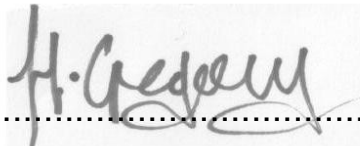


**Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in
U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses**

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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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 www.census.gov)
- 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.¹ 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

¹ 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...