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ORAL POETRY IN A LITERATE CULTURE:
A PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY OF POETRY SLAMS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Speech Communication

by
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Dedicated to Dee Comeaux
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ABSTRACT

Poetry slams are competitive poetry performances that have drawn increasing public attention in the last decade. Despite their widespread popularity, few people outside the poetry slam community understand the nature of the slam’s appeal. This study examines the organizational culture of poetry slams, and attempts to define the characteristics that contribute to its meaning, value and success for those who participate in them.

This study describes four poetry slams that took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during the months of June and July, 1999. An ethnographic approach is used to describe these events in terms of three variables: (a) the event field in which these performances are embedded; (b) the poets who performed in these events; and (c) the individual performances that occurred during these competitions.

This study proposes that the Baton Rouge poetry slams are unique cultural events that reconnect speaking and writing in a social context in order to engage a wider audience than typical poetry readings. It examines how the organizational structure for these events is designed to include a broad range of poets and audience members. It also examines how the structural features of the slam event field combine to create this unique forum. Finally, it shows how the context for these performances influences the outcome of the event.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

During the last decade, a form of poetry performance known as "poetry slam" has become popular in the United States and abroad. The first poetry slams were organized and held in Chicago in the late 1980s by poet/entrepreneur Marc Smith, who developed the slam in hopes of drawing larger audiences for poetry readings at a local Chicago bar, The Green Mill. Poetry slams have since become popular in other locales across the country. Most of the larger cities in the United States and many smaller communities produce their own local poetry slams on a weekly basis. Poetry slam teams from forty-eight cities competed in the tenth annual National Grand Slam that was held in Chicago in August of 1999. The national competition last year grew to fifty-six four-person teams that competed in Providence, Rhode Island. An international competition billed as the "First International Poetry Olympics" was held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1999, built on the sustained success and popularity of these performance poetry competitions internationally.

A typical poetry slam is a competitive poetry reading/performance that is held in a public setting, usually a bar or cafe. Anyone who attends may read one poem of his/her own original work. Usually, the performance/reading must be less than three minutes in length. Five judges, selected from the audience before the reading begins, rate the poems after they are performed on a scale from one to ten. As in some sporting competitions, such as diving or figure skating, the high and low scores are discarded, and the other three scores added together to yield a score between zero and thirty points. At the end of the competition, first, second, and third place winners are announced.
Often, slams are held in a series of four events. Winners of the first three “open” slams in the series are invited to compete in the fourth event of the series, known as the “grand slam.” Prize money is typically awarded to the first, second, and third place winners of the grand slam. While there are some variations in the slam format according to local preferences, most slam competitions feature self-nominated poets reading their own compositions, an informal bar or café setting, and judges selected from the patrons of the bar or café.

Having attended slams in various cities in the United States, and having served as a reader, host, judge, and audience member-at-large in local competitions, I have experienced the slam phenomenon as both a participant and an observer. I have found these competitive readings to be interesting and entertaining performance events. While much of the poetry one encounters at a typical poetry slam would be considered amateurish (or worse) by literary standards, I have heard poetry of all levels of taste, quality, and sophistication performed at various slams. Furthermore, the judging of the poetry and the performances seems, at first glance, to be entirely whimsical or arbitrary in many cases—little more than snap judgments based on personal or idiosyncratic preferences. Even so, it is rare to hear either the competitors or the audience members disagree strongly with the results of the judging. Poetry slams attract poets and audience members with different ideas about what poetry is and what a poetry reading/performance should be; with different levels of experience, training, or education in the literary and performing arts; and with different criteria for evaluating the competitors. Consequently, we must consider other factors besides the literary merit of the poetry or the performance skills of the competitors if we are to understand the meaning and value of these events for those who participate in them.
In this study, I describe and interpret four individual poetry slams that took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the months of June and July, 1999, at a local venue, in order to explain the factors that contributed to the popular success, meaning, and value of these poetry slams for those who participated in them. The four slams I investigated included a regular round of four slams (i.e., three open slams and a grand slam).

In the following chapters I provide evidence to support my contention that poetry slams are unique cultural events that reconnect speaking and writing in a social context in order to engage a broader audience than typical poetry readings. In Chapter Two I describe the performances in these four slams in terms of the event field in which they are embedded. We can only understand the orally performed poetry of a poetry slam as communication in the context of the event itself. As well, we must understand the slam event as an occasion for performance within a particular community. In other words, in order to fully appreciate and understand the relationships of poet, text, performance, and the audience in a slam event, we must first understand the features of the communication in a specific context. As Richard Bauman suggests, we must "view the act of performance as situated behavior, situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts" (1984, p. 27). Bauman believes that the way performance events are temporally and spatially bound, programmed with structure, and set apart from the everyday are significant features of the performances within the event. This approach extended to include poetry slams would view the expected behavior of participants, the language, and the ground rules of the competition, among the cues and verbal features the participants in this event use to make sense of the performances. These relevant contexts figure prominently in the ongoing interpretation of meaning by the members of a particular community. To identify patterns, as well as
exceptions and problem cases in a given event, we must first understand what is expected as the norm within the context of this event field—which includes the event and the community that supports it—as the members know it.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the poets, their poetry, and their performances in terms of what they are attempting to communicate with their written poetry and why they choose to communicate it via oral performance in a competitive event. To what extent writing serves to enable the oral performance of these poets is of special interest in order to appreciate how writing and speaking work together in the case of slam poetry. The communicative means available to an individual performer, considering their social and educational background, their level of literary training and sophistication, as well as their abilities as performers, are the significant attributes of the individual's success in this type of performance.

In Chapter Four, I look at the individual performances embedded in the particular event field of each slam in order to determine what the audience considered relevant in a particular performance within the framework of slam event. I provide evidence that establishes the criteria for success in this forum and shows how these criteria are measured and referenced. We will see how the consequences of these value systems, which emphasize relative success, help create an environment where the context of performance becomes relevant to success. The audience's interpretation of meaning and the degree to which it valued what was communicated in the performances are particular goals of inquiry.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I attempt to draw conclusions of the findings in my study and provide what I believe to be the consequences of those findings. I also attempt to provide an explanation for the popularity of poetry slams in general. I point
out the features that contribute to the appeal of the slams in the context of local performances and in the larger context of "oral" performance. I also consider the unique characteristics of this genre of performance and discuss how slams create a distinct form of verbal art that can be judged only in the context of its performance. Finally, I discuss the consequences of these findings as regards the values that are reinforced in these events concerning the writing and performance of poetry.

My goal in this study is three-part: (1) to identify the characteristics of poetry slams that are meaningful to this community and describe these meanings, (2) to identify the attributes necessary for successful performance in this forum, and (3) to characterize the attributes of the event that contribute to its relative success as a popular art form.

Rationale for the Study

RoseLee Goldberg, who wrote the first history of "performance" in 1979 and issued a revised and expanded history of "performance art" in 1988, traces the historical context of performance through the avant-garde tradition in twentieth-century art and theatre. However, Marvin Carlson, in his 1996 *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, argues that performance has deeper roots in the less formally structured social entertainment activity that dates back to the middle ages where troubadours, bards and minstrels performed. Carlson suggests:

Many a modern performance artist, monologist, or stand-up comedian would likely, in terms of technique and approach, fit very easily into this versatile company. The natural gathering places for such performers were the great medieval and Renaissance fairs, but like the strolling players of the period (and often in league with them) they traveled about the countryside, performing in marketplaces, in great houses, in taverns, wherever an audience could be assembled. (p. 83)
Even though large public gatherings were the preferred sites of these performers, Carlson further states that "the solitary performer or small group of performers displaying their skills before a small gathering, even a single family in a medieval great hall, offered a more intimate performance model that has continued up until the present" (p. 85). Even though much performance art has been considered avant-garde, it could easily be interpreted as the continuation of a quite traditional activity.

However, entertainment presented to the public as "Performance" or "Performance Art," according to Carlson, came into vogue in the early 1970s (p. 100). Carlson describes these early forms of performance art as primarily concerned with the body. The body artists of the 1970s explored almost any sort of physical activity as art. This kind of "life art" offered examples ranging from such everyday activities as walking and sleeping to the extremes of being shot on stage. What distinguished performance in these early instances was the conscious effort of the artists to experiment with the relationship of art to its audience. Performance artists concerned themselves with framing and intensifying everyday activities with a general rejection of verbal language. As performance art moved into the 1980s and 1990s one noticeable trend was a return of language. "Word" or "Spoken Word," as it is commonly called, had become a dominant feature of performance art with the performance artist becoming more often seen as poet, preacher, storyteller, or rapper. As Carlson explains:

This shift is clear almost everywhere one looks in recent performance. Solo performance, though still built upon the physical presence of the performer, relies heavily upon the word, and very often upon the word as revelation of the performer, through the use of autobiographical material. (1996, p. 116)

The effects on performance art, and art production generally, caused by this shift in perspective created a complex body of performance based on language.
Another trend Carlson recognized that encouraged a greater use of language in performance from the mid-1980s onward, especially in the United States, "was that political and social concerns became one of the main themes of performance activity, especially in work involving individuals or groups with little or no voice or active role in the current system" (p. 117). In 1995, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in one of the earlier mentions of performance poetry that attempted to define it, noted the recent appearance at two downtown New York performance spaces (the Fez and the Nuyorican Café) of a new "scene" or "movement" in language performance called "rap meets poetry" (qtd. in Carlson, p. 117). Gates described the work as "captivating in performance" even though it "just doesn't survive on the page." Gates' description points out the paradoxical nature of performance poetry.

In an attempt to analyze and understand the sort of human activity that performance represents, scholars have begun to explore more deeply the "theatrical" element in arts such as photography, painting, sculpture, and literature. Using the metaphor of theatre and performance to describe such arts can foreground the tacit dramatic and communicative elements in them. For example, poetry writing itself could be considered an "act" where the writer performs his, or another, "self" in writing, for himself or some other virtual addressee. One of the distinctive features of art since the 1970s, however, has been the shift from a metaphorical to an actual use of performance in the creation and display of art works in order to downplay the art's objective status and to intensify its processual and experiential dimensions. Henry Sayre describes the social implications of this shift in aesthetics from art as object to art as experience in his study The Object of Performance:

It has had the effect, more and more pronounced as the seventies progressed, of valorizing "popular" art forms—such as photography itself—over "high" art, or
at least blurring the distinction between high and low. And it has given rise to a great deal of politically oriented artwork—that is, artwork explicitly addressed to the community as a social institution. (1989, p. 6)

Sayre considers this approach as a reaction of the avant-garde that signaled an opposition to the formalist/immanentist aesthetics where art is considered autonomous and durable (1989, p. 7). The resulting “post-modern” aesthetic endeavored to create an art that implicated itself in time and consciously situated itself in relation to issues of local and topical significance instead of the “universal” or “transcendent.”

Poetry Slams have risen out of this “performance art” movement that began to be recognized during the 1970s as an artistic movement in its own right. Earlier precursors to this movement toward performance, in the case of poetry, can be traced to the Beat Poets, who inspired an oral poetry movement in the 1960s and 1970s and attempted to redefine the locus of poetry from the written page to the spoken word. The oral poetry-reading tradition which developed in New York City between 1960 and 1970 with Paul Blackburn at its center, was a reaction against a formalist and academic criticism, which they believed overvalued the poem as an object in its own right (Sayre 1989, p. 16). The idea of the written poem as a closed system, permanently before us, was replaced by the voiced utterance of the poem as the primary location of meaning for these poets. The tendency was to valorize the experience of the text’s performance over the text itself.

In performance poetry, a sub-species of performance art, many of the same issues that Sayre describes as the impetus for performance art in general are relevant. According to this perspective, the poem in a poetry performance is considered only a record of the performance—a script. The work as an activity is privileged over the work as product. The performance poet operates with a presentational medium that
involves the self and the rest of the audience. The meaning and value of the poetry performance may go well beyond anything the poet can control precisely on the page. The poetry performance experienced in the larger context of the event will produce meanings relevant to a particular community, and this community may not share the same value system as the poet. The very nature of how quality or acceptable standards are established may well become the issue for whatever discussion the poem generates.

If we think of poetry performance as a theatrical experience, we can begin to consider the “art” involved in the performance and what makes performance poetry distinct from written poetry. In theatrical performance the “actors” are involved first and foremost in a public display of technical skills. The technical skills involved in poetry performance involve speaking and writing. Poetry writing involves the use of language in a special way—measured verse, metaphor, alliteration, word choice, and the like, are among the typical elements we recognize as poetic language. The performance of that poetic language involves another set of skills such as articulation, gesture, the use of pauses, eye contact, and the like. On a basic level poetry performance can be judged on a continuum involving writing and the performance of that writing; the more emphasis placed on the writing will weight the value on literary standards, and emphasis on the presentational skill will weight the value on performance standards.

There is, however, another level of performance that has less to do with the display of skills than with a “recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior” (Carlson, 1996, p. 5). This behavior, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage, involves a certain distance between the “self” and the behavior. As Carlson suggests, “Even if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage...
it is considered ‘performed’ and off stage merely ‘done’” (1996, p.4). The difference between doing and performing lies in an attitude of the performer, and as Carlson further suggests, “we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance” (p. 4). As we will see in the poetry performances included in this study, this double consciousness figures into the perceived quality of poetry performance.

Both of these aspects of performance, the display of skills and the attitude of the performer, feature attributes of performance that are in the hands of the performer. Yet there is another significant attribute of performance that is not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer. Carlson explains:

When we speak of someone’s sexual performance or linguistic performance or when we ask how well a child is performing in school, the emphasis is not so much on a display of skill (although that may be involved) or on the carrying out of a particular pattern of behavior, but rather on the general success of the activity in light of some standard of achievement that may not itself be precisely articulated. Perhaps even more significantly, the task of judging the success of the performance (or even judging whether it is a performance) is in these cases not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer. (1996, p. 5)

At poetry slams this feature of performance is emphasized to the point that the audience is actually given the role of articulating publicly its assessment of the success of the performance relative to other performances in light of standards which are not articulated. In addition to the poetry and the performance, the value systems of a particular community are displayed and negotiated at poetry slams.

Judging performance relative to other performances points up another aspect of poetry slams that is somewhat unique in this performance art genre—the competition. Although the competitive element of poetry slams makes them somewhat unique in relation to performance art, competitive oral poetry performances have a long tradition in the West that dates back at least to the Greek tradition of symposia, festival, and
A. Thomas Cole, in the preface to Gentili's study of poetry and its public in ancient Greece, points to other factors that we might consider important in terms of the competitive aspects of performance. He states:

The poet and public it [Gentili’s book] discusses are never author and reader, but always performer and hearer: on the one hand a reciter or singer improvising in some sort of social setting—banquet, symposium, political gathering, religious rite, public festival—and on the other, a largely or totally aliterate audience for whom such occasions function both as a source of entertainment, information, moral edification, and practical advice, and as the principal means for putting the here and now of one’s day-to-day existence into some sort of larger cultural context. (1988, xii)

Even though Cole is here speaking of a culture existing in a state of primary orality, many of the same points can be made for social gatherings like the slam competitions in a literate society. In the case of the Greek culture, however, these performances took place in a society where the spoken word was considered primary. In the case of the slam phenomenon, the culture exists in a state of primary literacy where the written word is the accepted authority. Why are poetry slams—a poetry competition where writing informs the featured spoken word—successful in this culture? Even though the poetry in the contemporary instance is composed primarily in writing, it is performed orally. The poets who perform at slams rely on the spoken word to present their discourse, and, like the oral poets of ancient Greece, their poetry is performed to appeal to an audience that is physically present at the moment of its utterance—to entertain, to instruct, to edify, and to put the here and now of their day-to-day existence into a larger cultural context. The degree to which the audience agrees with, finds entertaining or useful, understands, and appreciates the poet's efforts determines the degree of a poet's immediate success in this forum, the meaning of his or her discourse, and the perceived value of the performance.
While performance poetry has a long tradition in the West, and while performance art also has some links with older performance traditions, performance poetry in its contemporary manifestations is usually classified as a nontraditional or avant-garde genre. Sayre contends that the postmodern attention to performance represents the admission—or the intrusion—into the realm of high art of what William Seitz in _The Art of Assemblage_ identified as the "vernacular" (1989, p.9). As Sayre concludes:

Harking back to the poet William Carlos Williams’s desire to admit, into the realm of poetry, an authentic “American idiom,” the vernacular includes for Seitz, such things as ‘beat Zen and hot rods, mescaline experiences and faded flowers, photographic bumps and grinds, the _poubelle_ (i.e., trash can), juke boxes, and hydrogen explosions.’ . . . it is the intrusion of the vernacular into the discourses of modern art—into the realm of aesthetics—that has most offended formalist sensibilities. The vernacular raises questions of decorum almost immediately, for it seems to undermine the aura of the work of art. Not only does collage composition draw upon the widest range of materials, admitting “mass culture” into the hallowed precincts of “art,” substituting the “low” for the “high,” imitation wood-grained wallpaper for the painted surface, but “high art” is increasingly susceptible to a kind of “mass” co-optation. (1989, pp. 9-10)

This tension between formalist and anti-formalist tradition continues to exist in our culture and to dismiss either is, I believe, a detriment to the enterprise of poetic discourse: which in either case implicitly envisions transformation or change to result from our encounter with them. As I said earlier, poetry in our contemporary culture exists on a continuum between writing and speaking, and its placement on that continuum depends upon its relation to the larger audience to which it is addressed. As Sayre suggests, “performance art accedes to interpretation, to hearing itself spoken, perhaps unrecognizably, in the myriad dialects of the vox populi” (1989, p. 17).

Richard Bauman defines an “artistic event” as “the performance situation, involving performer, art form, audience, and setting,” and this definition serves to point up a reorientation of folklore research that invites scholars to conduct studies based on
"folklore-as-communication" rather than "folklore-as-materials" (1984, p. 4). Though Bauman is concerned with folklore rather than poetry, the performance-centered approach (that contrasts the traditional text-centered approach) for folklore study serves well in this study that concerns itself with poetry as a verbal or spoken art. This shift in perspective makes way for a conception of the poetry performed at a poetry slam to be considered as another example of verbal art: a special way of speaking, loosely based on poetic convention as studied in the American academy, and its attendant phenomena. What this study attempts is to develop a framework for understanding the poetry of the poetry slam performance as "a species of situated human communication" rather than as a written artifact of poetic communication measured by literary standards (Bauman, 1984, p. 8). This is not to say that the written poetry texts of poetry slams are necessarily different in quality or kind from any other written poetry, but rather, that the performance of the poetry in poetry slams is the rendition of that poetry in another communicative mode. I attempt to understand and appreciate the performed poetry in the poetry slams in light of its context in the larger scope of cultural performances.

Methodology

In contemporary performance study much is owed to the disciplines of Anthropology, Theatre, and Sociolinguistics. Investigating performance/cultural events such as poetry slams involves an appreciation that "more" is being communicated than just the poetry. Among the other things being communicated in such events are the attitudes of the performers and audience members as well as the value systems of both. Being able to understand and appreciate what is specifically communicated in a particular cultural event involves understanding and appreciating how communication is carried out in the specific cultural context of the event. In order to understand the
context of the performance, the researcher cannot rely on an objective reporting of
events but rather must involve himself as a participant observer. Participant observation
requires the fieldworker to suspend his own value system, enter into the performance
situation with a clearly defined goal, and attempt to understand the culture as the
“natives” of that culture understand it. According to Colin Turnbull, such an approach
“represents a major shift in modern anthropology from the model of the neutral
objective reporter of cultural customs to that of a native from one culture observing
natives from another, creating a complex interplay of influence and adjustment” (1990,
p. 50). The result of this type of ethnographic interplay is to create what Dwight
Conquergood describes as a “dialogical” performance, which aims, “to bring together
different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a
conversation with one another” (1985, p. 9).

My performance ethnography sets as its goal the investigation of a series of
poetry slams in order to understand what meanings are communicated in this cultural
event, how meanings are communicated there, and which meanings are most important
to its members. The view of performance that I attempt to develop in this investigation
emphasizes the context of the performance and the dynamics of reception as influences
that are as important as any specific activities of the performer in the construction of
meanings in this community. Therefore, it is necessary to use research methods that
account for the performance context.

In this study I have adopted an ethnographic approach using research tools based
on the tenets of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Information gathered
from the “natives’ point of view” (Malinowski, cited in Gregory, 1983, p. 359) is the
primary source of data for this project. In 1996 I traveled to several United States cities
and viewed a spectrum of poetry performance events and readings as a researcher. I
spent the year doing ethnographic research while living with different poets for periods
of time (usually one or two weeks each) and recording their activities, thoughts, and
insights into the performance of poetry as a cultural and social phenomenon. I
conducted dozens of interviews with participants and attempted to understand why
people do this sort of activity.

I encountered a number of different perspectives and motivations. Poets in the
eastern United States have a different style from the West Coast poets, and poets in the
larger cities seem to have a different style from those in smaller communities. One
thing performance poets all seemed to have in common, however, was the need to “get
the word out on the street” or “among the regular people.” It was during this fieldwork
that I first attended a poetry slam. In the intervening three years I have attended (on an
almost weekly basis) local poetry slams as a host, a poetry performer/reader, and an
audience member. I have been responsible for organizing poetry slams in Baton Rouge,
Louisiana, for the last three years, and I was a member of the poetry slam team that
competed in the National Poetry Slam for the last two years. My interest in
performance poetry and my background in ethnographic research have afforded me a
special kind of opportunity to study poetry slams both as an observer and a participant.
To understand why other poets choose to perform their poetry at poetry slams and to
determine what they derive from it have been the primary motivations for this study.

In order to gather information relevant and particular to the individual
participants of poetry slams, I have used the research tools of participant observation,
key informant interviewing (both structured and unstructured), and a collection of life
histories. I have also collected and examined a variety of textual documents, including

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written texts of poems read and "official" written documents that concern the structure
and design of poetry slams. I base my analysis on the four slams I mentioned earlier,
including follow-up interviews, but I also draw on my fieldwork throughout the course
of my investigation to discover the motivations of individuals who participate in these
events.

Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism provide the general theoretical
ground for conducting this research (Becker & McCall, 1990; Blumer, 1969; Cicourel,
1972; Garfinkle, 1967; Sanday, 1979; Yee, 1971). These theories are based on the
premise that cultures are built upon an accrued knowledge that is shaped by members as
they understand and interpret the surface rules and accepted normative behaviors that
are required for membership in the culture. In other words, theorists of these
"interpretive schools" believe that culture is a social construct shaped by the behaviors
of members at the point of social interaction in the culture, i.e., at the point where the
identity of the culture is displayed and philosophy is turned into experience (Putnam,
1982). In the case of the poetry slam this site of display is the performance event itself.
Throughout this study I use the term "culture" in the same broad anthropological sense
as these theorists use it. As Becker and McCall (1990) note, "culture" includes: "(1)
'knowledge' and recipes, (2) humanly fabricated tools, and (3) products of social
interaction that in turn may be drawn upon in the further conduct of social life" (p. 20).

In a cultural performance such as a poetry slam, the behaviors and actions of the
individual performers represent their understanding of the cultural reality as they work
in concert to entertain a group of individual audience members according to an
acceptable standard. This acceptable standard is the "cultural text" that guides the
actions of the individual member (Brown & McMillan, 1991). The cultural text is
loosely constructed and intentionally ambiguous because it is based on implicit meanings, interpretations, and practical reasoning. Because of its equivocal nature, the cultural text exists not as a strict program identical for every member but rather as a network of associations and "configurations" designed by each individual and constantly shifting as expectations are negated or confirmed (Benedict, cited in Sanday, 1979, p. 530).

Ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists contend that the cultural text should be interpreted from the emic perspective (i.e., the insider's view, in the space and time that situates it). This perspective requires researchers to observe the role behaviors of individuals and the symbols they use to perform and convey their roles, and also to adopt the interpretive methods that the members of the organization themselves use. Simon (1986) defines these interpretive philosophies as vehicles of observation that will lead one to

see how members in social groups work together to construct the social reality of the setting through their interaction. In interaction, members apply interpretive procedures in their observations of expressive acts. In this way it is possible to see social reality as constantly up for grabs, constantly being recreated. (p. 66)

Garfinkle (1967) further corroborates this opinion when he suggests that to find out what is really going on in a social setting, beyond the operational structure, the analyst must

use the common sense knowledge of the society in exactly the ways that members use it when they must decide what persons are really doing or really "talking about," i.e., to use common sense knowledge of social structures as both a topic and a resource of inquiry. (p. 31)

Garfinkle believes that by looking at the rational properties of "indexical expressions" (i.e., context-bound expressions) we may see individual reality as an "ongoing
accomplishment of the organized artful practice of everyday life” and discover what factors determine this process (p. 11).

In this study, I try to reconstruct a reality, not only as reported to me by informants, but also as revealed to me through my participation in as well as my observation and analysis of the routinized performance of the members of the Baton Rouge slam “community.” I focus my investigation on trying to determine which of the factors that make up the cultural text are most important to individual members when they decide the behaviors and activities necessary to perform their assumed roles in a poetry slam. In short, I want to understand, from their perspective, both how they do what they do and why they do it.

The particular kind of ethnography I will be doing in this study is ethnography of oral performance. Performance ethnographers are primarily concerned with performance events within a community. The ethnographic perspective that guides this work centers on the basic reorientation from a text-centered study to a performance-centered study I mentioned earlier. Richard Bauman defines this performance-centered conception of verbal art as follows:

I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display. It is also offered for the enhancement of experience, through the present appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of both the act of expression and the performer. Viewed in these terms, performance may be understood as the enactment of the poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry. (1986, p.3)

As we can see, Bauman believes many of the factors important in appreciating and understanding verbal art lie outside the text itself. Relationships among the performer,
the text, the audience, and the context become paramount in fully appreciating verbal art performances.

In the study of performance events Bauman goes on to offer basic guidelines I adopt in this study. I look at the participants' identities and roles; the expressive means employed in performance; the social interactional ground rules; norms and strategies for performance; and criteria for its interpretation and evaluation, as well as the sequence of actions that makes up the scenario of the event (1986, p. 4). Even though each performance differs depending on a myriad of intrinsic factors particular to that performance, the ethnographic construction of the conventionalized and patterned organization of each will provide a reference point for description and analysis.

To serve the purposes of this study and to bring the phenomenon of poetry slams into sharper focus, I videotaped four poetry slams and conducted interviews with several of the participants and promoters. I investigated this series of poetry slams as differentiated and planned events from a number of provisional categories: the event field, the poets, the performances, and the audience—including the judges. I used the behaviors and comments of the participants in these four events to investigate three basic questions: (1) how do the poets define the performance, (2) what is the role of writing in the production and appreciation of the oral performance, and (3) what value do participants place on the performance? These questions led me to understand—from the perspective of the poets and the audience—what the performance is, how it is created, and what is accomplished by their efforts.

I focused my investigation on three poet/performers from each of the four slams; I observed and interviewed one of the highest scoring, one of the lowest scoring, and one near the middle in each bout. I also observed and interviewed several audience
members, including judges, from each event. Since it was difficult and unnecessarily cumbersome to provide a detailed analysis of every poet competing in the slam, I established and used a representative sample to serve the purposes of this study. The poets and performances I chose to analyze in detail represent a sample that typifies the relative degree of success possible in this forum as well as the demographic profile. I analyzed the data collected from these individuals and tried to interpret from an emic perspective what factors determined the relative success or failure of each performance according to the poets' estimation of success, the judges' scores, and the audience's reaction to those scores.

Significance of the Study

Despite the popular appeal of slam competitions, there has been little detailed academic inquiry into this phenomenon. Most of the published commentary has appeared in popular magazines and daily journals and is concerned with a basic introduction of the slam phenomenon in different cities rather than detailed study (see, e.g., Allam, 2000; Bahr, 1999; Carr, 1991; Clines, 1997; Cullen, 1999; Fischer, 1995; Gillespie, 1998; Goldberg, 1993; Ingall, 1993; Ingrassia, 1993; Jackson, 1994; McDonnell, 1996; McLane, 1994; Millner, 1998; Price, 1999; Reynolds, 1997; and Smith, 1995).

One the more informative discussions of the poetry slam phenomenon was published in the in September 1992 issue of Smithsonian magazine. Richard Conniff gives an account of a slam at the Green Mill six years after Marc Smith began the slam there. Although the article begins as a descriptive account of a particular slam, Conniff goes further to point out the controversies that surround the slams at this date. He speaks of the "dismay" of the academic community regarding slams, "the covertly high-
minded purpose of reconnecting the American people to poetry,” and the difficulty of defining the slam in relation to other kinds of poetry readings (pp. 78-79). Conniff also points to the distinction of the poetry slam as an “event” rather than a “kind of poetry.” His discussion considers the relationship of the audience, the poets, and the judges as constituent factors of the event and mentions their influence on each other. He furnishes a brief debate between poetry “experts” regarding the value of slams; one critic decries the commercializing of poetry and poets pandering to an audience, while another considers the most significant aspect of slams is that “there are audiences that want to go out and make an evening of listening to words” (pp. 81-82). The hybrid nature of slam as “a combination of poetry and theater” is highlighted when he quotes Lisa Buscani, a prominent “slam star,” attempting to explain what is involved in performing poetry in a slam (p. 82).

Critic Mona Molarsky writing in 1999 for American Theatre still points to the hybrid nature of poetry slam when she claims:

If there’s one thing clear, it’s that poetry, hip-hop and performance art have coalesced into an unprecedented something [her italics], a multi-faceted theatrical form that’s attracting people of every age, from every walk of life. (p. 60)

Considering performance poetry as theatre allows Molarsky to trace the evolution of this form from the “choreopoems” performed by Ntozake Shange in the early 1970s. Molarsky points out how Shange and other performance poets are now writing commissioned “plays” based on these poetic monologues. She also points to the controversial status of slams to theatre artists and poets. Although the slams may be like theatre and like poetry, neither discipline seems willing to recognize or embrace the form. Like Conniff, Molarsky ultimately claims value for performance poetry regarding what it offers the audience as communication within a community:
If performance poetry is in ways neither fish or fowl, why are there so many devotees? What’s all the excitement about? Maybe part of it has to do with the sheer pleasure of reclaiming the spoken language as our own, of being in a room with people who are using words [her italics] to communicate—not the bland words of office gossip, instruction manuals or the evening news, but words that are playful, experimental, artful, calculated, charged. Words that rhyme, tease and alliterate or smash up against each other in dissonance. (p. 63)

That these questions are still being asked and that the answers are still so ambiguous is evidence that the value of poetry performance and the cause of its popularity are still not clearly understood or agreed upon.

What most of the writers do agree on however is: (1) the relationship of audience and poet in the slam environment is a significant attribute of the event; (2) the participants in the event are engaging in some special form of communication; and (3) there is controversy regarding the relationship of this hybrid form to the traditional forms that it most closely resembles. Heather Beal’s comment, in another journal article, typifies the common perception of poetry slams as it still exists at the present:

Few, if any, of the people who participate in these events qualify as “poetry professionals.” During the day they work as carpenters, video artists, sculptors, lab technicians, technical writers, and business professionals. The one characteristic performance poets and their audiences seem to share is a desire to initiate and sustain a public discourse that has not been sanctified by the media or formal institutions. (1994, p. 6)

In order to understand why these conditions continue to prevail as the slam phenomenon has continued to grow, it is necessary to provide more in depth study and scholarship.

A final point concerning the common perception of the poetry slams, especially among people who have only read about slams in the available media, is the common use of the boxing metaphor to describe the event. Marc Smith was first quoted using the metaphor to explain the poetry slam’s similarity to this sporting event. Subsequent journal and popular articles have almost universally used the metaphor to describe the
slam. Terms such as "do battle," "bout," "get whomped," "in this corner," "duke it out," and the like, are common in writing about the slam. The fact that this metaphor is used so extensively, I believe, has helped create a negative image of the slam among those who have never attended. I have encountered many people who have heard of poetry slams only through the media and believe the slam is a violent affair. This common misperception rises from the difficulty of those who do not attend slams to reconcile the disparate connotations of fighting and poetry. Even though the poetry slam may have been patterned after an athletic event such as a boxing match and have some similarities in terms of winners and losers, it differs greatly in practical terms. The poetry slam is a unique competition where the winning and losing are more relative than absolute. The confusion regarding the mock-seriousness of the slam as combat is another example of misinformation regarding the slam that has been perpetuated by much of the popular reportage.

The inverse proportion of interest between the academy and the public concerning this type of poetry performance is unfortunate. Any public activity, built around poetry, that draws this much sustained attention and excitement among the general public is certainly worthy of scholarly investigation. Perhaps the literate bias of western culture has led us to forget that poetry has its roots in oral performance, consequently "oral poetry" is considered a lesser form of poetry than the kind that is composed and communicated through writing. This study is designed to contribute to the growing body of work on verbal art performance that has questioned these assumptions.

Ruth Finnegan makes a distinction between "oral poetry" and "oral" poetry -- the latter distinguished from the former by its mode of transmission and means of
circulation (1977, p. 16). Does the poetry of the poetry slam qualify as a unique genre of “oral” poetry? Finnegan notes how we might have lost sight of a large part of what poetry is:

It is easy to overlook such oral poetry. This is a special temptation to the scholar and those committed to ‘high culture,’ whose perceptions all tend to direct attention toward written literature as the characteristic location of poetry. Oral forms are often just not noticed—particularly those which are nearby or contemporary. (p. 5)

This observation suggests that the “oral” poetry of poetry slams might well be an instance where academia is once again dismissing or “not noticing” a significant genre of poetry.

Finnegan describes three ways in which a poem can most readily be called oral: (1) its composition, (2) its mode of transmission, and (3) its performance (1977, p. 17). Oral composition is understood to cover that type of creation where the poem is composed orally, concomitant with its performance, but she also points out that “the kind of composition-in-performance is not the only kind of oral composition.” According to Finnegan, the process of composition can also be prior to, and largely separate from, the act of performance (p. 18). Only occasionally, in my experience, has the poetry of the poetry slams been composed during the performance; most texts are created prior to their performance. Many slam poets vary the oral presentation of the same text in successive performances—a sort of re-composition—but little of the poetry in slams would be classified “oral poetry” strictly by these criteria. However, all of the spoken poetry of the poetry slams would qualify as “oral” poetry when we consider her second condition; all poetry at the slams is transmitted orally. Oral “performance” is defined separately from oral “transmission” in Finnegan’s third qualification because, she later explains:
This [performance], if anything, is what distinguishes it ["oral" poetry] from written forms, and it is here, as well as in the bare text, that one must look for the stylistic characteristics of a genre of poem or an individual poet’s art. It is also in the aspect of performance, in addition to the textual and content factors, that one can find the constraints and opportunities according to which an individual poet produces his compositions, and his audience appreciates them. (1977, p.133)

Here, once again, we have the suggestion that there is more to “oral” poetry than what can be contained in the written text, and this “more” can only be found outside the text in terms of the immediate context of the performance itself. The art of performance by an oral poet, in Finnegan’s definition, is the poet’s ability to recognize the “constraints and opportunities” available to him or her and to use these to create a successful performance. The degree to which the poems at slams are performed—by this definition—is an attribute of each individual performance that must be considered case by case. In addition to categorizing poetry slam poetry as “oral” poetry, a study of the performative attributes of each oral rendition will further define possible genre classifications necessary to distinguish the poetry at slams from other “oral” poetry.

This study also investigates the degree to which the poetry slams qualify as cultural performances. Cultural performances, as Bauman (1984) describes them, are: “scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bounded, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community” (p. 28). Poetry slams satisfy these conditions it seems, and, although they are organized and conducted primarily as entertainment, they do provide something more than a context for the poetry itself. The slam event seems to enjoy a distinct and relatively wide public acceptance as an occasion in which participants are drawn together in a special ceremony where the meaning and value of poetry performance is the creation both of a particular community and a particular individual. This
“communal” nature of oral literature is an important aspect of its value and appreciation.

Bauman (1984) describes the communal nature of verbal art and, citing the work of Abrahams and Black, goes further to describe a potential inherent in cultural performance, when it is conceived of as a communicative interaction, for changing existing social structures or for creating new ones:

It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience—prestige because of the demonstrated competence he has displayed, control because the determination of the flow of the interaction is in his hands. (pp. 43-4)

The emergent power of performance that Bauman describes here is relevant only within the immediate context of a particular performance, but it helps to explain part of the appeal of live poetry performance.

Is it possible that this power may lead to longer social transformations that manipulate existing social structures? Bauman suggests the possibility of this power to effect change in society and offers a philosophical consequence of the power of performance as he concludes his discussion:

The consideration of the power inherent in performance to transform social structures opens the way to a range of additional considerations concerning the role of the performer in society. Perhaps there is a key here to the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared—admired for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo. Here too may lie a reason for the equally persistent association between performers and marginality or deviance, for in the special emergent quality of performance the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest to the community. If change is conceived of in opposition to the conventionality of the community at large, then it is only appropriate that the

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agents of that change be placed away from the center of that conventionality, on the margins of society. (p. 45)

Does this “capacity for change” explain part of the appeal of poetry slams to the performers and does this also help to explain why conventional societal institutions—including the academic and literary community—might feel “dismay” regarding oral poets? If we consider this perspective, finding poetry slams and their poets marginalized by their relegation to “popular culture” status is not surprising; on the margins is where we should find agents of change, and those who are, in fact, marginal to the culture.

The disregard of contemporary humanities scholars concerning the performance of literature, according to James Winn, is rooted in Platonic philosophy—when Plato banned poetry from the Republic in an attempt to fit experience into ideal forms (1998, p. 89). Havelock further corroborates this notion when he explains:

Greek literature had been poetic because the poetry had performed a social function, that of preserving the tradition by which the Greeks lived and instructing them in it. This could only mean a tradition which was orally taught and memorized. It was precisely this didactic function and the authority that went with it to which Plato objected. What could have been his motive, unless he intended that his own teaching should supplant it? What was the difference? The obvious one, already noted, was that his own teaching was formally non-poetic. It was composed in prose. Was this a superficial accident? Or, since it represented a replacement for poetry, was it also meant to replace orality? Was the arrival of Platonism, meaning the appearance of a large body of discourse written in prose, a signal announcing that Greek orality was giving way to a Greek literacy and that the oral state of mind was to be replaced by a literate state of mind? A replacement which Plato’s genius intuitively recognized? (1986, pp. 7-8)

Winn describes the subordination of performance to text as a perhaps now unconscious strategy by scholars and established poets in the humanities to carry on the Platonic ideal of using the text as a focal point in literature study. Winn recognizes the reductive distortion as a detriment to the teaching enterprise:
... we often place our students in the position of the 'judicious reader in his
closet.' When we ignore the visual, gestural, vocal, scenic, and rhythmic parts of
a play, we falsify the experience of drama. A play reduced to its words is
missing at least as many of its dimensions as a symphony reduced to its score.
(p. 39)

Although Winn is speaking here particularly of plays, the same principle applies to the
performance of the written text in a poetry performance.

Winn goes on to describe these "missing dimensions" of written texts and to
show how they contribute to the meaning of the whole text when performed; attributes
of nonverbal performance, such as gesticulation, the use of pause, intonation, and so
forth, all contribute to meaning. In much the same way, if the performance event of
poetry slam is reduced to the printed texts of poems read during a given performance
studied under the isolating pretext of literary criticism, we fall short of the full
understanding, meaning, and force of the work. As Bauman contends:

an integral part of the ethnopoetic enterprise - has been the burgeoning of the
performance-centered perspective, founded on the realization that the essence of
oral literature, including its artfulness, is not to be discovered in folklore texts as
conventionally conceived, but in lived performances. (1986 p.8)

My overarching concern in this study is to help illuminate the "oral" poetry of slams as
"lived performance" and discover the meanings and whatever "artful" accomplishments
they exhibit.

End Notes

1 These types of comments were received from poets throughout my field research. Over and over poets
suggested that poetry’s benefits were being kept from people outside the academy. There seems to be a
commonly held belief by performance poets that written poetry has become the official repository for
poetic discourse. Performance poets also suggest that this official discourse is becoming more removed
from people outside the literary community by sophisticated encoding methods that exclude the
uninitiated.

2 For a detailed account of how I chose the representative sample and information regarding its makeup,
refer to pp. 62-64 in Chapter Three.

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CHAPTER TWO
THE EVENT FIELD

Each poetry slam is an individual occasion, a particular event situated in time and space. The Baton Rouge poetry slams are governed by some relatively explicit factors. These factors include details of the venue where the event is held, how the official rules of the slam are made manifest, and who attends each particular slam. In addition, certain implicit factors concerning the accepted normative behaviors within this particular venue by a particular night’s poets, audience, and judges contribute to the framework in which the performances are imbedded. In this chapter I provide a description of the explicit, as well as the implicit, factors in order to establish the structural context for the performances. I begin by describing the setting of the slams I have investigated, and then give a general account of the participants in each slam, with special attention focused on their respective motivations for attendance and participation in the event. The understanding of participants’ expectations will lead to a fuller appreciation of the atmosphere that is created and maintained at a typical slam in this setting.

Three principal features of the event field distinguish these performance events from typical poetry readings. I establish how these situational norms tend to democratize this type of performance event. The features of this event field are the structure of the slam, the people who attend, and where the event is held. These features are interdependent, but each feature contributes significantly to the overall schema particular to this event. First, we will see how the rules of the poetry slam operate on the principle of inclusion, regarding who is allowed and encouraged to participate in this event, as opposed to other types of poetry readings. Secondly,
because more and different people are included in this forum, a unique type of poetry event is created. Finally, I show how the venue that houses these people, acting according to these rules, further contributes to the atmosphere of these slams.

The rules of the slam explicitly state that any poet can participate in the slam; no one is disallowed. This rule invites poets of every sort to the slams: community poets, folk poets, academic poets, street poets, the novice and the expert alike. Because the poets at slams are diverse, the audience is diverse as well; all types of people attend slams. People who like traditional poetry, those who prefer non-traditional, people who appreciate the more easily accessible, those whose preferences lean toward the more erudite, in short, anyone may attend slams and find something there to suit his or her taste. Consequently, slams not only appeal to those who normally attend poetry events, but, as well, attract those who might not attend conventional poetry readings. Because the rules of the slam also factor in the audience’s tastes in the outcome of the event, the more varied the audience is, the better.

Since the poets and the audience who attend slams are diverse, and the quality of the poetry and the performance, by any definition, is heterogeneous, the community represented is broad. Unique to the design of this forum and its appeal, in contrast to traditional poetry readings, is the potential for encountering the unexpected. For instance, it is not unheard of in this forum for the most successful performance to come from someone who has never read a poem out loud before, or for that matter, for someone to win the event with the only poem they have ever written. Regardless of the quality of the poetry or the unusual nature of the event, the most important aspect of the slam environment that sets it apart from the typical poetry reading, I believe, is its
ability to engage its audience. People are engaged and listening to the poetry at the slams, even if only to find whether they agree or disagree with the judges.

In addition to the unique design of the slam, and the diverse group of people and poets who attend, the place where the slam is held contributes significantly to the distinctive character of this event. The same people governed by the same rules will behave differently if the event takes place in a park, or a church, or a school, or even within two different bars. How the venue affects the outcome and the situational behaviors of the participants is extremely relevant to the nature of a particular slam. Understanding how the setting of the Baton Rouge slam contributes to the event field will be one of the most important aspects in determining the structural context of this event.

In order to describe the context of a speech event, we must first understand what underlies and brings participants into the event. The difficulty in providing accounts of whatever is significant within the event field is in selecting which of the many aspects of verbal behavior we observe. To begin with, we need a system of inquiry that includes an emphasis on human groups as well as grammar; this system must take into account that in social groups how something is said is part of what is said and to whom. In other words, the message form in the case of speech events like poetry slams is as relevant as the message content. As Hymes (1986) puts it:

Whereas linguists deal with dictionary meanings (denotation, or meaning abstracted from context), sociolinguists deal with what Sacks calls situated meaning (meaning mediated by rules of speaking) which reflects speakers [sic] attitudes to each other, and to their topics. (p. 37)

Dealing with situated meaning, as Hymes suggests, involves an appreciation of the interaction of language and social life. To understand language within a social setting, sociolinguists have struggled to develop systems of inquiry based on understanding
Hymes goes on to describe the importance of this sociolinguistic approach:

The significance attached to what is found will depend on understanding what is possible, what universal, what rare, what linked, in comparative perspective. What survey researchers need to know linguistically about a community, in selecting a language variety, and in conducting interviews, is in effect an application of the community’s sociolinguistic description. (1986, p. 53)

As we see, Hymes advocates a comparative perspective that appreciates the linguistic system as members of the community might describe it themselves. An adequate descriptive theory, according to Hymes, must take into account not only the speaking competence of the individual speakers themselves, but also the expectations and competence of the particular community that participates in the interaction.

Hymes has developed a formal system of analysis that can be used generically to observe, in a community, the constraints and conventions that govern content, order, interrelationship, and the like. I have found Hymes’ system economical and useful in the analysis of the poetry slam community. His system provides a template that offers units of analysis used to locate the factors and variables of communicative interaction, which in turn determine how meaning is established in a local system of speaking within a particular community.

Hymes’ method of analysis begins with the social unit as a base, then proceeds through the particular message form and content, then into specific speech acts and interactions of individual members within the community. His system provides a mnemonically convenient reference using the letters of the term SPEAKING. The mnemonic code groups together sixteen components into eight categories: setting, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres (1986, p. 32).
65). I will explain each component and category in its turn as I proceed in the description of the poetry slam event field.

Setting and scene may be linked as components of “act situation.” The setting refers to the time and place of a speech event and, in general, to the physical circumstances. Scene, distinct from setting, refers to the psychological setting of an event; for example, a scene may be described on a continuum—formal to informal, serious to festive, or the like. I will begin with a description of the setting and scene of poetry slams.

All four of the slams included in this study were held at M’s Fine and Mellow Cafe in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. M’s café is located in the original downtown district of Baton Rouge. Situated near the present Louisiana State Capitol building and one block from the historic Old Louisiana State Capitol Museum and two blocks from the current city courthouse, M’s serves as a lunchtime restaurant and an after-work café for many downtown employees, including state and city employees. M’s serves alcohol, but because alcohol is not its primary source of income, it is classed as a restaurant and not a bar; patrons of any age are allowed to enter the café even though those patrons under twenty-one years of age are not served alcohol.

The building itself is part of the original downtown plan constructed in the pre-World War Two era of the Huey Long administration. The buildings were built on the loess bluff that runs parallel to the Mississippi River one block up from the levee. Most of the original buildings like M’s are made of brick and are no more than two or three stories high. Some original buildings closer to the new State Capitol are six to ten stories high; other newer office buildings built in the last two decades are skyscrapers in the modern sense. The majority of buildings in the downtown district are set in a block
grid with little or no space between the buildings, and most have glass storefronts or canopies projecting over the sidewalk from the front doors that identify the businesses.

The Downtown Development District is an organization that was created to revive commerce in the downtown area in the last two decades. Much of the development in Baton Rouge prior to this time took place in the outlying neighborhoods. The DDD has promoted tourism of the historic sites, as well as development of the arts community, to encourage traffic in the area. Plans are underway to build a planetarium, a Space Theater, and a performing arts center that will seat five to eight hundred people, and which will include a black box theater to accommodate performances by local theatre groups and small chamber groups. Funds have been donated for an interactive water fountain that will be built in one complete city block that will serve as the “nucleus of an arts district” (Downtown, 2000). The streets have been widened, allowing for more curbside parking; the sidewalks have been widened and refinished, and many of the old buildings have been remodeled or restored. More luminous street lighting and more rigorous police patrols have reduced the instances of crime that plagued the area in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, this area is struggling to gain an image of a safe and inviting part of this community; during the week nights and most weekends the area appears deserted except for pockets of activity around four or five clubs or restaurants. In short, the Downtown Development District is attempting to restore the image of the downtown area as “a place to play, a place to work and learn, and a place to live” (Downtown, 2000).

The downtown area is becoming more traveled, in the daytime especially because of the large influx of office workers now employed there. Many small businesses such as coffee shops, and restaurants have opened which cater to the new
population. Even though the daytime traffic has increased markedly, the traffic after 7:00 p.m. is virtually non-existent except for two or three pockets of activity around certain restaurant-bars that serve to attract relatively small numbers of patrons. Most of the nighttime attractions provided by these establishments center around what might be termed "alternative" entertainment. Unlike the more popular and heavily attended dance-clubs and large chain restaurants that predominate in the suburbs of the city, the downtown area serves a smaller and more "fringe" culture. For instance, a well-known blues club, Tabby's Blues Box, is located there. A relatively up-scale gay bar is also located downtown and another bar serves as a gallery where artwork is displayed and sold. But, for the most part, only people who are there to visit a particular venue visit the downtown area at night, especially during the week, and very little traffic is seen on the streets.

M's Fine and Mellow Café itself is part of a two-story brick complex that has a narrow storefront entrance flanked on one side by a doorway to an upstairs apartment and on the other by a daytime-operated restaurant that specializes in Mediterranean dishes. M's is open for lunch every weekday from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. On Wednesday through Saturday nights the café opens again in the late afternoon and stays open for the evening. M's offers a variety of musical and literary events. The café is relatively well known throughout the area for offering live music and is on the circuit that many local, southern, and, occasionally, national musicians include in their booking schedules. M's is noted for providing local talent a venue to perform, with open-mike nights during the week, and for booking well-known blues, folk, bluegrass, and jazz musicians on the weekend nights. Cover charges at M's range from "pass the hat" on weeknights, to $40.00 for special performances. The calendar at M's is booked two
months in advance and there is at least one performance nightly, Wednesday through Saturday night, year round.

As one enters the doorway into the café, the room is noticeably narrow and deep. A small lobby with a glass counter displays compact discs of various artists who perform there. Patrons must pass this glass counter, single file, to enter the restaurant area. In the main room, the space opens into a rectangle thirty feet wide, eighty feet deep, with ceilings about twenty feet high. Suspended from the ceiling, fans spin slowly. The ceiling fans are almost always on as patrons are allowed to smoke—and many do, including the manager of the café. Located near the entrance are a bar with eight or ten stools on the left of the aisle and three high-tables that seat four people each on the right. Past the bar, further into the café, the room opens wider. For about fifty feet a row of five table-booths seats four to six people each on the right wall. A small walkway to the back is cleared next to the booths. On the left of the walkway is a row of six tables that seat four to six, with the stage area on the same level against the left wall. Half the stage is taken up by a grand piano used by visiting artists. Past the booths are ice and drink machines on the right wall and a small area with a cluster of four tables on the left at the end of the stage. A covered passageway on the right continues to the restrooms and the back exit. On the left, behind the cluster of tables at the end of the stage, are the kitchen and a stairway that leads to a seating area upstairs over the kitchen. The seating area upstairs accommodates approximately thirty patrons seated at tables. The upstairs area offers a poor view of the stage area and so is usually last to be occupied on busy nights. Filled to capacity the café will hold little more than one hundred patrons seated. The official maximum capacity, according to the fire code, is seventy-seven.
The restaurant is equipped with a sound system. Speakers, both on the floor and suspended from the ceiling, play recorded music (chosen by the manager) at all times, except when a live band is playing or a poetry slam is in progress. A corded microphone in an adjustable microphone stand is set up on the stage during the poetry slams; an adjustable music/reading stand is also available on stage, although few readers use it.

At its inception, the poetry slam in Baton Rouge was held at a cabaret theatre near the university. In this location, there was a raised stage with spotlights and, most often, the stage was decorated as a set for whatever play was in progress on the weekend. The establishment served no food and the bar was outside the performance space. The slams were held there for about three months before being moved to M's. The change of venue had to do with a disagreement between the manager of the theatre and the organizers of the slam concerning the erratic scheduling of the events. The reason the slams were moved had nothing to do with concerns about the design of the theatre space. However, many members of the original slams who made the move to the new venue, commented on the appropriateness of the move. The poets appreciated the more intimate relationship with the audience at M's, and the audience members who attended the earlier slams commented most often on the more relaxed atmosphere at the new venue and the availability of food.

The menu at M's consists mainly of specialty pizzas that feature artichoke hearts, spinach, whole olives, pine nuts, and the like. Po-boys and hamburgers, made with homemade bread, are also served. Most of the fare is moderately priced and the food is popular among the slam patrons.
For more than three years to date, the poetry slams have been held on an almost weekly basis at the current venue, M's. The open slams have become a mainstay of the weekly calendar at the café as they bring, on most occasions, an audience of between twenty and forty people; some of these patrons will remain to listen to the live music following the slam, but most leave before the music begins.

To understand the scene, or psychological setting, at poetry slams, it is necessary to understand the basic principles that govern a typical "official" slam. The poetry slam at M's is organized with reference to the official rules provided by Poetry Slam Incorporated, the non-profit organization that Marc Smith's idea has fostered. The official rules are used as a guideline by the slam organizers at M's, although the only rule rigidly enforced at the Baton Rouge slam is that the performed poem must be of the poet's own construction. The official rulebook is several pages long; however, an understanding of six basic rules is sufficient to understand the philosophy of the organization. First, the poems must be of each poet's own construction and no longer than three minutes in length when performed; second, the poet may not use props, costumes, or musical instruments; third, if the poet goes over the time limit—three minutes plus a ten-second grace period—points are deducted from his or her score; fourth, judges are encouraged to factor both content and performance into their evaluations, and judge each poet on a 0.0 to 10.0 scale; fifth, the audience is encouraged to respond to the judges in any way it sees fit; and sixth, the judges are encouraged to remain consistent with themselves and not to let the audience influence them. As we can see, these six rules allow anyone to read one poem that will be judged relatively freely on its content and performance. How the judges are chosen figures prominently in the foregoing equation and will be discussed at length in following pages. Also
included in the official rules is a “code of honour” that speaks of fairness and freedom of speech, and a ten-point equal opportunity statement that prohibits exclusion of anyone who wants to perform. There is no one at PSI who monitors local slams; the rules are enforced rigidly only at the national competitions. The basic rules that govern the organization of the slams at M’s are outlined in what has come to be called “the opening spiel” that is narrated to the audience by the host at the beginning of the night’s performances. The following is a spiel at M’s given by the host of the grand slam in this series:

The way this deal works... the slam comes in a series of four competitions. We got three open slams where anybody can come in the door, sign the book, get up and read one poem no longer than three minutes. Three minutes?... five minutes, don’t go over five minutes. This is a Southern genteel slam... we talk at a slower pace here, so don’t go over five minutes. We ain’t gonna be too picky. I got five judges in the audience who score the poem after its read on a scale of one to ten. “One” being a poem that shouldn’t be read, and “Ten”, the poem that changes your life. And we get several tens in here every time. And then we have ‘em throw out the high score, the low score, and add the other three together. Uh... thirty’s the highest score you can get. Top four finishers in the open slam go on to the grand slam. The open slams are held durin’ the week on Wednesday night and the Grand Slam’s held on a Saturday night. It’s the big thing, the main event. And tonight’s the big thing, the Grand Slam. All the poets in the Grand Slam won the open slam with one poem. Tonight in the grand slam they have to read two poems – the one they won the slam with and the other one can be anything. . . .

Obviously, many of the formal rules are left out of the spiel. Only rule three, the time limitation, and half of rule four concerning the numerical scoring, are mentioned to the general audience, and rule three is openly relaxed here. Rule one, that the poem must be the work of the performer, is made clear to the performers when they sign the logbook to read. At the time when the judges are picked, before the slam starts, they are told rules four and six because they concern judging directly. Rule two, about props and costumes, is not mentioned or enforced at M’s. Rule five is mentioned only if during the slam the audience doesn’t respond of its own accord.
At the Baton Rouge slam the audience understands that the rules are as relaxed as the atmosphere. The judging is not taken too seriously by anyone. The audience understands that they do not have to agree with the judges, and the judges understand that they may be booed for their scores, but each is encouraged to be honest about their feelings. Rarely are there occasions where someone gets angry over scores at the Baton Rouge slams, but this is not always the case at the more competitive slams such as the national competitions. At M's, the judges enjoy relative freedom to express their honest opinion without harsh ridicule.

The poets at the Baton Rouge slams understand they can read only one poem. The time limits are rarely an issue at M's because usually there is time enough to accommodate all the poets who have signed up to read and, typically, few poets read long poems. Even in the national competitions, the poets are not stopped when they go over three minutes, although they are penalized. The poets at M's are never booed or ridiculed. Even novice poets are encouraged and rewarded for their efforts.

As mentioned in the preceding excerpt from the spiel, most of the open slams are held on Wednesday nights at M's from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Following the open slams on Wednesday there is usually an open-mike for musicians, or a featured musician, who command a pass-the-hat donation or, at most, a three to five dollar cover charge. As a rule at the Baton Rouge slams, most of the audience does not stay for the musical entertainment. The audiences at most of the slams are people who work daily jobs, and many go to work early. However, even on the Saturday night grand slams, a large percentage of the audience will leave after the slam is over, before the music starts. The musical audience at M's is also considered a listening audience, and the
manager frowns on loud conversation during the performances, which encourages most slam participants to leave shortly after the slam.

The participants of the slam community (mnemonically, P) can be described in distinct categories. Several roles must be performed at poetry slams. Required roles include the host, the scorekeeper, the judges, the poets (including the "goat" poet), and the general audience (including the wait staff and the bartender).

The host plays a significant role. Usually the host is the organizer of the event, as well as MC. Jim is the regular host in Baton Rouge, although Buzz will occasionally substitute. In the case of the four slams in this study, Jim hosted the first open and the grand slam, and Buzz hosted the second and third opens. The host's duties include selecting the judges, signing up the poets, preparing the stage, welcoming everyone, giving the opening spiel, introducing the individual poets, calling for judges' scores and writing them in the logbook. Most importantly, the host's implicit obligation is to keep the slam moving while keeping the audience entertained and involved.

The host of the slam and the manager of the venue are largely responsible for the organizational dynamic at the Baton Rouge slam. Monica Prentice is the manager at M's. The restaurant is named after her, for she was the original owner. Even though M's is now owned by a silent partner, Monica, or "M" as she is affectionately called, runs the place. She books the artists, hires the employees, takes care of material acquisitions, and is almost always present in the café when it is open. Monica is also largely responsible for the atmosphere at the café, which is dimly lit, casual, relaxed, and "fine and mellow." Monica is in her early forties, single, friendly, and open. She often sits with her patrons, drinking, smoking, and conversing with those who invite
her. Although Monica is most often mellow herself, she is also well known for her temper and business-like disposition when dealing with problems.

Even though Monica’s first love is music, she enjoys the poetry slams and, on occasion, will enter the poetry contest herself. Monica is easy-going and as long as no one does anything to hurt her business or upset the atmosphere (such as drinking too much or creating a disturbance), she is amicable and relatively passive regarding the operation of the slam itself. For the most part, Monica and the slam organizers consider it most important that people come in, enjoy themselves, get along with others, appreciate the poets and the performances, and then come back.

In the open slams especially, because of the smaller crowds, judges are often friends of the poets or people who happened by the bar and decided to stay to see what a slam is. The organizers attempt, whenever possible, to recruit newcomers to the slam as judges. At the national slams and at slams I have attended elsewhere, judges who are friends of the poets are disqualified, and a timekeeper with a stopwatch strictly tracks the three-minute time limit. In the grand slam and at other special slams at M’s, judges are often local celebrities or special guest judges, but even at these slams effort is expended to get at least a few newcomers to judge. Some nights the audience agrees more with the judges’ ability to recognize a “good” poem, and some nights the judges are booed and hissed.

When the judges are chosen at M’s they are given instructions as to how they might go about judging. The main points stressed are: (1) to rate the quality of both the poem and the performance of the poem; (2) to avoid ratings below a 7.0, so as to encourage the poets; (3) to strive for consistency in their scoring; (4) to be honest; and
(5) to have fun. Instructing the judges to avoid ratings below 7.0 is not typical at most of the slams I have attended elsewhere.

The scores at slams tend to inflate as the competition proceeds and sometimes novice judges tend to give very low scores. Some judges seem to consider only the literary merit of the poem while others appear to value the performance aspects more. Newcomers often judge the performances with little appreciation of how easily very low scores discourage poets. An effort is made at the Baton Rouge Slam to maintain an environment where even when the poets fail to earn high scores they are still encouraged. Each rule emphasized to the judges at the Baton Rouge slam is designed to orient the novice in the basic tendencies of the competition.

The most prominent tendency at slams is score inflation, termed “score creep.” Judges’ scores often inflate as the slam progresses. The alcohol consumption by judges is often higher toward the end of the slam making them more (and sometimes less) generous, and factors such as the audience’s approval or disapproval of a judge’s scores can affect the scoring as well. Some judges score consistently lower than others, but they are all encouraged to express their honest opinion and to stand by their decisions.

Score creep is such a tenacious problem that the first poet to read often receives one of the lowest scores of the event. The ritual offering of a “sacrificial goat” has developed at the slam to offset the problem. Each slam begins with the performance of the sacrificial goat poet. The “goat,” as he or she is commonly called, is usually a better known poet in the local slam community who serves as a “calibration poet” for the judges. The judges are allowed to test out their understanding of the scoring rules, while the audience and poets can get an idea as to how the judges will perform. The goat poet is considered to be a “featured” performer, and special guest poets who are
considered among the best often perform the role. It is considered an honor among regulars at the slam to be the sacrificial goat poet, even though goat poets often receive the lowest scores of the evening because they go first. The goat performance is also designed to create a reference point on which the judges will base their scoring for the rest of the evening. Whatever score the judges give the goat, they are asked to use it as a reference point to determine scores in the remaining performances; that is, they are asked to score the rest of the performances according to whether they like it more or less than the goat performance. The goat performance is not included in the competition for that particular slam, although the goat performer may also perform another poem in the regular competition for a score that will count.

In my experience judges, regardless of bias or level of literary sophistication, accept the duties of judging with a high degree of responsibility. Some audience members refuse to judge because it is too stressful and prefer to remain free of the responsibility, but those who do judge take it quite seriously. One of the main concerns of the organizers, especially the host, is to support the judges, to draw attention to the difficulty of the judges’ role, and to show an appreciation of their efforts.

The judges are drawn from the audience in attendance at a particular slam. As I said earlier, many downtown employees who range in age from twenty-five to fifty years frequent the café as well as students from Louisiana State University. The poetry slam does advertise in the local entertainment magazines and some younger and older audience members come from the suburban areas of Baton Rouge.

At a typical open slam at M’s, there will be twenty to forty participants. The audience at the Baton Rouge slam can be characterized generally as members of three broad groups identifiable by age. Generally speaking, the audience at the Baton Rouge
slams consists of 40% college age students, 40% aged twenty-five to fifty years, and the remaining 20% will be teenagers or people over 50 years. The youngest poet to read in a slam at M’s was thirteen years old and the oldest was eighty-four.

The audience at the Baton Rouge slam consists of friends or relatives of the poets, people who are interested in poetry, and those who are curious about the slam event. Sometimes people are out for the evening and drop by the café accidentally on the night of a slam and decide to stay. Several of the poets who perform at the Baton Rouge slam also teach at the university and offer extra credit in their classes for students who attend poetry events. These students comprise a small portion of most audiences.

The grand slam usually will draw a much larger audience than the open slams; forty to eighty members typically attend the grand slam. Prize money is awarded at the grand slam—fifty dollars for first place, twenty-five for second, and ten dollars for third place. A few audience members are considered “regulars,” because they attend the slams on an almost weekly basis and have attended for many months. Most of the regulars are also poets; many will attend nearly every event, though they may not perform at every slam. As a rule, most people will attend one open slam in the round of three (where they will either be performing or invited by someone who is performing) and then attend the grand slam.

Comments by patrons describe the atmosphere at the Baton Rouge slams with adjectives such as “gentle,” “genteel,” “friendly,” and “relaxed.” For example, Beth, who is a regular at the Baton Rouge slams and has been since their beginning, states:

I’ve been to other slams and this is a gentler slam. There is a sense of community here, and everyone gets to know each other, and it’s like seeing all your friends once a week who share a common interest. There are always some new people here, but everybody figures it out pretty quick. Every now and then
something crazy will happen, but that is part of what I like about it; you’re never really sure what might happen.

There are rare instances in which individuals will disturb the usual atmosphere at the Baton Rouge slams by drinking excessively. In the worst cases, audience members have been asked to leave and were escorted to the door. For the most part, perceived inappropriate behaviors concerning the participants in the slam itself are dealt with by some witty comment made by the host, or by an audience member, to defuse the situation and draw laughter to the offense or the offender.

For each slam, differences in the audience’s size and demographics figure in the atmosphere of a particular event, and these differences will be noted for each event. The biggest factors that determine the atmosphere at a particular slam are the poets who show up on a given night, and the quality of their performances.

The next aspect of the event field, the “ends,” concerns the motives of the participants and also refers to the objective or desired outcome for the event as a whole. People attend poetry slams for a variety of reasons. The audience, in general, expects to be entertained by the performances at the slam. Most of the participants at the slams, including the poets, do not expect every poem read or performed there to be a wonderful experience; almost everyone realizes that performances will vary in quality by anyone’s definition. Even though participants expect some less successful poetry—especially at the open slams—most people support the effort of poets who are brave enough to get up and perform even when they are not the best. Another duty of the host is to create an atmosphere in which the poets are respected for their performances; a recurring line of the hosts at slams is, “We always encourage the poets; only the judges are booed.” Rarely are poets given any negative comments beyond low scores by the judges. Only twice in my experience has an audience member at a slam booed a poet;
both times the audience member found the poem offensive. Even on those two occasions, the host or another audience member chastised the offended audience member for booing the poet; the host commented, “You can boo the judges but not the poet.” The slam organizers understand that the lifeblood of the slam is the poet. Anyone who attends slams over a long period will note how poets improve with experience. Many poets, who currently are the most popular and successful at the slams, performed poorly initially.

Poets themselves attend slams for a variety of reasons and their reasons will be discussed at length in Chapter Three. The reason for attending the slam that is put forward by the organizers and the regulars has become one of the “rules” that is often included in the opening spiel: “Have fun.” The implication for poets to have fun is, to quote The Official Poetry Slam Rulebook, “check their egos at the door” (Marsh, 1999, inside cover page, rule 1). Overt displays of anger are rarely witnessed at slams. How poets negotiate their interaction with the audience in order to avoid disagreement or disapproval can be better understood if we consider the resources available to the poet to manipulate the interaction. The message form and content are the two primary resources of the poet in this forum.

Understanding the relationship of the message form and the message content requires understanding the significance of what is said in this community as well as how it is said. The success or failure of the interaction of the poets with their audience at poetry slams often depends on the degree of their shared understanding and appreciation of poetry and performance. There are often cases, for instance, in which poets claim the judges were not able to recognize the quality of a poem or a performance. Quite often
the general audience members express different systems of appreciation from the poets or the judges.

Many of the performers at the poetry slams have strong backgrounds in literary criticism or creative writing. Rarely—and only coincidentally—are judges chosen who are formally educated in these areas. It would seem that this fact alone would negate the possibility of agreement among poets, audience, and judges but such is not the case. In my experience there is a sense in most cases that the top-ranked poets at a particular slam are considered by all participants to be among the “best” poets or performers at that particular event. There may be slight disagreement in the order of finish but only occasionally is there complete dissent. I have heard poets—especially those who have attended only once or twice—say, “I don’t like the slams because the best poets never win.” Among those poets who are regulars of the slam, however, there is an implicit understanding that even those listeners who know nothing about the technical aspects of poetic creation can appreciate a “good” poem when they hear it. This “natural” ability of “ordinary people” to appreciate poetry is recognized by many slam poets as a true test of whether a technically well-crafted poem has value beyond the academic purview.

Many of the poets at the slams believe that the judges weight their decisions more on the performance aspects than on the literary quality, but as we will see later, this is not always the case. The performances of poems at slams range from a perfunctory reading, with little or no physical or emotional expression beyond the oral recitation of the written word, to the performance of the poem from memory with complete physical and emotional involvement and a clear manipulation of performance techniques. No clear line of demarcation insures the success of a particular performance at a slam; at times poets with little performance ability and a strong poem
score high and those with well-developed performance skills and a weaker poem rank low. What seems to be important at a particular slam in terms of the content and form is the logic that develops within a particular slam in accord with the variability of the shared competencies and value systems of the audience members and the poets in attendance at that slam. Different judges appreciate different aspects of the performances according to their own particular taste and critical abilities. In addition, each poetry performance at a particular slam is judged relative to the other performances that occur in each particular slam. An example of this dynamic is detailed in Chapter Four where the poet Eve ranked second out of fourteen poets in the open slam, and then finished eleventh of eleven in the grand slam. In the grand slam, Eve scored much lower with the same poem and an almost identical performance because she was scored by different judges and in reference to stronger competitors, for a larger audience.

Investigating the poetry slam event in terms of its “act sequences” concerns reporting the generic plot of a typical slam. The order of events at slams from the time the door opens to the close of the event follows a relatively consistent pattern. This pattern is detailed at length in the beginning of Chapter Four. The sequence of events at the Baton Rouge slams arise partly from necessary design features of the slam organization, such as manipulation of the time allotted for the event in order to allow for the requisite activities to take place. But there are features of the act sequence that can be attributed to a natural evolution of this community’s members in the way they conduct themselves in relation to each other. Particular personality traits of the organizers of the event and the regular members who make up the core of participants, along with the social norms that govern the larger society here figure prominently in the
normal sequence of events. There is a distinctly "Southern" flavor to the Baton Rouge slam that sets it apart from slams I have attended in other sections of the United States. People in this locale, it seems, are more prone to speak openly to one another and introduce themselves. I have attended slams in New York and San Francisco for instance, where no one spoke to me at all during the event and I felt uncomfortable when introducing myself to others. At the Baton Rouge slam, people are greeted at the door, welcomed, and often introduced to others right away by the organizers, especially if they are there alone. Perhaps because the population of the city and the poetry community is smaller here and less heterogeneous in terms of cultural norms, individuals are less hesitant to interact socially here. Beyond the formal sequence of events that typify the structure of the Baton Rouge slam, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four, the communal aspects of coming together, interacting socially, participating in the poetry performances, and then parting company constitute the background scenario of the event sequence.

Questions of form and content discussed earlier are muted if the poet is unable to provide a "key" for the audience to understand the tone, manner, or spirit, in which the performance act is to be understood. Acts otherwise the same in setting, participants, ends, and the like often differ in terms of key, such as whether a performance is intended to be taken as literal or ironic. For example, when an overly serious tone is used to perform a poem that makes fun of overly serious poems, the audience must be able to recognize that this poem is to be taken ironically. The degree to which the poet is able to key his or her performance clearly will determine the success of his or her performance in many cases. The tone the poet establishes in an introduction to a performance, or the tone of voice used during the performance, or
mannerisms and gestures, to list but a few examples, can communicate how the poem is to be taken.

The dominant tone, mood, or atmosphere that typically pervades at poetry slams is relaxed and informal; the organizers and the regulars make a pronounced effort to “have fun.” The poets can manipulate this atmosphere or change it incidentally with the performance of a particular poem. Sometimes a poet will perform a poem that directly confronts the audience’s complacency or lack of sophistication, for example, and it may be perceived as a “good” poem and still not score well. A similar poem that is keyed by the performer to be taken as confrontational toward an audience that is not present—those other complacent, unsophisticated people, not us—may rank higher, regardless of the displayed ability of performance or construction of the poem. In other words, people seem to have a stake in maintaining the dominant tone of the event over rewarding only the literary or performance quality of poems. In general, audiences at Baton Rouge slams are less appreciative of angry or confrontational poems. Therefore, how the performer keys the poem can figure prominently in the success or failure of a performance at a slam. Special attention to the keying of individual performances will be given to each performance analyzed in Chapter Four.

The mnemonic “I” that considers the “instrumentalities” of the performance has to do with the channel, that is, the medium of transmission as well as the forms of speech. The forms of speech concern the varieties of speech, such as standard or vernacular, as well as the specialization in use and the degree of mutual intelligibility between audience and poet. Here, once again, the success of what the poet says and how it is said depend on variables outside the poets’ control. How the poet
communicates the written text orally, and how the audience understands it, are separate variables. Let us first consider the medium of transmission.

In each performance at a slam we are concerned with two mediums of transmission—oral and written. Even though only the performer sees the written poem, it is clear that the performer—especially when he or she is holding the written text—is communicating orally a written communication. There are two channels of communication in this instance: the performer is in communication with the text and with the audience. In some cases the performer will seem to read the poem from the page to a general audience that he or she does not acknowledge. At other times performers will seem to speak directly to the audience as from a prepared speech that they refer to only occasionally. Novice performers, for example, generally tend to read their poems with little connection to the audience in terms of eye contact or the sense that they are communicating the poem to someone. Nervousness or shyness often causes them to read as though they are reading the words of the poem to themselves for the first time with little expressive meaning. More experienced performers often read in a fashion described in the interview comments of a local veteran slam poet, referring to one of the better performances he witnessed on a particular evening as follows, “He read like he was talking right to one person, and that one person was the audience.” This degree of intimacy that some performers are able to maintain with the audience allows them to communicate much more than the words of the poem.

There are also lines of communication between the audience, the judges, and the poets. For instance, the audience responds to the judges’ scores, the poets respond to the reaction of the audience to the judges’ scores, and the judges respond to the poets.
Each of these possible relationships forms its own requisite hierarchy and value to the
audience and poet.

The slams are a poetry reading event unlike other poetry reading events. Most
of the more formal poetry reading events that I have attended elsewhere feature a
particular poet or poets who read several poems as the audience listens quietly. Very
often at these readings, the audience will not respond between poems with applause or
comment. There will usually be applause at the end of the reading and some audience
members will approach the poet or poets with comments but, for the most part, the
audience is not expected to critique the poet or the reading. In these types of readings
the control over lines of communication between audience and poet is more in the hands
of the poet. At the slam poetry reading, the audience holds a share of the control over
who may speak, and how. Even though anyone may read at a slam, not everyone will
fare well. The channels of communication between the participants of these slam
readings are more pronounced and vocal. Most of the vocal communication between
the audience and the poet is positive and appreciative; the most often observed sign of
disapproval is a pronounced silence. In the slam environment, silence speaks loudly.

Appreciating the forms of speech used at slams amounts to being able to
recognize what Hymes calls the “verbal resources” of this community (1986, p. 65).
The types of language used, from the vernacular to the formal, as well as the language
codes and the mutual intelligibility of the codes, figure prominently in the
communication system of the slam community. Many poets emphasize a refined
language in their poetry and have a strict definition of what is acceptable as poetic
language and what is not. Some poets are more inclined to use the vernacular and
feature instead, for example, sophisticated rhythmic patterns of delivery. The range of
styles seen at poetry slams includes poems created by any combination of dialects and levels of sophistication written by poets from a range of social backgrounds. Some poets even perform poetry that is considered by participants to be racist or sexist, although it suffers in the ranking. The overarching attitude concerning the appropriateness of a particular performance is: say anything you want, but be prepared to receive immediate and honest criticism by those in attendance.

The formal rules of the poetry slam prohibit the use of props and costumes. Even though this rule is not enforced at the Baton Rouge slam, such things are rare. On occasion, performances will include musical accompaniment, but even in these cases the perceived qualities of the poetry and the performance are the prominent markers of success at slams. The way a poet dresses onstage can, at times, contribute to the interpretation of his or her performance. The style of dress speaks to the personality of the performer and influences how their personality contributes to the keying of the poetry they perform.

In this category it is also useful to consider the accoutrements of the slam, for instance, the logbook that the poets must sign in order to perform. The logbook includes the poets’ names as well as the names of the judges, the host, the scorekeeper, and the goat. Even though the poets sign their names in numerical order, often the host—in the open slams especially—will call them to the stage in random order, or some order perceived by the host to create variety. The well known poets will often be called to perform near the end; most of the poets who are regulars will ask the host to let them perform in a certain spot in the order of performances. Some poets like to perform near the beginning of the slam so they can get over their nervousness and enjoy the other performances, but most poets prefer to perform later in the slam. Other accoutrements
of the slam are a microphone, which most performers use, and a music/reading stand that few use.

As in any speech event, the interactional norms among participants are established as ground rules for the performance. For example, in a typical performance of a play, it is considered rude for the audience to talk to the actors or to comment during the performance. The interactional norms for a poetry slam, however, encourage such behavior. The norms of interaction and interpretation at poetry slams are different from theatre and from other kinds of poetry performances because poetry slams are highly interactive events. The more the audience shows its involvement in a performance, the more confident the performer feels. In most cases, if the audience likes the performance, it will listen attentively and make only brief comments so as not to interfere with the reception of the poem. But sometimes the audience gets so involved in expressing its appreciation of the performance that the performer must pause to allow the audience to quiet down before proceeding; most often, such a performance will be among the most successful of the event.

Many times poets will comment that the audience is too quiet on a particular night and will be anxious about performing for that audience. The reverse is also common. Performers will be more nervous performing on some nights because the audience is more vocal and boisterous. Many of the poets who perform at the slams regularly will bring several poems to a slam and choose the one they will ultimately read according to how they perceive the mood of the audience when it is time for their performance. The atmosphere at a slam is not static; the mood of the audience will fluctuate according to the eventualities of each particular slam.
The final orientation of this event survey is labeled “genre.” What are the genres of speech that comprise this event and set it apart from others? Of course, the poetry performances are the most prominent type of speech at poetry slams. However, many types of speech occur at a slam in addition to the poetry performances -- commentary by the host, the host’s spiel, the comments and reactions of the audience concerning the poets and their performances, conversations among the audience members, conversations among the poets, and the comments of the judges. Each of these types of speech in some way marks a recurring and prescribed form particular to this event. Whether the form is required, accepted, expected, rare, or forbidden contributes to the understanding of what is happening in a given situation within the slam. How these types are marked will depend, of course, on the situation in a particular slam but generic conditions apply to every slam.

In every slam the audience is encouraged to speak. The host often goes through the audience introducing himself and welcoming newcomers. It is expected that the regulars will come early and visit with each other so that the conversations are going on when people first enter the venue. Almost everyone is involved in a conversation with someone else after they enter the café. Most often the slams begin at 7:30 p.m. even though the advertised beginning is at 7:00 p.m. During this half-hour before the slam begins the judges are chosen and informed of their duties. Often the host will have to convince prospective judges to accept the role; there is an “interview” process where the host briefly gets acquainted with the prospective judge. The host searches out prospective judges who profess to be among the least interested in poetry because it is thought they will be more honest and harder to impress. Also, giving the most
uninterested members a vested interest in the outcome of the event encourages active participation by those who might normally be least involved.

Newcomers who are asked to judge often exclaim that they “don't know anything about poetry” or are biased because they know one of the poets. The host at M's will explain that it doesn't matter here, that the judging is supposed to be subjective so that no one will take it too seriously. Booing of the judges during the slam is also accepted, and often encouraged, because it shows the performers often that there is strong disagreement between the judges and the audience. The judges are given two sets of eight-inch by five-inch scorecards on a ring binder. Each set of score cards contain cards numbered “0” through “10.” The cards are held up at the end of each performance to show the judge's ranking for the performance. The host will wait until all the judges are ready before he calls for the scores, and they are asked to hold them up simultaneously so as not to influence one another.

Usually, the conversation is so loud in the room that it takes a few minutes for the host to settle the audience when the slam is ready to begin. When the host takes the stage, he or she will deliver the spiel in a humorous fashion, and usually someone in the audience will banter with the host or make asides at the host's comments. Then the host will introduce the judges and the scorekeeper, usually accompanied by comments yelled from the audience and jokes from the host. Then the host introduces the sacrificial goat. Absolutely no conversation is allowed during the performances, especially if the poet is reading in a serious tone. Anyone who does speak is met with a harsh “Shhhh!” from other audience members, the host, or regulars who are aware of this tacit rule. Even though comments from the audience such as laughter or expletives are accepted when they are appreciative, never is any noise or comment allowed that will interrupt or
distract from the performers' or audience members' attention. Even the waiters and bartenders are quiet and move little during the performances. At the end of each performance, the audience comes back to life with conversation and applause. The host will again take the stage, call for the scores from the judges, and read them off to the scorekeeper to comments of approval or disapproval from the general audience members and other poets. The conversation noise level will rise again until the next poet takes the stage and begins his or her performance.

Another significant genre of speech heard at the slams is the poets' introductions to their performances. Not all poets will give an introduction before they begin their performance but many do. Often the introduction to the performance by the poet will key the audience as to how the performance is to be understood. The introduction—or the lack of one—can figure prominently in the success or failure of the performance.

There is another more subtle form of communication made by the audience at the slams. The audience is expected to applaud to welcome the poets to the stage and to applaud their efforts at the end. Types of applause differ widely. Sometimes the applause is more enthusiastic for a certain performance or a certain poet. Applause can encourage a shy performer, or "pump up" a seasoned performer. Often the applause will be accompanied by cheers, boos, or comments of approval. Generally speaking, one can often gauge the level of appreciation by the audience for a particular poet or performance by the enthusiasm of the applause.

At the end of each slam there is usually a five minute break where the host will confer with the scorekeeper to determine the top ranking poets, and then he or she will announce the winners from fourth place to first place. After the winners are announced, the host will thank the judges and call for a round of applause for them. Then the poets
are thanked with applause and the slam ends. Sometimes the crowd will stay in the
venue, talking and drinking after the slam is over, but most often people leave within a
half-hour.

As we can see, there are a variety of components of this event field. Even
though I surveyed the components of the event field using discrete units of
investigation, these units are interdependent, often overlapping. This survey method is
employed as a guide only that will lead us to discover the local system of speaking in
which these verbal art performances are imbedded. Hymes’ method and its vocabulary
will be used throughout this investigation.

In terms of the event field, the slams are a unique type of poetry reading
distinguishable from others by the prescribed and recurring competitive form of its
structure and norms of interaction. The rules for the slams, including the scoring of the
poetry performances, the roles prescribed for audience members and judges, and the
relative freedom of participants to respond to the performance, set the slams apart from
other types of poetry readings. These situational norms democratize the event by
allowing anyone to participate, by including the general audience in the interaction, and
by encouraging a more broad and variable criteria for judging performance excellence.
Excluding performers is not allowed in this event. Consequently, the slam provides an
open forum for competing definitions of quality and taste. Even though most
performers in the slams are, or have been, members of the academic community, the
slam provides a space where competing notions of quality, based on criteria other than
traditional academic literary standards—and otherwise excluded from consideration in
other types of poetry events—can be expressed and judged.
It is easy to see how the slam, because of the combination of its setting in a bar and the motivations and expectations of its participants, manages to include participants who might not otherwise attend traditional poetry events. But even those poets who have received much of their poetic knowledge and training under traditional academic circumstances express views that describe other appeals of the slam environment not prevalent in more formal readings. According to these reports, the slam attracts a wider participation because it includes members outside the literary or academic community without disparaging or excluding the academic or literary community.

The following chapter will provide background information for a representative sample of the poets who performed in the four poetry slams included in this study. Understanding who these poets are and the motivations of their actions will help us to understand how they fit into this community and contribute to the degree of success and meaning of each event and the community as a whole.
CHAPTER THREE

THE POETS

If we are to understand the social phenomenon of slam, we must first understand the poets who provide the central focus of this community. The poets who perform at the Baton Rouge slams come from all walks of life—school teachers, teenagers, elevator and outboard motor mechanics, lawyers, judges, restaurant owners, accountants, college students, college teachers, salesmen, and therapists, to name a few, regularly perform. Some of these poets have written many poems and read/listen to poetry of many other poets. Others have written few poems, sometimes only one, and have studied poetry very little, if at all. Poets occasionally have won open slams with the only poem they have ever written and have to create another poem to compete in the grand slam where they must read two.

In order to understand what draws these poets to slams and to measure their relative success at slam performance, we must first understand what the individual poets are attempting to communicate in this forum and why. The judges’ scores do not always determine the degree of success for the individual poet. The individual expectations of the poets must be taken into account if we are to appreciate how they define success. Since the group of poets who participated in these four events is large, I have chosen a sample group for close analysis. I provide an account of their individual backgrounds in regard to their education, especially in writing and performance, and their motivations for writing poetry and reading it at the slams. I also consider the perspectives they express regarding the meaning and value of the Baton Rouge poetry slam. The goal of this survey is to understand why, how, and to what degree these poets
succeed or fail at slam performance and to provide a better understanding of the culture of the event.

In this chapter I first explain how I chose the sample group, then proceed to introduce each poet with excerpts from recorded interviews. Using the data from personal interviews, I show why these poets attend slams. Perhaps contrary to the popular perception of those outside this community, most poets who perform at slams are not entirely motivated by winning the slam. In fact, for those few poets who do place an important emphasis on winning, the appeal of the slam is diminished. For most of the poets who attend slams regularly, winning is not the most important criterion that determines the meaning, value, or success of their performance. Secondly, most poets perform at the Baton Rouge slam in order to “expose,” “publish,” or “try out” their written work. Despite attention on the “spoken word” aspects of slams, most poets feature poetry in their performances created as a written form that is communicated orally. Finally, I show that the most common and valuable appeal of the slams for these poets is the sense of “community” they report. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of this communal aspect of slams for the poets is the ultimate goal of this chapter.

In this series of four slams, three open slams and a grand slam, twenty-five different poets performed. Fourteen poets read in the first open slam, eight poets read in the second open, and twelve read in the third. Several of these twenty-five poets performed more than one poem in this round of slams. The four highest scoring poets in each of the open slams competed against each other in the grand slam.¹ There were fifty-six performances in total but because several performances were repeated in successive slams, such as the grand slam where the poets were required to repeat their
open slam winning performance, there were only forty-five different poems performed. The relative success of these performances varied and an appreciation of who was most successful in this forum—who was moderately successful, who failed, and, most importantly, why—in terms of their ranking by the judges, will provide a profile of poets that span the range of the displayed performances. In the interest of sharper focus I concentrate attention on ten poets chosen by their variable ranking in each event. I introduce the poet who finished first in each event, a poet who finished near the middle of the rankings in each event, and the poet who finished last in each. The poets I have chosen for more detailed investigation constitute what I believe to be a representative sample.

The twenty-five different poets who performed can be separated into four broad categories by their age, their gender, whether they had performed at a poetry slam before, and finally, whether they performed from a written text or memory. According to these variables, the sample group corresponds closely with the complete group. In each category across the four separate events we find forty-six percent were female and fifty-four percent were male. Fifty-one percent of the poets were under thirty years of age and forty-nine percent were over thirty. Twenty-six percent of poets had never read in a slam before and only thirteen percent of the poets who performed in these events performed their poem from memory while the other eighty-seven percent performed from a written text. In the interview sample fifty percent are female, fifty-one percent are under thirty, twenty percent are new performers, and eighty percent performed from a written text. Also, of the forty-five different performances in these four events, the poets in our sample provide fifteen performances (33.3%) for detailed analysis that
typify the range of performance styles as well as a one-to-one correspondence with the rankings of first, last, and near the middle in each event.

I introduce three poets from each of the four slams. I provide a more detailed account of each poet who finished first in each competition, one who finished last, and one poet who finished near the middle. Because I was not able to secure the written permission of each of these poets to use their real names, I have created pseudonyms for each.

Beth Weldon

Beth is in her late fifties and teaches a sophomore English course at Louisiana State University. Her class is an introduction to twentieth-century poetry and drama, and she tries to get her students to “better understand and appreciate poetry and drama—to try to help them understand how they work and see what’s good about them.”

Beth is a small woman who speaks softly. She is a regular at the slams and has been coming to the Baton Rouge slam since it began. She has won many slams and always finishes high in the rankings. Beth has been writing poetry consistently since she first decided to take a poetry writing class seven years preceding the time of this interview. She claims to have joined the class, which is taught at the home of a local poet in Baton Rouge, more to be with her friends than to write poetry. In the class, they were required to write a poem once a week to bring to the class. Beth found she was well suited to the poetry writing enterprise.

I was pretty good at it and I liked to do it. I was pulling the car over on the side of the road on the way to work to scribble down some line that popped into my head, and I only live two miles from the campus. I was bringing in the assigned poem and nine other ones every week. (Weldon, 1999)
Beth is a popular poet at the slam and, as a consequence of her popularity, she has drawn audiences to several readings in central and south Louisiana where her poetry was featured. When asked why she did not make more effort toward having her poetry published, she replied, “I don’t like the idea of sending your poems out just to get in any magazine. I did it one time. Sent a poem to Poetry magazine. Evon [her poetry teacher] said it was the best, so I shot for the top. They rejected it and I never tried again.”

Beth has had one poem published in the New Delta Review. When I asked how that happened she recounted this experience.

Evon told me I should keep trying to send poems out. She said they weren’t going to come to my door and ask for them. The next day I was in my office and the editor of the New Delta Review came and knocked on my door. She said she had heard me read this poem at the slam and wanted to know if they could publish it. I said yes and I’m still waiting for the second one to come ask.

Even though she spends little effort getting her poems published, Beth admits that she enjoys it when people like her poetry. She performs her poetry at the slam because she enjoys the sense of community she feels at the slam. Beth commented that the slams were “really just a chance to get out once a week and hang out with all your friends who like poetry.” She further described slams in terms of their contrast to the typical academic workshop environment.

I hate the cutthroat atmosphere of workshops; everybody is out to find something “wrong” with your poem. These poets who teach writing at the universities and those in graduate programs are the ones that have survived those kinds of programs. I don’t think it’s a good way to teach. In Evon’s class and here at the slam I think people try to look at what is good in the poems. I’ve heard some really great poems here, written by non-academic poets, that I’ve liked as much as poems written by anyone. Sometimes it’s only a line or part of a poem that is great but I enjoy listening to it. You can watch a poet develop here. They start reading and it’s not so good maybe, but you watch them get better over time. That’s the part I like.
Beth reads her poems from the page on stage. She reads with much expression and maintains good eye contact and a strong connection with her audience, as if she were speaking to them informally. Her style of reading is not flamboyant or loud, and she exhibits a sense of humor in her delivery and in her writing. She speaks most often in her performances as though she is conversing with the audience. For the most part, Beth writes in a narrative style, however, on occasion she will use forms such as the sonnet, villanelle, and haiku.

Roy Morrison

Roy is 6’ 3” tall and weighs 210 pounds. He is in his early fifties, and he is also a regular at the slams, along with his wife who serves often as the scorekeeper. His sons Bill and John, who are in their early twenties, also write and perform at the slams. His daughter does not write but often accompanies the family at the slam, as does his brother.

Roy is an elevator mechanic and has worked for the same company for thirty years. His formal education ended in the ninth grade, but he has been required to attend several classes sponsored by his employer that have to do mostly with math and electronics. He is an avid reader and has been since an early age. He describes his connection to literature and storytelling with fond remembrance.

I’ve always read a lot. When I was three or four years old I remember relatives reading fairy tales to me and they fascinated me. By five years old I was memorizing the stories and the images they portrayed and began telling them to others. I got praise and was fascinated with the stories so I always associated reading with pleasure. I didn’t do well in school except in some of the English classes where we read. In all the other classes I was reading things like Brave New World or Mark Twain hidden behind my textbook. (Morrison, Roy, 1999)

We can see also that Roy describes his attention to the imagistic quality of storytelling. That imagery figures prominently in his style of performance. Roy’s fascination with
reading has continued throughout his life even though he has never pursued any more
formal education.

Roy came to his first slam three years ago. When asked why he came he
replied:

When I came to that first slam I wasn’t writing poetry. I mean I had dabbled at
it a bit but I wasn’t actively writing. I read about the slam in the newspaper and
I like to put myself in new and different situations so I decided to go and I really
had fun. The next time I went I wrote a poem to read and it was horrible—
probably the worst poem in the history of the slam, and I didn’t get a very good
score, but I still enjoyed reading it. It entertained me. Now it’s different
though. I spend a lot of time writing poetry. It’s a compulsion now and a
sharing thing. Besides that, it is an excellent family thing for us. My whole
family comes and has a good time. My sons write and my wife enjoys it. Our
family life can be falling apart, and we can be mad as hell at each other, but we
can always get together with the poetry. The poetry thing always works, and at
least we can meet together on that ground.

It is evident that Roy’s family enjoys the slams; they attend nearly every slam even
when they do not read.

Since that early reading experience at the slam, Roy has written a lot of poetry.
His poems have been published in several magazines including the Louisiana Review
and several international publications in Canada, France, and Ireland. He has
performed at local readings as a featured reader on several occasions and was recently
featured in the Louisiana Writer’s Gala held in Baton Rouge. He especially likes to
publish his poetry in other countries. When asked why, he replied, “I get a kick out of
it. Like this guy in Ireland said, I like to have my finger on the pulse of the world, at
least any place that speaks English. I read their stuff, and they read mine, and it doesn’t
feel so far from where I am.”

Roy always reads his poems from a written page. His performance style is
quiet, and he reads purposefully, rarely looking up from the page. Roy’s poems are
generally written and delivered as a series of images strung together on a particular
theme; his poetry is somewhat abstract in that it does not usually follow a narrative
pattern or grammatical norms; his poetry is not easily accessible for much of the
audience. Roy seldom makes very high scores at the slams; he usually finishes
somewhere in the middle of the pack and occasionally scores near the bottom. He has
finished well at a few slams and even finished second one time in a grand slam. When I
asked him why he thinks he does not score well at the slam, he replied:

Well, you know, you are being judged by people who aren't really qualified to
judge most of the time, but they are judging, and it's interesting to see what
people think. It's a wild card. I bet I could take the same poem in every week
and get a range of scores depending on who's judging and how I read. It's the
same judges for everybody so you can't say it isn't fair. I learned from Beth that
you have to look at who is judging and get the feel of what they like if you want
to score high, but I don't really care too much about winning. The more
enthusiasm and pizzazz you put into it equates to more points too. As time goes
on, I get a lot of gratification from publishing the poems so I don't feel too bad
if I know it's a good poem. Most of the time I read poems that are fresh. When
I read a poem at the slam, I've usually written it in the last two weeks. I don't
like to read old stuff. Also, at the grand slam I'm committed to read the poem I
won the open with and usually I've lost my enthusiasm for it by then because
I've already read it before and, at the grands, a lot of them are good slam
poets—more performance oriented poets. I don't really perform. I just read.
Sometimes I'll try to rehearse beforehand, but most of the time I don't put much
effort into performing. I just read and don't worry about it too much or rehearse
it while I'm sitting at the table waiting to read. It don't kill me to get low
scores; sometimes they get it and sometimes they don't.

As we can see, Roy doesn't need the affirmation of the judges and puts little emphasis
on his ranking in the slam. He sees his scores as a reflection of the judges' inability to
recognize the quality of his poem separate from the performance aspects. Roy does not
interpret low scores as a devaluation of the quality of his work, but rather attributes
them to his lack of emphasis on performance aspects in his writing and reading. Roy
further comments that he likes how the judging serves to involve more people in the
event. "Almost everyone there is participating in some form or another or is with
someone who is participating, so everyone is included and participates and feels like
eye are part of the show, so it's more fun for everyone.”

John Morrison

John is Roy’s youngest son and he is also a large man, although he is three
inches shorter than his father is. He is twenty-one years old and in his third year in the
undergraduate creative writing program at Louisiana State University. When I asked
John if he liked college, he paused for almost ten seconds, as though he were a bit
embarrassed and then, with a tone of apology and anger, he gave the following reply:

No. Actually, I hate it…. Well, that’s not entirely true; I liked some classes. The
academic creative writing program has a negative impact on new writers. It’s
like a formula for how you’re supposed to learn poetry, and they are all a tight
knit group with similar tastes, and every poet is supposed to get hooked into
trying to make it in their little community. It’s a political thing. (Morrison,
John, 2000)

John considers himself an outsider in the university poetry community. He is also
considered to be a little more dangerous by the slam community in terms of his
willingness to take risks; it is not uncommon to hear John read a poem that is
considered vulgar or sexist or angry and confrontational. He usually scores in the
middle to low rankings at the slams, but on occasion has scored higher.

John describes himself as a “post-beat poet,” a term he said he just learned and
did not like, but he admitted that it came closest to describing his poetry. He has been
serious about poetry writing since he began college three years ago. When asked why
he wrote poetry, he responded with the following narrative:

I grew up with my father and brother. Out of high school I spent some time in
the northwest—Washington, around Seattle. Being from the Deep South, I was
completely inspired by the land, the trees and the clear water and the poetry of
Whitman and Bukowski. I was inspired by the scenery and in the middle of it.
all I see is coffee and mineral water drinking people with cell phones stuck to
their ears. I guess I developed a hatred for capitalism in America and started
writing political poems.
The anger at capitalism that John expresses is more evident in his style of delivery than in his poetry; his tone when reading from the page is considered to be “in your face,” a term meaning confrontational. The hosts will usually introduce John’s performance with some warning, such as, “Please welcome John and get ready: you never know what you are gonna get from John.” Promoters at one poetry venue in Baton Rouge that features impromptu performance by people from the audience have banned John. John often goes to poetry events with friends, and he openly admits their tendency to drink too much. There have been occasions where John has gotten what his dad calls “liquored up” and made a scene at the slam. One night his girlfriend, whom he described as “pilled up pretty bad,” fell off her chair onto the floor twice during the performances before she was asked to leave. John got drunk on another night and stood up on a chair on stage and screamed a poem filled with what was considered by his family and members of the audience “some pretty disgusting stuff.” On that particular occasion he got three of the lowest scores ever seen at the Baton Rouge slam and two “tens” (the highest score possible). All of the regulars at the slam know John and consider him to be friendly and a bit shy in his offstage demeanor, but he has a reputation for “pushing the envelope” with his poetry and his performance style. When I asked John if he felt constrained by the slam rules, he replied, “No, I feel like I can read anything, filthy, vulgar or whatever. Sometimes if kids are there I try to be more careful.”

When I asked what he thought about the judging at the slams, John replied, “Kind of silly, but it gets everybody into it—there is a rapport between everybody. Some people take it too seriously though.” John does not place much importance on winning the slam.
John often comes to the slams and does not read and does not like to serve as a judge. When asked why he attends so often, he answered quickly:

I was born and raised in Baton Rouge and we never had much of an arts community here and we are starting to get one. I like what they are doing there and I want to do what I can to contribute and support it. I don’t think this is the best venue for poetry but I come to support the arts. People come here and see poets that are good. They see something different and know what else poetry can be and I like that. Also, it’s a thing with my family.

John is a soft-spoken young man, but he exhibits a high degree of intensity and enthusiasm in his performances. He always receives a strong applause when he gets up to perform and often receives a smaller applause when he leaves the stage. John has had two poems published in a local poetry magazine, “Verbal Intercourse” and one poem in another poetry magazine called “Alpha Beat Soup.” He is proud of the fact that he won second in a grand slam once, and he also made it to another grand slam once where he failed to show up because he “forgot about it.”

Liz Knighten

Liz is an attractive woman who is twenty-four years old. She grew up in a rural area south of Baton Rouge. She is a graduate of Louisiana State University where she majored in Creative Writing and had a double minor in Psychology and Sociology. Since her graduation she has been working two jobs; she manages a music store in the daytime and works in a bar at night. When I asked why she pursued Psychology and Sociology as a minor, she replied:

I started out in the Creative Writing program, and I had a bad experience with one of my professors that completely turned me away from writing for three years. She was not a pleasant person; she made me feel like I wasn’t any good. I have to say she did improve my writing, but she required a certain style and I was more abstract and she failed to mention that it was okay for me to be abstract. Anyway, after I was in Psychology for a while and realized what I was really about, I knew I had to go back to English because I love it. I love language and words. I had a better time when I went back. One of my professors even submitted my poetry and it won the John Hazard Wildman...
award. When I went to the reception I saw that other professor there and she actually came up and introduced herself to me—she didn’t even remember me—she didn’t even know who I was. She caused me to give up writing for three years, and she didn’t even know who I was. LSU has some great professors but she wasn’t one of them. (Knighten, 2000)

Even though Liz “had a better time” when she went back to the Creative Writing program, this “bad experience” left a negative impression of the program on her.

Liz has attended only two slams. In the first, which was an open slam, she finished first in the ranking with a rare perfect score of thirty points. She came back to the grand slam and there she finished fourth. She never returned to the slams. I asked her why she never returned, since apparently her poetry was well liked by the slam audience. She replied:

Well, I felt like they liked it because I was pretty. I guess that’s a horrible thing to say, but I wasn’t sure that they really liked my poetry. I might’ve been wrong, but I worried about that because it’s a problem; I feel like I have to work harder because of that. I want to be a good poet and not just pretty. Does that make any sense? Also, when I came back to the grand slam the poets there were way better than the night I won, and I was intimidated by the way they all performed. I’m inclined to say I don’t like the performance stuff, but I think that might be because I don’t know how to do it yet. My knees were shaking so bad when I got up there to read at the grand slam that I’m surprised I was able to finish the poem. Plus, I’ve gotten real busy in my life working two jobs and falling in and out of love. I’m more ambitious when I’m not in love. I am going to come back though; I think I’m ready now. I liked it. There were some great poets, and I need to be around poetry again. I miss being around it and being with other poets.

Liz’s lack of confidence in her writing is clearly something she struggles with; even when she receives praise she doubts that it is genuine.

Liz’s mother accompanied her to the grand slam and Liz read her poems from a journal she held in her hands. She has a quiet voice and was obviously nervous about her performance. She has been writing poetry since she was in grade school but has written all of her poems in private journals. She has shown them to no one, and her first
slam was the first time she ever read her poems in public. She has never had a poem
published.

When I asked Liz why she wrote poetry, she laughed and then replied:

For solace. To clear my head; you have to make room or your thinking gets
crowded. People say interesting things and they deserve a spot in there. I hear
them all the time, and I write them down. We live in a world where there is this
big quest for money, and there is so much wisdom and philosophy out there, and
it escapes us, and that's what we do—poets. I really got serious when I got back
in English. There was all this emotion, and then that got cleaned out, and then it
became an art rather than a necessity, and that's when I started getting better.

This comment suggests that Liz has used poetry to satisfy diverse needs and continues
to search for the role her poetry plays in her life.

Donald Strain

Donald is fifty years old and works for a survey company that maps the sea
bottoms for fiber-optic cable placement. He works at the home office of the company,
and he does administrative work concerning personnel and safety. He lives and works
in Duson, Louisiana, a small city about two hours southwest of Baton Rouge. His
residence is near the University of Southern Louisiana campus. He has friends in the
university, which is how he discovered there was a poetry slam in Baton Rouge.

Donald was born in Rochester, New York, and moved to Connecticut after his
graduation from high school. He worked odd jobs in the construction industry until he
began working for the state of Connecticut in the health care industry, which led
eventually to a teaching position at a correctional facility. Donald enjoyed teaching and
decided to attend College at Willimantic University where he majored in English. His
teaching position was eliminated at the correctional facility during state budget cuts,
and he had difficulty finding another position in the area. He moved to Louisiana seven
years ago. Donald has never been married and has no family in the area. He has many
friends at the university in Lafayette, Louisiana, fifty miles from Baton Rouge.

Donald began writing poetry when he was twelve. He claims to have always
had a propensity for “rhythmic language.” He describes his early attempts at writing as
“secretive and precious.” In his early thirties he began reading his poetry and working
with children in the schools, teaching poetry writing in his spare time. As he puts it, “I
found sharing it helped my ego and my sense of worth as a poet.”

Donald’s poetry has a predominantly narrative style and he performs his poems
from memory. He appears comfortable on stage, and his use of performance technique
is well developed. The imagery and situations in his poetry are made more accessible
by his grasp of performance techniques; the use of gesticulation, pause, word emphasis,
voice control, and the like, are pronounced and studied.

In 1993 Donald heard about the slams that were based in Connecticut and
started attending them regularly. He met with a high degree of success and won the
individual slam championship that year in Connecticut and a spot on the national slam
team from Connecticut that competed at the National Championship held in San
Francisco. He describes his experience competing at the national level as a turning
point in his performance career that is worthy of note:

At first it was great. I felt like I have my own voice now. I can do this. I was
single-minded about it and I learned a lot, real fast, about being on stage. I
started listening to other people—who won and how they won—what works and
what material worked—how to tailor it to specific audiences. The only way to
learn is to do it until you get confident. Tailor your stuff, learn how to modulate
your voice, which key words to emphasize, where and when to pause, making
the words say, how to draw attention to and juxtapose contrasts in the piece and
use the metaphors. That kind of performance stuff. I learned how to tailor my
pieces to slam stuff that wins and hopefully still made it poetry—real good
poetry, slammed, that wins. I hate to say it but I had to win. I hate losing. I
wanted to have excellent poetry with body and breath and something to say that
was important, not all that ranting “I got raped,” or “I got fucked over,” or “I
hate you” stuff. I hate that stuff. I could read off the page and win. I beat out some great performers—some great actors.

I got frustrated with the slam because of what it did to me to be on stage and fiercely competing—cutting your throat to see you lose. I didn’t like the competition and those feelings. It took me away from the poetry. What the slams are really about is empowering people to challenge themselves to get up there and say what they want to say; it causes them to write and create. The competition at the top is clique-y; they are all in cliques and they celebrate only themselves. The in-fighting and problems in the organization, the politics, the people on power trips. You start to think, this is my dance with fame and then it becomes about winning. It got ugly, so I quit it. (Strain, 2000)

Donald came to the slams in Baton Rouge four or five times after being away from it for the seven years since this experience in Connecticut. In Baton Rouge he ranked near the top in every slam in which he performed. Donald is a pleasant man; he is friendly and soft-spoken when off-stage. He was a popular performer and was received well by the regular competitors. After attending slams in Baton Rouge for two months he stopped. When asked to explain why he quit participating, he hesitated, then responded:

The biggest reason is that it is too far; I get off work at 5:30 and the slam starts at 7:00. I’ve got to rush to get there and then I have to look at that drive back after and going to work the next morning. It kills me. Another reason is, like I said, I hate losing. This slam is a lot better than others I’ve been to; everybody is friendly and the poetry is good but I don’t like to lose. I just can’t stand it and I asked myself why do it. I like the idea of giving it back—showing others. Poetry has been a blessing for me; it changes people and makes people kind and feel like they are in it together. Poetry can do that; give them the idea that they are creative people and it’ll make them better and nobody can take it away from them. But you can’t get too hung up in the competition. The audience is ignorant and the audience makes the slam; if they choose the vulgar instead of the eloquent. They determine what wins and as long as they are in control—if they could adopt a standard for judging—have some continuity and a standard then the thing could get out of its chrysalis, but it doesn’t happen like that.

I would still come, probably, if it wasn’t so far. I like to watch the people evolve. You can see the good in it—how they choose their elements—technical and heart—that makes it a poem—art.

The competitive aspects of the poetry slam environment still trouble Donald. Even though it is easy to see he has a sophisticated understanding of the slam phenomenon.
and appreciates many of its more subtle aspects, he places a lot of importance on winning. Because winning is important, the appeal of the slam for him is lessened.

**Sherry Wilson**

Sherry is a short woman at four-foot, nine inches. She is 46 years old and has three children in their early- to mid-twenties. Her children are out on their own now, and she lives alone. Sherry was involved in a difficult marriage that ended in divorce four years ago. She was married for twenty-three years. After her divorce, she began attending Louisiana State University in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education with an emphasis in Creative Writing. Included in her course work were two introductory classes and two advanced classes in both poetry and short story writing. She completed a second-year composition course and a second-year course on twentieth century poetry. When asked to describe her experience in the English Department at LSU, this was her response:

I loved it. I got into a really good Introduction to Poetry Writing class. I loved the teacher. She really helped me. It was really structured and I needed that. I was a beginning poet. She gave me a good framework for how to write poetry. I even won an award—the John Hazzard Wildman award that they give for the best undergraduate poet that year. I couldn’t believe it. I told someone I felt like Sally Fields winning the Academy Award that time, “I can’t believe they like me.” I couldn’t believe they liked me. I didn’t like the advanced class too much though. In there it was mostly about critiquing; it didn’t really teach you about how to write. I didn’t learn as much in my advanced classes, I mean, it was less structured. I was more on my own. It was like workshop, where we talk about each other’s poems. (Wilson, 2000)

As it turns out, the poetry writing instructor that Sherry admired so much was the same instructor that Liz had the bad experience with. Where Liz liked the advanced courses more when she came back into the department, Sherry had the opposite experience in the advanced coursework. It is also interesting that, despite their opposing style and attitudes, both Liz and Sherry won the same award.
Sherry claims not to have written a poem before she was forty years old. She began writing poetry near the end of her marriage, as she describes it, “out of my pain.” She goes on to recount her introduction into poetry writing:

I didn’t even know I was writing poetry in the beginning; I was just writing what I felt. It was therapy. I showed a couple things to one of the high school teachers at the school where I worked and she suggested I take some writing classes. That made me feel good, so I did.

Sherry continues to write and is very enthusiastic about writing poetry. She is preparing a manuscript for a collection of her poems that will be made into a chapbook. She is also working on her first novel that was started in her novel-writing class, and she writes short stories occasionally as well.

Sherry found out about the Baton Rouge slam as a student in Beth’s class, and she came for extra credit in the class. When asked what she thought of the slam, she replied:

I liked it—meeting other people and other poetry and being in that environment. It was stimulating and broadening. It showed me just how many styles there were. I knew I could extend and grow. At first I was writing about my own experience. Now I try to write from other perspectives.

Sherry usually places in the middle to high rankings at the slams. She has competed in two grand slams, though she has never won. She continues to frequent the slam when her schedule allows. When describing how she felt about the judging at the slam she explained:

I take it with a grain of salt. If I don’t do well it just means people that night didn’t like it. I don’t think my poem is awful ‘cause it didn’t win. Sometimes it helps me to see what’s wrong with it. I revise it; it must lack punch. It’s a non-threatening environment; a good way to get your poetry out there, and seeing how people react without a big rejection, where its not a big deal. I mean, it has to be received by the public not just poets. When I first started I did not think my poetry was good unless my teachers said it was good. I don’t think I read well. I think that hurts my scores. It’s hard for me to do that but I think . . . . I mean I am in such awe that I do this compared to what I was doing five years ago. I am out of my shell and out in the world. I’m developing still.
Winning at the slam seems to be secondary to Sherry; being able to participate and have her work accepted appears to be gratifying for her. Sherry has never had a poem published. In the last two years she has sent out approximately twenty poems for publication and they all have been rejected. Collecting her poems for her poetry manuscript has become the focus of her publishing efforts and she continues to write.

Eve Davis

Eve is a forty year-old woman. She has been married for nineteen years and has two children, one ten years of age and one six years old. She was born and reared in New Orleans, Louisiana. After graduating from high school she moved to Baton Rouge. She enrolled in Louisiana State University where she obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Creative Writing and met her husband, who has a Master’s degree in Business Administration. She moved to Dallas, Texas, with her husband in 1980 and attended Southern Methodist University, where she received a Master’s degree in Theology. She is now an ordained Methodist minister. She moved back to Baton Rouge in 1990.

Eve’s mother was a poet and encouraged her to write at an early age; she remembers writing poetry at the age of six. She claims that she was always “serious” about poetry, participating in literary festivals all the way through high school.

When asked to describe her experience at LSU in the Creative Writing program, she gave the following account:

It was great. It was the late seventies and we had a real tight-knit poetry community; we all kind of hung out together. We had weekly readings in a loft above the Gumbo Shop restaurant that was by the gates of the university back then. The whole Creative Writing department would go there to the open mikes, read and hang out—professors and students. I was nervous about reading though; I used to break out in hives. Seriously. (Davis, 2000)
Although uncomfortable about reading, Eve remembers her experience fondly with her peers and teachers in the program. An important aspect of her appreciation for the writing program when she attended LSU as a student was the strong sense of community exhibited in the program during her tenure there.

Eve now teaches in the English department at LSU. She offers her students extra credit to attend the slam and write about it. When I asked her why she encouraged her students to attend, she gave the following reasons:

I like the philosophy of the slam; I think it’s poetry for the people by the people. Poetry has always been an elite exercise. My students, when I ask them about their experience with poetry, most often say poetry is boring. After they go to a slam they are into it; they quote lines from poems they heard; they were engaged by it and that is hard to do. If the slam can get them engaged, that’s cool. Some of them even start writing poetry. It may not be the best in the universe, but it gets them engaged.

Eve teaches her classes with an emphasis on social issues, and when her students are engaged she finds it easier to teach them.

When Eve reads at the slam she often places low in the rankings. When asked how she accounts for this and how it makes her feel about the judging at the slam, she responded with this comment:

I go to the slams because they are fun. It’s also a great venue to read your work. I like the idea of making poetry accessible to everyone.Finishing last, at first, upset me but the truth is, not always the best poetry wins and after I came a while I learned that; I started to understand that it isn’t about winning. It’s about the poetry. I’d rather win but I realized I wasn’t going to win all the time.

I don’t write stuff for the slam. The poems that win at the slams are usually entertaining and usually performance oriented—a strong sense of rhythm, funny, political, represents some form of protest, or has an extreme point of view they like. The things I’ve done well with are things the audience relates to the most. Poetry that wins engages the audience. It can’t be subtle. The subtlety gets lost most of the time. Sometimes I keep reading a poem over and over; I figure that if I keep reading it they might get it.

Eve is a regular at the slam. She reads every time she comes and never seems to be discouraged with low scores.
Buzz Hammond

Buzz is twenty-four years old. He was born in Ohio and moved to Baton Rouge with his family when he was six. His father was a reporter who moved here to work for the local paper. After graduating from public school, Buzz enrolled at Louisiana State University in Mass Communication and then changed his major to Creative Writing after his first year. Describing his experience in the writing program, Buzz seemed ambivalent:

Well, it was all right. It was helpful in a lot of ways—different styles, different teachers. I'm lazy and it made me write. I had some teachers that were, well, challenging. You know, if you don't write in their style, you don't do well. And then I started working and my grades went down. There were some good things; I met Dustin. (Hammond, 2000)

When Buzz first came to the slams he read as a duo with his friend Dustin, a young African-American poet. Dustin was a popular local hip-hop poet who moved to New York; he and Buzz worked together for several months before he left. As a team they did well at the slam, finishing high in the rankings. Buzz continued to read after Dustin left but, as he says, he had trouble finding his own voice.

When I started reading at the slam I sucked. I was so nervous. I was more comfortable reading with someone else on stage. Dustin helped me then I went on my own and he moved. I did all right in the opens but I sucked in the grands. I did like eights in the writing and ones in the performance.

Buzz continued to read despite his lack of confidence and rarely missed a slam. He always reads his poems from memory and began to do well after a time. He made the 1999 National Slam Team from Baton Rouge but was not happy with his performance in Chicago. Buzz eventually quit coming to the slams. When I asked why he replied:

I fell in that trap about scoring all the time. I started getting worried about the scores and I quit having fun. I would get low scores and get bummed out. I felt like I sucked and I should stop. One time at a grand slam I scored real low and thought I should give up and someone came up to me after and said the “ten” thing, you know “your poem changed my life.” But I started my own thing on
Thursday nights and my wife wants me to spend more time with her at home. She doesn’t like the poetry stuff as much as I do and she doesn’t like it when I go without her.

Buzz started another, non-competitive, poetry reading in Baton Rouge that meets once a week. Buzz’s wife always accompanied him to the slam when he came and was very supportive of his efforts.

I asked Buzz why he writes and if he was still writing.

I haven’t written in a long time. I spend a lot of time memorizing. It’s easier to connect with the audience if I am not on the page. My goal is to make them laugh first, then, hopefully, think. I am most affected by laughing and thinking and not serious stuff. I don’t enjoy the serious; it’s not fun. I go now to have fun and put on a good show.

Once again, competition affects a poet that takes the scoring as a validation of his value as a poet. Because winning is so important to Buzz, the slams are no longer appealing.

The next two poets included in this survey I was not able to interview outside the event where they performed. The first poet, Vivian, finished near the middle of her round and the second one, Jason, finished last in his round. They both came to the slam only once, and I was unable to locate them for follow-up interviews. Consequently, their background information is not as detailed as the other poets included here. I chose to keep them as part of the sample group because their performances yield unique characteristics and important information regarding the success or failure of individual styles in performance. Also, the poets that finished near them in both cases were already included in this sample. Even though the interview testimony helps us to understand motivation and interpretive issues as they regard the individual poet, I believe that with the limited information I was able to obtain and the transcripts of their performances, the study will benefit from their inclusion. Many of the questions regarding their writing experience, as well as age, education, publication experience,
reading experience, and their relationship to the academic poetry community, were ascertained from other sources.

**Vivian LeBlanc**

Vivian was an exchange student from France who attended only two slams, an open slam where she ranked third and the ensuing grand slam where she finished in the middle. I was not able to interview her before she left the state; the information I can provide about her was made from observation, a brief introductory interview at the slam and from later interviews with her friends.

Vivian was a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at LSU. She came to the slam with a group of other graduate students. She was in her late twenties and spoke English as a second language. Vivian did tell me she had never read in a slam before. She has had poetry published in one or two small presses.

Vivian left LSU after finishing her Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. She is presently considering a Ph.D. program in Comparative Literature at a university in the Southeastern United States. She has been in the United States since finishing her undergraduate work in France.

Vivian read her work from the written page. Her style of reading was deliberate, purposeful, and exhibited little skill in performance technique. She was nervous when reading, and her command of the English language was not well developed.

**Jason Smith**

Jason appeared to be in his late teens/early twenties. He had a clean-cut appearance and attended his only slam accompanied by two friends. One of his friends was chosen to serve as a judge on that night. He never attended another slam in Baton Rouge, and I was not able to interview him or anyone who knew him. I do know that
he was a student at LSU and not an English Major. He introduced himself and signed into the slam book only as Jason, with no last name. He did tell me that he had never read a poem "out loud" before and that he had just begun writing poetry.

Jason read with no emotion and an almost inaudible voice. He was apparently nervous and was quick to leave the stage after his performance.

Discussion

The information presented in this chapter demonstrates that there are variations in the lifestyle, age, experience, attitude, personality, and reasons for writing among these poets. However, there are commonalities regarding their educational backgrounds, value systems, perceived roles as poet, and abilities at performance. We can identify the similarities and differences in terms of three variables: the individual poet and his/her background, their writing and performance style, and finally, their attitude regarding the meaning and value of the poetry slam.

The majority of these poets share, most obviously, an advanced education in Literature and Creative Writing; seven of these poets have Bachelor's degrees at the least; one is finishing her degree, and Roy, who has little formal education, is and has been for over forty years, an avid reader. Three of these ten poets have a Master's degree in Creative Writing. Despite their formal education, none of these poets has anything but experientially based education in performance. Since their performance experience varies, the degree to which performance figures in to their success at slams is variable.

A further similarity all but one of these poets share is a feeling that they are "outside" the academic poetry community, in that their own sense of what poetry is and how it is taught differs from the contemporary academic notions. This shared
perception of marginality might well contribute to another of their most obviously stated values, the appreciation of the sense of “community” at the slams. One notable exception to this perception of exclusion from the academic community is Sherry. Sherry’s alignment with the academic paradigm might be a need, as she reports, for acceptance by her teachers. Unlike the other poets in this sample, Sherry places her trust in the credibility of her teachers to define what poetry is, how it should be written, and to define her success. We might also note that Sherry is the only one of these poets who has no other reference point for defining poetry. As she stated, “I didn’t even know I was writing poetry.” A teacher was the first person to identify her writing as poetry.

Success at the poetry slam is relative for most of these poets. Scoring near the top of the rankings is considered successful for most of them. However, high scores do not correlate perfectly with “success.” Since poets at slams are ranked in relation to other poets and scored on a continuum based on a variable (and at the least arguable) reference point, successful poetry at the Baton Rouge slam does not mean good or bad relative to a criterion based level of mastery. Because success at poetry slams is based on a continuum rather than exclusion or inclusion, it is possible these poets have perceived a greater chance of acceptance for their deviant beliefs or unusual style in the slam environment. It is also possible, as Beth suggested in her interview, that there is something of value in every performance at the slam. The reasons for poor scores are negotiable for these poets; many qualify their not winning by citing poor judging attributable to the ignorance or bias of the judges. But most of these poets are concerned if they finish last, with the notable exception of John. Often the poets
themselves agree that a performance in a particular slam was better than their own because of the winning poet’s performance skills rather than their having a better poem.

The most commonly stated reason for attending poetry slams among this group of poets is for the professed sense of community that prevails there. The communal nature of the slam environment derives from the perception that the slam promotes and encourages, to some degree, every attempt at poetic creation. As Roy commented in his interview, “Our family life can be falling apart and we can be mad as hell at each other but we can always get together with the poetry.” Being with other poets and people who appreciate poetry, sharing, engaging the audience, watching poets evolve, and showing people, as Donald said, that we are “in it together,” were reported aspects of the slam that describe its communal nature. There were other reasons for attending slams reported, including the perception of the poetry slam as an environment where poets can broaden their scope of poetry styles, and as a place where poems can be “tested.” Other reasons cited by poets for attending slams were the immediacy of feedback on their work, as well as the opportunity to read in a non-threatening environment.

Across the board, every poet who reported reasons for going to slams included comments regarding the communal and lighthearted nature of the slam, as well as its entertainment or “fun” factor—laughter is prevalent, and encouraged, in the slam environment. Many occasions for laughter arise at slams not only during the more comedic performances, but also during the interaction among judges, audience members, the host, the manager, and the poets. The slam atmosphere, in fact, invites play among its members and participants. The amusement of the audience by the
playful atmosphere, combined with its appreciation and enjoyment of the poetry, contribute most prominently to the audience's definition of "fun" in this case.

In terms of their individual personalities, each of these poets is reserved in his/her off-stage manner, including the two poets who have well developed performance skills, Donald and Buzz. These poets also are soft-spoken and rather shy in public when they are not performing. This trait may further explain their initial attraction to the slam, a place where they have the opportunity to be the center of attention -- at least for three minutes at a time.

Although only three of these poets actively pursue publication of their poetry, all but one of these poets (Jason) have had poetry published at least once or recognized with an award. Validation of their written work in the academic sense could explain why at least seven of these poets do not take the judging at the slams very seriously. Poets can receive validation in both the literary environment and in the slam environment. The implication that validation of their poetry in the literary environment negates the need for a high degree of success in the slam environment is one indication of the literate bias these poets share.

In general, regarding their attitudes about the value of the poetry and the value of performance, these poets exhibit marked differences and similarities as well. Only two of these poets exhibit a performance-centered approach to their readings at the poetry slams; Donald and Buzz both perform their work from memory and rely on performance technique to enhance their scores. The other eight poets read their work from the written page, and Roger, Liz, Sherry, Eve, and Vivian consider themselves to be poor readers or performers. Jason read only once and performed poorly -- and even though John does not score well at the slams, he does often read with an animated style.
Beth is the one poet in this group who is considered to be a good performer while choosing to perform from the written text. She manages to read her poem and still maintain a strong connection with her audience; she uses many of the same performance techniques that Donald and Buzz do, even though she reads from the page. Whether the poet reads from the page or performs from memory is not as important as the connection the poet establishes with the audience. Even though most of these poets believe the performer is more validated in the slam environment than the poet who merely reads from the page, we will see in Chapter Four that this is not always the case.

Several of these poets suggested the slam was a good place to put their poetry before a public. This type of oral publication of their written work is appealing to these poets. Some poets suggested the immediate feedback was important and helpful. Others suggested the environment was conducive to creativity. Roy reported that the slam encouraged and inspired him to begin writing seriously. Beth had one of her poems recognized at a slam by an editor in the audience who later published the poem. Few of these poets receive or pursue other opportunities to publish most of their work, and performing at the slam is an easy and non-threatening way to receive recognition for their efforts. It is a common understanding among poets that the more you perform at the slams, the more your poetry will improve.

End Notes

1 One poet was absent from the Grand Slam.

2 Two of the poets in this group placed in a different target area of a different slam. For example, the same poet might have finished near the middle in one slam and at the top or bottom in another reducing the total number of different poets included from twelve to ten.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE PERFORMANCE

The interaction of individuals within this slam community, including the audience itself, the chosen "official" judges, the organizers, and the poets who perform, is the focus of this chapter. Even though poetry performance is the central feature of the slam, these performances are embedded in the existing event field of a particular slam. As demonstrated by the comments of slam participants in previous pages, features ancillary to the performances often determine the appeal and success of the slam. The routine interaction of individuals, as well as the anomalous interactions within each event field, will point to other salient features of this type of poetry reading.

First, the performance ability of the poet is not the sole criterion for success in this event. Second, evidence demonstrates that, in this forum, the standard of excellence is norm-referenced rather than criterion-referenced. Norm referencing allows for a degree of relative and negotiable success for every performance. Finally, the investigation of the relationships established and communicated between participants, demonstrates that the lauded "sense of community" particular to this type of poetry reading is a product of the structure of the event. For many participants, the communal nature of slams is its most important feature.

Each open slam is a two-hour event. Each open slam examined started at 7:00 p.m. and ended near 9:00 p.m. Within this two-hour period, the members spent approximately half to three-quarters of that time in casual conversation and visiting among themselves. The performance aspect of the slam begins when the host takes the stage for opening remarks and introductions. From the time the host takes the stage, to the time winners are announced at the end of the performances, is the amount of time...
included in the show "proper"; it accounts for only one-quarter to one-half of the total event time. The grand slam differs only in that it is a three-hour event and that the number of performances for each poet is doubled, as is the host-time between performances. Even in the grand slam, the amount of time dedicated to the poets' speaking accounts for little more than one-third of the event time.

Within the show itself, four types of communication are manifest: (1) communication between the host and the audience—explaining rules, introducing the performers, calling for scores, announcing events, joking with other members and the like; (2) communication in which the poets introduce their own performances; (3) communication that consists of poets actually performing their poems and (4) reactions of the audience to the poet and the judges. From among the four types of communication within the show proper, the time in which the host is in communication with the audience is at least equal to, and often nearly double, the time poets are in communication with the audience. Therefore, to be able to understand the appeal and success of the slam event beyond the poetry, we must understand how the communicative interaction inherent in each of these other types of communication contributes to the success and appeal of each particular slam.

Typically, the host's role between performances is, as I mentioned earlier, to take the stage, comment on the previous performance in order to give the judges a few seconds to prepare their scores, call for scores, read them aloud to the scorekeeper, make another comment in order to allow time for the scorekeeper to tabulate the score, record the score in the logbook, and introduce the next poet. These basic duties are usually accomplished in forty-five to sixty seconds between performances. To avoid repeating accounts of this routinized behavior, I refer to the host's actions between
performances only when they deviate significantly from this norm or influence significantly the actions of other members. In order to account for the factors that determine the relative success of individual performances, I provide the fully transcribed poem of each poet in the sample group—referred to in the individual slam as the “target group”—from each event. I also provide less detailed accounts of the other poems performed on that night. In Chapter Two I discussed the “keying” of performance. In this chapter I elaborate on the term and look at how each performance is keyed by the poet, and how the keying in turn contributes to his or her success in that particular performance. How well the poet is able to express the way his or her poem is to be understood beyond the referential content of the poem contributes significantly to the audience’s and the judges’ ability to appreciate the performance. For each performance, I also attempt to identify stylistic characteristics of the performance and the text, along with noting the thematic content of each poem and the audience’s response to the poem.

The transcription method I employ depends on a relatively simple system of typographic and diacritical symbols. The details of the method are included in an Appendix. Scholars use transcriptions of oral discourse in order to report on the structure, content, and sound of the utterance. By recording the content and capturing the structural, verbal, and vocal elements of the performance, this transcription method attempts to represent the poem as it was performed rather than as it might appear on the page. Capturing the performance elements of each poem includes consideration of non-verbal, vocal elements such as false starts, disfluencies, problems, repairs, laughs, sighs, coughs, and so forth. This method also attempts to arrange the material on the page so that it suggests features of the delivery that figure in its reception by the audience.
Because this method marks individual units of sense, phrasing, and breathing as verses, it lends itself appropriately to poetry transcription. Most of the more prominent typographic symbols are commonsensical and familiar. For instance, underlining indicates stress or emphasis, vocalized non-verbals are written out, “greater than” and “less than” marks (> < and < >) are used to bracket talk that is faster or slower than surrounding talk, and quotation marks are used to signify that the speaker is speaking in someone else’s voice.

The audiences at slams respond in a variety of ways, the most obvious being the scoring done by judges. However, the audience also responds to the performances with its applause, which can be gauged on a continuum from short and quiet, to moderate, to long and loud, and most appreciatively, long, loud, and vocal. A short and quiet applause can be characterized as an applause that has duration under five seconds and lacks enthusiasm; I have heard this type of applause referred to as “polite” applause. A moderate applause has duration of five to ten seconds, and is more enthusiastic than the short and quiet applause. The long, loud, and vocal applause includes whistling, yelling, or other vocalizations of enthusiastic approval, and duration of over ten seconds.

Another more subtle response of the audience often can be recognized in the way it listens to each performance. In the following accounts I use the term “strong connection” to describe the relationship of the poet and the audience during a performance. Sometimes the audience listens with what I term a “comfortable quiet,” where it appears to listen attentively and seems engaged in the performance. This type of listening is one of the physical manifestations of a strong connection between audience and poet. At other times an uncomfortable quiet permeates in which the
audience seems disconnected from the performance; although quiet, its attentiveness is lessened, as suggested by the way it ignores the performer, or appears to be “looking through them,” occupied mentally by something other than the performance. As one prominent slam poet commented on the nature of the audience’s attention at slams, “You know when they are listening -- but you also know when you can hear crickets chirping and shit, you’re in trouble.” The physical manifestations of this lack of attentiveness are often noted in the way the audience fidgets or looks away from the performer.

Another less subtle feature of audience response is the general audience’s response to the scores of the judges. The general audience will usually respond to the judges’ scores after each performance; they will respond positively by applause, and negatively by little or no applause and sometimes booing. Often the general audience will disagree with the judges’ scores and when they do, booing is encouraged; even when they do not boo, the agreement of the general audience with the judges is reflected in the magnitude of its applause. The judges, the criteria of judgment, and attitudes concerning the very idea of judging itself are often on display at slams, as well as the poetry.

In this chapter, each of the four slams is described in its turn considering the aforementioned foci. At the end of each account a brief summary is provided to draw attention to significant features relevant to each event. The size of the audience, the demographics, and the number of poets who perform in each event are relevant features that contribute to differences in each event; however, similarities among slams are pronounced in the sequence of events and routinized behaviors of individuals when the event starts.
At the start of every slam, the audience members begin to come in and choose their seats. Conversations begin as people greet each other or introduce themselves. Drinks are ordered and patrons peruse the menus. The stage is prepared with the music stand and the microphone. Music is playing in the background and the noise volume of the crowd increases as more people arrive. The host eyes prospective judges and walks hurriedly back and forth between the lobby where he greets people and the tables and booths where he converses with prospective judges and the regulars. After the judges are chosen and most of the audience has arrived, the host comes to the microphone.

As soon as the host takes the stage and begins to introduce the judges, the music dies and the crowd gets quiet as it focuses its attention toward the stage. Once the audience is informed of the slam rules in the spiel, and the judges of the evening’s performances are introduced—along with the scorekeeper—the host then introduces the goat poet. The goat poet takes the stage as the host leaves the stage leading the audience in applause. A short dead silence can be heard as the poet begins his or her performance. For that short silence the connection between the audience and the poet is established; the most effective poets endeavor to maintain and build on that connection. Each poet experiences that slight and fleeting moment in which expectation meets the ensuing reality of the performance. The degree to which each poet is able to build on that connection and stay within its parameters determines his or her degree of success. The abilities of the poets that will be judged by those present are the perceived quality of their poems and/or their ability to deliver them to the audience effectively.

The four slams presented here constitute a series, or what is commonly referred to as a “round” of slams. The first three slams are open slams in which anyone is allowed to read one poem. The fourth slam in the round is the grand slam in which the
poets who ranked in the top four places in each open slam compete against each other. Each of the individual slams within this group is presented in the order in which each was held.

The First Open Slam

At 7:00 p.m. it is still daylight outside M’s café. Inside, Roy’s family is seated around a double table with Beth, Buzz, and his wife at the kitchen end of the stage. Next to them are four regulars at a double table in front of the stage. A young couple is in the booth closest to the bar. He is a poet, and she is asked by the host to judge. Next to this couple, in the second booth, are two young women—both are newcomers, and one is chosen to judge. In the next booth is a newcomer in his early twenties sitting alone; he also is asked to judge. In the fourth booth are three people in their late teens, a brother and sister who attend to read once every three months or so. They have brought a friend who is asked to judge. In the last booth is another young couple; he is reading, and his friend is judging. They have been to a few slams, but this is the first time he has read publicly. Two regular poets are at the bar with a friend. Of the twenty-one people present at this point, ten are poets signed up to read, five are judges, and six are friends of one of the above. All but one of the people in the booths are judges or poets; none of the judges has been to a slam before. As usual, the judges were chosen at random by the M.C. based on brief interviews that determined what they knew of slams and their relationship to poetry. Those individuals who had never been to slams before, do not write, or do not usually care much for poetry, are most sought after.

As in following accounts of the other slams, I provide a brief description here of each poet’s performance and provide an account of each poem as the slam progresses.
but I go into more detail concerning the performances of the three target poets in each event. On this night, the target poets are Beth, who finishes first; Roy, who ranks seventh; and his son John, who scores in last place.

At 7:30, the M.C. gets on the stage for introductions and "the spiel." The audience is small and quiet. Only nine poets have signed up to read so far, including Jim, who also is hosting this night. Jim is in his late forties, with shoulder-length hair and dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt. He appears distracted, glancing toward the door repeatedly, and the pace of the spiel is going slowly. While Jim is speaking, a group of four graduate students from LSU, who attend the slam frequently, come in and sit at the end of the stage near the bar. One of the graduate students comes up to the stage and signs the book. When Jim gets back to the mike he says to Beth at her table, "OK. Where was I?" Beth says, "I don't know," and everyone laughs. Jim goes on to introduce the judges, bragging about his ability to pick great judges who are "perfectly biased and totally unqualified." Laughter goes around as he introduces the judges and points out their biases—being with a poet or disliking poetry—and their lack of qualifications—never having been to a slam before or knowing nothing about poetry. The crowd loosens up a bit, laughing more and being more vocal, as Jim nears the end of the introductions. Four more people trickle in, three of them poets, and after nearly eight minutes on stage, Jim introduces the sacrificial goat. Thirteen poets have signed up to read by the time the goat is introduced. The audience applauds as Buzz takes the stage to do the goat poem.

Buzz stands at the microphone and comments on how quiet the crowd is. Someone yells, "Hey, Buzz." Buzz replies, "That's better." Then he begins his performance from memory. The poem pokes fun at how televangelists are predicting
the end of the world. “I’m stocking up on Twinkies, tampons, toilet paper and weapons, lots of weapons.” The poem is much like a stand-up comedy piece. The audience is not laughing. Buzz performs the poem from memory, but six lines into the performance he stops and stares at the microphone. His wife yells out with a sigh, “He forgot.” Buzz laughs awkwardly and rolls his eyes up as he tries to remember the next line for thirty seconds. The audience is in an uncomfortable silence as someone yells, “Do another one.” Buzz keeps struggling to remember for a few more seconds and then says, “Ok, I’ll do something else.” He begins a poem he’s done several times. Buzz has a repertoire of about six or eight poems he performs repeatedly; most of the regulars have heard most of his poems several times. This next poem he attempts plays on Andy Warhol’s “fifteen minutes of fame.” In this poem the speaker rants about how he is not satisfied with only fifteen minutes of fame and lists the types of recognition that he would prefer: “I want them to rename the Oscar the ‘Buzz.’” Buzz gets through it even though it is obvious he has lost a lot of the confidence and enthusiasm he needs to emphasize the irony of this poem in his performance. The audience does not appreciate the irony, but it loosens up a bit during this performance and responds with a few chuckles; finally, a small applause when he finishes and bows, with a small nod of his head, almost as if apologizing. The host comes up and calls for the scores. His score ranks among the lowest of the evening. He will read again later in the regular competition and finish among the top four poets who go on to the grand slam, but in this performance, he knows he has “bombed.”

The first poet who is called up to read in the competition proper is the teenage girl who is with her brother. She has long hair, and wears a see-through top and an ankle-length skirt with sandals. Her poem is called “Love in a Car,” and she says, “This
is a poem I'm sure everyone can relate to.” She reads the poem from the page without looking up.

I love the way you lay with me.
I love the way you feel my skin.
I love the way you look at me.
Uh, I just hit the door with my shin.

This is the first of five four-line stanzas. As we can see, the poem is designed to contrast the romance of lovemaking with the actuality of making love in a car. In her introduction to the poem, which was nearly as long as the performance, she reported that the poem was based on a real experience. In her performance, she speaks as though the experience is happening in the present. In the first three lines of each stanza, the speaker is directing her speech to her lover in the car. For the fourth line in each quatrain she reports an action that occurred in the car. The language and rhyme scheme are simple and direct. She steps to the side of the microphone, makes a formal curtsy upon finishing and leaves the stage. The audience smiles and listens quietly throughout the performance, and softly applauds her effort at the end.

Jim comes back up to the stage and comments on the poet as the judges prepare their scores. He tells the audience that this young woman used to come to the slam barefoot when it was at the theatre, and on how far she has evolved as a poet by now wearing shoes. The girl laughs and says she has to, and Monica yells out from the bar that it is a rule. Jim mocks astonishment at the rule and claims it is a discriminatory policy. Everyone laughs, and Monica claims her insurance company made the rule. The scores are then called for and tallied in the book. Her scores rank thirteenth of the night. Another poet comes in, and Jim stops to sign her into the book. Then Jim comes back to the microphone and introduces the next poet.
Next up is David, the young man in the booth away from the bar. His is a short poem he reads from the page; he explains that it was written in honor of his father whose birthday was the day before. The poem is entitled, “Some Wisdom.” The opening lines are:

All my life when I needed advice
I went to the smartest man I know
that’s dear old Dad
I’m 7 years old.
“Father, why do boys like girls?”
How could I forget this one?
“Son, women are the most mysterious, profound, inspiring
and intelligent creatures in the world
I’ll tell you what
they’ll ruin you quicker
than a speeding bus
and it’ll be twice as painful.”

A chuckle or two is heard in the audience as he continues through his adolescent years with dad’s advice. Some audience members smile and others start eating again, looking around or staring quietly; the audience is disconnected. The advice becomes more crude and sexist as he continues; further into the poem when he asks his father why God made women so beautiful and arousing, his father replies, “That’s easy son, because an erect penis is easier to bite off.” In addition to the poem’s crudeness it also is confusing in terms of its key. The poet does not make it clear before or during the performance whether we are to understand this poem as praise of his father or condemnation; his attitude is ambiguous. He does change his voice in the quoted lines of his father to give the suggestion of his father speaking, but it is not clear how he or his father feels about this advice. He folds the page up and puts it in the back pocket of his jeans as he leaves the stage. His girlfriend gives him a ten, the only high score, which is thrown out. His other scores rank him tenth.
Next, Roy is introduced and invited to the stage. At the microphone, he makes a comment about writing a poem in honor of Buzz, inspired by Buzz’s Andy Warhol poem. He apologizes to Buzz for leaving it at home. Then he pauses and begins to read “Violin”:

There is a sound of fifty violins at the edge of morning.
My grandfather is near.
Eight miles high
Fifty violins hang like balloons in a rented indigo sky.
Grandfather visits my dream.
Love is a sweet cream coffee of our early morning conversation
Grandfather sits on a violin and below is a curve of earth
dizzy smoky.
The moon preens her shadow
A mirror of the sun’s golden thin line.
Grandfather stands on his tiptoes for a glance
Just around the corner the thin light of tomorrow
Behind us in the darkness
Love is a cold Irish potato.
Pine cone fire face
The backside of the cross where spikes come roaring through
Like Cadillacs driving blood and bone forgetful and invisible disappearing.
The music of violins is word unspeakable
Projecting from the impotent to the finite.
Narcotic and yawning rain washing over stone the thin light of tomorrow
Slipping from my soul the edge of morning
Severing and blinding.
The crow-footed moon on vacation loves staring into a hazy mirror
Hiding under a five-o’clock shadow.
Skinny strings of smeared violet
cots of swimming vibration
The face of swarming violin music
Distant and searching.
Roy read the poem with a serious tone as the audience listened closely. When he finished there was a long applause and another poet yelled, “Whew.” In his reading, he recounted the images as though they were a dream sequence; his voice was eerie and rhythmical. His scores ranked him seventh, in the middle of the group.

Next, Beth is invited up to read. The audience applauds loudly and several people yell out “Yeh,” and “Alright”; Beth is a favorite among the regulars. She comes up slowly, looks at her audience, smiles, and speaks: “This is an answer to David’s poem.” She smiles and pauses. “It’s called ‘Pandemonium’s Trunk.’” The poem begins:

Oh sure, we’ve all heard about Pandora’s box.  
How her fatal female curiosity led her  
To let out all the horrors of the world  
Pestilence and war and all that male blah blah blah  
But what Hesiod and all those guys don’t tell us  
is that Pandora had a twin  
Pandemonium he was called.  
Some people called him Pandorkis for short  
[poet pauses for audience laughter]  
It seems, when Pandora was given the box  
you don’t have to be a Freudian to figure that one out Pandorkis  
Pandork for short  
Was given a huge steamer trunk  
Which he wheeled around on a dolly  
Hello Dolly  
Well, one fine day  
and know this was before Pandora opened her box  
The guys were teasing Pandork,  
Well of course they were  
About his trunk  
“Can’t you get it to stand up by itself?”  
they’d say, or  
“That’s not so big”  
So Pandork  
Dork for short  
Of course had to show them  
“It’s even bigger than it looks” he boasted  
Opening the trunk and letting out  
>Paper-cuts, yeast infections, junk-mail, mildew, flat tires  
post-nasal drip, hangnails, thong bikinis, call waiting,
processed cheese, in-grown toenails
Cat dander
Cigar smoke, high heels . . . crusty underwear
Flat coke, sour milk, perfume inserts from magazines
Dog shit, Cosmo, Kathy Lee Gifford, and Howard Stern
[audience laughter]
Kudzu and poison ivy
Mosquitoes, cockroaches and fire ants
Ti:me.
And
Curiosity.
And that’s the real story.

Beth emphasizes the words “Time,” “And,” and “Curiosity,” then nods to David as she says the last line. The audience laughs and applauds long and loudly as she leaves the stage. During her performance, she read this poem from the page, slowly and purposefully. She paused for the audience laughter when it grew pronounced. She emphasized certain words more than others, pausing for effect. She spoke directly to her audience and made eye contact. She modulated her rate of speaking and tone of voice, emphasizing the irony, thinly veiled as an innocent account of facts. This satire contrasted David’s earlier performance in that here it is clear how the speaker feels, and we appreciate the feigned innocence of the performer as an intentional, indirect, and comical means of “gender bashing.” The audience laughed throughout Beth’s performance, especially during the list of things let loose from the trunk, and they listened intently and engaged. Unlike David’s poem, hers is clearly understood to be taken humorously and lightly; she read the poem as though she had empathy for the unfortunate Pandemonium but several times lets slip an ironic smile. The last line of the poem makes reference to popular radio journalist Paul Harvey’s style of reporting that tells another, little known side of popular stories. She took the full three minutes allowed to read the poem. She earned the highest score of the night.
Next up is Adam, brother of the first performer. He walks to the microphone with a folder of poems on loose-leaf paper. He is wearing baggy pants and a T-shirt. He is in his late teens, has short red hair, and mutton-chop sideburns. He removes the sheet of paper with his typed poem on it and steps to the microphone, and without an introduction, begins to read his poem in a quiet and serious tone:

Ask yourself when confusion is the only thing
Where do you go?
When the emptiness of freedom and security grasps too tightly
Ask yourself
When confusion is the only stable thing
Where do you go?

The poem continues for three more strophes in the same written pattern and is delivered in an identical vocal pattern. His voice is low and quiet; he appears nervous and shy. He reads quickly with no pauses. Some of the lines are mumbled and cannot be heard distinctly. The poet expressed little emotion in his delivery and exhibited no discernible stylistic device in his performance or his poem; it was a perfunctory reading. The questions the poem poses can be understood only as rhetorical; there are no objective answers to these questions implied by the speaker or expected from the audience. The poem had a confessional and desperate tone. The audience gave him an encouraging applause and his scores ranked his performance twelfth.

Next, a young Asian man reads. Jim has trouble pronouncing his name, which is Ben-Yah Hu. Several people laugh and yell, “Yah Hoo” and applaud as he comes to the microphone. Ben is dressed in blue jean overalls and a T-shirt, John Lennon-style spectacles, and shoulder-length hair. He tucks his hair behind his ears and tells us, “This one is titled ‘Veal.’” His poem is short, twelve lines written in rhymed couplets that he delivers in a quiet, sing-song voice, adhering to the meter of iambic pentameter. His is a poem about cunnilingus. The metaphor is thinly veiled as a “meal.” He has a
smile on his face throughout the reading that keys the performance as humorous. He
appears shy and somewhat embarrassed. He reads with one arm folded behind his back
and holds the folder that contains his printed poem in the other. He is on and off the
stage in less than twenty seconds. He shrugs his shoulders as he finishes as if to say,
“that’s it,” and leaves the stage to moderate applause. He ranks ninth.

Next up is John. He steps up to the microphone with no introduction to his
poem, clears his throat, says the title—“Blows, and Blows, and Blows”—then begins to
read from the page. It’s an animated reading, but he never looks up from the page. He
reads quickly and stresses certain words.

A little deadness on the floor
And white nose in the aluminum can
A wonder of spit and decimation
culture fucks and fucks
Little wads and >spiders and little knots of toxic dildos
and Bilbo Baggins sucking comdrops<
And iron fingers reaching
And a plump nostril in gray napkins
A feverish drop from a sack
Or a mouth or a skin-cell grape
Or this mouth filled with mud and ass
And the ashes of a great shadow door with glass
Pink-holed, their circular dust balls and hands
>With empty breath movies moving steam and thin legs
that wear green stocking light<
And the go
The go receives dead mother’s milking
in jig-like pool halls on Saturday night
Before whiskey, and beer, and white candle staples
and wire heads and mouse chirping chirping
Blowing fellows’ shoes
And idioms of juice-sweat
And decayed bones and wet-skinned monkeys
In a yellow book already dead . . .
And the moon is a dull glowing skull
And the cat is a friend gone sane . . .
But weird
Very weird I think
But never wondering too long or too far
But curious and alive in the shadows his friends
And I can wait for all the dumb world
Somber as a fish-eye and a rainy North Texas farm
Somber as a cat lying cripple without her jungle
Without paperflowers twisted and bent and crayon fucks
And crayon fucks your eyes and fingers and legs
That show charcoal blossom holes
Alone as a bird, alone as a radio in desert and storm
Alone as a Mexican mother in an American city
And alone, is alone, is . . .a . . .lone.

The host comes up during the applause and says, “You got to stop doin’ them drugs, boy!” The audience laughs. During John’s reading, the audience paid close attention. Most people were smiling and listening intently; it is as though they were waiting for something, and no one made a sound except a few quiet chuckles. It seemed the audience was not sure whether the poem was supposed to be understood as funny or serious, angry or sad, and it was intent on figuring out which. The poem is a series of abstract and disconnected images. The verbal cues were confusing or, at best, ambiguous; there was no one clear meaning provided. He never looked up from the page except when he said the final word of the poem, and the look in his face then suggested the poem was painful and made him sad. He nodded his head shyly, a little embarrassed, and then left the stage. During the performance, Jim was the only person who laughed out loud; he seemed to enjoy the performance. As the scores were read, Jim and several audience members booed the judges. Jim says, “That poem was better than that, John. Don’t worry about it.” The audience laughs. After he recorded the scores Jim spent an extra minute, before introducing the next poet, to encourage the audience to boo the judges if it did not agree with the scores. He explained that at the slam the poets are “revered” and the judges are “supposed to catch hell.” The regulars are aware of John’s political bent and confrontational attitude, but the general audience, including the judges, doesn’t share this background information, and therefore,
appreciated his performance less. His scores ranked his performance lowest of the evening. There is a lot of conversation among the audience members after John’s reading, which is interrupted by cheers and whistles as the next poet is introduced.

D.W., a popular poet and a regular at the Baton Rouge slam, is called to the stage. He is forty-eight years old, wears starched khaki shorts, a starched shirt, and sports a ponytail. He asks if there are any amateur astronomers in the audience. Three or four people respond affirmatively. D.W. goes on in his introduction to explain how light pollution from the city has changed our ability to see the stars clearly. He explains how his initial anger at this phenomenon has turned to sadness and inspired the poem he is going to perform. D.W. usually performs from memory, but this is a new poem that he has only partially memorized. He refers to the written page held in his left hand while his other hand is placed in his pocket. The poem is a three-minute piece that decries how the city lights are drowning out the starlight to the point that one day we won’t be able to see the stars at all. “The Sky I Once Knew” is the title of the poem, and it is written in three-line stanzas with a consistent rhyme scheme where the first two lines in each stanza end rhyme and all of the third lines share an end rhyme. D.W. is partial to rhyming poems: most of his poems have clear end rhymes. He makes little obvious attempt to naturalize the meter during his performance, and the delivery is made in a singsong manner. The poem is sad, nostalgic and sentimental, and is read emphasizing the iambic meter. In this poem the rhyme and meter are its most prominent features. The language is simple and straightforward. Even though several people in the audience find the poem amateurish, especially the table of graduate students and D.W. himself, who describes the poem as “elementary,” the judges’ scores are high. He finishes in third place this evening.
After D.W.'s performance, Julie reads a poem. Julie is a regular also. She is in her early twenties. She dresses in a flower-print cotton dress and a muslin blouse. She is wearing wire-rimmed glasses. In her introduction, she tells the audience that she has never read the poem before. She has a soft voice, and the host asks her to move closer to the mike. She does, but it is still difficult to hear most of her introduction. She begins to read from the page a poem about a young woman who has never known love. Much of it is inaudible and the audience strains to hear. It is read with a sad tone, and it is clear the poem has sentimental value for Julie as she seems about to cry during her reading. The poem is a free-verse narrative that recounts in third person the description of a young woman sleeping and imagines what she must be dreaming. The audience is silent during her reading, and it responded with a long and loud applause at the end. She ranks fourth with this performance.

Diana, a middle-aged woman, a regular who teaches in the English department at LSU, dedicates her poem to "all those women you see at Hobby Lobby." It is entitled, "Crewel Work." She explains in her introduction what "crewel" is, and the play on the word, "cruel." The poem is a third-person narrative about an aging woman, using her endless pursuit of hobbies as a means to satisfy her desire.

Every stitch a chain stitch
Suturing the place she stores desire. . .

Every stitch a whip stitch
Keeping her within the lines.

Diana reads the poem from a large black binder full of typed poems. Her reading is delivered monotonously; every line is delivered with the same pitch and tone. The poem is keyed as sentimental and sad by her tone of voice. It is a perfunctory reading of the written work with little stylistic device in the performance and no variation in the tone of delivery. The language of the poem, however, is witty and has a
sophisticated wordplay. There is emphasis on alliteration and assonance in the poem, and the extended metaphor is craftily employed. The audience responds with a moderate applause. She ranks sixth.

Buzz is up next. He explains, “My mistake earlier was designed ‘cause I didn’t want y’all to hear that poem yet cause I’m doing it at the All Star Grand Slam,” and he announces the date and time of that slam. This performance is a poem he calls, “The Spiritual Vandal”; it is a satire about preachers who dictate morals and values, and who thereby steal “creativeness”:

With two fingers I can extinguish your soul like the flames of a candle Cause I am the spiritual vandal Tripping my words across your inner being Giving you my prophecy Like Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden Moses leading his people to freedom.

Buzz emphasizes the rhythm and rhyme of this piece. He is less nervous now and is working the audience, more confidently and energetically. He holds the microphone in his right hand and with his left gestures wildly. He performs the poem from memory, and the delivery of the poem is angry and passionate. It is clear that the addressee of the poem is not this audience. The performance is without breaks this time, and the audience gives a long applause. He uses just over two minutes to deliver the poem and ties for second place with this performance.

Next, Eve reads. She ties for second place with Buzz with her performance. The poem is called, “The Realist Credo: What I Believe.” She explains in her introduction how the poem was written while she was in divinity school, where students were required to write a credo. She also states that it is an old poem that she rewrote today for the slam. She says, “I don’t really know if it is even a poem, but it was fun to
write.” She tells us that the poem was written while she was in a cynical mood. She pauses, and then begins reading the two-page poem:

I believe in words
I believe in the sacramentality
Of every poem, story, essay, screenplay and conversation
That points to something beyond itself
Even when its meaning is beyond me.

Eve keeps the attention of the audience as she reads from the page in a style of delivery that emphasizes the rhythm of the piece. The audience laughs throughout the first two minutes of the piece, particularly at several lines like “I believe music will save my life. I believe musicians will kill me.” The pattern of the poem and the pitch of her voice point out the contrasts between the humorous and the more serious beliefs. The poem, in terms of language use and construction, is a relatively simple listing of her beliefs, one after another, which lasts almost four minutes. The audience applauds long, loud, and vocally at the conclusion of her poem.

Next up is Beth’s daughter. In her early twenties, she works in the computer industry. Her poem is about a computer program that gives her fits. She explains that the poem requires a short computer literacy lesson to understand, and she goes on to provide the description of the three main terms she uses that we must be familiar with. Her explanation is a bit confusing, but it is brief. She reads the title, “The Sequel: For The Limited Audience Of Computer Geeks Who Also Read Poetry.” She pauses, then she begins her performance. The poem is like a limerick, and she reads at a fast pace. She stands with one arm behind her back and reads from the typed page. The poem lasts thirty seconds, and it scores seventh. The poem is witty and light – its strongest features are its fanciful play on words, its rhyme, assonance and alliteration. For example, one line goes, “I’m stewing and the information is screwing with my right foot...
on the table but I’m stable and I’m able.” The audience enjoys the poem and laughs loudly; she gets a long and loud applause when she finishes. The graduate students boo the judges when the scores are read.

The last poet to read is one of the late-arriving graduate students, Kathryn. She is in her late twenties. She gives a brief introduction, explaining that the poem is part of a series she has written about kitchen gadgets, and which was written in collaboration with a painter: “It was inspired by a tag found for a band saw saying, ‘this tool is not a murder device.’ It’s about a cheese grater.” She begins to read from the page:

Perched on the edge of one plateau of Portrero Hill
    is a tiny restaurant
Two graters
We offered up Pecorino cut from the wheel
    like salvation
Mashed together the contraption and the cheese
All the way to the rind.

The poem uses the metaphor of the grater to describe her encounter with a man for whom she felt nothing but sexual attraction. She reads the poem like a narrative, looking up at her audience as though talking in a coded language about her sexual thoughts, sharing them with an innocent voice and ironic tone. The poem is full of sentiment. The audience understands the sexual innuendo in the poem and appreciates it; several audience members, especially the other graduate students at her table applaud long, loudly, and vocally. She ranks fifth.

After the scores for Kathryn are tallied, Jim announces a five-minute break to give himself and the scorekeeper, who is Diana’s husband, time to tabulate the scores to see who has won. The conversations among audience members resume. The winners are figured within a few seconds and then Jim begins to move around the room to visit different tables and converse. After approximately ten minutes, Jim moves back to the
stage to announce the winners. Jim leads the audience in applause for the poets, the judges, and the wait staff. Everyone is reminded of the date of the next open slam and then Jim leaves the stage as the musician begins to set up for his show. About half the audience holds conversations as the other half lines up to pay tabs at the bar. In less than half an hour all but one couple has left, as a musician with a guitar sits down and begins to play.

Of the three open slams, this first open had the largest number of poets competing. The poets who ranked in the top nine places were all regulars. Only one of the last five finishers was a regular, John, and he finished last. The two poets who had never been to a slam before and the brother and sister who only come occasionally finished in the last five also. Only two of the fourteen poets performed their poetry from memory on this night, and they both finished in the top four places. Beth, who had the highest-ranking performance, and Eve, who tied for second, read their poems from the written page. Both reading performances were well done in terms of their maintaining a strong connection with the audience. Both of these poems also were humorous. It is interesting to note that the other two winning performances, by D.W. and Buzz, who both performed from memory, along with the majority of the remaining performances that were read, were based on more serious themes. Also, many of the poems were shorter than the three minutes allowed; only twelve minutes of the fifty-two minute show were consumed by the actual performances.

The performances of the target poets in this slam were different in many respects. Beth won first place with a poem that was funny, easily accessible, witty, narrative in style, and well read. Roy, who finished seventh, gave a perfunctory reading of a rather abstract poem. Even though John, who finished last, gave a more animated
reading of a similarly abstract poem, he fared worst, perhaps because the audience perceived the poem as confrontational and/or vulgar.

This slam started out slowly; the goat performance went badly and then the first three performers in the competition received low scores. Beth was the fourth performer and she ranked highest of the evening. After Beth, the next three poets scored among the lowest of the evening. The last seven performers, however, finished in the middle of the rankings or higher. Only one of the top finishers in this slam read early in the order. The other three read nearer the end of the slam.

None of the judges were poets even though poets accompanied three of them. There were three female and two male judges. Except for the cases of John's performance, which finished last, and Beth's daughter who finished sixth, the audience did not appear to disagree radically with the scoring by the judges on this night. In John's performance the judges were not able to appreciate or recognize the key of the performance as well as the regular audience, and in the other case, members of the general audience thought the scores should have been higher.

The total event time in this slam was one hour and fifty-two minutes. A total of twelve minutes was spent on the performance of poetry. Even though many poets gave short introductions or no introduction at all, a total of six minutes was spent on introductions. The amount of time the host was on stage between performances, and for opening and closing remarks, totaled thirty-four minutes.

The host was on stage almost twice as long as the poets were in the show proper. With the exception of the five humorous poems, most of the laughter recorded was during the time the host was on stage. In this slam the host spent seven and one-half minutes on the spiel and the introductions of the judges, the scorekeeper, and the
sacrificial goat. The remaining twenty-six minutes of the host’s stage time was spent in the intervals between performances where the scores were tabulated and recorded. Jim averaged approximately sixty seconds between performances. Typically, Jim came up to the stage between each performance and made some comment about the poet or the performance while the judges prepared their scores. Then he called for the scores and led the applause while announcing the scores to the audience and the scorekeeper.

While the scorekeeper added the scores, Jim usually made further comments about the judging or the poet, or he used this time to make announcements of upcoming events. In most cases the scorekeeper would yell out the total score at some break in Jim’s remarks, and then Jim would record the score in the book and introduce the next poet.

The shortest amount of time Jim spent between performances was forty-five seconds; the longest time he spent was just over two minutes. Another notable aspect of the host’s performance was the number of introductions he performed. Of the twenty-five people in attendance, the host introduced—usually with some background information—twenty people including the judges, each of the poets, and the sacrificial goat. The role of the host from this perspective could be considered as serving a communal function, creating a more personal connection among participants, in addition to its more practical function of providing humor and continuity between performances.

One hour of the event time, including before the show and after, as well as the break between the end of the performances and the announcement of the winners, was consumed by conversations among participants when no one was on stage. In other words, well over half the time was spent in the communal aspects of the event beyond the performance. If we count the time the host was on stage as communal time,
communal aspects of the event consumed three-quarters of the event time. At any rate, little over one-quarter of the total event time was dedicated to the performances of the poets.

There were approximately twenty-five people in attendance at this slam. Nearly everyone was involved in some role in the event as a judge, poet, or friend of one of the poets. Also notable on this night was the range of the participant's ages. High school students to graduate students participated in the event and at least eight members were over forty.

The Second Open Slam

At 7:30 there are five poets and three judges. Jazz is playing low on the house sound system in the background. There are a total of twelve people seated, and the organizers are waiting for latecomers to arrive. Already seated is Roy's family (minus his wife) at their usual table near the kitchen at the end of the stage. Buzz, along with his wife and two friends who are judging as a team with one score, are seated next to Roy's family at the table in front of stage center. The other five people, including two judges, are seated in two booths; two of these are regulars, the other three are new, including two first-time performers. A young African-American man comes in, signs the book, and sits at a table by himself. All the patrons are talking, ordering food and drinks. Beth is sitting in the booth closest to the bar by herself. A lone, middle-aged woman comes in. Her name is Diane. The host asks her to judge, and Jim introduces her to Beth. The woman joins Beth in the first booth. The host begins to set up the microphone on stage. At eight o'clock the host greets everyone and begins the spiel.

Buzz has shown interest in creating and hosting his own slam, so Jim has arranged for Buzz to host the next two slams at M's. This night is his first time to host
a slam, and he is excited about his debut as MC and, has prepared in advance for it. Jim is in the audience; he has joined Beth and the woman who came in late. Jim is the scorekeeper tonight. Jim and Buzz have known each other for about a year. Buzz wants to start his own slam in another part of town and Jim is letting him get the feel of hosting at M's. Buzz has studied his introduction and performs parts of it from memory:

Get ready to hear the word made flesh
The word made fresh and alive
Poetry comes to life on this stage,
Through this mike

He is working hard to create an exciting atmosphere, but there are twelve people in the audience and only four of them are newcomers. The attendance for this slam is one of the lowest in months; only seven poets have signed up to read, and two of these are Buzz and Jim. The regulars are trying to support Buzz in his effort to enliven the small audience, and there is a sense that the enthusiasm is a bit forced. Buzz's wife and their two friends, seated at the table in front of the mike, are especially vocal, along with Monica and Jim.

The judges are introduced. Buzz has asked each of the judges a question during their interview, and he introduces them using their replies. All the judges are regulars except one: the woman who came late. D.W., who is not reading tonight and has agreed to judge, was asked whether he wore boxers or briefs and replied that it "depends on how I feel that day." Julie, who read and also qualified along with D.W. for the grand slam in the first open, is judging; Buzz had asked her which Spice Girl she liked best and she replied, "The spunky one, whatever her name is." (The "Spice Girls" are a well-known pop musical group from England, especially popular among adolescents.) Then, Terry, Julie's friend, was asked how he felt about cross-urinal conversation and
whether one should make eye contact during such conversation. Terry replied that one
shouldn’t. Diane was introduced as the woman who claimed to be Fanny Brice in a
previous life. D.W. is sitting at the bar, and Monica is behind the bar. Monica decides
to read and goes on to the stage to sign the book. The host calls the goat to the
microphone. Roy did not want to read in the competition tonight, but he agrees to
perform the goat poem.

Roy is asked by someone in the audience, “Where is your wife?” as he walks up
to the stage. Roy explains, “She’s in the hospital but she’s doing fine. She’s coming
home tomorrow.” Roy’s wife has had a heart attack over the weekend. Monica says
from the audience, “Oh my God... tell her hi and tell her we miss her.” Roy always
comes to the slams with his wife, and it is unusual to see him without her.

Roy adjusts the mike and, without an introduction, begins to read from a single
typed page in a serious tone. The poem is a series of surreal images like those of a
nightmare that lead up to this end:

Desperate and dear thing.
She came crawling out of the grave
Creeping, other versions to save,
She ripped and tore and clawed her way
From a sleeping Adam’s thigh.

The audience listens intently to Roy’s performance. Roy leaves the stage to a long,
loud, and vocal applause. This poem was similar to the poem Roy read at the first open
in that it was a series of images like a dream sequence, but it was not as abstract. This
poem was a series of images that described metaphorically his wife’s heart attack. Roy
read the poem expressing more emotion than usual; it was an intimate, vivid, and
moving account that he appeared to feel deeply.
The host comes back up and asks for scores. He has trouble adjusting the microphone. Jim, the regular host, comes up to the stage and shows Buzz how the microphone stand is adjusted. Buzz has trouble with the microphone stand adjustment all night, but this is the only time Jim came on-stage to help. Buzz calls for scores. The scores are high and rank Roy fourth highest of the evening.

The target poets for this slam are Liz, a newcomer who finished in first place, John, who places fifth, and Jason, who finishes in last place. Buzz introduces John, Roy’s son, and calls him up to read. John reads a poem similar to the poem he read in the first open slam in that it is abstract, but it differs from his earlier performance in other respects. He begins the poem without introduction except to announce the title, “Worn.”

Waters and chains, waters and chains
The brown hair of feminine regal
And that’s what she is, water and chains.
And the chains seem to be more important
than the jewelry seems to be more important
than the hair, the skin, the teeth, the body, and the breast.
And why do you breathe as a magnificent snake
With curling majestic blossoms
Incensed like vanilla and butterscotch?
You degrade yourself as an object
To obtain an object making the subject seem less real
More so fabricated and dead.
Dead like scavenger carrion.
And here we see who you really could be
Your body, a sweet milky body dying
Your hair balding, your skin thinning, your teeth decaying, your body whimpering,
your breasts sagging.
But a man, a man might give all the pathetic world
This you are certain of.
You could make the most intelligent of men stutter and fumble his words.
You could make the man go mad and crash furniture across the room in early night after

gin and cigarettes and hopeless agony.
You could make the man go to the bottle and take to the gun.
But you, dear, at times seem nothing more than water and chains

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Yet I'd scrape dirt from your feet and calmly collect it into a dirty bowl
And kneel silently and pray
Because women are death, torture, agony, and life
Pure life bursting through the veins of human misery
Women let us know that we are human, man, mortal.

John read this poem with a serious tone and was deliberate in his delivery. This poem also has a perceived relation to John's mother's heart attack. The audience responds with a long applause. John's attitude was less harsh than usual. The poem seems to be in praise of his mother. Because most of the judges are regulars and know Roy's family, the poem is especially well-received. Buzz comes to the microphone and says, "All you feminists prepare your scores." He apparently found the poem offensive toward women in contrast to the response of the audience and judges. The audience agrees with the high scores as they are announced and responds with loud and vocal applause. John scores one tenth of a point above his father's score in the goat performance.

Buzz says, "This next poet is the greatest poet in the world, in my opinion. I'm going next." The poem is called "Pleasantries." It begins, "How am I?" It is a rant about those people who ask, "How are you?" as a way of opening the door to complain about how they are. Buzz gets eight lines into the poem he is performing from memory before he loses his place. His wife sitting nearby makes an inaudible comment, then Buzz responds to her: "You're messing me up!" They both laugh and he continues. He is less energetic and more reserved in the remainder of the performance. The audience laughs awkwardly at some of the lines, but Buzz's momentum is lost and he knows it.

The poems ends with:

   How am I?
   I'm sick of you telling me all your problems
   The next time I ask you how you are<
   Just smile politely

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Say ‘fine thanks’
And be on your way... 
I will do the same.

The audience responds with a short applause except for Buzz’s wife who applauds long, loudly, and vocally. Buzz calls for his scores. His wife gives the highest score, which is dropped. He ranks sixth of the night’s eight competitors.

An African-American poet in his early twenties is called up next. He introduces himself and adjusts the mike. He says, “Everybody ready? Judges?” The audience laughs and he begins to read. The title of the poem is “Mask.” It is a short narrative poem about feigned actions and appearances and how they can shape who we are. It is read in a conversational style with little animation and emphasis on the rhyme. Read from the page, it ends with the lines:

Masks we wear every day, in every way
Trying to be something I don’t need to be
Finally I rise
To look into the mirror
And there I see
Someone I do not recognize
To be me.

The audience gives him a short applause. This is the first time this young man has read in public. The poem has simple, straightforward language, and a narrative style. His performance ranks second to last.

The host introduces the next poet, Jason. This is the first time Jason has read his poetry in public. The poem is called “Mechanical Fate.” He comes to the stage and begins to read one step before he arrives at the microphone. Jason appears nervous as he reads quietly and quickly from a single typed page without emotion:

Legs of titanium joy
Muscle for those who have none
Chink chink chink chink
He walks, no runs down the aisle

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The mechanical clink clink clink clink
Broad and smiling his exuberant face
Contradicts his physical stature
Or so the shriveled mind decides and watches
Poor little thing
Chink chink chink chink, on a young mind
Taught only to know pity
Can know only the shackles of sadness
Strong strong strong strong
Nothing for titanium legs
Only a joy so holy, so innocent,
It can only exist in childhood.
Strength as strong as any
Long fibers and muscle,
Strength
Built on artificial bones
Upholding the weight of life
Blissful and blithe
(Molding) the muscles to his smile
Conquers the depravity of fate
For a little while,
With a chink chink chink chink.

Jason reads from the page without looking up. This poem also uses a straightforward, simple language. He reads the poem with a serious tone and no introduction. The word “maling” seems to be a mispronunciation of the word “molding.” The audience listened quietly and they recognize his effort with a short applause. His scores are the lowest of the evening.

Monica reads next. Buzz introduces her as “The Divine Miss M.” She walks slowly to the microphone and, once there, she takes fifteen seconds to adjust one of her bra straps. She tells the audience how the musician who is playing after the slam inspired this poem. “This poem is a haiku [which she pronounces “hi—Q”]; that’s all I ever have time to write. It’s about the blues”:

Is it our passion
For the feel-good... or the pain
Makes us... love... the blues?
Marion reads the poem from a typed page, slowly. She reads the poem in a serious tone and stands quietly after finishing it for a few seconds before she bows and leaves the stage. The audience responds with applause that is long, loud, and vocal. Her scores rank her fourth.

Buzz introduces another “first-timer.” Liz comes to the mike, opens her journal to a marked page, and says the title of the poem, “This Boy Down South Who Had No Self-Control.” She begins to read from the page the handwritten poem:

Someone almost got in tonight
Of all the many places you can kiss a hand
He chose the rough spot
And the hand boldly seceded
from the authority of the determined mind
And the militant body gave permission
Then the lips rebelled and said
‘If hand can be kissed
Then we should not be deprived.’
And audaciously took his henchmen
Both mouth and tongue
The mucus overwhelmed the judgment of the traitorous arm
the arm, of all regions
Who never gave the body a moment’s worry
Joined the union because it was bored.
The back was divided in the upper half
The angular shoulder blades
and the calligraphy spine
Grew too considerate of the fanaticism
Of the renegade parts
Who cried out moistly
‘She has denied us too long
We are fleshy states alone
In an abundant land deserving of this.’
But that other back,
Being too proximal to that neglected chest
The withered part
To perceive the benefits of loyalty
And as she was saddened
By the segregation of the lower back
Who did it simply out of spite
Stayed, the breasts were taken captive
The stomach surrendered next
The thighs, impatient, and always partial
to the side that was winning, yielded
and finally she
The militant and beautiful tyrant
Into whose dark and warm void
The instigator of the pitiless civil war denied access
She, who contains secrets
The other parts will never know
[pause for microphone problem]
>She, who had humbled, severed, and honored men
She, who had been humbled, severed, and honored
Asked, with quivering breath, the opinion of the heart
To which the heart replied,
‘No one comes to the body except through me.’
Thus it was decided the South rose victorious.
Someone almost got in tonight
With nothing to his credit
Except he knew how to kiss a rough spot
The body was reunited
The heart absolved them all
Wishing you the indulgent and carnal parts united with
Let the flesh betray out of loving
Never pleasure<
Never, ever, pleasure.

Liz appeared extremely nervous; she read the entire poem so rapidly that it was difficult to recognize the line breaks. As she began to read, the microphone started to fall slowly toward the floor. Buzz crouched on to the stage and grabbed the end of the arm holding the microphone. As he pushed the arm down on the one end, the microphone on the other end rose to Liz’s mouth then eyes. She grabbed the microphone with one hand and lost her place in the reading briefly, then let go the microphone to find her place again. The microphone continued to drop very slowly during her performance. She read even faster in order to finish before she had to stop again to adjust the microphone. She was distracted by the microphone, but concentrated on her reading. With her voice she tried to read the poem in a conversational fashion; she changed her voice slightly when she quoted the different body parts speaking and changed her tone from frustrated to adamant to relieved at the
end. The poem, even though read very rapidly, was read well in terms of expressive and stylistic variation.

This narrative poem uses the extended metaphor of the Civil War in a light, playful way on the surface. Underneath, the poem explores the struggle of an individual's body, heart, and mind. The poem is provocative and at the same time the speaker is troubled and confused; this contrast is played till the end where the speaker of the poem makes a moral choice.

Liz was wearing a long skirt and a short top with an unbuttoned light blouse over the top. She has a pierced navel that shows in the one-inch space between skirt and top. As Buzz comes back up he suggests that she wear a bigger ring in her navel so it will show more. Liz appears embarrassed and a little offended. Buzz quickly calls for scores. Despite the problems of a very fast rendering of the written work and the awkwardness at the microphone, Liz receives a perfect score: thirty points.

Jim is introduced next. He spends thirty seconds explaining how his nickname and his first name have caused him problems as he has gotten older. He dedicates the poem to people with nicknames. The title of the poem is "The Understudy." He explains that having the two names in his case is like having a split personality. He has long hair, is in his late forties, and is wearing jeans and boots. His shirttail is un-tucked. After his introduction he pauses, and begins to read from a printed page:

I've been talking, lately
To the bad boy in me
The problem is I like him.
He sees the lighter side of things...
People, possibilities...

The poem goes on to describe the hidden "bad boy." He reads the poem with emphasis on certain words, strategic pauses, and a modulated delivery. He leaves the
stage to a long and loud applause. His scores are high, and he finishes ranked in a tie for second, with the next and last performer of the night, Beth.

Buzz introduces Beth as “indisputably, immortally entrenched as Baton Rouge’s number one slam poet.” Beth begins with an introduction: “This is a poem about divorce. It’s not really a slam poem but I’m gonna read it anyway.” Beth qualified for the grand slam in the first open and will be disqualified tonight if she places in the top four; she often reads poems that are more serious when she is not competing for a spot in the grand slam. She begins reading from a typed page. It is a moving poem about a husband and wife sitting with lawyers to dispute a property settlement. The piece in dispute is a silver ice bucket bought by the couple’s daughter as a birthday present to the mother. The poem subtly describes the tension of this emotionally charged situation. The poem is relatively short in relation to her usual poems (about one minute versus three minutes) and well-read in a serious and expressive manner. The audience applauds loudly and cheers as she finishes and leaves the stage. She places second, tying with Jim.

The winners are announced at 8:40. Monica comes up to introduce the musician as she (the musician) is setting up to play. Buzz comes back up to announce the winners and thank the slam participants. When Buzz leaves the stage, people begin to mill around the room, pay their tabs, and visit each other, commenting on the performances. The conversations are loud and lively. All but four patrons leave before the music starts at 9:00.

Because Beth was disqualified, John was included in the top four finishers (even though he failed to attend the grand slam later). Only three of these eight poets did not qualify for the grand slam on this night: two of the three new poets and Buzz. The
show proper lasted for a little over thirty minutes. The audience was small and all the judges, except one, were regulars—and three of the regulars were poets—which is very unusual. The scores were higher, in general, than they typically are in an open slam. The higher scores can be attributed to the fact that poets and regulars were acting as judges because of the smaller turnout; regulars and poets tend to be more generous in their scoring than most newcomers.

Several poets who attended the first open slam were in attendance at this slam as well, including John, Roy, D.W., Beth, Buzz, Julie, and Jim. D.W. did not come to perform in this slam, but agreed to judge. Roy also had not planned to read but agreed to perform the goat poem. John did plan to read in this open since he finished poorly in the first slam, and he fared much better in this slam, finishing in the top rankings. Beth also read again in this slam despite her first place finish in the first open. However, Beth chose to read a poem in this slam that she did not consider a “slam poem” since she wasn’t concerned with winning. Jim read only because there were so few poets, as did Buzz. Only Buzz performed from memory during this slam and he scored low due to a break in his performance. Julie did not read in this slam, but one of her friends who came with her was asked to judge.

Three of the eight poets who performed this night were newcomers and had never read their poems in public before. Liz finished first with a perfect score even though she had trouble during her reading with nervousness and the microphone. The other two newcomers, the African-American poet and Jason finished seventh and eighth respectively.

All of the poets who finished in the top of the rankings read in the bottom half of the reading order with the exception of John who read first. It is notable that John’s
performance tonight, which was as abstract as his previous performance, scored better in this slam. I believe his higher scores can be attributed to the fact that regulars, who are more familiar with John and his style of performance, were judging; also, this poem was more clearly keyed in terms of its intended meaning. Most of the audience understood the poem to be referencing his relationship with mother and his feelings of sadness and confusion about her life-threatening condition.

The target poets in this slam offered a variety of styles in their writing and in their performances. Liz, who finished first, had many problems in her performance despite her perfect score. Her reading was done well in terms of modulating her delivery, embodying different voices within her text, and maintaining a connection with the audience. However, because of nervousness and the unfortunate situation with the drooping microphone, she read quickly and it was difficult to hear some parts of her poem. Evidently, the stylistic characteristics of her poem were appreciated enough to counter the shortcomings in her delivery. The extended metaphor of the war between the North and South to portray the conflicting emotions of the heart, body, and mind when confronted with passion, was witty, subtly humorous, and, at the same time, serious. Her language in the poem was relatively sophisticated, and the poem was provocative and sensual. As well, the moral position presented affirmed the inappropriateness of sex without love, an idea the judges and audience may have appreciated.

John finished fifth in this slam, and the combination of the improved keying of this performance along with scoring by judges who are familiar with his style, were the major factors that I believe contributed to his better finish in this slam. That John read first and that he achieved scores this high are further evidence of his success. Jason on
the other hand gave a perfunctory and monotonous reading of a poem that used a simple and straightforward language. Jason's connection with the audience was poor due to his nervousness and lack of eye contact.

The most pronounced feature of the event field of this slam was its low attendance. It was difficult to find enough people to satisfy all the roles required in the event; several people performed more than one role including Jim, who was the scorekeeper and a performer, Buzz, who hosted and performed, and Monica, who tended bar and performed. Because of the low attendance, the slam started late to allow more time for latecomers. The actual time for the show was the lowest of the four slams, accounting for a total of thirty-two minutes of the two-hour event. Less than nine minutes were spent on poetry performances, and less than three minutes were spent on introductions by the poets. The time the host was on-stage accounted for twenty-one minutes. Since it was his first time hosting, the host spent extra time addressing problems with the microphone or correcting scoring errors.

Even though many people supported Buzz's performance of the role of host, there were many differences between the way the role was performed by a novice that interrupted the continuity of the slam and weakened the communal function of the host. In contrast to Jim's hosting in the first open, Buzz gave little personal background information in his introductions of the judges and the poets. He introduced the judges according to their reply to arbitrary questions designed to be humorous regardless of their answer, and introduced the poets only by their names. Between the performances Buzz did not make comments that served to allow the judges time to prepare their scores, and consequently, found himself waiting awkwardly for the judges. When the scores were called to the audience and scorekeeper, Buzz, because he was unfamiliar
with the necessity to allow the scorekeeper some time to tabulate the scores, found himself waiting again for the totaled score. Several times Buzz introduced the next poet before the score was tallied and had to backtrack to record the score in the logbook.

For the most part, the audience appeared to agree with the judges’ scoring. There was no booing of the judges recorded in this event. At times the audience was quiet in response to the judges’ scores, suggesting that the scores were too high, but there were no indications that they thought the scores too low.

The communal nature of the slam can be important for some participants. Beyond the fact that well over three-quarters of the event time was spent in communication between and among the participants when no one was on stage, Roy and his son John attended this slam together even though Roy’s wife, John’s mother, was in the hospital recovering from by-pass surgery. This is testament to the value of the slam for this family, as well as the value of poetry to mediate feelings between these community members. Both poets read poems that had to do with their relationship to her, and both performances were among the best received of the evening. The concern of the other regular community members for her well being was manifest in their responses to the news of her surgery.

The Third Open Slam

By 7:15 p.m. the Café is starting to fill up. The judges all have been chosen. Roy’s wife joins the family again tonight. She had a triple by-pass heart surgery ten days previously. They are seated at their usual table with their son and daughter. Buzz is the host for this slam. David, who read in the first open, is working as a waiter tonight. Donald, in from Duson to perform tonight, is sitting at the bar. There are about thirty people by 7:30. The room is noisy with conversation and laughter. There are
seventeen regulars in the crowd, nine newcomers, and four people who have been to at least one slam. Four of the newcomers are performing tonight. Three other newcomers come in after all the judges have already been chosen. The other two newcomers are judging: a middle-aged couple who came with Sherry, who is reading tonight. They are seated in a booth. Three people are working as a team-judge; that is, they decide together on one score, which is done often at the more heavily attended slams to allow for more participation. Four female graduate students from LSU are together in a booth, and one of them has been chosen to judge. Another couple in their mid-thirties who have attended two or three slams also are judging, seated in a booth. Also judging as a team is the same couple who came with Buzz and his wife to the second open, where they also judged. They are seated with Buzz and his wife at the center-stage table close to the microphone again. The fifth judge is an African-American man in his early thirties who is typically a waiter at the slams, but has taken off the night to be an audience member; it is his birthday.

The crowd gets quiet as Buzz steps up to the microphone to give the spiel. Buzz has worked on a mock religious theme for hosting this evening’s slam. He begins the spiel like a performance; in a serious tone he begins:

Welcome tonight. . . . . .
To the church of the poetry slam at M’s Fine and Mellow Café.
I will be reading to you from the book.
[He opens the log-book]
Now, what we have this evening is a communion of sorts
Because each poet will come up on this stage
And leave a piece of his or her soul with you.
Five members,
   well actually five sets of members
of our congregation have been chosen to judge these poems on the divinity scale.
[The audience laughs as Jim yells out “Amen, Brother.”]
A “one” is a poem that has the mark of the beast.
A “ten” is a poem that can walk on water.
The audience laughs and applauds as Buzz breaks out of the performance and continues in a conversational tone with the introductions of the judges by their first names only.

Buzz finishes the spiel in just over three minutes and introduces Mitch, who was a member of the 1999 National Slam Team from Baton Rouge, and who is performing the goat poem tonight.

Mitch approaches the microphone with a glass of dark beer, sets it down on a table next to the microphone and says, "This is so bad I brought my beer." The poem is improvisational; Mitch explains that he did not bring a poem to read tonight but he agreed to do the goat poem and so has "thrown together" this "thing" that was inspired by a press release he read that day. He has brought the article tonight and it became the first part of a poem he created in the thirty minutes before the slam started. He begins to read in the character of its author, a member of the rock group Sonic Youth. After a minute of reading the press release, Mitch takes the words of the press release and begins to mix them with his own words as he continues to read. He is able to keep the tone of the press release, as it eventually becomes a poem of his own words and less of the press release, until finally it is only his words. It is difficult to tell where the press release words became Mitch's words. At the end of the performance, Buzz comes to the microphone and asks, "Can I get a witness?" Despite much loud laughter and applause from the audience, his scores will rank him three-tenths lower than any member of the regular competition. The poem was delivered in a mock serious tone of the band's leader who was portrayed as angry, vulgar, and someone who finished most of his sentences with "man." The band had suffered a theft of their van with all their musical equipment in it just before a major performance and began the complaint in the press release with, "We had a fucked up situation come down on us last night, man!"
The main features of the poem are its impromptu creation, the wit with which the poet assimilates the language of the press release, and its sarcasm. The judges are booed as the scores are called out. Even though the scores were relatively low, the performance adds more humor to the atmosphere as the slam continues with the regular competition.

First up in the competition proper is a man in his early twenties with glasses, a beard, and curly long hair, who decides to sit in a chair on stage. Buzz comes back up and adjusts the arm of the microphone and tightens the adjustment clamp to avoid a repeat of the drooping microphone experienced in the second open slam. Buzz finds him a chair, and the poet begins to read from a folded-over notebook after a forty-five second introduction. He snaps his fingers at the end of the repeated refrain: “Tick-tock, not a clock at all.” The poem is a philosophical treatise about how clocks are poor markers of time. The poem is read rapidly and features a vague rhyming pattern and meter. He performs in a monotone voice. Much of his performance is inaudible as he speaks with his mouth below the mike facing down at his notebook. His poem lasts just slightly longer than his introduction. The audience responds with a short applause. His scores rank him eighth of the twelve poets who read tonight.

Next up is Kathryn, one of the graduate students from the LSU English Department. She also read in the first open slam where she qualified for the grand slam. When she gets to the microphone, she begins by saying in a serious tone, “This is my call to the judges to give a perfect score to a formal poem, because this is a villanelle. It has no title.” She pauses and then continues in this serious tone, reading from a typed page:

Standing at the altar of Ben’s chest
My head up under his white T-shirt
There was nothing I could do
But pray and dance

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Sway jazz against the fruit of the Australian coast
Slow... and almost stopping
Standing at the altar of Ben’s chest.

The poem continues as she further describes this encounter as a moment of prayer. This poem is similar to the poem she read in the first open in that it describes a sexual encounter with a man and it was also professed to be in the form of a villanelle.

However, this poem differs in that it is written in praise of the encounter. The language of the poem is formal, and the performance of the poem is like a formal reading that emphasizes the structure of the poem. Her voice is soft and sultry. The audience gives her a long and loud applause. Buzz comes back to the microphone after she finishes and says again, “Can I get an Amen?” The audience laughs as he calls for scores. Her scores are high, and she ranks in a tie for third place in the competition.

After the scores are in, Monica announces from behind the bar that she would like to “address the teams of judges.” Everyone gets quiet as Buzz says, “Yes.” Without naming anyone in particular, she berates the team judges for being “wimps” and just “going along with the crowd” and applauds the other two judges for being strong and speaking their own minds. She also berates the audience for not booing the judges. The audience laughs while the middle-aged couple who are judging hold up a “1.7” on their scorecards as the man yells, “We are judging the owner of this place.” The audience laughs awkwardly as Jim yells out, “You better not mess with Monica. You’re asking for it.” To which Monica responds jokingly, “That’s it, you guys are paying triple.” This was a tense and awkward moment as no one was sure who was kidding until Monica’s last comment got the audience laughing again. The audience is still laughing as Buzz introduces the next poet to perform.
Sherry is invited up to the stage. She says hello to the audience and explains that she is glad to be back after a three month absence. Her poem begins, as she reads from the page:

Will we still make love for breakfast in two thousand ten?
I am the five hundred forty-ninth woman to have him
    his fifth wife
Walking on early spring school sands
We whisper plans of how we will spend
Our days... and nights
    until two thousand and beyond
With nine stories of the Holiday Inn as our backdrop
At Wal-Mart in Destin, we buy cheap gold bands
We exchange them in the presence
    of a gray-haired judge that we do not know
And a young witness named Marcy
Two hours later we uncork a bottle of champagne
    in the beige painted room
numbered three fifty-nine
A few flashes of light capture the moment
Why is the twentieth century dotted
    with past husbands and wives like cities on a map?
How about the twenty-first century
Will we get it right this time
Or will McDonald's go belly-up?

Sherry reads the poem as though conversing with the audience; however, she reads quickly. Sherry admitted in her interview that she is always extremely nervous on stage, which would explain her fast-paced reading. Her narrative poem is delivered with a serious tone. The poem is fictional, but no one, except for her two friends, who give her a score of ten, know that she is not married. The rest of the audience is not sure whether the poem is confessional or fictional. The audience gives her a moderate applause. Her other scores are much lower than the ten that is thrown out, and she finishes sixth in the competition.
John is called up next. He comes to the stage with his shoes off and in stocking feet. He reads from two typed pages, with no introduction, a cynical and sad poem about death; the sentiment of the poem is harsh. For example:

I could make no difference in this humanity
And this misery and torture
And this place of flattened skulls
    and raped women clutching their torn crotches
Struggling to find importance<
The thirty dollar suit
Acid cosmetics staring into question marks
    or an empty matchbox.

Despite the desperate tone of the poem, the delivery is passionate, loud, and deliberate. He uses the metaphor of the matchbox to represent a human. The poem is a more linear narrative than John usually performs. The audience responds with a moderate applause. The judges rank John’s performance fifth of the night.

Buzz’s wife is the scorekeeper tonight, and someone in the audience challenges her score for the previous poet. There is a pause in the competition while she refigures the scores and corrects the mistake. His wife has been slow to announce the totaled scores, and Buzz has twice already hassled her to go faster. Once the score is corrected, Buzz introduces the next poet.

This poet is a well-dressed young man in his early twenties. His name is Steve. This is his first time to perform at a slam. His poem, he explains, was written when a group of his friends started being committed to rehab programs: “I started seeing a darker world,” he says. The poem is written in long rhymed couplets that he reads quickly. He reads with little emotion other than sadness, and he reads so quickly and quietly that many lines are hard to understand. He stands with one hand in his pants pocket as he reads from the two typed pages that he holds trembling in his other hand. His reads in a monotone. The audience gives him a short applause. His scores are low.
and he finishes ninth. After the scores are announced, Buzz asks the poet if this is the first time he has ever read at a slam, and the poet replies that it is. Buzz says, “Good job, Steve,” and leads the crowd in a round of applause.

Roy is the next to read. The name of his poem is “Saturday Night.” This poem is more narratively based than many of Roy’s poems. It describes, with a sharply focused lens, a blues bar on a Saturday night. Roy is wearing a faded T-shirt, jeans and tennis shoes. He says the title of the poem and begins reading from the handwritten page in a loud, clear, rapid, and unemotional voice:

The moon is slumped sound
Spread out under the stars
crying tears of sorrow
Drinking vinegar from the big dipper
Smoking coke in the parking lot
“throw that cigarette lighter
under the car when you’re through with it”
Cover charge to get in
Long thin hallway
A small, seedy place
Bass player wearing sunglasses
Robert Johnson poses behind the band stand
Some guy standing at the bar
wearing a Sandman T-shirt
Very old black man sitting in the corner
wearing an aluminum hard hat and sunglasses
Might be Minnie the Mooch
Couple of city college girls smoking cigarettes
Spotlight’s on a huge black woman
Just in off the street
Wearing a skin tight red glitter
Drunk white boys sitting in the balcony
Smoking dope shouting out
“Back door man, back door man”
Table next to them a man
with polyester trousers on
His old lady there, um, pregnant
Big belly hanging out
With... standard uniform:
Beer in one hand cigarette in the other.
A band nobody ever heard of
From where nobody ever heard of
Not too bad, playing some strange licks
And that...red glitter big black woman
Belting out some slanted songs.
One man over there,
Maybe, um, a salesman in real life
Charcoal gray sport coat
Sleeves pulled up to the elbows
His wife with him, supernaturally thin
Um, she's in a sequined dress, high heel shoes
  eyeing the girl with the big brown eyes
over at the bar
Uh...Drinks are starting to taste like lighter fluid
Uh, nine in a shoulder holster
  hanging on a hat rack behind the bar
Drinking...gin by the band
White trash...blonde sitting in the balcony
  cut off jeans, pubic hair sticking out
Tattooed legs, floppy halter top
Whispering in some man's ear.
Just another Saturday night.

Roy's scores are very low except for the waiter who is judging, who gave the
performance a "10." The ten is thrown out and his other scores rank his performance
lowest in the competition. There are several boos directed toward the judges. The host
boos the judges as well.

Roy read the poem from two handwritten pages. The poem is a simple list of
images. There are lines that he stumbles on; he looks closer at the page as though the
writing is difficult to read and he uses vocalized pauses during his stumbles. Roy's
poem features sharp imagery, and simple, straightforward language. The crowd
responded to his performance with a moderate applause.

After the scores are totaled, several boos are heard, and Monica makes another
derogatory comment about the judges and says to Buzz, "Look at that. I got 'em
laughing again." The audience laughs and applauds as Buzz introduces the next
performer.
Vivian is invited to the stage. She is sitting in a booth with the three other Creative Writing graduate students. She is wearing a skirt that ends above her knees. She has long hair, and speaks in what she describes as "broken English." She gives the audience two options: (1) she has some of her early work in English, or (2) she can read a new poem she has just written in French. Several people in the audience yell, "French." She accepts and as she is readying the page, John yells from the audience, "Read something we might understand." She says, "We can talk about what it means when I finish," and she begins to read. The poem is four minutes and forty-five seconds long. She reads from the printed page with no obvious emotion. At first, the audience is still and listens intently. After two minutes of studious attention, many of the regulars begin to fidget in their seats. Donald gets off his stool at the bar in frustration after three and a half minutes. Several audience members are visibly losing interest—whispering, eating, or staring down at their tables. Someone makes a comment in the audience and several people laugh. When she finishes, the crowd responds with a moderate applause, and the host comes up just as someone reminds the poet that she has promised to translate the poem into English, or explain what it is about. Vivian goes back to the microphone and describes what the poem is about, part by part, for over three minutes. John asks after two minutes, "What about the Kafka and Blake parts? Those were names I heard." She explains that they are references she utilized to make allusion to waking up one day in rose thorns, and the next day in the claws of a cockroach.

Buzz goes to the microphone as she finishes the explanation and calls for scores. She receives two tens, one from her friend who is judging and another from Buzz's friends who are judging. An 8.7 from another judge gets thrown out as the low score,
along with one of the tens; she receives a 29.6 cumulative score that ties her for third place. No one mentions that her poem went longer than three minutes even though it was stated as a rule in the opening spiel.

Donald is the next poet called to the stage. As he begins to speak, John yells out, “Speak in French.” Donald replies, “I wouldn’t do justice to the language and you’d laugh at me.” Donald is comfortable on stage; he adjusts the microphone absentmindedly as he begins to speak. He explains that this poem was written for his brother and then goes on to say, “He used to say, ‘Dad always liked to take me fishing’ and I’d say, ‘Why’s that, Eric?’ and he’d say, ‘Cause I didn’t bitch and moan and whine like all you other little sons-of-bitches.’” The audience laughs and Donald begins “Channel Cat” after a five second pause:

You said that Dad always liked to take you fishing
You have the patience to sit... and wait... and watch...
Crowds of words didn’t chatter in your head
And the squawk of crows
Was enough to settle your need for language
Your landscape was rural and...

Donald breaks out of the poem, turns to the host, and says, “I’m forgetting the poem. Can I start over?” Several people in the crowd yell, “yes.” He begins again:

You said that Dad always liked to take you fishing
You have the patience to sit and wait and watch
Crowds of words didn’t chatter in your head
And the squawk of crows
Was enough to settle your need for landscape
Your landscape was rural
A Wyeth painting of Adam
And as natural as a barbed hook
But your challenge was observation
And from the fishing camp in upward look
You knew every girder and rivet in Bonner’s Bridge
The low drone of tires
biting into grates
Of bridge roadway
were notes in your margins

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of ring-worn cylinders and asbestos brakes
Raining down fibers and fumes >into your lungs
And the tart purple-black of the elderberry<
Growing wild in the shrub and brush behind you
Set upon your plate the small hard seed of being.
You spit-washed the world
And the lines of sunderdeath
That you and dad . . . cast out
Held a spell . . . into the river
Kind journey with the channel cat
A:hh . . . I remember you >telling me

how you used to close your eyes
And envision that whiskered leviathan< .h
coming up through the mud
And how you leapt up
expecting to hear a reel go screaming
and see a flash . . . of hands
Grab a pole to set the hook.
But there was only Dad’s bottle
falling from his hands
Mumbling to himself something about the war
And you settled back to watch rainbows
And things in the world float you by
On the film of oil from barge bilge water.
Being was enough for you
You had no apprenticeship
  in the shop of asking why
When evening settled out of light
Your play was the snapping of the fire
And that certain beauty of the stars
And . . . without a word you’d crawl into the bed
Of the old pick-up
And sleep . . . and dream
Of barges with their deep draft
Sucking the river under them
Revealing the slope of shore
The channel and a long wide throat
That swallows everything
The infinite gullet of a channel-cat
And you would [inaudible] the stern
In the sleepy hollow of your hard bed
And see in swirl:s and eddies of consciousness
The yellowing pages of years drift
Under bridge
And your children born and grandpa and grandma and dad
And mom and your beloved Uncle Carl
Wrapped into the Channel-Cat’s whiskers
And you would awaken one half-century later

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To the screaming reel of now
Feeling the swelling in your neck
And the oat cell cancer in your lungs.<
Oh Eric... the Channel-cat's rising
Hold tight now.
Hold tight.

Donald performed the entire poem from memory. This poem also lasted well over three minutes. The audience applauded long, loudly, and vocally. His tone was serious throughout the performance and he spoke with much emotion, using pauses throughout to emphasize certain words and phrases. He gestured with his hands and arms constantly and changed his speed of delivery depending on the actions described in the poem. The poem features metaphor, vivid imagery, and is full of sentiment. The audience listened in rapt attention and there seemed to be no lessening of his or the audience's attention and focus after his initial break in the performance. He scored "10" from four of the five judges and ranked first.

Next up is a young man, about twenty, who takes the microphone and says, "Judges, do you feel alright?" He is imitating the stance and voice of Elvis. The audience laughs and he laughs at himself. He maintains the stance as he reads a rhymed poem from the page. He reads at a fast pace and seems confident. He is wearing baggy blue jeans, a T-shirt and tennis shoes. His poem is called "Eye of the Storm." He has never read at a slam before. The following is an excerpt from his poem:

Run and fuck and laugh and cry
Get all your kicks in before you die
Procrastinate contemplate
And when the pressure's on
Masturbate.

The audience applauds moderately as he finishes. He reads with little emotion or change in his fast rate of delivery. The poem is about living life to the fullest every day.

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in a carefree way (carpe diem), and the audience laughs at several lines. It is written in rhymed couplets. His scores rank him tenth.

Next up is Arlene. She is another LSU graduate student in the English department and is sitting in the booth with the other grad students. She reads often at the slam and is jokingly called the “Porno Poet” because her poems are considered “steamy.” She stands at the microphone and dedicates her poem to one of her favorite rock singers, who has just died. The poem is called “Resembling Beethoven’s Mistress.” It ends with the lines

As your body began to glow
I resembled her
Knew what she felt
Upon swallowing whole
The product of genius
Succumbing.

The poem is short, less than a minute long. She reads with a sultry tone and she reads slowly and deliberately. In the poem she imagines an intimate and loving sexual encounter with a man. The poem is provocative and sensual. She reads as though speaking to someone who is not present. The poem is sad and read in a serious tone. The audience responded with a moderate applause; however, her scores are high and she ranks fourth.

Jim is introduced next. He comes to the mike and explains that the poem is a prose poem: “This poem is a short story, I think. But it’s a short, short story so I’m calling it a prose poem.” He begins to read from a page that he removes from his back pocket and unfolds. The poem is a narrative about an experience in which the speaker is running in the rain from a lightning storm in the woods where he has been searching for Native American artifacts. In the course of the poem, he spooks a family of deer and separates one young deer from its mother. The speaker gets in a footrace with the
deer that is trying to get ahead of him and cut in front to get back to its mother. The poem starts slowly and gains momentum in the end, as do the narrated events; the first part of the poem is descriptive and the lines are long and read slowly, near the end the lines are abrupt and delivered fast. In the poem the speaker is running slowly in the beginning and faster near the end. Jim does not look up from the page during the performance and the reading lasts over five minutes. The audience responded with a moderate applause. His scores rank his performance second highest of the evening.

Last up is a young man with long hair and a beard. He is dressed in blue jeans and penny loafers with a buttoned and collared shirt untucked. He has been to one other slam a month before tonight’s slam. He asks the audience to listen closely, as the poem “seems pretty important to me.” He seems to be serious. He then reads from the page what he explains is the first poem he has ever written. He explains it was written after attending the previous slam in Baton Rouge a month before. The poem is called “575: A Poem to My Beloved Bitch.” The poem is short enough to reproduce in its entirety. He delivers the first line quietly and then yells loudly the last two lines:

She yelled in my ear,
‘Write a fucking poem!
And win a hubcap!’

After the last line he composes himself and in a self-satisfied voice says, “Thanks.” Buzz comes to the microphone and explains that a month earlier, a benefit slam was held at M’s to raise money for the slam team going to the nationals in Chicago. The prizes for top finishers were gag prizes. One of the prizes was a hubcap. Contrasts are the dominant features of this poem. The tone of the performance was in contrast to the introduction; the introduction was mock serious while the tone in the performance that followed was sarcastic. The audience gives the performance a moderate applause as
Buzz comes up and says, “All you feminists prepare your scores.” The scores he receives rank him second to last.

The slam ends as the winners are announced and the date for the grand slam is announced. Many in the audience leave within fifteen minutes as the musician sets up the stage for his performance. The musician is a local favorite, and eight or ten people from the slam stay for his show as the lights are dimmed.

One of the more noticeable features of the event field in this slam is the percentage of first-time performers; there were five new performers in the total of twelve. Also, there was a noted improvement in Buzz’s hosting skill. The smoothness of transitions between performances and his attention to the adjustment of the microphone stand, as well as his mock religious theme, caused fewer unintended breaks in the continuity of the slam than were present in the second open slam. Buzz, however, again neglected to acquaint the audience with the judges and the poets with any information about them beyond their names. He also found himself waiting for his wife to total the scores often, and several mistakes were made in the tallying, which caused some unintended and lengthy breaks.

The most noticeable feature that affected the event field of this slam versus the second open was the larger number of participants. There were a total of thirty people in attendance. Including the scorekeeper, the judges, and the poets, twenty-one people had formal roles in this slam; only nine people were general audience members. Of the nine general audience members, only one was not a regular.

The judges were a mixture of newcomers and regulars. There were three couples teams judging. One of the couples had never been to a slam before but attended with a regular poet. Another of the couples consisted of a young man who attends
slams occasionally and his date, who had never been to a slam. The final couple
judging had been to only one other slam—the week before this one, when they also
served as judges. The fourth judge was from the LSU English department; she was with
other graduate students who performed; she also had been to a few other slams. The
fifth judge was a regular waiter at M’s who doesn’t write poetry but enjoys listening.
None of the judges were poets. The audience booed the judges several times
throughout this slam. Monica and Buzz each interrupted the competition to complain
about the judging. Buzz complained about the low scores after Roy’s performance, and
Monica complained that scores were too high after Kathryn’s performance. The general
audience appeared to disagree often with the judges’ scores as well.

Only one of the new performers, the French graduate student, Vivian, finished in
the top half of the scoring. Only two regulars finished in the bottom half of the
rankings; Sherry finished near the middle and Roy finished last in the rankings. Three
of the performers who finished in the lower rankings had obvious performance
problems such as reading too fast, or too quietly, or monotonously. Two of the other
three performers at the bottom of the rankings were not clear in the keying of their
performances. The judges were unsure whether Sherry’s poem was confessional, and
the last performer so confounded the listener with sarcasm, satire, and feigned
seriousness that no one was sure of the performer’s intent. Roy, who scored lowest of
the evening, had problems in his delivery; he stumbled over words and had difficulty
reading his poem.

The three English department graduate students who performed all qualified for
the grand slam; one finished fourth and the other two tied for third. Vivian performed
her poem in French for an audience in which few understood the language, and even
though the poem was long and tedious for several audience members, she still managed to tie for third place. She was given one “10” from the judge chosen from her group but that score, being the highest, was thrown out. Novelty may account for part of her score as few people perform in languages other than English at the Baton Rouge slam.

Only one poet who finished in the top five rankings read early in this slam. The other four read nearer the end of the slam. Kathryn read second in the competition and received the third highest score of the evening.

The sample poets in this group are all regulars to some degree; even though Roy attends much more often than either Sherry or Donald, all three had been to several slams before. Donald was the only performer in this slam to perform from memory. Even though he stopped his performance and had to start over again, Donald received four perfect scores and one score of “9.9.” His poem expressed sentiments of praise and admiration for his ill brother and his performance enhanced the emotionality of the poem. Donald was careful to visualize the imagery and dramatize the language used in his poem. He also appeared comfortable on stage. Even when he lost his place and had to start over, he seemed no less confident or more self-conscious. His delivery was strong and focused from beginning to end.

Donald was the eighth poet to read. His introduction to this serious and nostalgic performance was light and funny; he adjusted the mike while he talked conversationally and told the anecdote about his brother that got the audience laughing. This poem written by Donald is what the regular poets are referring to when they call a poem a “slam poem;” this poem is well written, full of sentiment, and obviously designed to move the audience emotionally. The term “slam poem” is not always a completely complimentary term among poets who attend the slams. Nearly every
regular poet at the Baton Rouge slam will tell you that they have “slam poems” and they are proud of them. But there is also a sense that a poet is cheating slightly if sentimentality or comedy is relied on too heavily in all their writing or emphasized too strongly in their performance. Donald manages to counteract to some degree the overly sentimental aspects of his performance with his introduction.

Sherry’s introduction, on the other hand, had nothing to do with her poem. Sherry was the third poet to read and she ranked sixth. She appeared nervous on stage; she read quickly and she made no attempt to talk to the audience beyond a cursory “Hello” in her introduction. Sherry gave no key for the performance to be understood as anything but confessional and serious until the very last line of the poem. If the judges had been aware of her place as the creator of this fictional poem or if she had keyed an ironic tone for her performance in her introduction or her delivery, she may have overcome the ambiguity of context for the judging of her performance.

Roy was the sixth poet to read; he also had no introduction for his poem. Even though his low scores were booed vehemently, he ranked lowest of the evening. The poem was a new poem that Roy was working on; it was handwritten instead of typed, as are most of his finished poems. Since Roy doesn’t worry about the scores or winning he was just reading the raw material of what he saw on this occasion. There was no obvious attempt on his part to give the impression that he was delivering a finished poem; it was simply a list of observations. Unlike the poem Roy read in the second open, which the audience perceived to be about his wife’s heart attack, this poem expressed no emotion whatsoever. Nor did it give the audience a reference point for understanding the relationship of the poet to the poem.
Roy's delivery in this slam was weak in that he stumbled and paused awkwardly. He read quickly and the poem was little more than an unshaped list. The combination of weak construction, weak performance, and an ambiguous context for understanding and appreciating the performance account for the low scores he received.

The total event time in this slam was two hours and five minutes. Of that time, sixty-five minutes were spent on the show proper. Within the show, twenty-six minutes were spent in the actual poetry performances, and six minutes were spent on the poets' introductions. The host spent thirty-three minutes on stage. Even though Buzz used only a little over three minutes to introduce the judges, deliver the spiel, and introduce the goat poet, he averaged over two minutes between each performance. Part of the extra time was expended waiting for scores and correcting scoring mistakes; some of the extra time also can be attributed to Monica's attempts to help Buzz fill holes while waiting for scores. On at least four occasions Monica got into a discussion with the judges, teasing them about being "wimps." Once again, the total amount of time the poets were on-stage amounted to less than one-quarter of the event time.

The grand slam is the final event in this series, and it was held on the Saturday night after the third Wednesday night open slam. In the grand slam all of the winning poets of the three previous open slams performed two poems. One performance was a repeat of the performance with which they won the open slam, and one other performance was a poem of their choice. The opportunity to place well in the grand slam and win the cash prizes offered add to the intensity of the competition. The idea of the winning poets of the three open slams competing against each other adds to the excitement.
The Grand Slam

By 7:30 p.m., over fifty people are crowded into the downstairs portion of the café. Every table and booth downstairs has at least two people seated; some have three or four. One booth is jammed with six young college students who are new to the slam. Two double-tables have six to eight people seated around them. Six people are seated at the bar and two or three others are standing at the bar. Unlike the open slams, where one or two waiters usually serve, at this slam there are three. Two of these three waiters are poets who read in the first three open slams; the third one has judged at one of the opens. They will be too busy waiting tables tonight to be attentive to the poems.

Jim is the host tonight. He is going from table to table choosing judges and informing them of their duties. One of the judges is a young man sitting with two other people in a booth; they are friends of John, who has qualified for tonight but does not show up to perform. John’s friend has judged before and has asked to judge tonight. Another judge is a woman in her early twenties who Jim later found out was a published poet herself. She is seated with four others at the table in front of the stage near the bar. A young college student at a table with his girlfriend has been chosen to judge; both are new to the slam. Two young undergraduate women in their early twenties who study marine biology at LSU and have never been to a slam are chosen to judge as a team. The final judge chosen is a middle-aged woman who also is a newcomer. A young man named Brad is calculating the scores; he is a physics major at LSU and uses a calculator wristwatch.

Jim comes to the stage at 7:40 p.m. and begins the spiel. At the end of the spiel, he introduces the judges and the goat. Jim spends almost nine minutes on the opening remarks. Much of the time is spent introducing the judges and providing background
information about them that he gleaned from interviews. He jokes about their professions or their attitudes toward poetry, and he leads the audience in a welcoming applause for each.

The goat tonight is Rick. He is from New Orleans, where he is a well-known political satirist and comedian. He was also a member of the Baton Rouge slam team at the national slam in 1999. The crowd gets quiet as he begins his performance. Usually, Rick performs from memory, but tonight he is reading slowly from the page with a mock serious tone. He reads from the page because it is a new poem, a satire of the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal. Ten lines into the poem, he begins to read so rapidly that the words run together in a barrage of one-liners. The audience is laughing hard, but not loudly, so that they can be attentive to the lines. He is not pausing at all for their laughter. The poem ends in just under three minutes. The crowd applauds long, loudly, and vocally.

The cumulative scores on this night range from the low of “25.9” to “29.0” for the highest. The average cumulative score tonight is “27.45.” The combined cumulative scores of poems for each competitor will determine the winner. The first place prize is fifty dollars; the second place prize is twenty-five dollars; the third place prize is ten dollars. The goat poet this night is not in the competition proper, so he reads only this one poem. His score is a “28.0,” just above average in the scoring for this evening’s slam. The crowd boos the judges.

Monica is the first poet to read and also will be the last to read. She has chosen her spot on the roster, as do most of the other poets as they arrive and are signed into the logbook. At the grand slams the poets are often allowed to choose the order in which they want to read according to who arrives first. The reading order at the grand slams
allows for score creep by having the poets read one poem each, in order, and then the order is reversed for the reading of the second poem; the poet who reads first will also be the last poet to read in the competition. Monica takes the stage and states again for this crowd, “This poem is a haiku, which is all I have time to write.” It is the same haiku that she read to high scores in the second open slam. She stands with the typed poem in her right hand and her left hand in the pocket of her jeans. She reads from the page. Her reading tonight is similar to her previous performance; she reads slowly and deliberately with a long pause at the end. The audience gives her performance a moderate applause. She receives “26.2,” a much lower score than she received for her previous effort. This is one of the lowest scores of the evening.

Next up is Buzz. He introduces his poem by explaining that “This poem is about the end of the world and I thought I better stock up.” He performs his “Toilet Paper, Tampons, and Twinkies” poem and has the poem well memorized this time. This is the poem he started to perform as the goat in the first open slam, when he forgot the lines and had to substitute another poem in its place. In this performance Buzz starts out tentatively, but as soon as the audience starts to laugh, he becomes more animated and confident. By the middle of the poem several participants join him in the refrain: “toilet paper, tampons and twinkies.” Buzz and his wife boo the judges as Jim reads out the scores. The audience gave his poem a moderate applause. He receives a cumulative total of “27.3,” just below the average score.

The host introduces Beth: “This is a lady who was asked to be on the national slam team, and refused--because she had too much class?” As Beth takes the stage, the audience laughs and applauds loudly. In her introduction she explains that the poem was a class assignment in which she was asked to write about “Barbie.” Each student in
her class was assigned a particular decade to write about the doll. Because she was
born in the fifties, she chose that decade as a reference point. Her poem metaphorically
dокументs the decades of her own life and how she, Barbie, and the perception of
women in general have grown and changed over the years. Her poem explores themes
of womanhood, relationships with men, aging, and she uses the Barbie doll as a
metaphorical reference point for how the doll has had to change in the decades since her
"birth."³

Beth reads the poem from the typed page, standing still at the microphone. She
takes her time in the performance. She pauses while the audience laughs at several
lines. She also uses pauses to emphasize certain words or phrases. She maintains good
eye contact with her audience and speaks as though conversing with them. She smiles
often during the performance, as though a particular line also amuses her, and she gets a
serious look on her face at another line that makes her thoughtful or sad. The poem is
comic and delivered with a mock serious tone. The audience applauds long, loudly, and
vocally. She scores “28.3.” The audience applauds the high scores.

Arlene, the “Porno Poet,” is up next. She comes to the stage to cheers from the
regulars. The poem she reads is the poem she read to qualify from the third open slam—
the elegiac poem she dedicated to her favorite rock singer who had recently passed
away. She reads from the page in a serious tone and with a conversational delivery.
The audience responds with a moderate applause. She scores “27.1,” just below
average.

Jim stays on the stage after the scores for Arlene are tabulated and introduces his
own first poem. It is the poem dedicated to those with nicknames that tied for second
place during the second open. He reads from the page with a conversational tone. The
audience is quiet and attentive, with chuckles occasionally and applause at the end. The audience gives him a moderate applause. He receives a “27.3,” just below average.

Liz is introduced next. She comes to the stage in a provocative, long dress with an open back. She is wearing high heels and her hair is pulled back from her face with barrettes. She reads the poem from her journal that received a perfect score in the second open: “This Boy Down South Who Had No Self-Control.” She has no introduction for the performance and begins to read after she says the title of the poem. Her performance this night is louder than her performance in the open but is still delivered rapidly. She does not appear as nervous in this reading as she was in her previous reading. When she finishes, she steps back from the microphone, gives a bow of her head, and quickly walks from the stage amid a long, loud, and vocal applause. Her score is well above average at “28.2.”

Next up is D.W. He chooses to read the poem with which he placed third in the first open, “The Sky I Once Knew.” He reads from the page after a lengthy introduction where he explains again to this audience about the light pollution in the cities. He emphasizes the end rhymes in his delivery as the audience listens quietly. He has much of the poem memorized now and refers to the page only occasionally. His poem is again performed with a tone that is sad, nostalgic and sentimental. The performance is still monotonous; each of the rhymed couplets is delivered with the same pitch and emphasis. The poem sounds like a nursery rhyme.

Jim comes up and asks for scores amid the moderate applause. D.W. receives a “10” from the two young women team-judging, but his other four scores are much lower. He receives a cumulative score of “26.5,” well below average.
Eve is the next poet called up. Jim introduces her as “the sexiest poet in Baton Rouge, next to Beth.” She stands at the microphone and says, “The shortest poet in Baton Rouge next to Beth.” As the audience laughter dies down, she introduces the poem. It is also a poem about Barbie dolls. This is not the poem she read at the first open. She explains in a lengthy introduction that “Barbie” turned forty this year—and, “totally incidentally,” she also turned forty this year. She also explains that the poem was inspired by an Allen Ginsberg poem: “What if you lost it all?” She tells how her parents threw away her collection of Barbie dolls years after she moved away from home. The title of the poem is “Losing Barbie:”

Shocked awake
By childhood’s sudden absence... My sense of violation growing
I stumble downstairs to face the perpetrator
My own father confirms
My worst fears
Barbie... is gone
My father breaks the news
He cleaned out the village
A roster of eleven-and-a-half-inch Barbie lineage
Third edition, twist and turn, talking, living
“ten” Midge and Skipper
Loaded into death wagon U-haul
And driven... to their incineration
Barbie is gone
Goodbye first Barbie with helmet hair and heavy lids
Discovered days before my fifth birthday
Treasure buried deep in mother’s closet
Goodbye pink satin ensemble
Glittered skirts, fitted jacket and pill-box hat
Found beneath mom’s own sheet dresses
with matching coats
Goodbye obsessive need for matching everything
Goodbye American Girl Barbie
Girl-Next-Door Barbie
Goodbye long legs
“All the way to her ass,” as daddy says
Bendable at the knees
All the pre-pubescent flexibility
I would need
Goodbye long hair, achieving lengths I never could
Goodbye golden blondeness
    stringy... from me trying to dye it red
Till it fell in clumps from her molding head
Goodbye talking Barbie, brilliant conversationalist
Who posed existential questions:
    “You want to ride in my Corvette?”
And provocative suggestions: “Let’s go shopping!”
When she was young, clear-voiced and understood
Goodbye agelessness
In toy midlife, her voice-box failed
In articulation to a shallow generation
Goodbye accessories
Goodbye spiked heels
They slipped quickly to the floor
Where bare feet found them painful
In the late-night darkness
Goodbye pink convertible, pink dream house
    pink camper, pink telephone, pink dishes
    pink everything
Goodbye pink. Period.
Goodbye Midge. Side-kick.
    Second banana, second best, silent friend
Goodbye Ken, eunuch boyfriend
Accessory more useless than shoes
Goodbye endless string of wedding dresses
A new one for each season
Goodbye perfect wardrobe, perfect fit
Goodbye perfect body, plastic dream
Goodbye perfect world, having it all
Twenty-one years now post-cremation
I finally face reality
Barbie is forty:
And I might be next.

She ends with “Thank you” and a small bow. The performance was four minutes long, and the audience listened attentively, chuckled occasionally, and gave her a moderate applause. Many of the lines in her poem have a recurring structure, a noun followed by a phrased description. She emphasized this repetitive structure as she read with little variation; the delivery was monotonous.

Like Beth’s Barbie poem, this one also uses the doll as a metaphor. In this poem, “losing Barbie” is a metaphor for losing her own innocence and naivety. Unlike
that in Beth’s poem, the language used in this poem is simple, the structure of the poem that of a list. The poem was meant to be funny, but the audience rarely laughed. The poem was perceived as a lament in contrast to her light and humorous tone. Her scores are below average for the night at a cumulative “27.0.”

Donald is called up to perform next. He takes the stage and says, “Hi. It’s nice to be here.” He explains that he will read the poem with which he won the first open slam. He goes on to explain that he believes this is a “dangerous poem in that it is about fishing, and dogs, and full of sentiment.” He tells the audience that the poem was written for his brother, Eric, and he explains to this audience, as he did for the open slam, his brother’s comment as to why his Dad preferred to take Eric fishing over his brothers. He reads the poem from memory, with no breaks this time. His performance has the same intensity as his open slam performance. In certain parts his voice is trembling with emotion. He emphasizes the imagery in his performance with hand gestures. The poem is exactly three minutes long, and the audience responds with a long applause. He finishes with a cumulative “28.7” that ranks his performance highest in the first round of performances.

Kathryn is the next poet to perform. Jim introduces her by reading a flyer that she gave him earlier that announces a reading at another venue the following week. When Kathryn gets to the microphone, she explains who the other poet is that she will be reading with and shows the poet’s newly published book to the audience. Kathryn is reading the villanelle that she performed in the third open. She received a score of “29.6” in the third open slam for her performance of this poem. Her scores are high for this slam even though she scores a full point lower at “28.6.” Her performance of this poem, in this slam, was nearly identical to her performance at the open slam; she read
smiling suggestively and pausing to emphasize certain words and phrases. She read slowly and maintained good eye contact with the audience. The audience responded with a lengthy applause.

The last poet to perform in the first half of this slam is Vivian. She comes to the stage and explains that the poem she read at the third open slam was in French and that she is not going to “bore the audience” with it this night. Instead she reads from the typed page a poem in English. Some of her English words are mispronounced, and she reads the poem with a low volume that makes some of her words barely audible. She begins her performance after a lengthy introduction in which she explains how the poem was inspired after she “read the Declaration of Independence.” The poem is titled, “The State of the World.” She reads:

We hold these statements to be self-evident
The different specimens of the human species
Constitute but one massive cruel
    and growing herd of sheep and cattle
Schooled by a few corporate mad whores
We are all born equal with the same body parts
Same organs and sensorial faculties
The same cranial rated battery
Producing electric volts
Which, if we are lucky, generate a thought
We are all endowed with certain laughable rights
Life, liberty and the pursuit of business
We need not move into the private spheres
    of others’ affairs
We are all entitled privilege
The currency of some lamentable wrongs
Our comfortable madness, the struggle against stress
The pollution of our prudishness
And the swelling power of the bulls
Having confused us in [inaudible word]
Our colossal directions.

While reading, Vivian stood at the microphone and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She read with little obvious emotion or variation in her delivery. The
poem is cynical and she delivered it in a serious tone. The audience listened attentively, perhaps because her strong accent made the poem difficult to understand. According to the rules stated earlier, Vivian was required to read the poem she read at the open slam, but she chose to replace that performance in French with a different one in English. No one made mention of the substitution, and the audience gave her a moderate applause. She received an above average score, “27.8.”

Jim announces a five-minute break where participants move toward the restrooms or get up, stretch, and visit neighboring participants. The sounds of conversations fill the room almost immediately. It is 8:35 p.m.

The band that will play at 10:00 p.m. (following the slam) arrives during the break. The musicians begin moving their instruments and equipment to the stage. The break lasts for thirteen minutes before Monica calls Jim back up to the stage. It takes him several seconds to get the crowd quieted down; he then announces that the second half will continue in the reverse order of the first. The last poet to perform in the first half, Vivian, is invited to the stage to begin the second half.

Vivian takes the stage for the second time and explains that she will read a short poem in English. She calls the poem an “old poem.” The title is in French, and she translates it as “The Queen of the Beach.” Several audience members laugh. She explains that the poem is serious, and she begins to read from the typed page:

Thigh deep in the heaving waves she stands
   water splashing and weeping against her breasts
Her soft light shirt sticks to her nipples
   black...icy
Raised to dark stormy clouds
Light brown hair wetted with salt and sand
Like an old [inaudible phrase]
Against the obscurities of the ocean
With one question [inaudible phrase]
Five years have passed but she has found a trust
With the beach, an abode, the water a companion  
The bare sky with cloudless whites, a shelter  
Yet she endures spring seasons of squalling winds  
Squatting in thin alleys of downtown narrow streets  
Where stinking bone-thin dogs sleep with drunkards  
Lying stretched across the way  
Still by the sun the [inaudible phrase] fishermen  
She sits on the sand, head buried in folded wounds  
Rounded as rocks on the strand  
With the vacant look of a vagrant  
As she raises her head  
She lingers within solar flames [inaudible phrase]  
That muses itself in the [inaudible word] of the Pacific  
Like a fool with a dried, hard and wrinkled face  
She rises [inaudible phrase] and wanders  
Among vacationers, the French, in the shade of [inaudible word]  
She begs [next two lines inaudible]  
Steered by thirst and hunger.

Vivian stumbles on the next line and breaks out of the reading to make a comment to the audience that is not audible; she then finishes her poem in a lowered voice that makes the rest of her poem inaudible except for a few words. She reads the rest of the poem quickly and when she is finished, she leaves the stage abruptly without any other cues that she is finished.

Vivian’s poem was read with a serious tone and little variation in the pitch of her voice. The performance lasted well over three minutes and the audience became restless before she finished. The last half of the poem was barely discernible because her voice grew softer and her dialect stronger; it was as though half-way through the performance she became uncomfortable and lost what little confidence she exhibited when she began the poem. She is obviously struggling with the fluency of her English, especially when she loses confidence.

The language of her poem is interesting, at least the part that can be understood, and the images are also vivid. The details of the poor woman who is described in this poem are contrasted with the resort-like atmosphere of her surroundings, and serve to
comment not only on her sad plight, but also the insensitivity of the others around her.

There is a soft applause at the end of her performance and she scores “28.1,” well above average. Her combined cumulative scores will rank her fifth.

Kathryn is called up to the stage next. She reads another poem that she explains was written in collaboration with a painter. It is called “Meeting Through Timbre.” It is similar in tone and theme to her poem, “At the Altar of Ben’s Chest.” An excerpt:

If I could write music
The song would be about you
In the key of rain.
The tune you know
    between each chord
There in the gaps
In the wet before the storm ceases
Breaks into the rhythm
Of a wanton hush
And there... inside
    the inaudible desire
Sets a place for itself.

The poem is read with a serious and conversational tone. The sexual innuendo is evident in both the poem and her delivery, where she smiles coyly to signal the play on words. The audience listens quietly and applauds loudly when she finishes and leaves the stage. She scores “28.8.” Her combined cumulative scores rank her third for the evening.

Donald is called to the stage for his second performance. He walks slowly to the stage, adjusts the mike as he introduces the poem, entitled “Poor Leroy’s Bones.” He explains that the poem is a ballad about a “young black man” who inherits a set of magical dice, a character from “the sordid past of his childhood,” from when he “was hanging out in the Blood and Guts Pub.” The poem is performed from memory. He pauses for five seconds after the introduction and slowly begins:

Thomas Jefferson Leroy Washington Jones
had a magic set of ivory bones
that his great-granddaddy, years ago
Bought from a slave in a medicine show.
Now Leroy had a knack for tossing the dice
Make a wise man stutter
Make a gambler look twice
He could go on a run lasting for hours
As if those dice were part of his powers
Hell, Leroy had half the county in hock
Three men went crazy, two were in shock
When he rolled up those bones in an easy sweep
Ladies would faint, grown men would weep
Men would call odds doubling their stakes
When Leroy Jones gave those bones
one of his shakes
With his hands clasped together
He'd rub off the ice
Warming up the magic of those ivory dice
Now one night down at the Blood and Guts Pub
Leroy was giving them bones a rub
A small crowd gathered and said
‘Leroy, perhaps some of your brothers
would care for some craps.’
Silver Fox Smith and Asphalt Andy
Stood over Leroy with their blackjacks handy
If anyone cheated to make the point
Those two dudes would tear up the joint
Smoke rose blue against the night
Fat Frank crapped out, Slim Jim went light
Willy the Weasel asked Tall Tim for a nook
While Mellow Milo...

[he stumbles here and takes three tries to say the name correctly, then moves on]
Unzipped his coat
But turned back to Leroy and thumbed it down
He said “No, my brothers, I’m not using those dice,
Them dice – that soon...”
“Those dice are loaded with two grains of lead!
Silver Fox gon’ see that, that MAN gets dead.”
Silver Fox looked at Milo, Milo just grinned
Mellow Milo knew he should not have sinned
Silver Fox threw Milo out on the road
Face down on the asphalt for breaking the code
“Hey whose dice do we use now?”
Now asked the rest of the crew
Leroy reached in his pocket and didn’t say boo
He raised up his hand and there in his palm
Was a sight that would make an angry man calm
Hey brother, that’s some fine set o’ bones
White ivory, black onyx with an African hone
But do they fall true to the wave of the hand
When they roll off the fingers of a gambling man?
Said “Here, Leroy,” with an ear to ear smile
“Brother, they fall as true as the strength of your style.”
So the bones went tumbling across the floor
Bouncing off the back of the men’s room door
And the clock, the clock, over the bar
She read quarter to four
Everyone except Leroy was losing that war
Smoke, sweat, booze, beer
Covered the floor
like a, sobering tear
The game ended, ended as quickly as it had begun
And Leroy packed his pockets with what he had won
He said fare thee well to his bankrolling friends
Tough luck my boys, too bad that it ends.
And the full moon. . .the full moon shone down
like a, silver dollar
And Leroy jingled as he walked
Turning up his collar
Old. . .brick. . .buildings rose up like a canyon of glum
And a rat scurried by for its place in the slum
As Leroy walked down the sidewalk the taps on his shoes
Sang out a melody
[he sings the next four words]
“Builded in the blues”
He reached in his pocket and pulled out a buck
And threw it in the gutter for the lady called. . . luck.

The audience gives his performance lengthy applause as he leaves the stage.

The poem was delivered almost like it was being sung; his voice was rhythmical,
smooth, and displayed much variation in pitch and tone. Donald’s reading was
animated, and it took him four minutes to perform the poem. He made every effort to
disguise or naturalize the rhymed couplets. He used slightly different voices for the
various characters in the narrative. He also used pauses strategically and varied his
speed of delivery as the actions of the story became fast-paced or suspenseful. He
seemed to enjoy his performance. Even though he received a score of “10” from the
two young women who were team-judging, his other scores were lower. His
cumulative score is “28.6” which, combined with the score of his earlier performance, ranks him first in the competition, tied with Beth, who will read later.

Next up is Eve. Jim introduces her as the shortest poet in Baton Rouge next to Beth. She laughs and takes the stage to audience applause. Eve reads the poem: “The Realist’s Credo,” the same poem that finished second in the first open slam. Her introduction and performance are almost identical to those from the open slam, but tonight the audience is not laughing. Not once during her performance does the audience laugh, although it listens attentively. She receives a cumulative score of “25.9,” the lowest score of the evening. Her combined scores rank her last in the competition.

There is a break in the competition in which Jim announces that the organizers are going to pass the hat for the young African-American man who works as a waiter for M’s, and who was a judge in the third open, the night of his birthday. He has fallen and broken his leg just this week and will be out of work for six weeks.

Monica walks around with the hat for donations as D.W. is called up to perform. He gives a brief introduction in which he explains that the poem is “self-reflective.” Its title is “Five Minute Therapy.” Unlike most of D.W.’s poems, this poem is not a rhymed poem. D.W. holds the folded page in his hand even though he performs from memory. His reading emphasizes a repeated rhythmic pattern for each line. It is delivered in a serious tone with little variation in pitch from one line to the next. The poem is also unusual for D.W. in that the language of the poem is more sophisticated and philosophical than most of his other work. The poem is about his inability to see the brighter side of things and people as he gets older. The poem is a bit confrontational in the sense that the addressee in the poem is an ambiguous other, and it is unclear
whether he is addressing this audience as those he condemns for looking at the world through “rose-colored glasses.” The audience responded to his performance with a brief applause. The performance lasted for three minutes, and he scored “27.2,” just below average; his combined scores rank him ninth in the competition.

Liz is called to the stage next. Because of a camera malfunction, the next three poets’ performances are lost. Liz scores “27.8” for her second reading; this score combined with her first score ranks her fourth of the evening. Jim reads next for a score of “28.3,” which ranks him sixth of the evening. Arlene’s performance is the last one not recorded. She scores “27.0” for her second performance and, combined with her first score, she ranks eighth.

Beth is the next recorded performer. She comes to the mike and reads from the page the poem “Pandemonium’s Trunk” that won first place in the first open slam. She reads the poem in a conversational tone, and the audience laughs after several lines. She pauses for the audience’s laughter and finishes to a loud applause and cheers of approval. She scores a “29.0,” the high score for the competition. Her two scores combined tie her for first place in the competition.

Buzz is invited to the stage next. Buzz performs the poem, “The Spiritual Vandal” that he performed in the first open, in which he ranked second. On this evening’s performance, he is animated and even more energetic. He speaks quickly and modulates the volume of his delivery. His individual scores range from “8.0” to “9.9.” He receives a cumulative score of “27.8.” His combined cumulative score of “55.1” ranks him seventh in the overall competition.

Jim takes the stage and says, “We are gonna end this thing like we started it. Where’s the mighty M? Drag it up here, girl.” Monica takes the stage and makes a
pitch for the musical group that starts at 10:00 p.m., then introduces her poem, “Lost in Arizona.” It begins:

Stuck inside of Bizby
And the Harley
Has broke down
I’m lost in Arizona
No way back to town
I’m sitting here, don’t hear from you
Know what you must be going through
Oh, that I could send you a shower pouring
To soothe your aching fever and cool the fire
Of your pained existence.

The poem goes on to describe her lover as “lost” in the spiritual sense and beyond help. She reads the poem with confidence, taking her time and using pauses to emphasize the sadness and seriousness of her tone. The poem is read from the printed page, but she speaks as though thinking of the lines for the first time. She scores well below average, and her cumulative score for this performance of “26.9,” combined with her earlier score of “26.2,” ranks her tenth in the competition.

Jim announces a short break to tally the scores, then comes back after eight minutes and announces the winners. Kathryn wins ten dollars for third place, and Beth and Donald tie for first; they win $37.50 each, combining first and second place prize money and dividing it between them. Everyone is thanked by the host and advised of the dates for the next round of slams as the band begins to set up for its show. The slam participants leave as the new crowd that has been waiting in the lobby enters and moves to the available tables. The conversation is loud and lively.

The event field for this slam was significantly different from the other three slams in this series in two ways: there are far more participants, and a smaller percentage of participants were newcomers to slams. By the end of the slam over sixty people were in attendance; of these, fewer than ten audience members had never attended a slam before.
The audience in this event was much livelier than the smaller audiences in the open slams. Of the new audience members, five were chosen as judges. The total event time for this slam was three hours and one minute. One hour and forty-six minutes was spent on the show proper. The actual poetry performances consumed fifty-three minutes, with introductions by the poets accounting for another twelve minutes. The host spent forty-two minutes on stage and averaged approximately ninety seconds between performances in the first half of the show, and sixty seconds between performances in the second half.

The judges on this night were all newcomers except John’s friend who had attended two other slams and judged in one other slam. He was a controversial judge in the other slam, giving lower scores than the others all night, and he was the lowest scoring judge consistently on this night as well. His score was thrown out as the lowest in nearly every tally. He performed at the other slam he attended where he did not judge, a confrontational poem that scored very poorly. Of the other five judges (three single judges and one team judge) only one was male and only the single young woman judge was a poet. The two male judges were consistently the lowest scoring judges of the night, but their scores were consistent and, therefore, considered fair by the audience. Overall, the scores at this slam were lower than the other three slams; there were very few “10s” given on this night and only one poet, Beth, had a cumulative score for any one performance that reached “29.0.”

For this slam there were twenty-three performances including the goat performance. This slam show lasted nearly twice as long as any one of the three open slams. Because the grand slam is longer, it is always scheduled to end at 10:00 p.m. instead of 9:00 p.m., and the performances begin earlier as well.
Of the eleven poets who competed in this slam, two-- Monica and Jim--are the organizers of the slam. Five of the other poets who performed—Buzz, D.W., Beth, Amy, and Sharon—are regulars who rarely miss a slam. Two other poets, Kathryn and Donald, although not really considered regulars, had attended several slams; and only two poets, Vivian and Liz, were newcomers who had only been to one other slam. Only one regular, Beth, finished in the top half of the rankings. Both newcomers, Liz and Vivian, finished in the top half of the rankings as did Kathryn and Donald. The lowest ranking performers of the night were all regulars.

Only three performers on this night performed their poems from memory, and only one of those, Donald, finished in the top rankings. Donald tied for first place with Beth, who read her poem from the typed page. Although Beth's second performance scored the highest of any individual performance on this night, her first round score was behind those of Kathryn and Donald. The order of reading and score-creep may have had an affect in her scores. Beth was the third poet to read in the first round, and Donald and Kathryn read ninth and tenth respectively. However, Kathryn was thirteenth in order for her second performance, Donald was fourteenth, and Beth's second performance was the twentieth. Donald's and Kathryn's scores for their second performances were almost identical to their scores on their first round performances that were proximal in their order read. The effect of reversing the order of reading in the second round, however, made Beth's second performance twentieth, and also could account for the wider variance in her scores. That Donald's and Beth's cumulative scores for both performances combined were identical is evidence that, for these judges, whether the poem was performed from memory or read from the typed page made no difference in their value in this forum. Beth is an excellent reader in terms of maintaining a strong connection with her audience.
and Donald's performance skills help him maintain a strong connection with his audience. Even though there are significant differences in the genres of poetry Donald and Beth create, the combination of poetry genre and performance style leveled differences on this occasion.

Of the three graduate student poets in the competition, Kathryn finished third, Vivian finished fifth, and Arlene finished eighth. Kathryn had the most formal poems and provocative performances, Vivian had the more imagistic and confrontational poems as well as an unusual performance style, and Arlene's poems and performances were the most staid. The order of Arlene's performances was the most disparate of the three as she read fourth and nineteenth, but there was only one tenth of a point difference in her two scores. Arlene's second score was actually one tenth of a point lower than her first.

Liz finished fourth in the final rankings. Even though the strength of her performance style was less a feature of her high ranking than some of the more experienced performers, her performance in this slam was louder and clearer than her previous performance in the open slam. Despite her own suspicion that judges at the slam give her scores based on her appearance rather than the appreciation of her poetry, in this slam, her appearance seems to have had little effect, as the two lowest scores she received were from the only two males who were judging. She received one of only four "10s" given in the entire event, and the two women who were judging as a team gave it to her.

Liz's mother and sister accompanied her to the slam. Wearing high-heels and the mid-calf length dress that was slit up the sides to the knee with an open back, and wearing make-up and a formal hairstyle gave Liz a formal appearance. For someone who expressed concern that her appearance interfered with the judges' appreciation of her
poetry, her manner of dress for this performance seems counterproductive. Even though Liz finished fourth in this grand slam, competing with the best performers and poets of the round, she never returned to another. She was the only poet in these four events to score a perfect score of five “10s.”

Vivian finished in the middle of the rankings. Her performances were over four minutes long, and she did not perform the same poem with which she won the open slam as one of her performances. Donald, who finished first, and Eve, who ranked last, also had performances that were over four minutes long, but Vivian was the only performer who failed to perform her open slam winning poem.

Even though Vivian introduced her second poem as a “short poem,” it was over three minutes long. Both of Vivian’s poems were cynical; her first poem was confrontational as well, but the language in both poems was sophisticated and interesting. Her use of simile and imagery in her poems was pronounced. Her difficulty with spoken English and her apparent lack of confidence, especially toward the end of her second performance, as well as her monotonous style of delivery, were the factors of her performances that could account for her mediocre ranking. There were many parts of her performances, especially in the second performance, which were inaudible. Vivian’s second performance still scored the higher of the two by three tenths of a point, which may be due to the more confrontational and cynical nature of the first performance. Another possible explanation for the higher scores on Vivian’s second performance is, given her trouble with English as a second language and her apparent embarrassment with her performance, the judges were sympathetic and inflated her score to make her feel better.
Eve was one of only three performers who performed her “new” poem in the first round of this slam. Eve’s Barbie poem scored much lower than Beth’s. In contrast to Beth’s Barbie poem, the construction of Eve’s poem was of a simpler design; Eve’s poem was simply a list rather than a narrative. Even though both poets used the Barbie doll as an extended metaphor for the plight of women through the last forty years, Eve’s poem was less about women in general and more about herself.

Eve’s performance style was monotonous, and she never established a strong connection with her audience in the grand slam; the audience listened to the long poems but seemed distracted and confused about whether the poem was meant to be funny or serious. In the introduction to her first poem, Eve told about her father throwing away all her Barbie dolls and gave no reason for his actions, then proceeded to describe “losing Barbie” in a contradictorily light and funny manner.

In her second performance, Eve read the poem that scored very high in the open slam in which the audience laughed throughout the poem. In this second performance of “The Realist Credo” she scored the lowest scores of the evening, and the audience never laughed. Her performance style in this second performance was nearly identical to the performance in the open round, but the judges in this slam were not appreciative. Once again, the audience in this slam listened but appeared confused as to whether to interpret the poem as serious or humorous. Because she performed late in the first round and early in the second, thereby putting her performances close together, the audience may have carried over poor expectations based on her first performance.

The poems and performance styles exhibited in this grand slam were quite diverse, and it is difficult to isolate any one feature of performance style or poetic construction that guarantees success in this forum. It appears that success is dependent upon a
combination of performance skill, poetic construction, and the ability to create a shared context with the audience for understanding and appreciating the performance.

Summary

Studying the communicative interactions among participants in these four events has brought into sharper focus many aspects of this community that warrant investigation. Determining which aspects of the poetry performances are valued by the audience, how this value is measured and expressed, and identifying what values are shared in this community are the three areas I have focused on in this chapter. The goals of this investigation are to understand which poets succeed or fail in this forum and why, as well as why participants continue to attend these events.

Many levels of poetic ability are exhibited at slams and many different levels of performance skill are displayed. It is difficult to point to discrete factors that guarantee success for a particular performance. Poets such as Liz read relatively poorly and received the highest score possible, and poets like John read well and scored the lowest score possible. Other poets like Buzz exhibited a high degree of performance ability using memorized poems and dramatic delivery and scored poorly. Graduate students from University Creative Writing programs won and lost competitions. Perhaps there is no one criterion that determines success at the poetry slam. I believe a combination of three different criteria contributes to the success of individual performances in this forum. It is clear for instance, from examples like Buzz and Donald who exhibit highly developed performance ability and often receive high scores, that performance ability is an important aspect of a successful performance. Poets like Kathryn who relies on well-read formal poems and Diana who reads well-crafted poems monotonously score well and show us that writing ability is also rewarded in this forum. It is also clear in
examples like John and Roy that poems are more appreciated by the audience when the poets and the audience share a context or reference point for understanding the poem. For instance, in John’s performance in the first open slam, he read well, and his writing was anything but simple, yet he finished last in that competition behind some very simple poems and poor performances. John’s ranking is often due to the fact that many of his performances lack a clear key for the audience to understand his work; they do not understand clearly what he is trying to say or the way he says it. When judges were familiar with John’s work or understood how his performance was meant to be taken, as they were in the second open, he scored much higher with a poem that was read as well as this one and equally as abstract as this poem.

The winners of each of these events show how each of these three variables figured into their success. In the first open, Beth finished first with a poem that was cleverly constructed and witty, with a sophisticated language use. Her poem was also well delivered in a performance that emphasized the irony, and she used pauses and stresses effectively, maintaining good eye contact with her audience. Equally important, the audience shared the context of the poem, relating it to the earlier poem that David had performed that made fun of women; everyone understood that the poem was making fun of men who make fun of women. In the second open slam, Liz won with a poem that was well written using a clever extended metaphor, and performed well even though nervousness made her read rapidly. But also, the audience and judges appreciated that this was Liz’s first time performing and understood the context of a young woman experiencing the conflicting emotions of passion. A situation of the event helped create the shared context for interpreting the poem in this case, and made the poem more appealing. In the third open slam, Donald won with a very well
performed poem that was well-crafted and easily understood as a negotiation of family values. It is not by accident that these three poems finished in the top four places of the grand slam as well. Success at the slam depends on all three variables. It is possible to excel in this forum with a performance that leans more heavily toward one of the three variables, or shows evidence of weakness in one of the three. However, when one of these three variables is missing in a performance, the performance will suffer in relation to performances that contain all three.

In the slam community, successful performances are not measured relative to an arbitrary standard, but rather, depend on their relationship relative to other performances within that particular event field. In other words, someone finished first in every open slam regardless of the number of excellent performances, with the degree of excellence being relative to other performances within each particular event. In other words, first place only means first place within that event. This norm-referencing is important in determining who wins the slam and also allows for some degree of success for every performance within a particular event. Even the lowest scoring poet in each event did not score a zero. Often, especially in slams in which many successful poets compete against each other (such as the grand slam), the poet who finishes last can still be considered successful in that he or she qualified for the grand slam, which features the best poets of each round. Even poets who finish in the middle ranges of competitions attribute their degree of success to the abilities of the judges in that particular round and their preferences, biases, or to their lack of sophistication. Consequently, not only is success relative in the poetry slam, but it is also negotiable.

I believe the negotiability of success in the slam is one of its most interesting features. Much of the discussion that slam poetry generates concerns which poems
were successful and which were not, and why. How value is assigned and by whom is often a topic members of this community use to determine how their values compare with others. Establishing one’s value system relative to others’ seems to be one of the more important concerns of poets and audience members. The idea of judging itself becomes a topic for discussion as important as the poetry.

Finally, the structure of these poetry slams creates an environment in which community is emphasized. First, people in this community are given a common focal point—poetry; second, they are placed in a common room with a common set of rules and expectations for conduct; and, finally, they are introduced to one another. Significantly, because of the structure of the slam and its sequence of events, the largest portion of its event time is devoted to these communal aspects. The fact that anyone is allowed to participate in this event, and that norm-referencing allows anyone a degree of success, further democratizes the event and opens it to include other communities. Since, as we established previously, the slam does not operate on the principle of exclusion or criterion-referencing, anyone, regardless of ability, style, or any other criteria, can participate in this community.

In addition, since the judging at slams is relative and negotiable, given the variable credibility and biases of the judges at each event, the judging serves only as a reference point for publicly agreeing or disagreeing, within this community, with what is considered “good” or “successful.” Regardless of the individual definition of quality, the slams are appealing to poets because in this community the audience listens to their poetry while it encourages and rewards their efforts. They are appealing to the audience because they offer occasion for laughter, a light communal atmosphere in which people
care about one another, appreciation of an artistic pursuit, and, occasionally, some excellent poetry performance.

End Notes

1 The three open slams discussed in this round ranged from one hour and fifty-two minutes for slam number one, two hours and two minutes for slam number two, to two hours and five minutes for slam number three.

2 Jim knows Beth refused to be on the team because she had already scheduled a vacation in New Mexico during the week of the National Championship in Chicago.

3 An editor of the *New Delta Review* listens to the poem intently, along with the rest of the audience. This is the same editor who later came to her office to ask permission to publish the poem in the journal.

4 Eve was in the group of five women poets, including Beth, who read poems in honor of Barbie’s birthday, earlier this year at a local venue.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Poetry is rooted in an oral tradition. Poetry was performed hundreds of years before the advent of a phonetic system of writing that could represent the sound and rhythm of a human speaking. In Western civilization, the Greek alphabet with its system of consonants and vowels created a way of “recording” the spoken idiom, at the earliest, around 700 BCE (see Havelock, 1982). The shift to a literate culture where groups of people began to be taught to read or write in large numbers began around 400 BCE (with Plato’s academy). For the three hundred years between these two dates, writing was used mainly to record the spoken word of a predominantly “oral” society. Writing was slow to take hold; written words weren’t trusted separated from their speaker. Much of these remaining early writings are in a distinctive form of language distinguished from the vernacular most obviously by their use of rhythm and meter. Both aspects, we now recognize as elements of an oral idiom that function as mnemonic aids for storing large amounts of information in the only repository available in these cultures—the memory. There is evidence, and common sense would tell us, that this early “written” literature is, actually, the inscribed idiom of a very sophisticated “oral” literature. It is important to note here the distinction between illiteracy, which is defined by Havelock as “a failure to communicate under altered conditions” and non-literacy, which “describes a positive social condition in which communication is managed acoustically but successfully” (1982, p.119). We still consider many of these texts written in these three centuries (especially the “Homeric” epics and the early Greek tragedies) to be some of our most profoundly interesting “literature.” The very fact that they were painstakingly recorded, have survived to this day, and have informed
so much of our literature and thought throughout history is testament to their significance.

We can identify three distinct phases of the shift from a primary orality to a primary literacy, (1) where language is orally composed and orally transmitted, (2) where language is composed in writing and transmitted orally, and (3) where language is composed in writing and transmitted by writing. The first phase describes a culture of primary orality. The third condition describes a society where literacy is primary, but the second phase is a synthesis of the two mediums that existed in the classical Greek culture for an extended period and exists, to some degree, in every culture as it shifts from orality to literacy. As Havelock remarks, "... the assumption that orality and literacy are categories of speech mutually exclusive prevents us from forming a concept of a creative partnership between the two which might have lasted at least to the death of Euripides..." (1982, p.124). This "creative partnership" describes a species of literature that is neither wholly literate nor wholly oral. This "literate oral" poetry blurs many of the distinctions between conceptions of a pure literacy and a pure orality. This particular transitional period offers an interesting example of what might be considered a distinct genre of poetic discourse that integrates the two forms.

If we use this period from 700 BCE to 400 BCE where orality and literacy formed a "creative partnership" as a reference point for understanding how orality and literacy might co-exist, we can begin to draw interesting comparisons with the slam culture. For instance, during this period in Greece, writing was used to record oral creations or create material for oral transmission. But in the contemporary instance, it seems the oral communication of the poem is not always the primary goal for most of the poets who read at slams. Rather, an important reason for reading at the slams for
many poets is to gain acceptance or exposure of their written work. There are slam poets who consider the performance of the poetry to be more important than the written work, but in this series of slams the majority of poets studied consider the performance to be secondary to the writing in importance.

Some might be tempted to look at the slams, as I did initially, because of their popularity and their emphasis on the spoken word, as heralding the dawn of a new appreciation for oral performance, for orality, or perhaps as more evidence that we are entering a "post-literate" era (Ong, 1982). The evidence that I have compiled in this document suggests that this might not be the case, at least in Baton Rouge. If we consider whether the Baton Rouge slam is representative of slams elsewhere, it is possible to argue that this slam, because its poets value writing skills over performance skills, as opposed to some other slams that feature and value performance skills more, is atypical. I do not believe this to be the case. Although it may be true that the written poetry, in this particular slam, is featured and perhaps valued more than performance, I believe this can be attributed to a shift in the emphasis of the three variables that determine success in any slam. As we saw in the rules of the slam, the value of a performance is to be deduced from the perceived skill of the writing and the performance as separate perspectives. We learned in Chapter Four that there was a third factor that figured prominently in the success of individual performances—shared context. We saw performances do well that would rate low if rated according to performance or writing alone, and we saw performances do poorly that would rate higher if performance or writing were the only measures of success. It seems that each of these three factors is constitutive of success in this slam, and from my experience, at other slams as well. Whether one factor is weighted more than another by a particular
judge, or in a particular locale, is a situational variable that distinguishes one event field from another, but does not warrant a separate classification of events.

If we consider that the Baton Rouge slam is representative of slams elsewhere, we are left with the question of whether slams are a manifestation of a dominant literate bias. Are the slams and performance poetry more literary than performing arts? Attempts to determine which of these features is more important leads us to needlessly separate the two and overlook the value of the two in concert. If we consider what is distinctive about the “creative partnership” of speaking and writing we are led back to the communal aspect of poetry slams—one person speaking well to a specific community, and the community speaking back. If the three relevant features of successful slam poetry performances are speaking, writing, and a shared context, the value of the performance becomes more than any one of these features in isolation. Liz’s performance of “The Boy Down South Who Had No Self Control” in the second open slam is one example of the way performances that have a relative balance of strengths regarding these three features, can be more successful than performances stronger in one or two of the three.

There are a number of poets, including Buzz and Donald, who consider the oral performance primary and who write for oral communication, which might explain their particularly intense need to win and their withdrawal from the competition when they do not. Poets such as Roy, Beth, Eve, Sherry, John, and Sharon do not need to win the slams in order to have their work validated. Because the work of these poets is validated for them by publication in literary journals, or by the acceptance of a respected poet or teacher, or by what they consider to be their superior literary sophistication over the judges at the slam, they do not have to depend on winning to
enjoy the slams. The three poets in this study who withdrew from the competition after considerable success had problems with the competitive aspects of the slam. Donald would like to manipulate the judging criteria, and Buzz has attempted to create a performance poetry environment where competition is eliminated. Liz also withdrew from the competition after her initial encounter, but her withdrawal was based not on her need to win, but rather on her perception that the scoring was not based entirely on her poetry.

Further proof that winning is not important to most of the regulars at the slam is the implicit rule they share that it is in poor taste to read poems that they have used to win a grand slam. Most of the regulars will not read a winning poem again in the competition at a regular slam. If asked to perform the goat poem in a slam or to participate in special exhibition slams, the regulars will repeat winning poems, but after they have won a grand slam with a poem, it is no longer performed just to win another regular round.

As the centuries have rolled on, and written literature has become the repository of cultural knowledge, and language has been successfully divorced from its need for a physically present speaker, “oral” poetry has been devalued relative to poetry transmitted by writing. Writing has become the medium through which most societies transmit their important knowledge. That the poetry of most slam poets is validated by standards based on the acceptance of their written work is evidence that a literary bias is present even in the context of an oral competition like the slam. Quite often slams are won by poems that are not performed from memory; poems that are perceived to be well-written and well-read can, and often do, place higher in the rankings than poems.
performed from memory that are perceived to be not so well-written. The performance ability of the poet is not the sole criterion for a successful poetry slam performance.

The shift from an oral discourse to a written discourse for the storage and retrieval of important knowledge has affected the evolution of individual societies and their language. Questions are then raised whether something has been lost in the shift to a literary poetics. To what degree has this shift determined what we see and how we are able to see it? Does the spoken word offer a way of knowing that is available to a culture that the written word cannot accomplish? In this community many of the audience members are not poets, sophisticated critics, or avid poetry readers. What is it about slams that they find appealing?

In the previous chapters we have looked at the culture of one particular round of poetry slams in one particular city, and we can begin to see how some of the inherent features of this culture function to satisfy the needs of this particular community. We can also begin to see this community’s needs might well point to “something” lost in the shift to a literary poetics. When we look at the needs of the community that the slam satisfies, we can see evidence of what the shortcomings of a literary poetics might be.

As I said earlier, nearly every poet involved in performance poetry events that I have interviewed expressed a need to “get the word out on the street” or to get the word to “ordinary people.” It seems the slams satisfy this need. Many poets, especially those involved in academic and other literary communities, expressed an appreciation of the poetry slams’ ability to engage or involve people outside the academic or literary community. Anyone can come to a slam and participate. There are poets who have never shown their poetry to another person who come to the slam and read. There are
also new poets who have never written poetry before coming to a slam. It is clear at the slams that some poetry is considered better or worse than others, but no poetry is excluded from entry; there is no standard that foregrounds the competition beyond the determination of quality by the particular judges on a given night. The standards of excellence at slams are based on an ever-changing set of criteria that depend on the participating members at that particular event.

We have also seen evidence of a widespread appreciation of the communal nature of poetry slams. The sense of community exhibited at poetry slams is considered to be one of its most attractive features. Roy and his family point up the value of this aspect of the poetry slam environment; the poetry slam is an environment where different people, even within one family, can get together to enjoy a common interest despite their differences. The fact that many poets come to the slam on nights that they do not read further demonstrates the appreciation of the poetry slam’s communal attributes. As Sherry stated, “I just like hanging out with other poets. I learn from them. It’s fun.” The bond of a common interest is strong. Taking up the collection for the waiter who had an accident and the concern shown for Roy’s wife when she missed the slam because of her surgery are further examples of a strong sense of community that goes beyond the common appreciation of the poetry performances. At most slams there are few participants who are not involved in some capacity, as a poet, a judge, or a friend accompanying a poet or a judge; at the slams, participants have a vested interest in the success of the event.

Another need made manifest by members of the slam community is for a non-threatening environment to expose and “test” new poetry. It is ironic that poets reading their poetry in an environment where they are judged and ranked in relation to other
poets would find the slam non-threatening. What makes the environment safe is the fact that the judging is, because of its subjectivity, understood as a pretense designed to get the audience involved rather than as a serious attempt to judge the quality of the work by some credible objective standard. Except for the judges themselves, most people at the slams, including the organizers, understand the subjectivity of the judging, and most poets are not threatened by failure to score well at a slam. The fact that the same poem performed in roughly the same way can score in the top ranking in one slam and at the bottom in another is testament that the chosen judges differ in their appreciation of the quality of a poem or its performance.

We have also seen how important it is to participants of the slams to be able to display their value system and cultural identity. One of the reasons judges seem to take their role at the slams so seriously and listen so carefully is to make sure they are gauging the quality of the performance not so differently from anyone else listening. Anyone who has been to several slams knows the quickest way to insure score creep is to boo the judges. The cultural identity of the judges is on display as well as the poets'. The degree to which the poets’ performances are accepted by the judges and the audience determines the relative agreement of values of the different participants—poets, judges, and general audience—and the tensions between them become open for discussion.

The negotiation of values may be one of the most important aspects of the slam culture. There is a sense that the poetry slams are a lowbrow parody of a highbrow, academic, elitist poetry reading. The popularity of poetry slams among marginalized poets may be evidence of a schism between conflicting value systems of the established poetry community and those who feel marginalized by or excluded from that
community. In his 1969 book, *The Ritual Process*, anthropologist Victor Turner offers an explanation for rituals that may explain part of the reason why poetry slams have risen in popularity in this culture at this time. Turner sees these types of cultural performances as sites of negotiation where disagreements with the normative established order in cultures are played out. Turner recognized a pattern in these sorts of social activities. First, there is a schism between members of the community, where competing factions form. Next, these factions attempt to redress the schism or “crisis” with formal and informal mechanisms of resolution which ultimately involve an adjustment of the original cultural situation or a recognition of the permanence of the schism. Turner proposed that the activities that took place in these sites were displays of “anti-structure,” opposing the “structure” of normal cultural operations. Such situations provide a space removed from daily activity for members of a culture to “think about how they think in propositions that are not in cultural codes but about them” (p. 22). According to Turner, these activities mark sites where conventional structures are no longer honored, and because they are often more playful and open to chance, they introduce and explore different structures that may develop into real alternatives to the status quo.

This sort of cultural self-reflexivity is common in all societies and the poetry slam may well be such a case where community values of poetry are being negotiated. Because poetry slams are especially popular among poets who consider themselves marginalized by the literary and academic communities, the slams may be a result of competing notions of value being played out according to the pattern that Turner recognized.
A good example of the way cultural values and identities are on display and judged can be seen in John’s performances. As we found out from his interview and in his performances, John has distaste for capitalism and often expresses his distaste with a confrontational tone in his writing and his performance. I believe his lack of relative success at the slams is due to the way he negotiates his anger and frustration with capitalism. As one very successful slam poet told me in an interview:

I’ve had life experiences that have humbled me; particularly, I worked with a group of people in my 9 to 5 life that would be considered “minorities.” They were all very angry and I was the “only” in the crowd. I felt enslaved by their rage, as if nothing I could do would ever make it better. It was devastating to me, not being able to make it better, to believe that we couldn’t overcome our differences. I realized that I was writing these angry feminist poems and that I was alienating people and not sending out positive messages about being female. I was saying, “listen to me, I’m a victim of patriarchal consciousness and I’m so clever that I can write poems about it. You will listen whether you like it or not.” I was talking down to them with my feminist agenda. I wanted to shock them out of their complacency. No wonder I lost them. (Majors, 1999)

John chooses to display his anger in confrontation, as this poet used to do. That his poetry is not scored highly is less about his ability as a poet or performer and more, I believe, about his inability to offer acceptable means to remedy the shortcomings of society that he perceives. The “here and now existence” of John’s present world-view and personality is put into a larger cultural context at the slam. Beyond the entertainment, the information, the moral edification, and practical advice of the poetry performances which were reported as appealing characteristics, the cultural identity of a community is displayed, negotiated, and enjoyed at slams.

The reason poets attend slams, given that many of the informants seem, on the basis of their comments and their readings, to be operating with an anti-performance bias, has to do with another aspect of what may have been left out in our shift from an oral to a literary poetics. The practical function of poetry to inform the ordinary person
of important cultural knowledge has been relegated to an almost taboo status for many contemporary poets and scholars. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “popular entertainment secures the spectator’s participation in the show and collective participation in the festivity which it occasions” (1984, p. 34). In contrast, the aesthetic point of view asks a distance from involvement. Bourdieu explains how “taste’ (i.e. manifested preferences) stratifies societies:

The aesthetic disposition, a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art. In other words, it presupposes the distance from the world which is the basis for the bourgeois experience of the world. (1984, p. 54)

As a form of class distinction, the contemplation of art is, and has been for centuries according to Bourdieu, a practice that distinguishes the common man from those who hold positions of power in society. Perceived also as a form of cultural capital, poetry has become an esoteric pursuit that is often appreciated for the very fact that it has no practical function other than to delight those with the skills to decipher it and to distinguish them from the masses. As Bordieu further suggests, the very logic of literary language, and for some its primary value, lies in a distance from simple or common ways of speaking (p. 226). As I noted earlier, people who perform poetry are interested in getting the poetry to the masses. Performing or presenting poetry to people successfully entails putting the elements of gesture, intonation, and the other missing elements of the written script back into play as means for understanding and appreciating the communication. These lived performances offer cues for understanding the poetry not otherwise available to audiences that are not as acquainted with critical literary skills required to tease out the meaning from written literature.
These poets, either consciously or unconsciously, are attempting to circumvent the means of class distinction that are based on formal education.

The communities that appear most threatened by or disdainful of the growing interest in the slam phenomenon are the established literary community and the established theatre or performing arts communities, judging from their attempts to distance themselves from this form of poetry performance. As Gates put it, most slam poetry works better on the stage than it does on the page. And it is also true that most of the performers do not have the skills of a classically trained actor or dancer or musician. But it does not follow that slam poets are wholly artless or that the slam environment is wholly baneful in its influence. Neither poetry nor performance have been the exclusive province of those who are classically trained in those arts.

Attributes of the slam environment could be seen as benefits to the enterprise of writing poetry rather than a threat. As any poet who has written for very long can tell you, reading your poetry aloud sharpens the ear and makes one more aware of the sounds and fluency of the writing. As well, evidence provided here suggests how important the slam environment can be in further publishing or exposing poets and poetry to a wider audience. Learning to present your poetry well is an important, useful, and appreciated by-product of reading in the slam environment. Also, seeing one’s poetry in relation to other poetry points up significant differences and similarities that distinguish one style or form of poetry from another. Poets learn from one another, and the slam environment, because it includes poets of all levels of sophistication and expertise, offers opportunities for furthering the poetry writing skills of its members. Overall, I believe the issues that might threaten literary and performance communities
outside the slam community arise from misinformation regarding the popular perception of poetry slams.

Because slam poets rely on skills involved with the oral communication of a written literature, another outcome of the practice is the refinement of their presentational skills. Recognizing that slams reward attributes of poetry as a verbal art inherently expands the resources available to the individual poet to create a successful performance. In addition to his or her writing abilities and language use, the poets in this forum learn to use the expressive qualities of the performance itself as a means to enhance the experience and understanding of the poem. Many of these performers display differing degrees of performance ability which factor into their success at the slam, and over time, despite their anti-performance bias, their performance ability improves.

As regards the future of the poetry slam, my hope is that the information provided in this study may serve to dispel some of the misinformation concerning any perceived threat to the literary or performance communities and the poetry writing enterprise in general. The fact that the slam exhibits a propensity to engage its listeners in the manner by which the poetry is presented offers a unique opportunity to create a wider and more appreciative audience for poetry. There are already efforts to use the slam format to bring poetry to younger audiences in schools and neighborhoods around the country due to its ability to engage members and communicate practical and meaningful issues that inform and display their unique cultural identities. Another feature of poetry slams that should interest teachers is the testimony provided by Eve that suggested the slam environment promoted poetry writing and poetry appreciation by the students in her class. Roy also claimed the slams encouraged him to write. Any
English teacher knows that anything that encourages or inspires students to write or read is a welcome benefit in their classrooms.

The increased emphasis on performance skills that poetry slams provide could also be used to further presentational and reading skills. As we saw with the transcription of the poems in Chapter Four, often the written poems are similar to scripts that offer interpretive opportunities that could be exploited in Speech classes. Learning to read poetry and deliver it well to an audience are skills that reward students and build appreciation of the literature.

Concerning the design and function of the poetry slam itself, the information that is provided in this study could prove useful in the refinement of purpose regarding the slam. For myself, as a slam organizer, this investigation has provided insights concerning how the positive structural and design elements of the poetry slams can be strengthened. For instance, I never explicitly understood how the introductions of the judges and poets played into the communal aspect of the slam environment. Understanding this element has caused me to place more emphasis on this aspect in building a more cohesive environment and to search for ways to introduce more individuals within the community. On the national level as well, I have heard many people complain about the competition becoming too focused on winning and the scoring, for example. Evidence in this study has shown how emphasis on winning is a problem inherent in this forum, and that it actually lessens the value of the slam. Efforts at refocusing the definition of winning and further downplaying the scoring might serve the poetry slam community well.

As regards the community at large, the evidence presented here suggests poetry slams provide a variety of benefits. One of the more potent benefits of the poetry slam
for the larger poetry community is the creation of a wider audience for poetry. In this community alone as a result of the popularity of the slam and the recognition of the poets who have performed there, several other poetry events have become established in the area. As I mentioned, Buzz has started a poetry event at another venue that features open mike readings. Local bookstores have sponsored readings that feature members of the slam community along with poets from the local academic and literary community. John now hosts a poetry reading in a local bar near the university. There is a reading at one local restaurant on the first Friday of every month that is organized by members of the poetry slam community. Another event that features hip-hop poetry has been established. A local public art gallery holds readings every Sunday where many slam performers are featured. Poetry readings that advertise themes such as “Southwest Poetry,” “Nature Poetry,” “Women in Poetry,” and “Louisiana Poets” have appeared in the area, and always include several poets who have performed at the Baton Rouge poetry slam. There are also several workshops and poetry writing classes in the area that have been formed in which members of the poetry slam community participate. In Baton Rouge, as a direct result of the success of the poetry slam, a variety of poets have been introduced to the community and given a public voice.

Another benefit to the community is that several “unknown” poets have surfaced in the area through exposure in the slam competitions. Poets who might not otherwise have been acknowledged publicly are now performing regularly and writing more. There are also poets who have never written before performing successfully. The number of poets in the area who are now recognized in the community through their performance at the local slam has increased dramatically. The surprising aspect of this phenomenon to me personally is that after nearly four years of weekly slam
performances there are at least three or four new poets and sometimes twice that number at every open slam. As the number of poets has grown, so has the audience. The slams now often include fifty or more audience members each night.

As Beth stated in her interview, for her, one the most important aspects of the poetry slams is watching poets improve their writing and performance skills over the course of several slams. Beth's statement implies that the poetry slam is a sort of training ground for amateur poets that employs another kind of learning tool. This experience-based form of learning allows individuals the opportunity to learn at their own pace and to develop according to their own tastes and preferences. The variety of styles and the diversity of the audience have not diminished at the Baton Rouge slam. The slam, it seems, has succeeded in bringing poetry to common people. The incorporation of the local idioms into the poetry at the slams has also created a wider appreciation of the variety of individuals who make up this community. Cajun poets perform at the slam, as well as hip-hop poets, cowboy poets, and academic poets. As the language and performance of individual poets is refined through trial and error, the poetry improves as well as the performance.

The consequences of the information in this study for further research include expanding the comparison of elements of the poetry slam within and among other communities. Examining which features of the slam influence the success or failure of slams in other communities could provide further insight into the mechanisms that contribute to its appeal. Using the information that is provided here as a reference for understanding and appreciating other poetry performance events in relation to the orality/literacy debate is a possible extension of my research. Applying this information across other slam environments in order to examine the ways society as a whole is
affected, and to discover which values are reinforced in these sorts of events elsewhere
would offer an interesting perspective of the social impact on a larger scale. The
sociological implication of democratizing poetry in this society is an issue that this
study answers only in a microcosmic perspective.

Finally, I would like to consider the question posed at the beginning of this
study based on Bauman's definition of "verbal art": does the poetry in the poetry slam
qualify as a unique genre of verbal art? I believe Donald adequately answered this
question during his interview. Donald believes that what makes poetry an art for slam
poets is the ability to breathe life into the words on a page, combine the heart with the
intellect, and, hopefully, make it poetry. Whether or not most of the poetry performed
at these four slams met Donald's criteria is debatable, but it is certain that in the eyes of
many of the members of this community some came very close, and the attempts of
others were at least recognized and appreciated. This combination of speaking and
writing has created an art form that is not completely a performing art nor a completely
literate art but rather a hybrid of the two. I believe this hybridization is a result of
competing influences in this community where language, and the communication of that
language, figure prominently in the ongoing interpretation of the very culture they
represent.
WORKS CITED


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Hammond, Buzz. Personal Interview. 16 October 2000.


Majors, Carol. Personal Interview. 19 October 1999.


Strain, Donald. Personal Interview. 18 June 2000.


Weldon, Beth. Personal Interview. 10 November 1999.

Wilson, Sherry. Personal Interview. 14 April 2000.


APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION METHOD
Transcription Symbols and Method

For several centuries now, scholars have been puzzling over the question of how to make written or printed texts that capture not only the content of an oral presentation but also its performance elements. The following is adapted from course materials developed by Professors Michael Bowman and Nathan Stuckey in their Ethnography of Communication and Performance classes. It is not perfect, but it tries to strike a balance between the readability of a straightforward prose transcript of content and the elaborate systems of notation used by some contemporary researchers, such as conversation analysis. Its main features are: (1) the use of a free verse structure (instead of prose paragraphs) to highlight discrete units of sense, phrasing, sound, or breath, and (2) the use of a few simple typographic, diacritical symbols to highlight other delivery features.

1. Verse Structure—The use of verse structure in transcribing oral materials serves practical, aesthetic, and even critical purposes. From a practical standpoint, it’s much easier to “visualize” – as well as transcribe – oral discourse on a page if we stop listening for complete sentences and pay more attention to smaller units of sound, sense, phrasing or even breathing. Although we’re trained to write in complete sentences, in everyday conversation, the sentence fragment is the rule, rather than the exception. From an aesthetic or ethical perspective, the use of verse is meant to signal a perceptual shift in how we apprehend the words of others. To put it crudely, we add a “touch of class” to their utterances by making them look like poetry, rather than ordinary, everyday prose. The main elements of verse transcripts are:

A. Treat each separate unit or phrase as a new “verse.” For example:

O.K.
Well
This is my UFO story...
It was in April, 1974
I remember cause it was my girlfriend’s birthday
And I’d gone down there to spend the weekend with her

B. If an individual “verse” runs longer than one line on the page, indent the second line (and any subsequent lines) without capitalizing the first word. For example, the first verse of the following runs on to the second and third indented lines to suggest that the speaker delivered the whole phrase as one unit, in one breath.

I bought a dog here ‘bout three or four months ago down here from an ol’ man and ended high nigh walkin’ him
And he was tellin’ me about that dog
C. Occasionally, a speaker will seem to interrupt him- or herself and deliver a brief aside that may be in a different pitch than the rest of the passage. Speakers also commonly deliver sequences of short, parallel phrases in a descending pitch and/or volume. Use the verse structure to signal such things by indenting the verse, as in the following example.

And they’re smart too
I know an ol’ boy by god
He fell on a scheme to make some money, ya know
Got hisself a bunch o’ damn dog pills
‘Stead o’ them damn-

He called ‘em smart pills, ya know
And by god he’d sell them damn things
And an ol’ boy’d come along
And he’d sell ’em a little to ‘em
And tell ‘em how smart they’d make ‘em
And he’d get a dollar a piece for ‘em

2. Other symbols—The following set of symbols is by no means exhaustive, but it adds a bit more detail than the verse structure alone permits.

**stress**  Underlining indicates stress or emphasis: who dat?

**pt**  This symbol indicates an audible lip smack or click of the tongue.

**stretch**  Colons are used to indicate extension of the sound immediately preceding; several colons may be used in proportion to the length of the extension:

He:::::::re’s Johnny.

**%word%**  Enclosing a word or phrase in percentage signs indicates that it was said more quietly than the surrounding talk.

**wha-**  Hyphen following a sound indicates a cut-off of sound, a glottal stop.

**?**  A question mark is used to indicate a rising pitch at the end of a word or phrase; the speaker may or may not be asking a question.

**.**  A period indicates a falling pitch at the end of a word or phrase. As above, the speaker may or may not have come to the end of a complete sentence.

**()**  Single parentheses are used to signal words or sounds or phrases you’re not sure about.

**(( ))**  Use double parentheses to enclose nonverbal, nonvocal sounds that can’t be described exactly.
Ellipses are used to signify pauses, with additional periods added in proportion to the length of the pause. The general rule-of-thumb is one period = 1/10th of a second of pause. (This is flexible, however; just be consistent.)

Try to write out what you hear in terms of laughter and other vocalized nonverbals, such as: “um hm:m”; “and u::h” and so forth.

Signify laughs occurring within words by using (h).

Quotation marks are used much as they are in printed literary narratives: to signify that the speaker is speaking in someone else’s voice; mimicking how someone speaks; giving you a direct quote from someone else; or reporting his/her own direct speech (or thoughts) at the time the events transpired.

The h’s indicate audible out-breaths or sighs (number may vary, as in use of colons and ellipses).

A period before h’s indicates audible in-breaths or gasps (as above, number of h’s is variable).

Use the “greater than” and “less than” signs in this way to bracket talk that is spoken at a markedly faster rate than the surrounding talk.

Use them in this way to indicate a markedly slower rate than the surrounding talk.

Commas should be used sparingly. Normally, the kinds of short pauses a comma would indicate can be represented by a verse ending. Exclamation marks may be used as they normally are.
VITA

Born in Baton Rouge on January 31, 1952, Ramon LaVelle Sibley, Jr., worked as a professional welder in his own construction company prior to pursuing his studies at Louisiana State University. He is presently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Speech Communication at Louisiana State University. In 1992, he was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in that department, with a thesis entitled Organizational Culture and the Problem of Educational Reform: An Ethnography of Middle-School Reading and English Teachers. He received a bachelor of science degree in elementary education from the Louisiana State University College of Education in 1989.

In 1997, Mr. Sibley established the Feliciana School for the Performing Arts in Ethel, Louisiana, where he teaches acting, directing, and creative writing in the evenings. While pursuing graduate studies at Louisiana State University, he taught courses on the performance of literature and public speaking as a graduate assistant in the Department of Speech Communication at Louisiana State University. He currently holds a teaching position in the department of theatre and performance at Broadmoor Performing Arts Middle Magnet School in Baton Rouge.

Mr. Sibley has directed several theatrical productions, including a series of multimedia dance performances at the Claude L. Shaver Theatre at Louisiana State University performed by “Of Moving Colors,” a professional dance company in the Baton Rouge area. He is also the founder and artistic director of Moonlark Productions, a non-profit performing arts organization.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

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Major Field: Speech Communication

Title of Dissertation: Oral Poetry in a Literate Culture: A Performance Ethnography of Poetry Slams

Approved:

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Major Professor and Chairman

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Date of Examination:

March 19, 2001