slam poetry communities inhabit. This included looking at how these artistic communities are constructed and maintained as well as how they engage and contribute to the larger communities they are situated within.

Given the abovementioned inquiry aims center on the meanings held by participants of slam poetry communities, there are several advantages of using constructivist inquiry for this research. First, constructivist approaches place meaning-making activities at the center of inquiry. My position parallels Lincoln et al. (2011):

We believe that a goodly portion of social phenomena consists of the meaning-making activities of groups and individuals around those phenomena. The meaning making activities are of central interest to social constructionists and constructivist simply because it is the meaning-making, sense-making,

attributional activities that shape action (or inaction). The meaning-making activities themselves can be changed when they are found to be incomplete, faulty (e.g., discriminatory, oppressive, or nonliberatory), or malformed (created from data that can be shown to be false). (P. 116)

Constructivist inquiry is an interpretive, inductively oriented research process. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, or a theoretical set of assumptions prior to conducting fieldwork, constructivist inquiry provides an adaptable framework for the shaping and reshaping of knowledge as new information becomes available. This is especially important for examining the meanings held by participants as the slam poetry platform provides the space and opportunity to challenge dominant norms and injustices that may occur within their communities. Thus, meanings held by members of slam poetry communities periodically change over time.

Second, a fundamental component of constructivist-oriented research is to understand social phenomenon within the environment in which it transpires—this is consistent with the qualitative ethnographic methodological strategy discussed below, as well as the assumptions of symbolic interactionism informing this study. Slam poetry performances are often emotional experiences for poets and audiences. To experience the emotional aspect firsthand is an important component for understanding the meanings poets and audiences have for slam poetry. Finally, the assumptions of constructivist inquiry are congruent with my experiences, basic belief system, and cultural repertoire (Swidler 1986), all of which shape my understanding of the social world.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative multi-sited ethnographic research strategy to explore the meaning/s of slam poetry from the perspective of producers (poets) and consumers (audiences) within the context of slam poetry communities, and the artistic scenes they inhabit. Due to the focus on individual and collective meaning/s of slam poetry, a qualitative research design is well suited as:

Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experiences, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (Denzin and Lincoln 2011:3)

Multi-sited Ethnography

A multi-sited ethnography was selected for this study to explore the artistic production and consumption of three interconnected slam poetry communities within the urban and metropolitan areas they are located within. While each community is situated in a different geographic location, all interact with one another, to varying degrees, influencing artistic production and consumption. Due to the interconnectivity between communities, the ethnographic design for this study is appropriate as

Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the ethnography. (Marcus 1998:90)

Sites, Respondents, and Sampling

There were three research sites located in urban and cosmopolitan areas within the state of Texas. The locations the slam poetry communities included in this analysis gathered were at businesses including two coffeehouses in popular areas that were artistically oriented, and one café and bar. One community transitioned from place-to-place through out the study as it did not have a permanent location for events.

The population for this study included all individuals who attend poetry slam events. I regularly made announcements during poetry slam events introduce the study to the community. Announcements included an invitation for all attendees to participate in this study. Generally, after each announcement three-to-five people approached me for more information regarding the study, often volunteering to participate following a short discussion. Additional invitations were extended to individuals who regularly attend poetry slam events—all of which were accepted. A sample 30 participants, 10 from each of the three poetry slam communities included in this analysis.

Instrumentation

I served as the primary data-collection instrument for this multi-sited ethnographic study. A human-instrument for data collection was utilized because the nature of social activity requires adaptability and responsiveness to any given situation that may arise. While activity within social settings may range from low levels of organization to being highly structured, including rules, regulations, norms, and rituals, there is always remains a degree of indeterminacy or unpredictability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate, "...only the human instrument has the characteristics necessary to cope

with the indeterminate situation” (p. 193). That is, the human instrument can adapt and respond as necessary to changing circumstances in the field.

Introducing the Study to Participants

The study was introduced to participants in two ways: first, I made periodic announcements to the three artistic communities included in this analysis.

Announcements were made on the performance stage during poetry slam events. After making an announcement, I provided an opportunity for more information for potential participants. Second, after spending time in each community I became familiar with regularly attending poets and audience members. I made contact with poets and audience to request their participating in the study. After providing a general description of the research, information sheet were provided allowing respondents an opportunity to gain more information about the study. I provided my contact information for participants to contact me with any questions about the study so they could make an informed decision whether to participate. After reviewing the information sheet, and having an opportunity to ask questions about the research, consent for participating in the study was requested. Upon consenting to participate in the study, an interview was scheduled and a consent form was provided.

Prior to each interview, I provided a detailed explanation about the focus of this research. Due to the expansive possibilities for observations during a multi-sited ethnography, participants were informed they were able to select a level of engagement that they felt comfortable with. Additionally, participants were advised that they could change their level of engagement at anytime during the project, including withdrawing

from the study altogether. Once participants demonstrated an understanding of the scope of the research, and completed the consent forms, the interview process began.

Data Collection

Data derived from my observations and participation within slam poetry communities over a period of three years. Participant interviews occurred during two different time periods. The first round of interviews occurred during a four-month period between January and May 2011. The second round of interviews occurred over an eight-month period beginning in April and concluding in December 2013.

I served as the primary data-collecting instrument throughout this study. The human instrument is important to qualitative approaches to research because:

Only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervenes in the mutual shaping of other element and that shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by humans, and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in a position to identify and take into account those resulting biases (Lincoln and Guba 1985:39).

Data sources included: participant observations, ethnographic and open-ended qualitative interviews, and various forms of artistic production such as writings, and documentation of performances.

Participant observations. Participant observations primarily occurred during poetry slam competitions and open-mic poetry readings at the multiple locations indicated above. Each community included in this analysis was visited regularly

throughout the duration of the study. Two communities were attended on a weekly basis, while the other two were attended on a bi-weekly basis. In addition to poetry slam venues, participant observation occurred in multiple locations including but not limited to: special performance events; poetry writing and performance workshops; informal social gatherings; and online-social media forums, primarily Facebook. Several communities included in this study utilize social media as a primary means of communication with members and other poetry slam communities.

Participant observations were detailed in ethnographic field notes. Since note taking during an observation would have interrupted the flow of social interaction, field notes were composed following an event. To provide promptings for field notes, I used a small journal to make jottings of events and conversations during an observation. Jottings were invaluable for ethnographic field note writing, as a “word or two written at the moment or soon afterwards will jog the memory later in the day and enable the fieldworker to catch significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:20).

Participant interviews. Two types of interviews used for this study: open-ended qualitative interviews and situational ethnographic interviews. Qualitative interviews were conducted with forty participants from three slam poetry communities. To gain a wide-range of perspectives, ten participants from each community, including poets and audience members, were interviewed for this study. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two and a half hours. Some participants requested to have more than one interview. All interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of participants. The location

of interviews varied according to the preferences of participants. Interview locations ranged from public locations such as local café's and coffeehouses, to the personal homes of participants. Upon the conclusion of each interview, field notes regarding the interview were recorded and the transcripts of each interview were transcribed.

A general interview guide was composed for qualitative interviews. The general interview guide only served as an outline as the content of an interview varied depending upon the participant. Interviews were adapted to each poet depending upon information introduced during the interview. Additionally, personalized questions were introduced for individual participants depending upon information obtained from background research in preparation for the interview. Additional questions came from my own familiarity with a participant's artistic work, or my observations of their engagement within their poetry community.

Ethnographic interviews generally consisted of informal conversations prompted by a particular situational context as it occurred. Occasionally, information from a prior or upcoming event prompted a conversation. Situational conversations ranged from a few short comments to more active discussions spanning several meetings. Situational conversations were especially beneficial for gaining insight into the social situation as it was experienced and understood by participants. These insights often led to a line of inquiry not likely to have come about during interviews transpiring outside the situational context.

Both interview methods were instrumental for the focus this study as they provided opportunities to gain rich sources of data from participants first hand. The open

format allows for the autonomy to generate new insights, and build new concepts that expand our understanding of various phenomena; “rich data afford views of human experience that etiquette, social conventions and inaccessibility hide or minimize in ordinary discourse. Hence, rich data reveal thoughts, feelings, and action as well as context and structure” (Charmaz 2001:338). The importance of context is described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997):

By context, I mean the seeing—the physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic—within which the action takes place. Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they do. (p. 41)

To understand the context and structure of participants’ lives, a richly detailed, “thick description” is indispensable for interpreting the symbolic meanings people utilize and create in everyday living (Geertz 1973; Cole and Knowles 2001).

An additional strength of the open-ended interview is the process allows participants the opportunity to introduce information, which may not have occurred to the researcher to ask. In this way, the qualitative interview is a co-construction of symbolic meaning between the interviewer and the interviewee (Cole and Knowles 2001). Most importantly, open-ended qualitative interviews allow researchers to represent individuals from their own voice. The focal point of participants own voice is important, because richly detailed data is necessary for understanding the context in which individuals organize and make sense of their daily lives.

Cole and Knowles (2001) advocate a collaborative approach to research between the researcher and the researched. Throughout the research process both the researcher and the researched are co-creators of meaning; “as researchers, we enter, as far as possible, the phenomenological field of our participants and work with them to understand to the fullest extent the experiences and meaning of those experiences and the meaning of those experiences to them” (p. 150). Thus, the co-construction of meaning is a dynamic process, in which the sole interpretation of the researcher does not prevail.

According to Cole and Knowles (2001) relationally, mutuality, and empathy should guide the research relationship. In the process of building trust and a mutual relationship, researchers must “do all that they can to challenge the hierarchical principles and practices that traditionally define their relationship between researchers and those whom they research” (p. 27). Mutuality involves a process in which the researcher and participants reason together to figure out the research process. Mutuality can be understood as an ongoing conversation in which, “the dialog between voices illustrates the tension between the two ways of understanding the approach to research” (p. 31).

Research that is empathic attempts to understand participants from their own point of view. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), empathy is mutually beneficial to the researcher and the participant, as it “...leads to heightened awareness of self, other, and the self-other dialectic” (p. 30).

The application of the principles of relationally, mutuality, and empathy entails caring about the research and participants, approaching the research process with sensitivity to the participants, and treating the research process with respect. Because “when we talk about care, sensitivity, and respect we are not talking about the theoretical, we are talking about the practical, the relational and the very personal elements of a relationship between two human beings” (Cole and Knowles 2001:43).

Artistic production. Additional sources of data collection included participants’ artistic production, published and unpublished writings, and documentation of performances. The focus of this research did not to analyze these specific cultural objects (boundary objects) in and of themselves, but rather used them as an additional dimension to comprehend the meaning and social context of the under which they were produced, performed, and consumed. Thus, it was important to examine artistic productions in more than one format and in different contexts as meaning varies according to spatial-temporal context in which it occurs. Poetry read from the page can be interpreted differently than when it is performed on a stage. Some poems are difficult to decipher intention and meaning unless one is able to carefully study the words and structure. Some poems take on new or enhanced meanings when performed. Yet still another layer of meaning occurs that is shaped by the situational context in which a poem is performed. All these components taken together provide an expanded understanding of slam poetry than would be accessible focusing on just one aspect. The inclusion of multiple formats of poetry is useful because it adds another layer of complexity and meaning the artistic production as a whole.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, I adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for at Texas A&M University. The American Sociological Association's code of ethical research is outlined by the following five principles:⁹

- (1) Principle A: Professional competence;
- (2) Principle B: Professional and scientific responsibility;
- (3) Principle C: Integrity;
- (4) Principle D: Respect for people's rights dignity, and diversity; and
- (5) Principle E: Social responsibility.

According to the Institutional Review Board, federal guidelines specify that research with human subjects must uphold the following ethical standards: properly informed consent of research participants, posing minimal risk to participants; insure the privacy, anonymity, and or confidentiality of research participants.¹⁰ I consider each these standards as below.

Informed consent. Additional ethical considerations overlap with the "Introducing the Study to Participants" section above. An important ethical consideration for ethnographic research is to address the question of where are the boundaries of the study to be drawn? Since this study extended across many locations,

⁹ For a more detailed description of The American Sociological Associations Code of Ethics, please visit: <http://www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm>

¹⁰ For more information regarding IRB ethnical standards and guidelines for research please visit: <http://rcb.tamu.edu/humansubjects/resources>

are research participants to assume that when I am present I am collecting data? For example, suppose a social gathering has been planned and several slam poets including myself are in attendance. This particular social gathering has been organized outside of the poetry community and is not considered a poetry slam event. This is not a time I would consider making observations for this study, and it is reasonable to assume that participants would not consider it in that manner either. Suppose a conversation about slam poetry spontaneously begins. These conversations are important and often rich because the information that is shared often goes beyond what one may bring up during an interview.

Situations such as these present an important question for this research and multi-sited ethnographic research in general: Do spontaneous conversations become an appropriate opportunity for data collection? For this research the answer is yes—provided the principles Cole and Knowles (2001) advocate were observed. In these instances, I requested permission to make note of the conversation for this study. For example I asked, “since we are talking about poetry, may I use this information for my study? Second, audio or video recordings were not used to document the conversation. Rather, my observations were recorded by hand as shortly after the interaction.

This scenario illustrates the importance of discussing the boundaries of the study with participants prior to obtaining consent. The primary reason for implementing three levels of consent was to elucidate the parameters of the research, and establish what is to be expected by participants throughout the study.

In addition to providing study parameters to research participants, I made periodic group announcements at slam poetry events and on Facebook group interactions. These announcements to the community are important because: (1) I observed the community interactions as a whole during poetry slam events; and (2) with the exception of “regulars,” attendance at poetry slam events is constantly in flux. In order to ensure everyone is aware of the ongoing study, I will make these announcements on occasion throughout the study.

Insurance of privacy (assurance of confidentiality). In order to insure privacy of research participants, I provided pseudonyms for research participants who wish their participation to remain confidential. While pseudonyms were used for some participants, they were not used for all for all. Several participants indicated in interest in participating in the research, but preferred to use their real names for publicity purposes. From their perspective, being part of an ethnographic study on their artistic community might increase the visibility of their art, and artistic community, thus increasing potential benefits that this exposure may yield.

Minimization of risks. The next ethical consideration is the minimization of risks. It is not likely this study posed risks that are beyond those experienced in everyday life. While the poets shared personal stories, these are of the same nature they routinely share with others within the poetry slam environment and through their artistic expression.

Intellectual property. Intellectual property considerations are particularly important for this study. Many of the participants were published authors, or attempting

to publish their material. This required negotiations with each poet for the authorization to utilize their artistic production in this study. It is my position that any intellectual property used in this study, remains the property of the participants providing their consent. This was stated on the third consent form which addressed the use of intellectual/creative property.

Data Analysis

I analyzed interview data using content analysis informed by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) adaptation of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. The emergent character of this process is particularly useful for inductive approaches as analytic categories are drawn "directly from the data not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses" (Charmaz 2001:336-37). Additionally, content analysis provided a systematic and inclusive process for the unitization and coding of data, the construction of categories, and the identification of patterns within the data. Each stage of the data analysis is discussed below.

Unitizing and Coding of Data

The unitization of data consisted of sorting individual interview transcripts into smaller units, each containing one recognizable idea. A recognizable idea is the source for a single unit of data. The criteria for a recognizable idea consisted in the data unit's ability communicate meaningful information on its own apart from the context of the interview transcript. Data units ranged from a couple words to several sentences, and in some instances entire paragraphs.

Following the unitization process, data units were printed on a 3"x5" index cards

for several stages of categorical organization. Each data card contained a unit of data on one side and information designating which interview the data originated from on the opposite side. Interviews were analyzed and categorized after unitization and coding. Interviews were unitized into individual units of meaning. Following unitization, individual units of data were printed on index cards (data cards) for sorting and organization.

Throughout the research process, research memos were used to identify, construct, develop, and compare ideas generated throughout the research process. According to Glaser (1978), research memos are a central component to the constant comparative method as they provide “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding...it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages...it exhausts the analyst’s momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration” (pp. 83-84). Additionally, research memos help clarify what is beginning to be known, as they “elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps” (Charmaz 2006:5-6).

The second step of analysis consisted of reviewing all themes and patterns identified in the research memos. This accounting provided a macro-view of what was beginning to be known, while also providing a frame of reference for constant comparison. Next, data units were compiled into data sets for categorical organization. Different steps of categorical organization are discussed in the following chapter. During this process some categories were expanded to include similarly coded data, while others

were reduced, thereby constructing smaller subcategories within a particular theme. After all data units were categorized, a research memo was constructed to detail the results.

The third step of analysis focused on the themes, patterns, and relationships within and across all categories. These findings were compared with observations detailed in field notes. This step of analysis continued until data no longer yielded further refinement to the analytical categories. At this point a final research memo was constructed detailing the results. These results are discussed in the following chapter.

Trustworthiness

While constructivism does not appropriate evaluative standards as such internal and external validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity as used by positivism, it does, however, promote trustworthiness criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research. Evaluations of trustworthiness entail four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Credibility

Credibility assesses the appropriateness of research findings as they relate to the meanings held by participants. In this way, credibility corresponds to internal validity in positivism without an emphasis on maintaining an exacting claim to truth (Guba 1981). Three approaches were implemented to assure the credibility of research findings: prolonged exposure in the field, peer debriefing, and member-checks.

For this study I participated in slam poetry communities for a period of three years. During this time I occupied several roles within the community including:

audience member, performing poet, team member, event organizer, organization co-leader, and researcher. Each of these roles provided a valuable perspective for understanding the meaning-making activities of the poetry slam communities included in this study.

Peer debriefing provides an external evaluation of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate there are four beneficial aspects of the peer debriefing process. These include: (a) helping to "...keep the inquirer 'honest' exposing him or her to searching questions by an experienced protagonist;" (b) providing "...an initial and searching opportunity to test working hypotheses that may be emerging in the inquirer's mind;" (c) providing an "...opportunity to develop and initial text the next steps in the emerging methodological design;" and (d) providing an "...opportunity for catharsis, thereby clearing the mind of emotions and feelings that may be clouding good judgment of sensible next steps" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:308).

Member-checks are assessments where, "data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:314). Participants were provided with interview transcripts, research memos, and regularly consulted during the research process. Prior to the providing interview transcripts to participants it was discussed that transcripts of the interview may appear incoherent due the difference between the patterns of conversation and written word. It was suggested that the wording in the interview transcripts was not final, but rather may be discussed to help clarify meaning by editing how something was said. In this way the interview

transcripts became a source of mutual consideration and co-construction.

Additionally, following the construction of research memo's participants were consulted regarding the initial findings. This provided an additional opportunity for research participants to co-contribute to the construction of knowledge.

Transferability

Transferability concerns the applicability of research findings to additional situations or contexts beyond the research setting. For constructivism, transferability performs a similar function as generalizability within positivism (Guba 1981). However, the aim of transferability is to establish the broad applicability of research findings, but rather to determine the conditions in which findings may be appropriate for additional contexts.

Dependability and Confirmability

Within the constructivist approach, dependability and confirmability corresponds to reliability and objectivity in the positivist research paradigm (Guba 1981; Lincoln and Guba 1985). To assess the dependability and confirmability of this study, I maintained detailed journals to document the project as it proceeded. These journals included: a research log, a writing log, ethnographic field notes, a journal for jottings, and a reflexive journal. The research log documented the dates, locations, and details of field observations and interviews. The research log was also a place where I kept track of research decisions and important developments as they occurred. The writing log detailed the dates, times, and content area of the writing process through out the study. The writing log was useful for tracking and evaluating my writing performance.

Ethnographic field notes documented my observations so that they could be analyzed later. A journal for jottings was used to note important events and conversations that occurred during observations. Jottings were used as a memory prompt for the construction of ethnographic field notes following an observation.

Summary

This study of slam poetry communities was informed by constructivist-interpretivist inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1994; 2005; Lincoln et al. 2011). A multi-sited ethnographic methodological strategy was employed, focusing on three slam poetry scenes over a period of three years. Data collection included: participant observations; ethnographic interviews; open-ended qualitative interviews; field notes; and the artistic production of participants. Content analysis of the data was performed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) adapted constant comparative method. The results of the data analysis are presented in the following chapter. The final chapter provides a discussion of the study, how the findings contribute to cultural sociology, limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and reflections on the study.

CHAPTER IV

THE ART WORLD OF SLAM POETRY

Ladies and Gentlemen, today is [say the date clearly including the year] and this is the [event name] coming to you from [City, State]!! My name is [say your name clearly] and I will be your emcee for the evening. The poetry slam is a competition invented in the 1980s by a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith [“So what!”] in which performed poetry is judged by five members of the audience. Poets have three minutes to present their original work and may choose to do so accompanied by other members of their team. The judges will then score the piece anywhere from 0 to 10, evaluating such qualities as performance, content, and originality. The high and low scores of each performance are tossed, and the middle three are added giving the performer their score. Points are deducted for violating the three-minute time limit. We beseech the judges to remain unswayed by the audience. Audience, try to sway the judges and score each poet by the same set of criteria, ignoring whatever boisterous reaction your judgment elicits. Audience, let the judges know how you feel about the job that they are doing, but be respectful in your exuberance; there could be no show without them. Now let me introduce you to the judges! (Daniel 2010:11)

The passage above is the official “Emcee Spiel” (MC spiel) that is performed prior to the beginning of poetry slam events affiliated with Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI). This ritual provides a basic introduction of slam poetry to people who may be

attending the slam for the first time. Additionally, the MC spiel symbolically connects the smaller community where the slam is taking place to the larger poetry slam community of which they are a part.

Slam Poetry Communities

One of the unique aspects of this form of artistic expression is a strong emphasis on the communities where slam poetry is practiced. Resonating with Smith's sentiment above, slam poetry communities are the places where poetry is given back to the people, where poetry is used to talk with each other—in short, it is where slam poetry lives. This section introduces the slam poetry communities included in this study by providing a short history of each community, their current activities, meeting location, etc. While this multi-sited ethnography focuses on three poetry slam communities, Mic Check, located in Bryan/College Station (B/CS), is the primary community of reference for this study. The reason for this arrangement has to do with access and frequency of contact. Throughout the duration of the study, I was able to attend Mic Check events and interact with members of the community on a continuous basis. In contrast, for the Austin Poetry Slam and Houston VIP communities, I was able to attend and interact with members of each community on a less frequent bi-weekly basis.

Austin Poetry Slam

Austin Poetry Slam (APS) is a slam poetry community that hosts weekly poetry slams at a popular central Austin venue, Spider House Ballroom. APS has been part of the Austin poetry scene since the early 1990's, and is one of the longest operating poetry communities in Texas. Since 2011, APS has been under the leadership of slammaster

Danny Strack. Prior to 2011, APS was run by Mike Henry, a former president of the national slam poetry organization, Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSI). During Henry's tenure, APS became a nationally recognized poetry venue, hosting the annual National Poetry Slam (NPS or NATS) in 1990, 2006, and 2007. Due to Austin Poetry Slam's affiliation with PSI, they are able to send a slam poetry team to NPS.

Over the years, APS has changed locations several times. Upon Danny Strack's entrance into a leadership role, APS relocated to the Spider House Ballroom, formerly called the U.S. Art Authority. Shortly after relocating to Spider House, APS began growing in the number for performers and audience members. The average audience attendance for an APS poetry slam exceeds 200 people, and the number of poets attempting to compete in the slam far exceeds the spaces available.

Houston VIP

Houston VIP (VIP) is a slam poetry community located in Houston, Texas. VIP hosts a bi-weekly poetry slam at Table 19 located in The Heights, a popular creative center within Houston. Unlike APS and Mic Check, VIP does not draw its primary audience from the local university. Rather, many who attend VIP events are members of the local community. However, unlike Austin and B/CS, Houston has a large, diverse, and dedicated poetry scene. On any given night of the week, one may find a venue to listen to or perform poetry in Houston. The current slam master for Houston VIP is Deborah "Deep" Mouton. Prior to Deep's leadership, Houston VIP was led by Marcell Murphy. Deep and Marcel co-founded the Houston VIP together following a separation

from another slam community, the Houston Poetry Slam. Due to Houston VIP's affiliation with PSI they are able to send a slam poetry team to NPS every year.

One of the biggest challenges for VIP is finding a long-standing venue to host poetry events. During the past two years VIP has changed locations from the Eat Gallery in 3rd Ward to Boomtown Coffee in the Heights to the current location of Table 19. With the combination of changing locations and limited space within the venues, the audience for VIP events has been limited. However, despite these challenges, VIP has garnered strong support from the community, and attendance for events continues to increase as the venue becomes more well-known. Currently, the turnout for VIP events ranges from 50 to 80 people.

Mic Check

Mic Check is a 501(c)(3) non-profit community arts-based organization focused on slam poetry. Mic Check hosts a weekly open mic and a slam poetry competition on the second Sunday of each month at Revolution Café and Bar (Revs) in downtown Bryan, Texas. The slam poetry scene in BCS was created in the early 2000's by Texas A&M University graduate student, Jeff Stumpo. Since its inception, there have been several changes within the poetry community until becoming a non-profit in 2011 under the leadership of Amir Safi and Christopher Call. Currently, the Mic Check community is in transition from the leadership of Bill Moran, also known as "Good Ghost Bill," to Madison Mae Parker, a poet and editor of the literary magazine, *The Eckleberg Project*.

While the poetry community in B/CS has gone through several transitions, Mic Check has had the good fortune of remaining in a single location, Revs. This has helped

the resiliency of the poetry scene within a larger community, which until more recently, has not had a strong presence in the arts. With fluctuations corresponding to the local university's schedule, the turnout of participants for Mic Check events has been fairly consistent throughout the time period observed during this study. The average weekly attendance for an open mic ranges between 40 and 60 people, and reach as high as 120 people for poetry slams. Mic Check is not affiliated with PSI, which means they are unable to send a slam team to NATS.

Poetry Slam Events

Poetry slams consist of two or three rounds of competition—each round provides poets up to three minutes and ten seconds to perform for the audience. Performances which go over the allotted time are penalized half a point in ten second increments over 3:10. After each performance, five judges who are selected at random from the audience prior to the slam competition score the poet with a range of zero to ten: a score of ten is an indicator of the judge's assessment of an outstanding performance. The total score for a performance is calculated by dropping the highest and lowest score and adding together the three middle scores. For example, if the five judges awarded a poet a score of 7, 8, 9, 9, and a 10, the 7 and 10 would be dropped, and the total score for performance would be $(8+9+9)$ 26 points.

At the end of each round, scores are tallied, and the poets with the highest scores move on to the next round of competition. Depending upon the rules of the particular slam, the scoring may be calculated from round to round, wherein each round begins a new set of calculations, or cumulatively, totaling the scores across all stages of the

competition. This process continues until the final round, when the poet with the highest score, either cumulatively or by round, is declared the winner of the poetry slam competition: the poetry slam champion.

Depending on the host community of the poetry slam, there are different formats for the competition. APS has a three-round format with 12 places available for poets to compete in the competition. After each round, the performance scores are tallied, and only those poets placing in the top half move on to the next round of competition. The round progression for APS is 12, 6, and 3. The first round consists of 12 poets, with the order of performances determined by random drawing prior to the beginning of the slam. The second round consists of six poets, with the order of presentations determined by the scores from the first round. During this second round, performances are arranged from lowest to highest scores; that is, the lowest scoring poet performs first and the highest scoring poet will perform last. The third round consists of three poets, and the order is arranged from lowest to highest scores from the second round. The APS format concludes with the judges determining the final ranking of the slam using cumulative scores across all three rounds of competition. Mic Check also utilizes a three round format; however, they do not have a predetermined number for the competition. The slams range in size according to the number of poets who sign up to compete.

The Houston VIP slam community utilizes a two-round competition format. Depending upon the number of poets competing, Houston VIP may or may not eliminate poets after the first round. Poetry slams that do not eliminate poets at the end of a round of competition provide opportunities for poets to gain more stage time in front of an

audience. Even though a poet may not place in one of the top three spots of the poetry slam, the opportunity to continue in the competition is helpful for poets attempting to become more comfortable on stage, seeking to refine their performance skills, and trying out new or untested material.

The positive aspect of competitions that do not eliminate poets is an increase in stage time for all performers. However, the lack of eliminations may make the poetry slam event especially lengthy if there are a large number of poets competing in the slam. For some, more poetry may be a good thing; however, the increase of performances risks the phenomena of poetry fatigue, where an audience has crossed a threshold of the amount of poetry to which they can listen with sustained engagement. Additionally, due to the often intense and weighty content of slam poetry performances, an audience's emotional energy can be depleted, particularly if there are a large number of deep, heavy-hitting identity poems during the event.

Event host. The host is the single most important position at a poetry slam. Oftentimes, the host will be the official slammaster or leader of the community; however, many communities provide opportunities for guest hosts. The host plays a vital role facilitating the event for the evening. The host has the responsibility of making sure the event is set up and ready to go. This encompasses a range of activities such as making sure the venue's sound and lighting equipment is prepared, the seating is arranged, the judges are selected and prepared, and the poets have signed up and are organized for the slam. During the slam, the host facilitates the ebb and flow of the competition by engaging with the audience, calling poets to the stage, managing the

judges, and interacting with the score and time keepers. The host serves both as an entertainer and as the event director.

The audience. The demographics of poetry slam audiences vary across communities. The audiences attending APS are consistently composed of a mostly white college students, ranging in age from 18 to 60 with a median age range in the early- to mid-twenties. The average number of people attending an APS event is around 200. Similarly, Mic Check draws a predominately white audience of college students, ranging in age from 18 to 45 with a median age in the early twenties.

Alternately, Houston VIP is a slam community with a changing demographic. When VIP hosted events at The Eat Gallery in Houston's Third Ward District, the audience was mostly black, ranging in age from 18 to 40 with a median age of 27. After the Eat Gallery closed, Houston VIP began holding events at Boomtown Coffee located in the Houston Heights. The Heights is a diverse historical area known for its artistic culture and is one of the few areas of Houston where the infrastructure is pedestrian friendly. After relocating to the Heights, the Houston VIP community has increased in average attendance and has become more demographically diverse.

The judges. While most poets prefer judges who have limited experience with slam poetry, there are drawbacks to inexperience. On the one hand, first-time judges have not had time to develop favorites within the slam scene which minimizes the potential bias. However, on the other hand, having a lack of familiarity with slam, the criteria from which judges are able to draw upon for evaluating a performance may be small. Additionally, people new to the slam format may have their own performance

anxiety since all poets and many audience members will be cuing into the scores that are given. This creates a space wherein the judgments made by audience members can be criticized by the poets and audience members, particularly if a poem scores lower than the audience believes it should. Examples range from “What?” to “Why do you hate poetry?” While these things may be said in jest, judges who continually score lower than others’ expectations earn an audible disapproval from the audience and poets. The difference between the two may be interpreted as slight.

When a set of judges has been selected by a call for those interested or random selection, they are provided directions by the slam host. After their instruction, the newly “trained” judges are introduced to the audience. At this time, the audience is asked if anyone has any objections to the judges on the stage. Generally, most keep any objections they may have to themselves; however, on occasion something may be said at an appropriate time. For example, during the Texas Youth Poetry Slam, it was requested that a different set of judges be selected from one competition to the next. This provided a challenge since the number of audience members was thin, and thus the pool of potential judges was small. Nonetheless, the first set of judges was perceived to show an interest in poets from one particular team, so there was an assumption that this would continue into the other competitions. Therefore, new judges were selected, and all teams were asked individually if they approved of the new set.

In theory, the format of slam provides a structure that attempts to maximize the democratic selection of a winner; however, in practice there are many obstacles that prevent fairness for all poets competing in slam. Factors that are taken into consideration

are the race, gender, and sexuality of the judges. On one occasion, a host at APS observed that three judges who had volunteered for poetry slam were all white males. She expressed her interest in having more diversity for the remaining two judges by stating, “We need two more judges...preferably female and preferably having a higher level of melatonin. Get what I’m saying?”

Poetry event themes. Some venues hold events that are characterized by particular themes. One popular reoccurring themed slam is the “New Shit Slam” hosted by APS on the first Tuesday of every month. The purpose of this specific slam is for poets, both known and new, to showcase poetry performances not yet heard by the public, thus providing motivation for poets to be productive and write more poetry. Another benefit of the New Shit Slam is it provides an opportunity for newer poets to get on the stage and read poetry in an event where the threshold for performing polished poetry isn’t as high as other times. While one may consider this an evening of the playing field, poets who are generally liked by the audience tend to do better in terms of the competition than poets who are unknown. That is the norm, of course, unless an unknown poet offers an outstanding performance.

Event atmosphere. Many poetry slam venues hire Music DJs to perform to help create an atmosphere for the event. APS has two professional DJs who rotate every other week. Both DJs are considered part of the community and are a central feature of the slam competitions. They have been performing at APS long enough to know many of the poets’ work and are able to coordinate songs with the poets’ performances, playing selections that are relatable to the individual poets.

Mic Check incorporates DJ performances with open mic and poetry slam events. DJ performances are not a mainstay of Mic Check events, but their musical offerings, when present, do add to the overall atmosphere for the event. Volunteers perform the role of DJ, which changes from week to week—allowing different members of the community to create an opportunity to showcase their styles.

At both APS and Mic Check, DJs play music before and after a poet performs on stage—this helps increase the level of energy for the poet and audience. When poets are finished performing, the DJ will either continue the same song that was played as the poet was being introduced or will present an entirely new song that matches the content of the poet’s poem. These little details contribute to the overall atmosphere at a poetry slam.

Focusing solely on poetry, Houston VIP does not incorporate a DJ into their events. Since Houston VIP does not play music during events, the host creates, maintains, and otherwise shapes the overall atmosphere of the event. This places more responsibility on the host to ensure the event is entertaining and energetic.

Culture and Style within Slam Poetry Communities

The List

When poets arrive to the slam venue, they are looking to see who is there and who may be reading or competing that evening. During this time, poets are greeting other poets and audience members they know. The time spent on socializing is shaped by whether there is a slam or an open mic that night, as well as the time remaining before the event gets started. On slam nights, poets want to ensure they get on the list, so

they may limit their socializing until they've signed up, as some venues have a limited number of spots available for the slam. On open-mic nights, there is generally more flexibility with the schedule, and the number of spots available for poets can vary.

Usually comprised of a notebook or sheet of paper, this list is the official sign-up sheet to perform poetry that evening. Each slam scene and event host has their own practices for the list, but the central, defining feature is that it provides a roadmap through which the slam poetry event will travel.

During open-mic events, many hosts prefer to call up poets to perform in the order they signed up on the list. Some hosts attempt to construct an atmosphere by calling up poets in an order that influences the audience's mood as the event continues. For example, if the poetry performances have been heavy with emotional content that evening, the host may want to lighten the mood by calling up a poet who is known for energetic or comedic type performances. Additionally, on occasions where individuals are signed up to perform for the first time, a host may not choose to have a first time poet follow an experienced or polished poet, as this might add to the anxiety of stepping on to the stage for the first time.

On nights when the list is light on poet sign-ups, hosts often carry the list with them searching for volunteers to read. For poets who don't read often, the abovementioned solicitation is common, sometimes taking some effort on the part of the host to fill the list. Poets who routinely perform sometimes only need to make eye contact with the host and follow with a gesture toward the list to signal their interest to

perform—this generally occurs at the more organic open-mic events rather than at the more organized slams.

At an open-mic event, the posture toward the list is more casual; in general, almost anyone who wants to perform is able get stage time. At Mic Check, this is most often the case. On rare occasions, however, and depending upon the venue, the list is filled with a number of poets that would take the event beyond a desirable conclusion time, and as a result, an announcement is made that the list is closed.

While the threshold for making the list is fairly low at Mic Check, it can be especially challenging at some venues. As the number of poets who want to perform increases, a place on the list becomes coveted. At APS, where there is a slam competition every week, there are only 12 spots available for poets to compete. There are often many more poets who want to compete than there are spots. On average, the number of poets attempting to compete ranges from 16 to 22 people. Since there are more poets than there are spots available, APS uses a random drawing to select the poets for the competition. Since making the APS list is fairly competitive, this encourages poets to arrive early to ensure their names are placed on the list for the drawing. In the event poets do not make it on the list for the competition, they are provided an opportunity to be placed on the list for the following week—this is referred to as “getting an X.” For poets traveling out-of-town to APS for the first time, the slam master Danny Strack extends the courtesy of placing them on the list for making the drive.

Once the list is created, the event may be facilitated in a number of different ways. Before the slam begins, all of the poets are gathered to discuss rules, make

announcements, and most importantly, draw for performance position. All competing poets draw numbers from a hat or a container. The number indicates the placement of the poet's performance on the agenda. It is generally more desirable for poets to perform later in the round, so there is often some vocalization when someone receives a number he or she doesn't like, such as "I pulled the one." There may be some sympathy expressed for the person who "pulled the one," but mostly, the remaining poets are relieved that the remaining possibilities do not include "the one."

For slam events, the agenda is rigidly structured to maximize impartiality and time management; however, open-mic nights are more casual, allowing more room for improvisation on the part of the host. When the list is heavy, a host will closely monitor the amount of time poets are spending on stage as the evening unfolds. To work within the time frame of the evening, the host will implement a time management strategy. During open mics, the host is able to do this by limiting the number of poems a poet reads during a visit to the stage and by limiting interactions between performances. During a slam event, poets are already limited to performing a single poem, and to conserve time, a host may limit the amount of time spent during the scoring process following a performance.

When the list is light, the host may allow poets to read more than one poem during their stage time. Some poets use this extra time as an opportunity to engage the crowd through praise or speaking on behalf of something they are passionate about. Additionally, hosts may use this time interacting with the audience through ritualistic

call and responses, providing elaborate poet introductions, or offering commentary on performances.

Prior to the beginning of a competition in a PSI-affiliated venue, the host performs the “MC Spiel” that is presented at the beginning of this chapter. This ritual serves several purposes. First, it provides a basic introduction to slam poetry for audience members who are new to slam. Second, the MC Spiel symbolically unites the smaller community to a larger social-historical community of slam poets.

After the introduction of the slam host, the host asks the crowd if they are ready to start the slam. Usually, this is responded to with a resounding “yes!” Then the host says, “No, we’re not. Blood has not been spilled on this stage; we need a sacrifice.” The sacrifice, known as the “sac,” sets the tone for the competition, as all judges will be calibrating their scores according to the performance. The sacrifice poet provides a baseline to judge performances for the competition but is not an official competitor in the poetry slam. If a poem is better than the sac, then the judges should score higher. If it was not as good, they should score lower. However, this calibration is not always maintained since the scores often increase throughout the competition, a phenomenon known as “score creep.” Score creep exists partially because the crowd can influence the judges’ behavior by verbalizing against the scores with raucous and difficult-to-ignore shouts of disapproval if the rankings are believed to be too low.

Calling Up a Poet

Calling up a poet to perform is a ritual embraced in many different ways depending upon the venue and host. While each host has their own style for calling up a

poet, the way someone is introduced also depends whether it is an open mic or a poetry slam event. During a poetry slam, many hosts attempt to introduce poets to the stage in an even-handed manner. A host will attempt to build as much energy as possible for the poet without indirectly influencing the audience's perception of that individual. This becomes a challenging task because the differences in the way a poet is called up to compete can be subtle—the host may even be unaware of any unintentional differences. One way this may occur is through a change in tone as the event continues. Poetry slams are characteristically high-energy events. To maintain an atmosphere with a high level of energy requires a great deal of energy to be expended by the host. Hosts often spend so much energy in the beginning of the slam that they are unable to sustain the heightened level of engagement throughout the event. Despite the best intentions to provide even introductions, hosts may be unaware of the inadvertent signals they provide to the audience when they are calling up a poet they like or dislike.

During open mics, there is no standard of impartiality to uphold, so hosts may introduce poets in any manner they choose. An introduction may tout a poet's artistic prowess or highlight other characteristics of the individual. Some hosts take great pride in providing warm and inviting introductions for poets coming to the stage to perform. Brian Francis, also known as B-Fran, at Neo Soul in Austin, is such a host—poets often describe his stage hospitality as making them feel like family. This is especially true when a poet is performing at Neo Soul for the first time. B-Fran will provide a thoughtful introduction and then call up the poet. As a new poet reaches the stage, B-Fran greets them with a warm embrace, places his arm around the poet and provides an

impromptu “get to know the poet” session. On one occasion, B-Fran called up Martin Caesar from the Mic Check community and asked him what he thought of a local poet, who was in attendance that evening. Displaying a slight sense of surprise, Martin responded, “She is one of my favorite female poets.” B-Fran quickly followed up with a challenge: “That’s good, but why did you say ‘female poet’? Why not just ‘poet’?” B-Fran’s follow-up queries received a nod of approval from the audience. Without hesitation, Martin quickly responded, “I was raised as the only male in a family of all women, and there is something uniquely special about women that men just don’t possess.” This quickly regained the favor of the audience and of B-Fran, who notably rejoined, “That’s good—you redeemed yourself right there.” This was followed with a little bit of laughter. “As you can see, our community is very proud and supportive of our female voices here.” Martin then returned to his seat, displaying a gesture that communicated, “What just happened? I had no idea that was in store!”

Other regular hosts, such as Outspoken Bean and The Fluent One –Houston VIP, Bill Moran—Mic Check, Tova Charles, Jomar, and Danny Strack—APS, all provide spontaneous interactions relating to the events of the evening. This helps create a comfortable and entertaining atmosphere for poets and audience members. Being a host is a great responsibility. Not only is the host responsible for the facilitation of a poetry slam, but he or she is also the main representative of the organization in the public eye for that event.

First Time on the Stage

At Mic Check and APS, there is a ritual for the first time an individual reads poetry on the stage. The host will introduce the poet by saying, “We have a new poet to the stage,” or “We have someone reading for the first time.” This is followed by the crowd repeatedly chanting, “Virgin!”

Mic Check has a large number of poets reading for the first time. The writing experience of those who read ranges from first-time poetry writers to individuals who write on a daily basis. Houston VIP occasionally has first-time poets to read on the stage. However, the poets who read are also competing in the slam, as Houston VIP does not have an open-mic night. Similarly, APS does not have an open mic, so first-time poets are also competing.

Reading for the first time can be an emotional and intimidating experience. Since there is already a great deal of anxiety associated with reading poetry in front of an audience, reading poetry for the first time in a competition environment raises the stakes substantially. Moreover, the poem will be scored and ranked against other more experienced poets, which is a daunting process for first-time competitors.

One way to lower the stakes, while still having an opportunity to read a poem at Houston VIP or APS, is to read as the sacrificial poet. As the sacrificial poet, the poem will still be scored; however, the added pressure of attempting to make it to the next round is absent.

Callouts

Many slam communities have callouts that are unique to their scene. Callouts are a form of call and response, which serves as a symbolic representation of a slam community during events. Callouts build feelings of mutuality and solidarity within the community, while at the same time provide an added layer of enthusiasm to the event otherwise known as “building energy.” Below are the callouts for the communities included in this analysis.

The Mic Check callout was implemented by Chris Call and Amir Safi when they began hosting the Mic Check slam scene. The first two parts of this original call and response always remained the same; however, the last part was occasionally altered according to the hosts’ preferences.

Host: When I say, “Mic,” you say, “Check!”

Host: Mic!

Audience: Check!

Host: Mic!

Audience: Check!

Host: When I say, “Re,” you say, “Spect!”

Host: Re!

Audience: Spect!

Host: Re!

Audience: Spect!

Host: When I say, “Chuck,” you say, “Norris!”

Host: Chuck!

Audience: Norris!

Host: Chuck!

Audience: Norris!

After two years of serving as the main call and response for the Mic Check community, the exchange described above was replaced. Austin Neo Soul Slam master, B-Fran, suggested a shorter callout that had a greater impact factor for building energy during an event. B-Fran proposed the following callout:

Host: Mic Check, Mic Check!

Audience: 1, 2! 1, 2!

Host: Mic Check, Mic Check!

Audience: 1, 2! 1, 2!

Indeed, B-Fran was correct, as the new callout builds a great deal more energy than the previous one Mic Check had been using. Both callouts continue to be used; however, when a host or audience member wants to spark an immediate response of energy, the latter one is used.

There are many different callouts used at Austin Poetry Slam. However, APS does not have a callout that uniquely represents its community. This is not for a lack of effort, as there have been several attempts to try to create a callout, but none have really exhibited longevity. One frequent callout used at APS is the one used by the youth slam team known as “TheySpeak.” TheySpeak’s callout is:

Call: Tell them...

Response: ...All of the things.

The above callout spontaneously started during a poetry slam as a joke by an APS community member as a way to differentiate from commonly used callouts such as “Go in, Poet.” Go in, Poet is a phrase which refers to the total commitment of oneself to a performance—living within the performance so to speak. When an audience member yells, “Go in, Poet!” in the middle of a slam, the callout is meant to provide energy and momentum to the poet while also signaling their support. “Tell them...All of the Things” quickly caught on and has spread to other slam scenes across the country. Additionally, this callout has become a common response to poets who put everything they have into their performance. For example, following such a performance, a host may say that the poet “told us all of the things.”

The representative callout for Houston VIP exhibits wordplay that references the name of the community:

Call: Houston VIP!

Response: Give ‘em the treatment!

More recently, additional call and response patterns have been introduced at Houston VIP. After making the 2013 Houston VIP slam team, poet Outspoken Bean came up with a new call and response to represent the team and engage the community. Remixing a verse written by the underground Houston hip-hop duo, UGK (Underground Kingz), which states, “I gotta Pocket Full of Stones,” Bean came up with the line, “I gotta pocket full of poems.” When Bean introduces the callout he emphasizes an elongated pronunciation of the vowels in the last word. According to Bean, the correct way to

pronounce the word “poems” is to add a bunch of *a*’s to the word poem while hanging your tongue out of your mouth: “I gotta pocket full of poeaaaaaaaams.” Sometimes an audience takes a while to warm up to this callout, which usually happens when Bean provides an explanation of the call. Although some audience members immediately recognize the callout’s reference to UGK, this allows Houston VIPs to acquire symbolic capital by representing the identity of “H-town” culture.

Another major organization within the Houston slam community is the youth slam poetry team, Meta4 Houston. Prior to competing in the largest youth poetry slam in the world, Brave New Voices (BNV), members of Meta4 Houston, created the following informal callout:

Call: H-Town is going down!

Response: Y’all ain’t even poet.

This callout was created in a jovial manner and is considered to be a playful way of talking trash to one another, often a form of solidarity building and bonding. However, outside the context of the community, the callout received a critical response during BNV. Other teams competing at BNV indicated Meta4’s callout was not appropriate for the good-natured competitive spirit of the slam.

For regular participants in a slam scene, the call and response is a form of solidarity building and a verbal display of community affection for a poet. However, everyone attending a slam event does not share these sentiments. Some newcomers to slam have described common callouts as “insider jokes” between a bunch of friends, exclusionary verbal exchanges that are inaccessible to those who are not “in the know.”

Audience Engagement

Some slam poetry communities incorporate additional activities into the event, providing an added layer of entertainment while building solidarity with the audience. For example, Mic Check has an adlib poetry session, where poets who performed that evening are asked to the stage. Audience members are also encouraged to participate. While on the stage, three individuals are selected—one from each side of the stage and one from the middle. The audience is asked to shout words they want to hear the poets incorporate into their adlib poem. The three individuals are instructed to listen to the audience in their section of the room and are told to select the first word they hear.

Using the three words from the audience, poets construct impromptu poems and perform them on the mic. This process often exhibits funny spontaneity in which poets struggle to put something together. The poets step to the microphone as they are ready. This process goes on until everyone has read. At the very least, if a poet is unable to put something together, he or she can speak the three words back to the audience.

Adlib participants often develop their own styles of adlib. For example, Good Ghost Bill is known for constructing word puns from the three contributed words. Another unique adlibber is dedicated community member and occasional performer, Jake Sparks, also known as “Mr. Cool.” In general, Jake does not approach the stage when poets are called for adlib. Rather, he remains seated in the audience. When he comes up with something, Jake approaches the stage and performs the adlib he created. Jake’s strategy is interesting. By remaining obscurely in the audience, the anxiety that often accompanies performing on a stage in front of an audience is much lower than

taking the stage immediately for the composing portion of the activity—there is less risk. When using this strategy, if an individual fails to create something that he or she likes, there is no need to share, and no one will know to the contrary. On the other hand, if an individual takes the stage and is unable to produce a poem, everyone knows. Freezing on stage, or “dropping the lines” of a poem, is often described as a poet’s worst fear.

Post Event Gatherings

Poetry ciphers. The poetry cipher is small gathering of poets and people from the audience, often occurring in the parking lot of the slam venue. Here poets will “spit” poetry. The poetry spit during a cipher may be a poet’s own work, a cover of someone else’s work, or an on-the-spot improvisation.

Meeting-up. Following an open mic or poetry slam, members of the Mic Check community would often meet-up at a local restaurant called Fuego. Fuego is a popular spot because it is one of the few restaurants that are open 24 hours, thus allowing members of the Mic Check community the opportunity to socialize as long as they want. Following an APS event, some members of the community gather at Kerbey Lane Café. The Houston VIP community does not have a regular meet up, but some members of the community occasionally get together for a meal following an event.

Summary

This chapter introduces the art world of slam poetry and the three artistic communities that are the focus of this three-year multi-sited ethnographic study. The format of slam poetry is discussed alongside each community to highlight the multiple contexts for this unique art form. Slam poetry is an art form in which each community is

engaged; however, the ways each community implements the components of slam is different. That is, each community has its own style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), which shapes and is shaped by the larger collective representations of slam poetry.

The following chapter presents an analysis of data. Chapter VI provides a discussion of the study, how the findings contribute to cultural sociology, limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, and reflections on the study.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an analysis of participant interviews from three artistic communities. There were ten participants from each artistic community, for a total of 30 participants. Interviews were open-ended, ranging from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, with an average length of one hour per interview. Prior to analysis, all participants were provided transcripts of their interviews and were invited to review, edit, clarify, expand upon, or make substantive changes once the transcripts were completed. Additionally, participants were invited to continue contributing to their interviews throughout the duration of the study.

Interviews were analyzed and categorized after unitization and coding. Interviews were unitized into individual units of meaning. Following unitization, individual units of data were printed on index cards (data cards) for the following stages of sorting and organization.

- (1) Data cards for each of the 30 interviews were organized into the community each participant participates within. This resulted in three sets of data cards; each set contained data cards for 10 interview participants.
- (2) Data cards for each community were subdivided into two sets of five interviews. The smaller interview sets were organized and sorted separately.
- (3) A listing of themes and subthemes were organized from the initial sorting of each set.

(4) Once the sorting of each smaller data set was completed the data cards were recompiled into one large set for each community. The larger data set was reshuffled and reorganized into themes and subthemes. The list from the previous organization and sorting of the smaller data sets was used as a reference; however, themes and subthemes were adjusted as necessary.

(5) Following initial sorting of each community, the themes and subthemes across all three communities were compared for areas of convergence or dissimilarity. Areas that converged across communities were grouped into single themes and subthemes. Areas that were unique to one or two communities were provided with their own identification. Once all themes and subthemes were organized into tables (see Tables 2-4), the organized units of data were rechecked for appropriate placements.

After the initial analysis was completed, the themes and subthemes across all three communities were compared for areas of convergence or dissimilarity, and visually displayed and organized into Tables 2-4. Areas that converged across communities were grouped into single themes and subthemes. Areas that were unique to one or two communities were provided with their own identification. Once all themes and subthemes were organized into Tables 2-4, the organized units of data were rechecked for appropriate placements.

The results of the content analysis are presented below. For ease of reference, the analyses of data are organized as they appear in Tables 2-4. The themes and subthemes are organized into three broad topical areas: Artists and Artistic Production; Audience,

Community, and Participation; and the Aesthetics of Slam Poetry. While the aesthetics of slam poetry were identified as a theme during the course of this study and presented in Table 4, a critical discussion of slam poetry aesthetics is beyond the scope of this analysis, and is reserved for future study.

Table 2. Artists and Artistic Production: Themes, Subthemes, and Perspectives Identified by Participants

Theme	Subtheme	Perspective	APS	MC	VIP
Personal Attributes	Biographical information		X	X	X
	Writing and participation in slam poetry		X	X	X
Artistic Production	Reasons for writing	Writing as an outlet/ catharsis	X	X	X
		Personally challenge/ growth	X	X	
		Identity work	X		X
		Challenges perspective/ awareness			X
		Inspire and connect with people			X
		Enjoyment			X
		Writing as companion			X
	Creative process	Prompts for writing	X	X	X
		Methods for writing	X	X	X
		Editing processes	X	X	X
		Metacognition		X	
		Influences	X	X	X
	Responses to Poetry	Audience response		X	
Peer response			X		
Assessment of Work	Early work		X	X	X
	Recent work		X	X	X
Goals and Challenges	Creative goals	Produce work	X		X
		Teach/ mentor/ coach	X		X
		Compete and win			X

Table 2. Continued

Theme	Subtheme	Perspective	APS	MC	VIP
		Be on a team			X
		Become a professional/ elite poet			X
		Publish work	X		
		Tour	X		X
		Other professional activities	X		X
	Creative challenges	Other responsibilities	X		X
		Don't have time	X		X
		Performance anxiety	X		X
		No support from family	X		X
		Overcoming self-criticism	X		X
		Limited opportunities to share/ perform	X		X
		Touring/ related work takes a toll	X		
	Competition Aspects of Slam Poetry	Competition		X	
Strategy			X		
Artistic integrity			X		

Table 3. Audience, Community, and Participation: Themes, Subthemes, and Perspectives Identified by Participants

Theme	Subtheme	Perspective	APS	MC	VIP
Audience	Coming to watch poetry		X	X	X
	Coming to see people I know		X	X	X
	Participation in the local scene		X	X	X
	Therapeutic reasons		X	X	X
	Conversations		X	X	X
Community	Common interests		X	X	X
	Community, friends, Family.		X	X	X

Table 3. Continued

Theme	Subtheme	Perspective	APS	MC	VIP
	Support group		X	X	X
	Development, support, and mentorship	Support/ mentorship	X	X	X
		Writing workshops		X	X
		Poet growth	X	X	X
		Youth poets	X		X
Participation	Roles		X	X	X
	Volunteering		X	X	X
Connection to Local Community*	Community service and partnership			X	
	Influence on local community	Adds to the local arts culture		X	X
		Downtown scene			X
Concerns within the Local Slam Community *	Clicks “Cool Kids Club”	Perception of approachability/ exclusivity	X	X	X
		Tight knit circle	X	X	
		Standing/ status	X		
	Competition issues	Slam is not fair/ biased	X		
	Gender	Poets perspectives	X	X	X
	Representation and topics			X	X
	Interpersonal		X	X	
	Unaware of any issues		X		
	Issue within the larger Slam Community		X		
Outsider assumptions about poetry			X		
*These themes will be addressed in subsequent research as they go beyond the scope of this study.					

Table 4. Aesthetics of Slam Poetry: Themes, Subthemes, and Perspectives Identified by Participants

Theme	Subtheme	Perspective	APS	MC	VIP	
Appeal of Slam Poetry*	Social value of slam poetry	Provides/ expands perspective/ challenges thinking		X	X	
		Creates dialog		X	X	
		Always something to take away		X		
		Challenges social issues		X	X	
	Honesty/ sincerity			X		
	Performance	Audience interaction			X	
		Command the stage			X	
	Poetry is fun			X		
Poetry is “Cool Now”*	Trends in poetry			X	X	
	Social media			X	X	
Favorite Poets/ Poetry*	Identity pieces			X		
	Fun/ funny poems			X		
	Poets with personality			X		
	Style			X		
	Poems about place			X		
	Love poems			X		
Format of Slam Poetry*	Free expression/ mode of communication			X	X	
	Limitation of understanding			X		
	Platform for youth poets to have their voices heard			X		
	Performance poetry versus slam poetry			X		
	Challenging format of slam poetry			X		
	Competition		X	X	X	
	Slam unfair/ biased		X			
Assessment*					X	

*These themes will be addressed in subsequent research as they go beyond the scope of this study.

Artists and Artistic Production

The following section focuses on the creative production of artists who participated in slam poetry. Emphasis is placed upon the meanings poets have for the writing and performance of poetry, which includes participating in slam poetry competitions. When assessing the meaning of slam poetry from individual poets' perspectives, six main themes were expressed: Personal Attributes; Artistic Production; Creative Process; Responses to Poetry; Assessment of Work, Goals, Challenges, and Growth; and Competition Aspects of Slam Poetry. Each of these themes are discussed below along with subthemes and differing perspectives.

Personal Attributes

The theme of Personal Attributes includes biographical information poets shared during interviews as well as their participation with slam poetry. Information includes brief personal histories, educational backgrounds, how they got their starts with writing and producing creative work, and how they became involved with slam poetry.

Since the representation of participants' identities is of primary importance to this study, I asked participants to provide their own representations of self. A brief description of each participant is provided as they are introduced in the text. Additional biographical information provided by participants is included in Appendix A.

Artistic Production

One of the most interesting aspects of working with poets is learning about how they think about their work, what the work means to them, how they go about creating work, and how the work changes over time. This section focuses on how producing

poetry is meaningful for poets by discussing the reasons poets provide for writing poetry, how writing poetry is identity work, how poetry is believed to challenge perspective or increase awareness of social issues, how poetry can inspire and help people connect with one another, how poetry creates opportunities, and how writing and performing poetry is enjoyable.

Reasons for writing. This section focuses on the reasons poets expressed for writing poetry. The reasons for writing poetry include: writing as an emotional outlet; to personally challenge themselves; writing is interesting; to be a part of a community; writing poetry is identity work; to challenge the perspective of others, or increase awareness; to inspire and connect with people; writing poetry creates opportunities; and because writing poetry is often enjoyable.

Therapeutic outlet and catharsis. A commonly expressed sentiment is that poets produce poetry to help work through difficult or challenging issues or circumstances. For some, writing is a way to process or think through complex social issues, while for others it is a form of emotional release ranging from the extreme of catharsis to what some consider a form of therapy on some level.

Austin poet Desiree Hooper revealed that she was troubled after learning details about cluster munitions by the U.S. Not only was she troubled by these activities, but she was also concerned about the lack of interest and information about these matters held by the general public,

I've been described as an angry poet more than once and I think that anger has a lot to do with what I choose to write about—situations that generally anger me

more than make me sad. I'm more likely to write about the angry thing because there's a certain impetus behind it for me to convey anger.

I have an awareness of the limitations of using the slam community as the place to open these dialogues; there has to be an understanding of how much you can actually get accomplished through writing a three-minute performance piece about the topic. And so it's definitely kind of a step one of the process—creating the discussions and then maybe that becomes a way for those discussions to either step outward and become some overall change, but I also tend to focus on issues that I am active with regards to my life outside of slam as well. For example, I'm working on a series of non-fiction essays about cluster munitions that I hope to get published so there's definitely, with that topic in particular, the correspondence between what I do at slam and what I do in my every-day life.

If I never write another slam poem again, then that's probably because I've run out of things to feel super, super emotive about and if so—I don't know if that would be a good thing or a bad thing.

While writing and performing work that engages social issues provides a temporary reprieve, Desiree recognizes the limitations of the format for the kind of dialogue her work attempts to engage. As a result of this limitation, Desiree produces different types of work, which include a slam-poem version to present the listeners with information, a longer essay-style version to provide material beyond the poem, and in some instances, preparation for a formal debate on the topic.

A younger poet who goes by the stage name Prince indicates that he has always had difficulty communicating his feelings with others. A component of this difficulty stems from his experience as a young Black man within a predominantly White, conservative space. Occasionally, when Prince has attempted to vocalize his experiences with others his concerns have been overlooked, misunderstood, or rejected by others with different experiences. During a transitional phase of his life, Prince discovered poets close to his age performing on a televised broadcast of the international world poetry slam for young poets, Brave New Voices (BNV).

I am one of those guys that just holds everything in and just doesn't let anything out. I'm very non-confrontational. I will just sit there and let something eat at me, and eat me. And it was just about the time that I quit football that I started getting into slam and it was because I just didn't have that outlet to let my anger go anymore. So it just sat there and it festered. So I just remember being really, really depressed and it was always eating at me and just questioning life and everything and I just hated it. It was about that same night when I was flipping over to watch *Family Guy* and I watched an episode of *BNV* and just listening to—again, just these kids throw their heart and soul out on the stage and hearing people respond. Alicia Harris has this poem called “That Girl” and she's talking about how her boyfriend pretty much just tried to use her for sex and she started crying on stage and you can hear her voice breaking up and I just remember hearing people clap and you throw that emotion out there and people give it back to you.

Prince recognized that the youth he encountered while watching BNV had discovered an outlet for personal expression, as well as a platform on which their voices could be both heard and respected. This realization was a transformative experience. Shortly after discovering slam poetry, Prince began writing and soon found his way to the local slam poetry scene, Mic Check.

I started writing and I would be less depressed, less—I started looking at life in a better perspective and I remember being on stage for my first slam and I was nervous, my voice was shaking. And I couldn't—this was the first time ever that I couldn't control my voice and I just remember looking out into the crowd and just people clapping and snapping and I felt kind of happy. I don't want to be cliché or anything but it felt good to have...this instant gratification, this instant, "it's alright, we've been there, too" kind of feeling. It really saved my life because I was just going through a really hard time with everything...[such as] daddy issues and everything that was going on in my life and I just remember questioning my life a lot of nights [questioning], "Where the hell are you going? What's going on?" And I haven't thought like that in years so...

Although writing and performing poetry has been challenging, discovering slam poetry has been beneficial for Prince in many respects. The open format has allowed him an opportunity to communicate experiences that he would not ordinarily express with others. Instead of holding everything inside, Prince has been able to mediate his frustrations through poetry.

While Prince used poetry in an effort to expunge discontent, some poets described an inverse relationship between happiness and writing productivity. When life circumstances were less than favorable for these poets, writing productivity increased, and when those same poets were happy, productivity decreased. According to Army-veteran-turned-poet Christopher Michael, “a happy poet is an unproductive poet.” He described this phenomenon as follows:

Ok. For example, I’m in a relationship now. I’m happy, things are going well, work, bills are getting paid, my PTSD issues are handled, and I’m not writing no poems. I don’t want to be miserable just so I can write poetry but man I really would like some new poems. I mean I’ve had ideas, I got...three or four ideas on the plate but nothing—the drive to make them happen isn’t there right now...My last good poem was a poem about that skinny chick on the VMAs who was supposed to be the queen of twerking and a booty is a prerequisite for being able to twerk. Although I don’t really care for twerking, I know you need a booty to twerk. So I was really angry because she didn’t just—when I heard that she made the statement when she was talking about her music she said, “I just want something that feels black.” When she made that statement, I suddenly became angry because not only did you just take our culture, you took the culture, you abused it, and you abused the women that you had on stage and minimized them. So I’m...[roar] “Now I’m angry; I must write!” And it turned out to be a really good poem; it got me into finals for APS; it helped get Killeen get qualified for the “Win and You’re in Slam,” but I was emotionally charged, so—negatively. I

need some good poems. I would like to be able to write a happy poem, but I think that it would be crappy.

As the passage indicates, Christopher currently viewed himself as happy; however, he attributed his decrease in writing productivity to his state of contentment. This illustrates the tension some poets experience between wanting to be happy and wanting to be a productive and successful poet. While, as Christopher mentioned, one could write about happy things, these poems are not always well received. To be successful as a slam poet requires a positive reception from the audience, and sometimes happy or cheerful poems can be received with some skepticism. Thus, not only is discontent associated with writing productivity, but it is also viewed by many as a prerequisite for writing to a level of sincerity that resonates with others.

Keith Ruckus argued a similar point:

I say this about some younger poets that come to me and say, “I don’t understand why I don’t win.” And then I say, “Well you need to suffer.” And they always take it the wrong way, but you need to have your heart brought through the wringer, you need to not be able to buy the designer clothes you want because you’re saving to pay your rent. You need a little heartache in your life to be able to write the level of authenticity that you want. You see a lot of young poets do a lot of persona poems about soldiers or...single mothers, but you know who’s been through the wringer and who hasn’t. They say that about a lot of famous artists, a lot of famous pianists...you wrote your best work when you were starving in your studio apartment because that’s when it’s all you have. There’s a

poet, I won't say by name, but I know they're in a shitty living situation and slam poetry is the only thing they have in their life that keeps them sane right now and that person is excelling in slam right now. And I can see as they're starting doing better in slam, their work is starting to get worse because now they have something positive in their life, but they're defining themselves about their suffering and it's a very interesting sliding scale to watch.

CS: What you're describing is similar to something another poet told me: "A happy poet is an unproductive poet."¹¹

Oh, that's absolutely true. Yeah and that's actually the truth; I find it incredibly hard to write when things are going well. So, Shappy [Seaholtz] has often told me he hates my poetry because it's too gloomy and I agree. A lot of people...[say], you're usually such a happy guy, you usually dance around and make funny jokes, why don't you write funny poetry? Because I do think I'm a funny guy, I think I do joke around and I have an outlet for that—all that negative emotion, slam is providing me an outlet for it that's incomparable to other things in my life. I can get up on the stage and anonymously say to 200 strangers every week everything that is destroying me inside and cry onstage—that's such a big thing for me. I can go up there and just bawl my eyes out and have a couple of people pat me on the back afterwards and I don't have to talk to any of these people again. There's anonymity...I can be anonymous in front of

¹¹ Questions that prompted further elaboration from a participant during an interview are identified with my initials "CS" and are italicized.

200 strangers. I can't say half the shit I say in my poems to my best friend or my mother or any of that shit. God forbid.

Having recently transitioned from a member of the audience, to regularly performing poet, and member of the Austin Neo Soul slam team, Victoria expressed a similar perspective regarding the anonymity of the stage.

Sometimes there's things you can't talk about with your best friend but you can talk about in a room full of strangers because 9 times out of 10 they're not going to know who you are, they're never going to see you again, and even if they do they're not going to remember who you are because you're not around often enough. So you kind of just have to go in it and again tell your story and get it off your chest because again, you can talk about it and even if they're not going to talk back then at least someone is listening and someone is physically listening to you. And you can see the emotion and interaction on their face.

In evaluating his own work and the writing of other poets, Keith strongly believed discontent or anger is a prerequisite for consistent writing productivity and producing work that meets a desirable level of sincerity. He believed this is also true with the performance of work. While poets often write persona poems, taking a perspective or lived experiences of a person, place, or thing, the level of sincerity of this work may be found to be lacking compared to an artist producing work when they themselves are struggling.

In Keith's own struggles, performing poetry to an audience allowed him the opportunity to voice personal feelings in a way that he was not able in other areas of his

life. From Keith's description, it seemed as though slam poetry provided him a form of therapeutic release, however, he disagreed with that assessment.

CS: Considering the way you describe the emotional release you experience on stage, do you consider writing or performing poetry therapeutic?

I think it's really cliché to say that; I think that if I didn't have it, I would find another outlet—it probably wouldn't be as healthy. I don't think it's—if you need therapy, go get therapy, don't become a slam poet or a spoken word artist. So no, I think it's important—I think it's a rock in people's lives—a lot of people, it really is all they have... There are other poets you can see in the scene, they're excelling now because they go home to a shit situation or even worse—they go home to nothing, they're living by themselves, no friends or whatever and this is it for them. Their time at the poetry slam is their time to shine.

CS: If it is cliché to say poetry is therapeutic, how would you describe it?

I'd say it's more of a crutch. And not to have all the negative connotations of a crutch because a crutch is a useful tool. I mean, it's, and I've heard the whole people saying "Slam poetry saved my life," but you'd find something else. This is one of a million art outlets and I'm sure those people would say, "Music saved my life" or "Painting saved my life." So it's no more special—and this sounds terrible—it's no more special than any other outlet you could find. It's just readily available and Austin just happens to excel at it.

Keith holds a complex view of slam poetry. He acknowledged that performing poetry to a crowd allows him the opportunity to voice personal feelings in a way that he

is not able to in other areas of his life. However, he was skeptical of the idea of slam poetry as a form of therapy. Rather, Keith viewed poetry as one tool in a larger toolkit—to be used for a very specific purpose as necessary. Keith indicated that he has outlets for his ordinarily funny and joking-around demeanor. So the purpose of his writing and performance is a tool for venting negativity in a productive manner.

Keith raised an interesting point regarding the efficacy of slam poetry versus other artistic outlets. Is there something unique about slam poetry that other artistic outlets do not offer? It depends upon whom you ask. Prince felt strongly that writing and performing poetry saved, and continues to save, his life. For Prince, slam helped him develop his voice while receiving immediate feedback from an audience. Many poets express positive feelings about the immediacy of audience response. Indeed, very few artistic genres offer the same level of audience interactivity as slam poetry.

Victoria viewed slam poetry as unique, recognizing the therapeutic aspects for performers and audiences:

I come from a background of self-harm. I come from a background of eating disorders. You know a lot of my poems have to do with that and... have to do with the hope of you're surviving and you're recovering because recovery is an everyday process and it's not, you get through it and you're done. And, it's kind of one of those you tell your story and how you choose to tell your story is where you get, you get either the line of you crossed it or you get the line of "Okay, this is just me telling my story. If this works for you then it works for you, if it doesn't then it doesn't for me, I have another." One of my other pieces, my

brother piece and I did it at APS, the one time I slammed with APS, which was recently, someone came up to me afterwards and said, “You know what, it’s not my older brother it’s my little brother but I know exactly what you were talking about” and that to me is what it’s about. If people can’t come up to you afterwards and say, “Hey,” regardless if they’ve seen the piece a hundred million times, if they come up to me and say, “Hey, I know what you were talking about there.”

I always say that’s why poets don’t need therapy...you don’t need to pay somebody—you just go to poetry slam and you’re done. Even if you’re not...on stage you go out and you heard somebody talk it or speak it...“I’m going through that same thing, I’m not alone.” Done, therapy over with, you don’t need to spend \$50 on some crackpot who’s going to sit there for three hours and tell you the same thing that you learned in twenty minutes, or in three minutes from poem. You’re saving a lot more money. That’s a tank of gas, and you can go to Mic Check.

Victoria attended slam poetry events long before she began writing and performing for the stage. Over time, she became friends with a large number of the people who regularly attended Austin Neo Soul and Austin Poetry Slam events. Attending slam offered not only a “something” that she had not found elsewhere, but listening to poets also allowed her to recognize who individuals are. When she began attending, she did not know anyone. Listening to poetry and later writing poetry is an important aspect of slam; however, the interactive engagement between those sharing

their stories and those listening to others' stories is critical. For Victoria, the value of slams is seen when someone's experience resonates with another's.

Whether slam poetry is viewed as a form of cathartic release, as one tool in a toolkit, or as something in-between, one thing is clear. The stage offers a place of respite from social norms that dissuade intimate expressive communication in everyday settings. It provides a space that buffers both intimacy and anonymity and it allows some the freedom to express themselves in ways they are unable to in other settings. In this way, the social scripts often reserved for "backstage" interactions are presented on the "front stage" (Goffman 1959).

Personal challenges and growth. Writing poetry is viewed by some as a challenging endeavor that presents an opportunity for artistic and intellectual growth. Dave, a mid-career computer software engineer began writing poetry fairly recently.

One of the reasons I did it though was, everything else I've done in my life is something I've been good at, ok? I'm very good at the logical thought business, you know, and math and science and so forth—I majored in physics in college, I was a good runner, I was All-American in cross-country in high school. And everything I've put a tremendous effort into, by my own choice, was just something I was good at. And when I ended up taking on a career, I ended up doing something I, you know, turns out I was a natural with computers and I'm pretty good at it. And I was, you know, just some of the poets were encouraging me to come to the writing sessions and it occurred to me. You know, maybe I should do something I'm not good at.

Compared with more experienced writers, Dave does not think his writing is up to par. He finds it both interesting and frustrating that poets much younger than he are able to use the same writing prompts from the writing sessions and produce something that is very advanced in such a short amount of time. While Dave did not devote as much time to writing as other poets who attend writing sessions, he surprised himself in what he had been able to produce and continued to improve.

Identity work. Some poets consider writing poetry to be identity work. This has been described as working toward greater self-awareness, breaking away from others' expectations, and finding or developing their own voices. Houston poet Konji Sen began writing what she described as fan-fiction poetry, expanding upon stories from popular culture such as Harry Potter. She regularly attended various poetry readings in Houston, but she only attended to listen. After she received positive encouragement from someone she now considers a mentor, she began reading her poetry on an infrequent basis. Then she began exploring her own identity in her writing, using it as a healing process and developing her own voice. Receiving feedback from the audience helped solidify Konji's interest in writing and performing poetry. For example, Konji explains,

I was one of those guilty poets, for a moment, of writing my healing on paper. But it did work for me, and at that time that's what I was putting on the mic and hitting people afterwards like, that really meant something to me.

I wrote poems about finding my identity and really identifying—a lot of identity poems. I'm never probably gonna write another—I take it back—I don't ever say never, but...I was really searching for identity, clearly, and by telling

them [identity poems] that was another thing I got as a reward for taking on a mic: somebody coming up and saying, “I got that.”

Somebody else coming up and saying, “I have no clue, I thought you were crazy after that poem.” I’ve had that response...“Oh.” Then I had somebody...[say], “I connected to what you’re saying, I know what you’re meaning by this because I felt that, too.” And I [thought]...“That’s different.” That was a first for me and that opened up a reason for me to keep at this. This is something more than me; for the first time I saw that and I [felt] like, “This is something worth investing in.”

Challenging perspectives and increasing awareness. Poets participating in slam are aware that their writing will eventually be heard by an audience. As noted above, writing and performing poetry was a cathartic experience for many participants. A major component of this experience is the interaction between a poet’s situated knowledge and that of their audience. Having an audience provides an opportunity for poets to communicate and relate to others on a variety of different levels that might not have occurred otherwise. Having lived all over the world, Dulcie Veluthukaran has had many different experiences, which she attempts to synthesize and communicate to her audience.

And so when people ask me, “What do you write about?” I always say, “What it’s like to be human” because I think it’s something that—we think about it but we don’t necessarily represent that to others out of fear of vulnerability or whatever it is. I tend to think about poetry like that—What does this say about us

as humans? How do we best represent this in writing? Those are the kind of big questions I ask when I try to revise and things like that because I wanna be able—even though I’m talking about my own experience, I want everyone in the audience to feel and get something from it for themselves. For something in there to be universal enough that they can walk away with that and...[think], “Oh yeah! This touched something in my experience.”

Recognizing that human experiences are interconnected, Dulcie works really hard to find common ground between her experiences and those of her audiences.

I try to do something to where there’s a connection with other people in the audience, because I’m aware that I’m writing for a slam but it’s bigger than that, right? People are sitting in the audience for a reason; they’re there maybe to enjoy themselves but as well, they’re looking for a more intellectual form of the enjoyment and so why not try to not indulge them per se but give people something to ponder on and kind of—I don’t know—masticate upon? I don’t know, when they go home—so that’s what I think my work is about, just the human experience.

An example of Dulcie’s approach is illustrated by her poem, “False Alarm.” She indicated this is the poem that she liked performing the least, yet it was the one that she received the most feedback from audience members. “False Alarm” is presented below followed by Dulcie’s commentary on the piece.¹²

¹² Dulcie Veluthukaran generously provided permission for the use of “False Alarm” for the purposes of this study. She retains all rights for the use of her intellectual property.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11
the smell of burning steel and flesh
freshly imprinted in the minds and T.Vs of America
I walked into English 1301
And suddenly,
James Wheeler
(the one that smoked pot in an asthma inhaler)
Shoots me this decidedly unfriendly look
Like I was the one running Bin Laden's
North pole like workshop
Specializing in the expertise crafting
Of Kamikaze Jihad warriors
So James Wheeler gave me the look that said
They're on you, Dulcie David
Your guilt is etched into your melanin
Your hair is wild like those iron wings that crashed into our safety
There is something in your eyes that denies innocence
He looked at me with this uncommon knowledge
And I dismissed his attitude as ignorance
Perhaps I should not have.
James, we used to be friends
But after 9/11

I sat in a row by myself
Separated by the rest of the class by the xenophobic hands
Squeezing the gullet of America
It's not over, James
10 years after the towers fell
When the American people have forgotten what it's like to be targeted
When they have ascended from victims to victors
Here I stand
On the proverbial rubble of Ground Zero
Breathing in the fallout of fear
Wondering why I am ALWAYS
One of the "random security checks" at airports
See, I know what it feels like to be the problem
The plague of locusts
I know what it feels like
To feel the toxic burn from immigration customized pesticide
Your papers mean nothing when your skin is home-grown-terrorist-brown
I know what it is like
To be hunted like a scuttling cockroach in a wide kitchen
3 rednecks shot and killed a Punjabi Sikh
Because at the bottom of the barrel of a shotgun
An Indian and an Arab look about the damn same

So I travel with my Texas Driver's License instead of my passport
Scrub the accent off my tongue
Stash my salwars and saris at the back of the closet
I think to myself
If only I could be like you
If only I could be like you
I won't be a problem anymore
There is not a day where I do not curse September 11th
I have lost a friend
A nation has lost it's mind
I am caught in the crossfire
Too American to go home
Too Indian to lay down roots
Red, white and fearful blue
Would you believe that all I wanted was a happy life?
Instead I've become like this country
Looking constantly at the ghosts and shadows over my shoulder
Searching in the dregs of future, only to find it clouded with regret
See no one writes poems about 9/11 anymore
But you and I both know that planes crash in your mind every time you see me
I've spent the last 10 years defending my borders against this viral strain of
ignorance

Allowed the recession in my soul
As I made myself as common as Texas dirt to you
Found a new normal
But we all know history repeats itself
So let me ask you, James
If I spit this poem in any other language but English,
Would it be reason enough
To set off
Another false alarm?

Dulcie discussed the content of her poem,

There's a line in there that says, "I know what it's like to be the scuttling cockroach hunted across a wide kitchen," and I think we've all felt like that sometimes. That's the line that gets the response of people and then the other one is "No one writes poems about 9/11 anymore, But you and I both know that planes crash in your mind every time you see me"—those lines. And I didn't do those lines on purpose to evoke a response but those are the ones that really get the response.

But obviously there's something in there that speaks to people. Let's say, ok I know what it's like to think an issue has been buried but it's really not, even when things return to normal in a friendship, you feel there's still something there—some tension, some barrier in the friendship or something like that. At the end of the day, the poem is about a friendship between two people and I think

others can relate to that even though it's specifically about my experience and specifically about 9/11 but in the larger context I think everyone's got a friend that they've been misunderstood by.

Dulcie enjoys taking her listeners on a journey, having them experience her own experiences. While the journey of her poem is taking place through a first-person narrative, she indicates that it needs to feel like narration is not taking place. Rather she wants the listener to live within the moment rather than listen to a story.

Houston poet Konji Sen held a similar perspective on poetry. While she considered herself to be in the process of finding her poetic voice, she wanted to use poetry to inform the audience about topics they may not have been aware of, "Now I just wanna write towards awareness; that's the audience. Making the unaware aware."

Inspiration and connection with audience. Some poets want to utilize their poetry to connect with their audience in a way that might not have been possible otherwise. Ressie is a poet who views limitless possibilities for art: "I see art with everything. I see art with no job, you could tell me [inaudible] I'll tell you, 'That's artistic'." For Ressie, one of the most powerful attributes of art resides in its ability to forge connections between people from different experiences. Ressie uses her poetry to spread the wisdom she had acquired and to motivate her listeners through the power of suggestion.

For example, one of the themes Ressie discussed came from her own experience of maintaining the integrity of her choices. No matter what circumstances may have been present, or how limited the available options were, she argued that options are

always available, and thus individuals must be responsible for the choices they make. Accordingly, when individuals own their personal choices, they take control over their lives, which is a positive thing that will lead to other positive things. Ressie expanded upon this idea further,

Now an action, a circumstance—yes, you can't guarantee that somebody won't just come up and—even right here—somebody could accidentally spill coffee on you—you couldn't predict it unless you have ESP, which I don't. But my response to it [is]...“Oh my gosh how could you?!” or “That's okay”—that's the choice part that I see. That's a daily battle for me...this is a 27-year process that has been scrutinized and challenged; it's...a daily, living experiment and in doing that for me, that's exciting. I like the challenge, the puzzle of it but for some, that might be not fun...How can I make a connection with them to let them know the same thoughts about owning choice, having that empowerment on their end without scrutinizing the way they see it? Art, to me, makes that happen. I might give a poem where you hear the undertone of all those things I'm talking about—the power of your own choice—and never think about doing that. But because it's just a bullet point, you might hear it; it might just plant a seed and then, I never thought I could do that. Who knows? That's the beauty of art, too. You have no idea how your seeds will germinate in other people. You have no idea.

The theme of choice had been very important for Ressie. She wanted to communicate her position on choice to an audience in a non-contentious manner so the

listeners would not feel as if they were being criticized. For Ressie, poetry provided an opportunity to connect because she can present her perspective in a passionate and digestible manner.

While many poets talk about the potential of slam, Ressie sincerely embodies this approach with actions that speak as loudly as her words.

I think art is just something that can connect to things. It brings a connection somehow—a link. It’s just a tool; I don’t think the art is its own entity or living—but I do believe that it’s a vessel...not a vessel but more like a mode of transportation to get us to whatever it is that that person means; what defines the other one.

I hear so much after a poetry thing that really reached me. They needed that, that poem, those words were what they needed; it was the tool they needed at that time...It’s the links—art makes all those connections happen possible and that’s beautiful to me because from my perspective it’s..., “Look at all the links! Look at all the connections! We’re uniting as a people; that’s awesome—it’s just pretty. That’s beautiful.” People smiling in the room that don’t know each other, all having a good time in unison. That’s beautiful; they’re all linked in the room. Art is a pretty powerful tool to do that.

Enjoyment. Numerous poets find writing poetry to be an enjoyable process, one that is able to engage them on a variety of levels. As Konji put it, “I adore writing; I think writing is the way for humans to become immortal; it’s just awesome to me. I love

writing.” Another poet who obtains a great deal of satisfaction from the process of writing poetry is Austin-based poet, Jacob Dodson.

My prime motivator, I think, was to have fun and express my thoughts in a way that made sense to me and was enjoyable. If I’m writing for myself, which I usually do, I enjoy poetry that entertains me but can engage me on a another level...I wanted to be different from people. I didn’t have a set of people to be different from. I had my own expectations, which I wanted to beat. I wanted to enjoy my own craft and that’s the genesis of why a lot of my poetry is funny, but I certainly have a good amount that isn’t. But for me to enjoy the craft of writing, it needs to be typically funny or clever on a level.

Jacob is known as a funny poet, or comedic poet. He indicated that he often writes in order to make himself laugh. If he is able to achieve that, it is an indication that the poem will be successful at making audiences laugh, but that is not always the case. Jacob’s approach relies upon performance as much as the words he is communicating: one way he achieves this is through the use of timing and pauses.

Some poets enjoy slam poetry because they found they were naturally good at it after trying it out. This was the case for Christopher Michael who initially got into poetry by writing a poem for a girl.

Well, I wrote a poem for a girl and it was good enough for her to stick around so I...[thought], “Maybe I’m good at this.” I came to Killeen, Texas, and I just wanted to perform—find a place to perform and this dude named Mister Nice rolled up on me and said, “Hey, you should come to *Underwater Roof*, we have

poetry there. I went to *Underwater Roof*. This is *Underwater Roof*, an African-American bookstore and culture shop at the time and there was a girl named Tina Johnson—she goes by “Journey” now—and she was having a poetry competition. So at this competition, I won and when you’re good at something, you wanna keep doing it, it feels good! So I started doing it, you know, they were more competitions, they weren’t officially slam because it’s not slam unless, you know, it’s sanctioned by APS, but I did the poetry competitions here in Killeen and we slammed and my first, I guess real official slam, was in 2004 at Austin Poetry Slam.

Unlike a lot of other poets who do it because it’s the art and they wanna reach the world—I just happen to be good at it and I like entertaining and it just happens to be the best vessel through which I can entertain so a lot of good comes out of it, but I’m an entertainer.

Christopher’s experience is unique compared with many of his peers. While many poets often described their first time on the stage as a terrifying experience, Christopher immediately felt at home on stage and has never looked back.

Writing as companionship. Dulcie indicated writing poetry has been a constant companion throughout many life transitions, including moving to the United States.

I wrote a lot when I moved here because I didn’t have any friends and that was one of my outlets of moving to a new country and the culture shock was real. For me, America was *Baywatch* and *MTV*—I thought I was gonna get off the plane and Meatloaf would be there standing there singing “I Would Do Anything for

Love” and clearly, that didn’t happen. I thought I had been raised in a very international environment and then moving out here, I wrote a poem about my first Mexican food experience that I had, about how I accidentally called somebody Jesus instead of Jesús—just kind of really being embarrassed about all of it and knowing that I was raised with people from all around the world and I still felt like a fish out of water when I moved.

For the first time when I moved here, I was forced to consider my race and I never had to do that before and so I wrote a lot about that and I think now a lot of the poems that I have is me settling into this person that I’ve finally figured out, “Oh yeah, you are Indian, you do live in a country that’s not yours—you are working here; get used to it.” And I’ve never had to think about things like that before, it was just whatever, you know? As a kid, none of that stuff ever bothers you.

While Dulcie has lived in three different countries, moving to the U.S. was an unsettling experience for her. Though she had a multicultural background she was not prepared for the experiences she would have in the U.S. She experienced her racial identity in ways she had not previously. This experience is evident in “False Alarm,” as Dulcie is describing an increased sense of hypervisibility stemming from racialization (Omi and Winant 1994),

I’ve lived in three different countries, this is the third one, and I think of all those major switches, there’s always been poetry in some big way, shape, or form at the very beginning of the experience. I was born in Kuwait so I wasn’t coming

out of the womb writing poetry but during the war, when we moved back to India and having never lived in India before and not being able to speak the language or anything like that and going around and talking in English to people and realizing they don't speak English and they're looking at you like you're some sort of coconut because you speak English and they don't so you're probably trying to be snooty. So poetry was there a lot for all of those big life, not changes, but just moving from place to place. I think it was there. I never really thought about that but...yeah man; it's all these deep questions!

Throughout her varied experiences, poetry has been a constant companion during settled and especially unsettled times. Swidler (1986) indicated that during transitions from settledness to unsettledness the culture becomes more ideological. At the individual level this means people usually fall back on what they know—for Dulcie, this was poetry. Poetry has helped her navigate new or uncharted experiences throughout her life.

The reasons the poets expressed for participating in slam poetry varied. Writing and performing poetry provided individuals the opportunity to participate in a community of people with similar interests; explore a path for identity work; challenge collective representations, perspectives, and beliefs; increase awareness in a variety of ways; inspire and connect with people; create opportunities that extend beyond slam poetry; and discover the enjoyment of writing, performing, and participating in slam poetry.

Creative process. The way a poem becomes a poem is a process that varies widely for poets. Some poets are able to sit down and write a poem in one sitting, while

others spend vast amounts of time writing, editing, and re-writing each of their poems until they are able to get them to where they want them to be. Not every poem will be complete. Sometimes, poems are left unfinished. Other times, a poet may not be able to get the piece to where he or she wants it to be, or a change of perspective later prompts the writer to return to the poem. While many poets have developed a process for writing poetry, the specific path each poem takes is unique. Ebony illustrated how the process for each poem can vary.

There are some poems that take a minute and there are some poems that take a lifetime to write and you keep trying to write those poems because they keep visiting you when you sleep or they keep coming to your brain like, “Yo, I need to write this poem.”

This section focuses on the artistic process of writing poetry by describing the prompts, methodologies, and editing processes poets use to write. Additionally, the preparation of poetry for the stage and poet influences are discussed.

Prompts for writing. What prompts poets to begin writing poems? While the process of each poem has its own unique qualities, there were some common practices shared by poets. Approaches varied and including writing frequently; writing as a response to an idea, conversation, experience, or event; waiting until an idea is ready or inspiration strikes; and writing sporadically without a specific process.

Some poets write on a frequent, if not daily, basis. Poets who take this perspective view writing as a way of thinking about and processing the world and their experiences. This perspective was shared by Houston-based, Nyne the Poet (Nyne):

It's... life, man. Life happens and there's some things you just can ignore... my new poem "Screwston," I was watching the news and on the little ticker, it said that Houston suffers—1,200 people in the last three years have died—[from] overdose of prescription medications. Me being from Houston and the culture, especially in the music, is really pushed towards that realm. It was impossible for me not to write a poem. It's just stuff that happens to us in everyday... "Safe Zone" came from all the random acts of violence in Colorado and around the state. People were just killing each other because of being bullied. You know what I'm saying? Sometimes we don't take the time to listen to what people or maybe God is telling us. As poets in our creative process, they make it so easy for you and nowadays radio makes it so that you can make a song about anything.

For Nyne, the practice of daily writing was a method of inquiry and knowing the self and social world.

Another approach to writing poetry mentioned by poets was to allow the process to happen naturally. Ebony is a poet who likes to take her time with a poem, allowing the process to unfold in an unrushed manner.

I never like to make myself write; I like it to be a natural, fluid thing that happens. Making myself write makes me think that I'm writing for a slam. So I like it to be a fluid, natural thing that happens where my hand is starting to be like, "No, let's make something happen" or my brain is thinking about this or my

heart is heavy with that. I really try to make it happen in a natural way and be very aware of myself and my surroundings.

My process is very—I would like to say that my poems choose me; my poems definitely choose me because they come in the strangest ways. Sometimes it is literally I can't sleep, these lines keep coming up in my sleep or my body is restless..., "Ok, let's write it; let's just write it." And once I give into the resistance, then there is a lot of writing in my—I'll text myself, I'll have a note in my phone, sometimes I'll set an alarm to come back to this—you really want to come back to this.

Ebony's organic approach to writing is one that is widely shared by poets who participated in slam poetry. What is generally meant by poets who say they prefer to write more naturally or more fluidly is they do not want to force the process to happen before they feel the poem is ready to be written. From this perspective, forcing the writing process feels contrived and insincere. While the principle is similar, poets think about the process in different ways. For example, National Haiku champion Jacob Dodson "ferments" on a poem, Austin poet Lacey Roop "searches for the door to a room," and APS Slammaster Danny Strack uses a metaphor of a "balloon" expanding with experiences and contracting during writing.

Jacob Dodson is a poet who wants to be a more productive and efficient writer; however, he is not willing to increase production at the expense of quality.

My goal with it is, like haiku, to get myself in a place where I will want to write but also where I'm better at writing when I don't want to. My idea of poetry is

I'm thinking about it enough that when I do sit down in front of the screen there isn't a lot of downtime between seeing a screen and writing down. That's why I ferment poems and just wait for them until I build enough excitement and then they must get written—building that excitement either through jokes, word play, or necessity of conveying some things out of it—catharsis, if you will.

Jacob realized time spent in front of a computer attempting to churn out a poem when it was not ready was counterproductive. Thus, he preferred to allow the poem to ferment in his mind until there was enough excitement behind an idea that the process became more enjoyable.

Similarly, Lacey Roop described the beginning of her writing process as searching for the “door” to a “room.” Once an idea has presented itself, she will spend a large amount of time searching for a door on a particular topic. Once she has found the door, she turns the handle and walks into the room. From there, the poem effectively writes itself.

Using a metaphor of a balloon, Danny Strack elaborated on how he understands his writing process to begin:

The best way I can describe this is with a metaphor. I think of the human brain a little bit like a balloon and it fills up with experiences and in your subconscious, which is in the balloon—and you can't see in the balloon—but there's all these experiences in the balloon and they're kind of churning in your head. It's almost like atoms in the gas cloud connecting with each other and forming new elements—that's how ideas form and so experience, experience, experience—

your balloon fills up with ideas because your subconscious is processing all the time and then it spits out these ideas that are not fully formulated but at least it's like molecules instead of just atoms. So I find that over the course of a year I might have been very interested in my work in a particular year. So in 2012–2013 I was doing a lot of marketing work; thinking about the Internet a lot and so the book that I produced for that year is all about the Internet and technology almost exclusively because that was the stuff that was filling up my balloon and when I went to squeeze it—it's almost like it bellows—you squeeze the balloon and the air comes out and you're like, Whoa that's the poetry that I made this year! But the year before I was writing about history a lot because I was thinking a lot about sociology so my 2011–2012 is very much like, “This is history” and it has a timeline of content. This poem takes place in 1854 and stuff like that. My book in 2010–2011 was focused on space and science and not the Internet at all but it crosses over because it's technology and science but it's a pretty different book than the one I made this past year. That's the background process of where do I get the ideas; they just come to me from day-to-day life and work around in my subconscious until a phrase will come to me or something like that and I'll...[question], Where did that come from? Well, maybe it came from this and this.

Danny was able to see how his topical interests influenced his writing during a given period of time. An interesting aspect of Danny's work is that he deliberately selects topics that are different than what other people are writing about. While Danny

writes about topics other poets are writing about, this is not to suggest the community does not influence his writing. Rather, intimate knowledge of the expansive poetry landscape is necessary to produce work that is different from that of others.

The approaches used by Ebony, Jacob, Lacey, and Danny are similar in that their writing occurs over a long period of time. It feels natural for them to immerse themselves in a particular idea and allow that idea to develop before they begin crafting it into a poem. The key is not to force a poem before it is ready. Other poets described a more systematic approach. An example of a more systematic approach is the way Houston poet, The Fluent One (Fluent), viewed writing poetry as similar to how he approached questions at work—a process to find answers.

I often say I engineer poems. My day job is a software engineer and I have a really logical background from everything that I do, so usually a poem comes about to me as a question with an answer so it's a conversation and then if it's based off a conversation, then what was the conversation about? Tell me the story. And then as I develop more questions for while I'm writing, it's kind of what happens is, what do I see? What do I smell? What happened next? How do I address this particular issue? Sometimes what I try to do is to separate the story from the point. I feel that if you do that it gives a broader depth for interpretation to the listener or to the reader. If you write exactly the story and the point then it..., Ok take this literal versus if I wanna tell a story about a father, I might use the Vietnam War. So now I'm telling you something about the Vietnam War and

I'm also telling you about a father versus if I just tell you about the father interacting with his kid.

Creative process where the ideas come from, sometimes it's just reading the news like CNN and *Democracy Now!*, sometimes it's a prompt—writing prompts. Occasionally I'll get the random bright idea, it doesn't happen often but sometimes those happen. "My Guardian Angels Called"—that came from a random thought while I was talking on the phone and driving and it's just like, Oh wait, yeah, that makes perfect sense—I need to write this down! Most of the time it's usually a response to something versus I don't know, getting into a creative mojo.

As Fluent mentions, often poems result from conversations—particularly conversations between poets. During a conversation someone may say something that resonates with other participants and someone says "You should write a poem about it." This happened recently between two newer participants to the Mic Check community, Sarah Maddox and Madison Wiggly. Sarah was describing her experience of being homeschooled as "the Venn diagram of cool and homeschool is just two circles separated by a bottomless pit of awkward." At Madison's encouragement, Sarah extended this discussion into a poem about her homeschooling experience called "Cool School," and it has been well received by poets and audiences.

Since Sarah was relatively new to slam poetry she had not developed a writing process. Not having an established approach to producing work is not uncommon, as a

small number of poets indicated they did not have a writing process because they do not write that often or the ideas of a poem occur randomly.

Recent college graduate, Caroline Golson, is a highly active participant in the Mic Check community, but she only performs poetry occasionally, as she does not consider herself to be a writer.

I really don't, I don't write a whole lot. I've been to the writing sessions a couple of times and it was like, OK write about this thing. And I'm just like—I can't do that...it just feels too forced man, I'm really more of a fluid writer. But...I don't know, because writing is really not my profession or goal or even...my hobby. I just—when I hear something—I'll hear a phrase in my head that will keep going over and then, Ok well let me write a thing about that. I do a lot of like, dumb little haikus that I tweet...I feel like big events kind of trigger it but I don't really write that much. But yeah I don't really have a process, I just kind of sit down and kind of crank it out and if I like it, then I'll just keep it and if I don't I might read it but I get really...insecure about it. I wrote this one earlier and it was about this dude and he's—you know, it was pretty good, it was a pretty good piece but I felt—I just felt like it was just so whiny. Like I'm just whining about my problems.

Caroline's self-described non-process hits upon several of the themes discussed above. While writing is not an area of emphasis, she does write on occasion. When she does write she does not like to force the writing because it does not feel natural. Rather, Caroline pulls inspiration from conversations and her experiences, particularly bigger

events such as the breakup of a relationship. It seems that she does enjoy writing and sharing her poetry; however, this may be tempered by her feeling that what she has to say is insignificant outside her own experience.

Prince is another poet who does not consider himself to have a process but rather creates poetry on the fly when he is inspired.

It's horrid; I wouldn't even call it a process. I have this knack—I can freestyle pretty well and if I would get a random idea...right off the bat, I'll freestyle the whole poem and it's always 10,000 times better than when I actually get it written down. And I just remember, I'll freestyle everything and it'll probably be three minutes long. And by the time I get home and I get on my iPod or get it on a piece of paper I can probably remember one-third of the things that I've actually said and that's how it is now.

Even though Prince indicated he did not know how he produces writing, he was knowledgeable about his process once an idea presented itself. His approaches work with a constructive process by building a foundation to work from and allowing a piece to go wherever it may. Mysteries of the writing process are not something that is experienced by new writers; veteran poets such as Christopher Michael were surprised by their writing processes as well.

When it comes to writing, if you—I've said for a long time, I don't know how I do what I do. It just—I guess maybe it comes natural? But if I really analyze it, I'll hear two words together or a line and I'm like, Oh man that sounds incredible! And I'll start writing. If I write two words or a line and I build around

it; I'll build some sort of structure around it, it becomes a foundation to where it turns into something. When I set out to write a particular poem about a particular subject, it's difficult. The more I have to force myself to concentrate the less I'm happy with it but sometimes I feel the pen just runs away with itself. I'll set out to write one thing and it turns into something completely different and it's wonderful, I love it—it's not what I meant to do but it's even better.

The way in which the writing process is approached is, innately, a matter of perspective. For some poets, it was waiting until an idea is ready or motivation strikes, while for others, writing daily, or constructing poems in a systematic fashion were preferred processes.

Methods for writing. Once a poet has an idea and begins the writing process how does a poem become a poem? A majority of the poets indicated the methods they use vary from piece to piece, as each poem is unique. A common method was to begin with an experience, idea, or image, and connect it with other experiences, ideas, or images. Other writing approaches ranged between unstructured free writing practices to the highly structured engineering of poems. The place where poets write was also a component of their writing process, some would write when an opportunity presented itself, while others preferred writing in a familiar and comfortable space.

Almost all poets indicated they wrote from their experiences, at least at some level. A good example of how personal experiences motivates and drives the writing process is Danny Strack's balloon metaphor discussed above—the balloon fills up with

experience and is released on paper. Danny is particularly insightful of how his writing process works, by recognizing it in three parts.

So then you have these phrases kicking around in your head and then I guess that brings me to another analogy which is, I heard that Joan Rivers, the comedian had a filing cabinet and every time she came up with an idea for a joke she'd be like, Ok here's a joke about fat women and she'd put it in the cabinet under fat women. And then over time she'd have...20 jokes about fat women in the thing so when she's doing a routine, she like, Oh now I have a bit because the file now has enough in it to be—in this case—a poem. So my brain's constantly spitting out these lines like, Oh this would be good, and then it starts connecting them and then you have a framework. So that's one way the process works.

Another way is to be a little bit more intentional and sometimes I'll get an idea and...maybe the phrase that came out of my brain is not a phrase like a turn of phrase, but it's a theory or something like that. It's almost...something that can't be expressed in three or four words, but you...[question], how do I express this?

And then you're trying to capture it. In those cases a lot of times I'll turn to some sort of metaphor and the way that I've been doing this conversation because I think a lot of the times you're able to use fiction to express truth a little bit more accurately than if you could actually write out—I could write 300 pages on a topic or I could write a poem that's maybe 300 words and maybe the poem

conveys the meaning better than the 300 pages would because I was able to use a metaphor.

I would say then the third part of the process is just sitting down and doing the work. Once my brain has the phrases, then I need to write them down or I'll lose them. Once my brain has the structure, I need to write it down. Once I have a theory and I've thought about it and fleshed it out a little in my head, I need to sit down and spend hours writing it. And to be honest that's one of the things I think if I'm feeling conceited, I would say one of the things that really differentiates me from some of the other poets is that I put time into this, a lot of time.

There's times where I'm not doing a lot of writing but there's times when I'm spending two hours a day sitting down at the computer, trying to write and it always took a lot of work. And honestly, I spent more time writing in the beginning when I wasn't as confident in my writing because I had to throw a lot of stuff away. But I think of it as a mental process as well as a time commitment and execution process.

The first component of Danny's writing process is compiling experiences or ideas and reflecting on them, making connections where possible. This is the part of his process that he described as filling a balloon, and collating ideas in a filing cabinet. The second component of Danny's writing process is thinking about how to express the connections, and finally to do the work of writing. Although Danny may make a notation of his ideas, the first two components of his writing process are primarily cognitive

work. The final component of his writing process is what he considered the labor-intensive part, writing down everything that he had mapped out in his mind.

Good Ghost Bill is a poet who centers his writing on imagery; it is something he has become well known for in the slam poetry community. Bill begins with an image that occurs to him randomly or is a response to something he has seen or heard.

Most of my poems started, at least for the writing process, and they still do to this day, I guess I'm more aware of it so it doesn't happen as often now but like most, all of my poems in the beginning started with an image. A cookie, whatever, surreal, um, image that just...struck a chord with me. And you know these images would...pop in to my brain over...a week or two, and they're all sort of related somehow but very distinct and separate. So these images would pop in to my head and...part of me believed, you know, whether it was construed or not is beyond the point. The idea is, whether there is a common thread built in between them or if I didn't convince myself it was there in the first place doesn't matter so much, but I found a common thread between these images. And I have a journal of just...two-three lines or just...two or three words and I would look at it, after you know...a certain amount of time and...[question], oh you know what's like, what's the central crux of this, what connects this, you know or is there one of these images that is the center of the wheel around which others spin you know?

So, for instance, I have this poem, "Calluses," which is...one of the first real hardcore poems I had and I had images of...people diving into hay, people,

human beings being guitar strings,... I had images of people playing catch with fire, but like actual fire and holding it. I had images of people jumping off buildings and um, exploding into Jackson Pollock paintings...on the sidewalk, you know... just weird stuff like that.

And...I would just thread them into a list type poem or a more narrative structure, either way, however, I tried to get out of the way of the poem, you know let it happen, come to be however it needs to. But, that's how I started writing. I found a common thread and usually halfway through literally I'm writing these and I'm like 'oh my gosh, that's what it means' you know, I'm writing about, you know, this is...my commitment to art or...my dedication to human expression...

Over a period of a few weeks Bill will write as ideas and images come to him. Sometimes this occurs slowly and other times it floods out of him as if he is observing the writing process happening rather than producing the actual writing himself. Throughout his process, Bill is searching for connections between different ideas and images attempting to find what he considers to be the common thread that connects everything together. This is largely a process of discovery as he produces much more writing than is able to fit the format of a slam poem.

A key component of Bill's process is what he described as "getting out of the way of a poem." What Bill meant by this is to write without judgment or expectations. Bill prefers to provide the poem with autonomy—to provide the poem some room to breathe, the space and freedom to run and play, and allowing it to become what it is to

be without forcing it into a preconceived notion of what a poem should be. On the rare occasions when he sets out with an expectation to write a particular style of poem, the result, he indicated, feels contrived and insincere.

Once Bill has found what he considers to be the central thread of a poem he begins weaving the different components together. Bill separates the process of generating from editing because he prefers to write freely without judgment during the generation phase. He feels writers are often too self critical as they are writing which constrains artistic possibilities and limits the potential of the poem. By writing without judgment Bill is able to capture his thoughts, as random as they may be, and reflect upon what they might mean at a later time. For example,

I would find the meaning halfway through just tying all these images together and I'd be like 'oh my gosh' and I'd write around that. Or I'd even been done with the first or second draft before I realized what's going on, but then I'd find what's going on and I'd center around that. But, the idea is a poem starts with these images that pop in to my head. A poem starts with just these weird impossible things that I...make possible in my writing. I guess maybe I was... just not enchanted with...the world I lived in, feeling a little alienated but...I had my own kind of way of...bucking the system (laughter). Well I'm just going to write my own world.

For Bill, the writing process is very much a process of discovery and constructing meaning between what may seem to be disparate elements—this is something that cannot be rushed, but rather needs to occur freely. Austin Neo-Soul poet Ebony Stewart

generally takes a similar approach to writing poetry. However, she noted the competition aspects of slam come into conflict with her preferred method of producing work. Ebony elaborated upon this conflict,

And in the back of your head, as a person who competes in slams you're like, I better write this poem before I go somewhere and I hear someone else do this poem and I'll be mad because I was like, Oh no, I thought of that first! And no, actually, this person performed it first so they thought of it first.

Ebony described the urgency that poets sometimes feel when an idea presents itself. While she does not like to force the writing process before she is ready, sometimes a poem needs to be written immediately and put on stage before someone else has the chance to do it first. In describing this sense of urgency she also hit on an important part of slam—there is a status that accompanies original ideas. Others who produce work that is similar are considered derivative.

Even though status and competitive advantage are motivating factors to produce new and original work, follow-up poems are occasionally successful if the original piece is well-known, and the follow-up is done well. For example, Amir Safi wrote a comedic response poem to San Antonio poet Travis Snell's "Caveman Love Letter." Amir was prompted to write his response poem at a time when numerous conversations about writing more comedy-type poems were taking place within the slam community. Comedic poems were gaining the favor of many poets because they offered an emotional respite from the dominant trend of deep, hard hitting identity poems for which slam poetry is so well known. Similarly, at the Killeen poetry slam, 45 miles north of Austin,

there is an ongoing theme where poets attempt to one-up one another by expanding upon a theme originally started by the scene's co-slammaster John Crow. Interestingly, response poems are often used as a prompt for writing poetry, as they become part of the collective solidarity of a group. So, the prompt from a poem could be a response to something a poet hears another poet doing.

For many experienced poets the writing process is one that generally unfolds over time. While the time spent writing a poem can be frustrating, experienced poets generally have an understanding and appreciation of how their process works. For slam poetry veterans, the writing process is something they have spent a great deal of time to develop. Poets with less experience often indicated they did not have a process for writing or were attempting to develop their own writing style.

While the process for writing poetry for many poets is one that unfolds over time, some poets such as Nyne are able to generate new work quickly.

I'm like the drunken master, I sit in my man-cave and I turn off all the music, all TV and all the everything and sometimes just in the dark because you've got lights on your screen now—and I just smoke and I work it out and it just comes to me. It don't take long, I don't smoke a lot, I just do what I gotta do, and before I know it—bam [snaps fingers] it's done. And I'm editing now because you write from your soul, but you edit from your mind. So the reason why I'm smoking is more of a mental help to get it out. Without [smoking], for me, my shit be all over the place and for me, just for me not the next person, but it helps me bring it

in, focus on it for long enough to where I got it and then after that, it's just editing and reciting and trying to get it to memory. I'm a huge showman.

Depending on the topic, Nyne is able to produce a poem in a single sitting.

That's most of the time. "Safe Zone" took a little bit longer—way more touchy subject, had to do some research and stuff like that. But stuff like "Oil in the Water" [snaps fingers]—pow, quick. "Screwston" [snaps fingers]—quick. When I'm saying, I'm gonna write this poem, that's what I do—I sit down and write that poem.

Nyne inhales much life, knowledge, and experience, and exhales it into poetry. Once Nyne has a concept or idea for a poem, he creates an environment free of distractions and puts his pen to work. A component of his creative environment includes smoking to help him increase his focus while allowing him access a certain level of sincerity in his writing.

Once Nyne captures his initial ideas on paper, he transitions to editing. Similar to many experienced poets, Nyne separates the emotive "writing from soul," from the cognitive, "edit from your mind." This allows him to focus on different elements of the poem rather than everything all at once. First, he is able to get the words out, then later sculpt the poem into a finished piece. The partitioning of different aspects of the writing process is a key distinguishing factor between experienced poets and poets with less experience.

In comparison with some of the poets discussed above, Konji had been writing poetry for a relatively short period of time. Prior to participating in slam poetry she

wrote short stories and fan fiction¹³. Even though she has a great deal of writing experience, she considers herself in the process of developing her approach to writing poetry.

I'm still in a process of trying to figure out what I want my writing to be like, what it needs to be; I'm trying to get a happy medium. One thing that's been killing me that everybody's been saying to me is that I have to go back and edit. And I have books and books of writing...this is probably my seventh composition book that's just lying around. I just started on that one and I would write, I have stream of consciousness paragraphs all up in these books but I won't go back for some reason, I don't know why. I won't go back and read it over and edit and make it into a poem; I just keep going and then I just go with the flow, I just keep going. I have a lot of books.

Konji enjoys participating in slam poetry; however, she is not content with her current work or writing process. Konji's experience is not uncommon for newer participants to slam poetry. New writers, or writers adapting to the medium of slam poetry, often struggle creating a poetic style and writing process that consistently works for them. New participants to slam often produce a large amount of writing; however, this often consists of free writing, or writing from prompts. For the most part burgeoning writers do not spend a great deal of time editing, which what a majority of experienced

¹³ Fan fiction is writing about a work, usually a popular work, by another author or authors. In fan fiction writings, characters and/or plots from the original work may be adapted or extended into new stories and adventures.

poets say is the most important component of writing poetry, and is an aspect of the craft that takes time to develop.

Editing processes. A majority of experienced poets described editing as the most important step in the process of writing poetry. For some editing is a tedious, but necessary, chore. Others regarded editing as the most exciting aspect of writing because it is where a poem becomes a poem. Common approaches to editing include shifting written lines around in the poem for placement, trimming down areas of excess, reading the poem aloud to hear how it sounds, and sharing a draft with an audience or trusted group of peers. Intersecting all these areas, Bill places great emphasis on editing.

A lot of people drink so that they don't have to think about the quality of their writing, I just don't think about it, um, I put it all down on page, all the raw material, because I mean - I'm sure you might have heard this analogy but..., Michelangelo would carve a statue, he would get a large slab of marble and he would consider it finished. The statue is already in the slab of marble, all I have to do is chip away the excess. And he called it like freeing the angel inside of marble, dammit that's good. But...that's the idea, and...I adapted that to poetry just like I accepted the fact that I rant and rave if it's not already obvious, by this interview, but um, I say a lot, I hope there's some gems in there and I just work on my ability to identify them and pick out what needs to go in.

Which is a skill I have had to develop, um, and it's not easy, that's the main thing I struggle with is that, because I want to put everything in. I have a hard time killing my darlings, as they say. If it doesn't contribute to the piece

then, or whatever, that's when you have to really confront why am I writing? Is there an agenda I have? Is there a message I'm trying to say or is the message beyond me? If I really want to put this image in but it doesn't like, you know there may be a stanza that...sounds great, I love um, but doesn't move the poem for me to be, or doesn't necessarily elucidate what I'm trying to portray, does it go in? Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes I have to kill it off, which sucks.

I have so much poetry that's just sitting on my computer. It's like well, see you later, um, but then sometimes I'm like screw it, you know, this is my poetry, I'm putting it in there because I like it and then that might be the part where people...[say] I love that part, yes. You know, take it. Take that, responsible editing.

Bill juxtaposed his process for writing with the practice of poets who practice drinking while writing. For some writers, alcohol consumption serves a function similar to what Nyne describes with smoking, it helps poets create a distance from their personal and/or social filter, which helps them to write uninhibitedly. Most poets will agree it is challenging to produce work that attains a high level of honesty and sincerity. Whether writing about the personal, social, or an intersection somewhere in between, it is a vulnerable terrain for a writer to traverse. A major reason for the challenge is criticism, either self-criticism or the perceived or anticipated response of others (family, peers, the generalized other). By writing under the influence poets are unable to sidestep creative

barriers, opening up new avenues of possibility that may have been overlooked otherwise.

Bill indicated he is able to write without judgment or expectation simply by not thinking about what he is producing. Once he has his content, he begins what he described as “freeing the angel” by chipping away the unnecessary excess of the poem. Bill’s editing process is a reductive one. He begins with a large amount of writing and edits it down to fit the format of slam poetry. Knowing what to chip away, where to chip, and what to retain is one of the biggest challenges of editing. This is especially true when one is emotionally invested in everything they have put down on the page. When Bill is presented with what may seem as an insurmountable obstacle, he will step away from a poem and return to it later when there is less emotion involved.

Once Bill has what he considers to be a sharable draft version of the poem, he will read it from paper in front of an audience. As Bill reads the poem he is particularly attentive to the way he is reading, how it sounds, what parts he is excited about, what parts do not quite feel right, all while he is gauging the audience response. Bill has had experiences where he thought a poem was completed and then once he was performing it on stage he discovered there was more work to do. Occasionally, Bill will make adjustments on the fly during a performance, where he will change things up, and flip things around unbeknownst to the audience. Bill considers his heightened sense of self-awareness part of the writing process, rather than an extension of it.

Knowing how to edit is something all poets struggle with, new or experienced. Experienced poets, however, generally have more resources and/or have developed a

method to help guide them through the process. For example, former Meta-Four Houston poet Joshua Nyugen is transitioning from the youth poetry scene to participating in adult poetry slams. Joshua indicated he loves weaving lines together during editing; however, in the past he had the scaffolding of his coaches to help him. With the scaffolding removed, he struggles making critical decisions during editing, but unlike poets who do not have the benefit of coaching, he has tools in his “toolkit” to assist him (Vygotsky 1934/1987; Swidler 1986). Newer poets may not have such a repertoire to fall back on.

Metacognition. Poets devote considerable amounts of time writing, editing, and performing poetry. However, reflecting upon different elements of the writing process is less common. Bill is a poet who is especially reflective of his process.

And whether that’s even...a thing,...an objective truth, or...something that can be quantified,...that’s not so much the point. The point is, since the poem is coming from your brain, it’s so important how you think of writing... you don’t even really think about that...but how you perceive your process, and...the mindset that you have going in to writing, is just as important as the words you put down on the page, it dictates what you write...whether I think that this poem is coming from the heavens and the clouds are parting and I’m just a vessel and it’s channeling through me and you know writing, but maybe that’s not true. But to me...if it produces good poetry no one can tell me otherwise. That is the mindset I’m going with. I’m less concerned in how objectively true that is than...what it produces.

To solidify his point, Bill indicated,

People need to think about how they think about poetry. Or at least I do, I tell myself that because I like to...think a lot, but I mean not necessarily at the beginning. At the beginning just do whatever...whatever you want, do what feels right, don't over think it, let it just come out.

Poets that were able to detail their writing process generally spent a fair amount of time reflecting on how they write. Understanding the writing process is a key factor for poets who consistently produce work and those who are generally happy with the work they produce.

Creative influences. It would be an insurmountable task to account for all the possible influences on a poet's writing. This is because influences are multifaceted, continuously in flux, and do not always reveal themselves to the writer until much later, if ever. Even when poets are not in the process of writing they are in the process of processing. That is, poets may be influenced by anyone or anything they come into contact with, even those they do not. Yet still, there are four sources poetic influences generally correspond to: personal experiences; culture and nature; other cultural objects and creators; and peers. While each source of inspiration is distinct, they are not experienced in isolation, but rather simultaneously, in interaction with one another.

A common element of the poetry of Jacob, Nyne, Ebony, and Danny is that the majority of their writing is inspired from their own experiences. Indeed, personal experience appeared to be the most influential constituent of a poet's writing. Lacey

Roop is another poet who derives inspiration from her own experience and unique perception of the world.

I draw inspiration from everywhere. Aristotle's poetics—the three essential components to life: language, (indecipherable), and conflict. It's important to understand that conflict does not mean chaos. There is an order to it. It is an essential component into life, like struggle. If we didn't have it, at least to a certain degree, we wouldn't progress. Take for example, Georgia O'Keefe's work. She creates these really big, beautiful flowers. People always ask her why do you paint flowers? She says that she doesn't paint flowers because she likes them, but because she finds beauty in everything. Especially in the places that are overlooked on a daily basis. She paints the flowers so people will notice them and see their beauty. So people won't continue to overlook them. That's what I do with poetry. I want people to take notice of what they don't normally see.

People won't look until it's brought to their attention. And that's what I try to do.

Lacey distinguished seeing abstractly from seeing and then abstracting what is seen. Lacey attributed her ability to see what others often overlook because she initially perceives in the abstract and moves toward the concrete. From her perspective many view the world mainly in the concrete. Perceiving the world in the abstract, at least initially, allows her the ability to make connections within and between things that would seem otherwise unrelated. The challenging task for her is finding the language to communicate the hidden beauty of the world that she perceives to others who do not experience it in the same way. Herein lies the conflict she described as an essential

component of life—there is tension between visibly concrete and abstracted intangible perceptions of the world. By bringing these perspectives into conversation with one another she is gesturing toward harmony.

As mentioned above, Bill is heavily influenced by imagery, which he attributed to his reading of Carl Jung, and especially to the work of early slam poetry pioneer, Saul Williams.

Like I said, I was reading a lot of Saul Williams, listening to a lot of his stuff and was drawn to it because, I mean, he opens poems with lines like ‘and out of the sun’s gates...come little girls with dresses of fire and hair of braided smoke that stem from their moon cratered scalps’ and...my imagination just latched on to that. I...[thought] this is amazing, and...it just got me thinking about writing what’s possible. It’s one of those things...my perception of poetry at the time was...old dead white guys talking about flowers. Great. But and then you get this dude who’s...one foot in the theatre, one foot into...hip-hop and he’s...writing these things that are...really cool.

Experiencing and reflecting on Saul’s poetry had a profound effect on Bill’s imagination. Saul’s seemingly impossible images held keys to doors of possibilities, and he was offering a set to Bill on loan. With freshly cut keys in hand, Bill was able to circumvent doormen gatekeeping entrances, stepping over the threshold of his own choosing.

Another influential source of inspiration and feedback comes from peers. In slam this happens in a variety of ways. Peers in the slam scene range from close personal

friends to acquaintances only encountered during poetry slam events. Conversations, critiques, and watching and listening to peers all influence poets in ways ranging from the subtle to the explicit. Another influential source of inspiration from peers occurs in competition with one another. Regardless of the relationship between peers, most slam poets compete against their peers at some time or another. Recognizing how influential competition between peers can be for writing, Fluent indicates,

Competitive culture kind of breeds...a betterment of yourself unless you become the capitalist who figures out how to win with trickery—which sometimes happens in slams, but different people argue the methods about that. I think generally almost every person that I've seen in the Houston community who's been involved with poetry seriously, once they go to a national-level competition, they don't stay the same. Khalid would be a great example of that. He went to Nationals in Minnesota, he made a point to get up there and he would hang out with the team, drive them to different venues and when he got back and not even, before he got back—while he was there, he was...I gotta change my poetry. And he gave me an idea and I...[thought], oh just keep working on it, keep working on it. And then that became his first amazing poem. It's day and night between Khalid before and Khalid after to the point where he's even re-written some of his older poems concept-wise with what he's picked up—writing, style, and quality—while still retaining his own identity.

Competition occurs at various levels local, regional, national, and international.

Not all poets participate at these various levels; however, for those who do, the

competition between peers is a strong source of inspiration for them. For some, like Fluent's example of the change in Khalid's poetry, competition can create an epiphanic moment, inspiring one to step-up their slam poetry game. Conversely, the competition aspect is a source of discontent for some poets who do not enjoy competing with some of their most personal and intimate experiences, against peers who are doing the same.

Responses to Poetry

One of the most unique and sensational aspects of slam poetry events is the interaction between performers and audiences. Audiences are encouraged to snap their fingers, clap, stand, and shout, before, during, and after a performance. Interactivity can be exciting for the audience as it allows them to become a co-participant of the performance. Interactivity is exciting for poets as well because they are able to evaluate how they are doing by the response of the audience. If an audience is responding favorably to a performance, a poet is likely to return that energy to the audience. However, if an audience is not responding favorably, the poet may tweak their performance, fine-tuning it to an audience's preferences in a manner such as Bill discussed above. The reciprocating relationship between poets and audiences can result in an increase of energy or decrease in momentum during a slam poetry event.

Beyond the performance there are opportunities for poets and audiences to interact. Often, audience members will approach a poet to tell them they like their poem, thank them, and perhaps begin a discussion. At times, interactions between poets and audience members may be a little awkward; however, most often, these exchanges are positive. On occasion, poets will receive critical feedback on their work from an

audience member. Whether the nature of feedback is positive or critical, interaction with the audience is helpful for poets because it provides an additional measure of how their poetry is being received.

Audience response. Assessing and anticipating the reception of an audience can be challenging because, as Outspoken observes, “Three different people can hear the exact same poem from the exact same poet three different ways.” Outspoken continued,

Case in point: I think this is case in point—my poem with Trayvoning.¹⁴ I wrote it kind of in a white out moment of the situation when Trayvoning started being popular and I was like, I’m gonna make this a group poem! I brought this to my teammates, I was like, Yo, we are all going to laugh in the beginning. And then when I started explaining what Trayvoning is, y’all are gonna mime it as I’m talking and then y’all get on the floor and you’ll stay on the floor in the Trayvoning position and I’ll keep doing the poem. I told it to my coach and she...[said], “that’s ridiculous, let’s go with it.” I told my team members, they’re like, I’m with it—all except James—James was like, You know, I think people are gonna think we’re gonna pop up of the floor. I’m like, No one’s gonna think that. Then we started performing it at different venues, get it tested before going to Boston and people loved it—it was edgy, it was something different, they had never seen it before, whatever. In front of white audiences—we have to find those here—but in front of white audiences, in front of predominately black, our

¹⁴ Trayvonning was a social media trend where young White males posed for photographs reenacting the death of Trayvon Martin, a teenager who was killed by George Zimmerman.

home audience, we did parties—we did it a good several times and we got great response out of especially that part. So in my mind, I...[thought], Yo, this is a solid poem; the poem is good—that’s an extra, an extra. Then I get to Boston, we [draw] the B¹⁵ in our bout, we have LA in there, Delray Beach. We have Toronto. LA is definitely the competitors. Delray Beach, they do a group piece and I...[say], we’re doing “Trayvoning.” They were..., Alright, let’s do it. I do it, I kill it! It scores 5, 6, 8, 9.1, 9.9 [choking noises].

Houston VIP’s experience with Trayvoning illustrated how poems receive different responses depending upon the audience. Trayvoning was initially Bean’s idea, written as a critical response to the trend that was taking place on social media. The poem served as a way for Outspoken Bean to vent his frustration with the blatant racism and outright disregard for Martin. Prior to competing in NATS, VIP performed their poems in front of different audiences. Prior to taking the stage at NATS, the response they received from Trayvoning was overwhelmingly positive. This provided the team with the confidence that they had a poem that would get a high score if they were facing tough competition in their bout. However, in front of the audience in Boston, the poem did not go over as well as back in Houston. In Houston, Trayvoning consistently scored

¹⁵ A team poetry slam consists of multiple bouts of competition. A standard format for a team poetry slam consists of four teams competing in a bout. A bout consists of four individual rounds where each team has an opportunity to perform during a round. The order of performances is determined by drawing a letter (A, B, C, or D) prior to the competition. Following the first round, the order changes: (2nd round) B, C, D, A; (3rd round) C, D, A, B; (4th round) D, A, B, C. Depending upon the poetry slam, the top team of each bout will advance to another bout of the competition until a winner is declared.

high 9s and 10s. In Boston it received an overall score of 23.1, which was the lowest score of the round.

One reason for a difference in scores between poetry venues is home bias. A home bias occurs when a poet is well known and liked by a local audience. Poets who are well liked by the audience at their local venue generally score better during competitions against poets who are not well known, or not generally favored by an audience. Poets who are not favored by a local audience sometimes do better at other poetry venues. Heart is an example of a poet who generally received moderate scores at his home venue, Mic Check; however, he rarely won the local poetry slam. It was not until he started performing in other venues that he started winning poetry slam competitions.

In addition to home bias, all venues have a style of poetry that tends to do better than others. For example, Josh Nguyen, a poet who recently relocated from Houston to Austin, observed differences in the poetry topics between APS and VIP. Often discussing God in his poetry, Josh regularly performed at VIP. He has been reluctant to perform the same work at APS, “I’ve never done a poem about God here yet [APS], I haven’t done one here yet. In Houston they usually receive it well.” Josh has not performed a poem about God at APS because he is uncertain about how it will be received. At VIP poets routinely talk about God and religion in their performances, while at APS, he has only encountered work that is critical of religious perspectives. Josh attributes the difference to VIP still being a relatively new scene, so the audience is in the process of developing a group style and learning what to expect

from poets and performances. APS has been around a long time and has a particular style that resonates with the local audience.

Josh's experience is an example of how the culture of a group has an influence on the type of performances that poets may or may not be comfortable in performing. Christopher Michael hinted at this as well:

There's poems that I either didn't write or wrote—they're incredible poems that I didn't do on stage because I felt it might be too raw. And I wasn't worried about offending random audience members; I was worried about offending people that I've grown to love in slam and...I think they would have a problem with this poem. They would take it too personally so I'm not gonna do it or I'll re-write it in such a way that by the time they're done, if they listened to me they'll be...[thinking], oh I got what you're saying, I'm cool with you.

Poets sometimes come to recognize they have a particular audience that resonates with their work. For example, Keith often performs a great deal of break-up poetry. He suggests that his work resonates mostly with women 20-25 years of age. Christopher Michael indicates his audience is mostly White and middle-class. He attributes this partially to the demographic he is writing to. Christopher often discusses race in his poetry. He suggests that Black people already understand what he is talking about so he does not write for them. His hope is to reach audiences with different experiences. He is able to gauge whether his approach is effective by the response he receives from the audience.

Whether performing for a new venue, local community, or niche audience, the interaction between audience and performer is an innovative and influential aspect of slam poetry. Unlike most other artistic mediums, slam poetry allows poets to instantaneously gauge how an audience receives their work. Feedback from an audience can have an immediate impact upon a performance. If audience responses are positive and enthusiastic, this is often returned to the audience with an increase of energy in the performance. This also operates in the opposite direction. When a performance is not received well, the poet may attempt to make spontaneous changes to win over the audience, or the lack of interest could alienate the poet from the performance. Beyond the immediacy of a performance, an audience's response often influences poets' artistic production and future performances.

Conversely, audiences are also influenced by performances. Members of the audience are encouraged to interact with a performer by snapping, clapping, yelling, and attempting to influence the judges' scoring of a performance. Audiences often have emotional responses to a performance. Sometimes this motivates audience members to approach a poet following a performance. Occasionally, audience members are motivated to write and perform their own poetry. This interactivity illustrates a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the performer, where boundaries separating each are fluid rather than static.

Peer response. In addition to the general audience, peer responses are another influential source of feedback. Some poets indicated feedback from peers is more meaningful than from others. This is especially true when feedback comes from a more

experienced peer. Prince recalled the first time a more experienced peer complimented his poetry,

One of my, one of the first times I went to Mic Check on Sunday I did that poem, my old piece. I've always looked up to Good Ghost Bill, so I remember we were outside and Brent's sitting on one side and Good Ghost Bill is on the other and the line is, 19 miles of mommy and daddy. And I remember getting off stage and Bill...[said], that line about the gasoline and the parents, Oh my gosh! And I look over [at] Brent and I...[say], "Good Ghost Bill just liked my line! Good Ghost Bill liked my line!" And we just started laughing and like cracking up.

While the compliment was a simple gesture on Bill's part, because of his status as a writer and member of the community, Prince was flattered by the compliment. Receiving positive feedback from a peer inspired Prince to want to write and perform more often. Christopher Michael shared a similar sentiment,

There are moments I've not won slams, and either the audience or my peers will come up to me and say, you were incredible; I thought you should've won. And that feels almost and sometimes better than actually winning. That feels like I won. Or when one person comes up to me and says, Your poem touched me—or—I was a soldier too—or—I went through the same thing—or—I write a poem about black history and a white person will come up to me and say, I didn't know that; thank you for telling me that—that feels more like a win than winning the slam.

While praise from peers is rewarding, the lack of acceptance can be challenging and unpleasant. After participating in the slam community as an audience member, Victoria transitioned to writing and performing poetry in front of an audience. Even though Victoria has been writing for a long period of time, she did not perform her work so many within the community viewed her role as an audience member rather than as a peer.

And to me, you know, for years, for a year and a half, almost two years, people were... [saying], oh she's not a poet, whatever..., I remember walking in specifically and the person I was with was like, well she's got paper, and he said just because you have paper doesn't mean you're a poet. And I was like, but it does, and you saying that to me makes me even not want to more because I know that you're not, you may not be the only one who has that reaction. They may not have it as drastically, or as rudely as you put it, but there's going to be others who have that reaction.

The struggle for peer acceptance within the slam community became a source of commitment, though Victoria admitted, at times made her not want to do endure the criticism.

Assessment of Work

When poets reflect upon their work, almost all have mixed feelings about their early writing. Many poets who have been around slam poetry for a long period of time acknowledge that writing has to start somewhere, and the somewhere is usually not very good; however, it is part of the process of getting better. Despite the necessary evil, most

poets view their early work as weak, embarrassing, too whiney, and/or unsophisticated. A few poets indicated they wrote frequently, but either did not know how to write or they were unsure what they were writing about. Bill recalled his early work:

I think I wasn't really sure what I was writing about. Um, I had content just pouring out of me, words um, meaning, that came second. My process has always, generally been like this...but was definitely like this more so when I started writing...especially with my early work, or...the work that I started sharing...was very, like I said, image heavy. But specifically, my poems pretty much began and ended with...surreal imagery.

Victoria had similar feelings toward her early writing,

I've always been writing...poetry and things like that. That was a catharsis for me in high school to get out of my own head was to just write and it's terrible. I found one of my binders and it's the worst things I've ever read. I rhyme and I hate rhyming now. And it was, it's a very interesting experience to see where you were and where you are now and just how much, and people don't know how much my writing has just been, how ever, many years. You know I guess it's been I guess about eight years now since I've started writing, like how much I've changed. I started writing I guess what we would call slam poetry in 2012.

A common approach for newer writers is rhyme with their poetry. Many new to slam poetry, poets and audiences, perceive rhyming as a central feature of the art form. This perception tends to dissipate as exposure to slam poetry increases. Amir is one poet

whose early work was influenced by hip-hop, and as such his poetry had a lot of rhyming. Amir's approach continued until Buck Hogue, a more experienced peer, told him he needed to stop rhyming and just write. Prince had a similar experience, "My first poem I tried rhyming a lot, that was it. But after that I was lucky I had a bunch of coaches around me that...shaped who I am today." In both instances, each poet had an idea what consisted of poetry. Once they were able to move past preconceptions, they were able to grow as poets.

Danny had almost an opposite experience. He knew he wanted to be a writer; however, he did not really have any preconceptions of what that meant, or how to go about becoming one.

So what does that mean? I don't know; how do you be a writer? Do you need school? I don't know; I want to be a writer, that's what I know.

So I was going to school and I got a job at a tech company and I was kind of spinning my wheels a bit at school and dropped out and it was a year or so after that I found the poetry slam. And it was actually, it was just obviously, what I wanted to do. I always wanted to write essays on my opinions on things and maybe get into performing and it was like, Oh! This is thing I've been looking for—this is what I'll do; I could be good at this. And that was the strangest thing about it which was, even though I was terrible at it I knew that I could be good at it and I was...I will be good at this; I just have to keep doing it.

CS: Why do you think you were terrible? On what criteria are you basing your assessment?

I'm basing it on a couple of things. I got very low scores and I was in some ways being kind of intentionally obnoxious because I thought it was funny. I was somewhat immature—was 23 years old, I guess—24, 23—and I knew a lot less about the world than I do now and I think when you're younger you think that you know everything but maybe you don't. One of the ways that I learned that was I'd go up and [proclaim]...this is my opinion! And people would [respond]...your opinion is a 2. And you're like, Oh, ok! I also found that I was very polarizing; I've always had a big tendency to—I'll get two low scores, really low scores, and two really high scores and maybe one in the middle but usually it would be two on one side and three on the other. I'm not likely to go up in a slam—even today—and get 8s across the board; that's just not gonna happen to me—I'm gonna get a 6, a 7, and three 10s! It's crazy and I've always wondered why that is as well. But early in my work...I'd get four low scores and one high score and now I've gotten, on average, in the other direction.

Discovering slam poetry provided Danny with direction of how to become a writer. His approach was to do what he always wanted to do—to write his down his opinions and figure out the details out as he went. Looking back at his work Danny views his early writing as terrible because it received low scores from the audience. He notes, however, that his work has always divided the audience, something that continues today even though his poetry has become increasingly sophisticated.

There comes a pivotal moment for many poets where something that had not occurred to them previously becomes transparent. Recalling his early work James

indicated he did not know how to write, then one day the writing process suddenly made sense.

It wasn't until...what's funny now is that people know me for my imagery. I had no clue how to write at—no idea, not even remotely close. And all of a sudden, it literally just clicked one day and I still remember my first line I ever wrote in my life, it was, she reminded me of abandoned cigarettes waiting to be lit again.

And...I thought of it and I wrote it down and I [thought], fuck that sounds good! And then I wrote my first slam piece off of that. And then right after that I wrote "Rounds," you know?

Once James made the connection it spawned a train of productivity, which helped him gain confidence in his writing and performing abilities. Bill described his transition to more sophisticated work in a similar manner,

I was talking about the subject, about John Paul, the suicide victim, saying he did this, he did this, he did this, but...it just didn't work, it just came across as...flowery journalism. Like a reporter who has had too much to drink and is trying to be, you know, poetic. And I was...this is all good and fine, but...why does the audience care? You know...why is this important? That wasn't coming through.

And then it just sort of clicked to me where I was. There's this weird distance in the poem between the audience and the subject and...it just sort of clicked to me and it was like well, if I want to close the distance and bring the audience,...if it's like a room, if I want to bring the audience into the room

or...build the room around them. I have to talk to the circumstance, you know, close that gap. It's as simple as changing "he" to "you" [from]... he did this, to...you did this. And then from there, the rest of it just spilled out, you know.

But that's the idea. Once I found that thing...the tone changed. I'm gonna talk directly to them. I found the voice of the poem, the tone, and it all just flowed out and it was like whoa. And I'm...watching this, I'm watching my hand...write all this stuff, you know.

Both James' and Bill's transformations were epiphanic moments in their writing process. For James it was learning how to connect imagery and metaphor. For Bill it was to "close the gap" transitioning from describing a subject to embodying the subject and talking from first person perspective. Such moments are transformative and frequently denote a time when someone who occasionally writes poetry begins viewing himself as a poet. This is also a transformation in which poets often feel like they are beginning to produce work they feel has maturity, quality, or sophistication.

Goals and Challenges

The number and level of accomplishments are distinguishing factors between poets participating in the slam scene. The accomplishments of participants in this study ranged from just beginning writers, to regionally, nationally, and internationally ranked poets. A number of poets are published authors; one poet started his own publishing company. A few poets have had videos of their work go viral on the Internet via YouTube, Button Poetry, Upworthy, and HuffPost. Two participants are national Haiku poetry champions, while many poets are working professionals. A large number have

undergraduate degrees or are in the process of obtaining one. Several poets have advanced degrees or are currently attending graduate school. With so much already achieved inside and outside of slam, poets were asked what their goals were for their poetry.

Creative goals. The most common goal articulated by poets was to continue producing more work. The production of work is hoped to lead to competing and winning poetry slam competitions, to be able to make a slam team, to publish their work, to tour nationally and internationally, all of which contribute to being a professional or an elite caliber poet. While a large number of poets would like to make their living as a writer, very few see writing poetry as something they could pursue fulltime.

Another ambitious goal many poets expressed includes building support for their poetry community. Nyne is focused on building support for the arts community in Houston. He views building community support as intersecting with his own goals for his poetry.

I think that's what every poet should write for, though. I think every poet should be like, Love what I'm saying—don't you agree with me? It's three minutes and ten seconds to basically get somebody to either agree with you or change how they feel to agree with you, you know what I'm saying? So that's the only reason you should write slam poetry is to wow the socks off of people to be considered like, Wow that's impressive; I never thought I could do that...I hope they take what I did and I hope they'll be like, Man! If they're not from Houston I hope they go home and they find some poetry to make them feel the same way that

they just felt. I hope that if they are from here that they find us at Boomtown Coffee and come and [say]... I'm sold. I'm a fan. I wanna build relationships but all that is based on being awesome. If you suck, ain't nobody wanna be your friend, you know what I'm saying? It's all about making them say, he knows what the hell he's talking about and is just so professional that I'm sold—I gotta buy into this.

Creative challenges. Many poets included in this study are ambitious, often balancing many different aspects of their lives. Whether attending to work, family, personal and professional responsibilities, school, or any other aspects that demand their time and attention, almost all poets desired more time to spend on writing and practicing poetry. Josh indicated that he is unable to spend very much time writing because the majority of his time is focused on school.

I write less because of college; just because I'm studying so much which I hate because poetry is the one thing I'm very passionate about but it sucks how I'm in college where I can't focus on my passion...It's not like riding a bike; you can ride a bike whenever you want. Whenever I try writing and I haven't written in a while, it's really hard and it never comes out like what I want it to be. That's why when I went to the Texas Grand Slam I loved it because after being immersed in all the poetry—three days—I was back in the grind. I have a lot of ideas now. So I write less in college because I'm studying so much, it's pretty sad.

As a single mother and working professional, Reese's time is fairly accounted for. While she has aspirations to pursue her poetry passions, she is mindful not to take on

too much because her decisions not only affect her but also those around her, most importantly her son.

This is something I would want to do and at one time I want to; I really do. So that was one of the ones I got on my radar. I like it because it's here, it's home so if I ever made the team that would be awesome but in the back of my mind and the truth is—I feel like I would be hurting the team more than I would help only because of my own circumstances. I know it could be adjusted around my schedule but I wouldn't want the team to adjust because I'm a mom with my son and he's young right now so...I know how schizo my schedule changes are—if he gets sick, I'm out. And if I give my word, I wanna give my word. I'm not gonna say, Yes I can do it—Oh, that time though? No, I gotta cancel that; let's switch that time—I don't like doing that.

In addition to limitations on time, additional challenges for poets include overcoming performance anxiety, and managing self-doubt and criticism. Most poets will admit it is not easy to get on stage and perform in front of an audience. Aside from a small number of poets like Christopher Michael, who took to the stage immediately, or Outspoken Bean, who has a performing arts background, most poets struggle with performing in front of an audience, at least in the beginning. Performing does become easier as poets become more confident in their abilities and they become more comfortable in front of an audience. But learning to manage performance anxiety is something that only comes with spending time in front of an audience and reflecting on these experiences.

Competitive Aspects of Slam Poetry

The most distinguishing feature of slam poetry is that it is a competition. What does it mean to participants in slam poetry who not only write poetry, but use their writing to compete? Many poets enjoy the competitive aspects of slam poetry, while others do not. For poets such as Christopher, it allows them to engage in strategic aspects of the competition. This includes paying close attention to how judges are scoring other poets and using this information to devise a strategy to gain a competitive advantage in the competition. For example, if comedic pieces are scoring better than hard-hitting identity pieces during a slam, a poet may want to perform a funny piece. If the majority of poems performed during a slam are really deep and heavy with content, then a poet performing a comedic piece may be a welcomed sign of relief for the crowd. Strategically, it instantly distinguishes them from the rest of the competition.

One of the most assiduous slam strategists is Danny Strack. Danny keeps a record of every poem that has been performed at APS during his tenure as slammaster. He is able to break down how a poem has scored over time, and under what circumstances the poem was scored. This is especially beneficial for his own work as he is able to make inferences regarding how a poem might score under a particular set of conditions. Slam strategies range from simple, such as leading with your best poem in the competition, to attempting to win the early favor of the audience and securing a spot in the next round of competition, to more complex strategies such as Danny's review of scores and circumstances of poems performed.

Some poets enjoy the slam competition, but prefer not to engage in competitive strategy because it conflicts with the artistic aspects of what they are attempting to accomplish. Ebony's experience during the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS) qualifier at APS illustrated this perspective.

I never know. I don't listen to the score—I don't know, I don't know. I have no idea what I make. So last night I heard my first score and it was like, What? What? What was my score? It was a 27.1—that shook me. What? 27.1? That piece is awesome, what are you talking about? And it's only awesome because I love it and it's new so I think I made the decision based on the fact that I heard a score that I'm not used to hearing behind my name and...I gotta make up for it! Because that's what happens when people sit there and write numbers and they strategically—which is, some people are great at it, I'm not a strategic-point-score-writer-person—I'm all about, this is what I wanna do, love it or leave it. This is what I'm doing and I think because I heard that score I was like, Whoa! I need to make my score up; I need to make my points up. Yeah it was tough; it was tough. And the piece that I wanted to do—I felt bad that I didn't do it because I really wanted to read that piece mostly because I felt like it was a piece that needed to be done.

Competition sometimes gets the best of me when it comes to poetry. In no other art form have I experienced myself being like, I'm gonna pull back or, Nope, I'm just gonna do this. No other—what? Like any—if you take sport—Ok, so you're not gonna try to run your fastest if you're in track? You're gonna slow

down? What are you doing, Ebony? In no other sport does this happen! You can dunk the ball but you're not going to; you're just gonna try to do a layup and miss or what is that you're thinking? And this is the only sport or art form that I have witnessed myself be like, I'm gonna question this and figure out which one is more important. Am I trying to make a statement or do I wanna do what's gonna feel good or do I wanna get some points? I think that's the thing that every slam poet goes through—they have to make a decision on what to do with that.

Ebony illustrated the conflict that can happen between artistic imperative, wanting to perform a poem because it is what feels right, and the competitive aspects of attempting to win. In general, Ebony does not listen to how her poems score. This allows her not to worry about her placement in the competition and she is able to perform the poetry she sets out to perform. However, on this particular occasion, she heard her scores announced over the PA system. Because the stakes were so high for the WOWPS representative, she made the decision to perform a piece that generally scores really well, but it was not the poem she wanted to perform that evening.

Summary of Artists and Artistic Production

This section focused on the creative production of artists who participated in slam poetry, emphasizing the meaning of such artistic activity. An analysis of participant observations, discussions, and interviews resulted in the construction of the following themes: Personal Attributes, Artistic Production, Creative Process, Responses to Poetry, Assessment of Work, Goals and Challenges, and the Competition Aspects of Slam

Poetry. The following section focuses on the group aspects of slam poetry including the audiences and communities that attend and support slam poetry.

Audience, Community, and Participation

Audience

An important facet of the slam poetry art world includes the audiences who attend poetry slam events. While the term audience is appropriate for those attending a slam poetry event, greater specification is necessary because an audience is not homogenous. Poetry slam events are comprised of several intersecting audiences, which include but are not limited to poets who may or may not be competing or performing, friends of poets or other active members of the poetry community, local art or music scene goers, frequent non- or occasionally-performing attendees, casual observers, and those who may be at the event by chance.

This section focuses on the meaning of slam poetry from the perspectives of the various audiences who attend slam poetry. Particular attention is given toward how participants are involved within a poetry slam scene and their motivation to attend a poetry slam event.

Coming to watch poetry. Slam poetry appeals to many because it is performed live in front an audience. Jane, a graduate student at the University of Texas, regularly attends Austin Poetry Slam (APS) because of the excitement of live performance.

Well the thing that draws me in is I love live performance. I did technical theater for 10 years as a serious hobby into my 20's and then realized I didn't want that kind of life so it wasn't gonna be a life's work. I wanted more control over where

I lived and not just going where I could find a job. So I haven't done that in many, many years but that kind of got me sucked into—I mean, I just love the connection and the intensity and the risk-taking of live performance whatever kind it is. And so slam poetry has all of that stuff.

Jane described herself as an older participant of the slam scene. Indeed, she indicated she is almost twice the age of the median age range of the performers at APS. Despite the distance in age, Jane is an avid enthusiast of live performance and theater and attends poetry slam because it provides her with many of the elements that she appreciates about live theater. Indeed, the excitement of experiencing a live performance is one of the main reasons audience members provide for attending poetry slam events. Part of the excitement as Jane mentioned is the risk factor involved with live performance as poets are performing, most often from memory, to an audience of peers, family, friends, casual acquaintances, and people they have never met.

The excitement, intensity, and risk involved make the art form of slam poetry uniquely entertaining for many audience members. Describing the entertainment factor, Christopher Michael indicated,

Oh...I think it's [slam poetry] definitely entertaining. I think it's a mixture of voyeurism and people who would be interested in standup comedy because when a poet is "spitting,"¹⁶ they are laying their lives on the line. Most poets are either telling true stories, or it's based on a true story—regardless, it's somebody's pain

¹⁶ Spitting is a term used by poets to describe a passionate performance by a poet. This is similar to what poets mean by "going in" on a performance.

and you're convinced that that poet lived through whatever that is. And you know, humans kind of get off on that; that's why reality shows do so well. And then it can just be raw entertainment...It wouldn't be successful if it wasn't entertaining, you know. That's one of the reasons they created slam because seeing people compete against each other was more entertaining than just a regular open mic.

Slam poetry is about life, love, drama, comedy, tragedy, and for the most part is performed from a first person perspective of the individual who is experiencing it, although persona poems, where a poet takes on a perspective other than their own, are not uncommon. What is unique about the space of the poetry slam is it allows participants access to poets' personal experiences, which would ordinarily be reserved for more intimate interpersonal interactions. In other words, the audience is permitted privileged access to discourse that would otherwise take place in backstage settings.

Although backstage discourses have been scripted for front stage performances, that is, performances are not spontaneous interactions that may actually occur within actual backstage settings, poets make themselves vulnerable to multiple audiences, nonetheless. This is not unlike actual backstage discourse, as people share different aspects of their experiences even with those who they maintain personal relationships. The nature, depth, and intensity of discourse people engage in is influenced by the relationship between those they are interacting with, the context of the relationship, as well as the context in which interactions take place—all of which are fluid. As illustrated in Chapter III there are multiple selves and different aspects of the self are revealed or

shared depending upon the relationship between those in interaction and the contexts in which interactions take place. For example, what I share with my partner about an experience may be different than what I share with my mother, which both may be different than what I share with an audience while performing on stage. Each of these would be an accurate representation of an experience; only the discourse or social script utilized to communicate the experience would be shaped by the context in which the interactions take place.

The slam poetry stage allows for an intersection of contexts, where an interaction between front stage/backstage discourses creates a transitional context for moments of shared intimacy between participants without the full commitment of interpersonal relationships. This allows participants to engage in communication that ordinarily would not be expressed outside the context of an interpersonal relationship.

Anderson (2011) makes a similar observation, as what he calls the cosmopolitan canopy provides a context where interpersonal interactions have the opportunity to take place, and where they might not have otherwise. This is not an assessment of quantity, quality, or sincerity of interactions, but rather an observation that boundaries, within certain spaces, can provide situational contexts for interactions to occur. The opportunity to engage in these interactions is highly desirable for many participants of slam poetry, both audiences and poets.

As will be discussed further below, the opportunity to hear someone speaking from first person experiences is beneficial for both audiences and performers. However, the voyeuristic aspects of slam poetry have prompted some to question audience

motivations for attending slam poetry events. As a participant of poetry slam for well over a decade, Somers-Willet (2009) argues slam poetry audiences are primarily White and middle-class, while performers generally occupy marginalized identities. Somers-Willet is skeptical whether White middle-class audiences are seeking out meaningful interactions, or assuaging White guilt. Since Somers-Willet's observations, the demographics of slam poetry, both audiences and performers, have diversified significantly. The increasing diversity of slam poetry events may be an indication that participants are searching for transformative experiences and meaningful interactions.

The voyeuristic aspect of slam poetry is not unrecognized by performers. Some poets view this as an unfortunate bi-product, while others welcome the opportunity to have their voice heard. If a poet wants to voice their opinion on a public stage, they have little control over who is listening and for what reasons. Yet, many poets acknowledge that slam poetry and open mic events provide spaces where they are able to talk about things they are not able to discuss in everyday conversations with most people. For example, in most everyday situations one cannot approach a person and talk to them about sexism or talk to them about race relations in the ways that these topics are talked about on stage.

The stage provides a platform for challenging dominant cultural structures that many living on/within/outside the margins of society see and experience on a frequent, if not daily, basis. Poets often indicate the stage is a space that allows for place making, where some poets talk about experiences and gain a greater cultural awareness or a greater insight. For audience members not having access to perspectives from the

margins, but who remain open to the possibilities of boundary crossings, the slam poetry spaces are respites from external cultural pressures, and allow them to do culture in a way that may not be readily achievable in their everyday interactions. For audience members who share perspectives from the margins, hearing others highlight similar experiences can be encouraging.

The performance of lived experience provides a significant draw for many participants; however, it is not the only reason audiences attend poetry slam events. Houston-based poet, The Fluent One (Fluent), recognized a sizable number of people at a poetry slam event may be attending unintentionally or because someone invited them.

I think for someone who comes to VIP—I mentioned earlier, maybe about 20–25% of the audiences come in a particular night just happened to be there by chance. Some like their experiences and they came back. So we're getting a good, consistent new following in the Heights area. Then at the same time, we get people from the broader Houston poetry community, because when poets come out, they invite people. So you have friends who come out and then they become appreciative of other people's work. They may know one or two poets but then they...[say], oh I really liked this poem that you did, that person. And so then they come back on their own sometime without their original friend being there because they're liking what they hear.

Fluent attributed the interaction aspects of slam poetry as a big attraction for audiences.

And I think that because of the interactive aspect of being able to cheer and boo judge scores, it gives an investment on the audience's behalf. It allows them to

contribute to the show in ways that doesn't feel so third party. Even though you still have your snaps and claps like you do at an open mic or wherever, I think that whole culture of BOO from the top of your lungs and some random person saying something off-the-wall funny—you look forward to the off-the-wall funny comment or the one person who's really upset at a particular judge and you catch them giving the judge bad eyes. Like if you're a people watcher—I noticed that people watchers love that about slam. Whenever I ask people: how did you like the show? That's what they say—Did you see so and so?

In addition to investing in a poetry slam through interaction, some audience members recognize the boundaries between audience member and performer are fluid; thus, prompting them to take the stage themselves. For participants this may be a one time or an occasional experience, but some become regularly performing poets. Dulcie described her transition into slam,

I want to talk about my experience first because when I started doing slam, I was an audience member and so a waiter at IHOP incidentally told me about slam and so I went and checked it out. The first two weeks I was an audience member, so I just sat there the first week and I watched the second week I went back I judged and I said to myself, You know what? This is something I could totally do. And I went home and I wrote in a frenzy and before I knew it, the next week I was slamming. I think a lot of the audience members are people that appreciate poetry but a lot of the people in the crowd are also people that write poetry.

And so I feel the people that come to slam either write poetry or appreciate poetry or knows somebody that writes poetry—sometimes it's just people off the street or people that happen to be studying that kind of get sucked into the world and they keep coming back to it because it is interesting to watch and a little bit addictive because of the score component. So I really like that.

Dulcie started out as an audience member captivated by slam poetry. After attending for a short time she began to realize that writing and performing slam poetry was something that she could do.

Coming to see people I know. As Fluent mentioned above, poets often invite their friends, family, and people they know to watch them perform. A supportive audience contributes to slam poetry events in a variety of ways. One, the more people there are at a slam event, the more potential energy there will be as the audience is encouraged to participate. Second, poets like having people they know at a slam because it becomes a cheering section of sorts—the louder the cheering the more energy the poet may put into the performance. In addition, there is the possibility that a noisy crowd will influence the judge's scores.

Poet invitations are also beneficial because they may introduce someone to the art form who may have little or no previous experience. Often times, those attending for the first time become enamored by their experience and begin attending more frequently. Indeed, this is the way many become acquainted with slam poetry, myself included. Slam poetry generally spreads by word of mouth. After learning about slam poetry from

friends, Caroline attended a poetry slam event and was fascinated by what she experienced.

Well, the first slam I just thought—the first poet I ever saw was Tova Charles at Rock the Republic in Revolution Café and I just sat there and I saw her and I was just like—it was the first time I had ever seen a slam thing ever, seen poetry in...that context. And...I cried...I was just like, this is so intense, oh my gosh! And then we just kept going and kept watching it and we just sat and like—the music—but I was mainly there because I wanted to see a poetry festival, I'd never seen it before. And then, I was just—I have to see more of this, like this is the coolest thing I have experienced and I need to go see it more. And so that was why I just kept going.

But yeah, I think it was just, it was just the newest thing...I had never seen it before. I had never seen poetry in that context. It was just so dynamic. We had...a poetry thing in high school and you're like [high pitched voice] Oh this is my poem! But then...you see it and you're there—there's so much emotion that you don't get when you're just reading it—for me anyway.

Caroline's experience is one that is frequently communicated by audience members who become more frequent fixtures at poetry slam events. Some go so far as to indicate they had a negative impression of what they thought they would see or hear from the poets. Sometimes it is the common stereotype of a poetry reading where everyone is dressed in black turtlenecks wearing berets and sipping cappuccinos to other common misconceptions of what performers do on stage. Some point to a scene from the

film, *So I Married an Axe Murderer*, where actor Mike Myers plays a poet named Charlie Mackenzie. At a few points during the film, Charlie performs poetry to a small hip audience in dimly light club with a jazz band accompanying him.

Through their performances, poets frequently overcome previously held audience expectations. In many instances, the result can be a transformative experience such as the one Caroline described, or as first time attendee, Catherine described, while attending a poetry slam held by Mic Check in Downtown Bryan: “after a couple poems, I laughed, cried, and felt many emotions in between. I didn’t know what to expect, but this is not what I was expecting.”

Participation in the local scene. Some participants indicated they were active in the local arts or music community, or expressed a desire to do so. Bill Moran discussed his introduction to the downtown scene in Bryan via his attendance at Mic Check.

Mic Check was, it was cool, it was very tiny, you know, I think I was enamored with the space just like in discovering downtown Bryan, that was like my door to downtown Bryan. This place is awesome, you know, ...this is nice. Especially at that time it was really starting to blossom and...a lot of cool bands, but not a lot of cool people here. I...[thought], this is really neat I need to start coming here more. So...I was very enamored by it, ...there wasn’t many poets, when I first started reading, again, ...our audience was poets, ...a few people there who had stumbled in, and the sign up list was 4-5 strong. But it was cool. There were regulars, regulars there.

The connection between the local creative community and Mic Check is a draw for many audience members who attend. This is due the fact that there are fewer opportunities for creative expression in the Bryan/College Station community. In Austin and Houston the arts community is much more diverse and widespread. Austin has a reputation as a creative, artistic, and musically-oriented city. Houston, although it does not receive the same recognition as Austin, because of the formal, institutionalized art scene including the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Menil Collection, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, as well as many privately owned fine art galleries, and non-profit arts organizations, it is considered as one of the most significant art scenes in the U.S.

The backdrop of the larger art culture in Austin and Houston is important because these poetry scenes are only one option among a plethora of artistic and creative opportunities. In Austin and Houston it was less likely an audience member would mention their reasons for participating in the slam poetry scene as a desire for being part of the art scene. It was the opposite for Mic Check because there are fewer options for creative expression within the local community.

Therapeutic reasons. Above, the analysis focused on how writing and performing poetry provided a vehicle for poets to work through difficult or challenging experiences. For a large number of poets, writing poetry provides catharsis ranging from intellectual to emotional. Some poets explicitly consider writing poetry to be a form of therapy. Audiences expressed a similar experience through listening to poetry. A number of participants indicated that listening to poetry has a cathartic function, helping some gain new perspectives on their own experiences. Some indicate more explicitly that

listening to poetry is therapy. Whether as a form of catharsis or therapy it is clear a poet's words resonate with many audience members. It is not uncommon for an audience member to thank a poet for a performance. Occasionally an audience member will tell a poet they feel similarly about a situation, but were unable to put their feelings and experiences into words.

As discussed above, attending a poetry slam provides opportunities for participants to experience moments of shared intimacy. For someone who is undergoing a challenging set of circumstances, these moments may be exactly what they need, particularly when closer interpersonal communications are prohibitive or perceived as unattainable. Victoria expanded upon this point,

Sometimes there's things you can't talk about with your best friend but you can talk about in a room full of strangers because 9 times out of 10 they're not going to know who you are, they're never going to see you again, and even if they do they're not going to remember who you are because you're not around often enough. So you kind of just have to go in it and again tell your story and get it off your chest because again, you can talk about it and even if they're not going to talk back then at least someone is listening and someone is physically listening to you. And you can see the emotion and interaction on their face.

Poetry conversations. Many audience members indicate conversations stimulated by a slam poetry performance are some of the most rewarding aspects of attending events. For some the conversation may focus on the content of the poem. This is particularly the case when poems critique an aspect of culture, or discuss lived

experiences. Other conversations may focus on the minutiae of the performance and/or the poem itself. These conversations centered on topics such as: how was the poem delivered?; did the performance match the content of the poem?; and how has the poem and/or performance changed over time if the audience member has seen multiple performances?

Poets often discuss the competitive aspects of the competition with one another, while participants who attend poetry slams as audience members often discuss the content of the poem, and/or the performance. For example, frequently attending audience member Jane looked forward to attending the Austin Poetry Slam with friends because an important part of the experience is having conversations about the poetry.

For me, a good week is if I have somebody to talk to about it afterwards. I really enjoy discussing what we thought of different people and it's on a different level than when I get to talk to my son about it because he's way more analytical about who scored what and whose poems are this or that, but yeah, it's a social thing. If it was just to go and see a performance, I wouldn't go two or three times a month.

The ways in which people discover slam are varied, but for the most part, slam poetry is spread by word of mouth—e.g., someone knows a poet, or someone attends poetry slam events. The first time attending a poetry slam is often described as a fascinating and energizing experience that runs counter to expectations. Newcomers often describe an apprehensive disposition to the idea of poetry slam until they experience it firsthand. Once the barrier has been breached some become faithful poetry

followers and attend events on a regular basis. Some become more involved and participate in various ways in the community.

For regular attendees, there were several reasons they specified for attending slam poetry events. These reasons ranged from just having an interest in seeing a performance and listening to poetry, to seeing people they know perform, while others had an appreciation of the aesthetics and experiences of participating in the larger arts scene within their city. Other frequent attendees indicated they identify with the content of performances. In particular, many audience members indicate slam poetry events are one of the only public spaces where they are able to engage in discourses detailing marginalized experiences such as lived racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ablebodiedness. Thus, attending a poetry slam can be a form of identity work where the listener is able to imagine a positive self-image through the representation of a positive identity performance by a poet on stage.

The next section shifts from the individual motivations of attending and participating in slam poetry events to a focus on the larger group dynamics of slam poetry communities.

Community

Slam poets often talk about the poetry community, which, depending upon the context, has a variety of meanings. At the national level, there is The Slam Poetry Community, which is a reference to the larger collective of communities brought together by a mutual interest in slam poetry. At the local level, community references smaller individual groups. Most major cities have an active slam poetry scene, often

described as a community by those who participate regularly. Many larger cities have multiple slam poetry scenes, so there will be a community associated with each particular group, which is also part of the poetry community within that particular city.

For example, Austin is home to the Austin Poetry Slam (APS) and Austin Neo Soul. Both APS and Neo Soul are communities within their own right; however, some members actively participate within both communities. While participation across local communities fluctuates over time, the cross-fertilization of creative production and consumption, directly or indirectly, is influential for the Austin slam poetry community as a whole.

Still, Austin is part of a larger poetry community consisting of many local slam poetry communities across Texas. The Texas poetry community is an identity referenced during regional and national poetry slam competitions. Thus, it is important to distinguish which community is being referred to when discussing the poetry community, as poetry community may mean the larger national slam poetry community, a more specific local slam poetry community, or various levels in between.

This section focuses on the meanings held by participants within three interconnected local slam poetry communities. Participants described the meanings of community as: a collective of people focused on common interests; an open and welcoming group; a collective of close friends and family; a support group; and a cooperative effort for development and betterment of writing. Participants also discussed the importance of interacting with the communities they are a part of, usually through

community service, the connection to the larger slam poetry community, and slam poetry rituals.

Common interests. The most frequent description of slam poetry communities indicated the community is a collection of people doing things centered on the common interest of poetry. Although interests were expressed in a variety of ways, participants generally indicated an interest for reading, writing, performing, listening, discussing, and critiquing poetry. Additionally, participants expressed differing levels of interest ranging from occasionally attending events to some participants eating, sleeping, and breathing poetry.

Beyond a common interest in slam poetry, one of the key distinguishing factors between participants who casually attend slam poetry events and those who view slam poetry as a community is a sense of shared values. One commonly held value includes a reverence for the structure of a poetry slam. That is, slam poetry provides a set of rules and resources that organizes and facilitates interactions among participants. The structure of the poetry slam as described in Chapter I creates roles such as performers, audiences, and event facilitators, including hosts, time- and scorekeepers, judges, and so on. As a shared value, many participants view the competition as the glue that holds together individuals who have a common interest in poetry.

Beginning with a general definition of community, Jacob Dodson discussed the shared value of competition within poetry slam communities.

Well on Wikipedia, refers to a usually small social unit of any size that shares common values—national community or an international community. So yes, it's

definitely a community all with poetry in common. It's something where a lot also is shared, some also is shared; I guess it depends on who you're talking to... Yes, the slam scene is a community.

I feel like the fact that it's a competitive, in a way, art kind of fosters the community because—I felt like people are naturally competitive but suddenly these people were performing alongside us but with we're also in a competition with—I think that betters us, I would think. But I feel like were I a painter in this community of painters, maybe that's just me speaking, but I would also feel some competition with my fellow painters and learn from them and personally, like I said, I've learned a lot about comedy from Andy and Shappy.

CS: So, community for you in that sense is you're all making each other better because you're hearing and seeing other people's work?

That's one of the effects of the poetry slam community. Not that I'm saying that all communities make each other better, but hopefully. People to compare ourselves to, strive against, learn from each other, help each other out when necessary, date each other, write breakup poetry about each other. The best kind of community.

Many participants hold similar perspectives as Jacob regarding the competitive aspects of slam poetry. Although skeptical and sometimes contradictory feelings toward the competition are not uncommon, many participants recognize the structure of slam poetry generates a level of excitement and charisma that brings people together in ways

that are unlikely to occur otherwise. “Nyne the Poet” from Houston VIP described the ability of poetry to bring people together:

It’s totally a vehicle. I’ve met more people around the country doing slam than I’ve met doing anything else. I’m pretty well traveled—my mom, she works for United Airlines or she just retired so I’ve been all over the world. I’ve never really had problems meeting people but with slam at least it puts you in a room full of like-minded people. Even if you’re totally different you still have one common goal—one common love in poetry.

As a common interest, slam poetry performs as a boundary object around which people form social bonds and orient activities. According to Star and Griesemer (1989), Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds. (p. 393)

As a boundary object, slam poetry finds it’s own unique expression and interaction style that is shaped by the local communities it is practiced within. Each community creates different meanings for slam poetry. For example, APS is a

community primarily oriented toward competition and hosts a poetry slam every week. Mic Check also meets on a weekly basis, but only holds a poetry slam once a month. The weeks Mic Check does not hold a poetry slam they host an open mic to provide an open space where poets are able to practice, take chances, and get better without the high stakes of competition. At APS it is believed the competition is what provides the opportunity for poets to get better. While value orientations vary from community to community, slam poetry is interconnected through mutual common interests. Some Mic Check participants travel to APS to practice performing in front of a larger audience while competing against well-polished poets. APS poets may travel to Mic Check to practice material they would not perform at APS because of the uncertainty of how it would be received by the audience. Hence, it allows them the space to play.

Another common value shared by most slam poetry communities is to show hospitality toward visiting poets. When poets travel to another venue they are generally treated with celebrity-like status, given an opportunity to perform, have a meal, and are able to socialize with members of the local community. The ability to extend this hospitality across venues fosters a sense of a larger community, which some refer to as an extended poetry family because they are treated as such. Nyne discussed how taking care of fellow poets is an act of community,

Slam community is the fact that I can go to Austin, do a feature, make a nice amount of money selling merch and getting paid and then not spending that nice amount of money getting home because I can ride with somebody or I can catch the Mega bus, or not spending that amount of money on a hotel because I can

stay with somebody. Not spending that amount of money on food because they fed me the whole time I was down there—that's community, you know what I'm saying? Because when we do features, when features come here—they go down there to Boomtown and right after we finish we come right here to Torchy's, feed them good, make them laugh, make sure if they drink and they're good with that, you know what I'm saying? If they've got any other activities, you know [claps]—good with that, you know? And make people feel like, Wow these are my brothers; these are my sisters. They actually care for the betterment of me, you know what I'm saying? That's community. That's totally community.

For Nyne, participating in community extends beyond an appreciation for the same form of artistic expression and includes taking care of fellow members of the slam poetry community. A sense of responsibility for members of the slam poetry community is a shared value that is highly regarded because it signals a commitment to the social bond through reciprocity.

Participating in community also means continued interaction and communication with other participants that go beyond poetry in and of itself. Slammaster of APS, Danny Strack, was attentive to the difference between simply sharing a space for mutual or common interests, and what it means to be a community.

Well let me put it this way—let's say you have a bunch of people that live in the suburbs on the same street and there was a signpost that said "Stonehenge" which is where—I used to live in Stonehenge. So it's like, Ok these people live in a community and it's called Stonehenge. But let's say they don't interact with each

other at all—are they a community? No, they just live on the same street but by the same token if all those people went to a church once a week, I think—there at the church where they’re interacting—that’s where they become a family and a community. That’s where they’re actually talking to each other and things like that. I’m not saying that Austin Slam is a church but I think it is a gathering place where a lot of people come together and actually share their ideas with each other directly and have conversations about it. Poets will do a poem and somebody will come up to them and...[say], that affected me; let’s talk about it. And they’ll go outside and they’ll talk about it.

Beyond the poetry, people meet at the slam and start dating, become best friends—like I said, I met my best friend at the poetry slam because he had just moved to town and was interested in slam and was like, Oh I’m interested in slam—let’s practice! So we’d go to the park, to the train station and we’d practice. That sounds like a community to me; I don’t see how it couldn’t be. If we didn’t get together, then it wouldn’t be.

At the center of any discussion of slam poetry community is a shared common interest for slam poetry, whether it is referencing local, state, regional, or the national slam poetry community. As a boundary object, slam poetry provides a set of rules and resources that are adaptable to the idiosyncratic context, or group style, of a local community. Slam poetry is something toward which they orient activities, but for many the relationships that are formed in the process of doing creative things together extend well beyond the art form.

Community, friends, and family. When recalling their first experiences attending a poetry slam event, participants frequently mentioned an open and welcoming experience. They felt welcomed by those who were facilitating the event they were attending. As a practice, the hosts of APS, Mic Check, and Houston VIP would all make an effort to engage new faces to help make them feel comfortable and welcome.

Over time some participants come to view themselves as members of the community. Frequently attending participants develop close personal friendships with other members, and some see the community as their poetry family. Fluent discussed how he perceives the relationship with peers in his poetry community.

I do view it as a community; I think family as well. The word family implies a certain closeness that maybe isn't implied in community but they're almost synonyms; it's just a matter of how close you perceive people to be. For the sake of this I'll just say community. In a community, you might have people you like, people you don't and it's still a community—same in the family, you might have an uncle that you hate or something or a sister you think is bratty—a variety of things. Same thing in the slam community; there might be—I'm not gonna name names—there might be two poets that don't get along but does that mean they're not in the same community? They know each other well enough to know that they don't get along so they've spent some time together so that implies that they're in some way organically connected.

Fluent also viewed the larger slam poetry community as a family he looks forward to visiting at different times throughout the year.

Other attributes of slam positive—wise—it's a big family. I feel like a lot of the people I've met around the country when I see them again it's just like a family reunion and then within a family there's always drama so there are scenarios that happen because we're people. Not everything is pretty and unicorns, but there's still, I think, more positive that outweighs the negative just like when you really think about a family.

Then outside of that, the networking—and I don't mean just like—you could say a family is a network but what I mean is that the external network and just so many other people are around the slam community besides just the poets that become like the family. You have those connections, which allow you to really—if you utilize them—to really just be able to move around the country in ways that I hadn't before doing poetry. I was telling people probably after the first year of me doing slam, I travelled more in a year and half than I had probably in the rest of my life combined. Just in terms of seeing the country. Performing and just sometimes, you know what? Hey, let's go somewhere just because and see if there are any poets in the city. That's been an interesting way to be; crash out on somebody's couch somewhere.

Jacob described how interpersonal relationships vary between members of a slam poetry community.

There's a semi-consistent group of people with which you develop relationships just by virtue of participating at APS or NEO or both. That's a community you can be connected to in a lot of ways; it can be very superficial, these are people

with whom you're Facebook friends, you chat with occasionally, but the reason the term community seems useful is because there is that continuous exposure to the same group of people who are choosing to continuously expose themselves to each other in a not creepy way.

At the same time, you can develop very deep friendships with these people; I know Gloria was having trouble today with her car and I saw this on Facebook and tons of people just offered to help and almost all of them were poets. So there's that kind of attachment to each other where you don't feel you have to know somebody all that way to have that sort of friendship. I think friendship isn't even the right word, that's why the term community gets used because they're not all necessarily all friendships in the traditional sense—you don't necessarily sit down and have long conversations with all of these people but at the same time they are people that you just feel like you know because you're around them all the time and we do choose to be around each other quite a bit.

Explaining the difference is between community and family, Christopher Michael indicated,

The community at Killeen is family. I try to get us to go on trips that have nothing to do with poetry. We get together for the holidays—this Saturday, there was a young poet who was on one of our teams—on our first teams—she's graduating from college. So the Killeen slam, as a family, is going to Main Event to hook up with her and the rest of her real family to celebrate her graduating

from college. So I mean real family like fight, I hate you, you did this to me, and tomorrow I love you again. The only thing that [doesn't] make us real family is blood.

Austin Poetry Slam is similar to that and I'm sure it would be more like that for me if I lived there—but when I say family, I mean family—the real deal. I mean we do things together for each other, with each other. There's different cliques but it's every sense of the word community; you know, supporting each other with buying CDs, one of the poets is opening up a café and I'm gonna be there as much as I can—I don't even drink coffee but I'll buy the man's coffee because I want him to succeed. I'll rock the [café] shirt—he'll say, Hey, you slamming today? –Yeah! –Will you wear my shirt? –Hell yeah, I'll wear your shirt! So that's how I feel. I love the people that I slam with and against. You can call me, you need something, I wanna be there for you—that type of thing. So yes, community, I mean community.

Slam poetry communities cultivate an environment where close relationships between participants are likely to occur. Some participants described their slam poetry community as their primary social group, where close friendships and family-like bonds extend beyond slam poetry events into their daily lives. Other participants described their slam poetry community as a secondary social group, interacting with community members during slam poetry events or occasionally during informal settings. While frequent attendance is closely related to whether a participant viewed the slam poetry community as a primary social group, this was not a prerequisite. Some participants only

attended occasionally, but maintain close bonds with their peers. Some participants attended frequently, however only remain acquaintances with other participants, whether involuntarily or by choice.

Support group. Whether a slam poetry community is considered a primary or secondary social group, or somewhere in between, a large number of participants considered their slam poetry community a support group. Participants who attended poetry slams primarily as audience members expressed similar sentiments. Regular attendees as well as participants who occasionally attend slam poetry events expressed this sentiment.

Some audience members attend slam poetry events because of the supportive atmosphere of the community. For some participants the support group extends beyond the space of the stage carrying over to the group of people who regularly attend poetry events. While not everyone who attends slam poetry events participates in the construction or maintenance of familial or community bonds outside the poetry slam itself, they still consider the atmosphere of the event as a support group. Prince is a regular participant who referred to weekly slam poetry events as a support group.

That—I actually, I have a support group in Mic Check now if there’s anything going on...One thing I really love about Mic Check is they gave me, my three minutes, or however long, just to say what was bothering me...When I’m unable to attend, it’s like I’m gonna miss therapy this week.

As an active participant within the slam poetry community, first as an audience member and later as a poet, Victoria shared a similar point of view.

I always say that's why poets don't need therapy. Like you don't need to pay somebody, you just go to poetry slam and you're done. Even if you're not like on stage you go out and you hear somebody talk it or speak it and you're like I'm going through that same thing, I'm not alone. Done, therapy over with, you don't need to spend \$50 on some crackpot who's going to sit there for three hours and tell you the same thing that you learned in twenty minutes, or in three minutes from poem. You're saving a lot less, you're saving a lot more money. That's a tank of gas, and you can go to Mic Check.

Although the slam poetry community is considered a support group for some, others are more cautious about the limitations of slam poetry as a form of collective therapy.

Reflecting on her experience as a youth slam poetry coach, Dulcie recognized the potential benefits for those looking to the slam poetry community for support. However, she was also aware this might also compound the situation.

You know... that's something that I'm struggling with—trying to determine whether the slamming is therapeutic or whether it just serves to be another sort of trigger—and I really think it depends on the individual poet. For some of them, taking that first step and even just putting that pen on the page to write about the issue is a huge step forward in the right direction and it's healing for that person but for a lot of them, focusing on the poem, on the issue that's within the poem becomes an obsession and it really does just depend on the child, the poet.

I would say it's always better to write it down and at least get it out of your system and have at least one person you can confide to, even if the person is

a blank sheet of paper—at least then it's not just you anymore—it's you and the page and if the room full of people is the people that you have to get it out to, then get it out. I don't think slam or slam poetry is a substitute for counseling or therapy. I think for some people it works but I don't think you should necessarily always say, Maybe I should write a poem about that awful experience that happened to you without taking legal recourse or going and seeing someone about it and trying to see what the underlying problems are. I don't know; I think it's a double-edged sword and it really does depend on the individual person and it goes for adults as well, I don't think it's a stand-in for therapy and getting it out.

Dulcie's point is an important one. Performing poetry does yield positive benefits for some participants. The extent to which poetry yields benefits is debatable. Indeed, many participants talk about the slam poetry community as a therapeutic support group because they are able to voice, or hear others voice, themselves in a manner they are unable to elsewhere. This is especially true for participants who seek the stage to perform an aspect of the self that is underrepresented in their daily lives. However, this is not to say that a support group is capable for standing in for therapy when therapy is needed. It may work for some, but, often, the potential cathartic benefit of rendering the self-explicit is related to how well a performance is received.

A critical issue that arises from the competitive environment of slam poetry is the competition itself. By rendering the self-explicit to an audience, performers become vulnerable to an audience. Despite the sincerity of their performance, for a variety of

reasons an audience may not be “feeling” a performance. That is, a poem may not have been written or performed well compared to others competing in the poetry slam.

Audience members may lack cultural tools to understand a poem, particularly when the topic of a performance resides outside of their own experience. Audience members may have strong feelings about a particular topic and judging a performance based upon their position on the topic rather than on the performance. An audience may have heard the poem on a number of occasions and may no longer be attentive to the performance.

Additionally, an audience may not receive a performance well when experiencing poetry fatigue—whether fatigue arises from the topic of the poem itself or the number of poems they have listened to during an event. Dulcie provided insight into how an audience can be desensitized to an issue over time.

And also, it’s kind of like that TV dilemma again—there’s only so many rape poems you can hear, there’s only so many “my dad molested me” poems you can hear before you become desensitized to it and that’s unfortunate because these are big, big issues that people that write about them are taking a huge step and you’re really saying it to people that might be unreceptive because they’ve heard so many of this type of poem before and I think that’s another thing that could really—I’ve heard people joke about, ‘Oh no, not another rape poem.’

It kind of undermines what they came to do and their purpose in reciting that because we haven’t been—then we’re not supportive of what they need and we’re just looking at it very clinically as a poem and there’s a real danger I think in that as well.

Regardless of the circumstances, if a performance is unfavorably received, the effects of a low score can be discouraging and may actually compound the situation the performer was attempting to remedy. Over time, this may have adverse effects for the poet's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and overall self-concept. This is why some participants are cautious about the effectiveness of slam poetry as a remedy to address such serious and challenging matters. Still, even those who recognize the limitations of the slam poetry community as a support group are aware that this may be the only place some participants have to discuss such matters.

Development, support, and mentorship. Slam poetry communities influence the artistic production of participants. Communities influence poets from beginning to advanced levels of experience. Participants possess varying degrees of knowledge and experience writing, performing, and competing in poetry slam competitions. Seasoned, or well-polished, poets generally have a deeper understanding of slam poetry and their creative process than those who possess intermediate- or novice-level understanding. As a result, experienced poets tend to fare better in slam poetry competitions, and are more consistent in the quality of their artistic production. Poets who consistently produce high quality work are influential for other participants at all levels of experience within their community.

Due to the relationship between knowledge of slam poetry and the quality of work a poet produces, intermediate or novice poets often seek information from more experienced peers. The transmission of information occurs through formal and informal writing and performance workshops, critiques, mentoring, peer interactions, and by

observation. These activities provide poets the opportunity to learn from one another, directly and indirectly.

Since information is a valuable resource in slam poetry communities, some poets are selective of the information they share and who they share it with because it may decrease any competitive advantage they may have. Yet, many participants readily share information with others. Dulcie discussed the internal conflict that arises from sharing information with newer poets.

That's a really tough question. Competitively I think sometimes it's tough to socialize new poets because if they're really good you're gonna see them as a threat to your slam standing, so to speak. But I think on the whole, we really do try to—one of the missions of VIP just as the non-profit part of it is to really mentor poets. And we have the writing workshop, which is set up to attract those people that want to slam but feel that they don't have the poems or the material and they also feel like they don't have the skills. So trying to be supportive in that way. I don't know about others but I make it a personal point to go and reach out to the new person and say, 'Hey I really liked your piece', or 'You did a really good job', or 'I really enjoyed hearing it' so that they come back and we have more people.

I mean, I'll share it; I'll share it because I'm—I don't think I'm 100% committed to slam as other people are and at this point it's just something fun to do. It's not a livelihood or anything like that so I'm open to sharing information and giving people details to all the events that are coming up. I'll share any

information that somebody wants to have. I don't think Houston poets are really stingy with information, though. I do think they give out information.

One motivation for sharing information is to increase the quality of artistic production in the community as a whole, in turn making everyone better as a result. Amir Safi described this as his motivation when he and Chris Call rebuilt the Mic Check community. Wanting to improve the quality of his writing, he worked to build a community of writers who would share information and push each other to improve.

An additional motivation for information sharing is the reciprocity that occurs between experienced poets and peers. Although intermediate and novice poets lack the tools and experience to consistently produce quality work, they often add energy and charisma to the community. Experienced poets, while capable of producing and performing quality work, sometimes experience stagnation in their creative production. In these instances, creative charisma becomes routinized¹⁷ when energetic interactions diminish over time. Thus, newer poets are capable of breathing new life into a community and increasing the level of energy of other participants. Christopher Michael discussed how new poets can bring a new level of energy to a community.

They wow me. I mean, on any given day, the They Speak Youth Slam team can beat an adult slam team and they usually do. The youth slam rarely comes in less than second place at our scrimmages and at Brand New Voices, the poetry on their final stage is always better than the poetry on the adult final stages—and the

¹⁷ The routinization of creative charisma is an extension of Weber's (1978) charismatic authority.

adults kill it. But the kids, you look at them, you're like, You're too young to have experienced that kind of pain. Because most poetry that gets on stage is coming from a place of pain—whether they make it funny or not—it's coming from a place of pain. And it's like, What the hell do you know about that? You couldn't have possibly struggled in your little tiny 16 years of existence. And they bring it and you...[think], Oh my God! I have to re-evaluate my life now.

That's the best part; I mean anybody can get up on stage and talk about how crappy their life is but to make it entertaining that is actually one of the most important skills because anybody can talk but can you make me want to continue to listen to you? And that's one of the skills I want to impart in *They Speak*. Most of them come to me knowing how to write, but can you write and perform well enough to make me wanna listen? That's what the art is to me.

A genuine desire to see others grow and achieve success is another strong motivation for sharing information. As discussed above many slam poetry communities are supportive and nurturing environments. According to Amir, that is one of the best things about the local slam community.

And one of the things that I've loved about *Mic Check* is just watching the growth of poets. Justin suffers from anxiety disorder. Jena suffers from anxiety disorder. We had a slam called "Anything but Common Slam" on The Texas A&M University campus. It was our first time to have a slam on campus. And Chuck forgot his lines and started crying and got off stage. Lisa just completely blanked and just walked off stage. You know. And these are people with anxiety

disorders, and they still read, because it's helping them build their confidence it's getting their poems down so they are able to speak in front of public. So we have people with anxiety disorders not only speaking in public, but getting better at it, and developing their own voice and being able to project it to people. So, more so than anything I like just watching a poet grow and feel comfortable with themselves and their voice and their community.

This orientation is particularly true toward youth poets. More experienced poets such as Christopher Michael recognized younger poets will eventually lead slam poetry communities.

The kids are getting ahold of it and that's where it's gonna be successful. The big guns in poetry slam—the people who slam and do it—I mean, relatively speaking we're old. I'm in my 40s; there's other poets I slam against who are killing it and they're knocking on 50. There's some people who don't slam anymore and they're in their 50s and then there's the young kids. We got people coming in APS and they're 15, 16 years old so yeah, they're starting to feed into poetry slam and revitalize it and that's one of the reasons I stick around—the youth.

Because I don't want this to die out; you gotta keep it going and the only way to keep it going—because I can't live forever—is to find people to take my place.

To leave a legacy; make sure they do it right.

Dulcie also touched upon this perspective when she described her work with youth slam poetry organization, Metaphor Houston.

Metaphor is one of those things—we were talking about the poetry community and what we're doing to support it—and I think helping out the next generation is really, really important. Because they're the ones that are going to be doing poetry when all of us get married and settled down and have children and stuff like that and they're gonna be the ones that carry the torch and you wanna make sure that you're really encouraging those people not just with, Oh yeah, you can do a great job, but bringing them alongside you and making sure they have that mentor person.

So I think it's really important to find poets that want to be involved with the ones that are coming after us and building a community in that way because they're going to be stepping into our shoes and taking over when we kind of decide that we don't wanna do it anymore. At least that's the way I see it.

Outspoken Bean and Dulcie viewed their work with youth poets as about more than just achieving success in the slam poetry community. They are interested in mentoring youth poets in all aspects of their lives, from personal to academic to professional. Dulcie reflected on her role as a coach and mentor.

Yeah, and the thing we realized after all these years of working with the kids is that if the writing isn't solid then it doesn't matter what you do at the performance level—you're not going to have a solid poem. We also looked at the writing as, how can you more clearly communicate something? And that's a skill that they need for outside of poetry as well. So a lot of our questions, when we get to revising, a lot of the questions will revolve around the idea of clarity, like,

How can you bring clarity to this? Could you clarify this for me or something—
How can you be more clear? Because I think having conversations, coaching in
that kind of verbiage will help them see what the value of being on a team for
Metaphor, the value of writing poetry is when they're maybe CEOs or business
people or something like that and they need to have a conversation with
somebody but they're striving for clarity or at least striving for specificity in
some way, shape, or form.

I see what we're doing as being not—it's not just about the poetry. It's
about poetry; I know Hodari Davis said that poetry was the carrot for the larger
movement of literacy; if we can get kids to love writing and to love reading, then
at the end of the day we've done our job even though we had to entice them with
the scores. It's a good carrot; it's a great carrot.

Nyne, also member of the Houston VIP community, shared the perspective that success
in slam poetry will lead to success in other areas.

We want our kids to go to college and we want them to get their degrees and do
it big but if you know that's not what you wanna do in life, man, save that
money. Do what you wanna do, make money—you know what I'm saying? For a
lot of these kids, it's poetry and these kids got it to where, shit, they're pressing
CDs before they get their high school diploma, you know what I'm saying? This
is easy for them, they do this all the time; [inaudible] their own stuff, making
their own websites, marketing their own stuff, you don't need to go to school for
that, you living school right now, you know what I'm saying? Don't live with

your mama, but just live and you'll see that it's so easy, it's so easy nowadays to be relevant, man; it's simple. Like Josh Bennett, he's a good guy, he's a good poet, and he is serious. But that's all he do is just focus on himself and work on himself and that's his job. That's how he makes his money; he doesn't have to work for no Subways; you don't have to work at no coffee house, just get paid, man. And these kids are doing it—Robin, she is doing it. Man, I love it. Nefertiti Brown—doing it out here making these moves—that's what's important.

For many poets, working with the youth and mentorship extends well beyond the development of creativity and communication skills. For example, Dulcie viewed her role as a coach similar to that of a member of the family,

Metaphor is everything, you kind of have to be the big sister and mother sometimes and the advice-giving aunt. It's like being a coach for any other sport or any other UIL event with the difference being the kids. Because some of the kids that come into slam are broken, or are coming from really rough situations, so you have to be able to sort of—it becomes about more than the writing, it also becomes about being that constant adult that would always be there for them even though every other adult in their life has let them down. So it's really a big job now that I think about it; it's not unlike teaching at an urban school but I think it's a little bit more involved than that.

Outspoken shared this perspective on youth mentorship,

Yeah, the amount of time that we're around each other—it really fosters some great friendships and I've seen that also with our youth. With Metaphor—

actually just last night—one of our youth alumni, he’s a sophomore at UT now and we started working with him at age 14. So from 14 all the way through 19, aging out of the program, I’ve either been a mentor or associated with Metaphor for that whole time so he’s grown up to become a friend but even within the Metaphor mentee friendship, the kids being around each other; they still keep in touch with each other.

We had a dinner last night, it was me and Dulcie and they invited us out for dinner at Chili’s and that was four of our alumni students. It was like, Wow! Having an impact like that where the friendship—it’s not just like, Ok you’re the coach—this becomes your friend, this is not just your slam member, teammate—you really develop a tight friendship when you’re going through stuff.

The close bonds Dulcie and Outspoken described are characteristic of the type of relationships that develop between members of slam poetry communities. This is why so many people describe their slam poetry community as a support group, a group of close friends, and for some, as their family. Because know they have others who are not only willing to listen, but also help them work through difficult and challenging circumstances by learning a process to help them redirect their energy into creative expression.

There are many ways slam poetry communities are arts-based learning communities of support. Mic Check has formalized their teaching and learning programs by partnering with local schools and other arts-based and community-oriented organizations to provide writing and performance workshops open to the public. While

Mic Check does not currently have a youth slam team, they recognize the importance of socializing younger poets into the slam poetry community, and they are in the process of developing a program; whereas Houston VIP holds writing and performance workshops prior to poetry slams, allowing poets at all levels the opportunity to practice and learn from one another. Houston VIP's affiliation with Metaphor Houston provides the opportunity for youth poets to learn from more experienced poets. APS does not currently host workshops; however, like all slam communities included in this study, members of the community support and mentor other members in the same ways discussed above.

Participation

Austin Poetry Slam, Houston VIP, and Mic Check rely upon participants of the community for contributions of time and labor. Organizing and facilitating slam poetry events requires a considerable amount of work, which means there are a variety of roles for participants to assume. Some participants perform poetry regularly, some occasionally, while others do not participate through performance. Some participants regularly attend formal and informal events while others attend less frequently. Other participants volunteer their time in service to the community on a regular basis, some occasionally, while others do not.

In general, there are three different types of roles for a poetry slam event; front stage, mid-stage, and backstage roles. Front stage roles include performing poet, slam master, slam host, and DJ. With the exception of performing poet, front stage roles are

limited in number. Front stage roles are highly visible and the community at large recognizes participants who perform these roles.

Middle-stage roles such as timekeeper and scorekeeper do not receive the same recognition as front-stage roles, but they are also not completely out of the periphery of those in attendance of an event. These roles are less intensive and are generally shared by members of the community—anyone who has been an active participant in a slam poetry scene for an extended period of time is likely to have served as a timekeeper or scorekeeper for a slam.

Backstage roles such as setting up and breaking down provide the infrastructure for an event. One can volunteer to help with a poetry slam event, and depending upon the frequency of the event (some are weekly, while others are monthly), these are relatively low commitment positions. While the backstage roles do not generally receive the recognition of other roles, they are essential to the function of an event and can serve as an entry point for many participants to become more involved in the community.

Outside of the event, it is not always easy to engage a wide range of participants to work on planning for events and other backstage work. Part of the reason for limited participation is that many people have outside responsibilities and are unable to make long-term commitments. Another part of this is some participants attend poetry slams for entertainment and socialization and do not want to become more involved. Still, there are participants who want to be more involved, but there may be limited opportunities for doing so.

The most significant contributing factor to the depth and duration of participation has to do with whether a participant perceives themselves as member of the community. Participants who perceived themselves as maintaining a role in the community expressed satisfaction with their participation and felt a sense of reciprocity from their contributions. Newer participants and those who do not perceive themselves as occupying a role within the community often experience ambiguous feelings about their participation and question whether their presence is valued.

For those occupying a role, events are time for putting in work rather than solely for entertainment and socialization. Poets who are competing in a poetry slam are generally focused on their performance and paying close attention to other poets' performances. Poetry slam competitions are not the best time to have a conversation with a poet or others who are occupying a role, as they are likely to be concentrating on the competition.

Following an event presents an opportunity for interaction. Sometimes members of the audience will approach a poet to express their enjoyment of their work. Praise is often appreciated by poets, but has also been described as a slightly awkward by some when all of the focus is placed upon them and their poetry. For audience members who really like a poet's work it can be a little unnerving to approach someone who is viewed as having semi-celebrity status. Some hosts recognize this challenge and make a point to introduce new attendees to other members of the community, which can help them feel more at ease.

A large portion of socialization occurs outside of the context of the event, but access to these spaces is generally limited to those who are already part of the community. With limited opportunities to become more involved and interact with regulars at events, some participants and audience members may perceive the community less open than others claim. This experience is especially pronounced for participants who do not perform, or at least do not perform often, and those who are not already friends with participants in the community. For some, becoming an acknowledged member of the community can be a challenging ordeal.

One of the quickest ways for new participants to get involved and be recognized by the community is to perform. This is particularly challenging when the only opportunity to perform in some communities is to compete in a poetry slam. The high intensity level of a poetry slam is a deterrent for many newcomers who want to perform, but do not feel that they have the requisite wherewithal to do so in a competitive environment. Open mic events provide a lower threshold and were perceived by newer participants as more welcoming.

Recognizing that some participants wanted to play a bigger role in the community, but may not want to perform poetry, Mic Check began developing leadership positions such as writing director, social media director, and social events director. Not only did these roles help regular contributing participants to feel more included, but delegating these responsibilities helped to decrease the workload of the president and vice president.

Organizers of poetry slam events are always looking for participants to get more involved with the community because it helps the community thrive, but also makes people feel like they are a part of something and working toward a common goal. This is especially true of larger events. Large-scale events such as the Texas Grand Slam Poetry festival run by Mic Check poses a substantial challenge in attracting, organizing, and motivating volunteers. These events are also the single most significant contributor to community building activities that slam poetry communities engage in. Large events require an expansion of roles and a clear delegation of tasks among participants, which provides an opportunity for a large number of people to take part. The concerted effort among participants increases the perception of a shared sense of community and working toward a common goal.

Caroline, a long-time participant of the Mic Check community, became involved with the community when asked to volunteer for the Texas Grand Slam Poetry Festival (TGS).

I went for about a year without knowing very many people. I knew Safi because he had invited me to some places but that was about it. And then it was really when I got involved with Texas Grand Slam that I became more like a fixture at Mic Check.

I guess because Safi asked me to be part of the volunteer coordinator person—I was the volunteer coordinator for last year's festival and then I took on a bigger role for this year's festival being part of the board formally... and then I

just kept doing more...score- and timekeeping, DJ-ing, just getting to know people.

I think TGS had been the main catalyst of being heavily involved with Mic Check. Texas Grand Slam allowed me to foster more relationships and work on something deeper in the community...but yeah I think it really started with being involved with TGS. TGS is like my baby.

Caroline's experience paralleled that of many participants following large-scale events, where there is a substantial increase in the number of visitors to slam poetry events. One reason for this increase is events expose many people who have not experienced slam poetry before. Regardless of a participant's experience with slam poetry, the collective effervescence generated during large-scale events extended well beyond the event itself. The carryover of energy may be seen in the increase of attendance, in the writing productivity of participants of all levels of experience, and in the overall satisfaction of the community.

For a variety of reasons, mobilizing participants to volunteer time and labor in service to the community is a challenging, yet essential endeavor. The community benefits from the collective effort of participants. Those who are able to contribute describe it as a sense of belonging within the community, because they feel like they are a part of something larger than themselves, they have a place or role within the community, and their contributions are recognized and valued by their peers.

Summary of Audience, Community, and Participation

This section focused on the group aspects of slam poetry including the audiences and communities that attend and support slam poetry. An analysis of participant observations, discussions, and interviews resulted in the construction of the following themes: Audience; Community; and Participation.

Summary of Analysis

This chapter provided an analysis of a multi-sited ethnography of three artistic communities located in the Southwest region of the United States. A total of 30 participant interviews were conducted over the duration of the ethnography. An analysis of participant observations, discussions, and interviews resulted in the identification and organization of the themes and subthemes presented in Tables 2-4. Themes and subthemes were further organized into the following areas: Artists and Artistic Production (focusing on individual poets); Audience, Community, and Participation (focusing on groups); and the Aesthetics of Slam Poetry. The purpose of this study was to understand the meanings of slam poetry from the perspectives those who are producers (poets) and consumers (poets, audiences, and communities). While the aesthetics of slam poetry were identified as a theme during the course of this study, a critical discussion of slam poetry aesthetics will be addressed in subsequent research as they go beyond the scope of this study.

The first part of the analysis focused on the creative production of artists who participate in slam poetry, emphasizing the meaning of their artistic activities. The

second part of the analysis focused on the various audiences who attend slam poetry events with an emphasis on the meanings held by participants.

The following chapter provides a discussion of the results as they relate to the research questions guiding this study. The implications for creative producers and artistic communities are discussed, and recommendations for further research in the area of cultural production and consumption are provided.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

With Becker's (1982) art world approach to the analysis of cultural production as a point of departure, this ethnographic study explored meanings of slam poetry from the perspective of poets and audiences within three artistic communities. To help navigate the complexity of an art world, Grisworld's (2012) cultural diamond was useful for focusing attention toward the multi-faceted interactions that occur within the slam poetry art world.

This study was prompted by a general interest in the meanings held by artists who produce creative work and the audiences who consume such work. More specifically, I pursued my interest in the micro-interactions that occur between creative producers and consumers and how these interactions relate to the construction, performance, and maintenance of self and identity, individually and collectively.

Participant observations, situational interviews, and 30 participant interviews (10 from each community) were conducted over a period of three years. Participant interviews were open-ended, ranging from 45 minutes to two-and-a-half hours, with an average length of one hour per interview. Throughout the study, field notes and interviews were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) adaptation of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method. The inductive approach of constant comparison was particularly useful for this ethnography, as analytic themes were drawn directly from the co-constructed experiences of participant observations and interviews.

Building upon previous chapters, this chapter provides a discussion of the study, how the findings contribute to cultural sociology, and implications and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Research Question #1

How is slam poetry meaningful for poets? When poets discussed the meanings of slam poetry, they discussed topics relating to artistic production, the creative process, responses to their poetry, self-evaluation of their work, goals and challenges, and the competitive aspects of slam poetry. Each theme is discussed below.

Artistic production. Writing and performing poetry provides opportunities to participate in a community of people with similar interests. An interest in poetry is the focal point for the development of a variety of relationships ranging from casual to primary and secondary group relationships. Indeed, throughout the study poets frequently discussed how writing and performing provided them opportunities for meaningful interaction with others who write, perform, and appreciate poetry.

For some poets, reading, writing, and performing poetry is a therapeutic outlet, a way of processing or managing challenging life experiences. A number of poets who described poetry as therapeutic indicated the writing process allows them an opportunity for recalling, reframing, and retelling experiences (a process of constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing, and sometimes performing). The retelling and reframing of personal experiences are characteristic of “mystories,” which according to Denzin (2003) identify turning points of consciousness and epiphanic moments.

Epiphanic moments and turning point experiences are helpful for understanding what poets mean when they say writing poetry is a therapeutic form of catharsis. Denzin (2001:37) identifies four types of epiphanies: major, cumulative, minor, and relived. A major epiphany is an experience that completely changes a person's life. Examples of a major epiphany include experiences with death, violence committed or endured, and betrayal. The occurrence of a major epiphany is not limited to firsthand experiences, as knowledge of others experiencing a life-shattering event, particularly when in close proximity, can be a pivotal experience.

Denzin (2001) describes a cumulative epiphany as a turning point of consciousness resulting from events that have built up over a person's life. This can be a process that unfolds slowly over time, such as gaining an understanding of particular behaviors that have been the source of a problem or issue. A minor or illuminative epiphany occurs when underlying tensions and problems in a situation or relationship are revealed. The last epiphany Denzin discusses is the relived epiphany, which occurs when an individual experiences a major turning point in his or her life all over again.

The process of writing and sharing mystories creates opportunities to reframe experiences while actively constructing a positive self-image.¹⁸ Writing and performing provides poets a method to manage challenging experiences, either interpersonally or externally, such as dealing with everyday instances of micro-aggressions relating to race, class, gender, sexuality, and able-bodied-ness. Poets described two key characteristics

¹⁸ The writing and sharing of mystories through poetry to tell, retell, and frame experiences serves a similar function as everyday talk and conversations as described by May (2000; 2001).

relating to poetry as a system of coping. One characteristic relates to the act of writing. For some poets, simply writing their thoughts on paper has utility. For others, writing is a way of thinking through difficult, challenging, and sometimes contradictory viewpoints and experiences.

Another characteristic relates to the act of sharing (e.g., sharing a poem with someone, reading a poem, and performing a poem). Depending upon the topic, sharing creative work is an act of courage because creators place themselves in a position of vulnerability to their audience. This is the case for poets of all levels of experience.

While performing to an audience is a terrifying experience for many, there are benefits to getting on stage. First, poets said they felt empowered by overcoming the fear of performing in front of an audience. Over time, many poets learn strategies for managing anxiety or at least become somewhat more comfortable on stage. Although occasionally seasoned poets become anxious prior to a performance, this is usually related to the stakes of a poetry slam or is due to the nature of the topic in which they choose to engage.

Second, performing on stage provides a space to give representation to topics that may not otherwise be discussed in a public forum. This allows some poets to champion or challenge collective representations instantiated by cultural and social institutions, the media, and popular culture. In this way, slam poetry venues are spaces that allow the practice of radical forms of democracy (Freire 2004; Giroux 1996; hooks 1996) including free expression, sites of socio-political resistance, and community-oriented pedagogical spaces for sharing information.

Whether for self-reflexive purposes, speaking to collective representations, engaging in political speech, or pedagogical objectives, engaging in discourse on stage is a form of identity and boundary work for many participants.¹⁹ In the previous chapter, I referred to the relationship between discourse and identity work as rendering the self explicit, where a performer brings backstage discourses to the front stage, thereby making themselves vulnerable to an audience in the process.

Creative process. One of the most interesting aspects of working with poets is learning about how they think about their creative process, what it means to them, and how they produce creative work over time. The creative process used to produce work varies widely between poets. Attention to the creative process is a key difference between experienced and novice poets. The majority of experienced, or “well-polished,” poets were able to describe their creative processes in detail. Less experienced poets were less likely to provide an understanding of their creative process, often making statements such as, “I don’t have a process” or “I don’t know how I write a poem, I just do.” This is not to suggest that writers with less experience don’t have a process for producing work; rather, it illustrates that they have spent less time reflecting upon their creative process than their more experienced peers.

¹⁹ See Lamont, Michèle, and Virág Molnar. 2002. “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28:167-195; and Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1986. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior.” Pp. 7-24 in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by S. Worchel & W. G. Austin. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

Responses to poetry. The format of slam poetry is unique in that it encourages interaction between poets and audiences during performances. Audiences are encouraged to participate by snapping their fingers, clapping, standing, and shouting, before, during, and after a performance. These interactions can be exciting for the audience as it allows them to become co-participants in the poetry slam. These interactions can be exciting for poets as well because they are able to evaluate how they are doing by the response of the audience. If an audience is responding favorably to a performance, a poet is likely to reciprocate the energy to the audience. When an audience is not responding well, poets may make adjustments to their performance to accommodate an audience's preferences. The interaction between poets and audiences influences the energy and atmosphere of slam poetry event.

Assessment of work. When poets reflect upon their work, almost all have mixed feelings about their early writing. Many poets who have been around slam poetry for a length of time acknowledge that the writing process has to start somewhere even if it is not very good. While early or unpolished writings are a source of embarrassment or discontent, most poets agree this a necessary part of the process for getting better.

Goals and challenges. The number and level of accomplishments are distinguishing factors among poets participating in the slam scene. The accomplishments of participants in this study range from just-beginning writers to regionally, nationally, and internationally ranked poets. A number of poets are published authors. A few poets have had videos of their work go viral on the Internet via websites such as YouTube,

Button Poetry, Upworthy, and HuffPost. Two participants are national Haiku poetry champions, while many poets are working professionals.

The opportunities to make a living at poetry are challenging. Almost all poets indicated a desire to pursue poetry full time. During the course of the study a large number of poets toured; however, none made a living performing poetry. Following the study, at least one poet left a successful career as an educator to pursue her craft full time, and others have found opportunities teaching poetry.

For poets who were not able to pursue poetry full time, one of the biggest challenges they encounter is finding time outside of their day-to-day responsibilities to write poetry. Additional challenges for poets include overcoming performance anxiety and managing self-doubt and criticism. Most poets will admit that it is not easy to get on stage and perform in front of an audience. With a few exceptions, most poets struggle with performing in front of an audience. Performing becomes easier as poets become more confident in their abilities and as they become more comfortable in front of an audience. Managing performance anxiety is something that is developed over time.

Competitive aspects of slam poetry. Many poets enjoy the competitive aspects of slam poetry and have developed strategies to increase their chances of winning the poetry slam competition. A smaller number of poets indicated they did not enjoy the high stakes format of poetry slam competitions and prefer sharing their work in an environment where their poetry will not be scored.

Research Question #2

How is slam poetry meaningful for slam poetry audiences? While the term “audience” is appropriate for those attending a slam poetry event, greater specification was necessary because audiences are neither homogenous nor mutually exclusive from performers. Poetry slam events are comprised of several intersecting audiences, including but not limited to poets, friends of poets, members of the poetry community, local art or music scene goers, casual observers, and those who may be attending an event by chance. This section discusses how slam poetry is meaningful for audiences by summarizing the reasons members of the audience provided for attending and participating in slam poetry events. Participants discussed the following themes: Audience, Community, and Participation.

Audience. Audience members specified a variety of reasons for attending slam poetry events. Reasons for attending ranged from general curiosity about the art form to having a casual interest in performance and poetry. Some were dedicated enthusiasts and active participants in the scene, and others attended mainly to socialize and see people they know.

A number of dedicated attendees indicated they participate because they identify with the content of the discourses that take place within the community. In particular, many audience members indicated slam poetry events are one of the only public spaces where they are able to engage in discourses related to marginalized experiences. The communication of experiences varied widely but often included topics such as lived racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and able-bodied-ness as well as how these

experiences related to larger cultural and social structures. Therefore many of the experiences represented on stage during a poetry slam event are often unrepresented in mainstream, popular culture, and everyday interactions.

Additionally, the roles of audience members are not fixed. An audience member may change the frequency and duration of their attendance over time. Participants who attend poetry slam events sporadically may increase their attendance, while others may withdraw from the scene over time. Some audience members become active participants in the community while others remain casual observers.

Depending upon the community, generally, there is a relatively low threshold to cross between the audience and a performer. With a fair degree of regularity, audience members begin writing poems after attending poetry slam events. Several participants who began writing after attending a poetry slam indicated they never wrote poetry prior to seeing performances on stage. Seeing poets perform, particularly those close in proximity of age, was a motivating factor for some audience members to begin writing and performing poetry. Crossing this threshold is easier for communities that have opportunities for practice, such as open mic nights, because competing in a poetry slam can be overwhelming for someone who is new at writing and performing.

Slam poetry events are spaces where poets are able to render the self-explicit by performing backstage discourses on the front stage. Just as rendering the self-explicit opens opportunities for epiphanic moments for performers, experiencing these moments is also beneficial for audiences, particularly for participants who may be experiencing a similar situation but have been unable to articulate their experience into words. Indeed, it

is not uncommon for audience members to approach poets following performances to thank them and tell them how much the poems mean to them.

Using slam poetry as a medium for communicating complicated experiences is similar to Behar's (1997) concept of the vulnerable observer. According to Behar, a vulnerable observer requires locating subjectivity within the processes in which one participates and then communicating these experiences to others. This approach generates opportunities for poets to communicate their experiences for themselves as well as convey the experiences of others. However, there are obstacles to becoming a vulnerable observer, as it opens one up to criticism. As Behar (1997:16) indicates, "When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably," and sometimes critically. Such is the case with many of the topics that slam poets write about. While occasionally challenging or unsettling, a social value of this approach of artistic production is found in artists' ability to stimulate discussion.

Community. Participants of poetry slam events often refer to the poetry community. Depending upon the context of the discussion, community may refer to a variety of different groups. There is "The poetry slam community," which is a reference to the larger slam poetry movement. The poetry slam community is also used to refer to the larger collective of communities brought together by a mutual interest in slam poetry. The official organizing body of slam poetry, Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSI), holds a number of national and international competitions where poets from across the world are able to gather. At the local level, community references smaller individual groups such as those included in this study. Many large cities have an active slam poetry scene. Many

larger cities such as Austin, Houston, and San Antonio have multiple slam poetry scenes, so there will be a community associated with each particular group, which is also part of the poetry community within that particular city.

Participants across all three communities included in this analysis viewed slam poetry events as a place where they were able to share a mutual interest for slam poetry with others. Within these settings, there are opportunities for interaction, support, and mentorship with writing and performing as well as different areas of life and artistic expression. In various ways, slam poetry communities provide a space for participation through artistic production and consumption.

Slam poetry communities can also influence poets' artistic production from beginning to advanced levels of experience. Participants possess varying degrees of knowledge and experience writing, performing, and competing in poetry slam competitions. Seasoned, well-polished poets generally have a deeper understanding of slam poetry and their creative process than those who possess intermediate- or novice-level understanding. As a result, experienced poets tend to fare better in slam poetry competitions and are more consistent in the quality of their artistic production. Poets who consistently produce high-quality work are influential upon other participants at all levels of experience within their community. Indeed, there is a relationship between knowledge, experience, and the quality of work a poet produces. Less experienced poets often seek information from their more experienced, influential peers. This occurs through formal and informal means including writing and performance workshops,

critiques, mentoring, peer interactions, and observations. These activities provide poets the opportunity to learn from one another, directly and indirectly.

Since information is a valuable resource in slam poetry communities, some poets are selective about the information they share and with whom they share it because it may decrease any competitive advantage they may have. However, not all poets feel the same way about sharing information. One motivation for sharing information is to increase the quality of artistic production in the community as a whole, making everyone better as a result.

An additional motivation for sharing information is the reciprocity that occurs between experienced poets and peers. Although intermediate and novice poets lack the tools and experience to consistently produce quality work, they often add energy and charisma to the community. Experienced poets, while capable of producing and performing quality work, sometimes experience stagnation in their creative production. In these instances, creative charisma becomes routinized when energetic interactions diminish over time. Thus, newer poets are capable of breathing new life into a community, thereby increasing the level of energy of other participants.

A genuine desire to see others grow and achieve success is another strong motivation for some to share information and provide mentoring. As discussed above many slam poetry communities are supportive and nurturing environments. For some participants of the community, mentorship extends well beyond poetry and develops into close personal bonds. The close bonds are characteristic of the types of relationships that develop between some members of slam poetry communities. This is why so many

people describe their slam poetry community as a support group, as a group of close friends, and for some, as their family. Now they have others who are not only willing to listen but also help them work through difficult and challenging circumstances through learning a process that helps them redirect their energy into creative expression.

Information sharing and mentorship between peers contributes to success in slam poetry, promotes solidarity within the community, and provides a basis for the development of personal relationships. Understood in this way, information and mentorship are valuable, albeit somewhat limited, resources. Poets who are granted access to resources of information and mentorship benefit in many of the ways outlined above. This is sometimes referred to by poets who don't have access to such resources as being part of the inner circle or part of the "cool kids' club." While valuable, the distribution of knowledge is asymmetrical. Not all who participate in slam poetry communities are granted access to information, knowledge, and the advice or mentorship of a more experienced peer. Poets without such scaffolding must develop and cultivate their writing and performing repertoires through other means, which may or may not be available.

Despite the challenge, some remain resilient and find success over time, while others perceiving the community as a closed group eventually seek out opportunities elsewhere. This occurred on a number of occasions when participants who had attempted to gain access to the community over a long duration of time witnessed newer participants being granted access to a wealth of resources, a process referred to as the "fast-track to cool kid status."

Participation. Participating in slam poetry events requires a considerable amount of time. Motivating participants to volunteer their time and labor is challenging, but it is necessary for the maintenance of the community. Depending upon the type of labor (e.g., front stage, middle stage, or backstage roles) and duration of commitment, participants indicated that volunteering increased their overall satisfaction and commitment to the community because it made them feel as though they have a place within their group and that their peers value their contributions.

A large portion of socialization occurs outside of the context of the event, but access to these spaces are generally limited to those who are already part of the community. With limited opportunities to become more involved and interact with regulars at events, some participants may perceive the community less open than others claim. This experience is especially pronounced for participants who don't perform, or at least don't perform often, and those who are not already friends with participants in the community. For some, becoming an acknowledged member of the community can be a challenging ordeal.

One of quickest ways for new participants to get involved and be recognized by the community is to perform. This is particularly difficult when the only opportunity to perform in some communities is to compete in a poetry slam. The high-level intensity of a poetry slam is a deterrent for many newcomers who want to perform but don't feel they have the ability to do so in a competitive environment.

Implications and Recommendations

Artists and artistic production. Poets produced slam poetry for a variety of reasons ranging from personal growth to professional goals. The competition format of slam poetry was a contributor to creative production for some, as it inspired them to write and perform new work on a continuous basis. In addition to increased productivity, a number of poets really enjoyed competing and developed sophisticated strategies to consistently place within the top performers of a poetry slam.

Although recognizing positive benefits resulting from writing and performing slam poetry, not all viewed the competition format with the same regard. Some participants held conflicted feelings about competing—particularly when poetry was intimately personal. Those who held this point of view sometimes they felt they were exploiting, or encouraged to exploit, their experiences in order to produce work that would receive the favor of the audience and judges. The more favorable the reception, the more some poets were swayed to continue producing similar work. Choosing to produce poetry that did not rely upon personal experiences was perceived as placing themselves at a competitive disadvantage to other competitors who were performing such work.

Another concern was the desire to win a poetry slam sometimes took precedence over artistic integrity. Occasionally, poets who set out to perform a particular poem felt they needed to switch out the piece for an “audience favorite” when they found themselves trailing in the competition. This situation was expressed as a source of frustration for poets who were attempting to push the boundaries of their artistic

repertoire as the desire to win encouraged the use of formulas, slam poetry “tricks,” or strategies that fare well in competition. It is well known that “some times the best poetry doesn’t always win.” While occasionally unpleasant, a few poets explained this aspect of the competition was part of “playing the game,” further noting the positive benefits typically outweigh the negative aspects of competition.

Poetry slam competitions are an exciting draw for many participants. However, there is an underlying tension between the status and hierarchy of the competition and the community narrative that slam poetry events are a place for inclusiveness and self-expression. Some participants become adept at navigating such terrain while this becomes irresolvable tension for others.

The competition did have undesirable after effects for some participants. Participants whose poetry discussed challenging experiences, but failed to resonate with an audience during competition expressed this perspective. A few participants indicated the challenging experiences they were writing about became compounded when they were received unfavorably.

A less competitive environment, such as an open mic, was more favorable for some as it entailed a less immediate and public judgment of their performance. Open mic events were also seen as beneficial for performers who desired opportunity to practice performing in front of an audience, or tryout new work. Indeed, many participants, from beginning to experienced poets, viewed open mics as a safe(r) place to practice performing in front of an audience.

Some communities have additional opportunities to perform outside the regular competition. For example some communities have themed poetry slams, where work relating to a particular theme is allowed in the competition. One such theme is the popular “new shit slam” where work that has not previously been used in competition may be performed. Less experienced poets found it particularly helpful to have different opportunities to practice and feedback from more experienced peers. Additionally, experienced poets appreciated having opportunities to experiment with work they would not want to risk performing in a regular poetry slam competition when the stakes are much greater.

While charisma of a poetry slam is a draw for many, the intensity of the competition provides a challenge for some participants to take the stage. This depends upon the community, as some communities are more oriented toward competition while others have other opportunities to perform outside of the competition. Without differentiated opportunities for participation, communities may inadvertently exclude potential participants who need to share their mystories the most.

In addition to having regular opportunities to perform and be recognized by the community, there were several key factors that influenced creative production. Participants, who had opportunities to perform on a regular basis, spent time thinking about and developing their creative process, learned how to receive and evaluate feedback, and regularly set and worked toward accomplished goals were generally more satisfied and self-confident about their artistic production, thus viewing their participation in slam poetry more meaningful.

These narratives suggest a relationship between creative production and perceptions of self. Thus, future research could further examine the relationship between creative production and concepts of the self and identity. For example, how does creative production influence self-concept and identity over time?

Since audience reception plays a key factor in creative production and perceptions of self, it is important to differentiate between writing for one's self versus work created to be shared with others? Some poets write for themselves without the intention of sharing their work with others while other poets write specifically to share their work with audiences. Many poets do both—writing some poetry to perform while also producing writing that will never be shared with anyone. The fact that some creative producers create works they never intend on sharing with others raises interesting questions about how conspicuous and inconspicuous creative production differ as it relates to identity work and audience reception.

Audience, community, and participation. Participants attended poetry slam events for variety of reasons. While motivations for attending varied, all participants expressed a desire to partake in meaningful interactions within a space that inspired such interaction to occur. Indeed, many described their participation with slam poetry as one of the most meaningful activities they partake in because it provided them sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, not all who attended were able to achieve a sense of belonging within the communities they attempted to become a member. The reasons some were not able to achieve a sense of belonging are discussed in the analysis above, but tended to

include perceptions of limited opportunities to occupy a role within the community. Thus, some participants felt their contributions were undervalued or unrecognized by other members of their community.

The fact that some participants were able to achieve a sense of belonging while others did not speaks to the underlying tension between slam poetry as competitive art form and the narrative of slam poetry communities as a space for inclusiveness and free expression. Although a difficult tension to resolve, a couple communities developed methods to mitigate its effects and have been successful in engaging more participants by providing opportunities to interact outside the context of a regular poetry slam event. For example, Houston VIP and Mic Check organize writing and performance workshops that are free and open to the public. Workshops provided opportunities for participants of all levels of experience to learn about poetry, practice writing and performing, and to give and receive feedback. The collective activity of the workshop allowed attendees to get to know other members of the community. A few participants noted the welcoming environment of workshops coupled with a collaborative activity helped reduced anxiety they experience in social settings that allowed them to engage members of the community where they may not have otherwise. Indeed, workshops were highly regarded by attendees of all levels of experience and served as an entry point for newer participants to become more active in their community.

Additionally, as communities are looking to increase participation, it would be beneficial to examine the roles available and how they are allocated. Leaders sometimes assumed casual attendees did not want to contribute more to the community. For some

participants this was true, however, a sizable number indicated they would like to be more involved, but they perceived the roles within their community as occupied by an inner circle of friends. There were a number of participants who simply stopped going to poetry events because their attempts to become more involved with the community were overlooked. Some participants may not have given consideration to participating more deeply because they didn't see an opportunity to contribute more due to the perception of a closed, inner-social group. Rather than relying upon the same group of people to carry out essential tasks, such as scorekeeping and timekeeping, distributing these responsibilities to a wide range of participants would help increase a sense of belonging. While some participants may not want to contribute any further than attending to watch the completion, others may be willing to but have not asked to dance, so to speak. This raises the question: should participants be responsible for finding their own place within a community, or should a community work to find a place for all participants who are willing? If assuming the former, communities may overlook an opportunity to engage participants who would benefit from slam poetry the most. Assuming the later, communities can work toward increasing participation while promoting inclusiveness and belonging by offering differentiated opportunities for participation.

Cultural Sociology. Becker's (1982) art worlds approach was seminal to showing how creative production is the result of collective activity rather than individual efforts alone. Focusing on the collective activity of cultural production of art at an interactional level prompts questions related to how artists become artists and how audiences become audiences for the arts. Put another way, what does it mean to be an

artist and what does it mean to be a consumer of art? Bourdieu (1993:139) touches upon this when he poses the question “but who created the ‘creators’?” I would extend this question by also asking, “who creates the audiences?”

Peterson and Anand’s (2004) production of culture approach is useful for illustrating how creative work is shaped at a macro level, particularly as cultural artifacts are institutionalized, moving from subcultural style (Hebdige 1979) or taste culture (Gans, 1999) to widespread audiences. However, as Peterson and Anand (2004:327) recognize, their approach “defocalizes the role of fans and consumers in shaping the content of culture,” and ignores the meanings of cultural production from producers and consumers. As this study illustrates, the meaning of creative work is significant to artists and their audiences. Artistic cultural production is not only influenced by the communities creative producers participate within, but also includes the dialogical interactions that take place with various audiences.

Thornton’s (1995) discussion of subcultural capital is useful for understanding how creative producers working outside of the mainstream remain motivated to produce work despite limited opportunities for economic returns on their labor. For many creative producers, being recognized for the skill of their craft amongst an audience of their peers (e.g., their social status, or subcultural capital, within their community) is highly influential for creative production.

Subcultural capital as an extension of Bourdieu’s (1986) understanding of social capital is also useful. According to Bourdieu (1986:248), social capital is a recognizable attribute of an individual or group: “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources

which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.” Bourdieu indicates there are three forms of social capital: symbolic, cultural, and economic. Bourdieu (1986:243) maintains the possession of one form is convertible to other forms under certain conditions. Thornton’s (1995) subcultural capital is closely related to symbolic capital; I refer to them both as symbolic status.

The question then is how does symbolic status become convertible into other forms? Additionally, does the conversion of status influence the shifting of institutional arrangements or the other way around? The production of culture approach would explain convertibility as the result of institutional or organizational rearrangements such as the emergence of new technology or regulatory changes (Peterson and Anand, 2004).

What the production of culture model does not explain is how some forms of cultural production continue when they are unrecognized or ignored by institutional arrangements or resist commodification. For example, in the early 2000s, Russell Simons attempted to commercialize slam poetry’s grassroots efforts with a television series on HBO called Def Poetry Jam. Simons attempted to link slam poetry to the popularity of hip hop culture by featuring popular hip-hop and rap artists performing poems alongside emerging slam poets. To help forge the connection, acclaimed underground hip-hop artist and actor, Mos Def, hosted the show.

While Def Poetry gained symbolic status amongst a niche audience, it never reached the widespread commercial success Simons was known for with his other endeavors. Part of this was due to the resistance of slam poetry gatekeepers, including

founder Marc Smith, who decried commercialization as antithetical to the purpose and meaning of the art form. For Smith and others, the purpose of slam poetry was to connect art with community. Despite the limited conversion of symbolic status to cultural or economic capital, slam poetry persisted primarily at grassroots level.

Slam poetry continues because it is meaningful for participants in ways that are not easily reducible to economic motivations. From the perspective of poets, slam poetry is meaningful because it provides opportunities to create work within an artistic community. Working collaboratively increases artistic production, while also allowing poets to learn from one another. For many poets writing and performing slam poetry is a therapeutic outlet, a way to process life and challenging experiences. To varying degrees, nearly all poets participating in this study utilized the format of slam poetry to construct and perform aspects of their identity they are unable to express in other arenas. By rendering the self-explicit, a process of bringing “backstage” discourses to the “front stage,” poets are able to recall, reframe, and retell challenging experiences in a way that is meaningful and personally enriching. Whether for self-reflexive purposes, speaking to collective representations, engaging in political speech, or for pedagogical reasons, rendering the self-explicit is a form of identity and boundary work for many poets.

From the perspective of audiences, slam poetry events are places where they are able to share similar interests with a supportive group of people. Many participants develop and maintain close friendships with fellow members of the community—some describe their relationships as family. Additionally, many attend slam poetry events because discourse within the space resonates with their experiences and challenges their

thinking. Indeed, many view slam poetry events as one of the few public spaces where they are able to engage in meaningful discourse relating to marginalized experiences and issues of social justice.

For poets and audiences alike, slam poetry communities provide a space that encourages meaningful communication. The intersection of contexts, where interactions between front stage/backstage discourses occur, creates a transitional space that prompts moments of shared intimacy and understanding between participants. Some participants describe these moments as transformational experiences that lead to new understandings of self and society, and encourage a shared sense of community and belonging.

In addition to the meanings held by participants, slam poetry is currently experiencing a conversion of symbolic status to more widespread cultural status. This transition is evidenced by: the growing number of communities dedicated to slam poetry; the wide spread social media distribution and consumption of poetry performances (e.g., BuzzFeed, Facebook, Huffington Post, Upworthy, YouTube); the emergence of organizations dedicated to the documentation and distribution of performance poetry (e.g., Button Poetry, Write About Now Poetry); and the increasing support of cultural and social institutions (e.g. schools, grant funding agencies, etc.).

Many social institutions are beginning to recognize slam poetry's ability to engage audiences along with its utility for pedagogical purposes. A number of communities have responded to the increasing visibility of slam poetry by developing teaching and learning programs for writing and performance. This includes partnering with local schools and other community-oriented organizations to provide writing and

performance workshops open to the public. As slam poetry communities continue increasing support, they will be able to expand opportunities for participants as well as contribute to the larger communities they are situated within. Contrary to the critics mentioned at the beginning of this study, poetry, as an art form, is alive and embodied within a spirit of community.²⁰

²⁰ Drops microphone!

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APPENDIX A

Project Title: Artists, Artistic Culture, and Community

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Chad Scott, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of art objects and artistic production within the communities they are located. You were selected as a potential participant because you are an artist or you participate in an artistic community.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an artist or you participate in an artistic community.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?

10 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally. Overall, a total of 40 people will be invited from four different study centers.

What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, alternatives to being in the study are not currently available.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?

You will be asked to be interviewed regarding your artistic production or participation within an artistic community. Interviews are generally 45-60 minutes in duration. Additionally, you are asked to have your interview electronically recorded by audio or video equipment. Please note that electronic recordings are completely voluntary. You may participate without having your interview electronically recorded. More information regarding audio and video recordings will be provided to you on a separate form prior to your interview.

If you are an artist you are invited to have portions of your artistic production documented and/or represented within this study. More information regarding artistic production will be provided to you on a separate intellectual property form prior to any inclusion within this study.

In addition to interviews, this research uses a process called participant observation. This means the researcher will observe the places where artists and participants of artistic

culture interact. Since artistic culture takes place in many locations (e.g., public events, private gatherings, and social media), participant observations will occur across these locations as well. Because participant observations will occur over many different locations, you may select your level of participation within this study (e.g., you may limit your participation to any of the following: interviews, single-location participant observation, multiple-location participant observation, public events, private gatherings, and social media such as Facebook).

Your participation in this study will last between six months to a year. The Naturalistic Inquiry approach I will be utilizing is an evolving research process. One in which I cannot specify in advance how long a research project in the field will take. Generally, this approach to research continues until data saturation occurs. There is no way to predict when this will happen.

Are There Any Risks To Me?

The things that you will be doing are no greater than risks than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?

The records of this study will be kept private, unless you provide authorization to use your name. If you do not authorize the use your name, no identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Chad Scott, Dr. Gatson, and Dr. Yvonna Lincoln will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in computer files protected with a password.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Unless you provide permission to use your name, information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?

You may contact the Protocol Director, Chad Scott to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at chadscott@tamu.edu. You may also contact the Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Sarah Gatson at gatson@tamu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program office at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

What if I Change My Mind About Participating?

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your student status, employment, or relationship with Texas A&M University.

Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

By participating in the interview(s) or agreeing to participant observation you are giving permission for the investigator to use your information for research purposes.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Artists, Artistic Culture, and Community

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Chad Scott, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of art objects and artistic production within the communities they are located. You were selected as a potential participant because you are an artist or you participate in an artistic community.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an artist or you participate in an artistic community.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?

10 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally. Overall, a total of 40 people will be invited from four different study centers.

What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, alternatives to being in the study are not available.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?

You will be asked to be interviewed regarding your artistic production or participation within an artistic community. Interviews are generally 45-60 minutes in duration. Additionally, you are asked to have your interview electronically recorded by audio or video equipment. Please note: electronic recordings are completely voluntary. You may participate without having your interview electronically recorded. More information regarding audio and video recordings will be provided to you on a separate form prior to your interview.

If you are an artist you are invited to have portions of your artistic production documented and/or represented within this study. More information regarding artistic production will be provided to you on a separate intellectual property form prior to any inclusion within this study.

In addition to interviews, this research uses a process called participant observation. This means the researcher will observe the places where artists and participants of artistic culture interact. Since artistic culture takes place in many locations (e.g. public events, private gatherings, and social media), participant observations will occur across these locations as well. Because participant observations will occur over many different locations, you may select your level of participation within this study (e.g. you may limit your participation to any of the following: interviews, single-location participant observation, multiple-location participant observation, public events, private gatherings, and social media such as Facebook).

Your participation in this study will last between six months to a year. The Naturalistic Inquiry approach I will be utilizing is an evolving research process. One in which I cannot specify in advance how long a research project in the field will take. Generally, this approach to research continues until data saturation occurs. There is no way to predict when this will happen.

Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?

The researchers will take photographs/make an audio and/or video recording during the study so that these materials may be utilized throughout the study and included in a written, or audio-visual account of the study. Photographs, audio and/or video recordings of you will only be made if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

_____ I give my permission for photographs/audio/video recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

_____ I do not give my permission for photographs/audio/video recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

Are There Any Risks To Me?

The things that you will be doing are no greater than risks than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?

The records of this study will be kept private, unless you provide authorization to use your name. If you do not authorize the use your name, no identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Chad Scott, Dr. Gatson, and Dr. Yvonna Lincoln will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in computer files protected with a password.

Information about you will be stored in computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?

You may contact the Protocol Director, Chad Scott to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at chadscott@tamu.edu. You may also contact the Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Sarah Gatson at gatson@tamu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program office at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

What if I Change My Mind About Participating?

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your student status, employment, or relationship with Texas A&M University. Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date

APPENDIX C

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION PROGRAM
CONSENT FORM AUTHORIZING THE USE OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Project Title: Artists, Artistic Culture, and Community

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Chad Scott, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to authorize the use of your intellectual property (i.e. published or unpublished artistic production such as poetry, writing, and/or performance choreography) for this study. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this form indicating whether you give permission to use your intellectual property. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.

If you give permission to use intellectual property, these materials may be used in this study. Please note that this option is completely voluntary. You may participate without giving permission for the use of your intellectual property. Please note, if you select to give permission for the use these materials, this could make your participation with this study known to the public. This is an important point to consider if you want your participation in this study to remain confidential.

If you give permission for the use of your intellectual property in this study you are not giving up ownership of your property. All intellectual property will remain the property of the creator.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Chad Scott at (209) 581-3175, by email at chadscott@neo.tamu.edu.

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____ I give my permission for the use my intellectual property (i.e. published or unpublished artistic production such as poetry, writing, and/or performance chorography) for this study.

_____ I do not give my permission for the use my intellectual property (i.e. published or unpublished artistic production such as poetry, writing, and/or performance chorography) for this study.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date