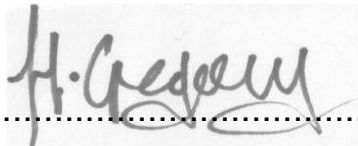


**Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in  
U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses**

Submitted by Helen Gregory, to the University of Exeter as a  
thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, July  
2009.

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### **Acknowledgements**

After a research project representing several years of full time research there is inevitably a long list of people to thank. In particular, this research would not have been possible without the generosity and support of countless members of slam and performance poetry communities in the U.K. and U.S.. I would particularly like to thank: Mee Ng, Ebele Ajogbe, Alvin Lau and Soul and Donna Evans, who offered up their homes, spare beds and sofas to me; everyone who spent valuable hours talking to me about performance poetry and slam, in particular Kurt Heintz, Matthias Burki, Jacob Sam-La Rose and the late Pat West who each sent me lengthy and informative e-mails; Jenny Lindsay and Russell Thompson for offering me their guest tickets to the fantastic Latitude Festival in 2006; and my good friend Paul Vallis, who endured many hours of research-related monologues. I would also like to express my gratitude to the British Sociological Association for financial support for travel expenses to London slams. Finally, I wish to thank Professors Grace Davie and Tia De Nora at the University of Exeter, Dr Maggie O'Neill at Loughborough University and the anonymous reviewers of the journals *Ethnography and Education* and *Oral Tradition* for their comments on earlier drafts of this thesis and on papers which arose from these.

Never did any science originate, but by a poetic perception.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1904: 365)

**Abstract**

This thesis aims to provide a close analysis of poetry slam in the United Kingdom and United States, using the tools of ethnography and discourse analysis to produce an in-depth account, which is sensitive to the discursively constructed, situated meanings of slam participants. The aim is to explore how slam is understood by its participants, producing a partial ethnography, rather than a definitive history, defence or critique of slam.

The thesis is based predominantly on research conducted in four key sites (Bristol and London in the U.K. and Chicago and New York in the U.S.), and considers how slam has been reconstructed in different geographical and social contexts. In addition, this study seeks to highlight issues around: the ways in which artists understand art worlds and their positions within them; the multiple and complex power relations with which art world participants engage; the transient, enduring and virtual communities which art world participants form; the local, translocal and transnational networks which connect these communities and individuals; and the interactions between new/avant-garde and established/dominant art worlds.

It is hoped that this analysis will enrich substantially the existing meagre body of research into poetry slam, providing valuable theoretical contributions to the study of art worlds and the social construction of self and relationships. Beyond this, the thesis aims to elucidate a social scientific paradigm which links micro level analyses with macro level social structures and processes, by allying work from multiple theoretical perspectives including those of interactionism, Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu and discourse analysis. This paradigm is mobilised to illuminate how slam participants actively construct their identities and negotiate the complex power relations which structure their everyday interactions.

In line with the poetic focus of this research, each analytic chapter of this thesis concludes with a haiku. I begin with this thought:

Power relations  
Are complex navigations  
Through interaction.

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**Additional Submissions**

DVD of poetry slam clip (Cook and Dak, 2006)

**List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

- BBC British Broadcasting Corporation, a media organisation which  
airs a host of national and international television and radio  
programmes and also broadcasts over the internet
- BME 'Black' and minority ethnic
- CMRC Chicago Municipal Reference Collection, a collection of  
documents held at the Chicago Public Library, including most city  
documents published since the mid 1800s, maps, city ordinances  
and the *Journal of the City Council* from 1858 onwards
- DJ Disc jockey, also spelt deejay, used to denote people who select and  
play (usually music) tracks at events or over media like the radio  
and internet. DJ can also refer to musicians who sing or speak  
over records. In this latter sense, the term is typically associated  
with reggae or dancehall music.
- GWR Great Western Radio, a radio network airing programmes from Bristol,  
Bath and Wiltshire
- HBO Home Box Office Inc., a U.S. based cable television network defined by  
its owners, Time Warner, as 'America's most successful premium  
television company' (Time Warner, 2007: Para. 1)
- HTV Now ITV West and Wales Ltd., this is the largest biggest commercial  
television network in the U.K. and comprises fifteen regional  
licences (ITV, 2007)
- Improv. Improvisation, an oral performance of a piece which is composed  
during the performance, rather than being written beforehand
- MC Master of Ceremonies or Microphone Controller, another name for a hip  
hop artist, can also be used to denote the host of an event,  
sometimes spelt 'emcee'
- NYC New York City
- NPS The National Poetry Slam, an annual event held in the United  
States, where teams from across the country (and some teams  
from elsewhere) compete against each other
- ONS Office of National Statistics, 'the government department responsible for  
collecting and publishing official statistics about the UK's society

	and economy ... ONS carries out the ten-yearly census and is also responsible for the registration of vital events in England and Wales through the General Register Office.' (ONS, 2007)
Open mic.	Open microphone, an event where anyone can perform, sometimes spelt 'open mike'
Para.	Used to refer to the paragraph from which information is derived, where a page number is not applicable
PSI	Poetry Slam Inc., the national organisation concerned with monitoring slams in the United States and organising the National Poetry Slam
WHPC	The World Heavyweight Poetry Championship, an annual competitive poetry event held in Taos, New Mexico every year from 1982 until 2003
UCB	U.S. Census Bureau, a government department which conducts surveys yearly and every five years, as well as being responsible for a nationwide census every decade (see <a href="http://www.census.gov">www.census.gov</a> )
U.K.	The United Kingdom
U.S.	The United States of America
YCA	Young Chicago Authors, a creative writing organisation based in Chicago which runs a year round programme of workshops, shows, slams and other activities with young people

**Preface: In the Beginning was the Word**

*It is 3rd December 2006. I am sitting in the bar of the Stratford Theatre Royal in London to witness the Word Up Grand Slam Final.<sup>101</sup> Most of the room is dimly lit, and the fifty plus individuals who are clustered around its twenty tables are quiet and attentive. Our attention is focused on a small, slightly raised corner, where a spotlit poet stands behind a single microphone. Joshua Idehen is an engaging presence, still in body, yet turning somersaults with his voice and words. At times funny, but with an underlying seriousness, he tells of a sadistic schoolteacher who used to make him and his classmates run for miles. When he finishes, the room fills up with applause and cheers. He returns to his seat in the audience, where his companions land congratulatory slaps on his back.*

*As he leaves the compere, Kat Francois, takes the stage. The (often comic) banter which characterises her compering is less in evidence tonight than it has been on my previous visits here, and she tells us that she is losing her voice. This does not seem to dent the obvious pleasure which she takes in the poets' performances though, and she is smiling broadly as she asks the audience if they like what they have heard. In response, I hold the laminated 'Word Up' card I have been given enthusiastically above my head. Many of those around me do the same, and Kat points to each in turn, as she counts them up. She writes something down in her notebook (presumably recording the score), and moves on to introduce the next slammer. As she does, the low level chatter which has filled the room begins to die down, so that, by the time the next performer has reached the stage, we are all quiet and attentive once more.*

*'I've gone straight into my poems before, 'cause I'm nervous. I know I'm supposed to interact with you, but I won't' he begins. Judging by the uneasy grin on his face, he is only half joking, and I notice a number of audience members nodding sympathetically as he launches into his poem...*

*This vignette offers an account of one of the many poetry slams which I have attended and one of twenty-one which form the backbone to this study. It took*

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<sup>101</sup> In order to represent as full an account as possible of this slam, I have gained permission from those concerned to use the real names of the performers and event in this Preface.



me some time to decide which event to write about. Over the course of my research I have observed adult and youth slams in London, Bristol, New York, Chicago and (less frequently) in other locations around the U.K. and the U.S.. I have participated as a poet, judge, organiser and audience member. My experiences at each of these slams were all valuable and unique, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to dig out a 'typical' slam from this rich experiential archive.

The Word Up slam, though, seemed as good a place to start this journey as any other. It came near the end of my own (academic) exploration into slam, and was both strange and familiar to me by this point. I had just finished a summer of data collection in the U.S. and the contrasts between slam in the two countries were still fresh in my mind. I knew many of the performers I saw on stage that night and was sitting at a table with friends whom I met both through and before my research. In many ways, being at the Theatre Royal again was like coming home, but the differences between all the slams which I had encountered in the last year, and the potential for analysis which they each presented, were bickering for attention in my mind. This thesis represents the untangling of many of those chaotic, frustrating and inspirational threads which were busily knotting themselves together more tightly as I sat in the audience that night. I begin with the seeds of my own interest and involvement in poetry which germinated more than two decades earlier...

## **SECTION A: RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS**

The first section of this thesis establishes the foundations upon which the research was built, discussing the collection of primary and secondary data and the contexts within which this study took place. Chapter One presents a reflexive discussion which bookends the research process, beginning with an account of the study's early stages and ending with reference to a publication which fed into the thesis near its completion. Chapter Two explores how poetry slam may best be defined and considers some of the influences on its emergence and development. Chapter Three continues on from this with a discussion of the different art worlds with which slam intersects, and the role of community and individualism in slam. Chapter Four maps out the theoretical framework of this research and takes a look at a number of prominent approaches to the sociological study of the arts. Chapter Five discusses the methodological implications of this theoretical stance, looking both at the abstract principles of the methodology adopted and at how this has unfolded in practice. Finally, Chapter Six situates slam in relation to the geographical and social contexts with which this thesis is concerned.

## **Chapter One: A Poet's Perspective on Slam**

A poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote.

~Yevgeny Yentushenko (1982)

The poet ... may be used as a barometer, but let us not forget that he is also part of the weather.

~ Lionel Trilling (1950)<sup>102</sup>

Very little social scientific research is conducted without the researcher/s having some personal involvement in the field. Indeed, many scholars are prompted to study a particular topic precisely because of this. As Allen (1999) remarks, it is their closeness to a field which often gives researchers the idea to begin studying a topic and the energy to finish. I am no exception to this, and it was my experiences as a member of U.K. based performance poetry and slam communities which inspired this research. Prior to beginning the study, I was already active as a poet, event organiser and audience member in slams across the U.K. (particularly in Bristol). My work has since taken me into contact with slam participants in other sites in the U.K., the U.S. and beyond. In the process, I have learnt a great deal about slam and performance poetry, and the communities and art forms with which they intersect.

Through conducting this research, I have placed myself in a new relationship to the slam community, learning to see through an academic's eyes the world which I had already encountered as a poet. In part, this meant developing a less partial understanding of slam and coming to realise that my experiences may differ substantially from those of other slam participants. In particular, my evolving ideas were necessarily restricted by the U.K. context in which I had previously encountered slam. Indeed, the differences between this and U.S. based slam continued to surprise me right to the end. I was unprepared, for instance, for how emotive my analysis proved to be for some U.S. based slam

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<sup>102</sup> Quotations taken from <http://www.quotegarden.com/poetry.html> (Accessed: 22.06.06)

participants, when compared to the more detached interest displayed by many of their U.K. counterparts.

Conducting this research has also impacted on my role as a poet, leading me to perform in poetry slams and shows which I would not otherwise have attended. In this way, my identities as a poet and academic can be seen to exist alongside each other and to have developed in tandem. It is not possible to wholly divorce the two. Indeed, as Clifford and Marcus, (1986: 10) note, social researchers 'constantly construct themselves through the others they study'. Nonetheless, my aim here is to make transparent my role within the performance poetry and slam communities which I studied, describing the interests, motivations and perspectives which have influenced my research. This is intended not only to clarify my epistemological position and the nature of my interest in slam, but also to introduce you, the reader, to the world of slam. In doing so, I hope to provide you with a glimpse of what is to come and to pass on just a little of the enthusiasm which I have for slam and performance poetry, both as an academic and as a poet.

## **1.1 Personal Background**

My interest in poetry goes back to my childhood. I was a prolific composer of poetry before I was even old enough to hold a pen. Aside from writing the odd poem for friends and relatives however, I never really *did* anything with my work. My poetry lay in notebooks and files, gathering dust on the bookshelves of my room. I didn't really think that they would ever be published and the idea of performing them never occurred to me. It wasn't until I encountered (and performed in) my first slam in the summer of 2000 that I began to take poetry seriously and to think of myself as a poet.

The slam was held in Stroud, a small English town in the heart of the Cotswolds, and the place where I grew up. I had heard of slams before, but I didn't really know what to expect. I thought that the room would be full of local poets, reading their work off the page, with a certain reserve and formality. I

expected a form of poetry recital; what I saw was very different. Few of the poets read their work directly off the page. Instead they delivered their poems like theatrical monologues, using their body and voice to dramatic effect.<sup>103</sup> It wasn't just local writers either. Poets had come from Leicester, Reading, Cheltenham and other cities across the U.K. to compete.

This event opened my eyes to the possibilities of poetry. I wanted to be as entertaining, charismatic and funny a performer as the poets I saw that evening. This was something I yearned to be part of; something I could relate to. Slam, it seemed, was poetry with attitude and the people who performed it were like me. Contrary to my preconceived (and somewhat stereotypical) ideas of what poets were like, these artists wore not a single black beret or leather-patched tweed jacket between them.

About a fortnight later I entered another slam, but this time I was better prepared. I had written a poem modelled on the slam style I observed that first evening in Stroud. It was funnier and snappier than my first attempt and I didn't read it off the page. I performed it – or at least tried to. I enjoyed performing my poetry. It meant that it had a destination, instead of remaining unread and unheard in dusty files. I was surprised and pleased to find that I could entertain an audience; that I could make a group of people laugh and think with my words.

Slam also turned me on to other people's poetry. Whilst I occasionally read poetry in anthologies and magazines, it often felt more like an obligation than a pleasure. Slam poetry, on the other hand, was engaging and entertaining. I enjoyed watching people perform their work and still do. My bookshelves are now full of poetry books, but they are mostly slim booklets of self-published poetry, by poets whose performances I have seen and admired. When I read these books I can hear the poets performing their work and their poetry comes alive for me. More importantly perhaps, these books are outnumbered by the poetry CDs which I have acquired over the last few years and which present those voices to me in a more direct and three-dimensional form.

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<sup>103</sup> See Foley (2002: 15-163) for an account of a slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York, which conveys a similar impression to this.

Performing my poetry has had a dramatic impact on the quality, style and subject matter of my work. My writing was rarely humorous and generally very personal before I began performing. While I may have secretly harboured a desire to publish my work, these poems were essentially written for me alone. Now my poetry is composed with an audience in mind. I try to write words that will make people laugh or sit back and reflect. I call myself a poet now, but not just any poet – a *performance* poet. Like many performance poets, I am keen to try to dispel the negative image which poetry has in the U.K. and I find that slams are a great way to do that. The poetry in slams is often accessible and entertaining. Slam may not be a mainstream activity, but it does appeal to people who have previously dismissed poetry as irrelevant and inaccessible. Slam has expanded poetry audiences beyond the realm of poets and a few of their close friends.

My interest in studying slam came partly from this wish to spread the news about performance poetry and partly from a desire to find out more about it. I wanted to understand why people invested so much time and energy in performing poetry, when the concrete benefits are so meagre. Performance poetry remains a minority pursuit and is unlikely to bring any great renown to its practitioners. Neither is it the way to seek your fortune. Most performance poets have a day job which pays the bills and the few who work full time as poets are unlikely to be particularly affluent. Poetry shows and slams are rarely (if ever) big earners for their organisers either. Instead, many lose money or barely break even. Yet the poets and poetry organisers I know are highly driven. Many slam poets spend hours writing and rehearsing their poetry and will travel for miles to perform in a slam or show.

The first piece of research which I conducted in this field looked precisely at this issue (Gregory, 2006). I used a combination of focus groups and Q methodology to uncover eight distinct narratives, which performance poets draw on to explain why they perform their poetry in front of audiences. This was an exploratory, social psychological study, which offered a tantalising glimpse into the world of performance poetry; but for me, it raised more questions than it

answered. I wanted to know more about this community in which I was so involved.

I concluded my paper with a series of questions, which I felt that future studies could profitably address:

How are these discourses constructed in society?<sup>104</sup> How do performance accounts differ between different types of performer or at different stages of performers' careers? and: What implications do these accounts have for performers? (Gregory, 2006: 61)

The expansion of this research into a PhD and the disciplinary shift from psychology to sociology has enabled me to begin to look at some of these questions more closely, but it has also led to the introduction of new and unexpected questions.

## **1.2 Developing a Research Focus**

Deciding what exactly to study next was no easy matter. I was faced with a vast, under-explored field, into which I had done little more than shine a weak beam of light. Inevitably, my focus developed considerably from the position in which I found myself at the end of my first, tentative study in this area. For example, I was initially intrigued by performance poetry as a whole, rather than by slam specifically. In this respect, my research interests mirrored my interests as a poet. Whilst I was still performing my poetry on a regular basis, I rarely did so in slams, finding that they imposed unwelcome restrictions on the kinds of poems which I was able to write and perform. My slam poetry tended towards three minute long pieces, for instance, which fit neatly into the time limit set for the majority of events I competed in, but created an artificial uniformity in my work. I worried that slam might nurture a particular style of poetry, which could

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<sup>104</sup> Whilst there is some debate over the precise meaning of the term 'discourse'. The following is sufficient for the purposes of this thesis: '...a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995: 48).

prove to be restricting. In contrast, performance poetry as a whole incorporates a broad range of styles and formats, which were fascinating to me both as poet and as researcher.

When I began to think in more concrete terms about my research, however, the need to sharpen my focus became obvious. Performance poetry may represent a diversity and complexity which surpasses the boundaries of slam, but this also makes it difficult to grasp and time consuming to study. Slam offers a tangible entrance into the performance poetry world; its poetry shows, open mic. nights,<sup>105</sup> workshops and social events. It also represents one of the pivots on which many performance poetry communities rotate. Thus, my research became centred increasingly on slam.

Having decided on this topic, I began to read more about it. I knew that very little academic work had been produced on slam, but what I didn't realise was how limited the focus was of the books, journal papers, magazine articles, weblogs and other studies, records and musings which did exist. I found that the papers and books I was reading all subscribed to a similar, rather limited, American-centric view of slam. The style of slam poetry they described was alien to me. I was used to slams full of funny poetry, with poets seeking primarily to entertain the audience. U.S. slam appeared to be a different thing altogether, dominated by serious political poetry, hip hop-influenced raps and poems exploring the poet's identity. These geographical variations seemed to me to be a key characteristic of slam, which had been overlooked in the literature to date. I felt that it was important to tell a story which embraced such diversity. One of the aims of this research, then, was to understand how slam develops differently in distinct contexts.

Of course, there are also similarities between slam in these sites. One of these is the emphasis which many slam participants place on community. There is a strong slam community, or rather there are many slam communities, existing on local, translocal and transnational levels. The poets in these communities socialise with, and support, each other. They book each other for shows and

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<sup>105</sup> Poetry and music open mic. nights are common in the U.S., the U.K. and beyond, and work on the ethos that anyone who wishes to perform can do so.



offer up their spare beds and sofas to visiting artists. They invite each other to parties and chat at bars, poetry shows and over the internet. Some slams are labelled as national or international contests, others make no such claims, but many break beyond the bounds of the 'local' artistic community to some extent.

If I go to a slam in Cheltenham, Bristol or Oxford I know that I am likely to meet poets from cities like Reading, Manchester and London, as well as those from the local area. Slam poets travel to other countries to perform too. I have seen visiting poets from Canada and the U.S. perform in Bristol many times and know of a number of British poets who have repaid the favour. These individuals perform on the same bill as local artists. They interact with them before, during and after the show, and the seeds of many long term friendships have been sown in poetry slams. In the U.S. (and to a lesser extent the U.K.) there are established touring routes, which represent national networks of slam poets and organisers, and there are also transnational networks linking slam participants in these countries. I was interested in learning more about what these interactions, within and between different sites, could reveal about: the meaning and significance which slam has for its participants; the performance of identities both on and off the slam stage; how slam impacts on communities outside of its own; and the nature of art worlds more generally.

### **1.3 Defining the Field**

Based on my experiences of slam across the U.K. and my preliminary reading around the area, I began to work towards locating a research sample. In order to explore the differences between slam in the U.S. and U.K. and to gain a wider perspective on slam as it is played out in different locales, I needed to study slam in several sites. Since slam is something of an urban phenomenon, this meant basing my research in several U.S. and U.K. cities. My position within the local slam community made Bristol a natural choice for the location of one of these case studies. I already had some knowledge about the Bristol slam scene, which enabled me to identify interesting people and events to study. These connections placed me in the enviable position of being able to

observe local slams and other poetry shows without being overly conspicuous. Further, the links between the Bristol slam scene and other scenes across the U.K. and the U.S. meant that it could also provide a base from which to begin to explore slam in other geographical contexts.

As I learnt more about slam in the U.K., I discovered that London was the first city to host slams in the country. This important role in the early development of U.K. slam indicated that the city may be a valuable site for a further case study. It was also clear to me that slam in London was much more closely linked to the U.S. slam community than was slam in Bristol, suggesting some interesting points of departure between slam in these two cities. This early observation was confirmed as I began to attend events in London and to make contacts with slam participants there. I realised that there were many respects in which slam differed between London and Bristol and that drawing samples from both sites could prove fruitful. Studying slam in Bristol and London would enable me to explore local slam scenes and give me an insight into translocal and transnational slam networks; however it was apparent that I would need to look at U.S. based slam if I were to create a more full and detailed narrative of slam's emergence and development. Thus, I decided to base my research in four key geographical sites, two in the U.K. and two in the U.S..

As I delved further into slam in the U.S., I began to notice links between styles of U.S. based slam poetry and rap. It became apparent that hip hop had played a notable role in the evolution of U.S slam. Many U.S. slam poets used rapping, beatboxing<sup>106</sup> and other techniques borrowed from hip hop music. I had encountered this only rarely on U.K. slam stages, and it seemed to be an avenue which was well worth exploring further. It was in this context that I first began to think about New York City (NYC) as a potential research site.

NYC is not only the birthplace of hip hop, but also home to a strong slam scene, (being one of the first cities in the U.S. to run slams). Further, NYC venues like The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, host regular nights dedicated to both slam and hip

<sup>106</sup> Beatboxing is a form of 'vocal percussion' (Carroll, 2006) in which the performer uses their mouth to create beats, rhythms and melodies. It is often associated with hip hop, but is becoming increasingly common amongst performance poets (see also Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 48; [www.beatboxing.com](http://www.beatboxing.com)).

hop. It seemed that closer study of slam here may reveal valuable insights into the intersection of rap and slam. Whilst I did not ultimately choose to pursue this link in any depth it did prove to be a valuable starting point, prompting me to think more about the intersection of art worlds and the development of slam styles in different sites. Further NYC's prominent position in slam, in the U.S. and beyond, meant that my research here revealed many valuable insights concerning the continuing (re)construction of slam.

My final case study was set in Chicago. Chicago is the city in which slam first reared its head and was therefore a natural choice. It is still home to a number of key figures from slam's formative days. I felt that these individuals could offer up uniquely interesting and valuable perspectives and experiences on slam. In addition, the Chicago slam scene differed from that in NYC in several significant ways. Slams are held far less frequently in Chicago than New York, for example, and the city is less associated with hip hop or with the direct, political style common in New York slam.

The staging of a slam requires a range of tasks to be performed, many of which may not be obvious to the audience on the night. Venues must be booked; flyers must be designed and produced; poets must be contacted, welcomed, hosted and introduced; they must compose, rehearse and perform their work; score cards must be prepared; money must (often) be taken on the door; drinks must be served; sound equipment must be sourced, transported and operated; and so on. Whilst several of these activities are often carried out by a single individual, the successful accomplishment of a slam inevitably results from the collaborative efforts of a host of different people.

Of all those who participate in slam, poets are the group who are involved most heavily in these activities. Indeed, poets almost always perform some additional role at slam events, frequently acting as audience, comperes, organisers, judges and educators. They thus offer access to a range of different perspectives. For this reason, I chose to focus predominantly on poets in this research. Doing so, also enabled me to redress the greater attention which has typically been paid to artistic consumption (compared to production)

in the literature, and to build on my previous research and personal experiences regarding poets' understandings of their art.

I decided, then, to observe slams and related events in Bristol, London, New York and Chicago, and to interview slam poets based in each of these four cities. As my research progressed, I also identified key slam participants based elsewhere, who I felt could contribute valuable insights into the (re)construction of slam. Youth slam was particularly significant in this regard, and the development of my research in this area led me to focus on events and participants spread across a number of different geographical sites. (See section 5.4 for more on this.) Thus my study developed and, much like slam itself, expanded in ways which could not have been predicted at the outset.<sup>107</sup>

#### **1.4 Reading Slam: The End of the Journey?**

This organic evolution continued up until the last possible moment. Indeed, one development which I could not have foreseen occurred just as I was in the process of redrafting my thesis. This was the publication of a book on the history of NYC slam, written by Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz (2008). Whilst *Words in Your Face* is more of a biography (perhaps even autobiography) of the NYC slam scene than it is an academic work, it is nonetheless the first time that such a comprehensive work on slam has been published.\_

I first found out about this book when I travelled to NYC in 2006; however I was unable to secure an interview with its author, and was forced to wait for the book's official release to find out more. When this time came, it was too late in the day to allow me to make substantial revisions to my thesis. (Although I was able to include several less weighty references to the book.) Thankfully, however, I found that such alterations were not necessary. Whilst it did not resonate strongly with my understanding of U.K. based slam, much of what I read here echoed my experiences of researching slam in the U.S.. The tensions and controversies which rage around slam, for example, were

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<sup>107</sup> See Gregory (2007a, b) for a more in-depth reflexive account of my experiences of studying slam from the initial definition of this study up until the beginnings of data analysis.

apparent in chapter headings like *A very quick and slanted prehistory by someone who wasn't there*, and continued to be rehearsed throughout. Indeed, the sensitivity of U.S. slam participants to the analysis of their world, which I was so unprepared for, is something which seems to have come as no surprise to O'Keefe Aptowicz, herself a long time participant in U.S. slam.

In addition, O'Keefe Aptowicz underlines many of the key themes in this thesis. She presents and discusses slam participants' concerns around: community and individualism; competition and status; the commodification of slam; the nature and existence of slam poetry; (ethnic/sexual) diversity in slam; the interaction and impact of slam on other art forms; the importance of authenticity; and youth slam as a bridge between popular youth culture and the academy. Finally, the book's omission of, and distance from, U.K. slam, reinforces the contrasts between slam here and in the U.S., as well as the disparate positions of these countries in slam's hegemonic structure.

Whilst O'Keefe Aptowicz's work lacks a sense of slam as a global phenomenon, the historical perspective which she adopts allows her to capture something of its dynamism. Specifically, she addresses how perceptions, participants, event structures and poetry/performance styles have changed throughout slam's evolution, suggesting that, for example, narratives of unjust oppression (which I discuss in Chapter Nine) are just a recent trend in the wider evolution of U.S. slam poetry. Thus, she sacrifices geographical for historical breadth. Ultimately, then, *Words in Your Face* emphasised to me the impossibility of ever creating more than a partial account of the small part of the world on which we choose to focus, whether as academics, biographers, critics or poets.

## **1.5 Conclusions**

In conclusion, my interest in slam developed from (and was sustained by) my own experiences within performance poetry and slam communities in Bristol

and throughout the U.K.. I began by wanting to discover more about performance poets, why they perform and how they talk about themselves, and gradually honed my research to focus specifically on slam. As I read more about this, I realised that an artificial picture of homogeneity was being presented, which did not resonate at all with my own experiences. I thus resolved to build up a picture of the development of slam which embraced, rather than ignored its diversity.

The aim of this research, then, is to undertake an in-depth exploration of poetry slam in the four key sites of London and Bristol in the U.K.. and New York and Chicago in the U.S., addressing, in particular, the following questions:

- 1) What significance does slam have for its participants?
- 2) How is slam constructed differently in different geographical and social contexts?
- 3) How has slam evolved since its conception?
- 4) What are the implications of the above points for slam participants' constructions of self and relationships?
- 5) In what ways can this micro level analysis of slam shed light on wider social processes?

## **Chapter Two: The Origins and Development of Slam**

The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence ... To speak of the poem in performance is, then, to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object.

~ Charles Bernstein (1998: 9)

A poem is not just performed, it *performs*, and that is its significance.

~ Peter Middleton (2002: 37; emphasis in original)

Poetry slam is a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick. It is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which is interpreted and applied in myriad ways. Definitions of slam are often contentious and, in the U.S. in particular, may be debated fiercely. At its simplest, slam is a kind of oral poetry competition in which poets perform their own work before a live audience. Slammers are scored on the quality of their writing and performance, by judges who typically are randomly selected from this audience.

The story of slam spans over two decades and thousands of miles. Whilst it parallels poetry more generally in remaining a somewhat marginal activity, slam has become arguably the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Its popularity is greatest in its home country of the U.S., where the annual National Poetry Slam can attract audiences in their thousands, and where it has spawned shows on television and on Broadway. Beyond this, slam has spread across the globe to countries as geographically and culturally diverse as Australia, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Germany and the U.K..

Slam has been described as one of 'the most surprising and significant development{s} in recent American poetry' (Gioia, 2004: 6-7)<sup>108</sup>; yet, despite its

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<sup>108</sup> Gioia's statement refers to slam as representative of a wave of popular poetry movements, which include rap, cowboy poetry and performance poetry.

prevalence worldwide and the number of intriguing research avenues which it presents, the phenomenon has attracted little academic attention, (practically none from the social sciences). There is much to be gained by casting an analytical gaze on slam. Studying slam could reveal significant insights into: how artists understand art worlds and their positions within them; the multiple and complex power relations with which these individuals must engage; the transient, enduring and virtual communities implicated in art worlds; the local, translocal and transnational networks which connect communities and their participants; the ways in which new, avant-garde art worlds may interact with established, dominant art worlds; the reconstruction of art worlds in different geographical and social contexts; and the social construction of individual and collective selves.

The recent history of (U.S.) slam is written in various books, published on the internet, and proclaimed through films, documentaries and, of course, poetry; however slam's roots are as diffuse as its many current manifestations across the globe, and its story is more complex than such sources would suggest. The same can be said of its evolution. Rather than being a homogeneous genre, slam takes on distinct forms in each new context to which it is brought, as it is reconstructed in line with local styles, traditions, conventions and concerns. Thus, there is not one, but many slam communities, which are intertwined with each other and the worlds with which they come into contact. These worlds interact in different ways on a local level, resulting in distinct geographically and socially situated identities for slam and its participants. In seeking to understand slam, then, we cannot isolate it from other art forms nor from the contexts within which it is realised.

With this in mind, the following two chapters lay the foundations for this thesis, with a selective look at the definitions, precursors, genesis and development of slam. Along the way, they explore concepts and perspectives which are pivotal to this work. The current chapter focuses, in particular, on the notion of poetry as an interactive, performative process, and on the localisation of global phenomena, setting the scene for a discussion of interacting art worlds, community and competitive individualism in Chapter Three.



## **2.1 The Performance of Poetry**

Most people have some idea of what poetry is. They may have read it for pleasure, studied it at school, heard/seen it being recited or performed and/or composed some themselves. Poetry is everywhere. It is recited on adverts, written in birthday cards, chanted in playgrounds and published in magazines and books. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) this ubiquity, defining poetry is not straightforward. Debates rage over what constitutes poetry and on what criteria its quality should be judged. As with all concepts, the way poetry is defined limits how it can be studied and understood, and indicates a particular epistemological perspective. This section, then, serves to introduce not only poetry, but also something of my own epistemological stance.

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, a poem is ‘a literary composition that is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm and imagery’ (Pearsall, 1999: 1103). This is so general as to appear innocuous; yet it does little to resolve the debates around poetry. Many would disagree with the idea that a poem must include imagery, for example, whilst others would question what ‘literary composition’, ‘rhythm’ and ‘imagery’ actually mean. To take rhythm as an example, one could ask: Must a poem fit into a traditional rhythmic scheme or could its style be innovative? Must it be written in a consistent rhythm or could the rhythm change and, if so, how often could it change before it is no longer considered to be ‘rhythmic’? Should rhythm be clear on the page or could it be manifest in performance? Must rhythm reside in the words themselves or could it be produced through humming, beatboxing or some musical accompaniment?

### **2.1.1 Poetry Performances on the Stage and Page**

Many of these questions would be answered differently when considering poetry on the page, compared to on the stage. Poetry on the stage is not

simply a matter of reading a text aloud. Rather, the oral performance of poetry presents new challenges and possibilities, utilising different skills and techniques, which imply contrasting definitions and narratives around poetry. The physical appearance of the poet/performer, the ways in which they use their voice, the setting of the performance and the social networks through which the performance comes to be staged are all key factors which shape the construction of meaning in this context.

Whether it is used consciously or not, the performer's physical appearance is central to their performance. Audiences are necessarily aware of performers' clothes (or costume), hairstyle and body shape. Thus, since poetry on the stage is most often performed by the poet him or herself, features of the author's identity which can be 'disguised' in the written text, such as age, sex and ethnicity, are more readily apparent (Silliman, 1998). In oral performances, poets must use their voice to present their work. Their accent and the tempo, volume, pitch and cadence of their voice all contribute to the performance. Additionally, many performance poets use singing, beatboxing and other forms of musical accompaniment. Auditory interruptions form part of a performance too. Whether intentionally or not, the laughter, applause and glass clinking of the audience, and the coughs, stammers and paper rustling of the performers all impact upon the performance (Bernstein, 1998).

Nor can the setting be ignored. Different countries, cities, neighbourhoods and venues shape performances in diverse ways. Poetry readings and performances are held everywhere from libraries and university lecture theatres to pubs, cafés and festivals to street corners. Each of these settings brings with it different characteristics which affect the performance, from the noises of the venue and its environs, to the seating arrangements and the show's ticket price. Venues adopt different conventions, which structure how the audience, performers and others behave during the performance. The importance of setting is reflected in a venue's layout too. Lighting, sound and stage set-ups are all important, yet frequently overlooked, elements which help to define a performance.

The primary factor which appears to distinguish poetry on the stage from poetry on the page, however, is the number of people who are involved in a poem's presentation. Networks of individuals are required to organise and market the event, take money on the door, set up the stage, lighting and sound equipment, introduce the poet/s, perform poems, staff the bar and, of course, watch the performance. Focusing on these varied roles highlights the (necessarily) social nature of oral poetry. Poetry readings and performances are essentially communal activities. They offer an important means through which poets can establish and maintain local, translocal and transnational networks, enabling them to meet, disseminate and discuss poetic works (Bernstein, 1998; Middleton, 1998; 2005). The audience too are an important element of these networks. Indeed, many of the audience members at poetry readings and performances are poets themselves.

For the duration of the performance, these poets, (other) audience members, bar staff and others present may be seen as forming a transient community. This is framed by the event and, in turn, helps to shape the performance (Middleton, 1998). The poetry itself is fashioned both within this immediate social context and through the more dispersed network of poets, comperes, event organisers, audience members, journalists, critics and others who comprise the wider poetry scene. The meaning of the poem, then, is shaped within the context of its oral performance. Poetry on the stage is not simply a realisation of the written text, but a recreation of it. Poetry performances cannot, then, be understood as mere embellishments to the text; rather, they are a key field for the construction and reconstruction of meaning (Bernstein, 1998). Each performance recreates the poem afresh, as these factors interact in new ways. The current study thus seeks to move beyond an analysis of slam poems themselves, asking (after Robinson, 2002: 46), not simply 'what does the text say?', but 'how is the text realized...?'

We should be careful, however, not to draw too sharp a contrast between the spoken and written word. As Middleton (1998: 295) notes, 'all reading, silent as well as public, depends on the network of hermeneutic communicative interactions within which we live'. It may not be presented in a bustling bar or

club, but poetry on the page is far from a-social. Presentation of the printed text is an interactive process. Just as somebody must advertise a poetry performance, set up the stage, sell tickets and introduce the poets, so poetry books and magazines must be marketed, poems must be set out on the page, texts must be sold and poets must be introduced. Further, poetry on the page is often supported by poetry on the stage, as readings and recitals become increasingly important for purveyors of the written word (Gioia, 2004).

Like all artworks, poems are thus created through the interaction of groups of individuals. This includes those who are involved in the work's conception, execution, manufacture, distribution, appreciation and evaluation, as well as those who carry out the training and education of art world participants and those who contribute to the general stability of the society which supports such work (Becker, 1982). Emphasising the importance of these interactive networks in the creation and recreation of artistic works gives a lie to the romantic myth of the artist as a solitary, creative genius (Becker, 1982; Finnegan, 1992/1977; Zolberg, 1990).

### 2.1.2 Poetry as an Interactive Process

Poetry is not created by an isolated individual shut away in an ivory tower. Rather, it is a social product; produced, performed, consumed and understood within groups. It neither arises from nor operates within a vacuum. Instead, individuals interact in its (re)creation and (re)interpretation. Thus, poetry can be better understood as process rather than as finished product. As Foley (2002: 73) notes:

... texts are seldom the replicable objects we buy, sell and tote around,  
and readers aren't often the scrutinizing, object-dependent dissectors we  
assume them to be ...

Nonetheless the idea of the poem as a product which is static in space and time dominates many discussions on poetry. This perspective is particularly prominent in analyses of poetry on the page. Indeed, many of those who acknowledge the continually evolving nature of oral performance persist in

portraying the written text as a final product that is somehow fixed in time (see for example Damon, 1998). In doing so, they overlook the many varied forms in which written texts exist.

Manuscripts evolve over time and different written versions of a poem often exist alongside one another, making it impossible to point to one manuscript as the definitive 'original'. Bernstein (1998: 8) calls these different versions of a poem 'textual performances'.<sup>109</sup> Much as with oral performances, textual performances are constructed differently, depending on the form of their presentation. The context of a poem's readership, in particular, is a key factor in the construction of its meaning. A poem will be read differently, for instance, depending on whether it is printed in a book, company newsletter or birthday card.

The concept of the printed poem as a static end product, ignores the importance of these variations, pointing instead to an elusive 'original' manuscript, as the source of some ultimate meaning. Such a perspective inevitably locates meaning in the text itself, rather than in the readers' interpretation of it. Thus the audience are seen by scholars like Adorno (1991), Bourdieu (1989) and Peterson (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson and Simkus, 1992) as passive recipients of the poem, varying only in their ability to detect its 'true' meaning. Yet people are not passive consumers, manipulated by authors and their work. Instead, they are active participants, who mobilise and interpret cultural objects to meet the needs of specific interactional encounters, using the meanings available to them and actively constructing new ones (Fiske, 1989). As Middleton (1998: 291) remarks, 'audience and poet collaborate in the performance of the poem'.

Just as on the stage, then, poetry on the page can be viewed as a form of performance. Printed poems too contain multiple voices and are the result of the interactive efforts of numerous 'support personnel' (Becker, 1982: 2-6). Written poems exist in diverse versions, which operate as sites for the creation and recreation of meaning. This emphasis on poetry as an interactive

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<sup>109</sup> Whilst Bernstein's stance has much to recommend it, this thesis retains the more common usage of 'performance' to refer to the oral performance of poetry.

performance challenges the idea that poetry can be thought of as a single, static product.

Oral performances of poetry, in turn, are not simply presentations of the written text, but a site for the reconstruction of meaning in their own right. Poetry readings, performances and slams play a key role in disseminating poetry, shaping poets' careers, defining new conventions for poetry and providing an important site of interaction for individuals worldwide. Despite this, they have received slight academic attention. Further, the work which has been conducted in this area has focused predominantly on slam as an American phenomenon, ignoring its many diverse manifestations around the world.<sup>110</sup> The treatment of oral poetry performances as mere embellishments of the original written text has fuelled this neglect, frequently leading to the rejection of poetry performances as a valid field of study (Middleton, 1998). This has resulted in a large gap in our knowledge of poetry and of art worlds more generally; an imbalance which this thesis seeks to redress.

## **2.2 Defining Slam**

Defining key terms is an important foundational task for any emerging academic field; yet the phenomenon of slam is 'controversial and polarizing' (Gioia, 2004: 9), and mapping its boundaries is no simple matter. Nonetheless, this section seeks to pin down a definition of slam - albeit one which will be developed, expanded and unpicked as the thesis progresses.

At its simplest, slam may be viewed as a competitive event. As Marc Smith, the founder and self-proclaimed 'Grand Papi' of slam, writes on his website: 'Simply put, poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry' (Smith, 1999a: Para. One). During a slam, poets perform their work before an (often vocal) audience, competing against each other to receive the highest scores for their writing and performance. Poems are rarely read directly off the page and are

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<sup>110</sup> Slam in Germany has received some academic attention (see Burki, 2003; Bylansky and Patzak, 2000); however these accounts are written in German and have yet to be translated into English.

often embellished with techniques like singing, chanting and beatboxing, and with non-verbal gestures like pointing, nodding and pacing, which use the body to dramatic effect.

The structure of these performance poetry competitions varies. Poets may be judged by the audience, a clapometer<sup>111</sup> or judges. They may have anything from one minute to an unlimited time in which to perform. They may compete/perform individually or in teams. Given the existence of such variations, it can be difficult to talk about a typical poetry slam. Perhaps the best way to convey a sense of what slams are like is through the use of concrete illustrations. This chapter presents two such examples, from slams held in 2006: The Good Vibe Slam, which is described below, and the Final Four slam, a segment of which is included in the DVD accompanying this thesis.

The Good Vibe Slam was staged at the Phoenix Theatre in Exeter, England on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2006. It was co-hosted by Sara-Jane Arbury and Marcus Moore. Slammers were each given three minutes in which to perform their work. After this time expired, one of the hosts blew a whistle to signal that the poet should stop. Slammers were expected to read different poem/s in each round. (See Table 1.1 for a summary of the slam structure.)

In the first round the competitors (who included myself) were announced by the hosts using short introductions, which had been composed by the slammers themselves. My introduction, for example, read:

Helen is a poet and an academic, which means that she not only lives in an ivory tower, but can describe it using interesting metaphors and vivid imagery.

In the semi-final, poets were welcomed back on stage with epithets composed by Sara-Jane Arbury, based on her observations of their first half performances.

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<sup>111</sup> A clapometer is an instrument which measures noise levels and is used to assess the magnitude of the audience response to a piece, in terms of how loud they clap and cheer.

The following, for example, was written for a poet whose first poem centred on television shows:

He's the host with the most who tuned you in in the first round, but will he be tuning into your aerials in the semi-finals tonight or will he turn you off? His remote is in your control.

Whilst many of the slammers were based in Exeter, others had travelled from U.K. cities up to a hundred miles away to compete. They performed poems on topics ranging from sex, to poetry, to Tower Bridge, before an audience of around sixty people. Some of these poems were serious, some humorous; some poets used props, whilst others limited their performance to vocal and bodily gestures alone, sometimes singing, chanting or using sound effects in their performance. Poets were met with anything ranging from a polite trickle of applause to hoots, stamping and loud clapping.

Scores were awarded by three pairs of judges, who were randomly selected from the audience by the hosts before the slam proper began. Each pair was asked to score each performance between nought and one hundred; with one pair being asked to mark the quality of the performance, one the quality of the writing and one the warmth of the audience response. The three scores were then collated and averaged before the final score was announced by the hosts.

Table 1.1: Structure of The Good Vibe Slam

<b>Time (Approx.)</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Event/s</b>
Weeks leading up to slam	Advertising/ recruitment of slammers	Slam advertised by festival organisers on website/venue programme, and by hosts via e-mail. Poets signed up to perform on a 'first come, first served' basis. Poets' introductions



		submitted to hosts.
19.55	Judge selection	Judges selected from audience by hosts.
20.30	Guest poet (1)	Poem performed by previous year's slam winner, Ash the Destroya.
20.35	Rules	Slam rules read out by hosts.
20.40	'Sacrificial' poems	Hosts read one poem each, 'competing' against each other to demonstrate scoring system.
20.50	Round One, Heat One	Three poets' names drawn out of a hat to determine order of performance.
		Each poet introduced and performed in turn. Scores awarded (written down) by judges.
		Scores for heat collated and averaged. Final scores announced in order of performance.
21.00	Round One, Heat Two	Above format followed for next three poets.
21.10	Round One, Heat Three	Above format followed for final three poets.
21.20	Announcement of semi-finalists	Winner of each heat and two highest scoring runners up overall announced as semi-finalists.
21.25	Break	Semi-finalists' introductions composed by host.
21.40	Guest poet (1)	Poem performed by Ash the Destroya.
21.45	Round Two: Semi-final	Name of first poet to perform drawn from hat.
		Each poet in turn introduced, performed and drew name of subsequent poet from hat.
		Scores for each poet collated, averaged and announced in order of performance. Two highest scoring poets declared as finalists.
22.00	Prize Giving Round Three: Final	Prizes of poetry books awarded to three losing semi-finalists.
		Coin flipped to determine order of performance.
		Each poet in turn introduced (by name only) and performed.
		Scores collated, averaged and announced.
22.15	Prize giving	Runner up presented with bottle of wine and two poetry books. Winner awarded bottle of wine, £50 and two festival tickets.
22.20	'Victory poem'	Winner read a final poem.
22.25	Close of slam	Hosts thanked poets and sponsors.
22.30	Guest poet (2)	Kat Francois performed thirty minute set.

Whilst this account illustrates how slams may unfold in practice, it cannot capture the variation between events held in different contexts. Nor does it convey adequately the three dimensional experience of a slam. I would therefore refer the reader at this point to the DVD appended to this thesis, which contains an excerpt from the Final Four slam held in Calgary in 2006 (Cook and Dak, 2006). There are a several key ways in which these slams differ from one

another. In the Final Four slam, for instance, poets were scored out of fifteen by four individual judges, and Olympic style score cards were held up by each judge to indicate their score. Further, The Good Vibe Slam was held in the theatre of an arts centre, whilst the Final Four slam took place in the back room of a bar. There are many similarities between these slams too however. For example, the majority of poets in both slams performed their work from memory, embellishing it variously with gestures, singing and other theatrical devices.

In the U.S., Poetry Slam Inc. (PSI)<sup>112</sup> have produced a standardised slam format. They expect all slams, through which teams are selected to compete in the National Poetry Slam (NPS),<sup>113</sup> to abide by this basic structure. The PSI slam format consists of three rounds – an initial round, a semi-final and a final. Poets are given three minutes (plus a ten second grace period) to perform their work. Points are deducted for any seconds in which poets continue to speak after this period. Slammers must not use props, costumes or musical instruments, although singing and beatboxing are permitted. Poets are scored on the quality of their performance and writing, on a scale from 0.0 to 10.0. (Decimal points are used to reduce the likelihood of a tie.) There are five judges, each randomly selected from the audience, who indicate their scores by holding up Olympic style scorecards. The final mark is calculated by taking off the top and bottom scores and averaging the three which remain. The audience themselves are encouraged to vocally express their approval (or disapproval) for a piece and the scores by clapping, cheering, booing and hissing (Smith, 1999a).

Just as the structure of slams varies between different geographical locations, so too does slam poetry. Whilst the concepts of poetry slams and slam poetry

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<sup>112</sup> PSI was incorporated in 1997, as 'the official ... non-profit organization charged with overseeing the international coalition of poetry slams ... PSI has emerged not only as an administrative body to maintain the rules which govern slam, but as an organization that seeks to grow slam's audience and protect slam's interests' (Smith, 1999b). Despite their claim to international regulation, PSI is primarily focused on North America and in particular on the organisation of the U.S. annual National Poetry Slam.

<sup>113</sup> The NPS is the U.S.'s most high-profile performance poetry contest, in which teams and individuals from across the U.S. (and some from outside the country) compete for team and individual titles. It attracts thousands of poets and audience members, who participate in the competition itself, as well as a host of other shows, slams and open mic. events, which have sprung up around the main event. PSI also holds its annual general meeting at the NPS, during which the organisation debates rules, policies and potential projects (Smith, 2006).

are clearly interrelated, they are by no means interchangeable. Slam poetry relates to a particular style of performance poetry, which is commonly associated with poetry slams, but is not confined to them.<sup>114</sup> It has evolved alongside poetry slams, as poets experiment to produce slam-winning work. Slam poetry may also be performed at open mic. nights, shows or on CD compilations, however, and is increasingly being published in book form.

Slam poetry is not recognised as a form by all, and many slam participants who do acknowledge its existence are highly critical of the label. As these individuals often remark, we must be careful not to allow the concept of slam poetry to obscure the huge variety of work which can be performed at slams. Poets may adhere to a more traditional 'academic' style, for example, reading their poetry slowly and deliberately off the page, without any theatrical embellishment. The notion of slam poetry remains a common (if often unwelcome) one however. It is depicted variously as performance-driven, loud, fast, rhythmic, impassioned, repetitive and simplistic. A number of critics and commentators have noted an increasing homogenisation of slam poetry, both in terms of style and subject matter. One frequent observation of U.S. based slam, for example, is that many slam poets concentrate on emotive poems exploring their identity and a limited range of political topics (see for example Bell, 2003; Somers-Willett, 2001; 2003). This is discussed further in Chapter Nine, whilst slam poetry in the U.K. context is considered in Chapter Ten.

To summarise, slam can be defined in myriad, sometimes competing, ways. It may be viewed most clearly as an event: a knockout competition in which poets perform their own work before an audience, some of whom are nominated as official judges. Though this definition may still be contested by some, I find it to be a clear and explicit categorisation, which fits well with the phenomenon as I have observed it. As suggested above, the boundaries of slam do not end here however, and it is often viewed as giving rise to a particular style of poetry (and performance). Given this, the decision was taken to refer to slam, throughout this thesis, as a 'for(u)m'. For me, this captures well slam's dual (and

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<sup>114</sup> In this thesis the use of the term 'slam' on its own, refers to the concept in its broadest possible context, incorporating slam communities, slam poetry, poetry slams, and slam-related events.

contested) nature as both art form and forum. This thesis uses the definition of slam which I have detailed here. It will also, however, concern itself with the struggle to define and (re)construct slam, according to the particular concerns of individuals and the specific socio-historical contexts within which they interact.

### 2.2.1 A Note on Youth Slam

Slam will be explored within both youth and adult contexts. Youth slam may be defined as any slam in which all those competing are aged nineteen years or younger. Such slams often vary from adult slam in both content and format, and typically operate within broader educational programmes. This didactic focus is frequently visible in the slams themselves, and is the focus of further discussion in Chapters Six and Eleven.

Whilst the use of youth slam as an educational tool has received very little academic attention, there has been some limited research on the didactic applications of oral poetry more generally. The analysis offered in these chapters builds on evidence provided by scholars that oral poetry may be used successfully to: teach students literacy (Alexander-Smith and AnJeanette, 2004; Dyson, 2005; Fisher, 2003; 2005); nurture their creativity (Gehring, 2005); provide them with a space in which to manage their identities and personal development (Fisher, 2003; Hall, 2007; Reyes, 2006); sustain a mutually supportive community (Fisher, 2005; Gehring, 2005; Herndon and Weiss, 2001); and encourage young people to engage more actively with formal education (Dyson, 2005; Gehring, 2005).

As with adult slam, youth slams, and the wider programmes within which they operate, vary on a case-by-case basis, and there is really no such thing as a 'typical' youth slam. Indeed, one of their apparent strengths is an adaptability to the needs of different contexts and individuals. Nonetheless, we can say that youth slams are often fast-paced events, in which order and purpose are carved from a churning hubbub of activity. The youth-dominated audiences are frequently vocal and involved; the slammers at turns confident and nervous; an emotional mix which seems to be inspired as much by their ownership of the

poetry they perform as their exposure on stage. The poems themselves may be delivered as group or solitary pieces, and cover a great variety of subject matters and styles, though they too commonly err more towards performance than recital. The wider programmes within which these slams are embedded are often student-focused and participatory, giving students the opportunity to tailor workshops to their own requirements, mentor others, perform their work before small groups and take part in a range of writing and performance related activities. These programmes frequently work towards creating a community of young poets.

### **2.3 The Historical Development of Slam**

Youth slams are the latest (relatively) high profile offshoot of a lineage of over two decades. As the story of slam's development progresses, accounts become increasingly fragmented and conflicting. Narratives of slam's early years, however, seem to be remarkably consistent. These are dominated by a strong 'official line', heavily influenced by the for(u)m's founder, Marc Smith. Indeed, many published accounts are either co-written by Smith or draw closely on his work.

According to Smith himself (1988, 1999c), he drew on bridge and basketball terminology to coin the term slam. The label was first put into action in 1986, when, at the helm of The Chicago Poetry Ensemble, Smith organised the first official poetry slam at The Green Mill, Chicago. The Uptown Poetry Slam was to become a weekly event and a key chapter in the official slam story. Smith traces these events back to the weekly poetry open mic. nights, which he hosted at Chicago's Get Me High Lounge from around a year earlier. The stated aim of these evenings was to present poetry in a way which challenged its popular image as a sterile product of the elite, 'academic' world, and, in so doing, attracted new audiences to the medium (Smith, 1999c; Somers-Willett, 2003). As the eighties unfolded, news about the Chicago poetry slams spread around the country and slams began to be established in other U.S. cities. The first inter-city U.S. slam was held in San Francisco in 1990, between teams from

San Francisco, Chicago and New York. From this, the NPS was formed and has run every year since. In 2005, over 70 teams competed for the title in Albuquerque.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, poetry slams mushroomed across the U.S.<sup>115</sup> and beyond. Slams were aired on the radio and over the internet, as well as in numerous bars, theatres and clubs. In 1997 and 1998 two films were released in the U.S., documenting the slam 'movement' (Levin *et al.*, 1997; Devlin, 1998). By 2002, slam poets not only had a successful U.S. television series (Def Poetry Jam), but an associated show in the theatre too (Def Poetry on Broadway). This was also the year of the first major international poetry slam, held in Roma Polesia, Italy. A regular International Poetry Slampionship is now run as part of the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam in the Netherlands (see [www.poetryslampionship.org/](http://www.poetryslampionship.org/) for further details).

### 2.3.1 Early Oral Performance Contests: Flyting and Beyond

Tracing the emergence and development of artistic traditions is a difficult job, since scholars must necessarily rely on those materials which critics, artists, devotees and others have seen fit to highlight and preserve. Such sources can be especially scarce when they relate to genres which are primarily oral, rather than written. Consequently, the history of oral poetry is rife with controversy and full of gaps (Middleton, 1998). Many such gaps are (perhaps inevitably) edited out in accounts of the development of art for(u)ms like slam; yet it is worth remembering that histories which look linear in retrospect contain within them numerous untold stories - 'failed' experiments, unrecorded events and unrealised performances.

With this in mind, any attempt to map the prehistory of slam, must be seen as highly selective. Nonetheless, it is valuable to take a brief look at some of the for(u)m's precursors; if only to note that they do indeed exist. It may not be possible to draw a clear developmental line from ancient oral traditions to

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<sup>115</sup> As O'Keefe Aptowicz (2008) notes, the spoken word Revival Tent in Lollapalooza's 1994 tour played no small part in this, hosting slams in each of the thirty plus U.S. cities through which it passed.

current day slam (whatever some slam participants would have us believe), but discussing the for(u)m in isolation from the centuries of poetry readings and performances which preceded it is a poor compromise indeed. The remainder of this section, then, will sample from a broad geographical and historical canvas to give a splash of historical colour to the more bounded story of slam which is presented in this thesis.

Oral performance contests have existed in societies as distant as tenth century Japan and ancient Persia, and forms as diverse as African griot poetry and the zajal song contests of the Arabic world. Ancient Greek authors, like Homer, Plato and Socrates, referred to poetry and music contests as early as the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.. Indeed, the 'flyting' which characterised such events provides us with perhaps the first documented example of oral poetry competitions.

Flyting can be defined as a 'poetic competition ... in which two highly skilled rivals engaged in a contest of verbal abuse' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2006: Article 9034708). Whilst they revolved around personal insults, the aim of a flyting contest was to demonstrate greater verbal prowess, rather than to reveal hidden truths about an opponent. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* locates flyting with fifteenth and sixteenth century Scottish poets; however it can be applied much more broadly, and is referred to in texts from ancient Greece to the twelfth century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. Flyting is represented in Old French, Irish and Norse literature and in Middle Eastern countries, Ancient Greece, Middle England, Scotland and seventeenth century Japan (Halama, 1996).

Similar insult-based performance contests, and other competitions which rely on oral demonstrations of wordplay and linguistic dexterity, exist in a myriad of forms worldwide (Foley, 2002; Hoebel, 1954; Parks 1986: 42; Zeitlin and Dargan, 1999: 1). One interesting example is the improvised poetry competition of bertsolaritza, held in the Basque region of Spain. (See Thomas, 2006 and [www.txapelketanagusia.com](http://www.txapelketanagusia.com) for more on this.) Sadly, however, a detailed discussion of these contests is beyond the scope of this thesis, and I must

move instead to the socio-historical context which more immediately preceded the emergence of slam.

### 2.3.2 Post World War One Poetry in the U.K. and the U.S.

Despite the prevalence and persistence of oral poetry competitions worldwide, poetry readings and performances in the U.K. and U.S. are often considered to have entered a decline after the First World War. According to this perspective, poetry was seen increasingly as a more text-based art form; something to be studied in an academic environment and read silently to oneself, rather than performed in groups. Whilst poetry readings persisted, they apparently did so largely within the confines of universities and other academic institutions (see for example Middleton, 1998). Some scholars have suggested that this reflects a more general move towards smaller, more elite audiences for poetry at this time (see for example Spaulding, 1999; Tate, 1983/1924-1944), whilst others have proposed a link between this trend and the rise of the modernist literary movement (see for example Harrington, 1996).

A popular view is that this situation began to change in the U.S. during the late 1940s and in the U.K. some ten to fifteen years later (see for example Finch, 2003). During this period, the argument goes, groups of poets started to react against what they saw as the inaccessibility and irrelevance of contemporary poetry, and the approach of academics like the New Critics, who saw poetry as something which should be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level, divorced from considerations of the artist or the nature of society (Eleveld and Smith, 2004). This new breed of poets sought to take poetry out of academic environments and into disparate urban venues, like arts centres, bars and cafés. They performed work which addressed the nature of the human condition and political issues pertinent to the time. The most well known of these poets were the Beats.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Interestingly, Middleton (2002: 33-4) offers a slightly different version of events to this, arguing that poetry reading groups began to decline sharply in the 1930s, being replaced by a 'professionalization of the reading as the poetry reading by the author, first confined largely to university campuses, then spreading rapidly outwards into Bohemia and then every local arts center, from the late nineteen-fifties on'.



This 'revival' argument presents an oversimplistic account however, ignoring the many oral performance traditions which continued to operate in the U.K. and U.S. throughout this time. Part of the problem with this narrative is its focus on predominantly white, middle class artists and audiences. Thus some scholars have overlooked the African-American contests of toasting and playing the dozens, which, whilst not widely popular until the latter half of the twentieth century, were practised across the U.S. from as early as the late nineteenth century. Other cultures in the U.S. also have continuous histories of poetry performances and competitions. The poetic tradition of la décima, for instance, has been prevalent in Latin American communities in North and South America from at least the seventeenth century (Martinez and Singer, 1999).

Oral poetry continued to be performed amongst majority ethnic populations too however. In the U.K. for instance, poets took the stage in folk clubs, music hall, druidic ceremonies and elsewhere (Annie McGann, personal communication 18.05.07), and the comic poetry which often graces U.K. slam stages today finds antecedents in many of these performances. Poetry was also aired over U.K. radio during this period; although it does not appear to have received as much airtime here as it did in the U.S. (see for example Harrington, 1996; Spaulding, 1999; Tolley, 1985).

In the U.S. meanwhile, the 'poet-performer movement' represents a clear thread of oral poetry between around 1878 and the 1930s. The movement included such poets as Vachel Lindsay and Will Carlton, who travelled around the U.S., performing their work in the streets, schools, homes and barns of the 'common person'. Just as with many oral/performance poets who preceded and succeeded them, the poet-performers rejected the academic conventions of the day. They focused on performance rather than the page and emphasised the accessibility and relevance of their work, in an attempt to attract a mass audience to poetry (Somers-Willett, 2003).

This critique problematises the key role in the resurgence of performance poetry with which the Beat movement is often credited. Whilst the Beats are typically seen as bringing politics back into poetry and attempting to attract a larger,

broader audience to the form, it is clear that others addressed such concerns before them. The Beats did not build up a new structure from the ground. They merely added another storey to one which existed already. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that these oral poetry forms failed to achieve widespread popularity. Somers-Willet (2003), for example, points out that the attempts of the poet-performers to reach a mass, working class audience were often unsuccessful, whilst la décima and toasting were limited to relatively small populations in the U.S.. Beat poetry, in contrast, did go some way toward attracting the popular audience which the poet-performers sought so dearly, and paved the way for the emergence of perhaps the most popular performance poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – that of slam.<sup>117</sup>

### 2.3.3 From Beats to Boxing: U.K. and U.S. Performance Poetry at the End of the Twentieth Century

The Beat movement began in the U.S. in the late 1940s. The Beats drew their inspiration from numerous sources, including earlier performance poets like Vachel Lindsay, Biblical rhythmic structures and the Greenwich Village intellectual-artistic scene of the 1930s. There is some debate over the precise origins of the term 'beat'; however it was apparently used by Jack Kerouac to allude to a beatific state, the beat of music (specifically jazz) and the poverty-stricken, 'outsider' status with which the Beats identified.

In the U.K., the Beat movement was paralleled by what Finch (2003) terms the 'Underground'. This was headed by the Liverpool Poets, Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, who worked alongside poets like Adrian Mitchell, Jeff Nuttall and the American Beats. The Underground came to prominence in the 1960s and drew the attention of the wider public with the 1965 International Poetry Incarnation, held at the Royal Albert Hall, London (see Morrison, 2005).

Much of the Beats' poetry focused on the political issues of the day, in work which was often seen as challenging and confrontational. The Liverpool Poets,

<sup>117</sup> Whilst the influence of the Beats on slam is not straightforward and is wholly dismissed by many slam participants, it is interesting to note the similarities between these movements. Also of interest is the fact that all three of the main NYC slam venues are in the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village areas of the city, which the Beat poets often favoured.

meanwhile, wrote work which was less persistently/explicitly political and emphasised poetry more as entertainment (Mackean, 2005). Indeed, Sheppard (2005: 42) suggests that the performances given by the Liverpool Poets 'lay somewhere between stand-up comedy and the happening'.<sup>118</sup> Both groups, however, stressed the revolutionary, popular and performative nature of poetry, in contrast to what they viewed as the staid, elite and lifeless character of the dominant 'academic' poetry of the day. Oral performance was central to this, emphasising the movement away from the academy and providing the means through which a larger, more diverse audience could be reached. Such performances also enabled these poets to experiment with music, chanting and other vocal techniques, and (for the Beats at least) to develop a characteristic improvisational format.

Around the mid 1970s, a new wave of performance poetry hit the U.S. in the form of punk poetry.<sup>119</sup> Punk in the U.S. pre-dated that in Britain by about four years, with the New York punk scene in particular thriving throughout the seventies. Punk formed a distinctive style, with its own fashions, music, visual art and literature. These different art worlds intersected, and punk shows often used a combination of visual arts, music, poetry and other performance forms. British poets like John Cooper Clarke and Attila the Stockbroker and American poets like Patti Smith and Richard Hell began to give performances which combined their poetry with music, drawing on the punk movement and the oral tradition for inspiration. The confrontational style of punk music was adopted by these punk poets, who followed the Beats in encouraging the vocal participation of their audiences. These poets also sought to define their work as belonging, not to elite academics, but to the man and woman on the street, thus echoing the rationale of performance poetry movements, like the Beats and poet-performers before them.

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<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, this U.S./U.K. disjunction continues to be reflected in present day slam. (See Chapters Nine and Ten for more on this.)

<sup>119</sup> Punk writing has also been termed 'blank fiction' and 'blank generation fiction', a term adopted from Richard Hell's (1977) anthemic song *The Blank Generation*. Authors like Annesley (1998) however have criticised the use of these labels as interchangeable, suggesting that the relationship between the two genres is a problematic one.

In the late 1970s, the punk poets' search for a mass audience inspired the staging of 'poetry boxing matches' in New York and Chicago. The first match was held by Ted Berrigan and Ann Waldman in around 1979, using rules adapted from the Illinois Boxing Commission. This was followed by further bouts in Chicago and other U.S. cities. In 1982 the boxing matches were incorporated into the Taos Poetry Circus in Taos, New Mexico. The matches (which became the World Heavyweight Poetry Championship) and Poetry Circus ran every year until 2003, attracting a wide range of poets, including Beat poets like Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg. During their lifetime, the poetry boxing matches shared cities, venues and performers with poetry slam (Heintz, 1999). In 1993, for example, Al Simmons, one of the organisers of the early matches and of the Taos Poetry Circus, performed in the NPS, whilst slam poets<sup>120</sup> like Saul Williams and Patricia Smith have competed in Taos boxing matches.

This account is far from a comprehensive history of oral poetry in the U.S. and U.K.. Whilst such a detailed history may be long overdue, it is not the purpose of this thesis to provide it. Rather, I have sought to present a selective look at some of the oral poetry movements, traditions and events which led up to the birth of slam. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that slam represents the current manifestation of a process of continual recreation, which has characterised oral poetry since its inception. Slam has thus adopted the position held by genres like flyting, Beat poetry and punk poetry before it, drawing on and reflecting some of the themes and concerns of these movements.

Slam has gone on to become perhaps the most prominent poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S.. Slam poetry is taught in

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<sup>120</sup> The term 'slam poet' is commonly used to refer to poets who are associated with the for(u)m, having performed in, and often made their name through, slams. It should be noted, however, that this term is not infrequently rejected by the poets themselves, many of whom see it as being unhelpfully restrictive.

schools, universities, arts centres and festivals across the country. Slams are aired over the radio and internet, on television, and at theatres, bars and clubs, and can attract audiences in their hundreds. The impact of the for(u)m, moreover, has spread beyond its home country. Slam has gone global.

## **2.4 The Spread of Slam**

In the mid 1990s slam came to the U.K. and spread quickly around the country. The first U.K. slam was run in London in February 1994 by John Paul O'Neill of 'spoken word and performance poetry organisation', Farrago Poetry (Farrago Poetry, 2007). Farrago hosted England's first national slam championship in the same year.

Shortly after the first Farrago SLAM!, London's Hackney Empire hosted a show featuring a group of slam poets from New York's Nuyorican Poets Cafe, who were on tour in the U.K.. Events such as these inspired poetry organisers to hold slams at venues like Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, where a slam has run every year since 1995 (Pat V T West, 2006, in conversation).<sup>121</sup> These early U.K. events demonstrate clear links between U.K. and U.S. based slam. Not only did the presence of the Nuyoricans (and other U.S. based poets like Thom the World Poet) help to spread the word about slam, but a number of U.K. poets returned the favour, travelling to the U.S. and taking an active interest in slam there. John Paul O'Neill, for instance, refers to himself as London's slammaster<sup>122</sup> and has competed in the NPS, as well as performing poetry across the U.S. (O'Neill, 2006 a, b).

It is easy to overestimate the influence of the U.S. on the (re)constitution of slam around the world. Focusing exclusively on slam as an American

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<sup>121</sup> Sadly, the founder of these slams, Pat V T West, died in the summer of 2008. Before her death, she handed the running of the Poetry&Words stage/slam over to myself (see [www.myspace.com/glastonburypoetry](http://www.myspace.com/glastonburypoetry) for more on Poetry&Words).

<sup>122</sup> Slammasters are poetry slam organisers who liaise with PSI to bring teams to the NPS. They meet at the Slammasters' Council twice a year to discuss rule formation and other issues affecting the future of PSI governed slam (Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 345). It should be noted, however, that whilst O'Neill dubs himself London's slammaster, Farrago do not send a team to the NPS annually.

phenomenon overlooks the importance of the local concerns, issues, artistic traditions and communities which help to shape the structure of poetry slams and styles of slam poetry worldwide. Further, slam has not always travelled directly from the U.S.. Bohdan Piasecki, for instance, founded the Warsaw Slam! in Poland after watching a documentary about the German slam scene and subsequently attending a Farrago SLAM! in London (Piasecki, personal communication 13.06.08). Similarly, slams in Austria and Switzerland developed partly in response to the success of slam in neighbouring Germany.

Nonetheless, as discussed previously, there is a strong 'official' story mapping the emergence and development of slam, and this tends towards a rather narrow, American-centred perspective. The dominance of this narrative can make it difficult to trace the history of slam's dissemination across the globe. Smith and Kraynak (2004), for instance, dub the Substanz Slam, established by Ray Patzak in Munich in 1996, Germany's first slam; yet slams were held in the country as early as 1994. The 1994 Munich slam has been effectively written out of the official slam story for failing to conform to the style which Marc Smith pioneered in the U.S.. Indeed, Smith himself has criticised the host for showcasing 'traditional, published authors' who read, rather than performed, their work, dismissing the event as a 'gimmicky stunt' (Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 318).

Representing slam in Germany as a mere offshoot of U.S. slam, not only glosses over important aspects of slam history, but also ignores the many differences between the for(u)m in these two countries. German slams, for instance, often give competitors up to seven minutes to perform their work. This longer time limit allows for a different style of slam poetry, with many slammers reading extended prose pieces, rather than the more fast-paced, snappy poems common in the U.S. (Mervyn Seivwright, 2006, in conversation).

Slams now take place regularly in the U.K., Germany, Croatia, France, Israel, Singapore, South Africa, Australia and beyond. Slam varies both between and within these countries. In Jerusalem, for example, an open discussion may separate two readings of the same piece by a poet, before the judges award

their scores. In Florida, meanwhile, actors have used performances by slam poets as the inspiration for improvised sketches, which are then themselves scored. Slams can vary within cities too. NYC and Los Angeles, for example, both host a Manhattan Monologue Slam, (which focuses explicitly on performers' acting skills and does not require that they write the work they perform) alongside slams in the official PSI mould.<sup>123</sup>

This diversity is rarely acknowledged, and many slam commentators paint a picture of a homogenous art for(u)m, which varies little between contexts. Somers-Willett's (2003) otherwise excellent thesis, for instance, states that:

In terms of tone, protestive and passionate pieces are frequent, and most poets treat the slam stage {as} a political soapbox at some point. (p. 9)

As will be discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten, this comment would fail to strike a chord with many slam participants based in the U.K., where slam poetry often takes a more comedic form, opting for wry musings on life over more serious political topics. In Denmark too, political poetry is frequently bypassed in favour of 'everyday issues, wordplay and comical angles' (Bjerre, quoted in Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 321).

Even within the U.S., slam styles vary. The Nuyorican Poets Cafe slams have acquired a reputation for strong political poetry in a highly competitive environment, for example, whilst San Francisco poets have apparently been more influenced by the performance arts scene. Such variations owe much to the art scenes which existed before slam in these different locales. As Heintz (1999) notes:

*The local colors of slam poetry* among the various cities {of the U.S.} derive from each community's established writing prior to the advent of the slam.

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<sup>123</sup> See [www.mmslam.com/](http://www.mmslam.com/) for more on the Manhattan Monologue Slam.

Yet Heintz (2006, in conversation) and others have also suggested that these regional differences have been ironed out over the years, in favour of a more generalised slam formula. It is this that enables authors like Somers-Willett (2003) to talk in terms of the 'personal and political themes' (p. 9) and 'protestive and passionate' (p. 11) tones which are prevalent in U.S. slam poetry. These themes and tones have influenced the development of slam in the U.K. too; however they have not been adopted uncritically by British slammers. Instead, as will be discussed in Chapter Ten, many U.K. based slammers have sought to deliberately avoid what they see as a U.S. slam style. Like all global phenomena, then, it is in local lives that slam is ultimately realised.

#### 2.4.1 Global Phenomena; Local Lives

Wherever slam has landed in the world, it has found related artistic traditions awaiting it. Such local arts scenes help to steer the spread of for(u)ms like slam and may affect whether they are imported successfully into new sites at all. MacNaughton (2004: 102), for instance, explains the successful siting of the Poetry Circus in Taos, a village in the mountainous region of New Mexico, by pointing to the persistence of strong oral traditions in the area. Similarly, story, song and poetry competitions were already thriving in many countries long before slam came on the scene. This relationship is not just one way however. The Poetry Circus, for example, has apparently had a considerable impact on the local area, attracting fresh audiences, and artists with varied performance and writing styles. Just as the local context shapes the (re)creation of these art for(u)ms, then, so the for(u)ms refashion the contexts within which they operate (Hall, 1987).

Slam may be a global phenomenon, but it addresses the concerns of the local environments within which it is mobilised. Audiences and performers, in turn, do not simply passively consume and reproduce imported for(u)ms like slam in an unadulterated form. Rather, they try to make sense of them, infusing them with meanings from their everyday lives (see for example DeNora, 2000; Thompson, 1995). They bring to these new genres the concerns and cultural forms which are pertinent to them and, in so doing, reconstruct both the old



traditions and the new (see for example Griswold, 1986, 2004). As Shepherd (1993: 198) argues, music ‘does not “carry” its meaning and “give it” to participants and listeners. Affect and meaning have to be created anew in the specific social and historical circumstances of each instance of music’s creation and use’.

Statements such as this apply equally to the production and consumption of slam. Indeed, whilst there is a dearth of sociological research on performance poetry and slam, research into music sociology is thriving, and there is much to be learnt from this rich body of work. Bennett’s (1999; 2000) comparison of hip hop in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England and Frankfurt am Maine, Germany, for example, provides an excellent illustration of the reinterpretation and recreation of artistic genres in new locales. Much as with slam, hip hop in these cities has developed geographically specific forms, as young people use it to articulate (and reconstruct) their different concerns and identities. Mahtani and Salmon’s (2001) account of Canadian band, The Tragically Hip, supports Bennett’s analysis, suggesting that global artistic products are reinterpreted and reworked in local contexts, to meet the needs of new audiences.

As Crane (1992: 172) argues, global art industries do not simply produce homogeneous art forms, but ‘transmit varied and inconsistent cultural messages, which in turn are interpreted differently by audiences in different social locations’. In a similar vein, Kraidy (2002) favours the term ‘glocalization’, as better able to capture such multi-level hybridisation than the commonly used ‘globalisation’. As these authors demonstrate, we need to recognise the importance of a range of social, as well as geographical, contexts, acknowledging interactions between the global and the local, rather than seeking to draw artificial distinctions between them. Indeed, it is through local contexts and the links between them that the ‘global’ is created in the first place (Hirsch, 1998).

Given this, it is perhaps more appropriate to abandon discussion of the ‘global’ and ‘local’, talking instead in terms of the translocal and transnational scenes

which local slam and performance poetry communities interact to create.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, we could argue that local resources run along translocal and transnational lines, being re-employed and recreated in new contexts. The use of these terms emphasises the importance of situating research in concrete, localised interactions (Hirsch, 1998). This need not mean focusing on the micro to the exclusion of macro level analysis. Not only can the global be illuminated through an analysis of the local, but local contexts themselves can be seen as expanding beyond fixed temporal and spatial boundaries.

## **2.5 Conclusions**

We should not be seeking to understand slam simply as the globalisation of a local phenomenon, but rather as a narrative about art, identity and interaction which has been, and continues to be, created and recreated within parallel performance and literary traditions worldwide. Slam participants actively work to make sense of the for(u)m and to create identities for themselves within it. In doing so, they establish new artistic conventions and create a story about the emergence and development of slam, which validates the identities they seek to maintain. Slam has developed along transnational lines, from a small club in Chicago to a broad range of geographically and culturally diverse locales. In order to understand these different manifestations, we need to look at the local contexts within which slam has been re-employed and reconstructed. This thesis aims to do just that.

Contextualising slam in this way entails a consideration, not simply of the local contexts within which it is realised, but also the other art forms and groups with which slam poets, organisers, audiences, educators and others interact, and of the ways in which slam participants understand themselves as a group. The following chapter explores these issues in some depth.

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<sup>124</sup> Whilst a number of important distinctions can be drawn between 'scenes' and 'communities' (see for example Silver *et al*, 2007), it is sufficient for current purposes to treat the two as interchangeable. The concept of 'community' is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three.

### **Chapter Three: Art Worlds in Interaction**

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.

~ Tom Schulman (1989), *Dead Poet's Society*

Chapter Two argued that slam cannot be understood in isolation from the contexts within which it is realised. The current chapter develops this idea further, exploring the different art worlds with which slam intersects. Particular attention is paid to the for(u)m's relationship with: spoken word; performance poetry; music; and the dominant literary world. The latter is especially pertinent to this thesis, acting as a focal point around which many distinct understandings of slam converge. Accordingly, this chapter considers how members of slam and the academy critique, challenge and interact with one another. This discussion is framed in terms of the notions of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) and artistic conventions.<sup>125</sup>

Art for(u)ms like slam are neither static, nor homogenous. Rather, they are changing continually and include within them a collection of diverse viewpoints, understandings and experiences. Exploring the relationship of slam to other art worlds enables us to begin to uncover some of these complexities. In doing so, we can build the foundations for an analysis of the many ambiguities and oppositions which characterise slam participants' talk. This chapter concludes with a discussion of one such conflict: the juxtaposition of community and competitive individualism in slam (and, indeed, the social scientific literature). Here, Schulman's opening quotation comes into its own, as we begin to see

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<sup>125</sup> The term 'cultural capital' was introduced into the sociological lexicon by Pierre Bourdieu (1989) in his seminal work *Distinction*. He used the concept to refer to the cultural currency, embodied in language and conventions, which is associated with high status groups in society. The richer the cultural capital of an individual, the greater the extent to which they can be said to have absorbed the dominant culture. (See Bennett *et al.*, 2005 for a more in-depth discussion of different forms and understandings of cultural capital.)

that, for many slam participants, slam is anything but 'cute'; rather, it is an important part of what they 'stay alive for'.

### **3.1 Overlapping Art Worlds**

Slam has been, and continues to be, influenced by multiple 'art worlds'. In its turn, the for(u)m has impacted many of those forms which inspired its formation and development. The influence of these diverse genres and traditions is apparent in the complex, multifaceted character of slam around the world. The term 'art worlds' is taken from Becker's (1982) insightful analysis of the ways in which artworks are created through the interaction of groups of individuals. He suggests that we cannot call an artwork the product of a single artist, but need instead to consider the community of people who work together to produce, disseminate and consume art.

As with 'social worlds' more generally, art worlds are characterised by 'common or joint activities or concerns tied together by a network of communication' (Kling and Gerson, 1978: 26). The boundaries between them are permeable and indistinct and their structures are changing continually. There is a strong temptation to ignore this dynamic nature of art worlds and attempt instead to pin them down with static definitions. Whilst this approach might result in tidier theories and research, however, it does not do justice to their complexity. Individual social worlds must be understood in terms of the shared meanings and joint action of their participants, not through some generalised, external criteria established from outside.

To understand slam then we need to explore the different art worlds with which it intersects. Slam poets, for instance, often adopt styles and techniques which are associated more readily with the theatre, performance arts or live music events, than with traditional poetry recitals. Further, it is clear that stand-up comedy and comic poetry traditions have influenced the development of slam (and performance poetry) in the U.K.. In Bristol, for instance, the first poetry slams were held in a local comedy club, whilst a number of high profile U.K.

artists have straddled the boundaries of these art forms.<sup>126</sup> With this in mind, the following two sections explore slam's relationship with those art worlds which have impacted most notably on the emergence and development of the for(u)m in both the U.K. and the U.S., namely: spoken word, performance poetry, music and the dominant literary world.

### 3.1.1 Slam, Spoken Word and Performance Poetry

Slam, spoken word and performance poetry are terms which are often used interchangeably, as is clear from the titles of books such as *The Spoken Word Revolution. Slam, Hip Hop and the Poetry of a New Generation* (Eleveld and Smith, 2004).<sup>127</sup> To a certain extent this usage is understandable. Indeed, there are many similarities between these forms (and forums) and poets frequently move easily between them. Nonetheless, it is worth teasing out some of their distinctions here.

In record shops, book shops and many other retail outlets 'spoken word' is applied to a range of materials, including audio recordings of speeches, comedy sketches, novels and poetry. When it is used within poetry circles, however, it refers to the oral performance of poetry or prose pieces. The term spoken word has been used for several decades; however it has become more popular with the rise of performance poetry, following the success of slam in the last decades of the twentieth century, and these forms are increasingly associated with each other. Indeed, spoken word poets align themselves more with performance poetry than with traditional poetry recitals (see for example *Spoken Word Art*, 2007).<sup>128</sup>

There is some contention around the origins of the term 'performance poetry'. Hedwig Gorski is often credited with coining the expression in the *Litera* column

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<sup>126</sup> Comedian Phill Jupitus, for instance, began his performance career as Porky the Poet, and well known poets like John Hegley, John Cooper Clarke and Pam Ayres have been performing comic poetry, songs and sketches around the country for decades.

<sup>127</sup> The title of this book also gestures towards the increasingly close relationship between slam and hip hop, which is particularly apparent in the U.S. and which is explored in the following section, as well as at various points throughout this thesis. (See also O'Keefe Aptowicz, 2008.)

<sup>128</sup> See the *Canadian Theatre Review's* recent special edition on spoken word performance for several articles discussing the nature of the terms 'spoken word' and 'performance poetry' (Cowan, 2007).

which she wrote for *The Austin Chronicle* in the early 1980s; however many slam poets also claim it as their progeny. Gorski used the phrase to distinguish her work, in which she performed poetry over music, with her band East of Eden, from performance art (Southern Arts Federation, 2007). Slam poets, meanwhile, apply it to the poetry which is performed on slam stages. The label has since been applied to poets like the Beats, whom Lawrence Ferlinghetti (quoted in Morrison, 2005: Para. 18) dubbed the world's 'first performance poets'.

Much like spoken word, the term performance poetry is commonly used within poetry communities to refer to work which is performed orally, rather than presented on the page, and which allies itself more with the conventions of slam, than with those of the 'academic' poetry world. (See the following section for a discussion of artistic conventions.) In the context of performance poetry, then, performance is juxtaposed against reading, since it possesses elements of 'acting and displaying' which Stern (1991: 73-5) notes are lacking from 'formal poetry readings'.

It would be erroneous to imply that performance poetry and slam are interchangeable however. Indeed, many performance poets are highly critical of slam, refusing to perform within what they see as the restrictive slam format. Slam poets, in contrast, rarely limit their performances to the slam stage and many would prefer the term 'performance poet' to that of 'slam poet'. In the U.K. especially, where slams are less frequent and high profile than in the U.S., it is rare for artists to adopt the slam poet label, yet many would happily call themselves performance poets. Given the relationship between these for(u)ms, then, it is reasonable to consider slam as a kind of performance poetry movement.

### 3.1.2 Music and Slam

As Gorski's use of 'performance poetry' to describe lyrics spoken over music implies, poetry and music have a long association. The jazz-infused poetry of the Beats springs readily to mind here.<sup>129</sup> Yet the interaction between these art forms extends much further; from the punk poetry of artists like John Cooper Clarke and Patti Smith, to the 1960s/70s poetry rock group The Liverpool Scene and the reggae influenced dub poetry of poets like Linton Kwesi Johnston.

Many poets continue to weave music into their work and it is not uncommon for open mic. nights to feature musicians alongside poets. These musicians may perform on their own or in collaboration with the poets. A number of events observed for this research showcased musicians as well as poets and almost all of the host venues included music in their wider programmes. Farrago Poetry's monthly slam often features special guest musicians, for example, whilst the Chicago's weekly Uptown Poetry Slam has an in-house band available to accompany poets.

These musical contributions occasionally involve groups of musicians, but more often feature solo artists. They may take a variety of forms, from rock to folk to jazz and beyond. Hip hop, in particular, is rapidly becoming a prominent force on the spoken word scene. This is particularly true in the U.S., where venues like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe host hip hop as well as poetry shows, and where techniques associated with hip hop, such as beat boxing and rap, are increasingly common on the slam stage. Indeed, many slam poets and hip hop artists alike have been keen to emphasise the poetic pedigree of rap music. As Eleveld and Smith (2004: 38) note:

Hip hop embodies a form of poetry just like sonnets, villanelles, litanies, renga, and other forms. Hip hop incorporates many of the technical devices of other forms, including slant rhymes, enjambment, A-B rhyme schemes ... In this sense, hip hop is a form. Nothing more.

Whilst rap's status as poetry is controversial (see Damon, 1998; Rose, 1994), there are clearly many parallels between the styles, content, audiences and platforms associated with hip hop and slam in the U.S.. This is perhaps most

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<sup>129</sup> See Neilson (1997) for an account of the long relationship between poetry and jazz as represented in the work of the Beats and other poets.

apparent in the HBO television series Def Poetry Jam. The series' title references the Def Jam record label, one of the biggest and most influential rap labels in the world, and gestures to the involvement of Def Jam co-founder Russell Simmons. Hip hop is interwoven throughout the programme. The show is hosted by MC Mos Def, and other MCs spin hip hop tracks between poets' performances.<sup>130</sup> The hip hop infused style of many U.S. slam poets is also illustrated in the 1998 documentary SlamNation (Devlin, 1998). Indeed, this impact of hip hop is so profound that a number of U.K. based authors have mistakenly credited it with giving rise to slam in the first place (see for example BBC, 2006; McBride, 2002).

Slam, then, draws on and interacts with a wide range of musical and other art forms. As Smith and Kraynak (2004) note, slams from the U.S. to Singapore have incorporated music, film, dance, stand-up comedy, mime and even sports into events. These artistic communities often overlap both formally and informally, as artists collaborate, exchange news and gossip, and form relationships which endure beyond the boundaries of particular events. Thus, these different art worlds work together to create a dynamic artscape with fuzzy, permeable boundaries, which are fixed neither in time nor space.

### **3.2 The Recreation of Artistic Conventions**

These art worlds incorporate different artistic conventions, which govern all stages of an artwork's creation, distribution and consumption. Conventions can be defined as 'generally accepted and shared, habitual, taken-for-granted ways of understanding, communicating, cooperating, and doing' (Hall, 1987: 13). Artistic conventions dictate everything from the materials used to the ways in which ideas and experiences are represented, the relations between artists and their audiences, and the manner in which an artwork should be appreciated and evaluated (Becker, 1982).

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<sup>130</sup> MC stands for 'master of ceremonies'. As in this case, the term is often associated with hip hop, where it is used to refer to rap artists; however it also has a wider application, referencing the compere for a show, which may feature poetry, music, comedy and/or other art forms.



There are marked differences between the artistic conventions which govern slam and those which characterise 'academic' poetry. ('Academic poetry', or the 'poetry of the academy' is used by slam participants to refer to the dominant literary world; a usage which is followed here. 'Academic' poetry is associated with university lecturers, school teachers, critics, published poets and the editors and writers of literary magazines, and dominates many people's perceptions of what poetry is in the U.K. and U.S..)

The conventions governing 'academic' poetry readings, dictate that the audience should be quiet during the reading itself, marking the end of the recital with polite applause. The poet, for their part, is expected to avoid the use of theatrical devices like flamboyant gestures or props. These formal poetry readings are structured around, and give primacy to, the written word. The poet typically reads their work directly off the page and audience members may choose to follow this on their own copies of the text. Further, the invited poet will often promote their latest publication/s at such events.

Whilst poetry readings are fairly common in academic settings, then, they are often seen as being secondary to the written text. The printed poem is studied as the 'true' and 'authentic' version, which oral presentations of poetry seek to reflect as accurately as possible (Middleton, 1998). As Stern (1991: 73) notes, these are:

... poetry readings in which the emphasis by the poet is less on acting and displaying than it is on reading, that is on the text as voiced, events in which the audience comes to see the poet and hear her/him read...

Working within these dominant, established conventions provides poets with ready access to materials, with which they can produce work that is easily distributed to audiences, who, in turn, know how to consume and evaluate this work. Thus, poetry which meets these conventions is easier to produce and more likely to gain recognition.

Whilst they are standardised however, conventions are not constant. Rather, they are changing continually and are often challenged by artists themselves. In reworking existing conventions, artists may help to establish new genres, which are themselves structured by fresh sets of conventions. This process may dilute and reorder existing power structures, however, and may therefore be seen as something of a threat to those who operate within the existing system; such can be said of slam.

### 3.2.1 The Challenge of Slam

Many of the conventions governing a slam differ greatly from those which operate at a 'traditional' poetry reading. A slam audience, for instance, is required to pay full attention to the poet on stage, rather than following the poem on the page. The audience is also expected to be more vocal during a slam, sometimes participating in the poem itself, through devices like 'call and response'.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, techniques like singing, chanting and beatboxing are common in slams, but alien to most poetry recitals.

As suggested previously, in seeking to establish fresh artistic conventions, which focus on poetry as a performative, rather than text-based genre, slam has drawn on the conventions of the theatre, live music and other performance-based arts. These influences can be seen both in the kinds of techniques which slam poets use and in the language with which they discuss the for(u)m. The term 'performance poetry', for instance, with its reference to theatrical traditions, classifies slam as something very different from the text-based 'readings' of the academic poetry world.

Introducing new artistic conventions in this way is a risky business, since it is more difficult for unconventional work to gain recognition amongst critics and audiences. Further, since conventions belong to complex, inter-dependent systems, changing one convention often requires altering a host of others, which can be costly and complicated. Slam's emphasis on live, oral

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<sup>131</sup> 'Call-and-response' is a theatrical technique in which the audience is asked to call back a response to a key word or words uttered by the poet. For instance whenever the poet says 'all I could see was', the audience shouts 'the gutter's edge'.

performance, for example, has resulted not only in the need for poets to acquire new skills, in order to present their work adequately, but also in the introduction of staging devices to create the necessary lighting and sound set ups. This, in turn, has meant that new materials (amplifiers, microphones, spotlights) must often be acquired and transported to venues, personnel must be trained to use this equipment and venues must be chosen which can accommodate these more complex set ups.

Breaching established conventions also brings with it a certain freedom, however, as slam poets experiment with new ways of performing their work. The group pieces seen on the NPS stage are particularly illustrative of this process, with poets producing precisely choreographed, multi-layered, polyvocal works that take poetry into dramatically new territory (see Devlin, 1998 for examples). New conventions, however, also generate a certain tension. Indeed, many slam conventions operate around fresh ideas of how poetry should be defined and valued, and thus aim specifically to challenge existing definitions of poetry. If these competing definitions were established successfully, they could bring with them different criteria by which the quality of poems may be measured, and potentially devalue the cultural capital associated with the dominant literary world.

Unsurprisingly then, numerous poets and critics of the academy have been vociferously opposed to slam. Many commentators argue that the for(u)m devalues poetry, by emphasising performance and competition over the writing itself. Middleton (1998: 263), for example, cites David Wojahn's critique of slam as comprising 'methods of delivery and gimmickry that owe more to show-biz than to literature'. Such comments seek to counter the challenge imposed by slam, by denigrating its quality and denying it the status of poetry.

Many slam participants are equally critical of academic poetry. Indeed, a number of slam conventions were established in explicit opposition to those of the academy. The use of randomly selected audience members to judge slams, for instance, was intended to subvert the notion of the academic critic, trained and qualified to assess a poem's merits. Whilst a number of scholars

(for example Adorno, 1991; Bourdieu, 1989) have discussed the 'high' culture critique of 'popular' culture however, fewer have acknowledged that this hostility can work in both directions (Harrington and Bielby, 2001).

Exceptions to this can be found in the work of subcultural theorists like Hebdige (1979), Willis (1977; 1978) and Thornton (1995). Thornton introduced the term 'subcultural capital' to distinguish between the cultural currency of dominant groups in society and that associated with 'other less privileged domains', specifically clubbers (Thornton, 1995: 11). Much like Thornton's clubbers, slam participants evaluate the objects and individuals which populate their domain using discourses and conventions which are distinct from, but rely on comparison with, those of more powerful groups.

Slams may be conflated with poetry recitals by those outside the community, and slam participants frequently feel that they must contend with this dominant perspective on poetry, striving to create an identity for themselves which contrasts sharply with it. In doing so, they have tended to reject 'academic' understandings of poetry and, just as with the Beats, punk poets and others before them, anti-academic narratives abound amongst slam poets. Slam is depicted by its proponents as an exciting force for change, which will revitalise poetry, dusting off the academic detritus, dragging it off the page and making it relevant and entertaining to those sections of society to whom it has been made foreign and remote (see for example Makhijani, 2005; Smith and Kraynak, 2004).

This academic/text - popular/performance axis is one of the primary lines on which competing definitions of poetry revolve; yet it is an unfair dichotomy. Neither 'academic' and 'popular' poetry, nor text and performance-based genres, deserve to be separated in this way. Poetry on the page and poetry on the stage have influenced each other for centuries and will almost certainly continue to do so. This is reflected in the complex relationship between academic poetry and slam, which is discussed in greater detail in the following two subsections.

### 3.2.2 Page Meets Stage: Interactions between Slam and the Academy

Despite the frequent hostility between participants in slam and the academy, interaction between the two offers a potential for mutual benefits which is difficult to ignore. Slam poets would seem foolish to ignore the rich source of cultural capital which the prestigious institutions of the dominant literary world represent. Correspondingly, if slam can be brought into the academy, then participants in the dominant literary world have the opportunity not only of capitalising on the relatively large and broad audiences which the for(u)m attracts, but also of reigning in, and subsequently controlling, this rebellious movement.

There are increasing signs of such interactions beginning to take place. Contrary to the oft-quoted academic argument that genres like slam have devalued poetry, for instance, authors like Bell (2004) and Kaufman and Heinz (1999) suggest that the success of slam in the U.S. has led to both increased audiences for academic readings and to a proliferation of poetry publications. The interaction of slam and academic poetry is apparent in other quarters too. The number of poetry workshops, writing programs and literary magazines has ballooned throughout the U.S. in recent years and many feature collaborations between slam and 'academic' poets. Most U.S. states now have poet laureates and, in 1996, April was declared National Poetry Month by the academy of American Poets. These moves have been interpreted by some slam participants as evidence of the increased popularity which slam has brought to poetry across the board. Conversely, slam has increasingly accepted academic conventions, with many slam poets publishing books of their work, performing in traditional academic settings or running formal courses, which aim to teach others how to write and perform slam/performance poetry. These developments suggest a growing acceptance of slam by members of the dominant literary world and vice versa. (See Chapter Eleven for more on this.)

Whilst such interactions may be on the increase, however, the differences between them have not been ironed out completely. The tension between slam and the academy remains very much alive and their participants continue to

emphasise distinct conventions and discourses. Thus, whilst many slam poets have released poetry books, for instance, these are often self-published in small print runs and sold, not in book shops, but at poetry slams, other live performances and increasingly over the internet. Further, slam's emphasis on oral performance is reflected in the number of slam videos and CDs which are released alongside, or instead of, printed texts. Academic poets, in contrast, have preserved the primacy of the written text, commonly publishing work through established poetry presses and magazines.

### 3.2.3 Out With the Old, in With the New: Avant-garde Art Movements and Artists

Such complex and convoluted interactions between established and emerging art forms are by no means unique to poetry. Gendron (2002), for instance, explores the ways in which popular music forms like rock and jazz came to be taken seriously by the 'highbrow' critics who initially rejected them, discussing the impact of this process on the evolution of these genres. Whilst such interactions were initially rejected by both new and established musicians and critics, they hold potential benefits for all groups, enabling them to boost and bolster their cultural and economic capital.

Gendron suggests that the interaction between 'high' and 'popular' cultural forms is most visible within avant-garde art movements, where there is greater reference to the mass market than within more 'traditionalist' arts. As he notes:

In Baudelaire's terms, traditionalists prize 'eternal' beauty and a barely shifting canon, whereas avant-gardes are enamoured with the continually shifting 'contemporary' beauties and are constantly fomenting revisions in the canon. (Gendron, 2002: 16)

Thus avant-garde artists are commonly seen as challenging the ruling orthodoxy, introducing new ways of doing, understanding and consuming art, which threaten existing conventions and discourses. In this sense, we could align slam with avant-garde movements and 'academic' poetry with the

traditionalists. As Gendron demonstrates, however, traditional art forms are by no means as static or isolated as they may appear to be; neither are avant-garde forms as new and unique as their proponents may claim. Rather, each relies on the other for its continued existence.

In short, slam is not constructed in isolation. Rather, it acquires its identity, in part, by being defined *in opposition to* the dominant literary world.<sup>132</sup> Kadushin (1976: 117) suggests that striving against existing artistic conventions is characteristic of art movements more generally. He describes art worlds as operating in 'movement circles', in which artists initially create works in opposition to established forms, noting that it is frequently 'the sense of embattlement that leads to common bonding' between these artists.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, a number of authors have suggested that this is true of communities more generally, arguing that they are defined by what they exclude as much as what they include (see for example Lamont's, 2000, writing on boundary formation amongst American and French workers). As suggested in the previous section, this 'embattlement' need not endure for art world participants to continue to thrive however. Rather, movements which begin on the 'outside' of dominant art worlds frequently migrate inwards, becoming accepted as part of the very world which they once defined themselves against. In this sense, existing art worlds can be seen to contain within them the seeds of movements to come, so that it is possible to 'see the new in the old instead of just the old in the new' (Adorno, 1984: 38).

Lena and Peterson (2007) note that such patterns of development may occur, not only between established and emerging genres, but also between the new and established practitioners of a given art form. Whilst some strive towards new conventions, others react against this, seeking to maintain those which already govern the genre. In this way, changing conventions may be viewed as a common feature of art worlds, as they emerge, develop, decline and give rise to new art forms. According to Lena and Peterson, individuals may respond to these changing conventions in two main ways. In a model reminiscent of

<sup>132</sup> This notion of the reliance of 'opposites' upon each other for their existence is reminiscent of the dialectical logic popularised by the Frankfurt School (see for example Carr, 2006).

<sup>133</sup> This interrelationship between new and established/dominant cultural forms also plays a central role in the theories of Bourdieu (1993:59-60) and Gramsci (1985/1921-6).

Baudelaire's aforementioned work, they suggest that 'traditionalists' seek to return to the genre as it was in an earlier period, when it was perceived as being uncorrupted by commercial concerns and thus able to produce higher quality, 'purer' work. 'Avant gardists', in contrast, prefer to continue innovating within the genre, allowing it to evolve further.

Lena and Peterson's typification of music genre trajectories can be usefully applied to slam; however it is not without its limitations. The categories of 'traditionalists' and 'avant gardists' are somewhat limiting, and there are many slam poets who fit into neither camp or who combine elements of both. Further, it is not clear whether we should consider these to be types of individual or patterns of behaviour. Nonetheless, Lena and Peterson's discussion challenges the notion that slam poets are an indivisible group. This leaves us open to consider not only how slam poets seek to define themselves in opposition to other art forms, (including the 'academic' poetry of the dominant literary world) but also the diverse ways in which they respond to slam as an evolving art movement in different geographical and social contexts across the globe. Whilst slam participants in the U.K. and the U.S. set the for(u)m against the dominant literary world, for example, U.S. slam participants often position slam more generally as an underground movement, challenging dominant political and consumer organisations, which are viewed as representative of 'mainstream' society.

Heath and Potter (2006: 18) suggest that it is not uncommon for art worlds to define themselves as countercultures in this way. Further, they contend that, despite claims to the contrary, such 'countercultures' are not qualitatively different from the mainstream cultures which they set themselves against. They operate in the same system, play by the same rules and interact in subtle and complex ways. Thus, rather than challenging each other, 'mainstream' and countercultures rely on one another for their very existence. After all, counterculture is meaningless without a mainstream culture to oppose.

Much as jazz in the 1940s, then, slam constitutes a 'unity in dispersion', being organised around 'a group of interconnected binary oppositions' (Gendron,



2002: 139). Such oppositions relate not only to slam and the dominant literary world, but also to art/commerce, artificiality/authenticity, popular/elite, underground/mainstream, American/non-American, youth/adult, and community/individualism binaries. These are referred to throughout this thesis, beginning with a discussion of community and individualism in the following section.

### **3.3 A Note on ‘Community’ and ‘Individualism’**

As has already been suggested, slam may be seen as a ‘community’ as well as a for(u)m. In this sense, it is often juxtaposed against individualism. In order to understand the import of these two constructs for slam participants, it is necessary to examine how they have been defined in both social scientific and more popular discourse. In addition to this discussion, and the sources cited within it, I would refer the interested reader to Ansdell (2004: 76-82) for a stimulating analysis of community and individualism, which elaborates on many of the points which I make here in the context of community music therapy.

#### **3.3.1 Defining ‘Community’**

‘Community’ is a complex, much used term, which has been defined in myriad and often conflicting ways. It is an ideological and idealised construct; a ‘warmly persuasive word’, which appears never to be used unfavourably, despite its salience for many social scientists (Williams, 1976: 76). As will be argued in Chapter Eight, community features heavily in slam participants’ talk, providing a pivot for the discursive construction of their identities and relationships.

Although, as Williams (1976) points out, community has no opposite, it is frequently juxtaposed against wider society, with society characterised as an atomised realm of competitive individualism and community as a cooperative, interactive collective, in which the needs of the group outweigh those of the individual. In this sense, individualism is positioned as a potential threat to the

sanctity of community. This community-individualism dichotomy has concerned scholars for centuries, from the conflict between Kant and Hegel's accounts of the person (see Stråth, 2001), through to Tönnies' (2001/1887) influential distinction between 'Gemeinschaft' and 'Gesellschaft' features of human relations.<sup>134</sup> Sociological interest in this debate was rekindled in the mid 1980s with the work of Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985), who decried what they saw as being the suffocation of community by individualism in post World War II America. Such concerns will no doubt continue to be raised by scholars for many decades to come, echoing popular discourse in which community plays the wounded hero to the victorious villain of individualism. (Of course, there is another side to this debate too, but those who echo Kant in championing individualism over community are currently few and far between.)

Whilst community is often invoked and supported by scholars, it remains ill defined. Early sociological and anthropological theorists conceived of communities as being bound to a particular geographic area (see for example Hillery, 1955: 111). More recently, however, attention has focused on shared discourses as a defining feature of communities, suggesting that they are not fixed to one spatial or temporal context, but are fluid and multifaceted, with indistinct boundaries and multiple identities (see for example Becker, 2004: 20).

This latter approach emphasises the importance of individuals' subjective understandings, so that community may ultimately be seen as something which is defined by its participants as such. Thus, what is a community for one person may not be so for another. Of those individuals present at a slam, for example, some may view slam simply as an activity or spectacle, with no real value as a community. Others may attend slams regularly enough that they come to form acquaintances with others present. In this case, slam may be seen as something of a 'lifestyle enclave'; a group of individuals who are affiliated loosely with one another through one or more common interests (see Bellah *et al.*, 1985: 333-5). For still others, the relationships they form through slam may

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<sup>134</sup> Tönnies intended his distinction to denote two different ideal type forms of individualism, and was critical of what he saw as being the simplistic, ideological dichotomy between individualism and community. His writing is often unclear on this point however, and the reader can find in his work much support for the common interpretation that 'Gemeinschaft' represents a form of family-centred community life and 'Gesellschaft' a more competitive, individualistic society.

persist, impacting on a range of different contexts, roles and activities. Here, slam may be deemed to be a community.

These varied understandings of slam may be associated with different roles, with audience members being more likely to treat slam as a detached spectacle, and organisers and poets more inclined to view it as a community, but the correlation is not absolute. All of these groups may be involved in discussion and decision making around slams and form the kind of social interdependence which Bellah *et al.* associate with communities. Further, neither these roles, nor participants' understandings of slam are fixed. Instead, they are likely to vary between and within different geographical, social and temporal contexts.

Whilst we may legitimately label slam a community, then, this definition cannot simply be taken on face value. Not only is the concept of community a problematic one, which must be understood as varying in nature and significance according to the subjective perceptions of its participants, but slam itself is a highly contested territory, characterised by numerous discourses, which do not always exist harmoniously alongside one another. As this thesis unfolds, many of these tensions and ambiguities will be explored, with attention being paid to the different ways in which slam is perceived as: a spectacle; a community; an individualistic competition; an oppositional movement; a political movement; an art form; an entertainment form; an incubator for artistic talent; an educational tool; and a facilitator for, and opponent to, the dominant literary world.

### 3.3.2 Defining 'Individualism'

As suggested above, 'community' has long been juxtaposed against 'individualism', with the latter often portrayed as an evil which threatens to fracture and undermine society as a whole. Whilst this understanding of

'individualism' goes back to its origins in the early nineteenth century, the term has also always been applied in diverse (and often contradictory) ways (see Claeys, 1986; Lukes, 1971; Swart, 1962). Underlying these divergent usages are two contrasting definitions of 'individualism'. In the first, the concept is understood to represent the selfishness or egoism of individuals who prioritise their own goals and values over others, whilst in the second it represents personal liberty or autonomy (more *individuality* than *individualism*). This dual character of individualism is reflected in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Pearsall, 1999: 722), where the term is defined both as 'self-centred feeling or conduct; egoism' and as 'independence and self-reliance'.

Billig *et al.* (1988) suggest that the former notion of individualism provides a necessary foil to the latter, helping to ensure that the needs of the individual continue to be weighed against those of others. This interplay between individual autonomy and social responsibility represents an 'ideological dilemma', common to both lay and scientific discourse (see also Bauman, 2001). Whilst dilemmas such as this cannot necessarily be resolved, our search for consistency and coherence prompts us to attempt such a resolution and thus to engage actively with the world. Slam participants' talk around individualism and community can be understood, in part, as an attempt to overcome this ideological dilemma. (This is explored in greater depth in Chapter Eight.)

This thesis, then, is concerned not with individualism *per se*, but with the relationship between individualism and community. It will be argued that, despite its prevalence in the discourse of slam participants and social scientists alike, the community-individualism dichotomy is overly simplistic and serves to mask the dialectical relationship between these constructs. This argument finds support amongst a number of scholars. Durkheim (1984/1893), for instance, contends that individualism, seen in terms of personal autonomy, is a necessary precondition for the development of social solidarity, whilst Alliaak and Realo (2004) argue that individualism and social capital are mutually reinforcing.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>135</sup> 'Social capital' can be defined as 'features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits' (Putnam, 1993: 35); as such, it is more frequently associated with community than individualism (see for example Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Putnam, 1993).

Scholars writing in the social movements literature have also emphasised the supportive relationship between individual and collective identity (see for example Enrique *et al.*, 1994; Della Porta and Diani, 1999). As I will argue, understanding individualism as egoism need not mean retaining this dichotomy, since communities themselves are structured by competitive frameworks and by individual, as well as collective, goals.

### **3.4 Conclusions**

As stated at the start of Chapter Two, poetry slam is more than simply a competition. Rather, it is a community, a movement, a philosophy, a forum, a form, a genre, an educational device, and a career path. Slam and its participants do not acquire their identity in isolation, but in interaction with a host of different groups and art worlds. These interactions may be harmonious or conflicting, but their impact on one another cannot be overlooked. They help to explain the evolution of art worlds, as well as the different ways in which individuals within a given world construct the for(u)m and their relationship to it.

This thesis is an attempt to explore some of these different faces of slam as they are constructed in and through the talk of slam participants based in U.S., U.K. and youth slam contexts. In doing so, it aims to build on the themes, issues and ideas which have been presented in this and the previous chapter. Thus, slam will be understood as an interactive, active performance; an art world, which intersects with other art worlds and in which local concerns are realised, despite the global nature of the phenomenon. Further, slam will be mobilised as an illustration of the complex power relations, ideological dilemmas, and above all, issues of identity construction, which individuals must negotiate in the course of their everyday lives. The following chapter considers how these ideas are represented and developed through social scientific theory, and how this, in turn, can be used to construct a theoretical framework for this thesis.

**Chapter Four: Artworks, Artists and Audiences – Theoretical  
Perspectives**

In an empire you don't just steal land, you steal ideas.

~ Ian Hart (2007: 98)

{There is} no need to isolate two courses of contrasting action as though in reality we were not permanently gripped in a whole tissue of states, of modes of being present to ourselves, to the situation, to others and to objects that interlace, superimpose, that encase themselves like parentheses.

~ Antoine Henion (2007: 105-6)

These epigraphs highlight many of the concerns of the current chapter, and indeed, this thesis more generally. Together, they suggest that power and status are important forces impacting on our daily lives, on the ways in which we understand our worlds, our selves, and other people. They indicate too that power and status must be understood as complex, dynamic processes, which operate through the control of ideas, rather than simply coercion. Henion's statement places the person at the centre of the analysis, enticing us to explore how individuals interact with and make sense of their social worlds. Further, his conception of a 'tissue of states' warns us against simplistic dichotomies, such as those which are drawn all too frequently between dominant and dominated groups, and between artistic production and consumption.

Taking these quotations as our starting point, we can begin to assemble an account of artistic forms like slam, which marks them as dynamic, ideological and interactively accomplished. This is not a task, however, which can be achieved through the adoption of any single theory. Instead, we must draw on a diverse literature, uniting approaches which consider micro level interactions with those focusing on macro level social structures, and scholars who

emphasise the ideological character of art with those who explore the nature and negotiation of status relations.

The current chapter traces the evolution of such a composite theory. This was constructed partly as an attempt to rectify some of the limitations of existing work in the field and partly to account for emerging patterns in the data. Accordingly, it developed with the research. Thus, Theodor Adorno's (1973/1948; 1991; 2000/1970) work on the social and ideological nature of art was influential during the early stages of this study, but became less relevant as it unfolded. Antonio Gramsci's (1971/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) concept of hegemony, in contrast, was introduced much later, as the need for a detailed account of status became increasingly apparent. This grounded theory inspired approach also means that I have brought together theories which are rarely viewed as allied, such as those of Antonio Gramsci and Erving Goffman (1967), whilst bypassing scholars, such as Richard Peterson (1976; 1978; Peterson and Kern, 1996), whose work is prominent in the field, but of less relevance to this analysis.

The current chapter is structured so as to reflect the development of this epistemological position, beginning with a discussion of key social scientific theories of the arts, and gradually refining and elaborating on these as the chapter progresses. It is divided into four main sections:

Section 4.1 opens the analysis with a discussion of theories which have helped to shape our understanding of culture as socially contingent, constructive and ideological. Particular attention is paid to Theodor Adorno (1973/1948; 1991; 2000/1970) and to Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) work on cultural capital. Viewing culture as a social process necessarily entails abandoning our 'romantic myth' of the artist as sole creator of an artwork (Becker, 1982: 14). Section 4.2 considers why such a conception is flawed, and proposes interactionism as an alternative theoretical framework, which is able to understand the meanings of art instead as actively negotiated through everyday social interactions.

These theories argue that art is a social, and thus ideological, process. This suggests that, in order to understand art worlds and their participants, we must also explore the nature, importance and process of status negotiation. Section 4.3 aims to do just this, taking as its starting point Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony (1971/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935). This is qualified and developed with reference to interactionist theory (see for example Becker, 1982; Goffman, 1967) and to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field (1993; 1996). (The latter was mobilised partly as an attempt to reconcile Bourdieu's work on cultural capital with his contention that status is complex, multiple and dynamic.)

The final section, section 4.4, acts as a bridge to the methodological discussion in Chapter Five, by considering how these processes are played out in the everyday lives of art world participants. It will be argued that one of the ways in which we seek to negotiate status is by performing socially desirable identities and that much of our talk is directed towards this end. By analysing slam participants' talk, then, we can gain an insight into how art world participants seek to perform their identities in such a way as to negotiate favourable positions for themselves within status hierarchies. This model is developed with reference to interactionist and discourse analytic theories (on the latter see for example Burman and Parker, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; 1995).

#### **4.1 Ideology and the Arts**

Sociological writing on the arts is dominated by a concern over the ideological nature of culture. This is especially true of work on cultural consumption. The current section focuses on two theorists, who have each played a profound role in helping to define this approach. Theodor Adorno (1973/1948; 1991; 2000/1970) is discussed in subsection 4.1.1, whilst Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) concept of cultural capital is considered in 4.1.2. These theories share a number of similarities. In particular, they both suggest that low status individuals are restricted to the consumption of 'lower' arts, whilst those of high status may access arts which are defined as 'high' or 'legitimate'. They differ in their understanding of aesthetic quality, however, with Adorno viewing this as



an inherent property of artworks and Bourdieu contending instead that it is socially constructed.

#### 4.1.1 The Theory of Theodor Adorno

Adorno (1973/1948; 1991; 2000/1970) sees culture as a means of reinforcing (and potentially challenging) social hierarchies. Implicit in his theory is the idea of a dominant class who control the 'culture industry', creating mass cultural objects which stifle independent thought and reinforce inequalities, through their standardisation and commodification of culture. Such 'mass' or 'popular' art is merely a shallow, empty replica of itself. Its content and form reinforce the illusion of freedom, encouraging people to be content with their lot, and to seek leisure and entertainment, in place of self-improvement or societal change. Adorno juxtaposes this against 'high' or 'pure' art, which challenges and stimulates the consumer. By explicitly embodying the contradictions of society, pure art paves the way for concrete social change (Adorno, 2000/1970: 258). Pure art is not typically consumed by the masses, who instead digest the popular art which has been co-opted by the culture industry and moulded to its needs. Thus, whilst individuals may have access to a range of art, this has largely been robbed of its meaning, utility and variety.<sup>136</sup>

Slam would not fare well in Adorno's analysis, residing, it would seem, firmly at the popular end of his continuum. He would be highly critical, for instance, of the promotion of slam as an accessible and entertaining for(u)m. Adorno also disdained contests, which he felt encouraged the standardisation of culture, through their emphasis on rules, and perpetuated the logic of the strong dominating the weak; thus legitimising oppression of the masses. Interestingly, these themes also recur throughout slam participants' discourse. Many of those I spoke to agreed with Adorno that the arts could and should be used as a tool of liberation, for instance, or were critical of competitiveness and

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<sup>136</sup> It is worth noting that the distinction between 'pure' and 'popular' arts is more subtle than this brief account conveys. Adorno's categories represent points on a continuum, rather than dichotomous poles, and are distinguished not only by the intrinsic properties of artworks, but also by the manner of their consumption. Further, whilst there are parallels between these concepts and popular notions of 'high' and 'low' arts, they are not direct equivalents. Adorno (1973/1948) condemned Stravinsky's music as 'popular' art, for instance, whilst Watson (1995) has suggested that punk meets Adorno's criteria for 'pure' art.

standardisation in slam. Slam, however, was often promoted as a for(u)m which could be used to alleviate, rather than reinforce, oppression. Further, there were important distinctions between participants, with some viewing standardisation and competitiveness as characteristic of slam as a whole, and others confining their critique to certain areas of the for(u)m. Whilst his work highlights important issues around art, then, Adorno does not allow us to theorise the heterogeneity *within* particular art worlds which is focal to this study.

Adorno is a prominent cultural sociologist and is often considered to be the 'father' of music sociology (DeNora, 2003: 3; 2004). Whilst he was certainly not the first person to take this stance, he has helped to popularise the view of music as a social force, rather than simply an object. Similarly, Adorno has contributed greatly to the study of art as an interactional process, in which cultural consumption and production are inevitably interrelated, and in which power and ideology play key roles. As such, he has helped to lay the foundations both for this thesis specifically and for the social scientific study of the arts more generally.

Adorno's insistence on the social and ideological nature of art helped to focus this research in its early stages. In particular, his contention that different art forms and styles of consumption can impact upon individuals' status became an important foundational premise of this thesis. His focus on the structural implications of compositional practices, meanwhile, supports the idea that a micro level analysis of slam can, indeed, shed light on wider social processes. As Adorno (1974: 57) notes, 'only he understands what the poem says who perceives in its solitude the voice of humanity'.

Adorno's relevance lessened, however, as the study progressed. In particular, I found that his theory does little to illuminate the lived experience of slam participants. Further, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate, the rather broad distinctions which he makes between popular/pure arts, and dominant/dominated groups are somewhat problematic. The idea that aesthetic quality is an intrinsic property of art works has been also called into question by

theorists like Bourdieu, who contend that the meaning, quality and status of the arts is socially constructed. This alternative viewpoint suggests that cultural products are ideological from the point of their conception.

#### 4.1.2 Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital

In his classic work, *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1989) theorised that certain genres and art forms are labelled more 'legitimate' than others. This 'legitimacy' is conferred by dominant groups in society. Members of these groups acquire tastes for, and competencies in, legitimate arts, giving them power over lower status individuals, who lack such competencies. They maintain this powerful position by restricting access to cultural capital, which may, in turn, be acquired through educational qualifications ('educational capital') or inherited by social origin.

In Bourdieu's terms, 'legitimate' poetry is represented in the publications and readings sanctioned by the dominant literary world. These outlets operate in a highly competitive field. Only a very small portion of the manuscripts received by publishing companies are selected for publication, and bookings for recitals are usually given to poets who have already flourished via this route. To succeed in this arena poets must have considerable knowledge of its workings. They must know, for instance, how to write and present work to appeal to prospective publishers and where to send completed manuscripts. In other words, poets' success relies upon them conforming to established conventions. Audiences too must understand these conventions in order to consume poetry successfully.

These dominant literary conventions are taught at educational institutions like universities, and learnt through reading and listening to poetry. Access to such institutions is largely restricted to higher status groups, who have the money and knowledge necessary to enter and succeed within them. These individuals are also more likely to expose their children to legitimate poetry early on in life. Thus, they pass on their cultural capital both directly and indirectly.

Bourdieu's account places the social context of artworks, artists and audiences to the fore. Importantly, he demonstrates that meaning is not an integral property of artworks, but is dependent on their social realisation; a contention which is of central importance to the current study and has received much empirical support (see for example DeNora, 2000). By extending this argument to its logical conclusion, cultural objects can be seen as having, not an intrinsic, objective essence, but multiple, ambiguous and socially dependent characteristics (Griswold, 2004). Thus, as DeNora suggests, a single piece of music may be used in many different ways. Similarly, a poem may stimulate diverse reactions, evoking the lightness and adventure of a first romance for some and a tedious classroom encounter for others. The same piece will likely nurture very different moods if it is used as the voice track for an advertisement or written inside a Valentine's Day card. Meaning is not a static property of the poem, then, but a fluid and multidimensional function of the interaction between poem, poet and audience. Whether it is performed on the stage or the page, poetry cannot be divorced from the social context within which it is created, disseminated and consumed.

Bourdieu's theory is insightful and invaluable, but insufficient to explain the operation of art worlds such as slam. In particular, his contention that the 'high aesthetic' dominates the 'popular aesthetic', so that the definitions of dominant groups are shared by all, is problematic. Slam poets, for instance, reject the idea that 'academic' poetry represents the only legitimate form. Further, they question the opposition of legitimate and popular art, arguing that it is precisely the popularity of slam which defines its legitimacy. Whilst Bourdieu (1993, 1996) presents a more complex account of the rules and conventions governing different artistic spheres in his field theory, he seems unable, even here, to escape this top-down notion of influence (see section 4.3 for more on this).

Bourdieu's account of status also merits closer scrutiny. He conceptualises status as a three-fold concept, being comprised of occupation, educational level and social origin (operationalised as father's occupation). These factors affect both the competencies which individuals acquire and the manner of their application. Further, since high status social origin privileges greater access to

the educational system and greater qualifications facilitate high status employment, these variables are inevitably interrelated.

Whilst this presents a complexity which eludes much other work in the area, Bourdieu still ignores numerous important elements of social status, tending to overemphasise its correspondence to social class.<sup>137</sup> The relationship between culture and status, however, cannot be explained so simply. Factors from marital status (Sintas and Álvarez, 2004), to sex (Sintas and Álvarez, 2004), to nationality (Lamont, 1992; Trienekens, 2002), to age (Gayo-Cal et al., 2006; Van Eijck and Bargeman, 2004), to education (Bourdieu, 1989; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978), to 'ethnic orientation' (Trienekens, 2002), to the size of an individual's residential community (Lamont, 1992) may all impact both status and patterns of cultural consumption. Further, Bourdieu appears to rely on a realist understanding of status, conferring on it an objectively quantifiable essence, which is unitary, constant and universal. Yet status is not pinned down so easily. Rather, as this chapter argues, it is dependent on the specific interactional context within which it is realised (see Goffman, 1967). Thus, as Henion's (2007: 105-6) opening quotation indicates, we are 'gripped in a whole tissue ... of modes of being present to ourselves, to the situation, to others and to objects'.

Both Bourdieu and Adorno offer insights into cultural consumption which have proved invaluable in constructing the epistemological foundations of this thesis. Despite their disparities, they each emphasise the importance of culture as a socio-historical phenomenon, and are united in the belief that it both reflects and helps to construct status hierarchies. Their work allows us to view art as an active, constructive process, and emphasises the importance of studying artistic phenomena like slam. The insights of both theorists need, however, be developed further. In addition to the points raised above, neither theory considers cultural production in any real depth.<sup>138</sup> Whilst Adorno drew on a detailed knowledge of compositional practices in his work, for instance, he did

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<sup>137</sup> Here too the concept of the field offers an important counterpoint, providing a more flexible and robust approach to status to that which is presented in *Distinction* (see also Bourdieu, 1985).

<sup>138</sup> Interestingly, whilst Bourdieu (1993; 1996) has written on cultural production elsewhere, his work on consumption has attracted far greater critical attention.

not explore the process of composition as it was enacted, nor the range of interactional partners whose collaboration is necessary for such composition to take place. Rather, as Huhn (1997: 344) notes, Adorno 'is less interested in how {the culture} industry produces its products and more interested in how it produces us as artifacts of it'. This disproportionate focus on cultural consumption is reflected in the field as a whole (Defonso, 1986; Zolberg, 1990). In order to construct a more balanced picture, we need to look, not only at the consumers of artworks, but at their producers too, understanding each as reciprocally related parts of the artistic process. This is precisely the focus which interactionism offers us.

## **4.2 Art in Interaction**

If, as Adorno and Bourdieu suggest, culture is an inherently social practice, then this has important implications for all stages of the artistic process. Subsection 4.2.1 builds on these theorists' work in cultural consumption by critiquing the notion of the a-social artist, creating their work in a secluded ivory tower. It will be argued that art is rather an interactive, collaborative exercise, and that we need an alternative framework in order to understand fully this process. 4.2.2 outlines such a perspective, introducing the interactionist take on art. The multiple benefits of this approach will be explored, with particular focus on its ability to: unite cultural production and consumption; understand culture as process, rather than product; explore the negotiation of cultural meanings in everyday interactions; view individuals as active, reflexive meaning makers; and unite micro with macro levels of analysis.

### **4.2.1 The 'Romantic Myth' of the Artist**

Understanding art as a social process necessarily entails abandoning the 'romantic myth' of the artist as a solitary, creative genius (Becker, 1982: 14). This myth underscores much scholarly work in the arts (Finnegan, 1992/1977). Literary critics, for example, often seek to identify the author through the text and vice versa. They may aim, for instance, to uncover authors' motivations for

using a particular image or turn of phrase. This approach portrays meaning as a transparent feature of the text, and ignores the many other individuals whose activities contribute to its construction.

Even poetry, which may appear to be a rather solitary art form, is a collaborative activity. Numerous individuals must work together for a poem to be created, distributed and consumed. Writing implements must be produced, packaged and sold, for instance; the text must be edited, and the publication in which it appears typeset, printed, promoted and distributed. Yet the romantic myth of the author segregates the activities of such 'support personnel' (Becker, 1982) from those of the artist. Adorno (1991: 101), for instance, refers to 'the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods', implying a clear division between the artistic and non-artistic tasks through which an artwork is created. This elevates the artist's activities over those of others. It is they who take the responsibility, and receive the credit, for an artwork (Barthes, 1977), and they who determine its meaning.

Romantic theories may also imbue the creative process itself with an 'aesthetic autonomy' (Adorno, 1991: 101). Here, art is depicted as being something which grows organically, almost without conscious volition (Finnegan, 1992/1977). One implication of this is that 'true' art should arise spontaneously from the artist, rather than being contrived to meet the needs of a particular audience. Such idealised conceptions of art and artists are not confined to academic discussion, but also dominate popular discourse. Poets, critics and audiences place great emphasis on the idea of the poet as sole creator of the poem. Poets clearly have a great deal to gain from this, but critics are also invested heavily in the concept, since much of their work revolves around an ability to identify the author behind the text (Barthes, 1977).

Writers like Barthes and Becker (1982) suggest that this model of the artist is a relatively modern creation. Becker draws on Baxandall's (1972) analysis of evolving understandings towards painters to explore the historical trajectory of this myth. According to Baxandall, the identification of an artwork with a specific painter arose in the fifteenth century, during which time there was a shift away

from a focus on collaboratively accomplished craftsmanship and technical skill, towards individual artistic authorship and creativity. Wolff (1993/1981), in contrast, locates the origins of this myth largely in nineteenth century Romantic ideas, which, in turn, developed from the individualistic nature of industrial, capitalist society, and the consequent separation of the artist as a distinct social class. Whilst the specifics of their accounts may differ, however, Wolff and Baxandall agree that the romantic myth of the lone artist is just that. Further, they emphasise that art, artists and audiences do not have an intrinsic, independent essence, but are historically and socially situated.

The romantic myth of the artist not only neglects the role of the numerous support personnel who collaborate to create an artwork, it also ignores many artists. Only the chosen few are permitted this title, whilst the remainder are viewed instead as hobbyists, craftspeople, technicians and the like. Further, the majority of scholarly attention is paid only to a tiny minority of successful artists (Zolberg, 1990; Bourdieu, 1993). Audience members, in turn, are relegated to a passive, vicarious position, distinguished only by their ability to uncover the meaning which the artist has embedded within their work. The process of production thus stops with the author. As Barthes (1977: 147) notes, 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.

This perspective thus serves to segregate artistic production from artistic consumption, portraying each as a distinct site of meaning making. Scholars like Battani and Hall (2000), Harrington and Bielby (2001) and Zolberg (1990) are highly critical of such an approach, arguing that production and consumption cannot be understood as isolated components, divorced from each other or their social context. What these critics suggest is that we need to consider art as an integrated process, characterised by continual (re)creation. This enables us to view culture as something which is not only *produced*, but also *produces* meaning. The focus thus moves from product to process; to something which is observable, not in macro level structures per se, but in the micro level interactions through which such structures are built and made sense



of. Interactionism supplies precisely this emphasis (see for example Gilmore, 1990).

#### 4.2.2 Introducing Interactionism

Interactionism is a diverse approach which can be said to include within it 'sociological phenomenology' such as ethnomethodology, 'interactional conflict theory' like Chicago Sociology, symbolic interactionism and Goffman's dramaturgical theory (Douglas, 1984: 9; Roberts, 2006: 4). Roberts distinguishes between these different perspectives on a number of grounds. His approach has much to recommend it and I am sympathetic to his argument that scholars should differentiate between these different forms. This thesis, however, takes a much more broad brush approach than does Roberts, mobilising general interactionist principles in a pragmatic, applied manner, alongside other bodies of theory. This requires a sensitive balance between commonality/generality and divergence/specificity. I therefore use interactionism in a broad sense throughout this thesis, paying particular attention to the work of symbolic interactionists like Howard Becker and to Erving Goffman's writings on the performance of identity. Further, I would direct the interested reader to Roberts' insightful account for a more in-depth, nuanced discussion.

In a broad sense, interactionism draws our attention to the everyday interactions through which we engage with, make sense of, and ultimately construct, art for(u)ms like slam. The approach thus offers the perfect antidote to romantic theories, replacing their vague idealism with concrete social interactions which are accessible to empirical study. This means that, by talking to, and observing the interactions of, slam participants, we can explore how slam is produced, consumed, critiqued and understood. Interactionists challenge the idea that art works are static objects, created by a-social artists. Instead, they emphasise the importance of the networks of social interaction through which artworks are produced, disseminated and consumed (see for example Becker, 1982; Becker *et al.*, 2006). They view culture, not as a product, but as a process, which is created and recreated by those who engage

with it. Art is thus portrayed as a 'circuit of culture' (Harrington and Bielby, 2001: 11-12), a continuous social process, which does not stop once an artwork has been produced, but continues as it is presented, consumed, re-presented and reinterpreted in new contexts. Interactionism thus denies rigid distinctions between concepts like production/consumption, high status/low status and tastes/competencies, allowing us to avoid the simplistic dichotomies of which Henion is so critical (2007: 105-6).

For interactionist scholars like Griswold (1986; 1987a, b; 2004) and Becker (1982; 2004), meaning resides, not in cultural objects themselves, but in the relationships between artworks, their creators, their audiences and the wider social world. They contend that all objects are social objects, which acquire meaning only through the behaviour of individuals towards them. A poem, for example, only becomes a poem when individuals respond to it as such. As Bob Holman (1994: 1) aptly notes: 'Poetry is a contact sport! The poem is not written until you read it!'. This simple, yet profound, contention has helped to shape the focus of the current study. It underpins this thesis' understanding of slam as interactively accomplished, and supports a focus on the ways in which slam poems are performed and understood, rather than on the content of slam poems per se.

Interactionists are not alone in their focus on cultural processes, over the content of specific works. Kaufman (2004), for instance, identifies this as a key feature of a recent 'endogenous' turn in cultural sociology. Whilst questions could be raised over the extent to which the work he discusses constitutes a clear theoretical development in the field, his paper does have merit in highlighting a number of different theorists who share interactionists' emphasis on: the performance and construction of meaning; the importance of social interaction; culture as process (rather than product); and the extent to which culture can be used as a resource for the construction of meaning. Prominent amongst these are Andrew Abbott (2001), Stanley Lieberson (2000), Ann Swidler (2001) and Robert Wuthnow (1987).

The aim of this discussion, then, is not to suggest that interactionism has a monopoly on these ideas, but rather that it offers a coherent, robust and flexible theory around which to base the rather eclectic epistemology which is drawn together here. Thus, as this chapter attempts to demonstrate, interactionism allows us to reinterpret key approaches to the sociology of culture in ways which are more relevant and meaningful to the project at hand. Interactionism's focus on the interactional negotiation of meanings, for instance, takes Bourdieu's (1989) account of social 'values' to its logical conclusion. Where Bourdieu's theory implies rigidity and homogeneity, interactionism supplements dynamism and heterogeneity. Interactionists theorise art as a subjective, ideological process throughout. They enable us to explore, not only how slam participants and others may come to hold norms and values around art, which differ from those of high status groups, but also how meanings may vary within these groups. Thus we can analyse the different ways in which literary critics, poets, teachers and other slam participants understand and engage with the for(u)m.

Interestingly, in many ways, Bourdieu (1989: 22) himself lends support to an interactionist model, emphasising that cultural meanings are context-specific and cannot be divorced from the relationships through which they are enacted. This contrasts markedly with the stance he takes elsewhere in *Distinction*. Indeed, Bourdieu is perhaps his own greatest critic, frequently attacking the deterministic, isolationist stance which he adopts in his theories of habitus and artistic tastes (see in particular Bourdieu, 1985; 1993; 1996). King (2000) suggests that this contradiction lies at the heart of Bourdieu's approach. He notes that, whilst Bourdieu's theory of habitus tends towards objectivism, portraying individuals as passive and a-social, his practical theory emphasises instead the importance of social interactions between active, thinking individuals. Bourdieu makes some attempt to reconcile these two theories, but this is ultimately doomed, since they rely upon very different epistemological frameworks.

Despite its many advantages, interactionism's focus on micro level social interactions would appear to make it a strange choice for a study which

explores the ideological nature of a global art for(u)m like slam. Indeed, the approach is often rebuked for neglecting the wider socio-historical context (Wolff, 1993/1981; Zolberg, 1990). Interactionists would criticise the simplistic juxtaposition of micro and macro level structures and processes, however, pointing out, that 'history is nothing but biography; a whole series of biographies' (Mead, 1934: 37).<sup>139</sup> As this quotation suggests, rather than ignoring the socio-historical context, interactionism is explicitly concerned with the nature of society and how it changes over time. Its interactional emphasis leaves it perfectly placed to study society through the eyes of those who experience and create social change, thus reconciling micro level interactions with macro level social structures and processes (Becker and McCall, 1990). (See Becker, 1963; 1982; Goffman, 1959; 1967; and Griswold, 1986 for some excellent examples of this sensitivity in action.) Adopting an interactionist approach, then, need not mean abandoning an analysis of the ideological nature of art. Instead, it entails locating status hierarchies within groups of individuals, understanding power, not as a structure, but as a process, which is played out in and through social interactions (see for example Hall, 1990: 36).

Thus, interactionism has proved pivotal to the analysis of slam which is presented in this thesis. It has helped focus attention on the everyday social interactions through which slam is constructed and made sense of, whilst situating these within a broader context. If we are to understand more about *how* this process takes place, and the impact of this for individuals' status, however, we need to look elsewhere. The remainder of this chapter, then, is devoted to developing the account of interactionism which has been set out above and to considering work which can bolster this approach.

### **4.3 The Nature and Process of Status Negotiation**

Through a discussion of Adorno, Bourdieu and interactionist scholars, like Becker, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that art is a social and ideological process. Our understandings of art, artists and audiences, it has

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<sup>139</sup> Weber (1949) reinforces this observation, reminding us that history is not objective fact, but constructed by historians through their accounts of historical events.

been argued, are inextricably bound up with status. If we are to realise fully the impact of this for slam, and other art world, participants, we need to develop a more detailed model of status, which accounts for how it is played out in everyday interactions. This section seeks to do just that. Subsection 4.3.1 begins by outlining Gramsci's (1971/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) theory of hegemony. 4.3.2 expands on this in the light of interactionist ideas. Finally, 4.3.3 considers the parallels between this approach and that of Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) field.

#### 4.3.1 Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony

Slam participants' talk frequently implicates power and status relations both implicitly and explicitly. They discuss their relationship to other art forms, genres, social groups and each other partly in these terms. By providing an explicit and detailed analysis of the nature and process of status negotiation, Gramsci offers a means of illuminating this discourse, which is absent from the work of theorists such as Adorno, Bourdieu and Becker. Gramsci's work is particularly pertinent to this thesis because of the central role which he allocates to culture in the establishment, maintenance and challenging of status hierarchies. His conceptualisation of hegemony can help us to understand how certain art forms, genres and aesthetic ideals come to be associated with higher status groups in society. We can thus use his work to explore the ideological nature of the discourses which art world participants weave around themselves.

As has been argued, power relations are perpetuated and challenged partly through the possession of, and control over, cultural knowledge, competencies and understandings. Gramsci used 'hegemony' to describe the process through which some of these ideas come to dominate others. He suggested that cultural mechanisms work alongside more coercive means of control to create a kind of consensus which regulates differential power relations (Gramsci, 1988/1916-1935: 249). In this way, existing power structures are constructed as natural and inevitable 'common sense'.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Weber (1978/1922) presents a similar analysis of the operation of power, whilst C. Wright Mills (2000/1959: 41) offers an alternative three-fold categorisation, dividing power into that which is sustained by: voluntary submission based on belief ('authority'), unconscious submission based on belief ('manipulation') and force ('coercion'). Hegemony could be seen

The concept of hegemony, then, indicates how particular art forms, artworks and artists come to be seen as inherently superior to others. This brings us closer to understanding, for instance, why slam may be considered to be an inferior art form by some members of the dominant literary world. Gramsci's theory is also able to explain how these ideas change, however, and thus why the 'academic' critique of slam has lost something of its potency in recent years.

Gramsci (1971/1929-1935: 5-11) suggested that the perpetuation and dissolution of hegemony is enacted by 'traditional' and 'organic' 'intellectuals'. Both groups are nurtured within 'civil society' to reinforce the hegemonic structure (Gramsci, 1971/1929-1935: 12).<sup>141</sup> They are also able to challenge hegemony however, and frequently do so. These challenges take the form of 'counter-hegemonies', unified popular discourses which threaten the hegemonic order and invite social change. Hegemony thus provides us with a framework for theorising, not only the academy's critique of slam, but also slam's critique of the academy, and indeed, 'mainstream' society more generally.

Gramsci's approach is often seen as a macro level perspective, which theorises classes, social structures and sweeping historical change. The parallels of this with interactionism, which emphasises individuals, groups and everyday interactions are not readily apparent. As argued previously, however, such micro/macro divisions are artificial at best. Taking this as its starting point, the following section argues that there are indeed many parallels between these approaches, and that exploring them alongside one another can produce a rich, flexible and sensitive theoretical framework.

#### 4.3.2 (Re)turning to Interactionism

Despite claims to the contrary, Gramsci's theory is concerned, not simply with the macro level political structures where power exists as a potentiality, but also

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here as an amalgam of 'authority' and 'manipulation'.

<sup>141</sup> Civil society includes all social activities and institutions which are neither directly subsumed by government nor part of the processes of material production, for example the family, church, voluntary organisations, and activities like poetry slam.

with the micro level interactions, within which this is realised. Thus he notes that 'the worker or proletarian, for example, is not specifically characterized by his manual or instrumental work, but by performing this work in specific conditions and specific social relations' (Gramsci, 1988/1916-1935: 304). There are clear parallels here with interactionism. Gramsci also shares interactionists' critical stance on deterministic approaches, viewing individuals as reflexive meaning makers, active participants in constructing the very social forces which drive, enable and constrain them.

Further, for Gramsci, as for interactionists, status is not a simple dichotomy separating dominant and dominated groups. Rather, power relations are contingent, transient, heterogeneous and context-dependent (see for example Gramsci, 1971/1929-1935: 355; and see Latour, 1987, 1988 and Emerson, 1962 for different, but allied, accounts of status). This fits more readily with empirical analyses of art worlds like slam than do models which restrict art world participants to either dominant or dominated groups. Indeed, there are status differences between slam organisers, poets and audience members, and these are interpreted diversely by a range of interactional partners. PSI, for example, has both implicit and explicit hierarchies, distinguishing between non-members, 'ordinary' members, 'associate' members, 'slammasters' and those on the Executive Council (Smith and Kraynak, 1994: 278-285).

Gramsci's model is essentially one of society in flux, and thus allows us to understand status as dynamic, rather than static. Such an approach is pivotal to this thesis, since status varies both within and beyond the borders of slam. For slam poets, for example, factors such as whether they perform on a given night, how well they score and their relationships with individual audience members can all impact on their status. Further, changing ideas and understandings around art affect the status of slam and slam participants more generally. The evolving relationship between slam and the dominant literary world, which is discussed in Chapter Eleven, is of particular note here.

As Gramsci demonstrates, this analysis need not deny the dominance of a ruling elite over less powerful groups. Indeed, there is nothing in here to

suggest that all status divisions are of equal potency or salience. My aim, then, is not to paint an anarchic picture in which status is reborn anew in each social interaction, but to follow authors like Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in emphasising the multiplicity of heterogeneous power relations which exist within a meta-hegemonic structure.<sup>142</sup> Thus we can conceive of hegemony as a more nuanced process than simply a grand battle between powerful and powerless, appreciating that, to a large extent, status is in the eye of the beholder.

In short, a close analysis of Gramsci's writings reveals productive, if paradoxical, parallels between his work and that of interactionists. This enables us to illuminate how individuals derive meaning from, and seek to negotiate within, multi-faceted power dynamics in their everyday interactions.

Interactionism brings to this partnership an emphasis on individuals as reflexive meaning makers, who seek to perform their identities in such a way as to negotiate successfully power relations through their interactional encounters (see for example Goffman, 1967). Hegemony, meanwhile, can enrich interactionist theory by illuminating the status hierarchies which structure, and are structured by, these interactions, and the processes through which discourses come to be dominant amongst particular groups in society. In addition, both perspectives work to strengthen the link between micro level analyses of small groups and wider structural processes.

Considering these perspectives alongside one another allows us to understand hegemony as multiple and layered, operating in micro level interactions and inevitably woven into our daily lives. Slam participants, in turn, can be viewed, not as the faceless 'masses' or mere representatives of the 'masses', but as individuals who are actively engaged in navigating their way through complex, multifaceted identities, and able to mobilise different aspects of these identities to meet the requirements of specific contexts.

#### 4.3.3 Bourdieu and the Field

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<sup>142</sup> Foucault (1980) and Weber (1978/1922) provide similarly nuanced accounts of power relations.



This model of status finds some support in Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) theory of the field. As suggested previously, field theory offers a considerably more complex and nuanced account of status than that which is implied in *Distinction*, and is therefore particularly useful in bringing out the relevance of his work for this thesis.<sup>143</sup> Bourdieu (1993: 162) defines a field as 'a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy'. Examples of such 'universes' include the 'educational field', the 'political field' and the 'literary field'; the last of which Bourdieu expounds upon at length. Fields are characterised by distinct 'stakes', 'capital' and status hierarchies, but must be understood as operating in relation both to one another and to the wider 'field of power'.

Individuals work actively (though not necessarily consciously) to secure scarce resources and desirable status positions for themselves within both domain-specific fields and the field of power. This means that the system is constantly in flux. New artistic genres, for example, arise, evolve and fall, as artists strive to establish their distinction from one another (see the discussion on genre trajectories in section 3.2 for more on this). Since fields are structured by different rules, resources and values, status is not necessarily transferable between fields and may even conflict. Status is further complicated by the nesting of fields and sub-fields, so that the literary field is contained within the field of power, and itself incorporates sub-fields of journalism, poetry, drama and so on. (The sub-field of poetry could, in turn, be seen to include slam, spoken word, 'academic' poetry and other poetic genres.)

In many respects, Bourdieu's field theory supports the conceptualisation of status as complex, multi-layered, dynamic and context-specific. His idea of the nesting of fields allies well with the notion of an array of different status hierarchies, subsumed beneath a meta-hegemonic structure, whilst the co-existence of different rules and resources may help to explain the contradictory understandings and values which are so evident in the discourse of slam participants.

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<sup>143</sup> It should be noted that, rather than this representing a linear progression of ideas, Bourdieu's theory of the field was developed alongside his work on cultural capital.

In order to formulate these arguments, however, we must view influence as operating, not only from the top-down, but also bottom-up and horizontally. Thus we must allow that the rules of slam may influence the wider literary field or the symbolic capital associated with the literary field can impact upon the educational field, for example. This means applying Bourdieu's theory with a flexibility and consistency which he himself was often unable to realise. Whilst Bourdieu (1993: 38) acknowledges the importance of field-specific rules, resources and understandings, for instance, these are represented by an isolated 'autonomous principle', whose influence is confined to a given field. This does not sit easily with his emphasis on the contingent nature of fields.

Once again, these inconsistencies represent a key limitation in Bourdieu's work. They make it difficult to theorise the relationship between different fields, the extent to which fields (and sub-fields) may be further subdivided, or the degree to which sub-fields may be structured according to their own autonomous principles. This latter point, in particular, presents a problem when theorising slam, where, in contrast to the broader literary field, there is a positive correlation between popularity and legitimacy.

In addition, Bourdieu is too quick to dismiss discursive social interaction (though here too his stance lacks consistency). He criticises what he views as the 'substantialist' notions of these theorists who he claims 'tend to foreground the individual, or the visible interactions between individuals, at the expense of the structural relations ... between social positions' (Bourdieu, 1993: 29). This overlooks the fact that social structures are realised and made sense of only through such interactions, and undermines Bourdieu's emphasis elsewhere on the importance of understanding the context-specific nature of social relations.

Bourdieu's argument that theories like those of Foucault (1968) and discourse analysis reify discourse and isolate it from society, relies similarly upon a fundamental misreading of these approaches and a false dichotomy between micro and macro levels of analysis. Bourdieu's disavowal of discursive power also contradicts his own contention that a central aim of participants in the

literary field is to control discourse around art *and thus* its value and meaning (compare for example Bourdieu, 1993: 33 with pages 35-6 in the same text).

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that, rather than obscuring social structures and processes, interactionism, discourse analysis, (and Gramsci's hegemony) enable us instead to view discursive interaction as an important site in and through which social meanings, structures and positions are constructed and negotiated. Further, unlike Bourdieu's field, these theories can help to illuminate, not only the nature of cultural meanings, but also how these are established, maintained and challenged. The following section develops these ideas through a discussion of discourse analysis and Goffman's work on the performance of identity.

#### **4.4 The Discursive Performance of Identities**

The ideological nature of art means that the ways in which art world participants define art, and locate themselves in relation to it, impacts upon their identities. In talking about art and its status, then, individuals are also talking about themselves and their status. Interactionists, like Goffman (1967), contend that such identity work plays a central role in structuring our everyday social interactions.<sup>144</sup> Discourse analysts go one step further than this, proposing that it is in *discursive* interaction that we construct our identities and the meanings around them.

The final section of this chapter uses these ideas to form a bridge between the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis. It will be argued that status and the ideological effects of art which were discussed above are enacted through/made visible in everyday discursive interactions, and that an analysis of art world participants' talk can reveal much about the ways in which

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<sup>144</sup> Whilst Goffman did not call himself an interactionist, he is typically identified with this tradition and fits well within it. More specifically, Goffman's work is often dubbed symbolic interactionist (see for example Douglas, 1984: 8-9). As Roberts (2006) points out, however, there are a number of points at which Goffman's work departs from this, and we would do better to associate him with a broad interactionist approach. It is partly for this reason that the current thesis refers throughout to interactionism, rather than symbolic interactionism.

they understand, not only art, but also themselves and their relationships to others.

#### 4.4.1 Interactionism and Identity

Goffman (1967) argues that performance is not confined to theatrical contexts, but permeates our everyday social interactions.<sup>145</sup> In particular, individuals seek to project an identity which is clear, consistent and socially desirable. In order to achieve this, they cooperate with interactional partners to maintain one another's 'face' or positive social value (Goffman, 1967: 5). Face is established through the 'line' which actors take in a given social encounter. This line communicates an actor's understanding of their self, others and the interactional situation, as well as the broader social context within which the encounter is played out. Goffman's dramaturgical analogy finds support in the 'spectacle/performance paradigm', which argues that ordinary social interaction has taken on the status of 'spectacle' in contemporary society, so that performance is not only pervasive in everyday life, but constitutive of it (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Though Goffman's model is one of interactional cooperation, it is not at odds with the concept of struggle which characterises theories like those of Gramsci, Bourdieu and, to a certain extent, discourse analysis. Rather, one of the implications of his theory is that, in seeking to perform socially desirable identities, actors also strive to negotiate status hierarchies. After all, the desirability of these identities goes hand in hand with the status they afford. Thus, Branaman (1997; quoted in Roberts, 2006: 78) notes that Goffman 'exposes the link between power, status, performance, and self'. Accordingly, Goffman's model enables us to understand that, when art world participants collaborate in constructing meanings around art, they are also performing their identities and, through this, their social status.

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<sup>145</sup> Roberts (2008), drawing on Burke (2005: 42), suggests that we distinguish between these types of performance, using the adjunct 'weaker' to denote everyday performances and 'stronger' to reference those which occur in rituals, festivals and on the stage. Whilst this is a useful distinction, it is not one which I pursue here, since I am more interested in exploring the continuity of performances across different contexts (see subsection 12.3.1 for more on this).

Interestingly, whilst the performance of identity permeates all of our social interactions, there are few fields in which it appears to be more salient than that of the arts, and specifically the literary field. According to Goffman, when a waiter takes an order, a scientist delivers a research paper or a footballer celebrates a goal, they are each performing their identities; yet the waiter's service, the scientist's paper and the footballer's play are rarely discussed in these terms. The same cannot be said of the poet. Poems are often read, by the lay consumer at least, with a view to understanding more about the poet's beliefs, values and experiences (and vice versa). A poet's work, then, is perceived as being a window into their identity in a way which the work of the waiter, scientist or footballer is not.

As Middleton (2005: 22-4) and Silliman (1998) both argue, this search for identity is especially salient in slam and spoken word. When slam poems are written in the first person, the events and opinions which they describe are invariably read as non-fiction, and even second or third person pieces may be viewed as autobiographical. The onus is thus on the poet to make clear to the reader where a poem is *not* a direct account of their own experiences or beliefs. They may do so through a variety of strategies, including presenting an explicit disclaimer, adopting an accent, using humour or including obviously fictional events in the piece. It is not simply poems which are performed on slam stages, then, but also the identities (and status) of poets. This identity work is not carried out by slam poets alone, but is an interactive process. Performers, audience members and other slam participants all cooperate to ensure that a consistent face is presented.

Consistency is vital, since any contradictions or irregularities in the performer's line (on or off stage) may result in a performance being deemed inauthentic, and authenticity is an important dimension on which slam poets and poems are judged. As Damon (1998: 329) notes: 'the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of "realness" – authenticity at the physical/sonic and meta-physical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels'. Performances which appear to be inauthentic may receive lower scores and levels of applause, as well as

impacting on less readily quantifiable measures such as future bookings and the establishment/maintenance of friendship ties with other slam participants.

I would suggest, then, that the performance of identity in slam is particularly pronounced for four key reasons. Firstly, as indicated in Chapter Two, the physical presence of the poet makes it more difficult to distance them from the experiences and beliefs which they voice. Secondly, as discussed in Chapter Eight, the value which is placed on community in slam means that the poet is often not just a performer, but also friend and colleague to many of those present. Thus, their performance takes on something of the status of a conversation between friends and its sincerity is vital. Thirdly, slam's appeal to a popular audience accentuates the tendency to positively correlate a poem's veracity with its quality. (These factors may well be negatively correlated in more academic circles.) Finally, the competitive nature of slam means that the performance of socially desirable identities is rewarded clearly, explicitly and often immediately.

Somers-Willett (2001; 2003) elaborates on this final point in the context of U.S. based slam. She suggests that poets enacting a black, male, urban, working class persona typically receive greater applause and higher slam scores, and that this has resulted in a large number of poets performing such an identity. The ways in which slam poets seek to portray a consistent identity on stage and the importance which is placed on the authenticity of such identities are both clearly apparent in Somers-Willett's work. Further, she draws attention to the differential rewards elicited by the performance of specific identities, indicating that authenticity alone is not sufficient; rather certain narratives, beliefs and experiences are prized above others.

As Somers-Willett demonstrates, preferred identities attract disproportionately high rewards, and are thus more likely to be performed by slam poets. This does not mean that slam poets are being deliberately deceitful (although some interviewees gave examples of occasions where they felt that this was the case). Rather, the suggestion is that individuals have a range of discourses on which they are able to draw and that the realisation of any particular discourse

is linked inextricably to the specific interactional context in which it is made manifest.

#### 4.4.2 Discourse in Discourse Analytic Theory

Analysing the ways in which slam participants perform their identities can supply valuable insights into how the status of art, artists and audiences is established, challenged and maintained both on and off stage. Discourse analysis allows us to develop these understandings further, moving from a general interest in social interactions to a specific focus on the discourse which structures these. Discourse analysts provide an explicit link between culture, identity and social interaction, presenting culture, and the discursive resources in and through which it is realised, as a kind of toolkit for the construction of self and identity. (Interestingly, though not explicitly discourse analytic in orientation, Swidler, 1986 expresses some similar ideas.) In doing so, it links micro and macro levels of analysis (Riley, 2003: 101).

Discourse analysis is a social scientific approach which straddles both sociology and psychology. It draws on numerous traditions, including ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, poststructuralism, semiotics and social constructionism (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1995). Discourse analysis offers both a methodological resource and a theoretical approach. It enables us to understand our selves and relationships as diverse, dynamic and interactive, and our knowledge of the world as socially and historically situated. In this sense, it reinforces the theoretical stance outlined above. The aim of this research, however, is not to produce a piece of discourse analysis per se, but to mobilise the insights it provides as part of a broader theoretical framework. The current section, then, discusses the theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis, whilst Chapter Five considers how these have impacted on the study's methodology.

Potter and Wetherell (1987: 7) define discourse as 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds'. For discourse analysts, such talk is not simply a route through which we can access individuals' beliefs about their selves, the world and others, but is itself the

primary site in and through which these understandings are constructed. From this perspective, then, analysing slam participants' talk around slam illuminates the very process through which the for(u)m (and participants' identities) are constructed and made sense of.

Discourse analysis is a heterogeneous approach. Willig (2001), for example, distinguishes between two major discourse analytic orientations: discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The former explores the discursive strategies through which individuals seek to negotiate meaning, whilst the latter analyses the narratives we draw on to make sense of our lived realities and the 'subject positions' (or 'ways-of-being') which these make available (Willig, 2001: 107; 91).<sup>146</sup> This research centres around such narratives, rather than the contextual features of discourse or the fine-grained speech strategies which structure talk, and is thus allied most closely to Foucauldian (or critical) discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysts also share with this study a concern with power processes and relations, seeking to explore the ways in which status hierarchies are mobilised, maintained and challenged through discourse. They argue that discourse can never be value-free, but is inherently ideological. Discourse is implicated in the perpetuation and legitimation of power relations, as well as their breakdown and dissolution. There are clear parallels here with Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Indeed, whilst it is rarely acknowledged explicitly, Gramsci's influence is evident throughout much critical discourse analytic research (see Edley, 2001; Van Dijk, 1993).

Discourse analysis reinforces the contention that the values and meanings of art are negotiated through everyday social interactions, and that the ways in which these are played out impact upon individuals' identities. In addition, it brings to this theoretical framework, a focus on *discursive* interaction. This enables us to explore, not only slam participants' understandings of slam and

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<sup>146</sup> There are parallels here with Bourdieu's (1993: 30) 'space of literary or artistic position-takings', in that both this and subject positions limit the ways in which individuals can talk about and act in the world.



their position in relation to this, but also how these are mobilised by individuals in order to negotiate their position/s within status hierarchies.

#### **4.5 Conclusions**

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that art is an inherently social process. The meanings and values attached to art, artists and audiences do not tap into some intrinsic, universal aesthetic, but are ideological in nature. The way in which individuals produce and consume art thus has important implications for their social status, and a detailed analysis of art worlds must take the nature of social status into account. Status is here viewed, not as a simple dichotomy of dominant versus dominated classes, nor as residing in abstract, macro level social structures, but as dynamic, heterogeneous and negotiated interactively.

Understanding status as something which is constructed in and realised through social interactions necessitates a privileged place for discourse, since it is through discourse that much social interaction is accomplished. Thus, we can argue that when individuals talk about art and art's status, they are also talking about themselves and seeking to negotiate their own status position/s. With this in mind, the current thesis utilises the work of Bourdieu, Gramsci, interactionist scholars, like Becker and Goffman, and discourse analytic theory to explore how slam participants use talk (and other actions) around slam to perform their identities in a way which maximises their social status. Thus, I aim to illuminate how slam is implicated in the construction of self and relationships for its participants, and through doing so, shed light on wider social processes, around the construction and maintenance of status hierarchies and the trajectories of art worlds.

The theoretical framework which I have outlined here has important implications for how the methodology of such an investigation should proceed. In particular, interactionists have long advocated ethnographic methods, as a means through which we can study the (re)construction of meanings in everyday social interactions. More than any other approach, ethnography has the potential to

produce rich, contextualised and meaningful data, situated in the temporal and spatial sites of everyday interactions (DeNora, 2000: 38). This enables us to view art, not as a disembodied product, but as a collection of dynamic social and interactional processes. The combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviewing and the examination of secondary data, which this research adopts, also allows for a close analysis of slam participants' discourse. This helps to realise the central role of discourse in discourse analytic theory and, to a lesser extent, Gramsci's account of hegemony. The study's methodology is discussed further in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Methodological Concerns**

Ours is the discipline, the model of analysis, for which ceremonies are data as well as duty, for which talk provides conduct to observe as well as opinion to consider.

~ Erving Goffman (1983: 1)

The methodology is not an isolated component of a study, but is wedded to its epistemology and shapes research development. Having discussed the aims of this thesis and established a theoretical framework within which these are grounded, it is important to consider the particular tools and techniques which have determined the progress of this study and enabled its aims to be addressed. It is these with which the current chapter is concerned.

This discussion falls into three main parts: Sections 5.1 to 5.3 take a broad look at the study's methodological approach, beginning with a consideration of its epistemological grounding in section 5.1 and moving on to discuss the implications of conducting 'insider' research and the negotiation of ethical issues in sections 5.2 and 5.3. The following three sections then look at the research process more closely, following the project through from sampling and data collection to the analysis of the data. Finally, section 5.7 concludes with an acknowledgement of the partial and personal nature of this research.

### **5.1 Establishing Epistemology: Interactionist, Grounded Theory and Ethnographic Influences**

Choosing a particular method involves making decisions about the problems posed, the identification of data, the interpretation of research findings and the use of concepts; choices which are all shaped by the researcher's theoretical stance. Theoretical understandings and methodological tools thus work in concert to shape the study at all stages (see Blumer, 1969). This section considers those concerns which have helped to shape the broad

epistemological framework of the current study, focusing in particular on the methodological implications of interactionism and grounded theory, and on the key principles behind ethnographic research.

#### 5.1.1 The Methodological Implications of Interactionism

The interactionist stance taken in this study has both direct and indirect implications for its methodology. Interactionists emphasise the importance of studying the everyday, micro level social interactions through which meanings are constructed, enacted and transformed. Implicit in this is the idea of individuals as active participants in the construction of meaning, and the belief that social life must be understood as process rather than product.

Interactionists stress the need to view all objects as inherently social, embedded within both concrete social interactions and the wider socio-historical context.

There is thus a great deal of methodological guidance implicit in interactionist writing. This has inspired a growing body of arts-based research, which is grounded in concrete, social interactions, framed by the wider socio-historical context and sensitive to the socially constructed meanings of its participants (see for example Gilmore, 1990; Hall, 1987; Hall, 1990). Such research demonstrates that interactionism is able to provide a valuable theoretical framework for the study of social life and social organisation. As Hall (1987: 18) notes:

The study of the social organization of social life requires an approach which is simultaneously concrete, observant, processual, conditional, contingent, dialectical, comparative, and contextual. Interactionism provides such an approach.

Hall (1987), Blumer (1969) and others have sought to make explicit the methodological implications of interactionism, outlining guidelines which researchers may follow. Central to these is the importance of conducting inductive research. Blumer (1969: 40), for instance, advocates that social

scientists undertake rigorous 'exploration' and 'inspection' of the field, acquiring a detailed familiarity with the world under study before designing research or forming hypotheses. Thus he suggests that categories and meanings should arise from in-depth observation of naturally occurring interactions, rather than being imposed beforehand. This approach has much in common with that of grounded theorists, who believe that research conclusions should not derive from pre-formed hypotheses, but should emerge from and be grounded in the study itself (see for example Charmaz, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

To a large extent, the current study follows these guidelines for inductive research. It should be noted, however, that, whilst the work of Glaser and Strauss is somewhat essentialist in nature, this study follows more closely Charmaz's social constructionist interpretation. Thus, it seeks to explore participants' subjective versions of reality, rather than aiming to uncover an objective 'truth' which lies behind them (see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The current study, then, was guided not by specific hypotheses, but by broad aims, which were formed only after several months of preliminary research. Even before beginning this research, I already had an in-depth familiarity with the slam world as a poet, event organiser and audience member. I was able to build on this experience by reading articles, internet postings and e-mails on slam, visiting poetry websites and internet forums, reading and listening to poetry compilations and, of course, attending poetry slams and related events. As I built up a more concrete picture of slam, I began to develop a firmer research focus and to form theories on the role which slam plays in the lives and understandings of its participants. Far from being set in stone, however, the scope and substance of my study continued to evolve throughout its duration. Even as I wrote up my findings, my ideas about slam were still being challenged, at times interfering with my attempts to impose a final order on the text.

A further implication of interactionism salient to this study is the focus on groups, rather than individuals, as the preferred unit of analysis (see for

example Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hall, 1987). This is a difficult balance to strike, especially within research such as this, where the focus is on the individual as an active constructor of reality, whose multiple identities are impacted by their interaction with a range of different groups. I strove to achieve this balance by focusing on one particular aspect of participants' identities which united them, whilst acknowledging the heterogeneity of individuals from which this group was comprised. Thus, this research considers individuals who are drawn together by their active participation in poetry slam, whilst exploring the distinctions between the ways in which participants based in different geographical and social contexts construct the for(u)m and their relationship/s to it. In this way, I have sought to stress the importance of collective action and of the networks within which people interact, without losing focus on the multiplicity of individuals' identities.

#### 5.1.2 Ethnography

As with much interactionist-inspired work (see for example Becker, 1963; Foote Whyte, 1993/1943; Grazian, 2004; Lundin and Wiridenius, 1990), this study uses an ethnographic frame, in order to address the ways in which interaction and meaning-making are accomplished in practice. By studying events as they unfold in day-to-day interactions, instead of within the artificial constraints of laboratory-like environments, ethnography is able to examine how people produce and consume artworks in real time, within concrete social contexts (see for example DeNora, 2000; Feld, 1984). This study, then, seeks to utilise ethnographic tools and methods of enquiry as a way of making concrete the theoretical claims which interactionism makes about the world.

Numerous studies attest to the strengths of ethnographic research on topics as widespread as: life in an Italian-American slum district (Foote Whyte, 1993/1943); the social construction of deviance (Becker, 1963); organisations' accounting practices (Jönsson and Macintosh, 1997); and independent childbirth centres (D. Walsh, 2006). Within the arts, ethnography has been applied successfully to research on artistic subcultures (see Zolberg, 1990: 19), female visual artists (McCall, 1978) and music (see Grazian, 2004), amongst

other topics. Research such as this demonstrates the utility of ethnographic research for the study of art as an ongoing socio-historical process, allowing us to explore how for(u)m(s) like slam are constructed, made sense of and played out in everyday life.

Whilst it is traditionally characterised by participant observation, informal conversation and unstructured or semi-structured interviews, ethnography is perhaps better thought of as a broad approach than as a narrow set of methods. Ethnographers frequently seek to collect rich data from a variety of sources, using an array of methodological tools (Toren, 1996), and the range of different research methods and designs used in ethnography is on the increase (see for example Handwerker, 2001; Kusenbach, 2005). In line with this, the current study takes a multi-modal approach utilising participant observation, informal conversation, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of secondary data sources, such as websites, television and radio broadcasts, posters, flyers and the materials used in slams. The ethnographic stance adopted here, then, is a broad and pragmatic one. Rather than taking an ideological stance on the many debates around ethnography, my intention is to harness ethnographic techniques and priorities to give central stage to issues such as participation in the field, reflexivity and understanding the world from the perspectives of slam participants. (These issues are discussed in greater detail later on in this chapter.)

It is on this understanding that the current study may claim to be an 'ethnography of slam', differing as it does from traditional ethnographic models in a number of key respects. The bulk of ethnographic research, for example, has focused on case studies of single sites, whilst the current study looks at slam in four different sites across the U.K. and U.S.. Further, this study places greater emphasis on interview data and less on participant observation than may be expected of ethnographic research. In addition, whilst ethnographers are often thought of as spending years in the field, the participant observation carried out for this research covers much shorter periods of time, ranging from just a week on the Chicago slam scene to around a year in Bristol.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>147</sup> This only concerns the time which was spent participating in the field for research purposes however. As a performance poet, I have been participating in the U.K. slam community for a

Participant observation (arguably the key identifier of ethnographic research) affords a unique perspective into participants' lived experiences and frameworks of meaning, allowing researchers to study collective action as it unfolds in naturalistic settings. Whilst there are many benefits to the familiarity which this affords researchers with the world under study, it may also breed complacency however. It is easy to take for granted that one knows what participants mean when they use a particular phrase or refer to a specific concept, yet we cannot assume such transparency of language. By pairing participant observation with semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to offer a solution to this problem, providing a means through which participants' understandings could be explored more directly. Thus I was able to ask participants to define slam explicitly, for instance, rather than relying solely on the implicit definitions of the for(u)m around which their observed interactions appeared to cohere.

Using interviews also allowed me to access a larger and broader group of participants than would have been possible through participant observation alone, and to approach issues and topics which may not have come to light during observed interactions. One example of this is the area of youth slam; the importance of which was not immediately apparent through the field work I conducted, yet was frequently emphasised by interviewees. Here, interviews offered a valuable tool to enable me to pursue salient issues both through conducting further, more targeted interviews and through observing youth slams and related events.

Despite its myriad benefits, adopting an ethnographic perspective brought significant challenges. It was necessary for me to invest considerable time and energy in the study, for instance, without having any clear idea of how the research would unfold in practice (see Agar, 1986; Jackson, 1983 on this issue). Whilst I feel that the investment paid off handsomely, this may well not have been the case had I been more confined in my research aims and applications. It is true too that ethnographic studies cannot be replicated and

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number of years, and, as previously noted, much of my work draws on these experiences.



that the same group cannot be studied twice in an identical spatial and temporal context. Yet this does not undermine the value of work such as this, which is nonetheless able to offer rich and meaningful insights into the worlds and understandings of a small group of participants, as well as providing conclusions which are generalisable beyond these groups. This study, then, aims not only to provide a detailed, multi-layered account of the ways in which slam participants understand themselves and their world, but also to illustrate wider social processes, such as the construction and performance of identity within interpersonal interactions.

The partiality of ethnographic accounts is often emphasised by researchers; yet we would do well to remember that all accounts are partial, regardless of their epistemological stance (Agar, 1986). As Clifford and Marcus (1986: 7-8) note, there is no such thing as a 'complete' account of social life. Ethnographers simply acknowledge this limitation in their research. A more unique and prominent challenge of ethnographic research relates to the problem of 'going native' (see Adler and Adler, 1987: 17). The idea behind this is that researchers may become so familiar with the world they are studying that they lose their ability to detach themselves from it. Even within the social constructionist stance adopted here, which denies the possibility of conducting research uninfluenced by the researcher's subjective stance (see for example Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), 'going native' can still be seen to pose a number of difficulties. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

## **5.2 Being an 'Insider'**

As a long-term participant on the U.K. performance poetry and slam scene, it was particularly important for me to be attentive to the problems associated with conducting 'insider' research. Indeed, rather than risking 'going native', it could be said that I was 'native' long before this study began. One of the greatest challenges which this presented to me was the ease with which I could overlook familiar, yet valuable, discourse or other interactional features (see Maynard and Purvis, 1994 on this issue). It seemed obvious to me, for instance, that

poets would read their own work in a slam, rather than that of others, or that many performance and slam poets would perceive poetry as a stigmatised and undervalued art form. I would have thought these features unworthy of comment had it not been for the surprise of 'out-group' collaborators, such as my research supervisor, Professor Davie (see Allen, 1999 for more on this). Similarly, I was able to gain a fresh perspective on my research by presenting papers to academic journals and conferences, and reflecting on the feedback which their readers, reviewers and delegates kindly offered to me.

Being an 'insider' also brought advantages however. Indeed, it was my involvement in slam and performance poetry communities which inspired this research in the first place. These experiences also enabled me to identify gaps in the ways in which the for(u)m and its participants were represented in the literature. It seemed to me that there had been relatively few studies looking at art worlds from the perspectives of their participants and none which did so in the context of slam specifically. The absence of literature on slam outside of the North American context also struck me as being a remarkable oversight; yet this may easily have been overlooked by a researcher who lacked my level of personal involvement in the field. My position as a slam 'insider' enabled me to isolate and begin to address these shortfalls.

Being an 'insider' undoubtedly aided the research process, facilitating my identification and recruitment of participants and the ease with which I was able to establish rapport with them (see Lipson, 2001). In addition to this, it has been suggested that 'in-group' researchers may possess a greater ability to access relevant and sensitive information (Jones, 1970), be more likely to recognise and understand important issues as they arise (Allen, 1999) and may ultimately produce more in-depth, sensitive accounts of participants (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Kanuha, 2000).

It is, however, important to avoid the temptation of reducing participants and researchers to a simple 'in-group' – 'out-group' dichotomy (Bola, 1996). As this study seeks to demonstrate, identity cannot be defined so simply. I am a performance poet, but I am also a young British woman, a student, a teacher

and a researcher. The impact of these and other aspects of my identity have permeated the study throughout, dynamically influencing interactions with participants both inside and outside of the research context. In addition, the nature and extent of my 'insider' status varied between the different sites in which this research was based. In New York and Chicago, for instance, where I had less knowledge of the slam scene and often met interviewees for the first time in a researcher-participant type relationship, I was less likely to be considered to be a slam 'insider' than in Bristol, where many of those I interviewed were long-term friends and poetry colleagues.

One strategy which I used to manage the issues around being an 'insider' was that of reflexivity. This process of 'disciplined self-reflection' (Wilkinson, 1998: 493) enabled me to challenge the impact of my own understandings and experiences whilst carrying out the research. I approached this in part by keeping a fieldwork diary, in which I noted salient thoughts and feelings prompted by my research. Once written, these notes enabled me to observe how my understandings of slam had changed over time and thus formed an important part of the analytic process. In addition, I have sought throughout this thesis to make visible my location in the data. This approach is most apparent in the reflexive accounts which I have given of this research in Chapter One and in the current chapter (see also Gregory, 2007a,b). Taking a reflexive approach also enabled me to better address the ethical dilemmas pertinent to this research. Reflecting continually on my responsibilities and obligations towards participants has made it easier for me to fulfil these; something which was important, not only to the successful resolution of this research, but also for my ongoing participation in slam and performance poetry communities.

### **5.3 Ethical Issues**

This research was approved by the University of Exeter's Ethical Committee and abided by the British Sociological Association's (2002) *Statement of Ethical*

*Practice.* Addressing ethical concerns does not end with this, rather, they must be negotiated throughout the study. Of particular interest here are the ways in which my continuing involvement in the social world of participants impacted upon the treatment of ethical issues like confidentiality, privacy and informed consent. Prolonged contact with participants offered considerable opportunity for me to address these issues sensitively and meaningfully; yet it presented risks too, such as participants' heightened anxiety around issues of confidentiality. There were also difficulties in balancing participants' concerns over the representation of their selves and of slam with my own attempts to produce an accurate account of the for(u)m as it is experienced by different individuals.

The concept of anonymity, though something of a 'fetish' in the social sciences (Becker, 1998: 51), seemed rather counter-intuitive to a large proportion of my interviewees, many of whom spent considerable periods of time promoting themselves as poets and ensuring that their words were credited to them. (See Atkinson, 2006: xiii for a similar argument in the context of his ethnographic research into the Welsh National Opera company.) As one interviewee noted:

Every poet that's worth his salt, of course, wants to have his name come up more times than the next guy or gal when you Google their name. So it's almost oxymoronic in a sense that you have that {anonymity}, because I would say most poets, they definitely want you to know that you interviewed them. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

This position is much more common amongst research participants than is commonly acknowledged. As Kusenbach (2005: Paras. 94-6) notes:

Many ethnographers discover that while they are ready to grant full anonymity to their subjects, this kind of protection is not important to them and might even be viewed as dishonest ... we might need to reconsider who benefits from the anonymity requirement, the subjects or the researchers (by shielding them from scrutiny or accountability), and

with which other ethical principles the outlined requirements might conflict.

With this in mind, I decided to incorporate an option for anonymity into the consent forms which I presented to interviewees and the organisers of observed events (see Appendix C). In the few cases where participants decided to take this up, their names, and/or those of their events, have been changed. Those interviewees who opted for anonymity are noted in Appendix G, whilst altered event names are indicated alongside the first reference in each chapter. This treatment of anonymity relates only to participants who have given their consent. Thus, I have altered all names of people to whom participants referred during the course of their conversations with me. There is, however, one exception to this, where it was felt that changing the individual's name would detract from the import of the participant's statement. In this case I sought and received permission from both individuals concerned to forgo the use of a pseudonym. (This is noted in the text alongside the relevant quotation.)

Confidentiality in this latter respect was of great concern to many of my participants. My continuing involvement in performance poetry and slam communities often brought me into prolonged contact with individuals who were discussed in interviews, and participants were all too aware of this. Indeed, several interviewees asked me to strike something from the transcript lest they cause upset within the community and many were keen to ensure that I would not pass on to those concerned any comments which had been made about particular individuals or events. As one Bristol-based interviewee commented:

I don't want to be the person responsible to cause a furore in any shape or form and I'd hope you'd appreciate that. I've got my own opinions and things, but I don't want to kind of get anyone's backs up, 'cause it's a very small world we're involved in.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> I have chosen not to refer to the interviewee's name in this instance, due to the sensitive nature of their comment.

It was, therefore, particularly important that I emphasised the confidential manner in which such information would be treated by myself. Discussing these issues openly with participants enabled me to underscore the professional nature of the research relationship and to ensure that I was aware of the needs and wishes of particular participants. This, in turn, made the interview a more relaxed experience both for myself and for interviewees.

Since I did not leave the field after interviewing individual participants, I had frequent opportunities to discuss the study with them, ensuring that informed consent unfolded as a continual process, rather than being confined to participants' signing of consent forms (see Guillemin and Gillam, 2004 on this). My progress, reflections and analysis have been shared openly with participants and I have attempted to respond to any questions which they may have about the research in this same spirit. This strategy treats participants with due respect, providing frequent opportunities for participant validation (see for example Labaree, 2002). It is not without its problems however. Indeed, my work inspired a notably negative response from one participant. The high level of participant involvement which I incorporated into my study thus created a greater obstacle to its successful resolution than I had initially anticipated. (For more on this see subsection 5.5.3.)

#### **5.4 Sampling and Data Collection**

Having defined the parameters of my study and obtained ethical approval for my research, one of the first tasks which I had to complete was to select and recruit a research sample. Practical constraints inevitably placed a ceiling on the research and it was necessary to select a sample size which was both realistic and yet able to yield rich and varied data. This section considers the make-up of the final research sample, the sampling process and the rationale behind this, beginning with a discussion on the evolving nature of the research focus in subsection 5.4.1, and moving on to look at the sampling of observed events and interviewees in 5.4.2 and 5.4.3 respectively. 5.4.4 concludes the section with a brief discussion of the interview schedule and process.

#### 5.4.1 An Evolving Research Focus

In the early stages of my research, I attended slam events and interviewed participants based in Bristol, Oxford, London and their environs. In the first couple of months I interviewed six participants and attended eight slams and related events. During this period, I began to think again about the ways in which I viewed my research, problematising concepts and methods which I had taken for granted previously. I started to explore emerging themes, many of which were unexpected, and to revise my research accordingly.

One of the most notable issues which began to concern me at this time was the existence of what seemed to be relatively discrete 'black' and 'white' performance poetry scenes in London and Bristol. This came as a great surprise to me, as I had not been aware previously of a distinct 'black' performance poetry community in Bristol. I realised that my years of experience on the local performance poetry scene were, in reality, highly partial. Interviews alone would not have led me to this observation, since, up until this point, my sample had been drawn from the 'white'-dominated scene with which I was familiar. It was only through participant observation of performance poetry communities in London that I became aware of this divide. This emphasised to me, not only the importance of conducting participant observation in tandem with interviews, but also the vital nature of my London-based research. In London I was able to approach performance poetry communities more as an 'outsider'. This gave me a fresh perspective which I lacked when researching communities in Bristol.

As the initial stages of my research progressed, I revised my methodology to take account of these early observations. For example, I altered my interview schedule to enable me to address more explicitly the apparent divisions between communities of different ethnic backgrounds. I also decided to target members of 'black' performance poetry communities specifically, seeking new individuals to interview and events to attend. My focus on youth slam provides another example of this approach. I had initially planned on restricting my

research to adult poetry slams; however many participants spoke at length about slam with young people and I began to feel that this was an important avenue to pursue. It seemed that the worlds of adult and youth slam could not be looked at in isolation from one another. I discovered that many adult slam poets teach and perform with young people. This work not only provides them with a large proportion of their income, but is often very important to how they view themselves as poets and members of the slam community. These findings led me to focus more on youth slam in my research, attending several youth slams and related workshops, and interviewing their participants. This is discussed further in subsections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3.

#### 5.4.2 Participant Observation

My initial aim was to observe a number of different slams in each of the four key cities covered by this research. This would enable me to explore the ways in which slams in a given locale varied, when run by different organisers, in different venues, with different poets and audience members. It would also allow me to gain an (albeit restricted) insight into how slams change over time in a given geographical location. Observation opportunities were limited, of course, by the number of slams which were held in each city during the research period. This varied between the four sites. In Bristol, for example, slams may be staged several times a year, whilst in New York they occur at least twice a week. Thus, I was able to observe the same number of slams during my brief stay in New York as I was over a much longer period in Bristol.

In total I observed twenty-two adult slams over the period between May 2006 and May 2007: seven in the Bristol area, four in London, two in other locations around the U.K., seven in New York and two in Chicago. (See Table 2.1 for a summary.)

Table 2.1: Adult Poetry Slams Observed

Slam Name	Location
<b>United Kingdom</b>	
Longpath Arts Festival Slam <sup>149</sup> (08/05/06)	The Kings Arms, Nr. Bristol
The Well Versed Poetry Festival Selection Slam <sup>49</sup> (15/05/06)	The New Road Centre, Bristol



The Farrago Spring SLAM! (18/05/06)	Royal academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) Foyer Bar, London
The Hammer and Tongue Slam Final 2005/2006 (05/06/06)	The Zodiac, Oxford
Latitude Slam with Luke Wright (16/07/06)	Latitude Festival, Stand up Poetry Arena, Henham Park
Word-Up Slam (20/08/06)	Stratford Theatre East, London
Farrago London SLAM! Championships (16/11/06)	Rada Foyer Bar, London
Your Bard Again Slam (19/11/06)	The Shakespeare, Bristol
Open House Newcomers Poetry Slam! (26/11/06)	Eldon House, Bristol
Word-Up Grand Slam Final (03/12/06)	Stratford Theatre East, London
Hammer and Tongue Four Continents Slam (07/12/06)	The Polish Club, Bristol
Earth, New Year's Eve Arts Party Slam (31/12/06)	@Bristol, Bristol
Slam Champions Slam (South West) (18/05/07)	The Polish Club, Bristol
<b>United States</b>	
Urbana Poetry Slam (19/09/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York
Nuyorican Cafe Slam (qualifier - 20/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York
Nuyorican Cafe Slam (showcase - 22/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York
Urbana Poetry Slam (26/09/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York
Nuyorican Cafe Slam (qualifier – 27/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York
Nuyorican Cafe Slam (showcase – 29/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York
Manhattan Monologue Slam (02/10/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York
Uptown Poetry Slam (08/10/06)	The Green Mill Tavern, Chicago
Uptown Poetry Slam (15/10/06)	The Green Mill Tavern, Chicago

As noted in subsection 5.4.1, the observation of youth slams and related events was incorporated into my research at a later stage. Since I was more interested in the similarities between youth slam in different locations than in pinpointing geographical differences, I did not confine these observations to the four key sites. Indeed, it is important to note that the majority of this participant observation was carried out in the U.K. alone, since I became aware of the necessity of conducting further research only following my visit to the U.S.. In total I observed three youth slams and four related events. (See Table 2.2 for a summary.)

<sup>149</sup> These slam and venue names have been changed on request of the organisers, in order to preserve their anonymity. Their geographical location, however, remains unaltered.

Table 2.2: Youth Slams and Related Events Observed

<b>Event</b>	<b>Event Type</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>United Kingdom</b> Rise! Against Racism, Youth Slam Final	Poetry slam showcase	Rise! Against Racism Festival, Comedy Tent, Finsbury Park, London
Rise! Slam, Inset 2007	Training session for teachers and youth workers interested in participating in the 2007 Rise! slams	The Poetry Society, London
Leeds Young Authors	Teen and pre-teen workshops	Host Media Centre, Leeds
Midlands Youth Poetry Slam Project, Worcestershire Regional Slam Final	Poetry slam	Artrix Theatre, Bromsgrove
Rise! Londonwide Youth Championship 2007, West/North Quarter Finals	Poetry slam	Soho Theatre, London
Community Building Day	Workshop, performance and networking event for participants in Lynk Reach's 2007 London Teenage Poetry SLAM	Harpley School and Inclusion Support Centre, London
<b>United States</b> Young Chicago Authors, Wordplay	Workshop and open mic. event	Young Chicago Authors, Chicago

#### 5.4.3 The Interview Sample

The majority of interviewees were drawn from the four key sites; however on several occasions I came across individuals based elsewhere in the U.K. or U.S., whom I felt that it would be valuable to incorporate into my research. As noted above, this was particularly relevant in relation to youth slam, where I was less interested in making site-specific observations. In total, I interviewed forty-

four participants, of whom twenty-seven were male and seventeen were female. (See Table 2.3 for a summary of interviewees by location and sex and Appendix G for short descriptions of interviewees quoted in this thesis.)

Table 2.3: Interviewees by Location and Sex<sup>150</sup>

Location	Number of Interviewees		
	Female	Male	Total
<b>United Kingdom</b>			
Bristol	4	7	11
London	3	7	10
Oxford	0	1	1
Cheltenham	1	1	2
Manchester	0	1	1
Leeds	3	0	3
Plymouth	1	0	1
<b>United States</b>			
New York City, New York	3	6	9
Chicago, Illinois	1	3	4
Champaign-Urbana, Illinois	1	0	1
Austin, Texas	0	1	1

Whilst many of those whom I interviewed in the early stages of my research spoke at length about youth slam, I felt that it was necessary to include additional participants in order to create a more balanced picture of slam in this context. Thus, I interviewed teachers, ‘academic’ poets and other individuals whose journey into youth slam began at very different points to the slam poets who had formed the bulk of my sample up until that point. Since I was interested in the links between youth and adult slam, I decided not to interview the young slammers themselves, but to focus on adult participants instead. Many of these interviewees had participated in youth and adult slam in a variety of roles; however two individuals who formed part of this later sample had encountered the for(u)m purely through their work as school teachers.

I selected interviewees who met several key criteria. Firstly, of course, they must be willing to be interviewed and secondly they must be active slam participants (or have been active on the scene in the past). Many of the

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<sup>150</sup> Additional demographic information was not taken from interviewees, since I did not intend to incorporate this into the data analysis.

additional characteristics I was seeking were more intangible however. I was looking for people who could provide interesting and valuable insights into local, translocal and transnational slam communities and who would, between them, present a range of perspectives and experiences. Thus, I targeted individuals who were, or had been, involved in adult and/or youth slam in a variety of different social and geographical contexts. Further, I approached participants who had performed a number of different roles between them, acting as: performers; event organisers/promoters; founders/directors of slam events and organisations; educators; and audience members. I was also keen to represent different demographic groups in my sample, including men and women, aged from their thirties to their sixties, and hailing from both 'white' and 'black'/minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds.

It was relatively easy to identify my initial sample within the Bristol performance poetry community. I was able to select individuals whom I knew, from my prior involvement in the scene, were active in performing at, organising, promoting, funding and attending slams. I approached many of these participants at slam and other poetry events, e-mailing or telephoning the others. Often the first thing which many of these individuals did was to recommend others who they felt would be valuable research participants, being active in slam in other locations around the U.K. and in New York City, Chicago and Austin, Texas in the U.S.. These recommendations (and others which I solicited) enabled me to broaden my sample further. This opportunity/snowball sampling technique proved to be very successful in locating research participants and only a handful of those whom I approached declined to be interviewed (in each case, because they were too busy). I was also able to locate additional interviewees by visiting slam websites, and by attending events which individuals from my growing sample organised, performed at or otherwise suggested to me. In this way, the participant observation and interviewing components of my research were intertwined beneficially from the outset.

I chose to focus largely on slam ‘veterans’<sup>151</sup> and other long-term members of these slam communities, partly because this enabled me to tap into a rich vein of experiences, and partly because of the ease of accessing this group compared with those who were newer on the scene. This was particularly true with regard to New York and Chicago, since the recruitment process was carried out before travelling to the U.S., using my contacts on the U.K. slam scene and what information I could glean from the internet. This necessarily skewed my sample towards individuals who had established a national (and often international) reputation through slam.

Whilst I was able to access a wide range of slam participants, I am aware that this sampling strategy missed out several key groups, in particular: slam participants in other geographical contexts; individuals who participated in slam as audience members only; poets who were new to the for(u)m; and U.S. based slam participants who were involved with slam on a local level only, having no notable connections with other participants translocally or transnationally. Researching these groups would no doubt produce different perspectives on slam, adding new dimensions to this already complex and multi-layered discourse.

#### 5.4.4 The Interview Process

The interview schedule was developed to cover four main themes around participants’ understandings of: poetry slam in general; slam poetry; local arts scenes; and the different roles of slam participants, such as poets, promoters and audience members. A concern with geographical variation and historical change ran throughout these themes. (See Appendix F for a copy of the final interview schedule.) Whilst the interview schedule contained set questions and prompts it was very much intended as a guide, rather than a standardised procedure, and interviews varied enormously on a case-by-case basis. This

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<sup>151</sup> The term slam ‘veterans’ is used within the slam community to refer to poets who are considered to have made their name through competing in slams and who have been involved in the scene for several years. Slam ‘veterans’ continue to be strongly associated with slam, regardless of whether they still compete in or attend the events. It should be noted however that, much like the term ‘slam poet’, this is a label which few of those to whom it is applied would adopt for themselves.

flexibility allowed me to follow up any interesting issues which were raised, as well as skipping over questions which were deemed to be inappropriate in particular instances (see Denzin, 1997; and Holstein and Gubrium, 1995 for more on this interviewing process).

Interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were generally held in cafés which were conveniently located for the interviewees, although several interviewees chose to talk in their offices and five others, with whom I was already acquainted, were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews were tape recorded in order that the conversation might be transcribed fully. This did not appear to present a problem for interviewees, most of whom were, after all, well used to putting their words on public display. In two cases, however, the interview process differed substantially. These concerned individuals whom I was not able to interview face-to-face for practical reasons. One of these participants was interviewed by telephone, with my analysis based on notes I took during and after the interview, whilst the other was sent a questionnaire by e-mail. In the latter case, the answers which I received were rather lacking in depth and this process was not repeated. (A copy of this questionnaire can be found in Appendix E.)

## **5.5 Data Analysis**

As has been indicated already, the research process was far from linear. Data collection and analysis were interwoven, as new issues came to the forefront and I began to see old topics in a different light. For simplicity's sake, however, the distinction between these stages is preserved here and presented in a linear fashion, which conveys the overall direction in which the research progressed. This section discusses three stages of data analysis, beginning with a look at content analysis in subsection 5.5.1 and moving on to a consideration of thematic analysis and discourse analysis in 5.5.2. 5.5.3 then concludes with some observations about the part played by participant validation in the research process.

### 5.5.1 Content Analysis

Initially, it was my intention to analyse the interview transcripts and other data using qualitative methods solely. Faced with an ever-growing pile of data to analyse, however, I began to look for other tools which would compliment this strategy, allowing me to process data more quickly for salient themes and to confirm (or challenge) my early observations. In particular I found that, despite the many advantages of the qualitative thematic and discourse analytic methods which I used, their lack of clear guidelines and the detailed level at which they were applied to the data made them rather unwieldy in the early analytic stages. Content analysis, in contrast, provides a clear systematic and easily replicable method for analysing texts, and proved to be invaluable in helping me to overcome these difficulties.

Whilst thematic and discourse analysis code for meaning, content analysis involves counting the instances of words, sentences or themes in the text. Despite possessing a clarity and specificity which the former methods lack, content analysis is a generic method, which can be applied to a vast range of topics by researchers operating within widely differing theoretical frameworks. Within the fields of the arts and popular culture, for example, it has been applied to areas such as: audience motivations for viewing soap operas (Livingstone, 1988); representations of femininity in women's magazines (Ferguson, 1983); changing depictions of designer fashion in European newspapers (Janssen, 2006); and representations of wealth in comic books (Belk, 1987).

Of course, content analysis has its limitations. It is rather a crude tool, which lacks the sensitivity of methods like thematic and discourse analysis, producing a less rich and subtle account of the data (Hayes, 2000), which tends to equate frequency rather simplistically with significance (Kellehear, 1993). Nonetheless, such rough and ready tools have their place in social scientific research, and applying this method at an early stage of my research proved to be a useful means of isolating interesting features in the data, which could then be followed up with more detailed analysis. In this way, it was able to provide a concrete foundation on which I could rest firmly my developing analysis. More

specifically, I used the method to test for statistically significant differences between the numbers of references which participants based in the U.K. and U.S. made to issues around: authenticity, politics and entertainment; slam in the U.K. and the U.S.; the dominant literary world; and community. (This process is described in greater detail and the results of the analysis presented in Chapter Seven.)

### 5.5.2 Thematic Analysis and Discourse Analysis

Whilst content analysis was used in the initial stages, the main portion of data analysis concerned inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, field notes and secondary data sources. Thematic analysis is a flexible method, which is well suited to the grounded theory approach taken here. It is able to analyse data in a rich and meaningful manner, allowing comparisons to be made across different accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Like the research as a whole, the process of thematic analysis was cyclical and the data were read many times before the final themes were fleshed out. The procedure followed corresponds approximately to Hayes' (2000: 178) seven stages, beginning with (relatively) unguided reading and note taking and progressing to the identification of thematic patterns in the data. Initially, these took the form of several protothemes, which were built on and refined until they were considered to represent the data fully and accurately, without overlapping with one another. The data were then coded for these final themes, and exemplary or otherwise notable passages highlighted. The latter stages of thematic analysis were influenced heavily by discourse analytic concerns. This slant to my research is something which evolved as the analysis progressed, and I began to realise the importance of the narrative threads which were woven into participants' talk, in interviews, slams, general conversation and written texts alike.

As discussed in Chapter Four, discourse analysis is a method of textual analysis which is based on the understanding that individuals use language actively to construct their selves and their worlds. Whilst discourse analytic concerns have influenced this research on both theoretical and methodological



levels, it is not my intention here to produce a piece of discourse analysis per se. I did not seek, then, to distinguish between discourse produced in different contexts or to analyse the hedging, repetition, descriptive talk or other discursive strategies which individuals use to support their positions. Instead, I was interested in the different ways in which participants talk about slam and their position in relation to this. To this end, I sought to identify discursive patterns in the text, looking at talk in terms of its function (what it achieves for participants), construction (how language is used to construct versions of the world, self and others) and variation (the differing, perhaps contradictory, claims which are made in the data). (See Potter and Wetherell, 1989 for more on this.) Further, I aimed to analyse the ways in which participants use this talk to position themselves in relation to wider discourses around such issues as individualism, community, creativity, authenticity and art.<sup>152</sup>

### 5.5.3 Participant Validation

The aim of this study is to understand slam from the perspectives of its participants. Thus, an effort was made to include interviewees and other contributors in the research process more fully than the ethical requirements of informed consent demand. As far as possible, participants were kept abreast of all developments in the research. The research aims and findings were updated regularly online at [www.hgregory.co.uk](http://www.hgregory.co.uk), and participants were made aware of this, so that they could check on the status of the research at any point.

All interviewees were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. A number of participants also requested that they be sent copies of work which contained quotations from them, so that they could appraise this prior to publication. These participants, and others who expressed an interest, were sent copies of journal papers and other work arising from the research. As a result of this, some of the interview quotations have been altered. These changes are limited, however, to grammatical edits, and some slight rephrasing which better preserves the anonymity of participants and the individuals/events

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<sup>152</sup> Day *et al.* (2003: 146) have used a similar method to that which I have described here, although they label their approach more simply as a form of discourse analysis.

to which they referred. Where such alterations have been made, they are noted in the text.

As my research progressed, it became increasingly apparent that slam is a highly contested territory to which many individuals (particularly in the U.S.) have developed deep personal attachments. I began to appreciate that the many ambiguities which exist, both within and between participants' accounts, meant that it would simply not be possible to produce a thesis which all of my participants were content to endorse fully. I was therefore faced with the difficult task of negotiating sensitivity to my participants' wishes and the need to create what I felt to be a balanced and accurate (albeit partial) ethnography of slam.

Whilst some participants were full of praise for my work, others have expressed reservations. My response to these objections varied on a case by case basis. Often I was able to incorporate participants' suggestions into my research. For instance, on reading a paper based on an early draft of Chapter Nine, Bob Holman e-mailed me to re-emphasise the importance of Def Poetry Jam in the formation of a slam poetry formula. This led me to look again at the role of the media in helping to popularise and standardise slam in the U.S.. It was not always so easy to accommodate participants' wishes however. One participant, in particular, disagreed so strongly with the observations which I had made in the same article that he asked that the quotations from his interview be removed from the paper concerned. After much thought and discussion with other slam participants and my academic colleagues, I decided to remove extracts of his interview from the paper, but to continue to include anonymous quotations from him in this thesis.

I wish to emphasise, then, that whilst I could not have conducted this research without the cooperation of countless commentators on, and participants in, slam, the conclusions which are drawn in these pages are mine and mine alone.

## 5.6 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined some of the methodological concerns with which this research has engaged and illustrated how these were managed in practice, through a detailed discussion of selected aspects of the research process.

Doing so has allowed me to explore in some depth how methodological and theoretical considerations are interwoven with each other and how they were made manifest in the day to day workings of this study. Table 2.4 (below) complements this, by providing a systematic account of the research at all stages. (I would reiterate, though, that the research was in reality much more messy and less linear than this is indicated here.)

Table 2.4: Summary of Research Stages

Stage Number	Stage Name	Description	Place Discussed in Thesis
One	Background Reading/Research	Reading around the area Collection of secondary data sources	Chapter One
Two	Defining Research Focus	Establishing the focus and setting the parameters for the research (In practice this was carried out alongside Stage One.)	Chapters One and Five
Three	Ethical Approval	Ethical approval sought and received from the University of Exeter's Ethical Committee	Chapter Five
Four	Site Selection	Deciding on the main research sites	Chapters One and Five
Five	Sample Selection	Locating and recruiting interviewees Locating slams and related events to observe and obtaining permission to do so from the event organisers	Chapter Five  Cont ...
Stage Number	Stage Name	Description	Place Discussed in Thesis
Six	Data Collection	Conducting interviews Conducting field work	Chapter Five
Seven	Interview	Transcribing interviews	---

	transcription	verbatim	
Eight	Preliminary Thematic Analysis	Analysis of first few transcripts for proto-themes	Chapter Five
Nine	Content Analysis	Content analysis of transcripts Statistical analysis of quantitative data yielded	Chapter Seven and Appendix A
Ten	Intermediary Thematic Analysis	Further analysis using existing proto-themes, developing new themes and refining themes (This was carried out several times before the final themes were defined.)	Chapter Five
Eleven	Final Thematic Analysis/Discourse analysis	Analysis of all transcripts for prevalent discourses, in light of final themes	Chapter Five
Twelve	Writing Up - Draft	Writing the analysis up into draft chapters Developing papers for publication and conference presentations	---
Thirteen	Participant Validation	Research papers and other work sent to interested participants Participants' feedback recorded	Chapter Five
Fourteen	Writing Up – Final	Redrafting thesis, taking into account feedback from participants, colleagues and others	Chapter Five

## 5.7 Concluding Comments

This thesis is intended to read, not as a definitive history of slam, nor as a defence of it, but as an ethnography of the for(u)m. That said, it must be considered to be a *partial* ethnography; partial both in terms of its application of ethnography and in relation to the account/s which it produces. For these reasons, it does not read like a traditional ethnographic study, drawing as it does on a range of tools and epistemologies which lie outside of the ethnographic frame. (The most notable of these being discourse analysis.)

This approach has allowed me to produce a rich, meaningful and in-depth account of slam as it is experienced, understood and enacted in the U.K. and

the U.S.. My wide-ranging sample of events and participants, combined with the analysis of secondary data sources, means that I was also able to attain a breadth which is lacking from some ethnographic work. That said, I do not claim to have produced a comprehensive account, which can be applied to the for(u)m in all of the numerous (social, historical and geographical) contexts within which it is played out. In particular, it should be remembered that the forty-four participants and twenty-two slams studied firsthand here were largely concentrated in four geographical sites, and that, even within these sites, understandings of slam vary according to a range of factors, including the individual's role in slam and the extent to which they are personally invested in the for(u)m.

Finally, discourses around slam are often contested hotly, and it is simply not possible to produce an account to which all slam participants are prepared to give their unequivocal support. I have worked hard to present a balanced and accurate (if partial) ethnography of slam in the key sites covered by this research. I am deeply grateful to all of my participants for giving up their valuable time to enable me to do so, and hope that they will receive this offering in the spirit with which it is given.

## **Chapter Six: Situating Slam**

And though we play our tunes  
The ghetto still plays the sound with us  
We bongo like madness we bongo our dreams we bongo our tunes  
Don't let us be stopped because we won't we will keep tryin'  
And if we are still a rhythm of sound  
Let our music bounce from every wall and town  
~ Pauly Arroyo, *I'm a Nuyorican* (1994: 392)

Chapter Six completes the *Research Foundations* section of the thesis, by situating slam in relation to the geographical and social contexts of this research. As will become apparent in the *Data Analysis* section, these sites overlap with, and impact upon, one another. Social contexts, for example, must necessarily be realised in particular geographical locations. Similarly, slam participants often move between different sites and express an awareness of the wider context within which local slams operate. It is important, then, that the reader be familiar with all of the research contexts before considering the data which they yielded. Just as slam is (re)constructed differently in these sites, representations of slam in the media have also helped to shape the for(u)m's development. This chapter aims, then, to situate slam, not only in different social and geographical contexts, but also in relation to some of the films, television programmes and radio broadcasts which it has inspired.

Section 6.1 begins this chapter by discussing the four key cities of Chicago, New York, London and Bristol. These are sequenced to reflect slam's historical development. 6.2 moves on to consider the role of slam in different social contexts with a look at youth slam. Section 6.3 then explores the formal, informal and virtual networks which link slam in these sites. Finally, 6.4 concludes the chapter with a look at some of the ways in which U.S. and U.K. based slam have been represented in the media.

## **6.1 Geographical Contexts**

This section presents an overview of the demographic and artistic make-up of the four cities within which this research was principally conducted. Initially, each site is discussed in general terms, with reference to: its geographical location; its population size and density; its ethnic diversity; its socio-economic composition; and (because of the important and problematic relationship between slam and the dominant literary world) the presence of local further and higher education institutions. Brief attention is then paid to links with past and present artists and art worlds (with particular reference to oral poetry), before taking a closer look at the local development of slam.

### **6.1.1 Chicago**

As discussed in Chapter Two, the first recorded poetry slam was held at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern in 1986, and several of the early poetry boxing matches were also staged here. Chicago is in the state of Illinois to the east of the U.S. It has a population of around 2,700,000 (U.S. Census Bureau – UCB, 2005a), of whom approximately 39% are classed as 'white', 35% as 'black or African American' and 27% as from some other ethnic background. In addition, around 29% are categorised as 'Hispanic or Latino'.<sup>153</sup> The city covers an area of around 367 km<sup>2</sup> (Chicago Municipal Reference Collection - CMRC, 2001). Average per capita income is just over \$23,500 (UCB, 2005a). 21% of the city's population are considered to be below the poverty level; a rate which is around 8% higher than in the U.S. as a whole (UCB, 2005a). The city is home to numerous colleges and universities, including Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. In the 2005/6 academic year, these had a combined enrolment of over 30,000 students (Northwestern University, 2007; University of Chicago, 2007).

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<sup>153</sup> These categories, (used here and in subsection 6.1.2,) are adapted from U.S. Census Bureau classifications (see UCB, 2005a). The first two categories remain unchanged, whilst 'some other ethnic background' is an amalgamation of the 'some other race', 'Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander', 'American Indian and Alaska Native', 'Asian' and 'two or more races' categories, all of which reference relatively small populations in both Chicago and New York City. 'Hispanic or Latino' relates to the category 'Hispanic or Latino (of any race)'.

Chicago can boast associations with writers from Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and Harriet Monroe to Nelson Algren, James T. Farrell and Saul Bellow. As well as housing many well known authors, it has also supplied the setting for numerous works of fiction and non-fiction. In the 1920s it became the home of the Chicago School, which pioneered research into urban sociology. Unsurprisingly then, Chicago has been called 'probably the most researched city in the social sciences' (Gabidon and Donaldson, 2004:75). Richard Lloyd's (2006) *Neo-Bohemia* presents a particularly accessible account of the recent evolution of Chicago's arts scene, which is influenced heavily by the Chicago School perspective.

The arts continue to thrive in Chicago. A 2007 *Americans for the Arts* (AfA) report declared the city's non-profit arts sector to be a \$1.09 billion dollar industry, which supported the equivalent of over 30,000 full-time jobs,<sup>154</sup> and attracted upwards of 11,000,000 audience members into 'arts and culture events' in 2005. When compared to similarly populated sites in the U.S., which were also covered by the report, the city's art industry is topped only by Philadelphia County, whose non-profit arts sector was valued at \$1.3 billion (AfA, 2007: 17).

There are numerous open mic. nights in Chicago, which are dedicated to poetry or welcome poets to perform. Those which are prominent on the spoken word scene include: In One Ear, which is run weekly at the Heartland Café (see [www.myspace.com/inoneear](http://www.myspace.com/inoneear)); Safe Smiles, held weekly at the Trace Lounge (see [www.myspace.com/safesmiles](http://www.myspace.com/safesmiles)); and the monthly Mental Graffiti evening at the Funky Buddha Lounge (see [www.myspace.com/mentalg](http://www.myspace.com/mentalg)). These events all feature special guest poets and musicians, alongside open mic. spots. In One Ear and Safe Smiles host open mic. performances from poets, comedians, musicians and others, whilst Mental Graffiti mostly reserves spots for poets. Mental Graffiti also holds monthly slams as part of the regular programme.

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<sup>154</sup> This is based on the total amount of labour employed; a measure which was deemed to more accurately reflect sector employment than the total number of employees, since it includes both full and part-time labour.



Chicago hosted the National Poetry Slam in 1991, 1999 and 2003, and Marc Smith continues to run slams on a weekly basis in the Green Mill Tavern (see [www.slampapi.com/new\\_site/mill.htm](http://www.slampapi.com/new_site/mill.htm)). These Uptown Poetry Slams feature special guest poets and open mic. spots in addition to the slam, and have an in-house band available to accompany poets. The Green Mill events were the only Chicago-based slams observed for this research.

#### 6.1.2 New York

Whilst Chicago birthed slam, New York City (NYC) has played at least as important a role in its development across the U.S., and indeed, worldwide. As discussed in Chapter Two, NYC poets were quick to capitalise on this phenomenon, just as they were with the poetry boxing matches. NYC is in the state of New York to the north-east of the U.S.. Its population is approximately 8,000,000, of whom roughly 44% are classed as 'white', 25% as 'black or African American' and 31% as being from some other ethnic background. In addition, 28% of the population are classified as 'Hispanic or Latino' (UCB, 2005b). The city covers approximately 518 km<sup>2</sup> (NYC Department of City Planning, 2006) and is split into five boroughs: the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens and Manhattan. NYC has been the nation's most populated city since around 1820 (Gotham Center for New York City History, 2007). Average per capita income is just over \$27,000 (UCB, 2005b). Approximately 19% of the city's population are classed as below the poverty level; exceeding the nationwide rate by almost 6% (UCB, 2005b). NYC is home to over one hundred universities and colleges, including the world renowned Columbia and New York Universities, which recorded a combined total of over 60,000 enrolled students for the 2005/2006 academic year (Columbia University, 2006; New York University, 2005).

New York has a long and illustrious literary history, boasting connections with well known authors such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Dorothy Parker. Greenwich Village has particular strong literary associations, with links to nineteenth century authors like Henry James and Mark Twain through to the Beats in the mid twentieth century. (See Corbett,

1998 and O'Connell, 1995 for more on NYC's literary links.) The city continues to possess thriving literary, dance, visual arts, comedy, cabaret, theatrical, music and other arts scenes, and, according to Bernstein (1998:22), is one of the United States' main 'centres of poetic activity'.

NYC is especially renowned for its theatre. Indeed, Kenrick (2003: Para. 1) dubs it 'the theatrical capital of the world'. Much of this reputation is due to Broadway, which is considered the most prestigious form of professional theatre in the U.S., and is one of the most commercially successful worldwide. According to The Broadway League (2009), Broadway theatres grossed over \$947 million profit in 2008, selling in excess of twelve million tickets.

On any given night there are easily more poetry open mic. nights in NYC than a single individual could realistically attend (see [www.poetz.com/calendar/](http://www.poetz.com/calendar/)). Several of these open mic. venues also feature regular poetry slams. The Poetry Project at St Mark's Church is a notable exception, being a high profile venue which features poetry readings, talks, workshops and open mic. events, but no regular slam. This East Village venue was founded in 1966 by the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, amongst others. (For more information see [www.poetryproject.com](http://www.poetryproject.com).)

NYC poets have been involved in the NPS since it began in 1990, winning or making the final stage in eleven out of the fourteen years between then and 2003 (Poetry Slam Inc., 2003). These successes have contributed to the growing reputation of NYC slam and the widespread dissemination of what is often seen as the New York slam style. The media has also played a key role in bolstering NYC slam's influence. New York poets starred in the documentary SlamNation (Devlin, 1998) and the movie Slam (Levin *et al.*, 1997). Further, NYC has been home to HBO's slam-influenced T.V. show Def Poetry Jam since its inception in 2001 and to the theatre spin off, Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, since 2002. (See O'Keefe Aptowicz, 2008 for more on NYC slam and 6.4 for more on slam and the media.)

At the time of writing there were three regular, high profile slams in NYC. These were all situated within approximately 1.5 km of each other, in Manhattan's East Village. Slams were held: twice weekly at The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, with an open slam on Wednesday evenings to select participants for the more popular Friday night slam; weekly, by Urbana, at the Bowery Poetry Club; and monthly, by louderARTS, at Bar 13. All events except the Wednesday night Nuyorican slam incorporate open mic. slots, and all feature special guest poets. In the Wednesday night Nuyorican slam, however, the guest was typically limited to performing the slam's 'sacrificial poem' and perhaps one or two additional pieces. For this study, slams were observed at the Bowery Poetry Club and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

### 6.1.3 London

Slam came to the U.K. some four years after NYC poets competed in the inaugural NPS. As discussed in Chapter Two, the first U.K. slam was held in London in February 1994. This was run by John Paul O'Neill of Farrago Poetry and led to the establishment of the monthly Farrago slams which continue today. London has a population of around 7,000,000. The city's boroughs cover a combined area of 1,572 km<sup>2</sup> (Office for National Statistics - ONS, 2001a). As England's capital city, London has been home to many well-known literary figures; certainly too many to name here. ([www.literarylondon.org](http://www.literarylondon.org) and Glinert, 2000 are good places to begin any investigation into the city's literary history. The former is the virtual home of the *Literary London* journal and explores representations of the city in different literary texts; the latter provides an accessible literary guide to London.)

Today, there are dozens of regular open mic. nights and shows in the city, which feature poets to a greater or lesser degree. Two of the best known are those hosted by Apples and Snakes and by the Poetry Society, both of whom have head offices in the city. Apples and Snakes are a prominent force on the U.K. spoken word scene and the self-proclaimed 'leading organisation for performance poetry in the U.K.' (Apples and Snakes, 2007). The organisation runs regular poetry events throughout London, at venues such as the Poetry

Café. This café and performance space is also home to the Poetry Society; a well-established and respected literary organisation which celebrates its centenary in 2009 (see The Poetry Society, 2007a). Spoken word events are held at the café most days except Sundays, when it is closed.

Numerous slams have arisen and fallen in London in the years since the Farrago slams began. These include one off and regular events, stand alone slams and those held as part of a wider programme of activities. Only a handful of these have endured the test of time, however, to become regular and well known features on London's poetry calendar. This study focuses on four such events: The Farrago slams and Word Up slams which are discussed below, and the Lynk Reach and Rise! youth slams, which are explored in 6.2.

Farrago's events are held in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) foyer bar in the City of Westminster, and feature (local, national and international) guest poets, occasional guest musicians and a number of open mic. slots alongside the slam. The City of Westminster is in central London. It covers approximately 22km<sup>2</sup> (ONS, 2005d) and has a population of around 244,400 (ONS, 2005b). Average annual earnings for a full time worker living in the area are around £33,800 (ONS, 2005a). The unemployment rate is approximately 9.2%, 4% higher than the overall rate for Great Britain (ONS, 2006f).<sup>155</sup> The borough is home to several university and Royal College buildings, including the Royal College of Art, the Royal College of Music, the University of London's Institute of Art and several University of Westminster campuses. It is also the location for over sixty theatres, museums and galleries, including the London Palladium, the National Gallery, Tate Britain and, of course, RADA.

Word Up also runs on a monthly basis, at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in Newham. Like Farrago, Word Up features open mic. slots and guest poets as well as a slam; although the slam here forms a larger part of the overall event. Newham is located three miles from the City of London in the East End. The borough covers approximately 37km<sup>2</sup> (ONS, 2005e). It has a resident population of around 246,200 (ONS, 2005c). Average annual earnings for a full

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<sup>155</sup> Based on the numbers of individuals aged sixteen years or older, who are classed by the ONS as 'economically active', but not in full or part time employment.

time employee living in Newham are approximately £26,600, roughly £3,200 lower than the Londonwide average (ONS, 2006d). Unemployment rates are nearly twice the national average, at around 10.3% (ONS, 2006e). The borough is home to a high proportion of individuals from ethnic minority groups, being comprised of around 40% 'white', 33% 'Asian' or 'Asian British' and 22% 'Black' or 'Black British' residents (ONS, 2001b).<sup>156</sup> Stratford East is the home of the University of East London's Centre for Clinical Education in Podiatry, Physiotherapy and Sports Science and Birkbeck University of East London campus.

#### 6.1.4 Bristol

Slam reached Bristol in December 1994, after Bristol Poetry Slam's Glenn Carmichael returned from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe slam in New York, having previously attended slams that year in London and at Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts.<sup>157</sup> The first Bristol slam, held in the Arnolfini Arts Centre, was a great success and encouraged Carmichael to establish regular slams in the city (Glenn Carmichael, in conversation; and see Carmichael and Arbury, 1998).

Bristol is the largest city in the south-west of England, with a population of around 400,000 (ONS, 2006a) and an area of roughly 110 km<sup>2</sup> (Bristol City Council, 2007). Approximately 92% of the resident population are white, 3% 'Asian' or 'Asian British' and 2% 'Black' or 'Black British'. Average annual earnings are slightly below the average for England and Wales at £23,700 (ONS, 2006b), whilst the unemployment rate is 1% lower than the average for Great Britain, at 5.1% (ONS, 2006c). Bristol is home to the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, which had a combined total of over 45,000 enrolled students in the 2005/6 academic year (Bristol University, 2007; University of the West of England, 2007).

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<sup>156</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all categories used for the presentation of demographic statistical information in subsections 6.1.3 and 6.1.4 are taken from ONS classifications.

<sup>157</sup> Bristol Poetry Slam is a Bristol-based organisation which runs slams and slam-related workshops in the south-west of England (Bristol Poetry Slam, 2007).

The city has a long literary history. It was the birthplace of Robert Southey in 1774, the home of Thomas Chatterton from 1752 until his death in 1770, and the base for Coleridge's launch of *The Watchman* magazine in 1795. (See Visit Bristol, 2007a for more on Bristol's literary landmarks.) Bristol continues to hold a prominent position in the country's artistic make-up, being a finalist in the recent European Capital of Culture contest (see BBC, 2003). In 1999 Bristol City Council's *Bristol Arts Strategy* report highlighted strong centres of media production, photography and visual arts in the city:<sup>158</sup>

Over 2,500 people in Bristol {are} directly employed in the arts and media industries ... This is before the many dancers, actors or artists; the BBC, HTV, GWR, local papers, night clubs, record shops, booksellers and other related private sector activity is taken into account (Bristol City Council, 1999:3).<sup>159</sup>

In recent years, Bristol has hosted several open mic. nights based in whole or part around poetry. Many of these have proved to have a somewhat transient lifespan. Others, however, have endured over a sustained period. These include: The fortnightly poetry and music evening, Acoustic Night, which began in 1994 (see [www.acousticnight.com](http://www.acousticnight.com)); and Bristol Can Openers, a monthly poetry open mic., which developed from the Second Tuesdays event established in 1988 (see [www.poetrycan.co.uk](http://www.poetrycan.co.uk)). Both feature special guest artists alongside open mic. spots.

Bristol also hosts an annual poetry festival, which was set up by local poetry organisation and registered charity, Poetry Can, in 1995. Bristol Poetry Festival showcases local and national poets of both literary and performative leanings (see Poetry Can, 2007). Slams have been held at the festival every year since at least 1996 (Glenn Carmichael, in conversation), in association with organisations such as Bristol Poetry Slam (see [www.poetryslam.org.uk](http://www.poetryslam.org.uk)), Paralalia (see [www.paralalia.co.uk](http://www.paralalia.co.uk)) and the organisers of the Vercity Slams.

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<sup>158</sup> Whilst this report was published some years ago now, it was the most up to date report available at the time of writing.

<sup>159</sup> The BBC, HTV and GWR are regional and national media companies with offices in Bristol. See List of Abbreviations and Acronyms at the beginning of this thesis for more detailed descriptions.

Several of these events have matched local teams against poets from across the U.K. and further afield.

Monthly slams were held in Bristol from 1995 to 2002, initially under Glenn Carmichael's direction and then in the form of the Vercity Slam, run variously by local poets Julian and Christine Ramsay-Wade and Tim Gibbard. During this period Bristol also hosted several larger slams, collaborating with poets from across the country. The slams fleetingly drew the attention of the national media, and in 1999, a Newsnight television programme rather hyperbolically dubbed Bristol 'the poetry capital of the millennium' (Newsnight, 1999).<sup>160</sup>

Since 2002 the only Bristol-based slams to run regularly over a sustained period have been the Bristol Poetry Festival slams (which are sometimes preceded by a team selection slam). This decline is apparent in the common use of the past tense by Bristol based slam participants, when discussing slam in the city. Slams do, however, continue to be staged irregularly in Bristol up to a dozen times a year, run by organisations such as Big Mouth (see [www.big-mouth-poetry.co.uk](http://www.big-mouth-poetry.co.uk)), Bristol Poetry Slam (ibid) and Paralalia (ibid). These vary in size and shape, from small local events in the backrooms of bars, to large national and international slams staged in one of the local theatres or arts centres. During the course of this research, slams were run in and around the city, at venues including: the Bristol Old Vic theatre (for the Poetry Festival); various pubs (both as standalone events and part of Bristol Arts Trail);<sup>161</sup> and a room above a 'science and discovery centre' (for a multi-arts New Year's Eve party; see [www.at-bristol.org.uk](http://www.at-bristol.org.uk)).

Slams are held in different social, as well as geographical, sites. Social contexts stretch across geographical borders, throwing different concerns and discourses into relief, and shaping slam in new and interesting ways. The following section, then, considers one of the principal social contexts around which this thesis is structured – that of youth slam.

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<sup>160</sup> Whilst the feature on slam in this programme contains many factual inaccuracies, specifically concerning the inception of slam in the U.K. and U.S., it nonetheless presents a valuable glimpse into the early days of Bristol slam, providing interesting footage of a local slam and interviews with Bristol slammers.

<sup>161</sup> See Visit Bristol (2007b) for more on Bristol Arts Trail.

## **6.2 Social Contexts: Youth Slam and the Education System**

Slam amongst young people is the for(u)m's fastest growing area and one which many slam participants see as its ultimate destiny. Young poets perform occasionally in adult events; however more commonly they participate in youth slam, in which all of those competing are aged nineteen years or under. As indicated in Chapter Two, youth slams are frequently embedded within a wider programme of activities. Thus they are often used as a skills showcase for students and a high profile advertisement for the work of organisers, educators and institutions.

The majority of youth slam programmes in the U.S. and U.K. cater for young people aged twelve years and older, and it is these on which this research focuses. It is worth noting, however, that slams are also staged between younger children. East-Side Educational Trust in London, for example, run the Westminster Poetry slams with nine and ten year old primary school students (see Royles, 2006),<sup>162</sup> whilst Bristol Poetry Slam have organised numerous slams in U.K. primary schools (see Bristol Poetry Slam, 2007).

Many adult slam poets work in youth slam as organisers and educators, running writing and performance workshops with schools and youth groups. There are also a number of independent organisations which hold youth slams and coach young people to perform in them. This work provides many (adult) poets with a more secure and regular income than they are able to obtain through adult slam or spoken word.

One of the longest running youth slam programmes in the U.K. is organised by Leeds Young Authors. This group was established in 2003 by Khadijah Ibrahim, initially with funding for a short-term project. Ibrahim felt that it was important to provide a more long-term resource for young people however, and has continued to run year round workshops, open mics. and poetry shows ever

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<sup>162</sup> The Westminster Poetry slams have been running annually since 2001 in the Westminster borough of London. East-Side's programme couples in-school workshops and slams with larger inter-school slams (Royles, 2006).



since (Khadijah Ibrahim, in conversation). (To read more about this project see [www.myspace.com/leedsyoungauthors](http://www.myspace.com/leedsyoungauthors).)

Regular youth slams take place in all of the key cities covered by this research, except for Bristol, where they are held on an irregular school-by-school basis. The longest running Bristol-based organisation to hold youth slams is Bristol Poetry Slam, who have used the for(u)m to teach poetry in schools since the mid 1990s. Bristol Poetry Slam run competitive and non-competitive oral poetry events with young people in individual schools, between schools and outside schools (Glenn Carmichael, in conversation).

In London there are two major youth slam programmes: The Rise! Londonwide Youth Slam Championship and Lynk Reach's London Teenage Poetry SLAM. Both programmes run for several months annually, holding workshops with young people, followed by a slam in which poets from schools and youth groups across the city compete against each other.

The Rise! slams were established in 2002 as the Respect! Slam, in response to the Lord Mayor of London's request for The Poetry Society to design a new kind of poetry competition for young people. This was to run in conjunction with the annual Respect! Festival, (now the Rise! Against Racism Festival). A small group of poets, selected by a panel of judges from over a hundred young slammers, now perform a showcase set at the festival each year (Joelle Taylor, in conversation). This follows a five month long programme of workshops (for teachers and young people), shows, in-school slams, and larger inter-school slams, in which young poets from across the city compete.<sup>163</sup> The performance and writing workshops continue on a smaller scale after the festival slam, centring around Joelle Taylor's SLAMBassadors. (See The Poetry Society, 2007b for more on the Rise! slams.)

Lynk Reach have run a slam with young London based poets since 2003, when Peter Kahn, a Chicago-based teacher and poet, began a collaboration with the

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<sup>163</sup> Many of the young slammers participating in this programme are recruited through schools. A small portion, however, are affiliated with other organisations or sign up as independent artists.

organisation's Executive Manager, Fahro Malik. In 2006 poets from Cardiff and Swansea also became involved, participating in the five month long programme of in-school workshops (with teachers and young poets), slams, performances, and a Community Building Day and slam final which bring together all of the slam teams (Sam-La Rose, in conversation). (See Sam La- Rose, 2007 for more on these slams.)

In 2006 the first U.K.-wide youth slam was staged by performance poetry organisation Apples and Snakes. The Word Cup is intended to run every four years, coinciding with football's World Cup. The project brought together young poets (aged 12 to 16 years) and youth slam workers from across the country, including Bristol Poetry Slam organisers Glenn Carmichael and Claire Williamson and London poets Jacob Sam-La Rose and Joelle Taylor. The Word Cup was organised as a three month long programme of workshops and other events, leading up to a residential weekend during which the slam was held (see Apples and Snakes, 2006a). A second U.K. national youth slam was held in 2008. This was run by a rival organisation, but included many of the same adult slam participants (see [www.dreadlockalien.co.uk/](http://www.dreadlockalien.co.uk/) for more on this event).

As with adult slam, youth slam is more established in the U.S. than the U.K.. A U.S. national youth slam event, The Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, has been held annually by Youth Speaks since 1997. Youth Speaks claim to be 'the leading nonprofit presenter of Spoken Word performance, education, and youth development programs' in the country (Youth Speaks, 2007a: Para. 3). They established and maintain the Brave New Voices Network, a collective of literary arts organisations based in the U.S.. Brave New Voices involves teams from over thirty-six U.S. cities as well as one U.K. team, in the form of Leeds Young Authors. Just like the NPS, Brave New Voices is held in a different U.S. city each year. In 2005 it was hosted by San Francisco, where 'more than 7,500 people attended twenty-two events in ten venues over four days' (Youth Speaks, 2007b: Para. 2).

Teams from both New York and Chicago have participated in Brave New Voices for a number of years now. NYC is represented by Urban Word NYC, the leading youth poetry organisation in New York and part of the Brave New Voices Network. Urban Word NYC select their team from the Annual Teen Poetry Slam which they have held since the organisation was founded in 1999. The slam is just a small part of a much wider programme of activities which run year round. This includes workshops in creative writing, journalism and hip hop, open mic. events, concerts and festivals (see [www.urbanwordnyc.org](http://www.urbanwordnyc.org)).

Young Chicago Authors (YCA) could be seen as Urban Word NYC's Chicago based counterpart. Also a member of the Brave New Voices Network, YCA have run their annual Louder Than a Bomb slam series since 2001, using these slams to select their team for Brave New Voices. YCA was founded in 1991 and has run a year round programme of workshops, open mics., poetry shows and other events since 1995 (YCA, 2005). YCA also administer the Writing Teachers Collective, a network of educators, writers and youth workers, aimed at promoting literacy in the classroom (YCA, 2006a).

There are a number of links between youth slam in the U.S. and the U.K. Both the London Teenage Poetry SLAM and the Leeds Young Authors programmes, for example, were inspired by meetings with Peter Kahn, who is a coach for Chicago's Louder than a Bomb slam team (Khadijah Ibrahim; Jacob Sam-La Rose, in conversation). Kahn has continued to collaborate with Lynk Reach, acting as a judge for the final slam and hosting the winning team in Chicago. Leeds Young Authors, meanwhile, have sent a team to Brave New Voices every year since 2004. Connections between the two countries remain largely informal, however, being based predominantly around personal relationships between individual slam participants.

For the purpose of this research, youth slams and related events were observed in London, Leeds and Bromsgrove in the U.K., and Chicago in the U.S.. Interviews were held with youth slam workers in the U.K. sites of London, Leeds, Plymouth, Cheltenham and Bristol, and the U.S. cities of Chicago and New York. In addition, secondary materials were analysed for all of the

observed slams, the 2006 Word Cup event and the London-based Westminster Poetry slams. Whilst there are undoubtedly distinctions to be drawn between youth slam in these different geographical contexts, this thesis focuses instead on their many striking similarities.

### **6.3 Formal, Informal and Virtual Networks**

As has been suggested, social and geographical contexts do not operate in isolation from one another. Rather, they are linked through formal, informal and virtual networks. Slam poets, for instance, travel to other cities and countries to perform in slam and spoken word events. In doing so, they form professional relationships and friendships with each other, and establish networks which are maintained through both face-to-face meetings and more distant media. Social contexts are similarly connected. The relatively long-term stability which many youth slam organisations and projects supply, for instance, means that youth slam work can often provide adult slam participants with enduring channels of communication. This section considers the nature and structure of these networks.

The nature of slam networks differs greatly between the U.K. and the U.S., with the latter characterised by more formal networks. Many U.S. slams are run by dedicated organisations, which are headed by a committee and governed by officially drafted rules. Such organisations may be for-profit, like the Urbana Poetry Slam,<sup>164</sup> or not-for-profit, like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. These are bound together nationally through PSI and the NPS.

The prestige which is associated with the NPS means that many U.S. slam poets wish to perform there. Venues too can benefit enormously from having a team make the final stage. Consequently, U.S. slams are often structured, in whole or part, around selecting a team to represent the venue at the nationals. NYC's Urbana Poetry Slam, for example, programmes almost its entire annual

<sup>164</sup> As Taylor Mail (personal correspondence, 05.11.07) notes, however, the term 'for-profit' may be misleading: 'While Urbana is not a non-profit organization, our whole purpose for existence is to send the team to nationals {the NPS}. We scrimp and save and all money goes toward the team.'

calendar around the search for an NPS slam team, with the winners and runners up of each weekly slam qualifying for their quarter-final, semi-final, quasi semi-final and, ultimately, final slams (see Urbana Poetry Slam, 2006a). Urbana also book many of their special guest poets from a pool selected at the previous year's NPS (Taylor Mali, in conversation).

The pivotal role of the NPS in the U.S. has led to the standardisation of slam across many venues, as organisers apply NPS rules to their local events. This is reinforced by PSI, who require that each NPS team is selected through a local slam which adheres to 'Stateside' rules. Besides bringing poets together for national events like the NPS, PSI also provide a focal point for formal slam networks by publishing a list of PSI registered slam venues on their website (see PSI, 2007a).

These formal networks are interwoven with more informal networks, which are much less tangible and more ephemeral. Whilst formal networks are structured around organisations, informal networks are reliant to a large part on friendships and professional relationships between poets, organisers and other slam participants. These relationships serve to connect venues, events and other locales, and to enable further associations between individuals, which act to extend slam networks.

Whilst U.S. slam consists of informal, friendship-based networks overlain with more clearly demarcated, formal structures, U.K. slam is dominated by these informal networks. There is no equivalent of PSI or the NPS to tie U.K. slams together formally, and they are often run on a transient or intermittent basis, rarely being overseen by long-running, formally incorporated organisations. (Figures 1.1 and 1.2 provide simplified illustrations of formal and informal slam networks for a given poet.)

Figure 1.1: A Formal Slam Network for a Given (U.S. Based) Poet

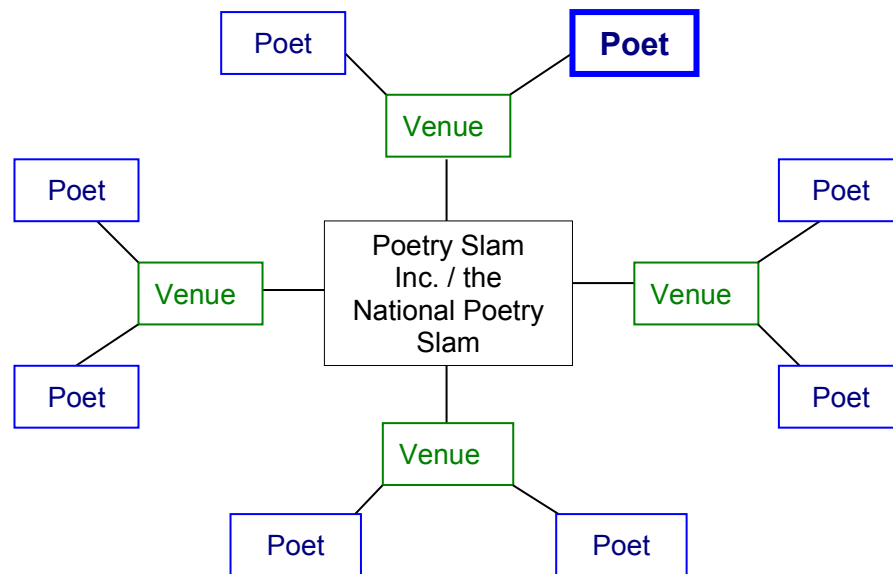
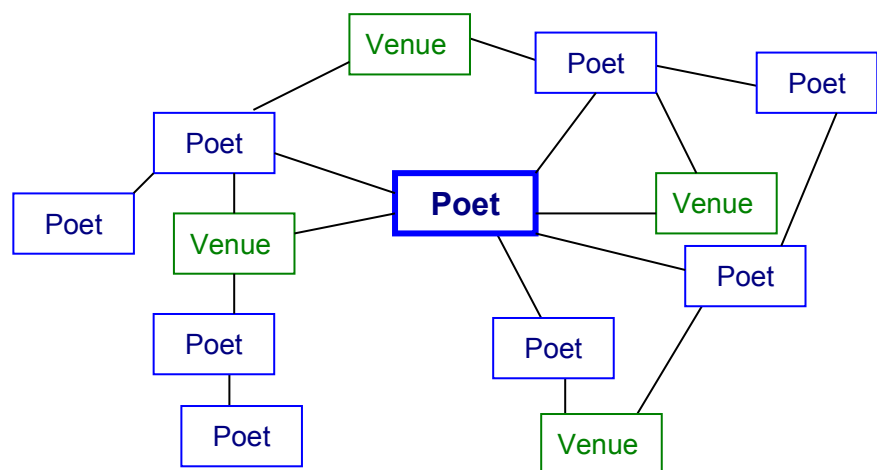


Figure 1.2: An Informal Slam Network for a Given Poet



Not only are U.K. slam networks less formally structured than those in the U.S., they are also more difficult to tease apart from performance poetry networks more generally. Whilst the U.S. possesses relatively distinct slam networks and communities, which overlap and interact with those in the performance poetry world, the same cannot be said for the U.K., where the relationship between the two is more nested. U.K. slams are not generally widespread, regular or high profile enough to have formed distinct communities and networks, but are instead subsumed within existing performance poetry communities.

Both formal and informal networks run along local, translocal, transnational and virtual lines, connecting slams and slam participants in disparate sites. As indicated previously, informal networks can have a snowballing effect, reinforcing the links between different nodes, as news spreads about a particular city, venue or poet. Thus, there are many more connections between poets in Bristol and NYC than there are between those in Bristol and Chicago for example. Indeed, it was the strength of this association which first led me to conduct research in NYC and enabled me to identify potential interviewees there.

I was able to contact many such participants from my Bristol base using virtual networks and means of communication. The internet offered a particularly useful tool in this regard. Indeed, as Roberts (2008: Para 76) points out 'the Internet is providing increasingly diverse sources of information and practice'. As a researcher, then, I used the net widely to correspond with potential interviewees, research slams and communicate my emerging research findings. Slam participants frequently use the web in similar ways, arranging bookings, reading about/promoting slams, and maintaining contact with one another. Many poets, venues and poetry organisations also have websites; some of which are linked to each other. The value of these virtual networks is such that it has been suggested that 'one of the aspects to the poetry slam's popularity is that it evolved at the same time that the internet was evolving' (O'Keefe Aptowicz, 2008: 348).

Online social networking forums like MySpace and Facebook are clear examples of more formalised virtual networks.<sup>165</sup> MySpace is an 'online community' which offers free hosting for personal web pages. These must fit into a given template, that allows individuals to describe themselves, advertise events, post blogs, and upload photos, videos and audio files (MySpace, 2003: Para. 1). Pages are linked when one member requests that another becomes their 'friend'. MySpace 'friends' can post comments and bulletins on each other's pages and send one another private messages. These channels are

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<sup>165</sup> See Facebook (2007) for information on the latter site.

used by many slam participants to advertise shows, comment on performances or just make chatty remarks.

Whilst the popularity of individual forums fluctuates, sites like MySpace are now firmly established amongst musicians, poets and other artists in the U.K., U.S. and elsewhere. They are often used as a quick and easy way of publishing a website and tapping into an established virtual network. As a poet, I have received and managed a number of bookings through MySpace and had several meetings (both unexpected and pre-arranged) with people I first encountered there. As a researcher, I used MySpace to correspond with participants, research upcoming shows and read comments about poets and events.

Formal, informal and virtual networks, then, provide both a practical tool through which poets can be booked, slams researched and events advertised, and a means of strengthening the personal and professional bonds between individuals. Many slam participants place a great deal of emphasis on this latter function, representing slam as a much valued community of friends and colleagues. (Community is a theme which crops up throughout this thesis and is discussed in particular in Chapters Three and Eight.)

#### **6.4 Representations of Slam in the Media**

Representations of slam in the media often rely upon these networks in order to locate and research slam events and poets. Much media coverage of slam is confined to local newspapers, events magazines, radio shows and other small scale outlets. This section, however, considers some of the ways in which the for(u)m has been represented in more mainstream media and the impact which this has had on its development.

Slam has courted media attention from the outset, seeking to provide journalists with a newsworthy spectacle (Bob Holman, in conversation). Slam participants harness newspaper, magazine, radio, television, internet and other media



outlets to advertise events and promote the for(u)m. The media have also played their part, however, in helping to shape the development of slam. Indeed, as Gendron (2002: 18-19) notes, critics, journalists and other commentators on the arts play a significant role in defining and promoting such emerging art movements. In U.S. slam in particular, three productions can be highlighted as influential in this regard: the film *Slam* (Levin et al., 1997), the documentary *SlamNation* (Devlin, 1998) and the HBO television programme *Def Poetry Jam*.

*SlamNation* follows the 1996 New York poetry slam team to the NPS in Portland, Oregon. It features interviews with poets, book editors and other slam participants, and footage shot in and around the nationals. The documentary was critically acclaimed, garnering awards at the 1998 International Film Festival in Philadelphia and the 1998 Northampton Film Festival in New York. (See <http://www.SlamNation.com> for more.) *Slam* was also well received by critics, being awarded the Camera D'or prize for best debut film at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. The film tells the story of Ray Joshua, his arrest for marijuana possession, detention in Washington D.C. city jail, release and subsequent introduction to the 'redemptive power of art' (Stratton and Wozencraft, 1998: back cover) through spoken word and slam. The television series, *Def Poetry Jam*, has been running since 2001. It does not feature competitive poetry, but is undoubtedly influenced by slam, sourcing poets from slam communities across the U.S. to perform in its shows.

These three productions were cited by the majority of U.S. based interviewees as playing an important role in slam's evolution. Many felt that their influence was largely negative however. *Def Poetry Jam*, in particular, was often criticised for encouraging the development of a slam poetry formula, and for attracting poets who are apparently more concerned with personal success than with delivering authentic performances or fostering artistic development. (This is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Nine.)

In line with the smaller scale of U.K. slam, there is much less media interest in the for(u)m here than in the U.S.. To date, there have been no feature length U.K. made documentaries or films around slam, and the vast majority of media coverage has been limited to local broadcasts and publications. There are two key exceptions to this however: In 2004 BBC Three staged a poetry slam featuring eight invited poets from around the country (BBC, 2004), whilst BBC Radio Four aired a national slam in 2007. The BBC Three broadcast, does not appear to have had a marked impact on U.K. slam more broadly, and it is possible that the programme was simply too marginal to attract much attention, being aired on a relatively new channel in the quiet Monday evening slot of 22.30.

The Radio Four slam was organised by Bristol based poets Pete Hunter and David Johnson, and showcased slammers selected from nine qualifying heats held across the U.K. and Ireland. (Two semi-finals and the final slam were broadcast by the network.) It is too early to calculate the wider impact of this on U.K. slam. The BBC have, however, commissioned a similar series of programmes to air some time in 2009 (David Johnson, in conversation), and, if these slams become a regular bi-annual feature, they may well have a marked role to play in the future development of the for(u)m.

Youth slams in the U.S. and the U.K. have also received local and national media coverage, attracting at least as much attention in magazine, newspaper, television, radio and internet articles as adult slams in the U.S. and the U.K. To date, however, there have not been any feature length films or documentaries on youth slam and, to my knowledge, no youth slams have been aired on national television or radio in either country.

## **6.5 Concluding Comments**

Much as with status relations or social structures and processes, artistic phenomena like slam must be understood within the social and geographical contexts within which they are realised. Exploring these contexts, however

briefly, enables us to understand something of the ways in which art worlds are conditioned differentially. Adopting such a stance need not mean treating these sites as isolated units, however. Indeed, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, slam events and participants are linked across a variety of contexts through formal, informal and virtual networks, and inevitably impact upon one another in multiple ways. Slam networks, in turn, are both mobilised by and reinforced through media texts, as media professionals seek to weave new narratives around the for(u)m, using it to attract audiences to their programmes, products and press.

This chapter, then, has sought to situate slam in the key geographical and social sites of this research, as well as in relation to some of the more high profile media representations which the for(u)m has inspired. Whilst there are undoubtedly interesting and valuable distinctions to be drawn between each of these contexts, this thesis focuses predominantly on: a comparison of adult slam in the U.S. cities of NYC and Chicago with adult slam in the U.K. cities of London and Bristol; and an analysis of youth slam across a range of different locales. It is to this analysis which I now turn.

## **SECTION B: DATA ANALYSIS**

Section B of this thesis uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the data in terms of the theoretical framework and concerns established in Section A. Chapter Seven acts as an introduction to this section, paving the way for in-depth qualitative analysis, with preliminary quantitative analysis of the data. Chapters Eight to Twelve then draw on interview extracts, notes taken during participant observation of slams and slam related events, and secondary data sources, to explore slam participants' discourse in different geographical and social contexts. The aim is to strike a balance between ethnographic and discourse analysis, drawing on the tools of both approaches to produce a rich, in-depth and meaningful account, which is sensitive to the discursively constructed, situated meanings of slam participants.

In greater detail: Chapter Eight explores the nature and importance of slam communities in different social and geographical contexts, considering how slam participants seek to reconcile the for(u)m's simultaneous focus on community and competitive individualism. Chapters Nine and Ten work alongside one another to provide an insight into slam's construction in the U.S. and the U.K.. The first of these focuses on U.S. based slam participants' discourse around politics, diversity and formularisation in slam, whilst the second compares this to discourses in the U.K., and considers what impact slam has had on the identities of U.K. based slam participants and performance poets. Chapter Eleven moves on to look at the role of youth slam in the education system and what this can tell us about the relationship between slam and the academy. Finally, Chapter Twelve works on bringing together the key arguments presented in this thesis.

Chapters Eight to Eleven are each structured similarly, with the first half being dedicated to the presentation of data and the second half to its analysis. All quotations presented are from interview data, unless otherwise stated. The data analysis covers both a general discussion of the data and a more targeted analysis, which explicitly relates the conclusions drawn to the theoretical framework established in Chapters Two to Four. The aim here is to illuminate

how slam participants mobilise discourses in order to present socially desirable identities and to negotiate successfully complex power relations in their everyday lives. Each chapter concludes with a discussion of elements of the analysis which could be addressed through future research. This allows the reader to reflect upon future developments as s/he progresses through the data analysis chapters, considering how each of the areas covered could be built upon in turn. That said, there is one additional point which applies across these chapters: This study focuses on the producers, promoters and teachers of slam. Whilst many of these individuals also contribute to slam's audience, my emphasis is inevitably more on slam's production, than its consumption. Future research could build on the rich insights which are presented here by researching slam audiences in greater depth.

Two further points should be kept in mind when reading these chapters. Firstly, I would reiterate that the analysis presented here is entirely my own, and is not necessarily endorsed by the individuals whom I have quoted. Secondly, there are clearly difficulties in generalising from observations obtained in a handful of cities to the U.S. or U.K. as a whole. The reader should, therefore, remember that this analysis is based on research conducted primarily in New York, Chicago, London and Bristol. Where slam is referred to more broadly, this reflects the work of other authors or, more commonly, the emphasis of participants themselves. (Participants rarely made observations which were restricted to a given city, and it was therefore often impossible to preserve distinctions between different local, translocal and transnational scenes.) Similarly, although this research focuses specifically on English sites, the decision was made to refer to the U.K., rather England. This echoes the discourse of my research participants, who did not make any explicit distinctions between slam in England, Scotland, Wales and (Northern) Ireland, as well as reflecting my own experience of slams in England, where Welsh, Scottish, Irish and English poets often compete alongside one another.

Before proceeding, some final points should be made regarding the presentation of interview extracts. (These comments follow on from the discussion in Chapter Five.): Most of the names given are participants' own.

Where pseudonyms are used this is indicated in Appendix G. Appendix G also includes a short description of each interviewee quoted. These descriptors were provided by interviewees wherever possible and are included in the appendices, rather than the main text, for ease of reading. In the main text, interviewees are identified by their name and that of the city in which they are based, except where further information about them is deemed to be relevant. Since it was not considered practicable to obtain written permission from all persons referred to by participants, the names of all such individuals have been changed, unless otherwise stated. Several quotations have been edited by participants to correct what they perceived to be grammatical flaws. Where quotations have been altered in this way, this is noted in the text. Finally, a transcription key is provided in Appendix D.

## **Chapter Seven: Preliminary Data Analysis - Locating Patterns and Differences**

Early readings of the interview transcripts revealed a number of interesting patterns and differences in the data. Of particular note were issues around: the importance of authenticity, politics and entertainment in slam; references to slam in the U.K. and U.S.; slam's relationship with the dominant literary world; and slam as a community. These themes were analysed initially using content analysis, the results of which are discussed here. Presenting the findings in this way reflects the chronological development of the data analysis and introduces key themes which recur throughout the remainder of this thesis. (See Chapter Five for more on thematic and content analysis.)

The themes were identified in interview transcripts using a cyclical method of reading, note taking and analytic categorisation. This process was informed through my background reading on slam, my analysis of secondary data sources, the participant observation which I conducted and the many informal conversations which I had with slam participants throughout the course of the research. The idea that slam could be seen as a political forum, for instance, is a recurrent theme throughout much of the U.S. literature on slam, being analysed in work by Somers-Willett (2001; 2003) and promoted in books like *The Spoken Word Revolution* (Eleveld and Smith, 2004). Further, political issues were raised both on and off the stage in all four of the key sites which I researched. Reading through the interview transcripts reinforced the salience of this theme, confirming my initial hunch that it was worthy of further investigation.

As this analysis proceeded it became increasingly apparent that politics was one of several themes which were approached differently by interviewees, depending on the country in which they were based. Thus, U.S. based interviewees focused heavily on authenticity and politics in slam, whilst their U.K. counterparts appeared to be more interested in slam as a form of entertainment. In addition, U.K. based slam participants seemed to focus more on the relationship between U.S. and U.K. slam, than U.S. slam participants,

who were more likely simply to assume that slam was a predominantly U.S. phenomenon. Content analysis was conducted to establish whether these differences were significant enough to pursue with further analysis. The data were tested for significance using unrelated 't' tests and repeated measures ANOVA. The results of this analysis are discussed in sections 7.1 and 7.2.

Slam's relationship to the dominant literary world and the idea that slam could be viewed as a community both appeared to be important to interviewees. There did not seem to be any marked difference, however, in the salience of these themes between U.K. and U.S. based participants. Thus, the content analysis which was carried out on these themes aimed to provide some indication of their prominence, and to test the hypothesis that there would be no difference in their salience in different interview sites. The data were tested for significance using unrelated 't' tests. The findings are presented and discussed in sections 7.3 and 7.4.

The content analysis was conducted on thirty-nine transcripts, representing interviews with forty participants. Four interviews were excluded from this analysis, because the transcripts were incomplete and therefore incomparable to those which are analysed here. In the case of two interviews this incompleteness was due to the interview method (via telephone and e-mail), whilst the remaining two were deemed to contain large portions of irrelevant discourse, which was not, therefore, transcribed. Two further interviews were excluded when analysing the community theme, since they represented unusually high numbers of references, which may have skewed the analysis. This is considered in further detail in section 7.4. The raw data and test statistics for all themes are presented in Appendix A.

As discussed in Chapter Five, content analysis is something of a blunt tool, which has many limitations – not least its tendency to equate frequency with significance. Before going on to look at these findings in detail then, it should be noted that this is intended to represent the first stage of data analysis only and should be treated, not as an endpoint, but as a kind of signpost towards the much more in-depth analysis presented in Chapters Eight to Eleven.



## **7.1 Authenticity, Politics and Entertainment in U.K. and U.S. Slam Discourses**

On reading the transcripts, it became evident that interviewees in New York and Chicago placed considerably greater emphasis, than those based in London and Bristol, on slam as a political forum. Bound up with this was a concern for authenticity and sincerity. Thus, for many of these interviewees it was important that political issues be expressed on the slam stage, and that these were the genuine and heartfelt views of the poet expressing them. In contrast, participants in the U.K. sites focused more on slam as a means of having fun and entertaining an audience.

For the content analysis, a number of words were chosen which were felt to represent authenticity, slam as a political forum and slam as entertainment. These were selected as an indicative, rather than exhaustive, list. In addition, I excluded words such as 'real' and 'engage', which were not considered to be reliable indicators of the themes' frequency, since their meaning may vary substantially in different contexts. Both partial and full words were searched for. Thus, 'oppress', for example, was used to locate references to words such as 'oppression' and 'oppressor'. (The one exception to this is the word 'fun', which was searched for as a full word only, due to the strong likelihood of locating words which began with these letters, but were unrelated to entertainment.) These references were counted and tested for significance using unrelated 't' tests. Table 3.1 shows the results of this analysis.

As Table 3.1 shows, U.S. based interviewees made greater numbers of references on average to authenticity and politics, than did those based in the U.K.. U.K. based participants, in contrast, made greater numbers of references on average to entertainment, than did their U.S. counterparts. This supports my early observations. The standard deviations in all groups are fairly high however, which indicates a reasonably large amount of variation in the numbers of references made by different participants. Clearly, some interviewees were rather more concerned with these issues than others.

Table 3.1: References to Authenticity, Politics and Entertainment in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants

Theme	Words Searched for	References Made in Interview Transcripts (by Site)					
		Total Number		Mean Number per Transcript		Standard Deviation	
		U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
Authenticity	Authenticity, sincere, sincerity, honest, truth	60	55	2.4	3.93	3.59	5.12
Politics *	Political, politics, Bush, Blair	74	131	2.96	9.36	4.46	10.46
Entertainment *	Entertain, fun, enjoy	167	42	6.68	3.00	5.21	2.48

\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Nonetheless, the differences in mean values proved to be significant in relation to two out of three of the themes. The number of references to politics was found to be statistically significantly higher amongst the U.S. sample than the U.K. sample ( $T = 2.68$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting the hypothesis that members of slam communities in New York and Chicago are markedly more concerned with slam as a political forum than are members of slam communities in Bristol and London.

The difference between the numbers of references made to entertainment was also found to be significant ( $T = -2.48$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), lending support to the hypothesis that slam participants in Bristol and London place significantly more emphasis on slam as entertainment, than do slam participants based in New York and Chicago.

There was no statistically significant difference, however, between the numbers of references made to authenticity by slam poets in these two countries ( $T = 1.09$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), leading to a rejection of the hypothesis that slam poets in the two U.S. sites are significantly more concerned with issues around authenticity in slam.

The average transcript length for participants based in the U.K. and U.S. sites was fairly similar (9,399 words for U.S. based interviewees, compared to 10,610 words for U.K. based interviewees). Thus, transcript length alone cannot account for these differences. These findings suggest, then, that members of slam communities in both countries have a comparable level of concern with authenticity in slam, but that those based in the U.S. place greater emphasis on slam as a political forum and less on slam as an entertaining medium, than do their U.K. based counterparts. The preliminary analysis presented here is developed in Chapters Nine and Ten.

## **7.2 Transnational Concerns: References to U.K. and U.S. Slam**

The United States is clearly more dominant than the United Kingdom on the global slam scene. Not only did slam begin in the U.S., only reaching the U.K. some eight years later, but the number of slams and slam poets in the U.S. far exceeds that of the U.K.. Slam audiences are considerably larger in the U.S., and the U.K. has no equivalent to the NPS or PSI to stimulate the continuing development of the for(u)m. This disjunction is reflected in writing on slam, much of which treats the for(u)m as if it were purely a U.S. concern.

Given all this, it seemed likely that interviewees would make a greater number of references to the U.S., regardless of the site in which they themselves were based. In addition, it was felt that the total number of references which were made to the U.K. and U.S. may differ significantly between these sites. In order to test these hypotheses, frequency counts were carried out on the interview data, based on twelve key words, which highlighted references to slam in the U.S. and U.K.. Just as before, these were selected as an indicative, rather than exhaustive, list. Table 3.2 presents the findings of this analysis. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted in order to test for main effects of reference type and interview site, and for any significant interaction between these factors.

Table 3.2: References to the United Kingdom and United States in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants

Theme	Words Searched for	References Made in Interview Transcripts (by Site)					
		Total Number		Mean Number per Transcript		Standard Deviation	
		U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
References to U.K.	England, English, U.K., United Kingdom, Britain, British	406	88	16.24	6.29	12.19	9.05
References to U.S.	America, American, U.S., U.S.A., United States, the States	505	174	20.2	12.43	19.0	9.91

As indicated in Table 3.2, interviewees made a greater number of references on average to the U.S. than to the U.K.. Further, U.K. based interviewees made a greater number of references overall to slam in both countries. Both of these differences were found to be significant; although no significant interaction was found between these factors ( $F = 0.41$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). It should be noted that the standard deviation scores for all categories are high, suggesting that there was a considerable amount of variance between interviewees in this respect. These significant main effects are discussed in greater detail below.

Across all of the transcripts, significantly greater numbers of references were made to the U.S. than to the U.K. ( $F = 8.87$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). This supports the first hypothesis and confirms the salience of the U.S. within slam scenes both here and abroad. Participants were aware that I was interested in comparing slam in the U.S. with slam in the U.K. and this may have increased the number of references which were made overall. It is highly unlikely, however, that this is responsible for the significantly greater number of references which were made to the U.S.. Rather, given the knowledge that I was a poet and researcher based in the U.K., interviewees might reasonably be expected to have made a greater number of references to the U.K. than they would have done otherwise; thus throwing this finding into even greater relief.

The second main effect relates to interview site. Table 3.2 shows that U.K. based interviewees made greater numbers of references to both countries than did their U.S. counterparts. This was found to be a statistically significant difference ( $F = 4.12$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that the site and national characteristics of slam were of greater salience to U.K. than U.S. based interviewees. This may reflect the common assumption in the U.S. that slam is a predominantly U.S. phenomenon, and the corresponding awareness of many U.K. based slam participants of their more marginal status on the world slam stage. Thus, whilst U.S. based interviewees often focused on their home country, with little reference to slam elsewhere, U.K. based participants were more likely both to reference U.S. slam and to make an effort to assert the existence and unique identity of slam in the U.K.. This is explored in greater depth in Chapter Ten.

### **7.3 Slam and the Academy: References to the Dominant Literary World**

As has been discussed, slam was established in part as a response to the perceived inaccessibility, irrelevance and elitism of the dominant literary world, and many slam participants continue to define the for(u)m in contrast to this. In many respects, the shadow of the academy still looms large over slam. This was apparent when reading through the transcripts of both U.S. and U.K. based interviewees. There did not appear to be any marked difference, however, in the salience of this theme between participants based in these two sites, and it was predicted that no significant difference would be found here.

Frequency counts were carried out on seven words or phrases which were viewed as indicative of this theme. The results were tested for significance using an unrelated 't' test. Both full and partial words were searched for, in order to maximise the number of references which would be identified. Thus, a search for the word 'academic' would also reveal references to 'academics'. Once again, this should not be considered to be an exhaustive list, but was used simply to give an indication of salience and difference, prior to more in-depth analysis. Before conducting the frequency count, all references to

academia and literature which did not directly reference slam or the dominant literary world were excised from the transcripts. Table 3.3 presents the results of this analysis.

Table 3.3: References to the Dominant Literary World in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants

Theme	Words Searched for	References Made in Interview Transcripts (by Site)					
		Total Number		Mean Number per Transcript		Standard Deviation	
		U.K	U.S.	U.K	U.S.	U.K	U.S.
The Dominant Literary World	academy, academic, academia, literary, literature, literati, ivory tower	91	96	3.64	6.86	3.74	7.56

As Table 3.3 demonstrates, U.S. based interviewees made a greater number of references on average to the dominant literary world. This was not found to be a statistically significant difference however ( $T = 1.78$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). This supports the hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in the salience of this theme between U.S. and U.K. based participants.

The dominant literary world was a prominent concern, being mentioned by participants in thirty-seven of the interviews, and referenced three or more times in twenty-three of the thirty-nine interviews analysed here. As with the previous themes, the standard deviation scores here are very high however, suggesting that there is a great deal of variance between the importance which different participants place on the role of the dominant literary world in slam. On closer examination of the U.S. data, it is apparent that four participants made an unusually large number of references to this theme. These were the only interviewees who mentioned the dominant literary world greater than the mean number of 7.56 times, making eleven, thirteen, twenty-one and twenty-four references respectively. Similarly, less than a third of the overall U.K sample made greater than the mean number of references to the 'academic' poetry

world, and four participants in particular stand out, two of whom made nine, and two thirteen, references to this theme. This high variation may well reflect the uneasy relationship which slam has with the dominant literary world and the changing nature of this association. Whilst, in many respects, slam continues to define itself in opposition to this, increasing numbers of participants in both scenes are collaborating with each other and the divisions between the two worlds can no longer be drawn as sharply as they once were. This complex relationship is explored throughout the thesis, and in section 3.2 and Chapter Eleven in particular.

#### **7.4 Community Concerns: References to Community**

The idea that slam is not simply a for(u)m, but also a community, is one which recurred frequently throughout the interviews. Many interviewees seemed concerned to emphasise that slam is about bringing people together to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences, at least as much as it was about developing individuals' artistic careers, having fun or challenging the dominant literary world. As discussed previously, slam communities can be both transient and enduring, and slam participants often form relationships with one another which endure beyond the boundaries of individual events.

This focus on community is reflected in the use of terms such as 'slam family' and 'Slam Papi', which are heard frequently on the U.S. slam scene. Such language is absent from the U.K. scene, where slam is typically perceived as slotting into the wider performance poetry community, rather than forming a distinct community of its own. Whilst there were differences in the way in which community was approached, however, it did not seem that U.S. based interviewees discussed the theme to a markedly greater extent than their U.K. counterparts. Thus, it was predicted that, community would be salient in participants' discourse across these contexts, with no significant difference in the numbers of references made between the two countries.

Community is a somewhat diffuse topic, which is particularly difficult to explore using the rather crude tool of content analysis. There was, for instance, great potential for confusion with other topics should words like ‘family’ be included in the frequency count. It was decided, therefore, simply to search for the number of references which were made to the word ‘community’, and to note that the resulting data are likely to underestimate the importance which interviewees placed on this theme.

These references were counted and tested for significance using an unrelated ‘t’ test. Before calculating the descriptive statistics and subjecting the data to statistical testing, two data sets were removed from the sample. These data sets, one from each country group, represented a conspicuously greater number of references to community than were present in the other interviews, (thirty-one references in the U.K. transcript and fifty-eight references in the U.S. transcript which was excised) and including them was likely to have skewed the results. The results of the analysis are summarised in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: References to Community in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants

Theme	Words Searched for	References Made in Interview Transcripts (by Site)					
		Total Number		Mean Number per Transcript		Standard Deviation	
		U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
Community	community	106	84	4.42	6.46	4.84	4.22

Table 3.4 demonstrates that U.S. based interviewees made a greater number of references on average to community than did U.K. based interviewees. As predicted, however, this did not prove to be statistically significant ( $T = 1.34$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). This supports the hypothesis that there would be no significant difference in the salience of community between slam participants in the U.K. and U.S..

Community was mentioned by all of the U.S. based interviewees and all but four of the U.K. based participants. Of those who discussed the theme, eight out of



twenty U.K. based interviewees and even out of thirteen U.S. based interviewees referenced community more than the mean number of times for their group. The standard deviation scores demonstrate slightly greater diversity amongst the U.K. than the U.S. sample, suggesting that U.K. based interviewees differed more in the importance which they attached to community in slam than did their U.S. counterparts. This may reflect the fact that, whilst community is valued by many slam participants in the U.K., there is no distinct slam community here. It may also be an indication of the more formal networks which characterise U.S. slam, and the unified discourses which they help to produce (see section 6.3 for more on this).

Different individuals may place greater emphasis on the slam community, depending on their position in the slam scene and the wider community within which they exist. This may help to explain the very high number of references to community made in the two outlying data sets. The U.K. based participant concerned (who made thirty-one references to community) spent a considerable amount of time discussing the divisions (and overlaps) between the local 'black' and 'white' poetry communities with which he was involved, for instance. This was also the case for the U.S. based interviewee (who made fifty-eight references). The large number of references made in this latter case, however, may also be explained by two additional factors: Firstly, this interviewee was keen to emphasise the many (formal and informal) relationships which he had with other members of the slam community. Secondly, he used the term 'community' in a variety of ways, referring to a loose grouping of individuals or an artistic scene as well as a family-like structure.

This discussion underscores some of the limitations of content analysis. It is indeed a very blunt tool and one which cannot be seen to produce a valid or in-depth account of the data when used in isolation. To this end, the analysis which was begun in this section is further developed in Chapter Eight.

**Chapter Eight: Exploring the Dimensions of Slam – Society, Community  
and the Individual**

Performance originates in impulses to make things happen and to entertain; to collect meanings and to pass the time; to be transformed into another and to be oneself; to disappear and to show off; to bring into a celebratory space a transcendent Other who exists there-and-then and later-and-now and to celebrate here-and-now only us who are present; to get things done and to play around; *to focus inward on a select, initiated group sharing a hermetic language and to broadcast out to the largest possible collection of strangers.*

~ Richard Schechner (1977: 90; my emphasis)

In his discussion of avant-garde inspired post-war artistic movements, Richard Schechner (1977: 89) notes that ‘the object of such performances is both to entertain – to have fun – and to create *communities*: a sense of collective celebration’ (emphasis in original). The same can be said of poetry slam. Whilst slam is a performance, in which poets seek to entertain an audience, this is only part of the story. For many of its participants, slam is a community; a network of relationships which permeate beyond the boundaries of individual events (and often the for(u)m itself). Understanding slam as a community provides a sense of belonging and meaning for its participants. This sets the for(u)m apart from other arts, pastimes or occupations (despite the similarities which the ‘outside’ observer may see between these fields), and ensures that it impacts beyond merely the amateur or professional sphere within which individuals primarily engage with slam.

This conception of slam is apparent in the poems which are performed on slam stages, the materials used to market and evaluate slams and slam participants’ talk around the for(u)m more generally. Such discourse serves not simply to *reflect* community, but to *construct* it. Thus, slam participants may be said to create community through both their art itself and the ways in which they discuss this.

Following on from section 3.3, community may be broadly defined as a group of individuals who interact socially, either face-to-face or via more distant media and who view themselves as forming a community. Groups are rarely, if ever, understood uniformly by all of their participants however, and individuals may vary as to whether or not they afford a particular group community status. Further, community is a value-laden concept, which cannot be discussed without recourse to the subjective understandings of group members. With this in mind, the current chapter will consider the varying discourses which slam participants weave around slam as a community, taking these as the point of departure for a closer analysis of the construct.

Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which participants define community in contrast to competitive individualism, seeking to construct the latter as an external threat, and to downplay evidence of individualism which operates within the for(u)m itself.<sup>166</sup> It will be argued that the presence of this latter 'internal' individualism calls into question the easy opposition between community and individualism which was discussed in section 3.3; but that, for slam participants at least, there are notable benefits to be derived from constructing community in a way which preserves this dichotomy.

As this chapter aims to demonstrate, an analysis of the construction of slam as a community enables us to explore what communities mean to those who participate in them, and the collective and individual benefits which particular understandings of, and associations with, community confer. We can thus use this discussion to provide a window into the relationship between individual and collective identities, helping us to understand how individuals may derive status gains from defining society, community and groups in particular ways.

The current chapter is divided into six substantive sections, which trace the lines of this argument: Section 8.1 considers the nature, importance and construction of slam communities in different geographical and social contexts. 8.2 explores the membership criteria for slam communities. Section 8.3 concludes the data presentation, discussing the ways in which slam participants

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<sup>166</sup> See section 3.3 for a discussion of definitions of 'individualism'.

negotiate discourses around community and competitive individualism in slam. Section 8.4 begins the analysis of these data, looking at the nature and significance of slam communities for their participants, with specific emphasis on the plurality of slam communities and on their bounded nature. Section 8.5 then considers the ideological nature of discourses around slam as a community, opposed to both 'external' and 'internal' processes of individualism. Finally, 8.6 explores the implications of this analysis for our understanding of the construction of identity and negotiation of multiple power relations within everyday social interactions.

## **8.1 The Nature, Importance and Construction of Slam Communities**

I begin by considering how slam participants construct slam as a community through their art, actions and discourse. Particular attention will be paid to: the value and significance which is attached to community; the friendship ties which characterise and connect slam communities; the variations and associations between communities in different contexts; and participants' discourse around slam as an oppositional movement.

### **8.1.1 Slam as Community**

The idea that slam may be viewed as a community has been alluded to already in this thesis. For many of its participants, community is a key defining feature of the for(u)m. As Bob Holman (New York) noted:

{Slam} does enable these poets to have a wonderful scene, and for people to have a community that's likeminded and that's truly national in scope.

Slam communities, in this sense, represent a nationwide group of likeminded individuals, who offer support and companionship to one another. Thus, they embody both a sense of belonging and a source of inspiration.

Outsiders or people that didn't have access to the literature world, they find a place for themselves {in slam}. (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

And: A lot of the poets that you've met are not from New York. They've moved to New York, because it's like iron sharpens iron. They wanna be around other people that have that creative juice. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

The relationships which are formed between participants are central to this understanding of slam as a community. As Mahogany Browne (New York) commented 'that's what it's all about, building relationships'. In North America, this idea is underscored by the frequent references which are made to the 'slam family'. A Google search for 'poetry "slam family" ' on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2008, for instance, produced 947 hits; the vast majority of which were from sites based in the U.S.. The term also crops up frequently in American books on slam such as Smith and Kraynak's (2004) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry*.

These relationships operate as a kind of informal communication network, offering a context in which poets, and the curators and promoters of poetry slams may promote their own events and work, and find out about those of others. This allows slam participants to glean information which is not readily available via the mainstream media.

Poets always talk to each other, 'cause it's the gossip, isn't it? If {they} don't talk to each other, they're not going to hear anything about what's going on. It's like dogs sniffing each other's asses really. You know, you can hardly get *The Guardian*<sup>167</sup> and read what's going on in the {slam and performance} poetry scene. (Steve Tasane, London)

For many slam participants however, the importance of community reaches far beyond this, and community is depicted as being something which lends slam a certain gravitas.

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<sup>167</sup> *The Guardian* is a daily newspaper with widespread circulation throughout the U.K..

I think that slams that have got {a} more fun perspective and a more developmental perspective or a more community perspective are more loved, and I think that they're also one of the reasons why slams have survived for so long. (Steve Tasane, London)

Slam venues or events which are associated with a strong community may thus be seen as superior to those which lack this element; a fact which slam organisers and curators often seek to use to their advantage. Farrago organiser, John Paul O'Neill, for instance, asserted that 'Farrago's a very kind of community based organisation', whilst the Nuyorican Poets Cafe promotes itself as a 'multi-cultural community' (Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 2007).

Individuals too may seek to represent themselves as being more community-minded than individualistic, suggesting that they are interested in listening to others, rather than merely promoting their own work. As Kurt Heintz (Chicago) remarked, when discussing a spoken word event which he had attended locally:

I must have gone there about five, six times just to listen, because I was interested. I wanted to hear what other people were saying, you know. ... I don't wanna listen to myself all the time.

#### 8.1.2 Friendship Ties

As noted above, slam communities are defined in terms of the relationships which participants form with one another. These relationships are articulated, confirmed and constructed through the poems that are performed in slams. Thus, London based performance poet, Steve Tasane, ends one popular piece with the line 'love is me and you', whilst Bristol based performance poet, Lucy English has performed a poem which muses on wanting 'to be in the company of poets' at slams and poetry events around the U.K.. Similarly, poetry, the stuff which ultimately links slam participants to one another, is the topic of many a slam poem.

More commonly, however, the relationships between slam participants are made visible through the talk which surrounds the poems themselves. In Bristol particularly, where the slams I observed were usually attended by the same core group of poets, 'in-jokes' and personal references were often directed towards particular individuals in the introductions, asides and friendly heckling which buffered poems. As audience members too, individuals may engage in actions which confirm and reinforce such relationships, sharing tables with, and buying drinks for, one another, playing informal games like 'guess the rhyme' (which several New York based poets referenced), writing notes to one another or sharing knowing smiles (or grimaces) when a particular poet's name is announced.

The relationships which these actions enact and around which they cohere may be formal, such as those which link the poets who perform in slam teams. (Slam teams are a perennial feature of the NPS and of youth slam events in the U.S. and U.K., and a more occasional feature of U.S. and U.K. slams outside of these contexts). More often however, they reflect more informal, friendship type relationships, which may endure beyond the bounds of slam itself. It is this latter form on which interviewees tended to focus:

Slam is a social scene and these people hang out together, and they're friends, and they're lovers, and they have civil wars, and they have divorces ... (Thom the World Poet, Austin, Texas)

And: The audience has become like a social vehicle, you know. They like going to the spoken word joints, because there's drinks being served, people interact and talk and then they become friends and then people hook up, you know, there's relationships that start. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

These friendships are seen as helping to shape the interactions which occur between slam participants in different sites.

... the impression I get {is} that if we {in Bristol} are able to get lots of poets from Manchester, it's because Becky's got a very close friend who lives up in Manchester and is involved in the Manchester scene. If we're able to bring people through from London, it's because one or two of the other people {in the Bristol performance poetry community} know a bunch of the London poets ... (Ian Sills, Bristol)

Such personal networks may be mobilised by promoters and curators looking for poets to book, and by poets in search of venues and events to perform in, in much the same way that I used my connections in the Bristol slam scene to recruit research participants.

If somebody phoned me and said "Mike, can you do Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup> of March?" and I can't, I'd say "Well no, but try calling so-and-so or so-and-so or so-and-so", and they would be my friends, who I think ought to be promoted. (Mike Flint, Bristol)

Conversely, interviewees suggested that individuals who are not liked may be avoided by other slam participants, resulting in less strongly integrated networks.

... if a promoter annoys a certain range of performers, then of course {the performers are} not going to go and be part of that scene or that performance night. Things aren't going to cross over as much as they could or should do really. (Nathan Penlington, London)

Slam participants thus articulated a link between informal associations and more formal relationships. This interaction was not seen as being unidirectional however. Rather, it was suggested that professional relationships may give rise to interactions which are more personal and informal in nature; so that, for example, friendships between poets may be established on the basis of a shared admiration of one another's work.

It's very difficult to relate to somebody if you really don't rate what they do, isn't it? ... So I think there's a sort of sense of people suss each



other out, and then when you've all gone on stage, it's more relaxed and you kind of go "Hey, I really liked what you do." ... And I think that's when you forge some of the friendships. (Jude Simpson, previously based in London)

### 8.1.3 Variations and Associations

Slam communities may last for mere hours or endure for weeks, months and even years at a time. As Keith Roach (New York) noted, 'community can be fifteen minutes or a thousand years'. In line with this, many interviewees were keen to stress, not only the lasting relationships which are formed in and around slam, but also the importance of the more transient communities which spring up in, and last for the duration of, individual slam events.

...if you talk about seeing somebody live, then there's that community. ... getting involved, getting a drink, sitting down with someone, sitting down with a group of people and enjoying something. (Lisa Buscani, Chicago)

Whilst these transient communities are clearly confined within concrete geographic boundaries, slam communities also operate along translocal, transnational and virtual lines. A number of participants noted that, rather than working in isolation, these different types of slam community act in concert with one another. As discussed in Chapter Six, virtual networks in particular may reinforce local, translocal and transnational interactions.

You see people around and you know what they're doing, and you go on their MySpace pages. (Jude Simpson, London)

And: The PSI have a website. ... And MySpace is so regular that you can see that they {poets with MySpace pages} were just on there two days ago. So you know it's still current, and I think it really has helped in just bridging those gaps and those lines of communication from somebody in Nebraska all the way to Delaware. (Mahogany Browne, New York)

Virtual networks, then, operate as lines of communication, which link different slam communities, and enable individuals to move more effectively within translocal and transnational scenes. The important role which the internet is perceived as playing in slam communities was apparent outside of the interview context too. Guest and sacrificial performers often promoted their web pages from the slam stage, for instance, and poets invariably include reference to their web pages and/or e-mail addresses on the CDs and books which they produce.

As suggested in Chapter Three, there are also connections between slam communities and different art worlds. Many of the slams which I attended featured musical performances of one form or another, non-poetry events were promoted routinely by comperes and performers, and leaflets for music, poetry and theatrical events were often strewn across the tables at which audience members sat. Slam participants were particularly keen to articulate the links between slam communities and the wider performance poetry scene. As Ian Sills (Bristol) said of the early Bristol slams:

There were these fairly distinct ways of performing poetry, and they sort of all overlapped. So that you would still get people who had maybe done two or three poetry sets at an invited night, and they would still be coming along to open mic. nights and performing to entertain and to try something out, and they'd still be going along to slams and performing.

This sense of an overlap between the worlds of slam and performance poetry was particularly noticeable in the U.K.. Slam participants here were often reluctant to conceptualise these as separate scenes, lacking the sense of a clear slam community, which characterised the discourse of many U.S. based slam participants. As Jude Simpson (London) noted:

I'm not sure that I could tell you what the slam scene is, but what I do is I perform poetry and I love performing poetry, and I discovered early on that one of the places you can do that is at slams.

While community was of concern to interviewees in all four geographical sites, then, those based in the U.K. typically spoke in terms of performance poetry, rather than slam, communities. (See subsection 3.1.1 for a discussion of the distinctions between slam and performance poetry.)

There are variations too in the ways in which slam communities are perceived by participants operating in different social contexts. The importance of community is stressed particularly within youth slam scenes. Indeed, for many youth slam participants, this focus on community sets it apart from the more competitive, status-driven world of adult slam. As Chicago based Spoken Word Educator, Peter Kahn, notes ‘with the youth scene, there’s more stress on a sense of community’. This view was echoed by many other youth slam participants.

What matters to them, the kids, is getting their poetry out and connecting with other kids that think like them. So I don’t think it’s about status at all. I think they are the true form of what I think the National Poetry Slam wanted to do, but our egos get in the way. (Mahogany Browne, New York)

Rather than stressing an allegiance to slam communities specifically, however, youth slam participants talk of community in terms of interactions between a broad range of artists and the wider social groups within which they live, work and play. Thus, performance poet and Director of Leeds Young Authors, Khadijah Ibrahim, described her remit as being the promotion of ‘community arts’, whilst Joelle Taylor, performance poet and coordinator of the Rise! slams in London, noted that:

...this project is not just about finding and supporting young artists, but about getting them to think clearly about their position in London community, in London society.

This focus was readily apparent in the poetry which was performed at the Rise! West/North Quarter Final slam I observed in London on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2007. Here

many young poets responded to the slam's theme of 'respect' with poetry which called for others to become actively involved in their communities by speaking out against racism, gang violence and oppression. One slammer, for example, urged audience members to 'write to your MP'. There were many references too to local events and issues, with poets alluding to London gang violence, reports of violent incidents in local papers and the Brixton riots, amongst other subjects. (Participants were encouraged explicitly to focus on issues of discrimination and gang violence in their work.)

In addition, youth slam communities are intertwined with adult slam. As will be discussed in Chapter Eleven, adult slam participants may act as educators, performers, hosts, judges and promoters on the youth slam scene. A number of participants suggested that this involvement may help to strengthen adult slam and performance poetry communities. As Joelle Taylor notes, when talking about the first U.K. national youth slam, the Word Cup:

What was really good about it, it's starting to involve all of the literary development officers and all the spoken word artists; all of us guys who've been doing this for years in our local communities. It's getting us networked and {forging} stronger associations between each group.

#### 8.1.4 Slam as an Oppositional Movement

In defining slam as a community, slam participants identify themselves as a distinct collective, juxtaposed against other groups in society. Indeed, slam is frequently portrayed as being an oppositional movement; 'an art form that was originated as an opposition or a resistance' (Bob Holman, New York). These oppositional categories are often very broad, so that slam may be depicted as something of an 'underground' community, set apart from mainstream society as a whole:

I think it's a very close community. It's a very clandestine community. It's also still a very underground community. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

Exactly what slam is portrayed as resisting varies depending on the social and geographical context however. Interviewees based in the U.K. frequently talked in terms of artistic oppositions, presenting slam (and performance poetry more generally) as a stigmatised art form, set in contrast to both the dominant literary world and to more popular arts.

...in one way, we may have been considered to be rebelling against the stuffy image of poetry and the huge academic institution here {in Oxford}, that keeps it out of the reach of many people. (Steve Larkin, Oxford)

And: ... M.T.V, Top of the Pops, Radio One, Radio Two {provide} major national and international backing for music. Okay. There is no major national or international backing for poetry. So it's no wonder that if a poet says to a musician "I'd like to work with you" the musician doesn't need to work with the poet. ... Part of the problem with working with other art forms is that those that are already respected don't necessarily feel the need to work with a lesser art form, what is perceived to be a lesser art form. (Tim Gibbard, Bristol)

This latter construction was underscored by the wry remarks about earning millions of pounds and great popular acclaim through poetry, which occasionally punctuated the U.K. slam performances I observed. Such comments were, without fail, greeted by laughter and nods of recognition from amongst the audience.

Whilst the above statements were echoed by many slam participants in youth slam, and in New York and Chicago based adult slam scenes, individuals in these contexts also presented slam as being oppositional in terms of its political outlook.

... the reality is the majority of the population doesn't think like the spoken word community ... The majority of Americans: one, voted for Bush; two, don't empathise or don't feel the pain of a lot of the poets and what they're saying in the poetry venues. {So slam} will be to some form clandestine. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

Comments such as this construct an image of society and slam as being governed by norms and values which are at odds with one another; a claim which is also apparent in a great deal of U.S. based slam poetry. (See Chapter Nine for more on this.) These oppositional discourses, then, may serve to establish a great distance between slam and many other groups in society, reinforcing slam participants' feelings of being different and prompting them to make stronger connections amongst themselves.

I think that poets make strong links with each other, because they have to. Well, it's nice to make links, but I think poets particularly have to, and internationally as well as nationally I think that's the case, because we are an isolated genre. (Steve Tasane, London)

## **8.2 Insiders and Outsiders: Defining Membership of Slam Communities**

Participants used a range of criteria to draw distinctions between individuals who were, and were not, considered to be members of slam communities. Salient amongst these was the assertion that slam (and performance poetry more widely) was something which community members must be personally invested in.

You have to be involved in poetry quite heavily to run a poetry night. It's that love for poetry that actually keeps people doing it, despite the low turnouts when they have them, and the disappointing nights or anything like that. (Jacob Sam-La Rose, London)

And: {Poetry is} not something you do as a viable business. It is something that you do out of love, interest and having some other way of getting an income. (Bertel Martin, Bristol)

Thus, slam participants often portrayed themselves as being involved in slam for artistic reasons, rather than for material or other personal gains. The love of poetry particularly was mentioned explicitly in many poems which I heard performed on U.S. and U.K. slam stages and this topic also featured heavily in

participants' talk around slam. As Tim Gibbard commented, on his involvement in the early Bristol slams:

...we weren't in it for the money. We weren't in it for the adulation. We weren't in it for the slam wins. Okay. We wrote poetry because we were poets. We joined competitions, because we enjoyed the competition, but we didn't write poetry to win competitions.

Adopting the label of 'poet' enables participants to convey clearly the importance of poetry in their lives. Audience members are expected to demonstrate a respect for the art form too however. In the U.K. based slams which I attended, for instance, it was rare for anyone off-stage to talk during a performance, and those who did were quickly shushed by their neighbours. Similarly, whilst U.S. audiences often participated vocally in performances, their contributions were viewed as just that and idle chat was not generally condoned. (Interestingly, the introductions, scoring and other talk which buffered poems was treated as less sacrosanct in this respect and audience members in both countries were more willing to talk at these points of the show.)

Members of slam communities, then, are expected to show a commitment to poetry in a broad sense, and participants who appear to be concerned with more individualistic aims may find their artistic integrity and community membership called into question.

At Poetry Unplugged, which isn't a slam, but it's a very popular open mic. night at The Poetry Café {in London}, people would in droves get up and leave either during the break or immediately after they'd performed their poem, and so you're not gonna speak to those people, 'cause they've gone; but then I don't really consider {that} they're really poets, because a real poet doesn't just wanna say their poem. They also want to hear somebody else's poem. (Steve Tasane, London)

Similarly, I noted that the few slammers who leave after they have been knocked out of an event often find themselves followed out of the room by the frowns of those who remain.

For poets, community membership may also depend on the extent to which their work is appreciated by others. Thus, whilst participants reported that friendships between poets may be struck up on the basis of admiration for one another's work, they also suggested that this process could serve to exclude individuals from the community. As Mahogany Browne (New York) remarks, 'a lot of people didn't talk to me until I won'. Fellow New Yorker, Lynne Procope, concurs:

One of the things that's hard about slam is that people worry that you won't like them, because they can't prove to you that they've been wildly successful at slams.

Whilst individuals may find their passage into slam membership eased by such achievements, the success of some organisations can work against their acceptance into slam communities. Indeed, a number of interviewees expressed fears around the involvement of powerful organisations in slam. As Bob Holman notes, when discussing an NPS team who were sponsored by a major record label, such organisations may be characterised as ' "nothing but a corporation coming in and trying to turn our little poetry scene into a corporate conglomerate" '. Indeed, one Chicago-based slam poet explained that PSI was set up partly to counter the involvement of 'outside' organisations, with slam participants arguing that ' "we've gotta get ourselves a non-profit organisation to protect ourselves from these outside entities that are exploiting us" '. Just as with individual participants, then, organisations which become involved in slam without demonstrating a commitment to the community, may be criticised for simply trying to capitalise on the success of the for(u)m.

What has been interesting is {that} Apples and Snakes did performance poetry, and they've suddenly started doing slams over the past year or so, which they never did before, and there's one or two people who've



said “Oh, Apples and Snakes” and “Oh well, they’re just jumping on the slam bandwagon”. (Mike Flint, Bristol)

Clearly then, not all organisations and individuals participating in slam are deemed to belong to slam communities.

Their acceptance (or lack of acceptance) into the community may have a marked impact on individuals’ perceptions of slam. As Caroline Jackson (Bristol) remarks, what is ‘a lovely community’ to its members, may seem like ‘some kind of exclusive club’ to those who are not welcomed in. Mahogany Browne (New York) supports this view:

HG: What’s the local slam scene like?

MB: It depends on who you ask I guess. If you ask someone who is involved with it now, and they’re succeeding, winning all the slams, then it’s a beautiful thing. It couldn’t get no better. And if you are talking to someone who may not be received well at all the different venues, then it’s one of those clique things that they’ve hated since they were in high school.

The word ‘clique’ is an emotive one. Indeed, one interviewee asked me specifically to strike the word from her transcript, lest she cause contention within the local slam community. Yet the very sensitivity which participants show around this word is indicative both of the importance of community to slam and the fervour with which community boundaries may be maintained.

### **8.3 Cooperation in Competition: Tensions and Resolutions**

Community proved to be salient in participants’ discourse across all of the key social and geographical sites addressed through this research; however it was rarely treated as unproblematic. This section considers some of the tensions around this construction, focusing on the discordance between understandings of slam as community and spectacle, and the roles of competition and community in slam. Underlying these tensions is a perceived opposition

between community and individualism, similar to that which was discussed in Chapter Three, and which has concerned social theorists for over two centuries.

### 8.3.1 Audience as Community and the Search for a 'True' Audience

Whilst audience members are certainly there to be entertained, they are also seen as being an important part of slam communities.

I think there is massive audience participation {in slam}, and I think that's one of the attractions for them, 'cause they are part of it, as well as spectators. (Jude Simpson, London)

Audience members, then, may achieve community membership through participating actively in slam. Membership may also be prescribed to them through their pre-existing relationships with other slam participants. Indeed, like many of the poets I interviewed, it is often the case that a large proportion of the slam audience attends events to support friends or family who are performing in, organising or otherwise participating in the slam.

That said, this high level of audience involvement in slam communities was often viewed negatively by interviewees.

If one were to be completely cynical, there aren't enough people that turn up at a poetry event just to watch. (Ian Sills, Bristol)

Despite making explicit attempts to involve the audience in slam communities, then, slam poets and organisers frequently place greater value on those who come from outside the community.

There is a difference between people on one side and *real* audience, not friends, not other poets, not family, but people who have come because it's entertainment, and not because they are in some way associated with the event itself. (Tim Gibbard, Bristol)

In defining slam as a spectacle, slam participants may thus distinguish between community members and 'true' audience, using the presence of members of the

latter group to signal an event's success. In this sense, the less connected an audience member is to the slam community, the more value is attached to them. At the Nuyorican Poets Cafe slams I observed, for instance, the compere invariably drew attention to the number of newcomers at the event, asking 'How many of you have never been to a slam before?'. Slam's apparent ability to attract this 'true' audience is often seen as indicative of the for(u)m's success more generally, and the claim that slam is, unlike more traditional poetry readings, something which 'non-poets would pay to watch' (Tony Walsh, 2006: Para. 7) is frequently used to promote slam and to defend it from its critics. As Tom Barnes (Chicago) argued:

Where else in the world does a poet go and have a built-in audience, a bunch of people who are gonna really listen to him, except the slam?

### 8.3.2 Competition and Status in Slam

There are status differences between slam poets, just as there are between different types of audience member. The level of success which poets have achieved within the for(u)m plays a central role in shaping these status hierarchies. As suggested earlier, slam wins may even determine whether or not a poet is accepted into a slam community. This observation is supported by Mahogany Browne's (New York) statement that 'people definitely do discriminate {between poets based} on slam wins'. Similarly, Clare Ultimo (New York) says:

Poetry slam is a very funny little animal. ... In America especially, it's like who you are in the scene; how many CDs you have out; how many times you've slammed; how many times we've seen you on television and Def Poetry Jam, whatever. It's status.

Slam is thus characterised by competition as well as cooperation, and by individual, as well as collective, concerns. Certainly, many participants suggested that 'deep down probably every bloody poet wants to win' (Marcus Moore, Cheltenham).

A poet who takes part in slam obviously is in there to win it or in there to compete ... slams are competitive; believe me they are competitive. You know, punch-ups happen at slams. People get angry at slams. (Lucy English, Bristol)

As will be argued in Chapter Nine, this individualistic stance is similarly apparent in much slam poetry.

Whilst the autobiographical element of poetry is often seen as being an important mark of a poem's authenticity, for many slam participants, there is an inherent tension between this competitive, individualistic element of slam and the emphasis which is placed on slam as a supportive community.

Although it's brought the attention of many more people to performance poetry, to poetry, at the same time it's gone for this competitive, professional, cutthroat, undermining idea of the individual. You know, a community of poets is one thing, where everyone is trying to help each other and support poetry, but the slam is an individual quest to be the winner, the best, the one who's got the most trophies, the big, professional "I am", who doesn't want to join a community of poets or support poetry ... (Pat V T West, Bristol)

And: ... this is a very clandestine art form, where there's only so much money, right. It creates a struggle between people keeping it real, and then at the same time being somewhat malicious and competitive with others, because there's only so much honey in the pot to sustain them all ... And so you see this loving community, but you also see a lot of hate ... (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

Participants are aware of this perceived disjunction, and commonly respond by criticising and seeking to undermine the competitive side of slam. This is readily apparent in Allan Wolf's oft-cited catchphrase 'The points are not the point. The point is poetry.' (cited in Smith and Kraynak, 2004: 20); a sentiment which was often echoed by the slam participants with whom I spoke. It is apparent too in Bob Holman's (1992) poem *Disclaimer*, which includes the lines

'We disdain/competition and its ally war', and which was used as a regular opener in the early Bristol slams.

Slam participants thus seek to present an idealised slam model in which competitive individualism plays second fiddle to the concerns of a supportive, inclusive community, suggesting that 'despite the element of competition, they're always very friendly, very positive things' (Russell Thompson, London). As Tom Barnes (Chicago) puts it:

The idea of building the community in the show itself is the more important aspect, and I've been able to go many places around the world and say "Oh, that's what it's about." Instead of this ultra-competitive, 'look at me' kind of art form ... That's not the roots of it.

Slam participants also take more direct measures to undermine the role of competition in slam. These include: running open mics. and other non-competitive events alongside slams; offering frivolous prizes, such as the tin of sardines which was presented to the victor at one slam in Chicago's Green Mill Tavern; and giving prizes to all competitors, as with London's Farrago SLAM!. As will be discussed in Chapter Eleven, such strategies were particularly common amongst youth slam participants and are reflected in the discourses which they weave around slam.

I'd say with a lot of the slams that I work with, in terms of the youth slams, we really subvert the notion of the competition, and we work more towards using slam as a way of making poetry accessible for young people, and we use it to build a sense of community among the poets that are involved. (Jacob Sam-La Rose, London Teenage Poetry SLAM, London)

#### **8.4 Understanding Slam as Community**

Slam communities are constructed through the actions and interactions of poets, promoters, curators, funders, educators, audience members and others. They include transient communities which dissipate after an event, broader groups connecting events across different social and geographical contexts, and relationships which are formed within these groups, but endure beyond their boundaries. Slam communities thus operate on many different levels.

Community is an ideological and idealised concept. Presenting slam in this way may confer great benefits on the for(u)m and its participants. Indeed, the construction of slam as a community is linked inextricably to the functions which it is perceived to fulfil. Slam communities are portrayed as offering: marketing opportunities; communication channels; understanding; support; companionship; belonging; sources of inspiration and artistic growth; and sanctuary from the pressures and prejudices of wider society. Community is very important to many slam participants and is often cited as a key motivator for their participation in the for(u)m. There would appear to be a conflict, however, between the notion of slam as a cooperative community, which provides a refuge from the competitive individualism of wider society, and the idea that it is a spectacle characterised by competition between individuals.

The remainder of this chapter considers this argument in greater detail. Section 8.4 begins with an exploration of slam networks and their construction as a particular type of community. 8.5 then discusses the relationship of community with individualism, arguing that an analysis of 'external' and 'internal' processes of individualism may help us to develop a fuller understanding of communities and what they mean to their participants. Finally, section 8.6 concludes by considering the implications of this discussion for slam participants' performance of identity and their negotiation of multiple hegemonic structures.

#### 8.4.1 The Ties that Bind: Formal and Informal Slam Networks

As discussed in section 6.3, slam is characterised by both formal and informal relationships. These reinforce one another, so that an individual's formal role as slam compere, poet or organiser may bring them into contact with individuals who later become friends or lovers. Conversely, poets may be booked or events attended on the basis of existing friendships between the key participants. These individual connections combine into wider networks, as individuals selectively form attachments with poets, comperes, organisers and other slam participants. Slam can thus be conceived of as operating on several levels: in the interpersonal connections between individual participants, in wider localised groupings (based in specific social and geographical contexts), and as a series of networks, which link together into a global, overarching group. These networks connect individuals across different geographical and social contexts, allowing them to participate in a number of sites. Adult slam participants, for instance, often work in youth slam, teaching, performing, organising, promoting, compering and/or judging in slam events and the workshops which form a key part of their programmes. In the U.K. in particular this helps to strengthen adult slam networks, providing their participants with more regular and reliable work and opportunities to maintain associations with one another.

Slam networks, and the relationships on which they are based, differ in quality, duration and site specificity, and may be constructed through a variety of means. As indicated in Chapter Six, internet based communication is particularly useful for the establishment and maintenance of connections between slam participants. Even events which rarely draw in audience and performers from beyond the local area are frequently promoted via e-mailing lists and web pages. The use of such tools helps to ensure the successful operation of slam networks on translocal and transnational levels. A poet visiting a venue or slam from another city or country, for example, may be able to organise this over the net, using the same method after the event to bolster the relationships which they have formed. This could, in turn, strengthen the likelihood of them returning to the venue/event.

As this example demonstrates, the majority of informal ties are ultimately realised through face-to-face interaction, at least partially within the confines of slam events themselves. Whilst slam networks may cover great distances of space and time, then, the events which spawn them remain at their epicentre, and virtual and face-to-face networks cannot be considered adequately in isolation from one another. Slam networks provide valuable lines of communication, enabling participants to make and secure bookings, and to promote and research events which are not commonly discussed through the mainstream media. It is not simply the 'objective' properties of these networks however, but rather the ways in which they are conceived of, and constructed by, participants which is of primary interest here.

#### 8.4.2 'We are Slamily'<sup>168</sup>

Personal attachments between slam participants are established, articulated and reinforced through talk and other activity which resides within and around the for(u)m. This is apparent in the poems which are performed on slam stages, the talk and friendly heckling which buffers these poems, the actions of audience members in sharing tables with, and buying drinks for, one another, and slam participants' recommendations of events to attend and artists to book (or avoid). Through their talk and (other) actions, slam participants actively work to construct these interpersonal connections as a community. In the process, they reinforce the popular conception of community as a supportive, family-like group, juxtaposed against the competitive individualism of wider society. Thus, interviewees spent much time discussing their informal relationships with other slam participants and frequently emphasised the friendships which underscore their more formal connections with others.

Such discourse works to strengthen slam, helping to ensure its continued success. The personal attachments which individuals develop motivate them to continue supporting particular events, venues or poets. Further, participants' allegiances often go beyond localised boundaries, so that they express a more generalised commitment to slam or performance poetry as a whole. In the U.S.

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<sup>168</sup> Quotation taken from Smith and Kraynak (2004: 273).



particularly, it is not uncommon for slam converts to display an evangelical zeal when discussing the for(u)m. Consequently, there is often no shortage of volunteers willing to offer up their time and other resources to help organise, compere and promote events, host visiting poets or perform any of the other myriad tasks which are needed for a successful slam to take place.

Because of the sense of belonging, support and companionship which participants often associate with community, constructing slam in this way gives the for(u)m a depth and meaning which would be seen as lacking from a series of isolated shows. The lens of community may thus add a certain gravitas to slam; peering through it, slam appears as something which is neither wholly work nor leisure, but a bridge between these, and consequently more important, meaningful and all pervasive than either realm alone. Viewed in terms of community, slam is not simply an art form or event, but a kind of 'slamily'; a place where people can feel at home and find a niche for themselves; where they can form lasting relationships and participate in meaningful interactions.

In line with this, slam participants and events that appear to possess a strong community spirit are valued more highly than those which lack this. Participants may use the discourse of community to promote slams or seek to portray themselves as community-minded, arguing that they are there to support and listen to others, rather than simply to read their own work; to participate in slam for the benefit of the community as a whole, rather than for mere personal gain. Conversely, individuals, events and organisations which appear to lack this community spirit are frequently dismissed as not being 'one of us'.<sup>169</sup>

#### 8.4.3 Community in Context

Slam communities are just that. Rather than constituting a homogeneous construct, they are plural and heterogeneous, being constructed differently in distinct social and geographical contexts. These differences are particularly notable when comparing youth with adult slam participants, and adult slam participants based in the U.S. with those based in the U.K.. As indicated in

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<sup>169</sup> This critique of individualistic, in comparison to more collective, motivations is also addressed in Chapter Nine, with particular focus on slam in the U.S. context.

Chapter Seven, there is no statistically significant difference between the numbers of references made to community in the transcripts of U.S. based interviewees compared to their U.K. based counterparts. This preliminary content analysis reveals little, however, about the ways in which community is understood by slam participants. In this latter respect, there are a number of striking differences between slam in the two countries.

Earlier in this thesis it was suggested that U.S. based slam can be seen as more successful, better developed and characterised by more formal networks than U.K. slam. In the U.S., it is perfectly feasible for poets to spend their entire poetic career performing within slam's confines. Consequently, U.S. based slam participants are more likely to define themselves as slam poets and to profess an allegiance to slam. U.K. based slam participants, in contrast, do not feel themselves to be so dominated by the for(u)m and often reject any moves in this direction. Members of this latter group typically declare their loyalty to performance poetry, rather than to slam. Thus, as will be discussed in Chapter Ten, rather than concerning themselves with the development of slam as an independent for(u)m, U.K. based slam participants are interested primarily in the impact which it has on (performance) poetry.

This is not to suggest that members of U.S. slam communities consider themselves to be isolated from performance poetry more broadly. On the contrary, many U.S. based participants too judged slam in terms of its impact on this art form. These individuals were, however, able to discuss slam in a way which their U.K. counterparts simply could not. Thus, interviewees based in the U.S. could: trace the parameters of slam communities and networks; define the purposes, strengths and limitations of slam; and readily describe something called 'slam poetry' (even if they denied its existence).<sup>170</sup> U.K. based interviewees, in contrast, often faltered and resorted instead to a more wide-reaching discussion of (performance) poetry communities, networks and artistic styles. Thus, whilst the distinction is more one of degree than of absolutes, it remains pertinent.

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<sup>170</sup> The issue of the development and formularisation of slam poetry was introduced in Chapter Two and is discussed in greater depth in Chapters Nine and Ten.

In youth slam too, interviewees commonly understood community as a valued construct, which permeated beyond the boundaries of slam itself. Young people participating in slam were encouraged to see themselves as being part of both wider artistic communities and of the local communities within which they lived or otherwise participated. (This is explored in greater depth in Chapter Eleven.)

#### 8.4.4 Containing Community

Acceptance into one slam community does not automatically equate to membership of others. A poet with a well-established reputation in one site may find that they are relatively unknown elsewhere, and poets need to extend their networks as they move between slam in different contexts. Thus, there is a continual need to form fresh relationships and bolster one's reputation in order to ensure membership of, and high status within, newly encountered slam communities.

As suggested in subsection 8.4.1, however, slam networks are not isolated from one another, but are highly interdependent. This interaction has both positive and negative effects for the individual slam participant. Whilst membership of one community often provides greater access to others, competition between groups may also limit participants' involvement in slam in other contexts. The nature and extent of such competition varies. In New York City, for example, there are three high profile slams, whose respective participants work hard to establish a unique identity for their venue. Whilst participation in one venue certainly does not preclude involvement in others, individual poets often identify more strongly with, and express an allegiance to, one specifically. In Bristol, in contrast, there were no regular slams at the time of writing. Those which did occur were thus more likely to be seen as representative of the Bristol slam scene as a whole, and to attract more widespread support from across the performance poetry community.

Slam communities, then, cannot be understood without reference to 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Communities are necessarily discursively bounded. They are defined as much by what they are *not*, as by what they *are*; by who they

*exclude*, as much as who they *include*. One of the most important criteria which slam participants use to confer community membership is that the individual or organisation concerned demonstrate a personal investment in slam and in poetry more broadly. This is particularly important given the stigma which slam participants commonly suggest is attached to poetry. In this sense, performance poetry and slam may outstrip their labels as art forms, becoming defined instead as causes, which participants must band together to support and promote. Thus, as Townsend and Hansen (2001: 2357) argue ‘the symbolism invoked in using the term “community” may be as much a rallying cry as a description of a social entity’.

Individuals’ perceptions of slam are inevitably coloured by their position in relation to slam communities. What appears to be a loving, inclusive community to some, is portrayed by others as a judgemental, exclusive clique. Whilst this latter perspective is more likely to be held by individuals who do not feel that they have been accepted into the fold or who hold a relatively weak position in the slam hierarchy, this is not always the case. Several successful U.S. based slam poets whom I interviewed, for example, suggested that, whilst membership of slam communities should be open to all, it was instead all too often reliant on poets’ success on the slam stage. As will be discussed in the following section, this notion of exclusivity and competition in slam clashes with understandings of the for(u)m as a democratic movement, which imposes no restrictions, no censorship and no restrictive entry requirements on its participants. This latter representation of slam goes back to its very founding principles. (See for example Smith and Kraynak, 2004, in particular the chapter on *Soaking in the Spirit of Slam*.)

Nonetheless, interviewees remained keen to protect the for(u)m against interference from non-community members. This was apparent in the ways in which participants discussed the involvement of different organisations in slam. ‘Outside’ organisations were seen as needing to be monitored and their influence tempered, whilst those run by existing members of slam communities were more often treated as trusted allies. (This distinction will be elaborated on

in Chapter Nine, in the context of U.S. based slam participants' talk around the perceived commercialisation of slam.)

There is a clear status difference, then, between community members and non-members. Because they are perceived as being personally invested in slam and expected to share certain aims and understandings of the for(u)m, members of slam communities possess greater authority over the regulation of slam conventions and discourses. Conversely, individuals and organisations labelled as 'outsiders' are given less control over slam, their efforts may receive reduced support from slam participants, and their authority to discuss and direct slam may be questioned. This has impacted on my research directly; for example my ability to recruit participants and gain consent to take notes at events depended, at least in part, on the extent to which I was considered to be a member of the slam (and performance poetry) communities which I was researching. (Barnes, 1995 also makes this link between the management of status and group membership, drawing on Weber's theory of 'status groups'.)

## **8.5 Community and Individualism: Competing Discourses**

As discussed in Chapter Three, the concept of community has been much criticised by social theorists as ill defined and value-laden. It is partly this vague, ideological and idealised nature, however, which has ensured the term's enduring popularity within both academic and more popular discourse, and which helps to explain its prevalence in slam.

Raymond Williams (1976: 75) has suggested that community has no opposite, and indeed the word has so many layers of meaning that a single opposing label may be impossible to find. Nonetheless, scholars have juxtaposed community against wider society for centuries, with the latter characterised by a competitive individualism and the former by cooperation and collectivity. This dichotomy can be seen in the works of Kant and Hegel (see Stråth, 2001), Tönnies (2001/1997), Durkheim (1984/1893) and many others. It pervades popular discourse and is readily apparent in the talk of the slam participants

studied here. The following two sections seek to demonstrate how an analysis of this talk may help us to develop a fuller understanding of these constructs and the roles which they are mobilised to play in our everyday lives.

Slam was often portrayed by interviewees as being something of an 'underground' or oppositional movement. Participants in all key sites defined the for(u)m in contrast to the dominant literary world, whilst in youth slam and U.S. based adult slam particularly many participants also pitted themselves against what were perceived to be the more right-wing political views of the majority. These oppositions are explored one by one in the following three chapters. Taken together, however, such antagonisms serve to mark slam off as a distinct group, divorced from the pressures and prejudices of wider society. In this way, community and society are juxtaposed against one another in participants' discourse. This dichotomy is one which is heavily value laden.

As noted in Chapter Three, Kadushin (1976: 117) has suggested that such oppositions are typical of many emerging art forms, serving to facilitate bonding amongst their participants. An analysis of the ways in which society and community are constructed in slam participants' discourse would seem to support this contention. Society is conceived of as being a sea of strangers, rife with competitive individualism and void of meaningful attachments, whilst community is constructed as a kind of family unit, which is able to offer support, understanding and belonging to those who are disillusioned with society's harsh individualism. Society is portrayed as exclusive, isolating and atomised, whilst community is depicted as inclusive and offering companionship. Consequently, community members may view one another as anchors of meaning and support in a hostile or indifferent world. The data presented in the first half of this chapter suggest that it is not always an easy narrative for slam participants to sustain however. Instead, they must negotiate a number of discourses, in which the presentation of slam as a cooperative, inclusive community conflicts with its portrayal as a competitive field and as an exclusive spectacle.

Slam participants' talk reflects understandings of individualism as both egoism and as personal autonomy/individuality (see section 3.3 for more on this). The

latter is usually seen in a more positive light than the former. Indeed, as Middleton (2005: 22-4) and Silliman (1998) note, the performance of authorship and autobiography is a central pillar of poetry readings like slam. Whilst such discourses necessarily emphasise the role of the individual, they need not imply competition between individuals and may thus sit fairly comfortably alongside the presentation of slam as a community. After all, as Aliak and Realo (2004: 34-5) note, 'voluntary cooperation and partnership between individuals are only possible when people have autonomy, self-control, and a mature sense of responsibility'. (See also Durkheim, 1984/1893 on this understanding of individualism.)

Individualism, in the sense of egoism, is more wedded to the idea of competition, and is thus less easy to reconcile with the image of a cooperative, supportive community. The existence of individualism within slam itself, then, has the potential to threaten the for(u)m's representation as a cooperative, supportive community. Competitive individualism is, however, all too evident in slam. This competition may be: immediate and explicit, in the sense that slams are promoted and played out as competitive spectacles; diffuse and explicit, in that titles such as 'NPS winner' or 'slammaster' have a widespread impact upon slam participants' status, influence and access to resources; immediate and implicit, as with the allegiances formed, identities performed and roles taken up by slam participants at a given event; or diffuse and implicit, in that these allegiances, identities and roles affect slam participants' careers more generally.

As these examples indicate, competitive individualism is central to both the identity of slam and the long term success of slam poets. Indeed, the limited number of slam wins, performance spots, teaching posts and publication opportunities which are available means that poets must compete hard to build up their reputations if they are to secure the most and sweetest 'honey in the pot' (Soul Thomas Evans, New York). This is true particularly in the U.S., where there is a more formalised status hierarchy, and where poets' careers can be made or broken on the basis of slam wins (although this is more often due to the cumulative effect of numerous slam wins and losses than to the effects of a single slam win).

Many slam participants acknowledge this central role of competition, critiquing it in a manner which is reminiscent of Adorno's (2000/1970) condemnation of contests, as reinforcing a logic in which the strong can legitimately dominate the weak. In this way, slam participants set the exclusivity and competition of divided individuals against the inclusiveness and cooperation of individuals working together. This serves to reinforce the dichotomy between individualism and community which is apparent in much academic and popular discourse and, in the process, pushes notions of individualism as individuality out of the picture. Thus, in negotiating different understandings of individualism and community, slam participants seek to resolve an 'ideological dilemma' (Billig *et al.*, 1988) between individual autonomy and social responsibility, which is present in both scientific and lay thought.

As suggested above, however, a close examination of slam communities suggests that competitive individualism is not simply an external process, but an internal process too. It is an inherent feature, not only of wider society, but of communities themselves. We must negotiate multiple status hierarchies, which not only separate different groups from one another, but operate *within* these groups. Thus, whilst slam participants adopt a shared identity which distinguishes them from others in society, they also compete with one another on and off the slam stage. Slam's (immediate and explicit) competitive format makes this competition clearly visible; however it is by no means unique to slam. Rather, communities are structured and strengthened by such competitive frameworks. The presence of community 'outsiders', for example, reinforces the integrity of slam communities by supplying sightings against which their borders may be drawn and providing an audience towards whom slam events can be directed.

This bounded nature of communities calls into question the easy opposition between individualism and community; yet these constructs continue to be juxtaposed in much popular and academic discourse. Slam participants must find a way to resolve the tensions this represents if they are to ensure a good fit between their presentation of slam as a community and this popular



understanding of the construct, and thus benefit from its positive connotations. This presents them with something of a dilemma. How do they continue to depict slam as a competitive spectacle, without damaging its status as a cooperative community? Or, in the words of Smith and Kraynak (2004: 19), how can they use 'slam to foster an environment of mutual respect in the midst of heated competition'?

The strategy which many slam participants adopted was to focus on 'external' individualism, and to downplay the existence of more internal processes. This enables them to defend themselves against critics who condemn slam's competitive aspect as being the antithesis to community and, indeed, to art. (See Chapters Three and Eleven for more on this.) Competition was thus frequently portrayed as a gimmick, something which was there simply to draw an audience in. As Tom Barnes (Chicago) remarked, 'We started using the competition because it's a natural theatrical device'. Here, the competition which occurs in slam is presented as being merely a theatrical sheen. It is play-acting and not something which should be taken seriously. In line with this, individuals who place too much store in slam wins or who seem to be motivated by personal gain rather than community spirit, are often rejected as narcissistic careerists who lack artistic commitment.

Discourses around slam as a community, then, are prominent across a range of different geographical and social contexts. In defining slam as a community, participants juxtapose it against the 'external' individualism of wider society and seek to downplay the individualism which emerges within slam itself. The narratives which these individuals weave are ideological in nature, casting slam in a positive light. This process implicates both inclusion and exclusion, as slam participants seek to position themselves favourably in relation to others with whom they interact. The theoretical implications of this argument are considered below.

## **8.6 Being Ourselves Together: Hegemony and the Performance of Identities in Slam Communities**

To a certain extent, Gramsci's (1971/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) theory of hegemony and Bourdieu's (1989) theory of cultural capital predict these ideological interactions, emphasising the centrality of social status to the cultural sphere, and indeed society more generally. As this section will argue, however, these theories are not sufficient to explain the operation of status hierarchies *within* slam communities. This more subtle understanding of status requires additional insights drawn from Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) field theory, interactionist scholars like Becker (1982) and Goffman (1959; 1967) and the work of discourse analysts like Potter and Wetherell (1987).

As interactionists like Goffman argue, we construct our identities, not in isolation, but with reference to others with whom we interact. The groups to which we belong play an important role in this process of construction. Thus, in defining the boundaries of these groups, we go some way towards mapping our selves. Communities represent a particularly salient group form in this respect. They evoke an emotive sense of belonging, a tendency to define individuals in terms of their membership status, as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders'. Because of their shared status, the identities of community members may impact on one another more profoundly than those of participants in less cohesive groups, such as the 'lifestyle enclaves' which Bellah *et al.* (1985) describe. This effect is further accentuated by the tendency of community members to spend greater periods of time with one another, interacting across a range of different contexts. It is largely through communities and the social interaction which they represent, then, that slam is able to impact on individuals' identities, becoming part of who they *are*, rather than simply something they *do*.

As Gramsci (*ibid*) and discourse analyst scholars argue, all discourse is ideological. Community narratives are no exception, and their value-laden nature accords them a central role in slam participants' search for distinction. Interactionism allows us to link these struggles with the interpersonal performance of identity, so that we are able to analyse how slam participants use community discourse to construct socially desirable identities within the course of their everyday interactions. More specifically, we can argue that slam participants mobilise and reinforce values around community and individualism

to present slam as a sanctuary from the brutal competitiveness of wider society, and to elevate themselves above other groups, such as the (allegedly elite and inaccessible) poets of the academy.

In this way, slam participants construct themselves as altruistic, understanding and supportive individuals, who are concerned with the well being of others and the development of the art for(u)m, rather than with their own personal gain. This has the, perhaps ironic, effect of increasing the status of individuals on both personal and artistic grounds. Whereas the motives of individuals who act for their own benefit may be seen as suspect, those who apparently have the interests of others at heart are deemed to be more genuine, trustworthy and impartial and thus have greater force. In addition, allying themselves to a community narrative allows slam participants to claim that they are speaking, not only for themselves, but for the group as a whole. This gives greater weight to their talk, regardless of whether they position themselves as being a leader or simply a participant of this group.

Such constructions do not, however, serve simply to differentiate slam participants from members of other groups. Rather, they enable them to negotiate internal status hierarchies and gain greater authority *within* the for(u)m. Thus, in presenting themselves as dedicated, community-minded artists, slam poets compare themselves favourably to competitive individualists both without and within the for(u)m. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is of limited value here, since it remains dominated by a top-down understanding of power, which leaves no room for such micro level distinctions. In addition, this model has difficulty in accounting for slam participants' use of a 'popular' (rather than 'high') aesthetic to position themselves above those of the academy. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in contrast, is of greater utility, allowing us to see how the ideology of community may come to be accepted as common sense, and consequently mobilised by slam participants. That said, hegemony is often interpreted as representing a similarly dichotomous model, which illuminates macro level structures and processes at the expense of micro level interactions.

It is clear, then, that we need a more subtle understanding of hegemony to account for slam participants' constructions of community, and the multiple status hierarchies which are implicated in these. Interactionism and Bourdieu's field theory are of particular relevance here. Field theory enables us to view slam as a relatively distinct 'social universe', which is characterised by its own stakes, capital and hierarchies. This allows us to escape the notion that the search for distinction operates on a macro level only, thus freeing us to analyse slam's internal status hierarchies, and the specific rules and conventions with which these are bound up.<sup>171</sup> That these hierarchies are negotiated through slam participants' talk (and other actions) reinforces the emphasis which Gramsci, interactionists and discourse analytic scholars together place on the interactive and discursive negotiation of status/identity. Further, slam participants' use of wider narratives around community and individualism enables us to articulate a discursive link between the nested power relations which are emphasised in, not only field theory, but also an interactionist interpretation of hegemony (see also Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Thus we can use this analysis of slam to illustrate how individuals draw on both field specific and macro level discourses to negotiate multiple status hierarchies in the contexts of their everyday lives.

## **8.7 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

The way in which slam is constructed varies in different social and geographical contexts. Nonetheless, the concept of community remains salient in all of these. For many slam participants, community gives slam a gravity, meaning and purpose beyond that of simply an art form, hobby or job, and is frequently juxtaposed against the exclusivity, competitiveness and individualism of an atomised society. In this sense, the talk of slam participants draws on wider narratives to retrace the lines of an age old debate. As Billig *et al.* (1988: 42) note:

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<sup>171</sup> As noted in Chapter Four, however, to escape a top-down notion of power completely requires a more flexible interpretation of this theory than Bourdieu himself was able to achieve.

Unaware of our ideological and semantic heritage, we can still live within its tradition ... the cross-currents and contrary tendencies of this history can continue to shape the contents of our thinking about the dilemmas of present ordinary life.

Despite their popular opposition, however, competitive individualism and community are not simply negatively correlated. Rather, competition may be viewed as a feature of communities, working to reinforce their boundaries and structure the interactions which take place within them. This supports the notion of nested status hierarchies, which operate according to both macro level and field specific stakes/capital.

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, analysing slam participants' negotiation of these discourses may enable us to understand more about both the ways in which individuals work to present desired identities for themselves and about the construct of community itself. Thus we may understand communities in terms of: their discursive boundaries; their functions and significance; the subjective understandings of their participants; their ideological nature; and their relationship to different processes of individualism. It is only through such in-depth analysis based on empirical research that we can come to challenge our existing assumptions and reach new understandings of the nature of society in all its messy complexity.

Before moving on to Chapter Nine, I wish to note one final point: Although I analysed variations between slam communities in different social and geographical contexts, these were restricted largely to a comparison of adult with youth slam and U.K. with U.S. based adult slam. This comparative analysis could be developed still further. In particular, it would be interesting to explore the distinctions between and within different cities in a single country.

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Though cast more as clans,  
Communities mask contest

In the midst of slam.

**Chapter Nine: Diversity, Politics and Formularisation in U.S. Slam  
Discourses**

When we're all poets, the politicians will have to look for a day job.

~ Bob Holman (1998a: Para. 10)

... the poet is consigned to speak about his own feelings. He is himself his chief subject matter ... Such poets can no longer be public persons, so that even when, as of late, some of them have turned to protest, it is a private protest.

~ Robert Bellah *et al.* (1985: 278)

As discussed previously, my research focus was determined in part by early observations of prominent differences between slam in the U.K. and the U.S.. The following two chapters tease out some of these distinctions. This chapter explores the political focus of many U.S. based slam participants, considering, along the way, the relationship of slam 'veterans' to slam newcomers. Chapter Ten, meanwhile, analyses U.K. slam discourses, looking at how ideas around entertainment and nationality impact upon the artistic identities of slam participants in this country.

Whilst the points discussed here represent notable differences between U.K. and U.S. based slam, they are not absolute distinctions. For example, the political discourse which features so heavily in the U.S. is still present, albeit to a lesser extent, in the U.K.. Further, there are important similarities between slam in these countries; for instance, diversity is valued in both. One of the ways in which I have sought to preserve these nuances is by drawing on a limited amount of U.K. data in this chapter and U.S. data in Chapter Ten. The current chapter, then, begins by considering how diversity is emphasised and promoted by slam participants in both the U.S. and U.K., before focusing on the greater salience of this in U.S. slam discourse. Consideration will be given, not only to how U.S. based slam poets understand their activities as 'organic intellectuals', striving to challenge hegemonic discourses by giving voice to the

concerns of the masses, but also to the ways in which these poets seek to manipulate the hegemonic structure of the slam world itself.

This emphasis on slam as a political, as well as artistic, movement is one of the most striking features of U.S. slam. For many U.S. based participants, an essential part of slam's purpose is to give voice to members of oppressed and minority groups. U.K. based participants, in contrast, are often more interested in promoting (adult) slam as a form of entertainment for performers and audience alike. As indicated in section 7.1, these proved to be statistically significant differences: U.S. based interviewees made significantly greater numbers of references to political issues and significantly fewer references to entertainment than did their U.K. based counterparts.

For many U.S. based participants, it is important, not only that slam be able to act as a platform for the articulation of political views, but also that these are authentic representations of the beliefs and experiences of those who express them. Section 7.1 suggests, however, that authenticity is not a statistically significantly greater concern for U.S., than U.K., based interviewees. Rather, authenticity appears to function differently in the discourse of these respective groups. This is discussed further both here and in Chapter Ten.

The epigraphs to this chapter provide apt illustrations of the themes discussed within it. Bob Holman's statement clearly gestures to the importance of politics in U.S. slam and the common view amongst many U.S. slam poets that they are spokespersons for certain sectors of society. Bellah *et al.*, meanwhile, highlight some of the tensions around community and individualism, which were discussed in Chapter Eight, and which underlie this apparently communal discourse.<sup>172</sup> Such contrasts lead us to ask whether this discourse is biography or autobiography, individual or collective in nature.

The key focus of this chapter, then, is on the discourses which New York and Chicago based slam participants construct around slam, its nature, purpose,

<sup>172</sup> Whilst I am interested in the inherent tensions between these concepts and the ways in which they are discussed within slam, it should be noted that Bellah and colleagues (*ibid*) view individualism in art as a consequence of the broader 'culture of separation and specialization' which they suggest characterises contemporary U.S. society.



value, strengths and limitations. These are illustrated and analysed in five main segments. Section 9.1 presents data which address notions of diversity in both U.S. and U.K. based slam. Section 9.2 develops this by considering the prominence of political and identity themes in the U.S.. Particular attention is paid here to the presentation of a specific slam discourse, the 'Rocky' narrative. 9.3 follows with a look at slam 'veterans' critique of, and response to, this narrative, in relation to slam newcomers and the development of a slam poetry formula. The following two sections then analyse these data. Section 9.4 considers diversity in U.K. and U.S. based slam. This is followed by a discussion of how positive and negative sanctions are used to regulate diversity discourse in the U.S.. Finally, section 9.5 explores what this can tell us about the performance of identity and negotiation of status within U.S. slam. It will be argued that this analysis of U.S. slam participants' discourse illustrates how individuals engage with, not only the meta-structure of power relations that characterises wider society, but also the internal power divisions which divide and structure individual fields.

One might argue that many of the observations presented here could only be have been made by a European. It is certainly true that my initial suppositions about slam, derived largely from my years of experience in the U.K., were thrown into disarray once I began to study the for(u)m in the U.S.. I thus took on something of an 'outsider' status, becoming surprised and intrigued by features of the Chicago and NYC slam scenes which were apparently taken for granted by many of their participants. (See section 5.2 for a discussion of my status as both an 'insider' and 'outsider' throughout the course of this research.)

## **9.1 Discoursing Diversity**

As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, slam, in common with many other 'popular' performance poetry movements of the nineteenth century onwards, centres around the idea of bringing poetry to 'the wo/man on the street'. This accessibility is emphasised not only for slam audiences, but for performers too.

Thus both U.K. and U.S. based slam participants express pride in the notion that slam offers a platform from which anyone can perform:

Because a slam is a competition and it's open to all, I think that there's more opportunities possible for people to think "I can do that", rather than thinking "I'm excluded". (Lucy English, Bristol)

And: .. part of the work {of slam} is to create as open a scene as possible. If not with the generational age or content, at least with gender and race. (Bob Holman, New York)

This emphasis on the accessibility and wide-ranging appeal of slam goes back to the roots of the for(u)m. Slam was created partly in response to perceived elitism in the dominant literary world, and has subsequently been promoted, in contrast to the apparently cloistered and restrictive academy, as a for(u)m in which everybody has an equal opportunity to succeed. As Kurt Heintz (Chicago) notes:

I believe he {Marc Smith} wanted to get people very engaged with the process {of performing poetry} and not feel that they had to have a PhD in literature to do it. It is a very egalitarian movement. I think that if slam is remembered for anything, that has to be one of its great pluses ...

And: The common thing throughout the slam world is that it is truly, probably one of the most, if not the most, diverse combinations of people, of all walks of life, all ages, and they all become peers. Just 'cause you're a grandpa and you're a professor, doesn't mean you're better than a high school student. ... people that didn't have access to the literature world, they find a place for themselves {in slam}. (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

Whilst the academic world is portrayed as being populated by middle class, middle aged, white males, slam communities, in contrast, are seen as being comprised of individuals from a range of backgrounds. As John Paul O'Neill (London) said of the local slam scene, 'it's not the kind of older, middle class, {people in their} thirties {or} forties audience that you get for reading poetry in

London'. Slam is thus portrayed as having a broader appeal than more traditional poetry readings, being accessible and attractive to a diverse group of people.

By intent {slam's} always been open to everybody and everybody has been there. At the national scene that diversity even leans to the point where it's more minority driven ... (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

As this statement indicates, the involvement of individuals from minority and oppressed groups is commonly seen as an important indicator of this diversity. Thus, the founder of slam, Marc Smith, is frequently referred to in slam articles and promotional materials as an 'ex-construction worker', a tag which clearly seeks to label him as working class. The presence of such individuals is often used to promote slam events and venues, whilst their absence may be cause for complaint. It was not uncommon, for instance, to hear participants at a slam bemoan the apparent difficulties of attracting more female or non-white poets. This concern is reflected in the interview data too. As Jackie Davis (Bristol) commented, regarding one local slam:

You know any Asian poets {who were} in the slam? Nobody turned up. That tells you what the slam scene is like. ... It was really your white middle class people that you see at your poetry gigs.

Despite frequent claims for the diversity and openness of slam communities, critiques such as this are not uncommon, and many interviewees suggested that slam is less diverse and accessible than it is often portrayed as being.

I certainly don't kid myself that any of the community have a terribly wide social class base. I mean, they're all pretty middle class really, even if they don't think they are. (David Johnson, Bristol)

These criticisms are countered by others, however, who argue that, whilst individual venues and events may lack diversity, the slam community as a whole represents people from a wide range of different backgrounds.

I think as a whole the national movement makes for {a} diversity that people don't realise, and I think that is just as valid {as diversity in individual slams}. It's not as necessary for Port Worth to have two white women and one Asian man, as it is for us when we come together as a national body to represent all of those things and all of those people.  
(Lynne Procope, New York)

My own observations of (adult) slams and related events in the U.K. and U.S. suggest that, whilst slam events often do attract individuals from diverse backgrounds, this is only part of the story. To take sex as an example, a rough headcount of those present at observed slams indicates that the majority of slam events were male dominated, with males comprising an average of approximately 68% of slammers and 59% of the audience. This observation was supported by several of the interviewees, who suggested that 'there's a definite kind of boys' culture in slam' (Caroline Jackson, Bristol).

In terms of the ethnic background of slam participants, across a total of twenty-two slams, approximately 35% of slammers and 25% of audience members appeared to be from ethnic minority backgrounds.<sup>173</sup> This figure, however, decreases to around 20% and 6% respectively when slams at just two of the thirteen venues are excluded from the analysis; namely those held at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York and the Word Up slams based at the Theatre Royal in Stratford, London.<sup>174</sup> This rather rough and ready analysis suggests that slam demographics vary markedly between different venues and events.

The importance of diversity in slam is not limited, however, to the (claimed and actual) numbers of different demographic groups who attend slam events. Rather, diversity is mobilised to promote slam as an 'egalitarian movement', which gives individuals from minority and oppressed groups a 'voice', a 'home'

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<sup>173</sup> Since it was not feasible to ask each individual present to define their ethnic grouping, these figures rely predominantly on visual cues and must be seen as a rough estimate only.

<sup>174</sup> See Appendix B for a more detailed breakdown of the ethnic background and sex of individuals present at observed slams, and subsection 9.4.1 for further exploration of these statistics.

and a strong base from which to fight their 'cause'. That said, this latter representation is all but absent from U.K. slam discourse. Indeed, it is here that the distinctions between these two countries become most apparent. The one exception to this generalisation is youth slam, where giving voice to members of oppressed and minority groups is seen as an important focus of many organisations in both the U.K. and U.S.. Joelle Taylor (London), for example, promotes the involvement of young Muslim women in the Rise! slams, saying:

So you get this incredible, incredible vision of a woman in full purda or burka rapping through her little thing, through her veil into a microphone, which I think, in London at the moment, is absolutely, bloody crucial, that we get these young women up there, speaking for the first time about what it's like to be a young, Muslim Londoner in this Islamophobic environment.

And: ... we have programming for queer youth, for Muslim youth, for immigrant youth, you know. It's all about providing a space for the most marginalized voices. (Jonathan Yates, Director of Speak Out New York)

(Youth slam is discussed in detail in subsection 10.1.1 and in Chapter Eleven. The remainder of the current chapter focuses on adult slam unless otherwise stated.)

More broadly, diversity is seen as being central to the success, authenticity and value of U.S. slam (and its participants) in a way which cannot be said of (adult) slam in the U.K.. This is reflected, not only in the words of U.S. based slam participants, but in the kinds of events which they run. In spring 2008, for example, PSI introduced a Women of the World Poetry Slam, which is open to female identified slammers and judges only (PSI, 2008a) and thus creates a privileged space for this group. (I am not aware of any comparable event existing in the U.K..) In line with this, many U.S. based interviewees were keen to emphasise that slam is an all-embracing community, within which members of oppressed groups can expect to be welcomed and supported. This was seen as reflecting positively on slam participants, who were often depicted as being open minded and non-judgemental.

I think because of the nature of slam being very liberal and open minded to people of colour, people of different orientations, ages, you know, you're gonna have somewhat of an open minded group of people in there. (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

Similar claims are used by many U.S. based organisers to promote their venue or event. Thus the Nuyorican Poets Cafe is described on its website as a 'multi-cultural community' (Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 2007), whilst Lynne Procope, New York based poet and teaching artist, said of louderARTS that it's 'specific to our mission that our audience and our slammers have to be gender diverse and ethnically diverse'. The following two sections explore in greater detail this central role of diversity in U.S. based slam.

## **9.2 Poetry for the People**

Unlike in U.K. (adult) slam, many participants in New York and Chicago actively promote the for(u)m as providing a platform upon which individuals from minority and oppressed groups can express their discontent. Such protestations have become increasingly prominent in U.S. slam, often taking the form of a 'Rocky' style narrative, in which the oppressed person rises above their unfair treatment. This narrative has, however, been critiqued heavily by many established slam participants (or 'veterans'), who associate it with a new wave of slam poets, suggesting that these newcomers are more concerned with following a formula for slam success than they are in conveying their authentic beliefs and experiences or in overcoming unjust oppression. The data presented in sections 9.2 and 9.3 trace the lines of this argument, in preparation for the data analysis in sections 9.4 and 9.5.

### **9.2.1 Freedom of Speech and the Regulation of Slam Stories**

For many U.S. based slam participants it is not sufficient that a wide range of demographic groups are present at slams; rather, it is important that their voices are represented on the slam stage. As Soul Thomas Evans (New York) notes:

That's why spoken word is so important. It's one of the few outlets for anybody that's willing to listen about what's going on in those communities.

Slam is thus portrayed as a providing a space into which anybody can enter and say what they wish without fear of censure. As Urbana Poetry Slam (2006b: Para. 1) state on their website: 'We remain a warm and welcoming venue for all kinds of poetic voices: political, confessional, musical, and spiritual'. Tom Barnes (Chicago), echoes this sentiment, noting that 'slam was always this open arena where you let it hang out'.

A number of interviewees, however, critiqued this representation of slam as a welcoming and receptive environment, in which everyone is free to express their beliefs, feelings and experiences. As Soul Thomas Evans (New York) states:

I remember {two poets} years ago were almost banished from {the} National Poetry Slam, 'cause they did a poem called *Bumper Humpers*, you know, and it was about bigger women. ... it was a comedic piece, but a lot of people in the slam community saw it as a slam on overweight women, and that all goes back to {the question of} how much free speech is there really in the spoken word community?

Mahogany Browne (New York) expresses a similar unease:

It's like "If we don't know you or if we don't agree with you or if you don't fit the stereotype, then we're not dealing with you". ... that is a whole bunch of these venues that represent slam poetry, the slam poetry community, and that in itself is disgusting. We are here as voices of the voiceless, you know. We're voices for the voiceless an' we're being censored by our own.

This observation was reinforced by my own experiences of U.S. slam. When in NYC, for instance, I considered performing a poem which questioned the labelling of white people as necessarily racist. I decided against this when

several local poets informed me that such a piece could well have explosive consequences. Similarly, at the Uptown Poetry Slams I observed in Chicago, audiences were encouraged to respond to what were perceived as being sexist poems with a 'feminist hiss'. In U.S. slam, just as elsewhere in society, then, certain beliefs and experiences are seen as being more acceptable than others, and negative sanctions are applied to individuals whose talk is thought to have undesirable content.

### 9.2.2 The 'Rocky' Narrative

Whilst poetry which is viewed as supplying 'voices for the voiceless' is particularly lauded on the New York and Chicago slam scenes, it is important that such performances be viewed as authentic representations of the poets' own beliefs, experiences and identity. As Peter Kahn (Chicago) said: 'If I go to hear poetry I want it to be sincere and meaningful'. In line with this, there is a strong trend in U.S. slam towards the performance of first person accounts and what are termed 'identity' pieces, where, as Lisa Buscani (Chicago) puts it, the poet effectively declares ' "Here is how I'm identified" '. Kurt Heintz (Chicago) echoes this, noting that 'You have people roll in with all kinds of identity work'. Such pieces took centre stage at many of the slams I observed in NYC and Chicago. References to being female, African American, Asian, a mother, a wife and so on were scattered liberally throughout poets' work, whilst a remarkable number of pieces implored the audience to accept who they were and to be true to themselves.

As Taylor Mali (New York) notes, this work frequently takes on a 'confessional' tone. Others supported this observation, noting that U.S. slam poems commonly have a style 'which is vernacular, urgent, personal, storytelling many times, theme based, usually {about} people's limits or dysfunctions or hard times or traumas' (Thom the World Poet, Austin, Texas). This apparent self-disclosure is often played out in a familiar pattern, evoking a 'Rocky' style narrative:



It's sorta like 'Rocky' the movie, you know. The underdog in three minutes is gonna become our hero. And it's a great journey. And you take it over and over in slam poetry. (Bob Holman, New York)

In this way, many of the poems performed on U.S. slam stages tell of a personal battle against injustice and oppression. This pattern has not gone unnoticed by the slam participants with whom I spoke. Clare Ultimo (New York), for example, discussed her observations of the poetry performed at the NPS finals one year, saying:

I actually created a chart and I charted the topics, and so there was a limited amount of them. Injustice was very big. ... It would be gender. It would be racial inequality. It would be political issues, about our government, {the} American government right now, our world politics.

Similarly, Taylor Mali (New York) suggested that 'the highest scoring emotion in slam is self-righteous indignation'.

The audience are implicated in these stories too. At the events I attended they were often addressed explicitly by the poet or would express their approval with finger clicking and murmurs of 'mm hmm' and 'I feel it!'. Through the performance of this narrative, then, audience and poet together play out the triumph of the individual over unjust oppression.

The speaker in a slam poem is saying "I represent. I'm a strong, black woman" or "I'm an Asian." "I'm a Chinese poet, who's never been able to speak." And to tell their story, in terms of having been victimised, and how the poet, the poem itself, is going to overcome these obstacles. (Bob Holman, New York)

### **9.3 Reinventing Slam: Slam 'Veterans' and the New Wave of Slam Poets**

This performance of political, identity poetry has come under attack from both within and without U.S. slam. From inside the scene, criticisms are perhaps

most often voiced by ‘veteran’ slammers and other long term members of slam communities, who may associate it with the development of a restrictive slam poetry formula. Many of those I interviewed located this formula within a new generation of slam participants, who were condemned for being motivated by a self-centred desire to win points and accolades.

### 9.3.1 The Drive for Authenticity

Slam ‘veterans’ frequently criticise newer slam poets for being shallow and numbly reciting a popular line, rather than presenting complex, challenging or well thought out ideas. This critique is demonstrated aptly in Taylor Mali’s (2004) piece *How to Write a Political Poem*, which mocks such hollow repetition by effectively producing a template for political slam poetry. Mali’s scornful entreaties to ‘wrap up in rhyme or rhyme it up in rap until it sounds true’ and ‘end by saying/the same line three times’, were echoed, in sentiment, by many interviewees. New York based poet and former Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam host, Keith Roach, for instance, contends that it would be wrong to assume that ‘saying the same things over and over again {is} symptomatic of racial or social awareness. It is anything but. To me, it reflects a complete lack of creativity and insight’ (in correspondence, 1 October 2006).

The assumption here is that slam should be a political forum, but that the new wave of slam poets are failing to develop adequately either their political views or the artistic expression of those views. Slam ‘veterans’ thus criticise only what they present as inauthentic and formulaic political poetry. They question the motivations of many slam newcomers, arguing that their politically-charged performances are inauthentic, and serve merely as strategies to win slams or advance individuals’ spoken word careers. As Jive Poetic (New York) said, ‘when I hear ten poems in a night and they all sound the same, I think they wrote that for a tactic to win, as opposed to writing it because they believed that’.

Some New York and Chicago based slam ‘veterans’ claim that newcomers may even adopt ‘inauthentic’ identities in order to gain acclaim, concocting tales of racial and sexual discrimination or claiming to be less privileged than they are.

It’s allowed to look like there aren’t a lot of people with privilege in the slam scene, but if you take some time to talk to folks, you realise that that’s not true. But it’s very fashionable to look under-privileged. (Lynne Procope, New York)

Similarly, Tom Barnes (Chicago) tells the story of a former pupil of his who performed a poem about a rape:

I’m like “Did you really get raped or did you just hear somebody do a rape poem?” ‘Cause all of a sudden, you know, over the years, you’ve heard a lot a rape poems. ... if it didn’t really happen, it’s so gratuitous. It’s so wrong to play that role, because it diminishes the people that that really happened to ...

Revealing such stories to be untrue can have marked negative consequences for those concerned. One poet I spoke to, for instance, told me that he had been spurned by many fellow slam participants, following a rumour that his poems about battling a serious illness were based on a fabrication.

### 9.3.2 Slam Poetry and Slam Poets: The Development of a Formula

As suggested above, established slam participants are often supportive of the airing of political issues in slam, and may well perform political work themselves. Indeed, the representation of U.S. slam as a platform for the expression of diverse and marginalized voices fits well with many slam ‘veterans’ promotion of the for(u)m. Nonetheless, ‘veterans’ often criticise newcomers’ political performances, arguing that they are enacting a tired slam formula, rather than expressing their ‘true’ beliefs. Taylor Mali’s *How to Write a Political Poem* relies upon this premise for its humour, and it is a critique which was expressed by many interviewees.

A lot of it's become formulaic, because these poets that are just concerned with succeeding on the stage, they borrow ideas and they borrow technique that's disingenuous to who they are, just 'cause they know that that's gonna work with an audience. (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

And: Now that I hear similar things, and I hear similar phrases and similar metaphors over and over again from this poet and that poet and this poet, I think "Oh God, this is not original. This is, in fact, something that I've heard before." Instead, it's about trying to find your path of acceptance, your path to being exposed in some way to a large, popular audience.<sup>175</sup> (Clare Ultimo, New York)

In this sense, slam is often seen by 'veterans' as having failed to live up to its early promises. As Mahogany Browne (New York) remarked 'I think that there is a fear that the bastardisation process will continue to churn out mediocrity'. This is supported by fellow New York poet Keith Roach:

KR: The other problem you get is that within that three minute context everybody sounds the same ... It becomes a system. You create a system for expressing your poem.

HG: Yeah. So there's quite a formula behind slam poetry?

KR: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. It wasn't always that way. In the very early days of slam I remember that, you know, *poems* won slams, and the styles were so varied.

As this statement indicates, there is a certain nostalgia for the 'good old days' of slam, when poets are perceived as having been more true to their art and to themselves. Indeed, a number of 'veterans' suggest that, whilst slam made great headway in its early years towards changing perceptions and experiences of poetry, the new wave of slammers have failed to continue this momentum, reducing slam to a pale imitation of its former self.

{The audience are} applauding the virtuosity of performance, which is in a way the success of slam, 'cause that's what was missing in the poetry

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<sup>175</sup> Quotation edited by participant.

world. Performance ability was missing. After twenty years the pendulum has swung, and now people get over on an audience with just the sheer technique of their performance, and a lot of times they're not saying anything. And the criticism of the national scene is just that. What happened to the writing? What happened to the text? (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

Many new slammers, then, are perceived by 'veterans' as erring from slam's intended path, striving to win audiences over with the power of their performance, not the quality of their words, and seeking individual success, rather than collective emancipation.

### 9.3.3 The Commodification of Slam

Similarly, U.S. slam 'veterans' are frequently critical of what they perceive as being a marked move towards the commercialisation and commodification of slam:

I think that there was a fundamental difference in what slam did in its early years and what's happened since it's become institutionalised. I think what's happened is common to any grass roots or underground artists' organisation as it hits the bright lights of commercialism and capitalism, and the rigidities that place slam in a context now, where you can say you are a 'slam poet' or that you write 'slam poetry', is something that was, in New York, unheard of. (Bob Holman, New York)

This media coverage is often viewed as having nurtured, and to a certain extent spawned, an increasingly homogeneous slam poetry style, by acting as a powerful cultivator of slam's image. The films *Slam* and *SlamNation* and the HBO television series *Def Poetry Jam*, which were discussed in section 6.4, are seen as having been particularly influential in this regard:

*SlamNation* was a great documentary, but what people took away from that *SlamNation* documentary – They didn't take away the variety that they could see. They saw Saul Williams and they thought "Boy, that's

great”, and Beau Sia, and that has spawned this kinda homogeneous {style}.<sup>176</sup> (Tom Barnes, Chicago)

And: You know, from what I’ve seen, and you could test this out by just watching some of the HBO Def Poetry Jams, having a mediaisation of the scene has sort of knocked out a lot of those local differences {in slam}. ... There’s an attitude and an energy that you’ll see on that T.V. show ... if you wanna get on that T.V. show, you can practice to try to do that, and that seems to be happening. (Bob Homan, New York)

Veronica Bonahan (quoted in Betts, n.d.: Para. 5) clearly articulates the links between these different media and the critique which they have inspired when she says of the poets on Def Poetry Jam, ‘I get annoyed with those that haven’t found their own voice and want to be Saul Williams in Slam’.

Media coverage of slam, then, is often perceived as having had a powerful effect on the for(u)m’s development. It is certainly true that almost everyone whom I spoke to at slams in New York and Chicago could talk (often at length) about these three media products and the poets they have featured. The relative fame which they have brought to slam is seen as being something of a mixed blessing though and, for many of those whom I interviewed, the negatives outweigh the positives.

#### 9.3.4 Artistic Evolution: Internal Changes and External Moves

The majority of U.S. slam ‘veterans’ with whom I spoke, both informally and in interviews, expressed a certain disenchantment with slam’s evolution. Their reactions to this varied however. At times, participants responded by trying to take control of the for(u)m, moulding it into their preferred shape.

I’ve witnessed more beautiful poetry win a slam when going against formula. louderARTS are really good at that, very, very good at that, and

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<sup>176</sup> Saul Williams and Beau Sia were part of the New York slam team who were followed in the documentary *SlamNation*. They also starred in, and performed some of their own poetry in, the film *Slam*. Their names have been left unchanged here, since it was deemed that altering them would have detracted significantly from the import of this participant’s statement.

I'm Co-champion of louderARTS 2004. ... So coming into The Nuyorican, I was really gung ho about saying "We don't have to sell ourselves short. It doesn't have to just be these yelling, screaming rants of whatever for the sake of a score. (Mahogany Browne, New York)

Elsewhere, participants sought to develop their art outside of slam, leaving behind what they perceived as the for(u)m's restrictive bonds. As Kurt Heintz (Chicago) said: 'I think I'm charting for myself a course where I know if slam died tomorrow I'd still have tons of things to write about ... I have ceased identifying myself as a slam poet'. This approach was not an uncommon one. Soul Thomas Evans (New York), for instance, indicated several artists who had similarly moved beyond slam:

The thing that the slams sometimes don't have, is they're somewhat limiting, because it is that three minute format, and that's why a lot of artists - like Kurt Amtell, left to do his one man show; and Reg Jones is another example; Lucy Main is another example; Amy Lee is another example; that took these and made them into Broadway or Off Broadway shows here in New York.

This may be a temporary, rather than permanent, move, with poets leaving the for(u)m to pursue work that does not fit readily into the slam mould, and returning when they have written poetry which they feel is more suitable for the slam stage.

When my work is really short and super experimental, I don't use it in slam and that might be a season that you won't see me on stage very much, because I am probably listening to the work in a different way. (Lynne Procope, New York)

Thus, whilst many long term participants in New York and Chicago slam are critical of the for(u)m's evolution, and in particular, of the apparent development of a slam poetry formula, their response to this predicament is far from uniform.

They may seek to direct slam back onto a desired path, or to leave the for(u)m behind on a temporary or permanent basis.<sup>177</sup>

## **9.4 Diversity, Democracy and Freedom of Speech**

Up until now, this chapter has focused on presenting U.S. slam discourses from the perspectives of its participants, stressing the importance which slam participants across the U.S., and to a lesser extent the U.K., place on diversity in slam. The following two sections analyse these data, beginning with a consideration of diversity discourse amongst U.S. and U.K. based slam participants. The current section considers the presentation of slam as a diverse and open community, defined in contrast to the apparently elite, closed world of the academy. Whilst many slam participants (particularly in the U.S.) are keen to emphasise slam's accessibility and appeal to a broad range of demographic groups, however, others question the accuracy of this portrayal. These objections, it will be argued, help to illuminate the essentially ideological nature of diversity discourse.

### **9.4.1 Diversity in U.S. and U.K. Slam**

As section 9.1 indicates, U.S. based participants are keen to portray slam as a for(u)m which is accessible and relevant to 'the wo/man on the street'. This is a prominent issue too for many of their U.K. counterparts. Representing slam in this way facilitates the attempts of slam participants to distance themselves from the stigma which apparently plagues perceptions of poetry in both these countries. For many of these individuals, such stigma is rooted firmly within the academy; itself portrayed as an elite, restricted realm, to which only the privileged can gain access. Slam, in contrast, is represented as an accessible and accepting world, within which success is due to artistic ability and popular appeal, rather than the trappings of wealth and power. Diversity discourse is thus intertwined closely with the tension between slam and the dominant literary

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<sup>177</sup> Interestingly, U.K. based slam participants displayed a similar divide; however they were less likely to seek to change the for(u)m from within, and more inclined to work outside slam or restrict themselves to casual participation in the for(u)m.



world, which has characterised the for(u)m since its outset.<sup>178</sup> This oppositional relationship enables slam to be marketed as a truly democratic art form. As Somers-Willett (2001: 42) comments:

Poets in the film SlamNation describe poetry as a 'representative democracy' a 'level playing field' in which equal access is granted to those denied more traditional poetic recognition such as publication and participation in academic writing programs.

The emphasis on 'equal access' extends to the audience too. Not only can anyone who wishes to take the slam stage, but all those present in the audience become judges of the work which is performed on it. Slam is thus portrayed as a meritocracy, in which everyone has equal opportunity to succeed and to determine the success of others.

In this context, the diversity of slam communities becomes representative, not only of slam's open and meritocratic nature, but also of the for(u)m's broad appeal, further underscoring its distinction from what is portrayed as the rather homogeneous world of the poetry recital. Slam poets, in turn, are perceived as representing the interests, viewpoints and experiences of members of a wide range of demographic groups, with the involvement of oppressed and minority communities being emphasised most strongly. This allows slam participants to present themselves as open minded and non-judgemental, welcoming into their venues, hearts and minds an eclectic mix of individuals, who are treated unjustly elsewhere. Thus, talk between slams works to reinforce identities which are played out on the slam stage, portraying slam as a kind of rhetorical sanctuary from the outside world, with slam participants as its benevolent gatekeepers (see Chapter Eight for more on this).

This presentation of slam as a demographic/cultural melting pot is, however, problematised by many slam participants. Their critique was supported by my own observations of slams, which indicate a greater dominance of men overall, and marked variation in the ethnic distribution of participants across different

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<sup>178</sup> This discussion builds on analysis in Chapters Three and Six and is further developed in Chapter Eleven.

events. In particular, the slams which I attended at Stratford East Theatre Royal in London and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in NYC featured far greater numbers of BME performers and audience members than those events which I observed elsewhere. Three key factors would appear to affect this ethnic distribution of slam participants: the location of events/venues; the explicit and implicit aims of organisers in setting up and running events/venues; and the ethnic background of organisers. As indicated in Chapter Six, for example, the Theatre Royal is situated in an area with a particularly high percentage of BME residents, whilst the Nuyorican Poets Cafe has a long history of encouraging the involvement of Latino, African American and other ethnic minority groups.<sup>179</sup> In addition, many of the slam organisers at these venues hail from a BME background themselves. (See Chapter Ten, and particularly subsection 10.4.1, for more on the role of ethnicity in slam.)

Despite these variations, many slam participants remain keen to emphasise the demographic breadth of the wider slam scene, suggesting that, whilst some venues may embody diversity better than others, the community as a whole can still be considered to represent individuals from a broad spectrum of society. This serves to strengthen the diversity discourse against individual critiques, whilst allowing individual participants to emphasise the greater breadth of particular events with which they are affiliated.

These observations are not intended to undermine individuals' claims about the diversity of slam as such. They do serve, however, to emphasise that the portrayal of the for(u)m as a diverse community is not so much objective fact, as ideological discourse, which acts to promote the interests of slam participants and enable them to present socially desirable identities. The unequal distribution of demographic groups across slam communities, in combination with the importance placed on slam's broad appeal, means that diversity remains a salient marker of difference between slam venues and events. In this context, promoters and curators often use diversity to evaluate quality, highlighting the heterogeneity of their own events and critiquing the

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<sup>179</sup> For an accessible and engaging account of the history of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which illuminates the key roles that such individuals have played in the venue's foundation and growth, see the film *PIÑERO* (Ichaso, 2005).

homogeneity of others. Conversely, by stressing the dominance of particular groups on the slam scene, individual slammers can promote themselves as a minority group, thus gaining access to the benefits which such status affords especially within U.S. slam.

Diversity in slam is, however, about much more than simply underscoring the relative popularity and accessibility of one slam event in comparison to another, or of the for(u)m as a whole in contrast to the dominant literary world. This is particularly true of youth slam and U.S. based adult slam, where many participants are keen to promote the for(u)m as providing a platform for marginalized groups.<sup>180</sup> Here, diversity is positioned as central to the success, authenticity and value of slam (and its participants). This is not something which can be said of U.K. based slam more generally.

#### 9.4.2 Focusing on the U.S.: Giving Voice and Setting Limits

The salience of diversity in U.S. slam is apparent in the talk (and other actions) which surround the for(u)m here. It is also a prominent feature of U.S. slam poetry. Indeed, many U.S. slam participants are keen to stress the importance of expressing issues and experiences relevant to oppressed and minority groups on the slam stage. In this sense, U.S. slam is seen as providing minority and oppressed groups, not just with space (as in the U.K.), but with *voice*. The majority of U.S. slam participants with whom I spoke saw it as natural that slam should promote the interests of such groups, and it was common for slam here to be seen as something of a political movement.

For slam participants to fulfil this political remit, they must not only encourage members of oppressed and minority groups to perform in slams, but also regulate the discourse of other groups of slam participants. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that a great deal of work goes into managing the views which are expressed within U.S. slam. This is certainly evident in section 9.2, where

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<sup>180</sup> In youth slam, this is tied up with the promotion of the for(u)m as a means of making literature accessible to a wide range of groups, particularly those who are seen as being failed by the mainstream curriculum. (This is discussed further in Chapter Eleven. Subsection 10.1.1, meanwhile, discusses the prevalence of political, identity poetry in U.K. based youth slam.)

several U.S. based participants suggest that language which is considered to be offensive to people from minority and oppressed communities may be censored, and those responsible met with negative sanctions, such as rejection from the slam community, low slam scores and heckling during performances. Conversely, work which prioritises issues affecting such individuals is promoted, through positive sanctions like high slam scores and loud cheering and clapping (see Somers-Willett, 2001; 2003).

U.S. slam participants are thus faced with the problematic task of presenting slam as an open for(u)m, within which everyone is free to speak as they wish, whilst simultaneously regulating and restricting this speech. This inevitably has a marked effect on the work which is performed on U.S. slam stages. As attested to by my own experiences in New York, many poems fail to see the (spot)light at all, as poets consciously and unconsciously tailor their work to avoid receiving negative reactions. The same process operates in reverse too, with artists performing pieces influenced by poetry which they have seen succeed on the slam stage. This has helped to create a concentration of such work, and the refinement of a 'Rocky' style narrative.

In addition, this regulation work accentuates the visibility of diversity within slam. Slam participants can produce ready evidence of the breadth of the slam community, and demonstrate to members of minority and oppressed groups that the for(u)m provides a safe environment in which views deemed offensive to them will not be tolerated, and in which they can hear voices speaking of the issues and concerns which affect them in their daily lives. Managing discourse to promote diversity thus enables U.S. slam participants to present both the for(u)m and themselves in a positive light. The following section develops this argument, using the theoretical framework which was set out in Chapter Four to illuminate U.S. slam participants' performance of identity and negotiation of status hierarchies.

## **9.5 Status and Identity in U.S. Based Slam**

Using Gramsci's (1973/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) theory of hegemony, it is possible to view U.S. slam as a counter-hegemonic movement, with the 'Rocky' narrative representing slam poets' struggle to undermine the power of elite groups in society. A closer analysis, however, reveals U.S. slam as a kind of 'false' counter-hegemony, through which individuals serve to support the very system which they critique. Even this, though, fails to tell the complete story. U.S. slam participants must negotiate a range of micro and macro level power structures, engaging, not only with the status hierarchies of wider society, but also those which are internal to slam. For this, we need an account of status which moves beyond Gramsci's hegemony, incorporating theoretical insights from Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) field theory, interactionism, discourse analysis and Lena and Peterson's (2007) account of art world trajectories. The current section considers this argument in greater detail, beginning with a discussion of identity poetry in U.S. slam.

#### 9.5.1 The 'Rocky' Narrative and the Politics of Identity

For many NYC and Chicago based slam participants it is important that the issues and concerns aired on the slam stage are authentic representations of the performers' own beliefs and experiences. The authenticity of a piece is central to evaluating, not only the integrity of the artist who performs it, but also the quality of the poem itself. Success on the U.S. slam scene thus depends, in part at least, on the perceived sincerity of a poet and their work. This helps to explain the popularity of first person narratives in U.S. slam (see Middleton, 2005: 22-4; Silliman, 1998), since these 'identity' pieces offer one route through which a poet may emphasise their authentic ownership of the beliefs and experiences contained in their poetry.

Given the prominence of discourse on the inclusion and liberation of members of minority and oppressed groups in U.S. slam, it is perhaps not surprising that many of these poems centre around such identities. Somers-Willett (2001; 2003) supports this observation, suggesting that young, male, urban, African-American identities, in particular, are frequently rewarded within U.S. slam.

This thesis allows us to develop Somers-Willett's analysis further, indicating that it can reasonably be expanded to encompass other marginalized groups, including the working classes, women, and lesbian and gay people.

The way in which these identities are played out on the slam stage frequently involves the presentation of a 'Rocky' style narrative, in which the oppressed individual overcomes hegemonic constraints. Thus, many U.S. based slam poets talk about how they have been unfairly made to suffer, but have prevailed over their oppressors. These tales are not delivered simply as stories told by a poet to a passive audience, but are narratives to be lived within the slam itself. The poet brings the audience into their story and effectively directs its re-enactment, including them as active participants.

Drawing on discourse analysis and Goffman's (1959; 1967) work on the performance of identity, we can view such narratives as discursive strategies, through which individuals seek to construct favourable identities for themselves. Goffman's (1967: 5) concepts of 'line' and 'face' are particularly useful here. The portrayal of slam as an open and diverse community, for instance, can be seen as a 'line' which enables slam participants to present a broad-minded, politically-aware, friendly and tolerant 'face' to others. U.S. slam participants' stories of overcoming unjust oppression, meanwhile, act as a 'line' which depicts slam participants as members of an underground, minority movement, fighting against social injustice. This latter 'line' allows slam to be seen, not just as a refuge from the oppression of wider society, but also as a platform from which this injustice may be challenged. Slam poets, in turn, become both the benevolent guardians of a creative sanctuary and the outspoken leaders of a political movement. This demonstrates that slam participants adopt multiple 'lines', which act together to reinforce their presentation of a socially desirable 'face'.

It is important to note that U.S. based slam does not consist simply of poets from subordinated groups, rallying against their oppression. At any of the handful of regular slam venues in New York and Chicago one could hear musings about a huge range of topics, delivered by poets who are young or old,

male or female, gay or straight, and who possess skin tones varying from alabaster white through to golden caramel and Americano black. To give an example, on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2006 I was in the audience at the Bowery Poetry Club's weekly Urbana Slam and was regaled by poems about the alphabet, heart disease, love and one night stands.

Nonetheless, stories in which the victorious poet conquers unfair repression/discrimination recur persistently on U.S. slam stages, and are discussed at length off-stage by many New York and Chicago based slam participants. Indeed, the poets performing at the aforementioned Urbana Poetry Slam also orated on the physical and sexual abuse of women, racial discrimination, and the importance of being strong and independent in the face of adversity. These were largely first person narratives, delivered to an audience of potential allies with a conspiratorial air. The feeling conveyed was very much one of – 'Together, we can overcome'.

#### 9.5.2 Slam as 'False' Counter-hegemony

The analysis so far seems to point to U.S. slam as a counter-hegemony. U.S. slam poets appear to be the kinds of 'organic intellectuals' whom Gramsci (ibid) described as emerging from amongst the 'masses' to give voice to the concerns of the people, paving the way for an uprising against their oppressors. In the two decades since its inception, however, slam does not seem to have enacted any marked change on U.S. society. Indeed, many of the beliefs and attitudes which slam participants rally against remain commonplace. Slam poets, meanwhile, continue to rehearse political protestations, inviting audiences to share in their stories of oppression and victory over the odds.

How could this be? One explanation, of course, is that performing poetry before relatively small audiences (many of whom are themselves poets) was never likely to change the world. Despite its success in attracting much larger and more diverse audiences than are typically drawn to poetry events in the U.S. (and U.K.), slam remains a minority pursuit. Whilst the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's Friday night slams regularly air before a packed room of two hundred plus

people, and The NPS attracts audiences in their hundreds, the majority of Americans have never heard of the for(u)m, let alone attended a slam event. Yet it is not simply slam's lack of mainstream popularity which restricts its ability to act as a force for political change. Rather, I would argue that it is the 'Rocky' narrative itself which serves to undermine the very social unrest it appears to incite.

Although this narrative may decry social discrimination, it is not as collective and unifying as it initially appears to be. Instead, it builds on a kind of American Dream frame, which gives this discourse a very different basis to those which dominate slam in the U.K. and elsewhere.<sup>181</sup> Within this frame any single person has the potential to succeed, no matter how lowly their beginnings. Thus, the individual is depicted as breaking free from his or her bonds of oppression, while the system itself remains in tact. The individualist basis of this serves, then, not to challenge, but to reinforce existing relations of domination and subordination. Audience members may be implicated in the performer's narrative, but their position in relation to the social structure remains unchanged. It is the poet alone whose status is at stake. Rather than bringing together a disparate group into collective action, these poets are performing an individual identity incorporating personal goals. In essence, then, this is an *individual*, rather than a *collective* discourse. It is, as Bellah *et al.*'s (1985: 278) opening quotation puts it 'a private protest', and therefore no protest at all.

Because of this individualist basis, the struggle which is played out in U.S. slam is virtual only, having no concrete impact beyond the for(u)m's safe borders. In this sense, slam can be understood, not as counter-hegemony, but as a kind of 'false' counter-hegemony. The use of the double negative is justified, I believe, since what can be seen here is not simply hegemony or counter-hegemony, but a mirage of counter-hegemony; an intricate display of smoke and mirrors in which what appears to explicitly undermine the system, serves in fact to reinforce it.

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<sup>181</sup> There are also parallels between the 'Rocky' narrative and the redemptive religious discourse in which a 'sinner' confesses their transgressions. I would argue that this latter discourse too is characteristically American.



Gramsci's notion of 'common sense' lends support to this idea, contending that individuals possess a fragmented 'contradictory consciousness', which may lead them to act against their own best interests. The process is further illustrated in Genovese's (1976) account of slavery in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Here, Genovese argues that slaves adopted a paternalistic discourse in the plantations. Whilst enabling them to resist aspects of the slavery regime, this served to reinforce the broader system, focusing their complaints on the actions of individual masters. Similarly, groups such as U.S. based slam poets may adopt a narrative which ultimately supports the very system it appears to challenge. This analysis reinforces the discourse analytic contention that we should avoid treating language as transparent, opting instead for an in-depth exploration of the particular functions which discourse serves and the groups which it makes powerful/powerless.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony, then, clearly provides some valuable insights into U.S. slam. These can, however, be developed still further. Slam poets are not merely spokespersons for the masses, but are engaged in multiple struggles for status, which operate on micro, as well as macro, levels. With this in mind, we can explore the ways in which U.S. slam participants construct and interact with one another, rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. The relationship between slam 'veterans' and newcomers is of particular interest here.

### 9.5.3 Slam 'Veterans' and Newcomers: A Different Kind of Power Struggle

As indicated in section 9.3, the ineffectiveness of the 'Rocky' narrative to stimulate the social change its exponents apparently aspire towards has not gone unnoticed. Rather, many slam 'veterans' acknowledge this, seeking to distance themselves from the narrative and associate it instead with a new generation of slam participants. These 'veterans' argue that newcomers' stories of triumph over oppression are not authentic representations of their beliefs and experiences, but shallow attempts to capitalise on a popular formula. Thus, many established slam participants suggest that newcomers who perform this narrative do so, not from a genuine desire to express discontent, but in order to

elicit empathy and support from the audience and judges, and ultimately promote themselves as artists.

The notion of inauthenticity is central to this critique. It is this which turns to mere formula, a poem which may otherwise be credited with originality and gravity. The perceived insincerity of newcomers is thus viewed by many 'veterans' as a fatal flaw, with many arguing that it damages the political objectives which 'veterans' view as being central to slam. In this way, established slam participants may retain the notion that slam has the potential to act as a political movement, whilst explaining its failure to effect any substantial political change to date. Slam is portrayed, then, not as being inherently flawed, but as simply having lost its way. This serves to depict 'veterans' as the true bearers of slam's political fire, and newcomers as opportunistic individuals, more concerned with winning slams and promoting their careers than with collective emancipation. As in the previous chapter, then, slam participants draw on wider discourses which offset community against competitive individualism, using these to distance themselves from criticisms of slam without compromising positive representations of themselves or the for(u)m. In this way, slam 'veterans' can preserve desirable 'faces' as both political actors and authentic, skilled artists, whose work remains unconstrained by the slam formula and unaffected by its limitations.

This notion of a slam poetry formula reveals that veterans' critique of newcomers rests on artistic, as well as political, grounds. In this sense, newcomers' performance of political, identity poetry is seen as being emblematic of the development of slam towards an increasingly restrictive for(u)m, which lacks creativity and originality. Thus many established slam participants argue that slam has lost its previous vitality, and that the poetry performed in slams no longer represents a desirable heterogeneity of content and form. There is a certain yearning, then, for the 'good old days' of slam, when it was apparently more authentic, diverse, meaningful and productive, and many slam 'veterans' are highly critical of what they consider to be the misrepresentation and misappropriation of slam. This is tied in with a distaste for the perceived commercialisation and commodification of the for(u)m.

Indeed, the involvement of large media organisations in slam is often viewed as having exacerbated, (and to a certain extent created) the development of an artificial and soulless slam formula.

Films like *Slam* and *SlamNation*, and the HBO television show *Def Poetry Jam*, though praised by slam participants in some respects, are perceived as having presented (and thus popularised) only one side of slam. Many 'veterans' argue that the styles of poetry and performance which these media outlets showcase have been mimicked relentlessly. A number of long term slam participants suggest that this has led to a loss of authenticity for slam itself, as newcomers seek to emulate a style which has been promoted and cultivated by the media, rather than having grown up 'from the ground'. To a certain extent, then, the media coverage which slam so coveted is perceived as having backfired on it, simultaneously limiting that which it promotes.

Many slam 'veterans' suggest that the motivations of new slam participants, (often apparently attracted to slam through this media coverage) may differ greatly from their own. Newcomers are perceived as being concerned with individual success, rather than collective emancipation, with the promotion of their artistic careers, rather than the development of slam as an art form. This indicates an extra layer of the 'Rocky' discourse: the individual poet striving for personal success within the existing system. In this instance though, the system concerned is that of U.S. slam, and success is measured in terms of slam wins and acclaim within this world.

It would be naïve, however, to suggest that the new wave of slam poets necessarily differ in this regard from slam 'veterans', and that 'veterans' do not themselves seek to perform poetry intended to elicit a favourable response from their audience/s. Artists' success necessarily relies on a positive reception of their work, whether they are carving out new paths or seeking to fit into an existing niche. Further, slam poets may both critique *and* perform tales of overcoming oppression. In doing so, they often frame their own work as an authentic account of oppressive experiences intended to support group liberation, whilst maintaining that that of others is a poor copy aimed merely at

attaining individual success. This enables slam poets to balance these potentially conflicting positions, whilst benefiting from the positive associations which they each bring.

#### 9.5.4 Art Worlds, Genre Trajectories and the 'Social Universe' of Slam<sup>182</sup>

By criticising the new generation of slam poets, 'veterans' strive to maintain their position within, and influence on, slam. Conversely, poets who are newer to the for(u)m seek to carve out their own niche, capitalising on the success of this narrative to earn themselves a desirable position within these communities. Further, performers of the 'Rocky' narrative (be they 'veterans' or newcomers) act to position themselves favourably in relation to both the oppressors whom they challenge and the members of marginalized groups whom they seek to represent. Slam poets can thus be seen as operating within complex power structures, not merely in the sense of a broad hegemonic structure, but also in terms of their relationships with their audiences and with other slam poets.

To understand this fully we need the more subtle and complex understanding of status which is achieved by combining Gramsci with other work, including Lena and Peterson's (2007) theory of genre trajectories, and Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) concept of the field. This latter theory enables us to understand slam as a 'social universe', which is structured according to internal stakes, capital and hierarchies, whilst continuing to be influenced by the wider 'field of power'. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 have used hegemony to offer a similarly nuanced understanding of status.) This nesting of power relations means that we can deepen the Gramscian analysis of slam as a 'false' counter hegemony, rather than abandoning it wholesale. Thus, U.S. slam 'veterans' can be viewed as mounting a (flawed) challenge to the meta-hegemonic structure, whilst simultaneously seeking to preserve the hegemonic structure of slam itself. That they do so with reference to broader socio-historical discourses around diversity, equality and the American Dream lends support to the claims of interactionists, discourse analysts, and indeed Gramsci, that status and identity are constructed interactively and discursively.

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<sup>182</sup> The term 'social universe' is taken from Bourdieu's (1993: 162) work on field theory.

Lena and Peterson's work allows us to develop this argument still further, by indicating the need to consider art worlds as dynamic fields, with permeable boundaries which allow individual participants to move between them. They view a struggle between new and established 'genre players' to control conventions and discourses as a necessary feature of art world trajectories, suggesting that such internal conflicts are common to a range of art (and specifically music) worlds as they emerge, develop and decline. In Lena Peterson's terms, slam 'veterans' can be seen as 'traditionalists', seeking to return slam to a past, idealised state, and newcomers as 'avant gardists', trying to reconstruct the for(u)m in new ways.

'Traditionalists' may not always try to mould their art world into a more desirable shape, however, but may choose instead to leave it behind, developing their work within new fields. This is certainly true of many of the U.S. slam 'veterans' with whom I spoke. Further, as evidenced in subsection 9.3.4, individual poets may flit between these responses, moving outside of slam to create work which is not conducive to the for(u)m, and returning when they have produced poetry which fits more easily within its confines. 'Veterans' may also combine elements of traditionalism and avant-gardism, embracing some of slam's changing practices/conventions and rejecting others. These differential responses suggest that we may be better off thinking of 'traditionalists' and 'avant gardists' as patterns of behaviour, rather than as types of individual.

Lena and Peterson's focus on the internal workings of evolving art worlds adds an important component to this analysis. It demonstrates that, by combining insights from a number of different theorists, we are able to paint a complex and nuanced picture of U.S. slam, which transcends the notion of U.S. slam participants as 'organic intellectuals' engaged in macro level power struggles. Consequently, we are able to view these participants as complex individuals who must engage with status hierarchies which are multiple and dynamic, operating on both macro and micro levels.

## **9.6 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

This chapter has argued that slam participants based in New York and Chicago mobilise discourses around diversity, politics and the development of slam in order to perform socially desirable identities and to navigate successfully through the complex micro and macro level power relations which govern their everyday lives. These discourses are expressed in the poems performed on slam stages and the talk which surrounds slams (both within and between events). In this context, U.S. slam participants' discourse may be viewed both as expressions of the failed attempts of a would-be counter-hegemonic movement, and as the differential responses of reflexive individuals to an evolving artistic for(u)m.

This analysis aims to demonstrate: that the performance of identity and negotiation of status are intricately related; that both are dynamic, heterogeneous and negotiated interactively; and that it is therefore possible to incorporate macro level concerns into a micro level analysis of how individuals interact within, and make sense of, their worlds. My aim in writing this chapter has been to contribute such insights to the field. In closing this discussion, I leave you, however, with an aim which was expressed by several interviewees, and which illustrates aptly the political focus of U.S. based slam:

My hope is that {slam} will impact more people in the audience, so that they will transform their own lives to make real changes in the world community, and that the people on stage don't separate what they say from the way that they live their own lives in the community.<sup>183</sup> (Soul Thomas Evans, New York)

Prior to concluding this chapter, I wish to note one final point. Much of the data on which this analysis is based came from interviews with slam 'veterans'. This was due largely to temporal and financial constraints, which limited the length of my stay in the U.S. and forced me to recruit the majority of my participants before entering the country. Thus, as discussed in subsection 5.4.3, I used a snowball sampling technique, asking my contacts in the U.K. to suggest

<sup>183</sup> Quotation edited by participant.

potential U.S. based interviewees and expanding this sample with recommendations from the latter group. This meant that my sample was inevitably skewed towards poets who had been established on the scene for some time and carved an international reputation for themselves.

Whilst my observations of slams, the many informal conversations I held with slam participants and my analysis of secondary data sources provided me with some exposure to slam newcomers, very few interviewees identified themselves as being from this newer generation of slammers. I was thus unable to analyse in any depth the discourses which such participants weave around slam, or to consider how they may seek to construct socially desirable identities in the light of the criticisms directed towards them by slam 'veterans'. Researching more into newcomers' perceptions of slam would offer a fascinating counter-point to this analysis, helping us to understand more about how identities are constructed in relation to one another and how different groups of individuals perceive the status hierarchies within which they interact.

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Revolution rests  
In everyday struggle,  
As art worlds revolve.

**Chapter Ten: Art, Entertainment and Authenticity in U.K. Slam Discourses**

...let's not forget poetry as entertainment! Something which – now  
here's a thought – non-poets would pay to watch! Hopefully more than  
once! Joyous, hilarious, dazzling, powerful, moving, life affirming,  
consciousness raising, awe-inspiring, myth-shattering entertainment!  
~ Tony Walsh<sup>184</sup> (2006: Para. 7)

I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as  
possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.  
~ Mahatma Gandhi (1921: 215)

This chapter explores the discourse which U.K. slam participants, based primarily in London and Bristol, construct around slam, its nature, purpose, value, strengths and limitations. Following on from Chapter Nine, comparisons will be drawn between this discourse and that of slam participants in the U.S. cities of New York and Chicago. The current chapter also explores how slam participants in these countries construct their relationship to one another, focusing in particular on the responses of U.K. based participants to slam as a U.S. cultural import. Unless otherwise stated, references to slam in this chapter refer to adult slam only.

Many of the concerns which are central to this discussion are highlighted in the epigraphs above. In the first, Walsh emphasises slam's role as an entertaining for(u)m, which can bring poetry to a broader audience. He echoes many other U.K. based slam participants in presenting the for(u)m as primarily an entertaining, accessible (and often comic) art. Whilst he does not ignore slam's potential political impact, this is not given the overriding attention which it receives in the U.S.. It is clear from this that U.K. slam is no mere carbon copy of U.S. slam, but is (re)constructed in line with local concerns and artistic traditions.

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<sup>184</sup> Tony Walsh is a performance poet and slammer based in Manchester, England. (See [www.myspace.com/tonywalshpoet](http://www.myspace.com/tonywalshpoet) for more information.)



The context of Walsh's statement, (that of a web forum debate on the desirability of slam) gestures too towards the ambivalent reception which slam has received in the U.K.. This is underscored by Ghandi's words, which anticipate the mixed feelings that many U.K. based slam participants display towards this cultural import. The U.S. undoubtedly has a higher status, than the U.K., on the transnational slam scene, and this power differential is focal to the ways in which many U.K. based slam participants define the for(u)m and their own positions in relation to it. The need to be seen as authentic British artists is prominent here.

This chapter is divided into six main parts, which further develop this argument. Section 10.1 presents discourse around the roles of politics, comedy and entertainment in U.K. slam, drawing comparisons between this and the U.S.. 10.2 follows with debates on the formularisation of slam and the relationship between slam and performance poetry in the U.K.. Section 10.3 concludes the data presentation, by discussing the place of the U.K. on the transnational slam scene, and the attempts of U.K. slam participants to draw on U.S. slam without losing their identities as British artists. Section 10.4 then begins the analysis of these data, considering the main differences between U.K. and U.S. slam and some possible explanations for these. 10.5 follows by discussing U.K. based slam participants' responses to slam as a U.S. cultural import. This section also pays some attention to how U.S. based participants seek to manage their role as the more powerful players on the transnational slam scene. Finally, section 10.6 frames this analysis in terms of the broader theoretical structure of this thesis, focusing on what this can tell us about status, identity and the interaction of the global and local.

### **10.1 Truth and Games: Politics, Comedy and Entertainment in U.K. Slam**

Whilst political expression does occur in U.K. slam, politicised identity pieces are less common on U.K., than U.S., slam stages. Further, light comic verse is more prominent in U.K., than U.S., based slam. This distinction is reinforced through the offstage talk of many U.K. based slam participants, who argue that

the for(u)m's primary purpose is not to give voice to members of minority and oppressed groups or to deliver a political message, but to entertain a broader and larger audience than is typically reached through more traditional poetry events.

Whilst patterns of 'slam poetry' certainly differ between the two countries, U.K. based slam participants enact similar debates over the existence of a slam poetry formula to those which concern their U.S. based counterparts. This formularisation is generally cast in a negative light, with participants expressing concern that it may limit the development of U.K. performance poetry more widely. Consequently, although some U.K. based participants seek to emulate slam's success in the U.S., others are more reluctant to encourage its development. Further, U.K. based slam participants are keen to establish a uniquely British identity for the for(u)m, decrying any attempts to copy the U.S. model uncritically. The following three sections trace the lines of this argument in preparation for the data analysis in sections 10.4 to 10.6.

#### 10.1.1 Political Expression in U.K. Slam

Just as in the U.S., U.K. slams often showcase politically focused poetry. This is evident in Walsh's (2006: Para. 7) talk of 'consciousness raising' in the web forum extract which opens this chapter. Such work frequently fits within rather narrow parameters, adhering to clear ideas of what warrants an acceptable viewpoint. This is noted by Mike Flint (Bristol):

- MF: Those are the things that will please people {in U.K. slam}: comedy, politics - the *right* politics - and clever wordplay and rhythm and rhyme.
- HG: And "the right politics" presumably being very liberal politics, from what you said earlier?
- MF: I'd say, yes. I'd say if somebody got up on stage and did a pro-Nazi poem, they wouldn't get through the slam.

It is certainly possible, then, to attend a U.K. slam and hear poetry which tells of triumph over unjust oppression or is critical of capitalism, consumerism or the

British Government. At the Farrago London SLAM! Championships which I attended on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006, for instance, slammers performed work which addressed all of these topics. There were also, however, poems on topics such as love, sex, job interviews, poetry and growing old. Whilst this could be said to mirror the diversity of the Urbana slam discussed in Chapter Nine, it also represents an important shift in emphasis, with political discourse being much less evident at the Farrago, than the Urbana, event.

Further, politicised identity poetry appears to be more prevalent in youth slam and amongst 'black' and minority ethnic (BME) communities. At the events which I observed, for instance, poems which addressed sexual, religious, and particularly racial, discrimination were more common amongst young and BME slammers. Several U.K. based interviewees make similar observations. Thus, David Johnson (Bristol) argues that the 'black poets I know have got a more serious agenda'. Whilst Tim Gibbard (Bristol) suggests that this focus may have led to fewer BME individuals participating in the first wave of Bristol slams:

Bristol had its own black writers' group, and that kind of distancing of black writers by themselves into a black writers' group perhaps also distanced them from competition and performance, because they were writing for a particular reason. They were writing because they were black or they were writing about their blackness.

Many participants were reluctant to generalise in this way, however, and even those quoted above cushioned their claims with a note of caution. Indeed, as Bertel Martin (Bristol) emphasises, 'within the group of spoken word writers who come from minority ethnic backgrounds, the importance of their culture, of their identity, to the work that they produce varies enormously'.

With youth slam the case is even more clear-cut. Political commentary, action and awareness are often presented as explicit aims by youth slam organisers and programmes in the U.K.. During the 2007 Rise! Londonwide Youth Slam Championship, for instance, young slammers were actively encouraged to write about gun and knife crime in the city (see The Poetry Society, 2007c). Identity

poetry also featured heavily in the youth slam events which I observed. These concerns were reflected in the interviews, for example:

So I think poetry is one of those ways that they {young people} can talk about their identity, talk about who they are, what they think and how they think they're being perceived. That is where I think the power is, is really them realising that words are powerful ... (Serena Brooks, Leeds)

In this sense, youth slam (and performance poetry more widely) is seen as a means for empowering young people. As one teacher commented, 'when {my students} were writing {slam} stuff the personal became very political, and they really understood the power of poetry and performance poetry to move people in quite a profound way' (Catrina Garratt, Plymouth). For many youth slam participants this was seen as indicative of the superiority of youth over adult slam in the U.K.. As coordinator of the Rise! slams, Joelle Taylor (London), noted 'poets who are funny on stage tend to win adult slams, but obviously we're trying to encourage a little bit of deeper thought'.

#### 10.1.2 Comedy and Entertainment in U.K. Slam

Political poetry is not always welcomed so readily within U.K. based *adult* slam. Indeed, a number of interviewees suggested that the slam stage was an inappropriate platform for serious, thought provoking work.

I saw a woman do a poem at the Cheltenham slam entitled *The Rape of Bosnian Women*, and I just thought "I'm sorry that's completely trivialising the subject matter by bringing it to what is essentially entertainment." ... I don't think a slam stage is where you bring really, really tragic problems of the world. (Jude Simpson, previously based in London)

A similar sentiment was expressed by British poet Luke Wright in the 2004 BBC Three slam (BBC, 2004).

Rather than viewing slam as a political movement, then, many U.K. based (adult) slam participants are keen to emphasise instead that 'slam is about entertainment' (Jackie Davis, Bristol). Indeed, as indicated in Chapters Seven and Nine, U.K. based interviewees made significantly more references to entertainment, and significantly fewer references to political issues than did their U.S. counterparts. This is reflected in the kinds of poetry which are performed on U.S. and U.K. slam stages, with politicised identity poetry featuring much less heavily in the U.K., than the U.S., and comic poetry typically playing a stronger role. This comedic angle is further underscored by the links between the U.K. performance poetry, slam and stand-up comedy scenes, with artists like Rob Gee, moving easily between the three (see Gee, 2008; and also section 3.1 in this thesis.)

U.K. based slam participants also emphasise this distinction in their offstage talk, and many interviewees contrasted the light, comic verse which they associated with slam in the U.K. to the serious, impassioned work of U.S. slam. Thus, Mike Flint (Bristol) contends that 'in the U.K., comedy is the big thing for slams; over in America politics is the thing'. Similarly, a number of interviewees acknowledged the dominance in U.S. slam of work in which the poet adopts a minority/oppressed identity, but sought to distance U.K. slam from this.

People like A. F. Harrold,<sup>185</sup> are still winning slams here, and it's not just a showy poem done in an oratory style with some passion about what it's like to be gay, Jewish, black, of mixed heritage etcetera that will win the day. It's respected, but there's too much desire for your bizarre cabaret or for your intelligent satire for that to take over ... (Steve Larkin, Oxford)

It would be easy to overemphasise the role of comic poetry in U.K. slam however, and I would stress, once again, that this is a difference of emphasis, rather than a clear dichotomy. Whilst the U.K. slams which I observed showcased decidedly less political/identity poetry than those I attended in the

<sup>185</sup> A. F. Harrold is a performance poet and slammer based in Reading, England. His style is often humorous and could be labelled eccentrically British. (See <http://www.quirkstandardsalternative.co.uk/> or [www.myspace.com/afharrold](http://www.myspace.com/afharrold) for more information.) A F Harrold's real name is used here with his permission, since it was felt that altering it would have detracted notably from the import of this participant's statement.

U.S., for instance, they displayed a roughly even split between comic and serious work. The quotations presented overleaf thus highlight, not only the distinct slam styles in these countries, but also the eagerness with which many U.K. slam participants seek to underscore such distinctions.

## **10.2 “But is it Art?”: Defining Slam in the U.K.<sup>186</sup>**

Like their U.S. counterparts, U.K. based slam participants often criticise what they view as the development of a slam poetry formula. Formularisation is commonly portrayed as encouraging work which lacks the artistic quality and depth of performance poetry more broadly. This relationship between slam and performance poetry was of central concern to many U.K. based slam participants, and the impact of the former on the latter provoked considerable discussion amongst them.

### **10.2.1 Fighting Against the Formula: Slam Poetry in U.K. Sites**

{Slam poetry} has to be x length long and fit to a certain formula to be successful. (Mike Flint, Bristol)

Many U.K. based slam participants echo this view. Ian Sills (Bristol), for instance, suggests that a slam formula emerged early on in Bristol. Like many in the U.K. (and U.S.), he casts this in a negative light:

I think, to an extent, that the slam poem became like the three minute pop song: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, middle eight, chorus. ... They were the sort of hoops that one jumped through to write a poem that worked in slam. ... Many of the pieces that I wrote like that have just not lasted; never stood the test of whether I could actually be convinced to perform them again since.

Whilst such critiques are fairly common, U.K. slam participants also share their U.S. counterparts' desire to emphasise the variety which is possible within slam.

<sup>186</sup> Quotation taken from interview with Bristol based poet, Mike Flint.

Several interviewees thus rejected the idea of a slam poetry formula in favour of a more heterogeneous model.

I've heard people do many different things quite successfully in slams. I think it does tend towards performance rather than a page poetry, and it tends towards rhyme, rather than tortured insight, but for me that's a difference of paradigm, rather than a very clear fence. (Brett Van Toen, London)

And: ... we've used this term of 'slam poetry' early on {in the interview}, but I mean, it doesn't really mean anything. It's not a genre as such. (Russell Thompson, London)

An attempt to distance U.K. from U.S. slam is once again apparent in this talk, and a number of participants suggested that the former may be less susceptible to formularisation than the latter.

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

And: It might be a style in America, but I think we {in the U.K.} have to look at slam as a format. (John Paul O'Neill, London)

It is certainly less easy to identify a slam formula in the U.K., than in the U.S.. Poems can cover a wide range of different topics, and styles can vary enormously, including fast-paced performative work, doggerel, rap and more 'academic' poetry. As elsewhere, however, this represents a difference of emphasis, rather than an absolute distinction. We cannot ignore heterogeneity in U.S. slam nor the prevalence of certain styles in the U.K.. Indeed, as suggested above, successful U.K. slam poetry often fits a particular pattern, leaning towards three minute long, fast-paced, performative poems, full of tight

rhymes, rhythm and comic word play. This is, as Mike Flint (Bristol) puts it, poetry with a 'bit of politics, bit of humour and lots of words, a lot of rhythm and rhyme and coming in on time'.

#### 10.2.2 U.K. Slam and Performance Poetry: The Search for an Artistic Identity

There is much discourse in both the U.S. and the U.K. around the validity of slam as an art form and its influence on performance poetry as a whole. In the U.K., however, this is a central concern, featuring heavily in my informal conversations with slam participants and dominating the interviews. Slam's influence is here cast in both positive and negative terms. As in Walsh's opening quotation, for instance, it may be lauded for attracting larger and broader audiences to poetry events:

{People} come along to see a night that's in a structure and framework like that {of slam}, which is very accessible, audience-friendly and extremely entertaining, and suddenly the whole notion of what a poetry night could be is opened up. (Sara-Jane Arbury, Cheltenham)

Elsewhere however, this focus on entertainment is portrayed as more of a flaw. At a (non-slam) poetry event which I attended in Bristol, for instance, one poet and sometime slammer prefaced his work with a long diatribe against slam's 'shallow' and 'artless' nature. Though typically less severe in tone, such critiques were also aired on and off stage at many slams I attended in the U.K.. Mike Flint (Bristol) gives a flavour of these when discussing a poem which he wrote for slam, saying that 'it has no real content. I mean it's got no philosophical argument or political debate or anything like that in it. It's just entertainment'. Similarly, many U.K. based slam participants argue that slam lacks the breadth and depth of performance poetry more generally.

I tended to find that the pieces I wrote for the {Bristol} slams were quite limited. You know, there were some comic pieces. There wasn't a lot of depth in them. I mean, performance poetry to me is any sort of poetry



that is presented in front of an audience, and to me the parameters are a lot wider. (Lucy English, Bristol)

And: I think one of the things that you need to bear in mind when getting involved in slams is they're only a very small, rather narrow, potentially not particularly deep aspect of performance poetry. You know, it's a bit of fun. (Russell Thompson, London)

In line with this, there is a feeling that slam's increasing popularity in the U.K. may serve to restrict the development of performance poetry by limiting the kinds of work that performance poets are able/inclined to produce. (Indeed, several U.K. performance poets declined to be interviewed for this research precisely because of such misgivings.)

I've become frustrated, working in this country, at the success of slam in some ways, because we had a very good, very vibrant performance poetry scene and a culture that existed over decades in this country. It wasn't that well supported and wasn't that well known. The marketing power of slam has given rise to this term 'slam poetry'. It's bullshit. There's no such thing as 'slam poetry'. There's just performance poetry and there's slams. (Steve Larkin, Oxford)

Slam is often portrayed, then, as being just one of a diverse array of for(u)ms in which poets may perform their work. It lacks the clear development and definition of U.S. slam and is seen instead as a subsection of performance poetry. As Steve Tasane (London) comments, 'slam is there to serve the purpose of the performance poetry community; serve the needs of the performance poetry community'. Similarly, U.K. based slam participants often prefer to call themselves 'writers', 'poets' or 'performance poets' than 'slam poets', contending, along with Kat Francois (London), that 'over here definitely you wouldn't call yourself a slam poet. ... It's a thing that you do, rather than a title'. This is reflected in the career paths of U.K. based performance poets, many of whom dabble with slam early on in their careers, before moving on to new ground.

I think there's a kind of natural progression in most performance poets' careers ... you'll go for slam, that's kind of your training ground on what will appeal to a general audience and what won't, and then you might want to move on and mix that {up} a bit more. (Caroline Jackson, Bristol)

This career trajectory is portrayed as enabling poets to hone their skills, without becoming trapped in slam. It can also be seen as something of a mixed blessing, however, and many U.K. participants are aware that slam works to support poets' careers in the U.S. in a way that is not possible in the U.K..

It's not as serious out here, so we can be a bit more laid back about it, but out there you can make money from it and it's good for your career. You know, you're National Slam Champion or you win these big slams. You make money. You make a name for yourself, and to be recognised as a quality performance poet out there, you have to win slams, whereas over here you don't. (Kat Francois, London)

Thus, U.K. based slam participants view U.S. slam as both enabling and constraining performance poetry. Whilst it may increase poetry's profile, attract new audiences, and aid poets' careers, slam is also seen as potentially restricting poets and reducing the quality of their work. Such ambiguity is encapsulated nicely in Stuart Butler's poem *The Ideology of Slam*, which praises the for(u)m for its ability to 'pack places to the rafters', but criticises its adherence to the values of 'America, the home of competitive self-help laissez-faire/Individualism' (Butler, 1998: 153-4).

### **10.3 Transnational Slam**

As indicated above, there are important distinctions between slam in the U.K. and the U.S.. This section explores in greater depth how participants in both countries understand and represent these differences. Particular attention will be paid to the power differential which is seen to exist between U.K. and U.S. slam, and the ways in which U.K. based slam participants strive to construct a

distinctly British identity for the for(u)m. This interest in U.S. slam, and its impact on the U.K., was prominent in the discourse of U.K. based slam participants. Indeed, interviewees here made a statistically significantly greater number of references to the U.S., compared to the U.K., and statistically significantly more references to *both* countries than did their U.S. counterparts (see section 7.2).

### 10.3.1 Comparing Continents: Placing U.K. Slam

The majority of U.K. based interviewees were conscious of slam's greater impact in the U.S., suggesting that U.S. 'poets are geared to the slam format more, and it's bigger in America than it is here' (Nathan Penlington, London). Many interviewees were aware too that slam is defined less clearly in the U.K., lacking the formalised and integrated structures of U.S. slam.

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

Partly because of this lack of a clear identity, U.K. slam is often conflated with performance poetry more generally. This is reflected in the many references to 'slam-and-performance poetry' in my conversations with U.K. based slam participants. Others resist this conflation, however, questioning 'how helpful or how productive it is to talk about slam poetry and performance poetry in the same breath' (Colin Brown, Bristol). Steve Tasane (London) is similarly critical of this tendency:

I've heard performance poetry described as slam poetry when the person doesn't mean slams at all. They just mean poetry. But it's become a by-word, for people who don't know the art form, for performance poetry.

Many U.K. based slam participants suggest that performance poetry has the potential to suffer from this association and are keen to resist this. Thus, Bertel

Martin (Bristol) observed that 'there are a number of writers now who are starting to break away from slam, and they become more powerful for it, because ... they've actually got a greater wealth of tools they can use'. Others, meanwhile, see benefits in slam's development, arguing that U.K. poets lack many of the advantages which slam has brought those in the U.S..

There's no real vision of there being a thing called a U.K. poetry scene or a U.K. slam, that could be marketed, that could be better funded, that could get say T.V. {exposure}, in terms of {the exposure given by} Def {Poetry} Jam in America. (John Paul O'Neill, London)

Here too, though, there is a certain wariness of U.S. dominance (whether this be imposed from the outside or encouraged from within the U.K.).

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

Slam is thus both rejected and encouraged in the U.K.. Amongst its cheerleaders are organisations like Dreadlockalien Productions, Paralalia, Spiel Unlimited and Hammer and Tongue.<sup>187</sup> The latter is one of the most active promoters of U.K. slam, running regular events in Oxford, Brighton and elsewhere (see Hammer and Tongue, 2007). Co-founder, Steve Larkin, has also indicated plans to set up U.K. equivalents to PSI and the NPS:

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

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<sup>187</sup> This is not to suggest that these organisations are unequivocally supportive of the for(u)m. On the contrary, the ambivalence with which slam has been greeted in the U.K. is echoed by many of those who are involved in these groups.

Similar aims were expressed by several other U.K. based slam participants with whom I spoke. All were keen to emphasise, however, that such an organisation would be no mere replica of U.S. slam. As Jacob Sam-La Rose (London) puts it: 'I'm not saying that we're modelling things on the States. It's just {that} there are things that should be in place that aren't at the moment'. U.K. based slam organisations are thus seen as operating on their own terms, rather than being subsumed within U.S. slam.

It's a very imperial attitude {that} the Americans tend to have. So they've known, for example, that {the} Farrago SLAM! has been going for years and years ... but they asked us to join PSI, and when we pointed out to them that was an American organisation and we were a national U.K. organisation, and shouldn't we affiliate ... they didn't really understand at all. (John Paul O'Neill, London)

### 10.3.2 Authenticity and the Creation of British Slam

There is considerable variation amongst the structures, scoring systems and rules of U.K. slams and they often differ notably from the U.S. model. Just as many U.K. based slam participants seek to portray their organisations as characteristically British, so slam organisers here are often keen to promote such variations as indicative of the uniquely British flavour of their event. Thus, poet Dreadlockalien's online publicity boasts that 'When Dreadlockalien hosts a slam the rules are not your usual "lets follow the americans" package' (Grant n.d.: Para. 1). Similarly, Joelle Taylor (London) says of the Rise! poetry slams:

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

As indicated earlier, U.K. based slam participants are also keen to assert their own style of slam poetry. Indeed, several U.K. based interviewees described a clear U.S. slam style, which they sought to distance themselves from.

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

Many U.K. based slam participants contend that British poets should avoid mimicking this style and becoming 'second rate copies of Americans' (John Paul O'Neill, London). As Caroline Jackson (Bristol), puts it:

I don't really like it when you get a poet who's kind of come back {from the States} and they're obviously sort of trying to do {an} American {slam style}. They're kind of mimicking it.

Consequently, those who are perceived as maintaining a peculiarly British form are often praised for preserving their artistic originality and authenticity.

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

Thus, whilst U.K. based slam participants may be happy to acknowledge the influence of U.S. slam on their work and events, they seek to maintain the distinction 'between being inspired by another style and blatantly trying to impersonate it' (Ian Sills, Bristol). As John Paul O'Neill (London) puts it:

I think that we need to use the kind of professionalism, use the kind of structure {of U.S. slam}, but look at the structures that they've set up, and

apply them to the U.K. where it's appropriate, adapt them where it's appropriate, but always be performing U.K. poetry, and not trying to be second rate copies of Americans.

Many U.K. based participants, then, are aware of the potential impact of U.S. slam on the U.K., and seek to capitalise on the benefits of this, whilst rejecting a wholesale takeover.

### 10.3.3 U.K. Slam from a U.S. Perspective

U.S. based slam participants too were often aware of the power differential between U.S. and U.K. based slam. This was made apparent both by the relatively small number of references which U.S. participants made to the U.K., (indeed, U.K. slam was barely mentioned outside of the interviews) and by the form which these limited references took. As Soul Thomas Evans (New York) notes:

I think having all these American poets coming through {to Britain} is akin to the British invasion on music on the other side ... I cannot help but think that we are bigger dog, so to speak, that's come over and infiltrated and influenced some of the spoken word.

The responses of these participants to the U.S. dominance of slam varied. Some felt that the U.S. system should be adopted by other countries, but were reluctant to institute this, for fear of being seen as overly domineering.

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

Others, meanwhile, relished the differences between U.S. and U.K. slam.

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

#### **10.4 Constructing U.K. Slam**

This chapter has so far focused on presenting U.K. slam from the perspective of its participants, (with some attention paid to U.S. based participants' discourse). The following three sections analyse these data. I begin by looking at the differences in slam poetry and discourses between the U.K. and the U.S., considering some possible explanations for why these may exist.

##### **10.4.1 The Place of Politics**

As indicated in section 10.1, political expression is by no means absent from U.K. based slam. The political viewpoints which are conveyed here often fit within fairly narrow parameters, representing a left-wing, anti-establishment, pro-diversity perspective, which echoes that of slam in the U.S.. Poetry which focuses on issues of identity, oppression and diversity is also present in U.K. slam and there is some indication that this is more common in BME, than 'white' dominated, groups here. Suggestions to this effect were made by a number of U.K. based slam participants and supported by my own observations of U.K. slams. It seems likely, however, that ethnicity intersects with variables like age and nationality. Thus, it would appear, for example, that adult BME slam poets in the U.K. are more inclined towards comic performances than their U.S. based counterparts. Further, whilst this research indicates that there may be important distinctions between BME and majority 'white' slam communities, the data only allow for tentative conclusions to be drawn. A central reason for this is that considerably more 'white' than BME slam participants were interviewed and



observed in the U.K..<sup>188</sup> This is particularly true for Bristol, where BME involvement in slam has historically been very low. Indeed, the picture of U.K. slam which is presented in this thesis may have looked very different had I focused on cities like Manchester and Birmingham, where BME participation in slam is generally much higher. (See section 5.4 for a discussion of sampling constraints, and both 5.4 and 12.1 for more on the ethnic make up of slams in the different cities on which this research focuses.)

That said, it is clear that ethnicity raises some important issues for slam. Just as with the Beats before them, for instance, slam participants (in both the U.K. and U.S.) draw on cultural forms which are associated with BME communities. For example, 'call and response', a technique linked to African American oral traditions and the African American church (see for example Connor, 2000; Wilgus, 1990), is prominent in U.S. slam, though rather less so in the U.K.. Similarly, hip hop, a genre which is associated traditionally with African American and Latino artists, has influenced adult and youth slam in these and other countries to varying degrees.<sup>189</sup> Thus, this area is well worth exploring through future research, and it may be wise to avoid the temptation to draw any concrete conclusions until then.

There are much firmer grounds, however, for claiming a greater prevalence of political and identity work in U.K. based youth slam. Indeed, many youth slam programmes encourage this explicitly, setting political themes for specific events or promoting youth slam more widely as a for(u)m for the exploration of politics and identity. Slam is often presented as a means of empowering young people, giving them the opportunity to talk about issues which are important to them in their everyday lives. In the U.K., then, youth slam and adult slam are viewed as fulfilling very different functions, and youth slam participants may be said to have more in common with adult slam participants in the U.S. than in their own country. (This point is developed more fully in Chapter Eleven.)

#### 10.4.2 Politics, Comedy and Entertainment: Distinguishing U.K. and U.S. Slam

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<sup>188</sup> See Appendix B for a breakdown of the (presumed) ethnic background of individuals present at observed slams.

<sup>189</sup> See section 3.1 for more on the relationship between hip hop and slam.

Despite its apparent favour amongst BME and youth slam participants, politics constitutes a much weaker discursive thread in U.K., than U.S., based slam. Political and identity poetry appear less frequently in U.K. slam, and such work is often delivered in an ironic or humorous style with less tendency towards the impassioned earnestness common in the U.S.. This distinction is reinforced in off-stage discourse, with U.K. based (adult) slam participants being more likely to refer to slam as an entertaining art form than a serious political movement. In line with this, slam poetry in the U.K. sites of London and Bristol leans more towards light, comic verse than does that of U.S. cities like New York and Chicago, (although there is a roughly even split between serious and comic poetry within U.K. slam).

Comic poetry is presented by many U.K. based slam participants as constituting part of a U.K. slam poetry style. This style (performative, fast paced, rhythmic, rhyming, often comic, sometimes political, and around three minutes long) was readily identified by the majority of interviewees here. Not all agreed that it constituted a binding formula however, and many were keen to emphasise instead the heterogeneity of poetry in U.K. slam, suggesting that what is often called 'slam poetry' is simply that which wins most often.

Interviewees were often aware of the distinctions between U.K. and U.S. based slam, and many identified a more typically American style of slam poetry. In many respects, this corresponds to the 'Rocky' narrative, being associated with political, identity poetry and stories of unjust oppression. Just like U.S. slam 'veterans', U.K. based slam participants are often critical of this style, depicting it as inauthentic and lacking in depth. In the U.K., however, this discourse is phrased, not in terms of 'veteran' slammers' critique of newcomers, but as a difference between U.K. and U.S. slam. Correspondingly, the U.S. style is often depicted as inappropriate for the U.K., where audiences and artists apparently prefer a lighter, less assertive approach. Thus, members of these two groups mobilise a similar discursive thread to serve very different ends.

There are a number of possible explanations for these differences between U.K. and U.S. based slam. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter Nine, U.S. slam discourse relies, to a considerable extent, on an American Dream frame, which is much less dominant (though certainly not absent) in the U.K.. Secondly, the greater focus on comedy and entertainment in U.K., compared with U.S., slam reflects a more enduring and widespread distinction between art worlds in these countries. As discussed in Chapter Two, for instance, there are remarkable similarities between this U.S./U.K. slam divide and the different approaches taken by the American Beats and British Liverpool Poets in the 1960s. More recently, a number of U.K. poets have moved between performance poetry and stand-up comedy, whilst the term 'stand-up poetry', which links these arts, is becoming increasingly popular amongst poets in the U.K., but is less often used in the U.S..<sup>190</sup>

Thirdly, and most centrally to this thesis, I would argue that U.K. based slam participants strive explicitly to construct, maintain and promote a style of slam which is characteristically British and distinct from that which they associate with the U.S.. Further, they are keen to preserve the distinctiveness of U.K. performance poetry more broadly, and are concerned with any impact which slam may have on this. This does not mean a straightforward rejection of slam however. Rather, U.K. based slam participants must weigh up slam's potential damage against its perceived benefits for performance poetry and poets.

## **10.5 Is it Art and is it Us?: Weighing up Slam**

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<sup>190</sup> The term 'stand-up poet' clearly references the stand-up comedy tradition, emphasising the performative and comedic elements of these artists' poetry. As Jude Simpson remarked: 'I describe myself as a "stand-up poet" now, as my act is a fusion of poetry, comedy and music.'

The current section explores this latter argument in greater depth, considering some of the ways in which the introduction of slam into the U.K. prompts poets here to reassess and recreate slam, performance poetry and their own identities as artists.

#### 10.5.1 Managing Slam's Impact on U.K. Performance Poetry

The extended debate around the validity of slam as an art for(u)m, and its impact on performance poetry more broadly, is perhaps the most salient feature of U.K. based slam participants' discourse. On the one hand, they echo participants in both U.S. slam and other U.S./U.K. performance poetry movements by portraying the for(u)m as something which can attract more substantial and diverse audiences to poetry. (U.K. based slam participants are aware too of slam's ability to boost poet's careers, and of the greater rewards which await U.S. slam winners in comparison to those in the U.K..) On the other hand, however, there is a suggestion that slam's dominance in the U.S. creates greater pressure for poets there to perform in and win slams, and that this, together with the focus on entertaining audiences, strengthens the tendency towards formulaic slam poetry in the U.S..

Whether or not they agree that such a formula exists, U.K. based slam participants commonly contend that *representing* slam as formulaic may restrict how slam is understood, and consequently, the kinds of work which slam participants are more able/inclined to produce. This is a concern which they share with U.S. based participants. Unlike this latter group, however, U.K. based participants generally focus, not on the effects which this may have on slam, but on its impact on performance poetry more broadly. In this sense, slam is portrayed as cheapening performance poetry, encouraging the production of work which lacks depth and has questionable artistic value. Further, in contrast to their U.S. based counterparts, many U.K. slam participants criticise the for(u)m's inherent nature, rather than its evolutionary path. Following on from this, there is often a reluctance to encourage the development of slam in the U.K., for fear that it may stifle performance poetry more broadly, and limit the avenues which poets can readily pursue.

Whilst some U.K. based participants view slam as an unwelcome cultural import which should be rejected in its entirety, then, others suggest that slam's potential benefits outweigh its limitations. A mixture of these viewpoints was often apparent in a single interview/conversation, reflecting the highly ambivalent approach which many U.K. based slam participants have towards the for(u)m. Uniting these discourses, however, is the idea that slam is there to serve the needs of the performance poetry community, and should be judged on this basis. This subservience to performance poetry is accomplished both by distancing the two arts from one another and by emphasising their similarities. In the latter case, slam is portrayed as simply another form of performance poetry, whilst in the former it is criticised as performance poetry's more restrictive, less meaningful and less artistically valid cousin.

The differential value attached to these arts in the U.K. is further reflected in the ways in which poets here engage with slam. Few U.K. based artists define themselves as 'slam poets', preferring instead to adopt labels like 'performance poet' or 'writer'.<sup>191</sup> Indeed, the lack of sufficient regular or high profile slam events in the U.K. means that it is extremely difficult for U.K. based poets to pursue a career in (adult) slam. Whilst U.S. based poets may spend substantial periods of time touring around slam venues, and are able to build a spoken word career on the basis of slam wins, U.K. based poets more commonly engage with slam for much shorter periods of time. Indeed, members of this latter group tend to leave the for(u)m behind once they have benefited from the instant, quantifiable feedback which slams provide, attracted the attention of event organisers and/or made other contacts within the community. In line with this, U.K. based slam participants are more likely to respond to critiques of slam by working outside the for(u)m, rather than trying to change it from within. Slam thus plays a very different role in poets' careers in the U.K. than the U.S..

#### 10.5.2 British Slam and Slammers: The Search for an Identity

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<sup>191</sup> Of course, this does not mean that U.S. based slam participants necessarily accept the label uncritically. Indeed, many of those whom I interviewed chose to describe themselves in other ways. Nonetheless 'slam poet' is a term which is much more widely used in the U.S. than the U.K..

U.K. based slam participants are often keenly aware of their less powerful position on the transnational slam scene and the more developed state of U.S. slam. This was apparent in the amount of time which these participants spent discussing the U.S. origins of, and influences on, slam, and comparing slam in the U.S. to slam in the U.K.. As with slam more generally, discourse around the U.K./U.S. slam relationship is both positive and negative. Opinions vary as to whether (and to what extent) U.K. slam should be resisted, remain in its current state or seek to emulate slam in the U.S.. Thus, whilst many participants have moved away from slam, producing and performing artworks outside of its borders, or seem content for U.K. slam to remain in its current state, others promote the for(u)m and work towards its development.

This difference is illustrated neatly by participants' discourse on the standardisation of slam in the U.S.. Standardisation may be praised as a means of allowing greater national integration, facilitating the movement of poets between slams and providing a more marketable for(u)m. Conversely, it may be decried as having created a formula for slam poetry (and performance poetry more widely), flattening out valuable regional variations and idiosyncrasies. Consequently, some U.K. based slam participants are keen to create and preserve their own unique slam structures and rules, whilst others talk of developing U.K. alternatives to PSI and the NPS, which would standardise slam formats across the country.

There is thus a tension within U.K. based slam between capitalising on the benefits which can be obtained by drawing on the U.S. model and seeking to maintain an authentically British identity for the for(u)m. Further, whether or not they seek to encourage slam's development in the U.K., many participants react against the perceived threat of American cultural imperialism, opposing the idea that U.K. slam is merely a diluted version of that in the U.S.. This is certainly apparent in my own work, and I have been keen to emphasise throughout this thesis that U.K. slam has a distinct and valid identity in its own right.

The risk that U.K. slam may become Americanised is not simply perceived as being imposed from the outside however. Rather, U.K. slam participants are themselves seen as instrumental in rejecting or reinforcing this process.

Organisers may (perhaps inadvertently) promote American poets over British poets, for example, whilst some U.K. based slammers are considered to have adopted a more American performance/writing style. This latter group were decried by many interviewees as being inauthentic, striving simply to achieve slam success, rather than create high quality, original artworks. Conversely, those who maintain a style which is viewed as being true to their identities as British artists were portrayed as authentic and innovative. Once again, this mirrors slam ‘veterans’ critique of newcomers in the U.S., suggesting that U.K. based interviewees too divide slam participants into authentic, original artists and career-minded impostors, interested only in personal gain.

Authenticity, then, is salient for both U.K. and U.S. based slam participants. It is, for instance, important to participants in both countries that, where performed, political, confessional or identity poems should be a ‘true’ reflection of the poets’ identity, beliefs and experiences. For many U.K. based slam participants, however, the prevalence and success of this style on the more powerful U.S. slam scene brings into doubt the authenticity of such pieces. Consequently, it is often of greater concern to them that slam poems are original artworks, which do not seek to recreate the U.S. style, than that they are frank and truthful accounts. This should not be taken to imply that U.S. based slam participants are unconcerned with artistic integrity, simply that the nature of the relationship between artistic and personal authenticity differs between these two sites.

### 10.5.3 The View from the U.S.

U.S. based slam participants were by no means ignorant of the difference in status between U.K. and U.S. slam. This is apparent in the interview data, where U.S. based interviewees made statistically significantly fewer references to the U.K. than to the U.S.. Further, those references which they did make tended to position the U.K. as an unequal (though valid) partner on the transnational slam scene. Most of these interviewees were, however, familiar with U.K. slam and performance poetry, having encountered British slam participants in the States or performed in the country themselves. This was not

the case with many other slam participants whom I encountered in NYC and Chicago, and it is notable that U.K. slam was rarely mentioned at all outside of the interview context.

U.S. based interviewees responded to the distinctions between U.S. and U.K. slam in different ways, which reflect their overall evaluation of the for(u)m. Some emphasised the superiority of the U.S. model, suggesting that adopting this system would be beneficial for the development of U.K. slam and for the coherence of the wider transnational slam scene. Interviewees taking this line often expressed a reluctance to impose their views on others however, baulking at the idea that they may be implicated in a form of oppression akin to that which they protest against elsewhere. Others, meanwhile, were more critical of the way in which slam has developed in the U.S., and see the U.K. situation as offering hope for a different evolutionary course, one which may avoid the apparent formularisation of slam and slam's dominance over performance poetry more generally. In addition, many U.S. based slam participants concur with their U.K. based counterparts that there is something inauthentic, and therefore undesirable, about British poets mimicking a U.S. slam style. Thus, several U.S. based interviewees expressed their hope that the U.K., and other countries where slam is less developed, may be able to retain the regional diversity which they perceive as having been obliterated in the U.S., or at the very least, supply the transnational slam scene with a diversity which U.S. slam lacks.

Slam participants based in both the U.S. and the U.K., then, seek to negotiate the status differences which they recognise as being present on the transnational slam scene; however they do so from very different positions. Whilst U.K. based participants strive to maintain a national artistic identity in the face of a stronger cultural partner, those based in the U.S. must come to terms with their relatively powerful position, sensitively tempering their assessment of, and influence over, slam elsewhere. Thus, this analysis may be used to illuminate the construction and maintenance of preferred identities within U.K. and U.S. based slam, and how participants use these processes to secure favourable status positions for themselves. The following section aims to do



just this, with reference to the theoretical framework which was outlined in Chapters Two to Four.

## **10.6 Global Arts, Local Artists: Hegemony and the Performance of Identities**

The impact of slam on performance poetry communities in London, Bristol and elsewhere in the U.K. throws into question the artistic identities of many poets here. To a large extent, the issues which this raises remain unresolved, so that processes of identity construction are particularly visible in these individuals' discourse. Indeed, U.K. based interviewees frequently supplied more questions than answers to points such as: whether the benefits of slam outweigh its negative impact on performance poetry; whether slam could be encouraged to develop in the U.K. without overwhelming performance poetry here; whether it is possible (or desirable) to label oneself a 'slam poet'; how U.K. slam could be (re)constructed to preserve local/national idiosyncrasies; and the extent to which the U.S. slam model should be implemented in the U.K..

Goffman's (1967: 5) work throws some light on this discourse, enabling us to view U.K. slam participants' critiques of slam, their emphasis on its subservience to performance poetry and their moves to (re)create a peculiarly British brand of the for(u)m as 'lines', through which they can present a positive 'face' as authentic, skilled British artists. Further, many participants seek to take a 'line' within which the ability to master, and indeed reconstruct, slam reinforces, rather than weakens, this desirable 'face'. This, in turn, allows them to retain control over U.K. performance poetry, whilst capitalising on the benefits which slam can bring.

Something of the opposite process is apparent in the discourse of U.S. based slam participants, as they seek to retain control over slam and their status as more powerful/skilled slam poets, without appearing to be (or indeed becoming) domineering cultural imperialists. This makes it clear that the direction of influence between U.S. and U.K. slam is not unidirectional. Rather, slam's

(re)construction in U.K. sites like Bristol and London impacts on its development transnationally, as U.S. based participants seek to accommodate and affect U.K. slam. This influence is, however, a subtle one. It is clear that U.S. slam has a more pronounced effect on slam in the U.K. than the other way around, and the dominance of U.S. slam transnationally makes the U.K.'s impact difficult to analyse without studying the for(u)m's evolution over an extended period of time.

Authors like Bennett (1999; 2000) and Mahtani and Salmon (2001) provide some support for such global-local interactions (see section 2.4). They argue that global arts are not merely imported wholesale into new sites, but are recreated in accordance with local concerns and existing art worlds. This is apparent, for instance, in the ways in which both Bennett's (1999) Newcastle-Upon-Tyne hip hop artists and the U.K. based slam participants studied here seek to balance authentic local identities with the appeal of a U.S. cultural import. As Bennett (2007: 27) notes, art world participants such as these 'use the prescribed meanings attached to such {global artistic} resources as templates around which to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity'. This means that these arts, in turn, 'become infused with distinctive knowledges and sensibilities which originate from the particular region in which they are lived out'. Thus, the different emphases on politics and comedy in U.S. and U.K. slam, for example, can be seen to reflect broader, pre-existing characteristics of art worlds in these countries. This reinforces the interactionist argument that meaning is not an inherent property of art works, but is constructed through the interaction of active, reflexive art world participants.

It is clear from this that slam participants cannot be treated as an indivisible group. Not only is slam (re)constructed differently in the U.S. and U.K., but these differences are pivotal to U.K. based slam participants' search for 'distinction' (to use Bourdieu's, 1989 term). In addition, the ways in which these distinctions are played out in micro level interactions, to negotiate internal status hierarchies, highlights the need to consider the different identities and status positions which divide art world participants *within* local sites. Bourdieu's (ibid)

work on cultural capital may thus be useful in helping to frame U.K. slam participants' interactions as a search for 'distinction', but this can only take us so far. Similarly, whilst we can use Gramsci's (1973/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) theory of hegemony to understand U.K. slam participants' discourse as indicative of a counter-hegemonic response to the perceived cultural dominance of the U.S., this too has its limits.

Neither Bourdieu's cultural capital nor Gramsci's hegemony is sufficient to explain the internal status negotiations and global-local interplay which are apparent in the discourse of U.K. based slam participants. It is clear, for instance, that U.K. and U.S. slam are structured according to different sets of conventions, offer distinct opportunities to slam poets and relate in diverse ways to other art worlds, like that of performance poetry. It is only by understanding slam as a distinct social universe, divided according to its own rules and hierarchies (as in Bourdieu's theory of the field), that we can account for such rich and varied interactions.

Further, the interactive, discursive negotiation of status which this analysis reveals is best illuminated with reference to the work of interactionists and discourse analysts (in combination with Gramsci). Interactionism is here able to bring out the active, reflexive nature of these art world participants, as they seek to perform socially desirable identities in and through their everyday interactions. Discourse analysis, meanwhile, enables us to link these micro level interactions with macro level social structures and processes by highlighting the wider social discourses around the desirability of authenticity and the undesirability of American cultural hegemony, which make such performances possible. We can thus understand U.K. based slam participants as drawing on broader ways of understanding and representing the world, in order to present themselves in a positive light, and as helping to reinforce these understandings as they do so.

## **10.7 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

This analysis seeks to illuminate the localisation of global artistic phenomena, the response of art world participants to perceived cultural hegemony and the ways in which artists seek to redefine their identities within changing art worlds. We can argue that, whilst art worlds may become globalised, influencing diverse sites around the world, this is an interactive, rather than unidirectional, process. Instead of accepting cultural imports unquestioningly, art world participants strive to reconstruct them in line with local concerns. In doing so, they seek to perform their identities in such a way that they stand to make status gains, not losses. Further, these status hierarchies operate on micro, as well as macro, levels, so that U.K. slam participants seek to position themselves favourably in relation to other participants in the U.K., as well as those in the U.S..

Resistance to a perceived American cultural hegemony undoubtedly affects the ways in which many U.K. based slam participants seek to (re)define their identities, and the identities of U.K. slam and performance poetry. It is important, however, not to overemphasise the role which these power relations play in the performance and (re)construction of slam participants' identities here. Whilst the majority of interviewees were well aware of slam's U.S. roots and of the thriving U.S. slam scene, (having performed in the U.S. or seen American slam poets abroad) this is not true for all U.K. based slam participants. Indeed, many participants in U.K. slam have only a sparse knowledge of the for(u)m outside of their local area. Thus, one of the school teachers and youth slam participants with whom I spoke knew nothing of adult slam. Similarly, one Bristol based interviewee insisted that slams usually feature pre-booked poets, since this was her only experience of the for(u)m.

These participants are largely unaware of slam's status as a U.S. cultural import and thus can hardly be considered to be fighting the U.S. domination of slam. The factors which influence how these individuals define slam and their own identities as artists are likely to be very different from those which impact slam participants who operate transnationally. Because they formed only a small part of this study's sample however, drawing any concrete conclusions about this group is problematic. Until further research on these individuals is

conducted, then, we must content ourselves with the observation that there are a range of power relations which affect slam participants' performances of identity, and that these vary, depending on the actors involved and their position in local, translocal and transnational slam communities.

Before moving on to Chapter Eleven, it is worth remarking on two other groups which could be studied more in order to enrich this analysis still further. Firstly, there is some indication that there may be important distinctions between BME dominated and majority 'white' performance poetry/slam communities. I have resisted drawing any firm conclusions about this here, since to do so would risk over-simplifying a rich and complex area. Secondly, whilst the impact of U.S. based slam on its British cousin is apparent in participants' discourse, and was often clearly visible in the slams I observed, the reverse effect is much more subtle. It is very difficult to isolate and analyse the influence of U.K. on U.S. slam using research which spans only a relatively period of short time. There are a number of avenues which future studies could pursue in order to address this. One could, for instance, map the changes in U.K. and U.S. based slam poetry over a period of time and look for correlations between them, or look for any change in U.S. slam participants' discourse/poetry before, during and after their involvement with U.K. based slam. It is clear, then, that this analysis offers valuable insights, which suggest a wealth of paths that researchers could follow to establish more in-depth knowledge of, not only poetry slam, but also art worlds, identity performances and the negotiation of power relations more generally.

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Globalisation  
Pens America's shadow  
On local art worlds.

**Chapter Eleven: Youth Slam, the Education System and the Dominant  
Literary World**

Audiences {for contemporary poetry} are slim and poetry books reach small sales figures, but the art form itself has many practitioners ... and is searching for a new status in society.

~ Open College of the Arts (2007: 18-19)

... many of the forays across the great cultural divide are part of a struggle for cultural capital, on the part of both high- and low-culture groups. This is why these overtly friendly encounters also exude a certain amount of mutual hostility, a mutual attraction unmistakably laced with distrust.

~ Bernard Gendron (2002: 6)

Slam was established partly as a response to perceived flaws in the dominant literary world. Marc Smith has said that he wanted slam to stand apart from the academy; to be accessible, relevant and engaging, in a manner in which 'academic' poetry could not, or would not, be (see for example Smith, 1999c). In many respects, slam continues to define itself in this way, and the academy maintains its salience for many U.K. and U.S. based slam participants. As a successful and growing global phenomenon, which both directly and indirectly sets itself against this world, slam could be viewed as presenting a challenge to dominant literary conventions and thus to the cultural capital of those who rely upon such conventions. Whilst the relationship between slam and the dominant literary world may be, to use Gendron's (ibid) words, 'unmistakeably laced with distrust', it is also one of 'mutual attraction' however. Interactions between these domains are on the upsurge, with 'academic' and slam poets increasingly publishing, performing and teaching alongside one another. This interaction finds its ultimate expression in youth slam.

The current chapter explores the discourse and other actions of youth slam participants, including mentors, promoters and audiences of youth slams, and school teachers and young people participating in youth slam programmes.

Particular attention is paid to the slam-academy relationship and to the role of youth slam in the education system. These data are analysed with a view to explicating the ways in which members of dominant art worlds and new artistic movements may interact, and the implications of this for the sustainability of cultural capital in the light of newly emerging artistic conventions and discourses.

Unlike the previous two chapters, this chapter explores the (re)construction of slam in different social, rather than geographical, contexts. Distinctions between geographical sites are not made here for three key reasons. Firstly, although such contrasts can undoubtedly be drawn, the similarities between youth slam across different locales are much more striking. Secondly, youth slam became a focus of this study fairly late in the research process, only after I had collected data in the U.S.. Practical constraints meant that I could not return to the country to collect additional data and was forced to concentrate further efforts on the U.K.. Thirdly, youth slams are generally held less frequently than adult slams, with many organisations staging only one or two such events a year. This limited the number which I could observe in any given location, requiring me to travel further afield in order to collect sufficient data. For these reasons, this chapter relies principally on data drawn from youth slams and related events observed in London, Leeds and Bromsgrove in the U.K., and Chicago in the U.S., and interviews with youth slam participants in London, Leeds, Plymouth, Cheltenham and Bristol in the U.K., and Chicago and New York in the U.S..

The discussion which follows is split into four main parts: Section 11.1 begins with a consideration of the relationship between slam and the academy, as seen through the eyes of slam participants. 11.2 continues by presenting participants' discourse around youth slam, with a particular focus on the realisation of youth slam within the education system, and youth slam's role in facilitating interactions between slam and the academy. The following two sections then analyse these data, exploring how individuals use youth slam to secure favourable positions within the complexes of power relations that structure slam and the academy. Section 11.3 considers the role of youth slam

as a site within which members of these worlds are able to interact to mutual benefit, without either group appearing to have lost ground or compromised their distinct beliefs and values. Section 11.4, meanwhile, analyses what this discussion can tell us about the ways in which individuals perform their identities so as to negotiate successfully the complex power relations which structure their everyday interactions.

### **11.1 Slam and the Academy: Interactions and Oppositions**

The relationship between slam and the dominant literary world proved to be salient for many research participants. Key words relating to this topic were mentioned an average of 3.64 and 6.86 times per interview in the U.K. and U.S. respectively (see section 7.3). This difference was not statistically significant, suggesting that the relationship is of equal concern to participants in both countries. Many of the references reflect criticisms by slam participants of the dominant literary world and vice versa, often framed in terms of a clash between performance or stage poetry and what is seen as being more traditional, page poetry. As Kurt Heintz (Chicago) puts it, ‘inevitably people fall victim to the page versus stage dilemma’.

Many slam participants, then, are keen to highlight the prevalence of negative portrayals of slam within the dominant literary world.

There’s detractors in the, what I call proper poetry or page poetry scene, who come down from their ivory towers and criticise slam and say “It’s not real. It’s not real poetry. It’s just performing. It’s too popular. It doesn’t really express people’s feelings” and all this sort of stuff. (Mike Flint, Bristol)

Others report attempts to sideline slam and slam poets, telling tales of rejection or marginalization from literary publications and events. Jude Simpson (previously based in London), for instance, notes that ‘a slam will usually be part of the fringe of a literature festival, sort of looked at almost like the noisy toddler



of the poetry world'. Lynne Procope (New York), meanwhile, suggests that such negative perceptions may lead artists to dissociate themselves from slam, in an attempt to safeguard their artistic reputations:

People who are aspiring to academia are afraid to be aligned with slam ... academia in this country particularly is so elitist and so much the bastion of the privileged that if you can get your leg in there, you certainly don't want your work to then be labelled either as 'spoken word' or as 'slam poetry'.

To some extent this claim is substantiated by my analysis of secondary data sources and informal conversations with poets allying themselves to the dominant literary world. It is certainly not difficult to locate critiques of slam amongst such sources. Perhaps the most striking of these is literary critic Harold Bloom's (2000: 379) description of the for(u)m as representing the 'death of art'. The scant attention which slam has received from researchers and other academic scholars could also be interpreted as a rejection of the for(u)m by the academy.

Slam participants often return this hostility, in what Steve Tasane (London) describes as an 'inverted snobbery from performance poets who consider that page poetry is elitist and inaccessible'. As discussed previously, this distaste for academic poetry has characterised slam from the outset. Indeed, the for(u)m was established not simply to provide an alternative to academic poetry, but to act as a critical commentary on it. This is clearly apparent in the use of randomly selected audience members as judges. Thus, Bob Holman (New York) draws attention to 'the mockery {slam} makes of the academic critic, by saying that anybody can be a critic'. In line with this, academic poetry may be portrayed by slam participants as elitist, and 'traditional' poetry readings as justifiably unappealing to the wo/man on the street.

It's very difficult to get people into poetry. And the reason for that is very, very, very simple, which is that most poetry readings, quasi-poetry readings i.e. not performance poetry, not performances, are dreadful and tedious and the poetry isn't very good. (Brett Van Toen, London)

Slam, in contrast, is depicted as being accessible, relevant and entertaining. As Caroline Jackson (Bristol) puts it: 'people have a perception of slam as being exciting, accessible, perhaps more rooted in everyday life. It's certainly not perceived with a lot of the negative baggage that page poetry and readings have'.

This opposition to the discourses and conventions of the dominant literary world was also apparent at many of the slam events which I observed, including both of the Uptown Poetry Slams I attended in Chicago. On one of these occasions, for example, the host sparred enthusiastically with an audience judge whom he identified as a university professor; whilst the other evening saw the guest poet being forced to cut her set short after the audience clicked (fingers), muttered and heckled their disapproval. One participant whom I spoke to later put this poor reception down to the poet reading her work from the page, something which is associated more with 'traditional' poetry readings than with slam.

Nonetheless, many slam participants are keen to stress the need to develop a more friendly relationship between slam and the dominant literary world. Indeed, despite his apparent hostility towards the academy, the host of these Uptown Poetry Slams also asserted that it was time to 'put an end' to past rivalries. This is supported by Bob Holman (New York):

Academics have to get over the prejudice that these people don't know anything and {have} only written three poems apiece, and the slammers have to get over the prejudice that these people are boring, you know. But that's happening, and as more and more poets are coming through the performance world {slam's} naturally just gonna seep more and more into the culture. There's gonna be more crossover.

As discussed in Chapters Three and Six, there is indeed increasing crossover between these worlds. Kurt Heintz (Chicago) gestures towards this, saying, 'in the early days I remember clearly we felt like we were trying to tear down the ivory towers; now we're actually looking to them for our pay cheques'. Similarly, more and more scholars are choosing to study slam, and there has been a

recent burst of scholarly attention directed at the for(u)m by postgraduate researchers (particularly in North America).

In addition, many slam participants are keen to emphasise the involvement of academic poets in slam or the adoption of slam conventions and discourses by members of the academy. Thus, Lisa Buscani (Chicago) suggests that ‘our initial attempts at theatricality and becoming more skilled as readers and things like that have influenced mainstream poetry’, whilst John Paul O’Neill (London) says of Farrago that ‘you find if the page poet wants to connect different generations, different kinds of poetry, that they will make the effort to come and read at the club’. This acknowledgement of interactions between slam and the dominant literary world is reflected in slam discourse more generally, and there are signs of movement towards a cessation of the old hostilities. In New York, for instance, louderARTS is often portrayed as the more literary of the city’s three main slam venues, and receives much praise for this status, particularly amongst slam ‘veterans’. Similarly, many U.K. poets with whom I spoke were keen to perform/publish in both slam and more academic for(u)ms.

Correspondingly, interactions between slam and the academy are allied with a reluctance amongst slam participants to confine themselves to what many view as the potentially restrictive for(u)m of slam. As discussed earlier, labels like ‘slam poet’ and ‘slam poetry’ are often seen as unhelpful (particularly in the U.K.), pigeon holing artists into artificially constructed categories and limiting the kinds of work which they are expected to produce. From this perspective, the page-stage dichotomy serves merely to close off opportunities to poets and other slam participants.

It’s very easy for us to say “Okay. That’s performance poetry more than poetry or more than page poetry” and kind of set up these dichotomies; but myself and a range of the poets that I work with, we kind of appreciate strong poetry in a wider sense. (Jacob Sam-La Rose, London)

Whilst hostility between participants of slam and the academy remains, then, the gap between the two is reducing. There is growing overlap between the poets, promoters, events and venues of these two worlds, and increasing intersection between their respective conventions and discourses. This is particularly exemplified in youth slam, where slam poets, academic poets and educators work together and the boundaries between these groups are noticeably blurred.

## **11.2 Youth Poetry Slam: A Meeting of Minds**

This section considers slam participants' discourse around youth slam, focusing in particular on the ways in which individuals working in this context enable the worlds of slam and the academy to interact with one another. Youth slam workers select conventions and discourses from both of these worlds, and, in so doing, construct a new realm which is poised somewhere between them. Youth slam programmes typically have an educational focus and slam poets suggest that they are often brought into schools to spice up the curriculum, teaching old skills and subjects to students in new and exciting ways. Youth slam is thus perceived to provide the best of both worlds.

### **11.2.1 The Use of Dominant Literary Conventions in Youth Slam**

Poets working in youth slam adopt a line which is more accepting of the institutions, discourses and conventions of the academy. When Kadijah Ibrahim, performance poet and Director of Leeds Young Authors, introduced me to her students, for instance, she was enthusiastic about my research, suggesting that the representation of students' 'achievements' in my thesis was almost as good as being on television. Similarly, Soul Thomas Evans, (New York) notes that slam poets may pitch slam and spoken word to schools by saying that ' "we're teaching your youth how to be more confident, more eloquent and more well read" '. This apparent willingness to traverse the borders between slam and the academy is supported by the choice of 'favourite poets' made by young participants in the 2006 Word Cup slam. These chosen

favourites range from Tupac Shakur to Maya Angelou to William Shakespeare (Apples and Snakes, 2006c).

Rather than being portrayed as its rival, slam is here seen as something which can collaborate with academic poetry to the benefit of both arts. Thus, Chicago based spoken word educator, Peter Kahn, suggests that slam gives young people 'an avenue to show off essentially an academic skill, writing ... and it usually builds their academic confidence and engagement and they become better students.' Urban Word NYC's (2006) promotional materials go even further, stating that 'the poetry slam adds a competitive element to the traditional poetry reading'. This statement serves to package slam as something which simply puts a new spin on academic poetry, rather than representing a drastic move away from it.

This acceptance of dominant literary conventions inevitably entails a rejection of some of the characteristics of adult slam. Indeed, youth slam workers like Peter Kahn are often very critical of adult slam, suggesting that youth programmes are able to produce much higher quality work:

I do think the writing in youth slams is superior to the writing in adult slams. I think adult slams have become very much rant based, stand-up comedy based, and they become a big cliché. I think youth slams have a little bit more freshness to the writing, and I would put on the page your better youth slammers' writing, up against your better adult slammers' writing, pretty much hands down.

Youth slam participants often seek to overcome the limitations which they associate with adult slam. Rather than randomly selecting judges from the audience, for instance, many youth slams appoint professional writers and slam poets to the role. Thus, the West Midlands Youth Poetry Slam event, which I observed in March 2007 used two performance poets and one member of theatre staff as judges,<sup>192</sup> whilst the Rise! Slam Quarter Finals in April 2007 saw

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<sup>192</sup> The West Midlands Youth Poetry Slam Project was set up by Spoz Productions in 2006. The slam which I observed was the regional final for middle schools in the area, and was the

the scores of audience judges adjusted by moderators from the Poetry Society. The Lynk Reach slams, meanwhile, supply judges with scoring guidelines which address content, writing style, team collaboration and performance. Peter Kahn takes a similar approach in Chicago, emphasising the benefits of this system over adult slam scoring procedures:

We made it important that there is some sort of rubric involved, that stresses imagery and metaphor and aversion to cliché. While on the adult scene, my sense is a lot of the clichés are the buttons that get pushed to get audience response, 'cause if you have an audience that doesn't know anything about poetry, they're not gonna be as appreciative of a unique metaphor as they are something they've heard before that they can grasp right away.

#### 11.2.2 Youth Slam as an Educational Tool

Youth slams are rarely held in isolation and are frequently embedded within a broader syllabus. The slam itself has a special status within these programmes, but is rarely the end of the story.

The backbone of Leeds Young Authors is the slam. That's the one thing that keeps the kids coming is the poetry slam, but there's a range of things behind all of Leeds Young Authors that we do. (Kadijah Ibrahim, Leeds)

Whilst a slam event may span a mere two or three hours, youth slam programmes range from day long workshops to a regular series of year-round activities. This longevity is apparent in the application which Apples and Snakes sent to the Arts Council when seeking funding for the Word Cup slam:

We plan to continue working with each of the partners {youth slam workers} after the tour and are talking about how as a sector we could develop an ongoing national project for young poets. (Apples and Snakes, 2006b)

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culmination of a series of day long workshops and slams run by Giovanni Esposito (Esposito, in correspondence, 10 February 2009).

Youth slams, then, are often used to shine a spotlight on a range of other activities, providing students with an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learnt, and organisers and educators with a high profile occasion in which to advertise their work and institutions. In this context, slam's role as a competitive, entertaining event is downplayed in favour of more enduring, overarching aims. Thus, performance poet and coordinator of the London-based Rise! slams, Joelle Taylor, contends that 'we're not terribly interested in finding the winners ... what we're looking for are artists'. Similarly, the organisers of the West Midlands Youth Poetry Slam sought to de-emphasise competition by indicating which teams had achieved first, second and third place without announcing any individual scores.

It is clear that discourses around youth slam have a strong didactic quality, with teaching being seen as integral to youth slam programmes. Thus, Lynk Reach's (2006) website declares a focus 'on forging partnerships in the education, arts, community and health sectors, with the aim of raising achievement', whilst Young Chicago Authors' site (YCA, 2006b) states that the organisation:

... supports partnerships between schools/community centers and teaching writers through year-round resources, including a roster of YCA-recommended teaching writers, curriculum resources, in services, assembly readings, and assistance to schools/community centers in designing effective writing programs.

Compared with adult slam, youth slam programmes place less emphasis on the quality of newcomers' work. This reflects the idea that performance and writing skills can and should be taught to young people. As Peter Kahn (Chicago) notes, when talking about the after-school club which forms part of his youth slam programme, 'kids that seem to have potential or might want to join {can}, and it's really open to anybody ... it's not dependent on skill level or anything'. Youth slam workers often portray youth slam as aiding students' personal and academic development, emphasising its ability to enhance 'support, community

and building' (Mahogany Browne, New York). For many youth slam participants, it is these learning and development opportunities which give the for(u)m its true meaning. Accordingly, Steve Tasane (London) criticises one youth slam, which was held as a standalone event:

To me it seems to have no context and as such it might as well just be a game of Connect Four. If the kids don't have anywhere to take it afterwards, like any way of developing it, then it's simply pleasure.

Youth slams must thus be seen as having a function which is greater than mere entertainment, and this typically focuses on teaching young people new subjects and skills. Particular emphasis is placed here on slam as a means of enthusing young people into poetry, improving their creativity and literacy. As Jacob Sam-La Rose (London) puts it, 'we work more towards using slam as a way of making poetry accessible for young people'. Youth slam, then, is often seen (by slam poets and school teachers alike) as assisting teachers in their quest to teach young people the literary canon.

I would have thought this would be a fabulous way in {to literature}. One of the kids {in the youth slam programme} ... his passion for words and the quality of language that he uses in his work is astounding. It really is. ... He is making and creating art, and I believe that he would approach anything like Yeats or Shakespeare with an awful lot more confidence than others, because isn't there an appreciation? (Catrina Garratt, Advanced Skills Teacher, Stoke Damerel Community College, Plymouth)

In this way, youth slam may aid, rather than oppose, the academy, encouraging and supporting young people to succeed within the traditional education system. As Urban Word NYC, organisers of New York City's annual Youth Speaks slam, note in their promotional materials:

Our many workshops are designed to enhance critical thinking skills, leadership and to ignite a personal commitment to growth and learning which leads to heightened in-school performance and greater interest in pursuing higher education. (Urban Word NYC, 2006)



In addition, youth slam is often viewed as engaging young people who would otherwise fall through the gaps of the education system, being unwilling or unable to benefit from the ways in which literacy and other subjects are traditionally taught in the classroom. As one teacher said of the London-based Westminster Poetry Slam, 'the performance side encourages children of all abilities to participate fully and enthusiastically' (Unnamed teacher quoted in East-Side Educational Trust, 2006: 7). Peter Kahn (Chicago) supports this view:

HG: So what do you see as the purpose of doing these youth slams?

PK: I see an educational benefit, where it's using competition to help get kids to work on their writing and performance skills, and through the process, it often engages kids who aren't normally engaged in academics and it gives them an avenue to show off essentially an academic skill, writing ... and it usually builds their academic confidence and engagement and they become better students.

These young people are often portrayed, both implicitly and explicitly, as being from groups which are marginalized within wider society (so that this discourse can be seen to be tied up with the promotion of diversity in slam which was discussed in Chapter Nine). As one website says of the Urban Word NYC programme:

*Urban Word's Vision* is to build a community of young leaders, writers, spoken word and hip-hop artists who, through self-awareness and enhanced critical thought, help {to} alter<sup>193</sup> the socio-economic pathway constructed for inner city youth, from marginalization toward one of empowerment, tolerance and social responsibility. (Perez, 2009: Para. 3)

Slam is thus perceived as supplying something which the traditional education system lacks. This is highlighted by the teaching materials and workshops

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<sup>193</sup> The original text reads 'after' instead of 'alter'. This is, however, almost certainly a misprint.

which a number of youth slam organisations supply to schools (see for example The Poetry Society, 2007c). Further, there is a suggestion that, as visiting artists/educators, slam poets are able to reach students in ways which their regular teachers may be unable to.

{Young people often} don't think that the teachers really know what's going on, and I think people that actually do come into schools and do after-school projects, I think the young people really think that they know what they're talking about or they see them as a bit more hip. (Serena Brooks, Leeds)

Interestingly, a similar story was told by those young slam participants with whom I spoke. Two of the Leeds Young Authors poets, for example, recounted how they had been disillusioned with poetry (and school in general) before they became involved in the youth slam programme and realised that poetry could be 'cool and fun', 'not dry like Shakespeare'. Young people's attentiveness and enthusiasm to learn was also noticeable at these workshops and many other youth slam events which I observed. Poetry slam, then, is often viewed by poets, teachers (and young slam participants) as providing a tool for teaching literacy in a way which is relevant and interesting to young people.

### 11.2.3 Youth Slam and Hip Hop

This perceived ability to provide new ways of engaging young people in the school curriculum is exemplified by the association of youth slam with hip hop. Slam poets, school teachers and young people often package these arts together. One teacher who participated in the London-based Westminster Poetry Slam, for instance, praised the programme for helping 'me to understand the importance of recognising rap' (unnamed teacher quoted in East-Side Educational Trust, 2006: 7). Similarly Jonathan Yates, former slam poet and Director of Speak Out New York,<sup>194</sup> comments:

Schools want us to come and teach teachers how to utilise hip hop in the classroom, how to get kids to write by using hip hop (moves) or how to

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<sup>194</sup> Names of interviewee and organisation changed at interviewee's request.

get kids to study history by using hip hop. So validating the things that are closest to the young people is really what's important to us.

This connection between hip hop and slam was reinforced throughout many of the youth slam events I observed. The Rise! Slam Inset workshop which I attended, for example, saw co-ordinator Joelle Taylor make frequent links between rap, slam and academic poetry, even rapping some lines from Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*.<sup>195</sup> Hip hop fashions and writing/performance styles are also evident in many young slammers' performances.

Hip hop is not always so evident or actively encouraged however. It was certainly less dominant in the West Midlands Youth Poetry slam than the Rise! slams which I observed, for instance, and the minimal use of rap at the former event was not welcomed by all those present. Nonetheless, slam and hip hop remain strongly connected for many, and a number of youth slam participants with whom I spoke told of having been brought into schools to teach both arts. The association of slam with hip hop is often used to underscore the claim that youth slam workers can engage students in a way that more traditional forms may not. As Soul Thomas Evans (New York) says of a slam poet friend:

He does a thing in the schools, where they teach about how hip hop is spoken word and how hip hop can be used to get kids more into English, and schools are all into that, because they have whole sectors of our society where the kids are so much into hip hop and they can literally recite every lyric from their favourite rap artists, but they can't tell you, for example, what they're reading. Obviously they're smart enough that they can remember five or six rap songs in a row. They can be just as smart in maybe memorising some of their written material in English class.

This observation is reinforced by the Leeds Young Authors students I mentioned earlier, who told me how they embraced poetry when it was associated with rapper Tupac Shakur, rather than with Shakespeare. It is also

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<sup>195</sup> This two hour workshop, held at The Poetry Society's headquarters in London, was aimed at school teachers and other educators participating in the 2007 Rise! Slam.

a sentiment shared by many school teachers who have participated in youth slam programmes. As Catrina Garratt (Plymouth) notes:

It's interesting that boys, a lot of boys, have really loved this, and you know, one might find that quite surprising, but maybe that's the rap element, certainly the beatboxing. I work in a school where working class boys particularly underachieve, particularly in English ... This is one of the ways in which they can raise their aspirations and also find their own voice.

The frequent conflation of slam with spoken word forms like hip hop, then, helps to extend slam poets' educational utility beyond the bounds of youth slam itself.

#### 11.2.4 Slam and the Confines of the Curriculum

Youth slam is frequently portrayed as offering a way to break out of the confines of a strictly regulated curriculum, which many school teachers perceive as stultifying.

From the school's point of view I suppose it's inspiring in a way to give the kids something outside the box that's extra curricular, and it feeds your imagination. And I think, speaking on behalf of teachers, the national curriculum at the minute ... is really, really dry. There's not much scope for creativity in there, which is a real shame. (Kate Midgley, English teacher in a Leeds secondary school)

Youth slam workers are often keenly aware of these concerns and the role which slam can play in addressing them.

The school slam is special, because I think, like I said, it really gives a voice to young people in an environment where education is led by "You've got to do this module, and you've gotta do this". (Serena Brooks, Leeds)

Slam is thus seen as providing a means for school teachers to meet the demands of the curriculum, whilst offering something over and above the everyday routine of the classroom. It is often portrayed as a mechanism for placing learning in the hands of young people themselves, enabling them to fulfil their potential within the formal education system.

Within an English-based classroom there's so much pressure to get through the curriculum - and x, y, z criteria has to be taught for them to pass – that it can often be difficult to get the creative edge in there as well. But this {youth slam programme} is just totally outside the box, and it allows them to express themselves and be free and it's just fantastic.  
(Kate Midgley, Leeds)

This provision for self-expression is echoed in the refrain 'today my voice has been heard' in the poem *Exceptions*, which was written by pupils at Holloway School for the 2004 Lynk Reach slams (Hamilton *et al.*, 2004: 14-17).

Further, from the perspectives of many of its participants, youth slam offers opportunities which stretch beyond the borders of the academic world. Kadijah Ibrahim, for instance, argues that many of the young people involved in Leeds Young Authors are not succeeding within the education system 'and they can't actually see a better future in terms of work'. She suggests that youth slam presents these young people with an alternative possible future; one in which they can use their skills as poets and spoken word artists to succeed, regardless of academic qualifications. Kadijah tells the story of a former member of Leeds Young Authors, who left school with poor academic qualifications and became a dinner lady, but is now beginning to realise that there are other possibilities open to her, and that her activities as a radio DJ could provide more than simply a hobby:

She's the youngest DJ on the pirate radio station. She's been doing it for five years, and she said to me the other day, she went "I realise, you know, what I've been doing is I've actually developed this skill as a DJ, and I'm a poet and I'm a performer." I think she's nineteen now and

she's saying "What can I actually do with this?" you know "Where can I actually go with this?"

Similarly, one young slammer featuring in the recent Rise! Slam promotional DVD declares that the programme has shown him that 'whatever you set your mind to you can do', 'not just poetry' (The Poetry Society, 2006).

#### 11.2.5 The Permeation of Slam Conventions and Discourses into the Academy

Whilst youth slam allows slam poets the opportunity to participate in the education system, academic poetry organisations are becoming increasingly involved in youth slam. This development is apparent in the growing number of 'academic' journals and anthologies publishing the work of slam poets. As Joelle Taylor (London) remarks:

*Poetry Review* recently got two of my SLAMBassadors<sup>196</sup> to write an article about their work, which has been fantastic, 'cause *Poetry Review* is the posh poetry, what people mostly call a 'quarterly body', slim volume, in the U.K., and it's an international publication as well, and it was giving, not only young people a voice for the first time, but young spoken word artists.

Slam is not seen simply as a way of attracting young people into the dominant literary world however. Poets working in youth slam not only use methods which diverge from those associated with educational establishments, they also emphasise different aims, seeking to promote young people as poets whose work exists on both page and stage. Thus, Joelle Taylor sees the Rise! slams as enabling young people to develop careers as 'professional spoken word artists', saying:

If they win I mentor them for a whole year, and that includes getting them gigs, trying to get them book deals, trying to get them CDs, matching

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<sup>196</sup> The SLAMBassadors group was set up and run by Joelle Taylor as a means of allowing students to continue attending writing and performance workshops after having competed in the Rise! Slam Championships.

them with producers, and, you know, obviously gigs, writing workshops, performance workshops.

Similarly, the Westminster Poetry Slam organisers note that:

As well as fulfilling the demands of the curriculum with enriching literacy work, the Slam process engaged children in all stages of producing, listening to and performing live performance poetry in a real theatre to a large public audience. (East-Side Educational Trust, 2006:8)

Others assert the ability of youth slams to attract large paying audiences, which allows them to be financially self-sustaining.

We get huge audiences. For the past three years we've sold out fifteen hundred seat auditoriums. This year we're gonna have a two thousand seat auditorium, a big opera house in Brooklyn, and it's gonna probably be the biggest slam in New York City history. (Jonathan Yates, New York)

In this way, youth slam workers continue to emphasise many of the artistic conventions and discourses of slam, such as the oral performance of poetry and the importance of writing and delivering work which is accessible to a wide audience. This is apparent, not only in conversations with youth slam workers, but also in their promotional materials and in the words of young slammers themselves. Thus, images of microphones feature prominently in materials produced by Lynk Reach, Rise! and other organisations, whilst Urban Word NYC (2006) make much use of a quotation from one young slam participant, who proclaims that 'spoken word is our generation's rebel music'.

### **11.3 Youth Slam as a 'Cultural Performance' of Negotiation**

So far, this chapter has focused on presenting youth slam and the relationship between slam and the dominant literary world from the perspectives of individuals who teach, perform, promote and otherwise participate in the

for(u)m. The following two sections analyse these data. It will be argued that, whilst there remains a certain degree of mutual distrust and hostility between slam and the academy, there are signs of increasing interaction between these worlds, and that youth slam provides an ideal site in which this can take place. Youth slam's educational focus means that it works in cooperation with the academy, lubricating, rather than blocking, young people's access to the literary canon and the dominant literary world. This offers slam participants a preferential alternative to wholesale exclusion from, or absorption into, the academy, enabling members of both communities to derive mutual benefits, without appearing to have compromised their relatively distinct ideals, discourses and hierarchies.

Slam poets thus stand to enrich their cultural capital and gain entrance into the academy without impairing their subcultural capital. Academic poets and school teachers, meanwhile, can benefit from an association with slam's subcultural capital and comparative popularity, whilst preserving their own cultural capital and relatively powerful position within the hegemonic meta-structure of the literary world. Following Turner (1969), it is therefore possible to view youth slams as 'types of cultural performances', which operate 'as sites of negotiation where disagreements with the normative established order are played out' (quoted in Sibley, 2001:182).

### 11.3.1 Slam and the Academy: Conflict and Cooperation

There has long been hostility between participants in slam and the dominant literary world. Members of the academy have sought to marginalize slam, portraying it as an artless form of entertainment, which values performance over writing quality, and which cheapens poetry by placing it within a competitive framework. Slam, meanwhile, was established partly as a critique of this world, which, in turn, was depicted as dull, inaccessible and outdated. Section 11.1 demonstrates that this animosity continues to hold sway. Many slam participants are keen to highlight the criticisms directed towards slam by the critics and poets of the dominant literary world, countering these with their own denigration of the academy.



Slam participants are conscious of a certain stigma around poetry in the U.S. and U.K.. Rather than denying the validity of this, they seek to distance themselves from it, locating the source of such stigma in academic, rather than slam, poetry. Slam is thus frequently portrayed as a viable alternative to the dominant literary world, a distinctive for(u)m which can make poetry entertaining, accessible and attractive to new audiences. Through this, the for(u)m is packaged and branded as a marketable product.

Slam participants thus present a challenge to the dominant literary world which is both direct and indirect, questioning explicitly the superior position of academic poetry in the artistic hierarchy and promoting discourses and conventions which appear to be at odds with those of the academy. Slam poets strive to take the place of academic poets in the hegemonic meta-structure, reversing the current order which places literary, 'page' poetry at the top of the status hierarchy and performance poetry firmly at the bottom.

The academic critique of slam can be seen as a move to counter this challenge, as members of the academy seek to protect their reputation, resources and relatively powerful status. Such critiques seek to deny slam the status of a true art form and exclude it from the institutions of the dominant literary world. This outright exclusion has proven to be somewhat problematic however. As Lynne Procope (New York) observes:

You keep something elite by tagging everything else and keeping it out  
... {but} slam performers, spoken word artists have a viable audience,  
and it's something that the academic world is going to have to deal with.

Whilst slam remains a relatively marginal phenomenon, it has become perhaps the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Slams and related events air regularly on the internet, radio and television, and are held in numerous cities across the U.K., the U.S. and elsewhere. Simultaneously, the for(u)m is attracting growing media attention on both local and national levels. It seems that slam just won't shut up.

Members of the academic poetry community, then, cannot simply erase slam. Yet the for(u)m's continued opposition to the academy means that it cannot be absorbed wholesale either. The most efficacious way forward would seem to be for slam and the academy to interact somehow. In this way, slam may become part of the dominant art world which it was initially defined against (as in Kadushin's, 1976: 117 notion of 'movement circles'). Participants in both worlds stand to reap rewards from such an interaction. Slam may become accepted as a legitimate art form by members of the academy, allowing slam participants access to its prestigious institutions, whilst academic poets may capitalise on slam's growing appeal with a relatively broad audience base. As indicated previously, there is evidence of such a relationship developing and of decreasing opposition between these two worlds. Slam and academic poets are increasingly publishing, performing and teaching alongside one another. Accordingly, members of both groups now reject the polarisation of these domains as artificial and unhelpful, seeking to adapt their conventions and discourses to enable greater interaction between them. This convergence finds its ultimate expression in youth slam.

#### 11.3.2 Mutual Benefits: The Utility of Youth Slam in the Academy

As indicated in subsection 11.2.1, youth slam workers have adopted many of the conventions and discourses of the dominant literary world. In doing so, they often take on elements of the academic critique of (adult) slam, portraying it as being overly competitive, providing poor mechanisms for judging the quality of poetry, and producing work which lacks variety and depth. Many youth slam workers seek to overcome these limitations. They may undermine slam's 'mockery' of the academic critic, for instance, by utilising scoring rubrics or appointing professional judges, rather than leaving scoring to unguided audience members. Similarly, youth slam competitions frequently differ from adult slams by being embedded within a broader programme of activities, which are aimed at developing young people's writing and performance skills.

Whilst many youth slam workers are participants in adult poetry slam, having organised, attended and performed at slam events, their critique of this world

sets them apart from (adult) slam. Indeed, a number of youth slam participants with whom I spoke were keen to emphasise that they no longer competed in adult slams and/or had misgivings about them. Youth slam workers are not wholly part of the academic community either however. Slam poets may work in schools, for instance, but they typically do so as visiting artists/educators hired on a contractual basis for a limited period of time.

In many respects then, youth slam workers operate in a kind of no-man's land, midway between (adult) slam and the academy. Indeed, poets who work in youth slam could be understood, not as representatives of adult slam seeking to infiltrate the dominant literary world, but as the primary agents through whom the conventions of both worlds are reworked. Their outsider status is highlighted by the fact that many such poets carry out their work through pre-existing organisations which only later incorporated youth slams. Thus they would seem to owe their allegiance neither to slam nor to the academy. This in-between status is also apparent in the discourse of young slammers' themselves, as conveyed through their informal conversation, their choice of favourite poets and, of course, their poetry.

Because they are outsiders, both to the dominant literary world and to the educational institution, youth slam workers can use tools which are not readily available to members of these communities. They have more freedom to perform poetry and use teaching methods which diverge from the norm for these domains. For young people, this outsider status can also give slam poets an air of being hip, which their teachers may be perceived as lacking. Thus, slam poets may find it easier to gain the admiration and respect of young people in schools. Just as youth slams operate, not as isolated events, but as high profile elements of more long term educational programmes, then, the utility of slam poets is portrayed as extending beyond the bounds of youth slam itself. Poets are often brought in by schools to teach literacy and other subjects to young people, not simply by holding slam events, but by using associated forms and approaches which are perceived as being able to engage students more generally. The association of youth slam with hip hop provides an apt illustration of this.

The influence of hip hop culture is readily apparent in many youth slams, with young poets performing in freestyle<sup>197</sup> or rap poetry, beatboxing and sporting hip hop fashions. In part, this reflects the influence which hip hop has had on the development of adult slam; however, whilst many participants in adult slam are keen to distance themselves from hip hop, youth slam workers have a far less problematic relationship with the genre. Many workers recognise the potential of hip hop as a teaching aid and seek to capitalise on its popularity, mobilising hip hop forms and culture in their slams, workshops and other events (see for example Low, 2001). In this sense, youth slams provide a bridge through which schools can connect traditional curricula subjects to youth culture.

For school teachers this can prove to be a welcome respite from the rigours of the curriculum, giving both them and their students the opportunity to be creative, ticking the boxes they need to tick, whilst teaching important skills which they feel are neglected elsewhere. Clearly there are also benefits here for slam poets. Their ability to meet this demand and provide a means for educating more 'difficult' students, means that slam poets can legitimately work in schools alongside academic poets, without being seen as becoming absorbed into the academic institutions of which they are often so critical. This work is more likely to be long-term, providing poets with a relatively regular and secure source of income, as well as greater access to funding opportunities for future projects.

In particular, youth slam workers are often portrayed as being able to address the needs of young people who are marginalized within the education system. These include boys (in the context of English language/literature), BME individuals and 'urban' youth; the latter being an implicit reference to young working class pupils. There is a clear congruence between this discourse and the promotion of diversity within adult slam, which was discussed in Chapter Nine. That the targeting of these groups by youth slam participants fits so well with the aims of school teachers and other educational practitioners

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<sup>197</sup> Freestyle is an improvisational form of rap, which typically uses fast-paced rhythms and heavy internal rhyming. (The online rap dictionary <http://www.rapdict.org> provides useful definitions for this and other hip hop terms. See also <http://www.flocabulary.com/freestylerap.html> for more on freestyling.)

demonstrates that the discourse and conventions of slam and the academy can, and often do, meet within the context of youth slam.

By interacting with each other in this way, then, school teachers and slam poets are able to negotiate successfully power relations which impact significantly on their everyday lives and identities. School teachers may more easily satisfy the demands of their students and of a curriculum which is imposed on them by powerful others, preserving their own creativity in the process. Slam poets, meanwhile, may gain access to the corridors of the academy, distancing themselves from some of the criticisms which have been directed at slam by members of the dominant literary world, whilst reasserting slam's value as a productive, meaningful and accessible art for(u)m.

### 11.3.3 The Quiet Revolution of Poetry Slam

This interaction between slam and the dominant literary world not only presents a means through which the cultural currency of slam poets and school teachers may be enriched, it also allows academic poets to cross over into slam and reap the benefits of the for(u)m's (relative) popularity. Rather than face the risk of being drawn down to the level of mere competitors, as is the danger in adult slams, youth slam enables 'academic' poets to take up a position of authority, by acting as mentors, patrons, judges or critics. Further, they can do so in the institutions conventionally associated with the dominant literary world, such as theatres, schools and universities, avoiding the clubs and bars in which adult slams are commonly held. During his term as U.K. Poet Laureate, for instance, Andrew Motion reviewed the Rise! Slam's quarter final at Jackson's Lane Theatre in Archway for *Time Out* magazine (Motion, 2006). Similarly, youth slams frequently use 'academic' poets as judges, alongside rap, slam and spoken word artists. In addition, an increasing number of organisations associated with the dominant literary world are becoming involved in youth slam. Not least amongst these is the long established and highly respected British institution, The Poetry Society, which organises and helps to fund the London based Rise! slams (see The Poetry Society, 2007a). The involvement

of such organisations lends slam an air of respectability and paves the way for other esteemed groups in the dominant literary world to embrace the for(u)m.

The incorporation of many academic discourses and conventions into youth slam, and associated critique of the adult slam world, further eases this transition. Thus, for example, the poetry which is produced in slams can be restructured in accordance with the conventions of the dominant literary world and, in being so altered, may be accepted more readily into its institutions as legitimate. As Joelle Taylor (London) said, when discussing the work of a recent Rise! slam winner:

He writes in his mouth. He doesn't write on paper, but he allowed me to write it down, and I wrote it as a page poem. It's a rap. You know, you just divide it up in a different kind of way, just restructure it, and *Poetry Review* were really, really impressed by it.

As this quotation suggests, while youth slam workers may be critical of adult slam, seeking to reinvent it in a new context, they continue to emphasise many of its discourses and conventions. In doing so, they are enacting a quiet revolution in how poetry is taught, produced, distributed and consumed in the U.K. and U.S.. To return to the Open College of the Arts (2007: 18-19) quotation which opened this chapter, it seems that poetry 'is searching for a new status in society' and that slam has a pivotal role to play in this. Thus, it could be argued

that slam is slowly becoming part of the academy, without participants in either world being forced to compromise their reputations, status or the resources to which they have access. As Joelle Taylor (2002: Para. 7) suggests, youth slams may represent the 'meeting point of the traditional and the new, the open page and the well-thumbed mic.'

#### **11.4 Cultural Capital, Hegemony and the Performance of Identities**

The previous section sought to demonstrate that youth slam operates as a site within which slam and academic poets may renegotiate literary conventions and discourses to mutual benefit. This section develops that argument further, making more explicit links to the theoretical concerns which frame this research. It will be argued that interactions between slam and the academy enable youth slam participants to reach more favourable positions within the hegemonic structures of artistic and educational worlds, and that this micro level analysis can thus help to shed light on how individuals seek to perform their identities in such a way as to negotiate successfully the complex power relations which enable and constrain their daily lives.

#### 11.4.1 The Performance of Identities

From a Goffmanian standpoint, the data presented above represent, not merely the abstract aims of youth slam organisations, schools and dominant literary institutions, but the performance of individuals' identities. Indeed, interactionists like Goffman would argue that organisations' goals cannot be separated from the beliefs, intentions, fears and desires of those from whom such groups are comprised. The discourse which is presented in this chapter can thus tell us as much about the concerns which govern individuals' everyday interactions as it can about the institutions and organisations involved in youth slam. Accordingly, we can use these data to open a window onto processes of identity performance, helping us to understand how and why such identities are constructed. I focus here on the constructions of youth slam workers, school teachers and academic poets.

In Goffman's (1967: 5) terms, youth slam workers' attempts to position themselves somewhere between (adult) slam and the academy act as a 'line' through which they can construct a positive 'face' as experienced and skilled artists/educators with something unique to offer both worlds. As discussed above, the successful presentation of this 'face' stands to provide them with multiple benefits, enhancing the (financial and practical) resources and authority which are available to them within these domains.

For school teachers, an association with youth slam allows them to distance themselves from the school curriculum, within which they must work, but which many perceive as being stultifying. Teachers can thus use slam to carve an identity for themselves which is distinct from that of the school in which they work. Slam enables them to tap into the subcultural capital of forms like hip hop, which are popular with many of their students, without threatening to dilute the cultural capital which they possess by virtue of their association with the academy. Adopting the role of gatekeepers, who enable slam poets and other artists access to educational institutions, allows school teachers to present themselves as creative innovators, without detracting from their position as teachers. Consequently, they may become seen as valuable members of the school team, who have an understanding of both the literary canon and how best to engage their students' enthusiasm in English literature/language.

Finally, whilst 'academic' poets were not specifically interviewed for this research, it is possible to analyse the ways in which members of this group seek to present themselves, by drawing on informal conversations with such individuals, secondary data sources and the discourse of youth slam participants, (a number of whom identified themselves more with the academy than with slam). Whilst they may be rich in cultural capital, academic poets are often perceived as lacking in certain forms of subcultural capital. This is potentially problematic, since it could alienate, not only 'mainstream' audiences, but also the new generation of artistic producers and consumers being educated in schools. A favourable stance towards youth slam may help to rectify this position, allowing academic poets to portray themselves as open and receptive to emerging art forms, and as literary figureheads who remain relevant to today's artists and audiences. Further, by taking up positions as judges, critics and mentors in the youth slam world, they may retain their authoritative status, continuing to comment on and influence the future evolution of literary forms.

The discursive stance of members of all three groups, then, enables them to portray themselves as valuable participants of the worlds in which they operate, be these the educational system, the dominant literary world or the more



popular artistic realms of hip hop and slam. Further, the successful performance of such identities offers the potential to elevate the social standing of these individuals in the eyes of their colleagues, students and rivals alike. It is to this that I now turn.

#### 11.4.2 Negotiating Hegemonic Structures

If we accept that society is governed by power relations which are realised in everyday interactions, and that individuals perform identities calculated to produce optimal social outcomes, then we can view youth slam participants' discourse as a means through which individuals strive to master hegemony, positioning themselves as high up the social hierarchy as is reasonably possible. The ways in which members of the dominant literary world and slam seek to manage their status, by controlling discourse around art and education, is reminiscent of both Gramsci's (1971/1929-1935; 1988/1916-1935) theory of hegemony and the work of discourse analysts. Bourdieu's (1989) theory of cultural capital is also of particular value here, helping us to understand youth slam participants' move into the academy in terms of a search for the reputation and resources which are associated with the 'legitimate' art of the dominant literary world.

As argued in Chapter Four, however, power relations are complex, multiple and dynamic. They cannot be conceptualised in terms of a static, monolithic structure which is perceived in the same way by all members of society. Rather, different social groups embrace distinct status systems, and elevation in one does not necessarily translate to another. During the course of their daily lives, individuals interact with numerous social groups and systems within whose status hierarchies they hold different positions. The direction of influence between these social groups is not just one way, so that slam can be seen to impact upon the academy as well as the academy influencing slam. As in previous chapters, Gramsci's hegemony and Bourdieu's cultural capital are of limited use here, and these theories can be significantly bolstered with reference to the more complex view of status which is apparent in Bourdieu's work on the field. Even this, though, needs developing further. If we are to

account for the interactions between youth slam and the academy which we see in this chapter, we must understand Bourdieu's fields as overlapping, dynamic and able to influence one another in complex ways. Further, the many distinctions between adult and youth slam which we can observe reinforce the observation of the previous three chapters that fields like slam can themselves be subdivided.

We can thus understand youth slam as residing within a series of nested fields, including those of the 'field of power' the 'literary field' and indeed slam, and as overlapping with others, such as the dominant literary world and the education system. Youth slam participants must balance the specific various constraints and opportunities which these fields afford, and this is a tricky task indeed. Accordingly, promoting youth slam as a midpoint between slam and the academy, and themselves as active members of this sphere contains hazards for the members of all three groups with which this chapter is concerned. By aligning themselves with academic poetry, slam poets could damage their subcultural capital, whilst the association of school teachers and academic poets with slam could weaken these individuals' status as members of the academy, thus diluting their cultural capital. As argued above, however, this discursive stance also holds significant potential benefits. Youth slam workers, school teachers and academic poets alike can use their involvement with youth slam to portray identities intended to maximise their multiple social positions. This analysis supports the central contention of this thesis that power is best conceptualised as contingent, dynamic and context dependent, and status in terms of the operation of multiple power relations within a meta-hegemonic structure (see section 4.3 and Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 for more on this).

The quiet revolution of poetry slam, then, is a revolution of individuals, enacted through everyday interaction and the discursive performance of identities. Yet whether these individuals' attempts at status renegotiation will have an enduring impact on the worlds of slam and academic poetry still remains to be seen. It is too early to conclude, at this juncture, to what extent the interaction between slam and the academy, which youth slam enables, represents the (partial) success of a counter-hegemonic movement in challenging artistic discourses

and conventions, the actions undertaken by a hegemonic group to preserve their dominance, or a complex interaction of these and other factors operating at the intersection of several different fields.

### **11.5 Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

This chapter has explored how participants in slam and the dominant literary world seek to negotiate complex (and often conflicting) discourses, ideals and status hierarchies. It seeks to shed light on the ways in which individuals navigate through complex power relations in their everyday interactions and discourse. More specifically, this analysis may help us to understand how members of dominant art worlds work to retain the value of their cultural capital in the face of threats posed by new artistic movements, and how such movements may become part of the dominant art world which they initially defined themselves against. It has been argued that members of both groups stand to reap benefits from interactions between slam and the academy, and that youth slam provides a safe site in which these interactions can take place, without either group appearing to have lost ground. In this way, youth slam enables members of the dominant literary world to deal with the challenge imposed by the new conventions and discourses of poetry slam, whilst allowing slam poets access into the academy.

After discordant beginnings, members of slam and the academy appear to have established a safe site in which they can co-exist, adapting their respective conventions and discourses to mutual benefit. Accordingly, this chapter has argued that poetry slam is enacting a quiet revolution in the literary world, giving rise to a new generation of poets, whose perceptions and applications of poetry often fuse together the conventions of these two worlds. Whether the changes enacted by this revolution will be radical or slight, transient or enduring remains to be seen. Only time will tell to what extent the interactions taking place in the 'safe' site of youth slam will permeate beyond the bounds of educational institutions to effect more widespread changes within the academy.

Before moving on to the concluding chapter, I wish to reiterate one important point: The sample studied here was comprised largely of school teachers, youth slam workers and other slam participants. Many of these research participants positioned themselves somewhere between slam and the academy, and there is thus little direct analysis of the discourse of purely academic poets, critics and promoters here. Whilst it could be argued that school teachers are representatives of the academy, their status is not conceptualised so straightforwardly. Those I spoke to positioned themselves as innovators within the school, seeing slam as an aid to teaching the literary texts and forms prescribed by the curriculum. Consequently they too tended to take a position midway between these worlds. Since, I did not have the temporal or financial resources to expand the sample further, I was forced to rely on accessing individuals who more clearly associated themselves with the dominant literary world largely via secondary data sources and the accounts of slam participants. I would, however, recommend firsthand study of this former group as a fruitful means for enhancing this analysis and indicating valuable avenues for future research.

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Art worlds in conflict  
Reap mutual benefits  
Through interaction.

## **Chapter Twelve: Wrapping Up? - Resolutions, Tensions and Future**

### **Directions**

A given socio-historical moment is never homogeneous; on the contrary, it is rich in contradictions. It acquires a 'personality' and is a 'moment' of development in that a certain fundamental activity of life prevails over others and represents a historical 'peak'; but this presupposes a hierarchy, a contrast, a struggle.

~ Antonio Gramsci (1988/1916-1935: 393)

Producing a concise and coherent conclusion for a thesis of this nature is no straightforward matter. In the past 90,000 or so words I have tried to give a feel for the (re)construction of poetry slam in different contexts, both geographical (Chicago, New York, Bristol and London) and social (youth slam, adult slam, the education system and the academy). I have looked at how slam participants understand slam and their relationship to the for(u)m in terms of community, individualism, diversity, authenticity, politics, national identity, art and entertainment, and at the oppositional relationships which characterise this discourse. Most importantly, I have theorised that it is in the everyday talk and (other) actions of slam participants that they construct their identities and seek to negotiate the complex status hierarchies of which they form a part.

I contend that we can understand these processes of identity construction and status negotiation using an eclectic theoretical framework, which draws on: Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital, distinction and the field; Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony; the work of interactionists, like Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, on the importance of micro level interactions, art as an interactive process and the everyday performance of identity; and discourse analytic theory around the importance of discourse and the ways in which this can be analysed. This theoretical assemblage enables us to explore how/why slam and its participants are constructed in particular ways, exploring the implications of these constructions for slam participants' identities and their positions in multiple status hierarchies.

In line with Gramsci's opening quotation, the picture which is painted here is one of struggle and contradiction; however there is also interaction, cooperation and coherence. Whilst individuals may compete for distinction and define themselves against the 'other', successful performances of status and identity rely upon shared definitions and on recognised conceptual points against which these can be mapped. Conversely, communities, often prized as inclusive refuges of cooperation, also imply exclusion and are structured by within group struggles for status. In this sense, the competitive individualism which operates within communities, like that of slam, is illustrative of both the multiple status hierarchies which we must negotiate through our everyday interactions and of the inseparability of cooperation and competition.

Following on from this, the current chapter aims to illuminate some of the patterns, interactions, conflicts and contradictions which characterise slam. The first two sections open by considering two key analytic strands which dominate this thesis: the (re)construction of slam in different contexts and the negotiation of power through everyday performances of identity. Section 12.1 takes the first of these, reviewing some of the variations between slam in different social and geographical contexts, and suggesting additional contexts upon which future research could focus. 12.2 concentrates on the second strand, exploring how slam participants seek to negotiate status hierarchies through multiple identity performances and the definition of self against 'other'. The final two sections look towards the future. Section 12.3 focuses on how this research could be improved and expanded on both micro and macro levels of analysis. 12.4 then concludes with a brief overview of the main research findings and a speculative discussion of what the future may hold for slam.

Each of these sections addresses one or more of the five research questions outlined at the start of this thesis; these are:

- 1) What significance does slam have for its participants?
- 2) How is slam constructed differently in different geographical and social contexts?
- 3) How has slam evolved since its conception?

- 4) What are the implications of the above points for slam participants' constructions of self and relationships?
- 5) In what ways can this micro level analysis of slam shed light on wider social processes?

The responses which these questions produce are complex and cannot always be teased apart from one another. It is for this reason that I reiterate them here, rather than referring to them explicitly throughout the chapter.

## **12.1 (Re)constructing Art Worlds**

I have argued that global artistic phenomena do not simply transfer unaltered to new sites. Art world participants are not passive consumers of art, and countries, cities and venues are not empty pots waiting to be filled. Rather, they bring with them their own concerns, experiences, resources, constraints and artistic traditions, which work to construct these arts anew in each fresh context. These (re)constructions then impact upon other individuals, contexts and art forms. Given the different concerns, identities and artistic traditions of slam participants in the U.K. and U.S., then, it is not surprising that we see variations between (and within) these countries, in terms of the kinds of poetry performed in slams, the ways in which this is promoted and discussed, and the events, communities and networks which slam participants seek to establish and maintain.

Contextualising slam in this way also requires a consideration of the different social contexts within which it is realised. Social contexts are necessarily located within specific geographical sites, but also move beyond these. They concern the immediate setting of a slam event, such as a bar, theatre or school and the broader institutions within which these are understood to belong, such as avant-garde arts, the academy or the education system. Slam takes a distinct form and is understood differently depending on which of these (immediate and broad) social contexts it is situated within. This thesis has focused on broader social contexts, considering some of the contrasts and

relationships between youth and adult slam, and slam and the academy. I begin, however, with a discussion of the for(u)m's (re)construction in different geographical contexts.

#### 12.1.1 Crossing Continents: Slam in the U.K. and U.S.

Many U.S. based slam participants present slam as a political movement, and there is a tendency here towards performing emotive, politicised, identity poetry, which often corresponds to a 'Rocky' narrative of success in the face of unjust oppression. In comparison, U.K. based slam participants focus more on comic poetry, and on slam as an entertaining for(u)m, which presents both opportunities and dangers for performance poetry/poets. Further, slam is much less developed in the U.K., tending to be subsumed beneath the performance poetry umbrella, and lacking the formalised networks and high profile events of U.S. slam. These variations find broader parallels within U.K. and U.S. art worlds, reflecting the differences between the U.S. Beats and U.K. Liverpool poets of the 1960s, and the strong vein of comic poetry amongst contemporary U.K. artists. They also echo the wider norms and values of these countries, with the 'Rocky' narrative relying on an American Dream frame that reverberates deep into the heart of U.S. culture. In addition, many U.K. based slam participants actively seek to maintain their distinction from U.S. slam, preserving a uniquely British identity for U.K. slam and performance poetry.

This heterogeneity does not stop at national borders, however, but continues on regional and local levels. Thus, we can also consider variations in the slam histories, events and writing/performance styles between the four cities at the heart of this research. There are differences too in the kinds of people which these cities' slams attract. Slams in Bristol, for instance, tend to draw in an older, more 'white' dominated demographic than do those in London. In part, this mirrors the different make-up of these cities (with Bristol being considerably more 'white' than London, and especially Stratford, home of the Word Up slams. See ONS, 2001a, b; 2006a). This contrast also owes something, however, to the distinctive evolutionary paths of slam in these cities. Thus the older cohort of Bristol slam participants reflects the fact that there have been no monthly or



weekly slams here for some time. Indeed, many Bristol based interviewees spoke of slam in the past tense, apparently looking back to a heyday of Bristol slam in the 1990s, when they regularly participated in local slam events and Bristol slams briefly received national press attention (see Newsnight, 1999). In London, in contrast, slams continue to be held on a monthly basis and there seems to be a constant turnover of performers moving in and out of both city and for(u)m.

Distinctions can also be drawn between slam in the U.S. cities of New York and Chicago. Indeed, there seems to be a certain competitiveness between the slam participants of these cities (see for example O'Keefe Aptowicz, 2008: 39-41). O'Keefe Aptowicz (2008: 39) goes as far as to suggest that NYC and Chicago embody 'vastly different approaches to the poetry slam'. Whilst she does not expound upon these, many of those with whom I spoke associated NYC with a more declarative, political style of poetry, and with high profile slam venues, events and spin offs, such as the Nuyorican Poets Cafe slams and Def Poetry Jam. Assessments of a Chicago slam style, meanwhile, varied from 'very in-your-face' (Keith Roach, New York) to poetry on 'common everyday experiences', in which 'you don't take yourself too seriously' (Tom Barnes, Chicago).

Nonetheless, a number of slam participants suggest there has been a flattening out of such regional differences as slam has developed in the U.S.. This has caused many to voice concern that the for(u)m is becoming dominated increasingly by a slam poetry formula, which inhibits variety, creativity and authenticity, producing standardised works, aimed at individual, rather than group, success. This observation indicates that slam varies historically as well as geographically. The discourses, structures and poetic styles documented in this thesis must, then, be viewed as specific to a particular period of slam's evolution. Thus, political, identity poetry, for instance, has not always dominated U.S. slam and is unlikely to maintain its prominence indefinitely. As Lucy English (Bristol) notes 'the definition of what is slam poetry is actually evolving all the time'.

Such historical changes are apparent throughout this thesis, being central to the analysis of, not only slam's perceived formularisation, but also: the commodification of slam; the interactions between U.S. slam 'veterans' and newcomers; the impact of slam on the changing identities of U.K. performance poets; the growth of youth slam in the education system; and the changing relationship between slam and the dominant literary world.

#### 12.1.2 The Academy, the Education System and the Internet: Different Social Contexts

Slam's relationship with the dominant literary world has defined the for(u)m since its birth. Indeed, it could be argued that slam owes its existence, at least in part, to a certain antagonism towards the academy. Whilst hostility between these respective art worlds clearly remains, there is, however, growing interaction between them. Slam and 'academic' poets are increasingly publishing, performing and teaching alongside one another, and it seems that (in a process akin to Kadushin's 'movement circles'), slam is becoming part of the world which it initially defined itself against. This is not, though, a case of simple absorption. Rather, slam participants have continued to emphasise distinct conventions and discourses and, in so doing, have stamped their own mark on the academy. Youth slam provides a safe site within which such mutually beneficial interactions can take place, without members of slam or the academy being seen to compromise their relatively distinct ideals, discourses and hierarchies.

Slam certainly looks very different in adult and youth contexts. Whilst both tend to be viewed as a showcase for the voices and talents of poets, youth slam possesses a didactic focus which adult slam lacks. Thus, many youth slams take place within broader educational programmes, with events staged in schools and theatres, rather than bars and cafés. Similarly, although youth slams continue to stress the ability of poets to entertain and engage an audience, youth slam participants are cast principally as mentors and students, rather than artists and audience members.

It is clear, then, that slam is (re)constructed differently across social, as well as geographical, contexts. I have only been able to explore a limited number of such contexts here however. This analysis could thus be expanded considerably, addressing both the immediate social context of slam events and the broader institutions to which these belong. We could, for instance, consider the impact of staging slams in a given bar, school or theatre, the differences across these venue types or the variations between slams when held as part of music festivals, literary festivals or a regular spoken word series.

It would be particularly interesting to explore slam in relation to the internet, a site which offers both networking opportunities and 'a new and ever-expanding forum for performance' (Roberts, 2008: Para 76). The web has long been an important site for slam participants worldwide to make and maintain contact with one another, develop relationships, organise events, and publish and promote their work. Slams may also be held entirely online. The first online slam appears to have been run in 1998 by WritersCorps, a U.S. based creative writing organisation, which has been working with inner city youth since 1994 (WritersCorps, n.d.; and see Holman, 1998b). Online slams did not really take off until some time after this however. The first U.K. organised online slam, for instance, was probably the Slam Idol Podcast which was first held in 2005. This site remains active today, asking visitors to rate audio (and, more recently, video) recordings of poems (Slam Idol, n.d.).

PSI joined the clamour in 2007, with an online video slam to determine who would represent the organisation at the Calabash International Literary Festival in Jamaica (PSI, 2007b). This was followed in 2008 by online video slam components to the Individual World Poetry Slam and Women of the World Poetry Slam competitions (see PSI, 2008 b, c). Online slams are now organised from all corners of the world, in association with slam organisations, like PSI, youth slam groups like the SLAMBassadors (Taylor, 2009) and even academic institutions like the University of Oxford, England (2009).

It is clear that the internet has a significant role to play in the future evolution of slam. Precisely what form this will take remains unclear, but it seems likely that

online slams will interact with other internet tools, outlets and materials, live events and face-to-face interactions to: promote slam as a fast-paced, performative and interactive for(u)m readymade for the internet age; support increasing interaction between slam participants across different social and geographical contexts; inspire the production of multi-media artworks, such as video poems; encourage new ways of consuming poetry; and stimulate scholarly research. The internet also presents new challenges and opportunities relevant to the second analytic strand of this thesis, namely: slam participants' performances of identity and their search for distinction.

## **12.2 Distinction, Hegemony and the Discursive Performance of Identity**

The question of how slam participants use talk and other actions to perform their identities and negotiate multiple status hierarchies successfully is central to this thesis. In its chapters, I have sought to demonstrate how these processes can be understood, using an eclectic theoretical paradigm, which views art as interactive and ideological, art world participants as active, reflexive and heterogeneous, and status as dynamic, multiple and negotiated interactively/discursively. The current section reviews the key contributions which this thesis has made in this regard.

### **12.2.1 Performing Power and Identity**

Goffman (1967), Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), discourse analysts like Potter and Wetherell (1987), and many others besides have emphasised that everyday interactions constitute performances, through which we construct the identities of ourselves and others. As suggested at the start of this chapter, these performances evoke a delicate balance between cooperation and competition, as we collaborate to construct identities which secure us favourable positions within multiple status hierarchies.

Identity performances are particularly salient in slam and spoken word, where poetry is frequently invested with a pronounced autobiographical element (see

for example Middleton 2005: 22-4; Silliman, 1998). Accordingly, this thesis has analysed how slam participants present themselves variously as: artists who can succeed on both page and stage; cutting edge performers; keepers of the oral tradition; community-minded individuals; original, skilled artists; slam's founders; spokespersons for minority and oppressed groups; political activists; original British poets; innovators; slam poets; performance poets; and educators.

Consistency and authenticity are central to the successful performance of such identities, with inauthentic, inconsistent performances discounted as flawed and artificial. Slam poems which are viewed as inauthentic are unlikely to be well received, for instance, and poets who are seen to live by values which contradict those they support on-stage are widely admonished. Consequently, U.S. slam 'veterans' are able to use authenticity to promote their political poetry, whilst condemning that of others, and U.K. based slam participants can seek distinction by representing themselves as authentic British artists.

The prominent role which discourse plays in these performances of identity is reflected throughout this thesis. Thus, I have explored how slam participants construct their identity through: the opening spiels of comperes and poets; slam participants' off-stage conversations; the banter which flows between stage and audience; promotional materials for slam events, poets and organisations; materials used in slams; interview talk; websites and forum discussions; anthologies and 'how to' books; and of course, poetry.

These are understood, not as discrete realms, but as overlapping, interacting sites, within which we can identify different discursive strands. Thus, slam is portrayed as a community across such diverse sites as slam participants' interview talk, publications like *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry* (Smith and Kraynak, 2004) and online promotional materials for slam events/poets. Similarly, the 'Rocky' narrative is rehearsed and reinforced, not just in poetry, but throughout slam participants' informal and interview based talk, and through audience participation, applause and scoring patterns.

As this latter example illustrates, identity performances are not confined to talk alone. Rather, they are apparent throughout our interactions. We perform our identities through the *absence* of talk, our gesticulations and facial expressions, the clothes we wear and the locations in which we interact. Also important are longer term actions, such as the relationships we form, the organisations we join and the career paths we pursue. Broadening the focus in this way allows us to build bridges between micro and macro levels of analysis and to utilise more fully materials collected through ethnographic research such as this.

Thus, we can explore how the notion of slam as a community is reinforced through friendly heckling in poets' introductions and respectful silence during their poems, through the use of volunteers to stage slams, and through relationships and interactions enacted outside of slam events. Similarly, we can see how slam participants seek to undermine the role of competitive individualism in slam (and maintain a community-individualism dichotomy) by incorporating open mic. sessions into events and by awarding frivolous prizes, or how youth slam participants shift slam's competitive grounding by using pre-appointed judges and scoring rubrics.

Whilst this thesis has considered the role played by such actions, however, it has focused predominantly on the wealth of information which is conveyed through slam participants' talk. Future research could offset this by paying greater attention to other kinds of actions. This may include anything from the clothes/costumes which slam poets wear and the props that they wield, to the visual images used in promotional materials, to the structure of slam organisations and networks. (I return to the analysis of visual images in subsection 12.3.1.)

#### 12.2.2 Distinction in Opposition: Defining Self Against the 'Other'

Performances of identity involve defining, not only what something *is*, but also what it is *not*. Slam participants do this by drawing implicit and explicit contrasts between slam/slam participants and other arts, artists and groups. These oppositions are ideological in nature, aligning slam and its participants with

particular norms, values and practices. Of particular note here is the aforementioned juxtaposition between slam and the dominant literary world. According to Kadushin (1976: 117) this opposition to established art forms and conventions is common to emerging art worlds, helping to cement relationships amongst their participants. This certainly seems to have been the case with slam, where many participants, especially in the U.S., are invested heavily in representations of a supportive, welcoming 'slam family'. The debarring of 'academic' poets from slam, however, demonstrates that this 'family' relies upon exclusion, as well as inclusion.

Setting themselves against the dominant literary world, enables slam participants to promote the for(u)m as a new and superior art, divorced from the stigma with which poetry is often greeted in the U.K. and U.S.. In this sense, slam owes its representation as an exciting, relevant, accessible, engaging, meritocratic and marketable for(u)m to a definition of the dominant literary world as outdated, irrelevant, inaccessible, dull and elitist. In a similar fashion, slam participants (particularly in the U.S.) mobilise images of a prejudiced, right wing, intolerant and elitist 'mainstream' society, in order to portray slam as tolerant, diverse, grassroots and welcoming.

Distinctions are also drawn *between* slam participants, separating groups such as newcomers and 'veterans', youth and adult slam participants, and U.S. and U.K. based participants. As with juxtapositions between slam and other groups, these internal divisions rely upon ideological, conceptual oppositions, offsetting notions like authenticity and artificiality, and community and competitive individualism. Thus, U.S. based slam 'veterans' may define themselves against slam newcomers, portraying the latter group as inauthentic, egoistic purveyors of formulaic poetry. This allows them to position themselves as authentic, community-minded, innovative artists and the true keepers of slam's flame.

Such discourse reflects a broader critique of changing conventions within slam, which Lena and Peterson (2007) identify as a common response of 'traditionalist' art world participants to the evolution of art worlds. In Lena and Peterson's terms, 'traditionalist' slam 'veterans' are resisting the attempts of

'avant gardist' newcomers to mould slam into new shapes, seeking instead to preserve what they see as slam's pure form. This mimics the broader conflict between slam and the academy, where slam participants represent the 'avant gardist' camp, and members of the dominant literary world the 'traditionalists'. In this way, we can identify a nesting of status hierarchies, discourses and identities being played out on macro and micro level stages.

In U.K. based slam, meanwhile, an opposition is often established between skilled, authentic British artists and inauthentic mimics of the U.S. model. This has parallels with the newcomer/slam 'veteran' distinction, in that slam participants here use the values of authenticity and innovation to position themselves as the rightful leaders of U.K. slam and performance poetry. Rather than being a critique of changing conventions and discourses within slam, however, this addresses the threat which slam is seen to present to U.K. performance poetry more broadly. This latter discourse also reinforces the notion of nested hierarchies, since it must be understood within the context of U.S./U.K. slam relations and the more powerful position of U.S. slam on the transnational scene. Thus, we can see that this process of defining self against the 'other' allows slam participants to negotiate favourable status positions in relation to, not only members of other groups, but also each other. This is expanded upon below.

### 12.2.3 Status in Slam

Status could, in many ways, be seen as an amalgamation of identity and power. These twin concerns lie at the heart of this thesis and are integral to many of the theories upon which it draws. Bourdieu, for instance, shows how our identities as artistic consumers (and producers) are connected to the power which we have relative to others in society, arguing that we use our artistic knowledge and competencies to achieve distinction from other groups and individuals. His theory of cultural capital illuminates effectively the difference in status between the 'popular' art of slam and the 'legitimate' dominant literary world. Cultural capital also helps to account for the salience of this relationship



in slam participants' discourse, as they seek access to the academy and a more favourable position for slam within the literary hierarchy.

Bourdieu is not alone in emphasising the centrality of power to the cultural sphere (and vice versa). Gramsci too allocates culture a pivotal position in the management of status hierarchies. Using Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and 'common sense', we can theorise how such hierarchies come to be established, maintained and challenged. This illuminates, not only to the relationship between slam and the dominant literary world, but also slam participants' engagement with macro level political structures. Thus, we can use Gramsci's work to analyse the discourse of slam participants (particularly in the U.S.) around slam as a counter-cultural political movement. Gramsci helps us to understand both the counter-hegemonic impulse of these slam participants, and the individualistic frame, through which the 'Rocky' narrative serves to reinforce the very structures and power relations which it claims to oppose.

As I have argued, however, these theories are insufficient to explain the multiple power hierarchies and processes which are implicated in slam. Power does not simply operate from the top-down, but also bottom-up and horizontally, and slam participants possess their own forms of subcultural capital (see for example Thornton, 1995). Bourdieu's (1993: 162) field theory is helpful here, allowing us to understand slam as a 'social universe', which operates within a meta-hegemonic structure, but is also characterised by specific 'stakes', 'capital' and status hierarchies. In this sense, slam (and other) communities can be seen to be structured by competitive individualism, rather than simply set against it.

Moving away from a simple top-down approach to power allows us to consider status relations within slam, as well as between slam participants and members of other groups. Thus we can use the struggles between U.S. slam newcomers and 'veterans', for instance, to highlight the multiple functions served by discourse around politics, diversity and authenticity. This more subtle approach reveals, not only the counter-hegemonic response of slam participants to

dominant political ideals, but also the varied actions of art world participants, as they seek to negotiate favourable positions within a changing art world.

Similarly, we can understand the discourse and other actions of slam participants within the context of U.S./U.K. power relations, or the interplay between youth and adult slam, as youth slam participants attempt to develop the for(u)m's educational and academic potential.

These status relations (and associated identities) are interrelated. Thus, a given individual could be identified, not simply as a slam participant, or even a U.S. based slam poet, but as a U.S. based slam 'veteran' who aligns his/herself with youth slam and the academy. Further, these identities are fluid. Slam participants adopt a range of identities and draw on diverse (sometimes conflicting) discourses in different contexts. They may, for example, mobilise both a pro-community discourse, which condemns slam's competitiveness and portrays them as supportive, community-minded individuals, and a pro-individuality discourse, which represents them as talented, authentic artists who have succeeded within a competitive meritocracy.

Billig *et al.* (1988) maintain that such contradictions are present throughout society, thus reinforcing the observation that we can meaningfully generalise from micro level interactions to wider social processes. Using their terms, we can view slam participants' discourse around community and individualism as an attempt to overcome a broader 'ideological dilemma' between individual autonomy and social responsibility. Indeed, it could be argued that it is partly the prevalence of such ideological dilemmas, combined with the existence of multiple and complex power relations, which necessitates the great variety of contrasting identity performances that we can observe in slam (and elsewhere). Inevitably, this thesis has only been able to scratch the surface of the large number of identities and power relations which are potentially relevant to slam participants. There is thus plenty of scope for expanding this analysis. It would be particularly interesting to explore the different identities (and associated power relations) available to slam audience members and to young slam participants.

### **12.3 Beyond the Text**

Throughout this thesis I have sought to strike a balance between micro and macro levels of analysis, using close observation of micro level interactions and texts to illuminate macro level social structures and processes. I have explored, for example, what slam participants' discourse on the 'Rocky' narrative, youth slam and U.K. performance poetry can tell us about art world trajectories, and how talk and other actions in slam mirror broader ideas around the relationship between community and individualism. Whilst, this has revealed a wealth of insights across a range of areas, there is undoubtedly more to be gained by developing this research further on both levels. Doing so need not mean ignoring one in favour of the other; rather their very reciprocity means that studying the micro can enhance our understanding of the macro (and vice versa).

The current section explores what such analyses might look like in practice, their theoretical underpinnings and the contributions which they could make to the study of slam. Subsection 12.3.1 begins with a look at the implications of discourse analysis for our understanding of the contextualised, constructive nature of slam talk. This is followed by a discussion of the potential which visual methodologies have to further illuminate slam participants' identities and status. 12.3.2 then switches to a wider lens, considering approaches which have sought to illuminate micro level interactions through a macro level analysis of identity, discourse and status. Particular attention will be paid here to the methodological implications of Michel Foucault's (1980; 1988; 1999) work.

#### **12.3.1 Focusing In: Interaction, Discourse and Visual Analysis**

Derek Edwards (1995: 585) states that 'talk is action, not communication'. This is an important observation. Indeed, it is this contention which enables us to understand slam participants as actively constructing their identity and negotiating status hierarchies in/through talk. Taking Edwards' claim to its ultimate conclusion, however, has more far reaching implications than this. It means understanding that talk is embedded within particular contexts, that it

functions to meet the needs imposed by different interactional partners, and that (to return to Goffman's dramaturgical analogy) it is shaped by the 'sets' within which interaction takes place.

This emphasis on talk as active, constructive and context-specific goes to the heart of discourse analysis, and gives some idea of the ways in which this research falls short of being a full discourse analysis of slam. It is clear, for example, that such a study would need to distinguish between the ways in which slam participants construct their identities and navigate status relations *in different contexts*. Thus, we could use discourse analysis to explore how slam organisers package events differently for literary festivals, bars and theatres, or how poets seek to balance representations of humility and pride in their promotional materials, compared with their onstage performances. Similarly, we could consider, in much greater depth, how the parameters of research help to shape slam participants' discourse. It may be, for example, that U.K. based slam participants are keen to emphasise the primacy of performance poetry over slam when being interviewed, but tend to reverse this in slam promotional materials and onstage banter. This does not mean that we should discount interview-based talk, rather it suggests that we could gain new, additional insights into slam identities/status hierarchies by exploring how the for(u)m and its participants are represented in different contexts.

Besides emphasising the contextualised nature of discourse, discourse analysis also allows for a close consideration of the specific words, phrases and strategies which individuals use to construct themselves, others and the world around them. The extent to which discourse analysts are concerned with such fine grained speech strategies varies. Whilst some are content to talk in terms of broad narratives, discourses or 'interpretative repertoires',<sup>198</sup> others take a much closer look at the structure of talk, drawing on methods like conversation analysis and ethnomethodology.<sup>199</sup> This latter approach allows us to analyse

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<sup>198</sup> Interpretative repertoires are roughly equivalent to discourses, though the latter term tends to be used more widely and across a greater range of approaches. (For more on interpretative repertoires see Potter and Wetherell, 1987.)

<sup>199</sup> Much could be said about the distinctions between these approaches (and within discourse analysis itself). For those interested in pursuing this further, I would recommend looking at the discourse analytic texts cited in this chapter, as well as Psathas (1995) on conversation analysis and Garfinkel (1967) on ethnomethodology.

how talk is made plausible, identity performed and power exercised through such techniques as silence, intonation, emphasis, selective repetition, the use of rhetorical figures and references to 'reliable' witnesses, sources or experts (see for example Potter, 1996; Van Dijk, 1993: 264).

This would mean, for instance, analysing, not simply the kinds of conceptual oppositions which slam participants use, but the specific ways in which these are enacted in talk, through strategies like reported speech, vivid description and 'they, but I' type pairings, such as '*they* perform political poetry to win slams, *but I* perform it to deliver an important message'. To give a more specific example, we could argue that the repetition in the following statement serves to undermine the validity and authenticity of 'therapy' poems and the poets who perform them, by making them appear tired and tiring: 'There used to be a time when it was a lot of therapy poems, ' "feel my pain, feel my pain, feel my pain" ' (Lisa Buscani, Chicago).

As discussed earlier, however, our interactions are not confined to talk alone. Scholars like Parker (1990), for instance, have suggested that discourse should be understood to include spoken, written and visual texts. Roberts (2008: Para 63-70) indicates that the last of these can and have been used by social scientists for varied and productive ends. Certainly, one need only scan the literature to find strong arguments for incorporating visual texts into a micro level analysis of slam. Pink (2007: 17), for instance, contends that close, visual research is invaluable in helping us to develop 'new ways of understanding individuals, social relationships, material cultures and ethnographic knowledge'. Meanwhile, Becker (1974: 21) argues that embodying analytic concepts in concrete images allows us to better communicate and substantiate these ideas. Still others have demonstrated the role which visual images can play in constructing identity and mediating power relations (see for example Gilroy's, 1987: 57-9 research or Rose, 2007 on the use of visual texts in discourse analyses).

Studying the visual need not mean abandoning analysis of the spoken/written word however. Rather, we should analyse these media alongside one another,

exploring how visual cues intersect with talk in the performance of identity/power. A micro level analysis of slam, then, could consider the words and images which adorn the covers of slam anthologies, websites and 'how to' books, or the ways in which slam poets construct their identities on-stage, using facial expressions, gestures and other visual cues, in combination with words.

### 12.3.2 The Bigger Picture: Socio-historical Discourse and a 'True' Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

These performances can also be understood within the context of macro level social structures/processes and historical/cultural trends. Indeed, shifting our focus to this more macro level of analysis has the potential to further illuminate both slam and the relationship between power and identity with which this thesis is concerned. Specifically, such research could expand our understanding of: the ways in which the meta-hegemonic structure impacts upon slam participants, dividing them along class, sex, ethnic and other lines; the ways in which slam is similar to/differs from other arts and groups; slam's place in the broader artistic trajectories of performance poetry, comedy and other arts; how slam discourse reflects socio-historical ideas around concepts like community, individualism and authenticity; how slam mirrors broader cultural distinctions between the U.K. and U.S.; and how U.K. and U.S. slam are positioned on a truly global stage.

The challenge is how we can research these macro level social structures and processes without resorting to the 'troublesome assumption' that art can be abstracted meaningfully from the social context within which it arises (Martin, 1995: 132). Whilst theories like those of Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Lena and Peterson can certainly help in this regard, using them in isolation risks driving an unhelpful wedge between micro and macro. There are a number of scholars, however, who have succeeded in adopting a macro level focus whilst maintaining a sensitivity to the micro. Billig *et al.*'s (1988: 42) aforementioned notion of 'ideological dilemmas', for instance, considers how the contradictions embedded within our 'ideological and semantic heritage' impact upon everyday reasoning and discourse; whilst, Stables' (2009) 'fully semiotic perspective'

analyses the impact of different socio-historical explanations around what it means to be a 'child' on the political, legal, and above all, educational spheres of our lives.

Michel Foucault's (1980; 1988; 1999) work would be particularly valuable in this regard, enabling us to develop further the contributions which both Gramsci and critical/Foucauldian discourse analysis have made to this thesis. Foucault analysed the relationship between power, knowledge and discourse, exploring how these have evolved throughout different historical periods. Rather than seeking to identify simple cause and effect relationships, he was interested in the complex ways in which power and knowledge combine to impact on our everyday lives. Thus, he explored the socio-historical movement of ideas, identities and power relations, whilst making explicit links to individual people and micro level interactions.

Although he has been criticised for adopting an overly micro level analysis (see for example Fraser, 1989; Layder, 1994), Foucault viewed his work more as a unification of micro and macro. For example, he sought to analyse the relationship between particular discursive formations and wider political, economic, social and ideological practices. Further, it has been argued that Foucault's understanding of the micro level realisation of power can be used in conjunction with Gramsci's work on broader social structures to produce a more sensitive and nuanced account (Olssen, 1990; and see Cocks, 1989; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 for more on the ways in which these theories may be combined to mutual benefit.) Developing this research on a more macro level may well mean, then, strengthening Gramsci's contribution to its theoretical framework.

Contrary to claims by scholars like Megill (1985), Foucault was a competent and thorough researcher and his work has clear methodological implications (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Foucauldian discourse analysis, for instance, draws on the work of both Foucault and Gramsci. As discussed, however, this tends to focus on close analyses of particular texts. Whilst such work has the potential to illuminate macro level social structures and processes, an explicit

effort needs to be made to 'attend to the conditions which make the meanings of {these} texts possible' (Parker, 1992: 28).

Hook (2001) criticises Foucauldian discourse analysts on precisely these grounds. He argues that their focus on specific texts results in the exclusion of other actions and of the broader socio-historical structures/practices which are mediated through, and impact upon, texts. Hook proposes instead a 'true' Foucauldian discourse analysis, which preserves a special place for text, but requires that we acknowledge a world beyond this.<sup>200</sup> Thus, he contends that a full and accurate application of Foucault's principles must include textual and material forms of data, as well as an analysis of the 'institutions, social structures and practices that limit and constrict the free flow of discourse' (p. 524). He argues that it is only through this shift to the macro that we can escape individualism and draw conclusions which have implications beyond the boundaries of a given text. This allows us to explore how discourses operate to establish 'truth' on a grand scale.

Foucault's emphasis on knowledge, materiality and the socio-historical context, then, certainly does allow for a more macro level analysis of slam. Whilst he outlines the principles of a methodology based on Foucault's ideas, however, Hook does not provide any concrete illustration of what such an analysis would look like in practice. (The same can be said for Kendall and Wickham, 1999, whose promisingly entitled book *Using Foucault's Methods* focuses rather disappointingly on abstract concerns, rather than on establishing a systematic methodology.)

Nonetheless, it is possible to use the work of Hook, Kendall and Wickham to make some concrete propositions for ways in which the current research could be developed on a more macro level: Firstly, we could explore the construction of ideas in a broader 'series' of slam texts and practices, considering not only what is said, but what is not and cannot be said. Secondly, we could analyse in

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<sup>200</sup> This requires adopting a critical realist perspective, which argues for a material reality, mediated by and constructed through discourse. The question of the extent to which a world can be seen to exist outside of discourse provokes much debate amongst discourse analysts. For those interested in pursuing this further I would recommend Edwards *et al.* (1995) as an excellent starting point.



greater depth how these texts/practices work together in complex ways to reinforce (and perhaps challenge) existing power relations. Finally, we could place much more emphasis on tracing these specific acts back to the social, political and historical conditions which underlie their claims to truth. Following these suggestions would bring us at least some way towards addressing the issues highlighted at the beginning of this subsection.

## **12.4 Conclusions**

This thesis set out to explore five key questions around slam. These can be divided into two broad analytic strands, considering: the (re)construction of slam in different (social and geographical) contexts; and how slam participants perform their identities, so as to negotiate successfully multiple status hierarchies. I have sought to demonstrate that these can be best addressed through an eclectic theoretical framework, which combines an understanding of macro level social structures and processes with a close examination of micro level texts and interactions.

Accordingly, the current chapter has discussed the key theoretical contributions which this study has made to our understanding of poetry slam, art worlds, and the social construction of self and relationships. In the process, I have suggested that slam means many different things to its participants, being perceived variously as: a community; a political movement; a site for the construction and maintenance of artistic identities; a place where friendships are made and maintained; an employer; a hobby; an educational tool; the salvation (or death knell) of poetry; and a source of fun. (Even this lengthy list, however, should not be considered to be exhaustive.)

Finally, I have sought to overturn simplistic dichotomies and static images, to reveal a world which, as Gramsci's opening quotation suggests, is complex, dynamic, heterogeneous and interactive. I have argued, for instance, that artistic production cannot be understood in isolation from artistic consumption, that micro and macro are two sides of the same coin, and that competition and

cooperation are both necessary for communities to function. My analysis of the relationship between identity and status also indicates that our everyday interactions and individual/collective identities necessarily involve both competition and cooperation. This, then, is no exposé of a morally decrepit world in which competitive individualism rules supreme, but rather a partial ethnography of a complex dance, in which we can never be entirely certain who will next take the lead.

#### 12.4.1 Evolving Arts: The Future of Slam

Throughout this chapter I have suggested ways in which research on slam could be developed further, to produce new and rich insights across a range of areas. As I have noted, however, art worlds are not static, and the for(u)m which future researchers will encounter is unlikely to be identical to that which I have observed here. Different narratives, networks and poetic forms have dominated slam throughout its history, and such changes will almost certainly continue to take place. Thus, we may see a move away from hip hop in youth slam, for instance, or a greater focus on political, identity poetry in the U.K.. I would like to conclude, then, with a discussion of the for(u)m's possible future evolution in the U.K., the U.S., and youth slam contexts. It should be noted that this is speculative only and that we cannot be certain at this stage which (if any) of these predictions will come to pass.

One of the key directions in which U.S. slam is likely to move is towards increasing commodification. There are already signs of this beginning to happen, and indeed the commercialisation of the for(u)m was a central concern for many U.S. based participants with whom I spoke. These individuals often saw commodification as both a symptom and cause of the for(u)m's undesirable evolution away from grassroots values and high quality poetry. Indeed, as I write, the internet is buzzing with debates around the marketing of the 2009 NPS, which some have criticised for apparently promoting partying over poetry and for involving *Hustler* (an 'adult entertainment' company) as a sponsor of the 'erotic slam' event (see for example Van Cleve, 2009).

Perhaps this commodification is an inevitable outcome of slam's success as an art for(u)m (not to mention brand). What does seem certain, however, is that slam participants will continue to react against this, producing work and running events that seek to reassert the artistic heterogeneity and grassroots organisation which have always been prized within slam. Some of these artists may well break away from the for(u)m all together, producing new art world/s and thus continuing the artistic cycle.

U.K. slam is unlikely to evolve in quite the same way. Indeed, unless U.K. slam participants develop equivalents to PSI and/or the NPS, it is doubtful that slam here will ever grow to anything like the U.S. level. U.K. based performance poets, however, will probably continue to be influenced by U.S. slam styles, structures and poets, whilst the fast developing U.S. slam/spoken word scene may well be viewed as an increasingly lucrative and exciting destination for U.K. poets. Conversely, the opportunities with which slam provides U.S. poets (in terms of honing their craft, building up a following, and financial remuneration) could lead to increased numbers of these artists touring in the U.K. (and elsewhere).

Youth slam too is likely to change. Indeed, this is the fastest growing area of the for(u)m in both the U.K. and U.S.. The ambivalence which characterises slam more generally is largely absent from youth slam discourse, and this domain is often held up as representing the future, both for individual participants and for the for(u)m as a whole. Many adult slam participants, then, are invested heavily in the development of youth slam. The opposite does not appear to be true however, and, whilst they may continue to write and perform poetry/spoken word, few young poets seem to move on to participate in adult slam. Further, an increasing proportion of adult participants are coming to youth slam having had little experience of the for(u)m outside of this context. It seems likely, then, that the gap between youth and adult slam will continue to widen and that youth slam will evolve along its own (relatively independent) trajectory.

At the outset of this research, I had no intention of studying youth slam and knew little about this version of the for(u)m (though I had run a handful of slam events in schools myself and was aware that others did the same). Youth slam has, however, proved to be perhaps the most interesting and fruitful area which I have explored, and it is here that I am most interested in developing my research further. Specifically, the time seems ripe to investigate the extent to which there is empirical support for the many educational, developmental and community benefits which youth slam participants claim for the for(u)m.

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[option=com\\_content&view=article&id=159:iwps-video-slam-call-for-submissions&catid=20:individual-world-poetry-slam-news&Itemid=38](http://www.poetryslam.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159:iwps-video-slam-call-for-submissions&catid=20:individual-world-poetry-slam-news&Itemid=38)

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## **Appendix A: Statistical Tests – Raw Data and Results**

Unless otherwise noted, the data analysis presented here was conducted on thirty-nine interview transcripts, representing interviews with forty participants. Four of the interviews were excluded from the analysis. In two cases this was because they were conducted via telephone and e-mail, thus producing transcripts of a different (and more incomplete) form to those analysed here. In the other two, this was because large portions of the interviews contained talk which was unrelated to slam, and it was felt that including these interviews in the data set may have skewed the analysis.

### **A.1 Authenticity, Politics and Entertainment References in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants**

#### Raw Data

Authenticity		Politics		Entertainment	
U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
7	0	1	18	5	2
0	1	2	12	11	1
0	1	0	3	7	8
5	0	0	7	10	1
1	5	0	3	11	1
0	2	12	9	4	0
1	8	15	40	18	8
2	2	3	4	6	1
0	0	0	5	8	3
9	1	0	4	2	3
0	0	3	1	7	4
0	15	5	18	14	2
3	14	0	7	2	4
0	6	0	0	0	4
4		2		4	
2		4		13	
15		0		2	
1		0		8	
0		1		8	
0		2		0	
2		13		16	Cont...

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Authenticity		Politics		Entertainment	
U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.	U.K.	U.S.
5		0		2	
0		0		0	
3		2		4	
0		9		20	

Unrelated 'T' Tests

Authenticity

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	U.S.	U.K.
Mean	3.93	2.40
Standard deviation	5.12	3.59
Observations	14	25
Df	37	
t Stat	1.092	
P(T<=t) two-tail	<b>0.282</b>	

Politics

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	U.S.	U.K.
Mean	9.36	2.96
Standard deviation	10.46	4.46
Observations	14	25
Df	37	
t Stat	2.676	
P(T<=t) two-tail	<b>0.011</b>	

Entertainment

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	U.S.	U.K.
Mean	3.00	6.68
Standard deviation	2.48	5.21
Observations	14	25
Df	37	
t Stat	-2.48	
P(T<=t) two-tail	<b>0.018</b>	

## A.2 References to the United Kingdom and United States in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants

### Raw Data

Reference Type		Interview Site
U.K.	U.S.	
13	1	U.K.
4	2	U.K.
12	27	U.K.
23	16	U.K.
20	32	U.K.
2	0	U.K.
28	52	U.K.
23	36	U.K.
17	22	U.K.
17	28	U.K.
2	3	U.K.
40	68	U.K.
4	7	U.K.
6	23	U.K.
12	3	U.K.
13	13	U.K.
47	53	U.K.
35	33	U.K.
16	32	U.K.
6	2	U.K.
4	0	U.K.
20	19	U.K. Cont...
Reference Type		Interview Site
U.K.	U.S.	
24	30	U.K.
0	0	U.K.
18	3	U.K.
<hr/>		
5	10	U.S.
22	19	U.S.
3	9	U.S.
6	6	U.S.
0	10	U.S.
1	1	U.S.
29	27	U.S.
2	14	U.S.
0	12	U.S.
7	38	U.S.
0	2	U.S.
0	7	U.S.

0	7	U.S.
13	12	U.S.

### Mean Number of References

		<i>Interview Site</i>	
		<i>U.K.</i>	<i>U.S.</i>
<i>Reference Type</i>			
U.K.	Mean	16.24	6.29
	Standard deviation	12.19	9.05
U.S.	Mean	20.20	12.43
	Standard deviation	19.00	9.91

### Between Subjects ANOVA

	<i>Reference Type</i>	<i>Interview Site</i>	<i>Reference Type</i>
	<i>(U.K. / U.S.)</i>	<i>(U.K. / U.S.)</i>	<i>x Site</i>
Mean Square	457.99	1409.88	21.38
Observations	39	39	39
Df	1	1	1
F Stat	8.87	4.12	0.41
P (sig.)	<b>0.005</b>	<b>0.050</b>	<b>0.524</b>

### **A.3 References to the Dominant Literary World in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants**

### Raw Data

U.K. Transcripts	U.S. Transcripts
2	11
1	3
3	1
4	13
1	4
1	3
2	5
3	1
0	24
1	21
3	0
1	4
13	3
1	3
7	
1	
1	

9  
2  
3  
6  
3  
9  
1  
13

#### Unrelated 'T' Test

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	<i>U.K. Based Interviewees</i>	<i>U.S. Based Interviewees</i>
Mean	3.64	6.86
Standard deviation	3.74	7.56
Observations	25	14
df	37	
t Stat	1.78	
P(T<=t) two-tail	<b>0.08</b>	

#### **A.4 References to Community in Interviews with U.K. and U.S. Based Slam Participants**

Since the Levine statistic was less than one in this case, the test was conducted assuming unequal variances. In order to avoid the risk of them skewing the analysis, the data sets in italics were removed before the statistical analysis was carried out.

#### Raw Data

##### U.K. Based Transcripts

31  
6  
14  
2  
1  
0  
4  
0  
7  
0  
3  
7  
1  
1

##### U.S Based Transcripts

14  
10  
2  
5  
4  
9  
58  
3  
4  
3  
13  
9  
7  
1

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4  
1  
3  
8  
2  
15  
2  
4  
17  
0  
4

Unrelated 'T' Test

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>U.K. Based</i>	<i>U.S Based</i>
	<i>Transcripts</i>	<i>Transcripts</i>
Mean	4.42	6.46
Standard deviation	4.84	4.22
Observations	24	13
df	35	
t Stat	-1.34	
P(T<=t) two-tail	<b>0.19</b>	

## **Appendix B: Sex and Ethnic Background of Individuals Present at Observed (Adult) Slams**

These figures are based on estimates only, since it was not considered practicable to ask each audience member to self-define their sex and ethnicity.

Slam Name	Location	Individuals Present (% Estimate)			
		Slammers		Audience Members	
			'Black'/ Minority Ethnic		'Black'/ Minority Ethnic
	UNITED KINGDOM	Female		Female	
Longpath Arts Festival Slam <sup>201</sup> (08/05/06)	The Kings Arms, Nr. Bristol	40	0	50	0
The Well Versed Poetry Festival Selection Slam <sup>101</sup> (15/05/06)	The New Road Centre, Bristol	30	0	50	0
The Farrago Spring SLAM! (18/05/06)	Rada Foyer Bar, London	42	8	40	3
The Hammer and Tongue Slam Final 2005/2006 (05/06/06)	The Zodiac, Oxford	54	22	30	2
Latitude Slam with Luke Wright (16/07/06)	Latitude Festival, Stand up Poetry Arena, Henham Park	33	0	40	0
Word-Up Slam (20/08/06)	Stratford Theatre East, London	0	80	40	65
Farrago London SLAM! Championships (16/11/06)	Rada Foyer Bar, London	36	18	50	20
Your Bard Again Slam (19/11/06)	The Shakespeare, Bristol	0	0	30	0
Open House Newcomers Poetry Slam! (26/11/06)	Eldon House, Bristol	22	0	40	0
					Cont ...
Slam Name	Location	Individuals Present (% Estimate)			

L

<sup>201</sup> Slam and venue names have been changed at the request of the organisers. Geographical location, however, remains unaltered.



		Slammers		Audience Members	
		Female	'Black'/ Minority Ethnic	Female	'Black'/ Minority Ethnic
Word-Up Grand Slam Final (03/12/06)	Stratford Theatre East, London	0	80	43	60
Hammer and Tongue Four Continents Slam (07/12/06)	The Polish Club, Bristol	37	50	45	10
Earth, New Year's Eve Arts Party Slam (31/12/06)	@ Bristol, Bristol	50	0	<i>Not Recorded</i>	20
Slam Champions Slam (South West) (18/05/07)	The Polish Club, Bristol	42	7	35	2
<b>UNITED STATES</b>					
Urbana Poetry Slam (19/09/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York	12	24	46	50
Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam (qualifier – 20/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York	0	80	47	72
Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam (showcase – 22/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York	40	60	40	80
Urbana Poetry Slam (26/09/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York	57	50	35	6
Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam (qualifier – 27/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York	65	71	30	80
Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam (showcase – 29/09/06)	Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York	75	75	40	70
Manhattan Monologue Slam (02/10/06)	Bowery Poetry Club, New York	37	22	30	5
Uptown Poetry Slam (08/10/06)	The Green Mill Tavern, Chicago	33	50	45	2
Uptown Poetry Slam (15/10/06)	The Green Mill Tavern, Chicago	0	67	45	2
<b>Mean (%)</b>		<b>32.05</b>	<b>34.73</b>	<b>40.52</b>	<b>24.95</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>		<b>22.24</b>	<b>31.55</b>	<b>6.76</b>	<b>31.24</b>

## **Appendix C: Consent Forms and Information Sheets**

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Information/Consent Form for Primary Interviewees

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter. The aims of this project are:

- 1) To investigate the ways in which slam poetry is recreated within local communities, in line with local issues, concerns and artistic traditions.
- 2) To investigate how these different interpretations of slam poetry are mobilised by individuals within national and international communities.

The interview will last between one and two hours and will be audio taped. The interview tape may be listened to by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this interview will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in selected academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

**Confidentiality**

Interview tapes and transcripts will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only the researcher has access to. Following completion of the study all tapes will be destroyed. The tapes will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript, so that you can comment on and edit it as you see fit. If you wish to receive a copy of your transcript, please state your e-mail address below.

E-mail: .....

**Anonymity**

Would you prefer your interview information to be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of your name? (Please note that I will still need to refer to the city in which you are based.)

**PLEASE CIRCLE YES / NO**

**Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the interviewer.

Name: .....

E-mail/phone:.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or your interview data, please contact:

Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Exeter University, Devon, England. [hg210@ex.ac.uk](mailto:hg210@ex.ac.uk)

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact:

Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social  
Sciences, Exeter University. [G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)

*Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S.  
Poetry Slam Discourses*

Information/Consent Form for Additional (Youth Slam Related) Interviewees

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter. The key aims of this part of the project are:

To understand more about the ways in which youth slams play out.

- 1) To look at the relationship between youth slam, adult slam and the academic poetry world.

The interview will last between one and two hours and will be audio taped. The interview tape may be listened to by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this interview will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

**Confidentiality**

Interview tapes and transcripts will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only the researcher has access to. Following completion of the study all tapes will be destroyed. The tapes will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript, so that you can comment on and edit it as you see fit. If you wish to receive a copy of your transcript, please state your e-mail address below.

E-mail: .....

**Anonymity**

Would you prefer your interview information to be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of your name or the name of your school/organisation? (Please note that I will still need to refer to the city in which you are based.)

**PLEASE CIRCLE YES / NO**

**Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the interviewer.

Name: .....

E-mail/phone:.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or your interview data, please contact:

Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Exeter University, Devon, England. hg210@ex.ac.uk

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact:

Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social  
Sciences, Exeter University. G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk

Information/Consent Form for Organisers of Observed (Adult) Events

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter. The aims of this project are:

- 1) To investigate the ways in which slam poetry is recreated within local communities, in line with local issues, concerns and artistic traditions.
- 2) To investigate how these different interpretations of slam poetry are mobilised by individuals within national and international communities.

During this event I will be taking notes on the kinds of things that the poets, audience members and other people present say and do, over the course of the evening. These notes may be read by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this event will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in selected academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

**Confidentiality**

These notes will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only the researcher has access to. Following completion of the study all tapes will be destroyed. The tapes will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of the notes relating to your event, so that you can comment on and edit them as you see fit. If you wish to receive a copy of these notes, please state your e-mail address below.

E-mail: .....

**Anonymity**

Would you prefer this information to be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of the name of your event? (Please note that I will still need to refer to the city in which the event was held.)

**PLEASE CIRCLE**

**YES / NO**

**Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of data drawn from these observations for the purposes specified above. I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the researcher.

Name: .....

E-mail/phone:.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or the data drawn from observations of your event, please contact: Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, England. [hg210@ex.ac.uk](mailto:hg210@ex.ac.uk)

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact: Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University.

[G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)

Information Sheet for Participants of Observed (Adult) Events

You may be aware that during the recent slam held at..... on....., I took some notes based on my observations of the kinds of things that the poets, audience members and other people present said and did, over the course of the evening. This information sheet is intended to give you an indication of why I took these notes and provide you with more information about the project to which they will contribute.

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter. The aims of this project are:

- 1) To investigate the ways in which slam poetry is recreated within local communities, in line with local issues, concerns and artistic traditions.
- 2) To investigate how these different interpretations of slam poetry are mobilised by individuals within national and international communities.

The notes which I took may be read by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this event will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in selected academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

The notes will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only I have access to. They will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena).

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or the data drawn from observations of this event, please contact:

Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, England. [hg210@ex.ac.uk](mailto:hg210@ex.ac.uk)

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact:

Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University. [G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)

Information/Consent Form for Organisers, Parents and Teachers Involved in  
Observed Youth Events

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter. The key aims of this part of the project are:

To understand more about the ways in which youth slams play out.

- 1) To look at the relationship between youth slam, adult slam and the academic poetry world.

During this event I will be taking notes on the kinds of things that the poets, audience members and other people present say and do, over the course of the evening. These notes may be read by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this event will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in selected academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

**Confidentiality**

These notes will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only the researcher has access to. Following completion of the study all tapes will be destroyed. The tapes will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of the notes relating to your event, so that you can comment on and edit them as you see fit. If you wish to receive a copy of these notes, please state your e-mail address below.

E-mail: .....

**Anonymity**

I will not be using any of the competing poets' names in my research. If you wish I can also change the name of your event/school. Would you like this information to remain anonymous? (Please note that I will still need to refer to the city in which the event was held.)

**PLEASE CIRCLE YES / NO**

**Consent**

I voluntarily agree to participate and to the use of data drawn from these observations for the purposes specified above. I understand that I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the researcher.

Name: .....

E-mail/phone:.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or the data drawn from observations of your event, please contact: Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, England. hg210@ex.ac.uk

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact: [Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University.](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)  
[G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)

Information Sheet for Participants of Observed (Youth) Events

During the course of this slam, I will be taking some notes based on my observations of the kinds of things that the poets, audience members and other people present said and did, over the course of the evening. This information sheet tells you about why I am taking these notes and what they will be used for.

I will not be using any of the competing poets' names in my research; however if you do not wish any data involving yourself or your child to be included in my research, please contact me at the address at the foot of this sheet and I will remove it.

This project is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of Exeter.  
The key aims of this part of the project are:

- 1) To understand more about the ways in which youth slams play out.
- 3) To look at the relationship between youth slam, adult slam and the academic poetry world.

The notes which I took may be read by myself, my PhD supervisor and the examiners for my PhD thesis. The analysis of this event will form part of my PhD thesis and may also be published in selected academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

The notes will be held in confidence and stored in a locked cupboard, which only I have access to. They will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties, besides those stated above, will not be allowed access to them (except in the case of legal subpoena).

**Contact Details**

For further information about the research or the data drawn from observations of this event, please contact:

Helen Gregory, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University, Devon, England. [hg210@ex.ac.uk](mailto:hg210@ex.ac.uk)

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact:

Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University. [G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk)



**Appendix D: Transcription Key**

{ } Researcher's words

( ) Transcription doubt

(...) Inaudible speech

- Cut off talk

“ ” Reported speech

... Missing text

**Source**

Transcription system based on a simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson (See Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977)

## **Appendix E: Questionnaire**

### **Study Background**

This research aims to look at poetry slam scenes in England and America, paying particular attention to the scenes in Bristol, London and New York. I am interested in finding out more about the ways in which the communities in these cities shape slam differently. I am also keen to learn more about the connections or networks which exist between these different groups locally, nationally and internationally. Although my study specifically focuses on slam, I am also interested in the wider performance poetry world. I want to work out how slam fits into this world and am therefore keen to hear, not only about slam, but also about performance poetry in general.

If you have concerns/questions about the research you would like to discuss with someone who is independent of it, please contact: Prof. Grace Davie, Dept. of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Exeter University. **G.R.C.Davie@exeter.ac.uk**

### **How to answer the Questionnaire**

I would like to hear about your experiences and opinions of slam. There are no right answers. I am not looking for some hidden truth, simply what you think about slam and performance poetry. The questions are meant as prompts, to encourage you to talk about slam and performance poetry in some detail and to include anything which you feel is relevant. Please feel free to change questions, go off on tangents and respond with as much or little detail as you feel is appropriate.

If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions or do not feel that you can answer them for some reason, please feel free to skip over them. If you have any questions or would like clarification at any point, please feel free to e-mail me at the above address. Thank you again for agreeing to take the time to help me with my research.

## **The Questionnaire**

### About You

- 1) What is your involvement in the slam scene?
- 2) How did you become interested in the slam scene?
- 4) How did you set up the slams you run in.....?
- 5) What is your involvement with.....?

### Poetry Slam Scenes

- 6) People do not necessarily mean the same things when they talk about poetry slams. Could you describe to me what you mean by slams?
- 7) What are poetry slams like in your local area?
- 8) Would you say that there are one or several performance poetry scenes locally? Please tell me a little about what these scene/s are like.
- 9) Do you think that there are distinct 'black' and 'white' poetry scenes locally? Please tell me a little about what these scene/s are like.
- 10) Are there many connections between groups and individuals on the local performance poetry and slam scenes?
- 11) What do you think that connections between poets and promoters are like nationally?
- 12) How similar or different do you think your local slam scene is to scenes elsewhere in England?
- 13) How similar or different do you think your local slam scene is to scenes in America?

### 'Slam Poetry'

- 14) Do you think that there is a distinct 'slam poetry' style?
- 15) Do you think that there are characteristic differences between the poetry which is performed in slams around different parts of England?
- 16) Do you think that there are characteristic differences between the poetry which is performed in slams in England and in America?

Additional Questions

- 17) Do you think that there are any differences between the ways in which poets, organisers and audiences view poetry slams?
- 18) Is there anything else which you wish to add?

## **Appendix F: Final Interview Schedule**

### **Introduction** (10 minutes)

Introduction and study aims

Tape recorder

Ethical concerns: - Right to withdraw

Confidentiality (self and others discussed) and consent form

Interviewer's role

Ground rules: - Mobile phone  
- Breaks  
- No right answers  
- Okay not to answer any questions  
- Anything to add?

### **Warm-up** (10 minutes)

1a) What is your involvement in the slam scene?

*Prompt:* Local/national/international?

1b) How has that changed?

2) How did you become interested in the slam scene?

3) Are you involved with any other art forms or communities?

*Prompts:* How long for? How did you become involved in these scenes?

Did your interest in X lead you to become involved in slam (or vice versa)? Do you see any links here with your involvement in the slam scene?

4) How did you set up X?

*Prompts:* How did you meet X (co-organiser/s)? What prompted you to set up X?

**Main Section** (60-80 minutes)

Poetry Slams/Performance Poetry

- 1) People do not necessarily mean the same things when they talk about poetry slams. Could you describe to me what you mean by slams?
- 2a) What are poetry slams like locally?  
*Prompts:* Are there different local slam communities/scenes? Are there different performance poetry communities? Are there distinct black and white poetry communities locally?
- 2b) In other places around England/America?
- 2c) In other countries?
- 3a) How have poetry slams changed locally?
- 3b) Nationally?
- 3c) Internationally?
- 4) What do you think has influenced the development of slam?  
*Prompts:* Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other art forms and communities? Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other slam scenes?
- 5) Are there distinct slam/performance poetry networks locally?
- 6) Nationally?
- 7) Internationally?

Slam Poetry

- 1) Do you think that there is a distinct 'slam poetry' style?  
*Prompt:* Could you describe it to me? How does it differ from other performance poetry styles?
- 2a) What is the slam poetry like of people visiting from other places around England/America?
- 2b) From other countries?
- 4a) How has slam poetry changed locally?

*Prompts:* Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other art forms and communities? Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other slam scenes?

4b) Nationally?

*Prompts:* Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other art forms and communities? Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other slam scenes?

4c) Internationally?

*Prompts:* Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other art forms and communities? Do you think that these changes have been influenced by other slam scenes?

Arts Scenes

1a) What is the local arts scene like?

*Prompts:* Is this true of all of the local arts scenes? Do you think that there are any important variations between these different art scenes?

1b) Do you think that different art scenes crossover with the slam poetry/performance poetry scenes locally?

*Prompts:* In what ways? Have you noticed changes in the local arts scene/s? Is there any link to the changes in the local slam scene?

Different Roles

1) What does it mean to be a slam poet? Performance poet? Poetry promoter?

2a) Do you think that there are any differences between the ways in which poets and audiences view poetry slams?

*Prompts:* What do you think audiences see in slams? What do you think poets see in slams? Why?

2b) Slam poetry?

*Prompts:* What kinds of differences? How have these changed?

2c) Do you think that this varies between different locations locally?

*Prompt:* In what ways?

2d) Between different parts of England/America?

*Prompt:* In what ways?

2e) Between different countries?

*Prompt:* In what ways?

**Final Section** (10 minutes)

Interviewer's summary of main points

Clarifications? Additions?

Reminder of right to withdraw data.

5) Thank you!



## **Appendix G: Names and Descriptions of Interviewees Quoted in Text**

This table includes an alphabetical list of interviewees, alongside a short description and the location in which they were based at the time of the interview. These descriptions are interviewees' own, except in the few cases where this information was not supplied.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
Sara-Jane Arbury	Of Spiel Unlimited, <sup>202</sup> performance poet and slam host	Cheltenham
Tom Barnes*	Slam poet/'veteran'	Chicago
Serena Brooks*	Singer-songwriter and inspirator <sup>203</sup>	Leeds
Colin Brown	Poet and Director of Poetry Can <sup>204</sup>	Bristol
Mahogany Browne	Slam poet and curator	New York
Lisa Buscani	Performance poet	Chicago
Jackie Davis	Performance poet	Bristol
Lucy English	Performance poet and lecturer in Creative Studies at Bath Spa University	Bristol
Soul Thomas Evans	Former owner of spoken word label, PoetCD.com, and NPS Finalist	New York
Mike Flint*	Performance poet, slam poet and slam organiser	Bristol
Kat Francois	Performance poet and promoter of the Word Up slam	London
Catrina Garratt	Advanced Skills Teacher, Stoke Damerel Community College	Plymouth
Tim Gibbard	Performance poet	Bristol
Kurt Heintz	Writer and media artist	Chicago
Bob Holman	Poet, professor at Columbia and New York Universities and proprietor of NYC's Bowery Poetry Club	New York
Khadijah Ibrahim	Performance poet and Director of Leeds Young Authors	Leeds
Caroline Jackson*	Performance poet, events organiser, writer and tutor	Bristol
<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>

<sup>202</sup> 'Spiel Unlimited (Sara-Jane Arbury and Marcus Moore) undertakes all manner of spoken and written word initiatives and had been hosting slams for over ten years.' (Marcus Moore, in correspondence, 2 August 2007. See <http://www.thepeoplespoet.com/spiel.htm> for further information.)

<sup>203</sup> Serena defines an 'inspirator' as 'somebody who inspires young people'.

<sup>204</sup> Poetry Can is a Bristol based poetry organisation and registered charity. See [www.poetrycan.co.uk](http://www.poetrycan.co.uk) for more information.

*Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S.  
Poetry Slam Discourses*

David Johnson	Performance poet, co-founder of Paralalia Poetry partnership, playwright, slam winner	Bristol
Peter Kahn	Spoken Word Educator	Chicago
Steve Larkin	Former International Slam Champion and co-founder of Hammer and Tongue poetry organisation	Oxford
Taylor Mali	Slam poet	New York
Bertel Martin	Director of City Chameleon publishing company, performance poet and workshop tutor	Bristol
Kate Midgley	English teacher in a Leeds secondary school	Leeds
Marcus Moore	Of Spiel Unlimited, performance poet and slam host	Cheltenham
John Paul O'Neill	Performance poet and Farrago Poetry organiser	London
Nathan Penlington	Performance poet and co-organiser of Shortfuse spoken word night <sup>205</sup>	London
Jive Poetic	Slam poet	New York
Lynne Procope	Teaching artist and poet	New York
Keith Roach	Poet and former Nuyorican Poets Cafe Slam host	New York
Jacob Sam-La Rose	Poet and Artistic Director of the London Teenage Poetry SLAM	London
Ian Sills	Performance and slam poet and poetry organiser	Bristol
Jude Simpson	Stand-up poet	Cambridge (previously based in London)
Steve Tasane	Performance poet	London
Joelle Taylor	Performance poet and coordinator of the Rise! slams	London
Russell Thompson	Poet and Programme Coordinator for Apples and Snakes performance poetry organisation	London
Clare Ultimo	Multi-media artist and educator	New York
Brett Van Toen	Poet and poetry promoter	London
		Cont...
<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
Pat V T West	Poet and founder of the annual	Bristol

<sup>205</sup> 'Based in London SHORTFUSE is a spokenword night that has been presenting a weekly fusion of stand-up poetry, performance comedy and music since April 2000' (Shortfuse, 2006). Shortfuse also host Poetry Idol, a regular performance poetry competition, which was inspired by slam (Nathan Penlington, interview data).

*Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S.  
Poetry Slam Discourses*

	Glastonbury Festival poetry slam	
Thom the World Poet	Instant Improviser, who works with various musical and poetry ensembles	Austin, Texas
Jonathan Yates*	Former slam poet and Director of Speak Out New York	New York

\* indicates that names of individuals and organisations have been changed at the request of the interviewee concerned.