Slam Poetry and the Poetry Slam: A Research Guide

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Poetry slam, a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, emerged out of inner city Chicago in the mid 1980s. Since that time, poetry slam has made its way into mainstream America, attracting diverse crowds and avid followers. A poetry slam, by definition, is a live competition in which poets perform original poetry and are judged by preselected audience members. The focus of poetry slam is not the written word; rather, it is a celebration of the art of oral interpretation and performance with emphasis on the interaction between the poet and the audience.

A quick analysis of the term "slam" suggests an intense, abrupt, and jarring motion, an act that would conceivably receive immediate and utter attention. This term, however, is appropriate, especially considering the poetry that emerges from each slam competition (slam poetry). Because each poet must perform his original piece within the time constraints of the competition, he must seize the audience's attention and captivate them with his words. The content of slam poetry is as diverse as the poets who perform, often leaving us with a "snapshot" of a particular time, place, and culture. It is this relationship between slam poetry and community that merits and attracts research and recognition within academia. Through slam poetry, one can track the evolution of modern American culture, not through passive observation, but through the words of the individuals themselves.

This bibliography serves as a guide to faculty, students, as well as anyone outside of academia who desires quality information on slam poetry and the poetry slam. This bibliography also serves as a core list of important resources and therefore can be helpful in developing a collection on the topic. Careful selection of materials for this guide was necessary considering the scarcity of specified information on this particular subject as well as the lack of research guides covering this topic. Contained in this research guide are print and non-print resources ranging from scholarly articles and books to audiovisual and web resources. While it is important to note that the poetry slam has recently crossed international borders, this research guide

focuses on materials written/spoken in English. The resources are categorized by material type and arranged chronologically by publication date within each section to illustrate the constant evolution of poetry slam and the increasingly academic nature of the materials.

Reference Materials

Reference materials are valuable resources, especially in the beginning stages of the research process, as they provide a basis of fundamental information on a given topic. Since there is no reference book devoted specifically to poetry slam, individual articles have been selected all of which offer basic scholarly information on the poetry slam and slam poetry. While each of the following articles could stand alone based on individual intrinsic value, collectively, the articles offer a multi-perspective and more comprehensive examination of the topic.

Crown, Kathleen. "Performance Poetry." In *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, Edited by Haralson, Eric L, 555-558. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001.
> Crown divides performance poetry into two distinct categories: "a genuinely popular, grassroots movement deeply influenced by jazz, rap, and hip-hop and emerging in urban community centers […] and an avant-garde, sound-based poetry." As a part of the first category, poetry slam is defined and compared to similar movements. This article provides extensive information on the influences of poetry slam as well as significant individuals and venues associated with the movement.

Camlot, Jason. "Poetry in Performance." In *The Facts on File Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry*, Edited by Burt Kimmelman, 391-394. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2005.
> The terms "poetry in performance" or "performance poetry" refer to a broad category of literary movements that are considered to be in opposition to traditional forms of poetry and commonly focus on the *oral* performance of poetry. This article gives a basic definition for slam poetry and provides a context for slam poetry by describing various preexisting and related models of performance poetry.

Hadfield, Gordon. "Performance Poetry." In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry*, Vol. 4, Edited by Gray, Jeffrey, ed., James McCrokle, and Mary McAleer Balkun, associate eds., 1240-1241. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2006.

> This article focuses on the historical evolution of performance poetry. Hadfield presents a timeline of performance poetry movements with detailed information on the corresponding stylistic changes.

Kaye, Jeremy. "Slam Poetry." In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry*, Vol. 5, Edited by Gray, Jeffrey, ed., James McCrokle, and Mary McAleer Balkun, associate eds., 1479-1481. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2006.

> The only encyclopedia article devoted specifically to slam poetry, "Slam Poetry" provides discussions on the definition and the academic versus popular nature of poetry slam, as well as the origins, historical influences, cultural impact, and lasting legacy of poetry slam.

Books and Book Chapters

With origins outside of print culture, the recent and rapid increase of monographs published on this topic illustrates the incorporation of slam poetry into a media generally associated with academia. The intention of this section is not to provide anthologies or collections of slam poetry; rather, the following books and individual book chapters were chosen with the intention of providing scholarly information about poetry slam and slam poetry. The materials were examined and selected using a number of tools and methods such as WorldCat, book reviews, citation analysis, and bibliographies found in related monographs, journal articles, and encyclopedia articles.

Damon, Maria. "Was that 'Different,' 'Dissident,' or 'Dissonant'? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions." In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 324-342. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

> Damon examines slams and open-mike readings as poetic forms of public discourse that defy traditional poetic definitions. While slams and open-mike readings are not

necessarily "politically interventionist," Damon argues that they create "a public sphere that is a healthy contestatory." According to Damon, this public sphere is also a "spear" or weapon in the "guerrilla war for equality, freedom, and joy."

Glazner, Gary Mex, ed. *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. San Francisco: Manic D Press: Distributed to the trade by Publishers Group West, 2000.

> This publication provides a series of commentaries from noted slam poets such as Bob Holman, Patricia Smith, and Taylor Mali. General topics discussed include the origins, rules, formats, and the atmosphere of slam competitions. This book also provides a timeline of major slam events and discussions on specific topics such as slam strategies, travel/touring, the use of props, group poems, slam in the classroom, as well as slam and the academy.

Eleveld, Mark, ed. *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop and the Poetry of a New Generation*, advised by Marc Kelly Smith. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2003.

> Editor Eleveld and poetry slam creator Marc Kelly Smith trace the evolution of spoken word poetry through various forms including beat poetry, rap, hip-hop, slam, Nuyorican, Taos, and youth poetry. While providing a context for slam poetry, Eleveld celebrates the energy, creativity, and influence of spoken word poetry within the macrocosm of poetics. This book also offers commentary from individuals such as Billy Collins, Marvin Bell, and Jerry Quickley.

Blitefield, Jerry. "Populist Poetry or Rantum-Scantum? The Civil Disobedience of Poetry Slams." In *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement*, edited by Gerard A. Hauser and Amy Grim, 107-113. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004.

> Blitefield explores the significant similarities between slam poetry and ancient lyric poetry. He applies Jeffrey Walker's claim for ancient lyric poetry to slam poetry by arguing that like ancient lyric poetry, "fundamentally, slam poetry is not rooted in appreciative aesthetics but in rhetorical judgment."

Smith, Marc Kelly, and Joe Kraynak. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2004.

>Marc Kelly Smith, founder of poetry slam, offers the most comprehensive book on slam poetry with extensive information on the history of slam poetry including the individuals and venues that make up the slam community. Smith also offers in-depth technical information on the composition and performance of slam poetry as well as the organization of slam competitions.

Journal Articles

Although the quantity of scholarly journal articles on slam poetry is considerably small, the number of articles has recently been increasing indicating the gradual growth of recognition of slam poetry among the academic research community. The following articles were found using a variety of relevant databases, most importantly MLA International Bibliography, ERIC, and JSTOR. A plethora of other relevant materials from popular magazines and newspapers can be found in EBSCO's Academic Search Premier and LexisNexis.

Silesky, Barry. "Poetry/Performance: The Stage on the Page." *Another Chicago Magazine* 32-33 (Spring-Summer, 1997): 25-72.

>This collaborative collection of articles, poetry, and an interview is the only scholarly material written about slam poetry prior to 2000 and thus deserves recognition. In the introduction, Barry Sileskey comments briefly on the history, increasing popularity, and debated literary value of slam poetry.

Taylor, Henry. "Read by the Author: Some Notes on Performance." *Another Chicago Magazine* 32-33 (Spring-Summer, 1997): 25-35.

>Henry Taylor, a perceived academic formalist and self proclaimed pseudo formalist discusses his personal experience with formal academic poetry readings and slam competitions. Taylor reflects on the meaning behind unique styles of reading/reciting poetry in any setting as well as the variances between formal poetry and slam poetry. While formal poetry readings elicit the perception of literary value and lack

confrontational criticism or judgment, slam poetry welcomes judgment and aims to provide immediate pleasure to its audiences.

Smith, Marc. "Marc Smith: An Interview." *Another Chicago Magazine* 32-33 (Spring-Summer, 1997): 36-38.

> Marc Smith is said to be the founder/"grandfather" of the poetry slam and slam poetry. This is a candid and most unusual interview with a seemingly irate Marc Smith. Throughout the interview, Smith claims, among other things, that the phrase "poet of the people" is a distortion of what he actually is, that he "never intended to be responsible for anything outside of his own self-betterment," and that "the art of poetry *is* self-centered." This interview demonstrates an interesting side of Smith opposite from the characteristically charming Smith portrayed in most slam related literature.

Rodriguez, Luis J. "Crossing Boundaries, Crossing Cultures: Poetry, Performance and the New American Revolution." *Another Chicago Magazine* 32-33 (Spring-Summer, 1997): 46-50.

> Rodriguez comments on the increasing tendency of poetry to cross genre boundaries into other art forms including music, theater, video, and dance. Due to this relationship, preconceptions are challenged and distinctions between what was once either academic poetry or performance poetry are blurred. Rodriguez challenges his audience (specifically academia) to "expand the boundaries of poetic expression," thus, "expand meaningful discourse."

Bruce, Heather E., and Bryan Dexter Davis. "Slam: Hip-Hop Meets Poetry—A Strategy for Violence Intervention." *The English Journal* 89, no. 5, A Curriculum of Peace (May, 2000): 119-127.

> Bruce and Davis introduce the article by commenting on the fact that the current education system promotes structural and systemic violence in a culturally, ethnically, and personally diverse society. Bruce and Davis provide a possible method to prevent violence at the institutional and individual level by embracing a non-violent curriculum where students are able to voice their opinions through slam poetry. Bruce and Davis suggest that self-expression through slam poetry will allow students to identify and

convey their thoughts and feelings through spoken word rather than internal or external acts of violence.

Hoffman, Tyler. "Treacherous Laughter: The Poetry Slam, Slam Poetry, and the Politics of Resistance." *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 8 (2001): 49-64.

> Hoffman examines the use of humor in slam poetry as a means for deconstructing social hierarchies. Hoffman draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a "second life" or the rebellious alternative to the "official" culture. According to Hoffman, "[Slam Poetry] seeks to undo ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes." Within this context, Hoffman analyzes select poems from the above-mentioned book *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*.

Schmid, Julie. "Spreading the Word: A History of the Poetry Slam." *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 23-26 (2001-2002): 636-45.

> Schmid addresses the history of slam as it spread geographically and diverged into a multimedia phenomenon. She describes the latter as a "chaotic evolution" due to the nature of slam poetry as a performance art. Schmid even suggests that this evolution into other form such as print, CDs, videos, and the world wide web, will cause "erosions of the poetry slam's grassroots origin."

Sparks, Barbara, and Chad Grochowski. "Narratives of Youth: Cultural Critique through Spoken Word." Paper presented at the "Seminario Cientifico sobre la Calidad de la Educacion," Matanzas, Cuba, February 2002.

> This paper examines the spoken word movement as a facilitator in identity development for disenfranchised youth. With the support of adult poets, high school teachers, and organizations (such as Youth Speaks in San Francisco), young individuals are able to manipulate language through and incorporate personal experience into their poetry. According to Sparks and Grochowski, the spoken word movement provides a "critical public and educative space" for young individuals to affirm their identities through unique, personal knowledge of their individual positions within a hierarchical society.

Belle, Felice. "The Poem Performed." *Oral Tradition* 18, no. 1 (March, 2003): 14-15.

> Belle offers a brief article discussing the quality of slam poetry as a poetic form that emphasizes the combination of art and performance rather than the written word. The accessibility and communal aesthetics of slam poetry are thus enabling the gap between it and academia to shrink.

Gioia, Dana. "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture." *The Hudson Review* 56, no. 5, 55th Anniversary Issue (Spring, 2003): 21-49.

> Gioia categorizes slam as one of several forms of performance poetry to develop amidst a modern, technology-based culture where print material is just one of many options for information transmission. Gioia distinguishes slam poetry as distinctly popular insomuch that, unlike traditional literary poetry, the origins of slam poetry are not contained within "official verse culture" or the academic network of respectable literature. Rather, slam poetry is an urban phenomenon relying on competitive oral performance. As with other forms of performance poetry (cowboy poetry and hip-hop), slam has characteristically revived traditionally formal auditory techniques and has flourished due to popular appeal. Because the monopoly that the academy once held over poetry, the reason for poetry's increasing inaccessibility, is declining due to economic, demographic, and technological changes, Gioia argues that a "healthy" balance is being restored between the academy and the non-academic literary culture.

Ellis, Lindsay, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Jill L. Lamberton. "Out Loud: The Common Language of Poetry." *The English Journal* 93, no. 1 (September, 2003): 44-49.

> Ellis, Gere, and Lamberton propose the use of slam poetry as an alternative or supplement to "ineffective poetry instruction," or the traditional instruction method which combines reading of printed poetry with teacher explication. This article describes a workshop on slam poetry and suggests that its use in the classroom will foster a better understanding of and connection to the poetry itself.

Gehring, John. "Outsiders' Art." *Education Week* 24, no. 37 (May, 2005): 25-29.

"Outsiders' Art" is a documentary style article that follows the journey of a group of teenagers from Washington D.C. to a teen poetry slam in San Francisco. By interviewing and analyzing the team members, Gehring resolves that regardless of its growing popularity, slam poetry remains an "outsiders' art" as it attracts individuals whom are "put down" and whose voices are not heard.

Sommers-Willett, Susan B. A. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38, no. 1 (Spring, 2005): 51-73.

Sommers-Willett explores the relationship between the poet and audience at slam competitions, especially the criterion used by audience members to evaluate the poem and, more importantly, the poet. According to Sommers-Willett, most slam poems are perceived by the audience as first-person narratives or the poet's "performance of identity." She argues that "*how* the slam poets perform their identities is just as important as *what* they say about their identities." She further describes the tendency of slam audiences to reward the marginalized identities as more "authentic."

Dissertations

Initially, slam poetry was categorized as a distinctly popular poetic form. However, the increasing recognition of slam poetry among graduate students (as demonstrated through the following dissertations) indicate, yet again, poetry slam's transition from a popular art to an art acknowledged and researched by the academic community. The following dissertations were found using ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. They provide current and historical information about slam poetry from both literary and social perspectives.

Harrington, John Joseph, Ph.D. "Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern United States Poetics." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995.

This study traces the historical variances of the meaning of "poetry" in the United States resulting from the inception of various social movements, new varieties of media, and political crises. Through the examination of both literary and spoken poetics throughout history, this study highlights the poetries' "social form." Harrington contends that US

academics distinguish poetry's social form as separate from "American literature." He also argues that the cultural meaning of US "poetry" is shifting yet again as increasing numbers of individuals generate, perform, and propagate poetry outside of academia by means of poetry slams and other similar formats.

Pihel, Erik Rein, Ph.D. "Post-literate Poetry: Toward an Aesthetics of Popular Art." PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1997.

>This dissertation attempts to define "popular art" by examining the historical relationship between poetry and technology. According to Pihel, the present society's propensity to store information electronically combines oral, chirographical, and typographic characteristics to create a unique culture. Pihel further argues that electronic media used for the creation, storage, and dissemination of poetry combined with the format of poetry slams as freestyle competitions democratizes the creation and propagation of poetry, therefore, generating a distinctly "popular art."

Schmid, Julie Marie, Ph.D. "Performance, Poetics, and Place: Public Poetry as a Community Art." PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2000.

>Schmid explores the evolving nature of poetry through examination of the following contemporary performance poets: Marc Smith, David Hernandez, Patricia Smith, and Bob Holman. Through the analysis of individual aspects of performance including "the voice, music, the body on stage, and the dialogic relationship between performer and audience," Schmid argues that the performance poetry movement attempts to form connections within a society divided by ethnic, racial, class, and gender lines.

Low, Bronwen Elisabeth, Ph.D. "Spoken Word: Exploring the Language and Poetics of the Hip Hop Popular." PhD diss., York University (Canada), 2001.

>This study explores the evolutionary nature of language and communication through the spoken word forms of slam poetry and rap. Low argues that popular youth cultures manifest and guide the evolution of language and communication, especially in a progressive society influenced by cultural and technological developments.

Sibley, Ramon LaVelle, Jr., Ph.D. "Oral Poetry in a Literate Culture: A Performance Ethnography of Poetry Slams." PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2001.

> Sibley investigates the organizational culture of poetry slams as events that combine spoken and written word in a social context. This study examines the events, poets, and performances from four poetry slams that took place in June and July of 1999 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Through this examination, Sibley aims to outline the distinguishing features of poetry slams that create meaning for those who participate.

Sommers-Willett, Susan B. Anthony, Ph.D. "Authenticating Voices: Performance, Black Identity, and Slam Poetry." PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2003.

> This study explores the actualization and authentication of marginal identities through slam poetry. Sommers-Willett focuses on the relationship between African American poets and white middle-class audiences. She analyzes slam's literary and performative predecessors including blackface minstrel shows, Beat era poetry readings, and the Black Arts movement. This study also examines the tendency of predominately white audiences to deem the performances of African American poets as "authentic" because of what Sommers-Willett terms "fetishism." Finally, this study explores the commercialization of slam and commoditization of blackness at poetry slams.

Maddalena, Cheryl Jean Psy.D. "The Resolution of Internal Conflict through Performing Poetry." PsyD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2004.

> This study investigates the psychological benefits of performing poetry. Specifically, Maddalena questions the relationship between participation in slam competitions and internal conflict resolution.

Johnson, Amber Lauren Ph.D. "'We Don't Write Just to Write; We Write to be Free': A Rhetorical Ethnography of Spoken Word in Los Angeles." PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2006.

> Johnson offers a rhetorical ethnographic study of the artistic sub-culture spoken word. This study reveals that spoken word poets attempt to resist the dominate ideologies of a

hegemonic society through collective assembly and performing discourse. This study suggests that, through the transgression of dominant ideologies, poets are able to actualize and validate personal experience. Conversely, this study also illustrates the ways in which spoken word poets support and reinforce dominant ideologies.

Audiovisual Materials

Deutsch, David, Spencer Michels, Elizabeth Farnsworth, Roger Bonair-Augard, and Ariana Waynes. *Poetry Slam*. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2000.
> The documentary film *Poetry Slam* offers a discussion of the increasing popularity of the poetry slam by two influential poets, Roger Bonair-Augard and Ariana Waynes. The second section of the film demonstrates the positive influence of the poetry slam on disenfranchised youth illustrated through organizations such as the Youth Poetry Slam League which is sponsored by San Francisco WritersCorps.

Delvin, Paul. *Slamnation*. [United States]: Slammin' Entertainment, 2004.
> *Slamnation* is a documentary film covering the 1996 National Poetry Slam held in Portland Oregon. The film crew captured the culture and atmosphere of the event as they followed several teams on their journey to the National Poetry Slam.

Web Resources

The simultaneous rise of the poetry slam and the World Wide Web indicates the interconnectedness between the two. For the poetry slam, the Web has become a means of expression and communication for the slam poets and fans. It is a mechanism that has allowed for the exponential growth of the poetry slam as well as a repository of information for the ever-evolving slam community. The following sites have been chosen based on quality of construction, content, accessibility, and purpose.

Poetry Slam, Inc. http://www.poetryslam.com/

Founded in August of 1997, Poetry Slam, Inc. is the official non-profit organization that oversees the international coalition of poetry slams. This site provides information on poets, competitions/tournaments, as well as current events within the slam community. The site also provides extensive lists of resources ranging from books, anthologies, and instructional materials to CDs, DVDs, audio downloads, and video downloads. Though these resources are available for purchase through the site, the lists themselves provide useful information as to the titles, authors, editors, publishers, and formats of available resources.

"Press" http://www.slampapi.com/2007/press.htm

Located at this address is a chronological list of print articles (newspaper and magazine) devoted to poetry slam. The list contains articles from 1986 through 2000.

LivePoetsDotCom http://www.livepoets.com

Considering the nature of the poetry slam as a performance art, this site is useful in that it contains a large collection of freely streamed poetry slam videos and MP3 audios. The collection of audiovisual materials is arranged according to an alphabetical list of poets. A photograph, short biography, and links to other websites containing further information on each poet are also provided.

An Incomplete History of Slam   http://www.epoets.net/library/slam/

This site provides a considerably in-depth history of the poetry slam and the individuals or groups of individuals involved. "Incomplete" suggests the continuous evolution of the movement which started in Chicago at the Greenmill and expanded from there.

Slamnation http://www.slamnation.com

This site is devoted to "Slamnation" and offers information on the documentary itself as well as the cast. The "Cast" link from the homepage provides a list of the cast members/poets with links to websites containing further information, interviews, and published works by the poets.