

Voicing Diverse Working Class Sentiment and Bringing Poetry to Life: The Contribution of San Diego's Millennial Poetry Crews

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In Fall 2000, poetry happenings swelled in San Diego, California, as organized collectives of poets emerged on the scene and poets and audiences came out in unprecedented numbers to participate in nightly events. The most well attended happening, a featured poet and open-mic event, drew 80-120 audience members and poets each week. Every other night of the week, poetry open-mics happened at other venues and drew between twenty and fifty people, and about once a month beginning in 2002, a poetry slam took place. Events were almost always free of charge and most were located in diverse, working class neighborhoods.

Chris Vannoy, long time San Diego performance poet, mentor to many newcomers, truck driver, poetry crewmember, poetry scene organizer, self-defined "blue collar poet," and former host of five local events from 1990 to 2000, reflects on the job of host and the fate of most poetry events: "Most of the time, people just dwindle down until there are just two or three people coming and the guy gives up! The poetry crews really helped get it going."¹ In 2002, San Diego poetry event host and poetry scene organizer, Marc Kochinos reflected on their emergence, "When I first came into town in 1994, the *Taco Shop Poets* had just started. Until two years ago, they were the only poetry crew... [Now] there are the *Able Minded Poets*—Shannon Perkins, Nazareth Simmons, and BE Dean; the *Folkalists*... *Goat Song Conspiracy*—Chris Vannoy, Scotch, Sun Dubois, Christina... *Elevated*, and a few others..."² The poetry crews ranged from three to ten members each and in 2000, at the height of their organization, there were eight poetry crews that performed in local venues on a weekly basis. A small but

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¹ Chris Vannoy, audio interview with author, San Diego, CA, March 5, 2007.

² Marc Kochinos, video interview with author, San Diego, CA, November, 8, 2002.

primary constituency, they played a key role popularizing events at the local level and setting the tone and purpose of an emergent poetry world.

In the following pages, I draw on ethnographic research carried out from 2000 to 2007 with poetry crews, poets, event hosts, and audience members in San Diego, California. These participants gathered through events staged in coffeehouses, nonprofit art spaces, taco shops and bars to practice poetry and, through the backdoor, rehearse an inclusive, multicultural community. Here, I focus on the poetry crews as primary participants in the poetry world of this time and place and their role in retooling the meaning and purpose of poetry for themselves and their audiences. I argue that the poetry crews' innovative use of language, organization, and practice of whole bodied poetry gave voice to a diverse, working class ethos. Further, the aesthetic criteria they ascribed to poetry making and their live acts of it before audiences conveyed this ethos and influenced the kind of community that emerged through events.

Claiming Language with Bodies and Minds

With names such as *The Able Minded Poets*, the poetry crews challenged dominant rhetoric directed toward blue-collar working class communities by being more than *able bodied* and redefined the practice and purpose of poetry for themselves and their audiences. Popular music critic Simon Frith (1996) explains that beliefs about the mind and body were propagated during the Industrial Revolution that claimed the head was for mental activity and the body for work and pleasure. He argues that rock musicians raise the role of the mind in the body through their thoughtful and creative performative practices distributing music across their bodies. In so doing, they counter the belief that the head is the exclusive site for mental activity (1996). Likewise, the performance poets I discuss here intervene in the mind body split by turning the whole person with head, body, and embodied voice into the poem during the performance. This practice of what I term *whole body poetry* becomes particularly salient in the context of diverse working class communities.

The view that the head is for mental activity and the body for labor and pleasure leaves blue-collar, working class individuals and their communities with a heavy archive of experiential knowledge from embodied work experience and no critical form of expression. Working class identified poets practice inscribing their bodies for the moment of live delivery, and audiences learn to see the working class body as capable of poetry, too.

Mikhail Bakhtin explains that within any telling there is an assemblage of discourse, "heteroglossia." The context in which the telling is delivered "refracts" it, adding to or subtracting from its meaning (1981, 294). The performance of poetry in communities lined with grim day labor offices, check cashing businesses, and quintessential *Salvation Armies*, means something different than poetry

performed in a cultural context such as academia. The corporate signage in working class communities often tell local people that belong to the place not to imagine themselves and each other with the mental and physical fortitude to change their conditions for the better.

A *Labor Ready* office, for temporary day labor in which unemployed individuals line up at six o'clock in the morning, in hopes of being chosen for a day's work and a day's pay, was located a block from the most popular poetry event in San Diego from 2000-2004. Its blue neon sign spoke, *Labor Ready*. The recognition of the *Able Minded Poets* by local audiences and their public performances of whole bodied poetry countered the flat sign with a message that poetry is in bodies, as well as work, and that working class people have creative minds.

Bakhtin explains, "[The] word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intensions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (1981, 294). Poets in general do this work by claiming language and transforming it into poetry. Yet performance poets in particular, active in various settings, gain a keen understanding of how their poetry works when refracted against different contexts and audiences. Performance poets in crews aim to make poetry that resonates with audiences in diverse working class settings, and in this sense, the words they claim must be words that resonate with the community, too.

The San Diego based poetry crews take up of the word "crew" bears consideration. Seminal hip hop scholar Tricia Rose defines the term "crew" as it is used by collectives of rap artists:

The crew, a local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system appears repeatedly in all of my interviews... These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements (1994, 34).

Rose asserts that a crew is a kind of family based on intercultural relationships that give members necessary support in difficult contexts. Further, she states that crews may be the beginnings of new social movements. In San Diego, the poetry crews functioned as a microcosm of a social movement in that they were organized in collectives. Further, most crews directed their poetic activity toward cultural and social change. The cultural politics they practiced within their crews came to influence the cultural politics of the local world of poetry, broadly.

In 2000, eight poetry crews emerged with three to nine members each. Prior to this time, there was just one poetry collective, *The Taco Shop Poets*. *The Taco Shop Poets* formed in 1994 and their name reflects their creation story. When they began, there were no popular forums for live poetry or bilingual poetry in the city. They got their start by asking taco shop owners if they could perform

poetry in their fast food restaurants, and some agreed. The *Taco Shop Poets* did much to shape the landscape for the local practice of live poetry. In 2000, they began calling themselves a crew, too. In combination with the *Taco Shop Poets*, the crews that came forward in 2000 functioned as seedlings of a small yet influential poly-vocal social movement for cultural change through the local world of poetry.

The *Taco Shop Poets* seized discursive space for themselves and their audiences with bilingual poetry and call and response styles of delivery. In so doing, they invigorated the Chicano/a community and demonstrated to the diverse working class and middle class people who regularly frequent taco shops that poetry with all of its possibility is part of their daily lives, too. In 2001, The *Able Minded Poets* formed the *Beautifulfight Coalition*. *Beautifulfight* is a verb invented by the *Able Minded Poets* that means to struggle against hopelessness and despair for a more just and beautiful world. This is done through collective organization; social movement actions; positive, nonviolent interaction with others; and the public performance and communicative exchange of live poetry. *Beautifulfighting* happens poetically in working class communities in the ephemeral spaces laid claim to for poetry and in the exchange between poets and audiences when participants recognize each other as creators.

Through the *Beautifulfight Coalition* the *Able Minded Poets* actively participated in community events to bring about positive social change and a sense of hope among diverse working class teenagers and adults. They spoke and performed poetry at high schools and community centers, and they were regular poet-speakers in anti-war rallies that began after September 11th, 2001. In this latter regard, they ran counter to the rhetoric of the military recruiters who descend on working class communities in times of war. The *Goat Song Conspiracy*, of which Chris Vannoy was a member, also participated in these same activities. When the *Able Minded* were beginning, Vannoy often went as an audience member to their events in the informal role of mentor.

To return to Rose's definition of "crew," it is useful in its linkage of collective organization to social movement and in its description of relationships among members as a kind of family. However, it omits the class meaning that such a word conjures. Rose's subjects are crews of verbal artists, not rap choirs or rap ensembles or even rap groups. The term "crew" does cultural work when linked to verbal art, conveying the classed identifications of verbal artists to audiences, especially when coupled with the "high" verbal art of poetry.³ Further, when reading the term for its classed meanings, the labor that members engage in to produce poetry becomes significant.

³ For a discussion of the high cultural capital associated with the reading, writing, and appreciation of poetry, see Barbara Smith Hernstein's *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Harvard University (1988).

Poets who organize as crews work together making poems: reciting them, sometimes writing, recording, memorizing, practicing and performing live acts before audiences. As such, they are “crews” in the labor and blue-collar sense of the term: a crew is a collective of people with whom one works and shares work experiences. In a standard dictionary definition a “crew” is “a group of persons involved in a particular kind of work or working together: the crew of a train, a wrecking crew.”⁴ Through the process of working together to produce something and the shared experience of one’s individual and/or community’s diverse class oppression, solidaristic bonds that feel like brother and sisterhood can also emerge (Marx [1848] 1978, hooks 2000, Fantasia 1988, Zandy 2004). Among the poetry crews, solidaristic bonds that feel like family emerge across members.

Nazareth Simmons, founder of the *Able Minded Poets*, discusses imagining the poetry crew before it came to be. He explains why he organized a collective, rather than perform his poetry exclusively as an individual:

Before there were any *Able Minded Poets*, it was just me (smiles). I used to sign it on the bottom of all of my poems. I’d put my name then I’d put *Able Minded Poets*. I had the idea that I wanted to do it with some of my friends, but some of them weren’t motivated enough, so I had to get out into the community and make it happen. I never even thought about doing poetry alone. I don’t like being all up in the spotlight. And I love being around my friends. My friends have always been my family, because the other kind of family-life doesn’t really exist for me. So, I had to get out into the community and make it happen.⁵

Simmons describes dreaming up the *Able Minded Poets* before they were a crew by signing his written poems with his individual name and the crew’s name. He describes the relationships he has with his fellow crewmembers as a kind of family. Finally, he describes making poetry in a crew as a practice based in shared work, rather than a creative activity that is an exclusively individual practice.

When Simmons’s states that he does not like “being all up in the spotlight,” he reflects a commonly held view among crewmembers that is expressed similarly in statements against *grandstanding*. By operating as collectives, the crews oppose the view that one individual poet should be raised above others and get all of the attention of the spotlight, or take up all of the best stage space and subsequent audience attention on a grandstand. The poetry crews work together when they are making poetry and when they are performing poetry before audiences, yet they have a strong sense of their individual embodied poetic voices. They do not believe the poetry of an individual remains intact if another poet performs it. In the working class aesthetic of this genre of poetry, the individual

⁴Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House College Dictionary, Revised Edition*, New York: Random House Inc. (1984).

⁵Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

poet's voice is strengthened by his or her belonging to and participation in the collective, rather than obscured and threatened by membership in the collective.

Challenging Definitions and Rearticulating the Purpose of Poetry

In the views of the poetry crews, live acts of poetry are something that only the maker of the poem can deliver accurately and correctly. This view differs from the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*' definition of "Performance [as] the recitation of poetry either by its author, a professional performer, (or any other reader) either alone or before an audience; the term normally implies the latter" (1993, 892). In a video interview conducted in San Diego outside of the Chicano/a performance space *Voz Alta* in 2004, I asked a member of the *Taco Shop Poets*, Tomás Riley if anyone had ever performed his poetry for him. He said, "MY WORDS?!" Fellow *Taco Shop* Poet, Adrian Arancibia who was standing nearby said, "Oh no, no, no, no, we don't do that! Lost in translation!" he explained. Riley continued, "It's not acting. You can't do anyone else's words."⁶

Nazareth Simmons responded to the same query in another video-interview. I asked, "If you were sick, do you think someone else could do your poems for you? Do you think that would work?" He looked skyward, then dropped his gaze

No. Because even if it's laid out on paper, it's not the way I'd want it to be delivered. You know, cause I don't read off paper in front of any audience, I memorize my poems. On paper you can read it and you'll understand it, but when I do it, it's completely different. There's certain spots where you're gonna have emphasis, or where I slow down, or I'll speed up, there's just a whole different rhythm that you can't see on paper. There's a rhythm that you can't see on paper that I developed just from saying it, and writing it, and saying it over and over to myself, you know, it gets into this rhythm. So, to give it to you on paper, and have somebody else read it, it wouldn't come across the same way at all.⁷

Simmons states that he does not read off paper in front of any audience and memorizes his pieces instead. He states further:

I don't believe in reading other people's poetry-- you won't see me on stage reading someone else's poetry. I don't care how famous they are. That's just something I won't do. Because I don't know how they want their poetry read. I'm not into that. I think when somebody does their own poetry there's a big difference between their *there* (pointing downwards) and their presenting it

⁶Tomás Riley and Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

⁷Simmons, *ibid.*

the way they felt they *feel* it. You can't get that from somebody else reading someone else's piece. You never know the feelings behind it or anything.⁸

In Simmons's account, he holds that it is unethical to read someone else's poetry publicly. Doing so implies that the speaker knows the poet's precise feelings and intentions and that all of this could be connected to the poet's written words. Nonverbal communication between poet and audience in the live exchange allows for the expression of feeling through intonation, rhythm, gesture and play with space that exceeds the written text.

Dwight Conquergood (2002) offers the concept "textocentrism" to indicate the privileging of the written text in academia and other institutions over performative modes. He explains that written modes and performative modes enable the expression of different epistemologies. Embodied knowledge can fall out of a text-based exchange. When the poetry crews choose to memorize and perform poetry rather than write it or read it publicly, they emphasize their respect for the public audience and raise them as the ultimate purpose of their poetry. *Able Minded Poet* B.E. Dean explains, "I don't even hardly write. I just memorize. So, without the audience, there wouldn't be much point. It'd just be me spitting my words to myself."⁹ In sum, the distinction between poetry that is written down and poetry that is performed from memorization is salient to the crews.

Conversely, the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (Encyclopedia)* states, "The distinction is not between the poem on paper and the reading of it but between the poem (an abstraction) and two ways of realizing it... phonic and graphic. ...Language is form, not the physical representation of form" (1993, 7-9). In the conventions and practice of the crews, the poem is not fully produced and completed until it is performed live before an audience with the spoken voice, gestures, facial expressions and sensuous delivery of the poet. The poet, with his or her whole body, is the sound and script of the poem, and the poem cannot be abstracted from the poet and remain intact. This aesthetic practice of whole body poetry functions to allow poets to do the cultural work of coming to voice and remaking themselves and the communities they conjure, during their live acts.

The performance event opens a panoply of communicative modes between poet and audience in which they see each other, smell each other and enter each other's space in face-to-face communication. BE Dean describes being drawn into poetry after witnessing a performance by Chris Vannoy at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse.

The first time I was at Claire's, Chris Vannoy—He started over by the bar and walked all the way around and stared at *ME*—the WHOLE TIME! He

⁸Simmons, *ibid.*

⁹BE Dean, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

brought all kinds of things out of me like fear, and like it was kind of cool that I was a part of it. All of these different emotions were happening to me...¹⁰

Thus, there are more than phonic or graphic ways of realizing a poem when it is performed in a given context.¹¹ In some ways, language becomes more pliable and exciting in its poetic possibility, not in a fixed physical representation of form, but in performance.

Lastly, the crews' poetic practice reflects a belief that poetry should be truthful, and popular audiences expect poets to be expressing their genuine views and actual lived experiences in their poetry. The *Encyclopedia* on the other hand holds that poetry is usually understood as fiction (1993, 1346). Further, the *Encyclopedia* highlights the difference between the poet as a "maker" and his or her creation of "personas" that may have little to do with the identity of the actual poet (1993, 1346). Yet, it is rare for poets in popular forums to assume voices as personas. If they do, however, they choose ones that the audience quickly recognizes as play or satire. Critics of contemporary popular poetry Christopher Beach (1999) and Susan Somers-Willett (2009) assert that performances of truthfulness are customary in popular events.

The poet's truthfulness is based in an epistemology of lived experience that no individual can know in the exact same way as another. This aesthetic criteria safeguards the poetry from being appropriated from the poet. Further it helps raise the value of each individual's poetry because it cannot be replicated by anyone else. Moreover, it levels the playing field between college educated poets and poets without degrees because the primary archive poet-participants are expected to draw from is one based in lived experience, not academic learning. The structure of the event also plays a role in bracketing the performance as an alternative classed space.

In Marxist folkloristic terms, because the event is free and the poetry uncommodified, the exchange of it between poet on stage and audience is a kind of gift giving (Limón 1983). Early Marxist writings assert that uncommodified labor feels and does different "work" than commodified labor. The former is generative and fruitful rather than a kind of work that strips away and depletes. It enables the binding expression of "species-being," a universal feeling of kindredness (Marx [1844] 1978). San Diego based poet Salim Sivaad, founder and member of poetry crew *Souls in Syzygy* and 2002 slam team member, describes the reciprocal giving between poet and audience and references the felt experience of species-being that emerges between them during the event. Here he re-

¹⁰BE Dean, 2002.

¹¹Audiences and poets who participate in Deaf performance poetry communities topple the notion further that poetry is realized only through the two communicative modes of script and sound.

sponds to my query on why he performs poetry publicly rather than writing privately and aiming to publish exclusively

Oh, because the gratification is so immediate- when you get the energy from the crowd, it helps to sustain you, you know? There's definitely a thing where there's a synergy happening between you and the audience, the audience is feeding your art and you're feeding the audience art, it works both ways--and it's the best thing, man! I mean art in isolation for art's sake is dead! Art is for the upliftment of society. It's for *people*. And what better way to do it—than in a very direct, public context—like performance?¹²

Sivaad directs attention to the reciprocal relationship between poet and audience during the event and the fruitfulness of this relationship for his own poetic practice, and for the benefit of society. On this last point, Sivaad's stated purpose in doing poetry for the people reflects the purpose of poetry crews in general and their function as seedlings of a social movement.

The Beautifight: Rehearsing Community

Next, I describe an interaction between Nazareth Simmons and a newer poetry crewmember, Scott Perry, in which Simmons performs a poem, then encourages Perry to perform a poem. By focusing on their interaction and performances I hope to ground the values and aesthetic criteria previously discussed that are central to the crewmembers' performative practices. These include an orientation toward other crewmembers and the audience in the production and performance of poetry, regard for each individual poet's unique embodied voice, and a social movement orientation.

Simmons's and Perry's interaction illuminates some of the ways in which the practice of live poetry as defined by the poetry crews enables individuals to come to voice and generates an egalitarian sense of community. Further, Simmons's role as a more experienced poet than Perry makes it possible to see the ways in which newer poetry crewmembers learn the craft. Through their interaction we glimpse their aspirations to affect consciousness and generate community, and gain insight into how they do this through their acts of live poetry. In my discussion, I draw on video footage I recorded of the poets on the sidewalk outside of the Tuesday night *Claire de Lune* poetry event.

In the following exchange, I asked Nazareth Simmons if he would do a poem for the camera and he said, "Sure, I'll drop a piece on the sidewalk for you." He turned toward Scott Perry and called him by his chosen name, "Hey, *Scotch!* Come drop a piece with me on the sidewalk! He's from *Goat Song Conspiracy*, another poetry crew," he explained. Scotch sidled up beside Simmons, I got the video-recorder into position, and then Simmons delivered his poem. When he

¹²Salim Sivaad, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

began to perform, people who were milling about on the sidewalk and sitting at tables talking got quiet, and many walked over and gathered round to listen. I quote a short segment from his three and a half minute piece here. During his live act of poetry he rallies a broad public to rise:

Witness the rebirth of constant artistic expression and riots of positivity
 Understand that we will not fall as long as we realize
 It is our destiny to rise! To rise above
 Hover like hawks above mountaintops
 Riding winged currents with exercised skill, skill, we need to build...¹³

Simmons's piece generates a large vision of collective purpose and the transformative possibility to which poetry can be directed as a "skill" to "build," a movement for more mentally vibrant and humane ways of being among diverse working class people. He uses language that is meant to be universal to key diverse audience members to enter his poem. The metaphor of soaring "hawks" is a poetic body for watchful-listeners to imagine themselves within, stretched out in wingspan and cawing throat, seeing the problems of the world below and hope on the horizon. Through the words, rhythm, his embodied voice, and the message of the poem, it works a bit beyond him and invites audiences to come into its imaginative space on the sidewalk. Together, they build a moment of emergent community.

After Simmons's poem was finished, and the crowd that had gathered dispersed a bit, he turned to Perry, AKA, Scotch, beside him and said, "Drop something Scotch!" He pointed one hand down towards the sidewalk and swung it right, then swung it left, and then swung it right again, sweeping the space of the ghost of his poem so it would be ready for Scotch's delivery. "You're the man!" Simmons said, lifting him up. Scotch replied, "*Nab!!!* Dude, I can't follow that up, Dude! That was fine!" Scotch was smiling, lit up by Simmons's poem and cognizant that Simmons's skill was beyond his at this time. Simmons's poem was too powerful for Scotch to step behind at that time. It was powerful because his poem was directed toward a public audience rather than toward an individual and because it built up the audience and rallied for social change. Further, it was powerful because he delivered his poem confidently from memory and made use of his gestures and embodied voice.

Scotch explained that Simmons's poem crystallized why they do what they do: "Basically, it just went to the heart of why we do poetry. Best to just leave it at that." Still, I asked Simmons and Scotch to explain more about why they do poetry and to elaborate on the purpose of the *Beautifulfight Coalition*. Simmons said,

“We’re just trying to build a community for poetry and artistic expression.”¹⁴
Scotch added

You know, there’s a lot of opportunities in this town to get out and go party, get drunk... but there’s not enough stuff going on around here for people to do positive energy kinds of things. So, I think that has to do with why a lot of us are bringing it out into places like this, you know. What’s not positive about the arts? What’s not positive about self-expression—and getting out there, and saying your piece in a peaceful way? You know? That’s what we’re all about—being a counter-point—to *everything that has no heart*.¹⁵

Simmons smiled at Scotch and he smiled back. Talking about hearts. Then Scotch said, “A lot of my poems have nothing to do with *beautifighting*, it’s just like me speaking my art—whatever!” he put both hands to his chest and then opened them towards Simmons and me. “You know? So, we were talking about the *beautifight*, and he just *spoke* that.”

Scotch looked at Simmons in his last phrase and put one hand to chest and then dropped it towards him, returning the respect that Simmons had extended to him. When Scotch said that Simmons “just spoke that,” he meant that he enunciated the purpose of poetry in the service of making beautiful community through his delivery of spoken word poetry. He spoke it, and in so doing, he made it so in an ephemeral moment through the creative act of making poetry. Poetry at root means “to make” through its definition as *poesis* (Damon and Livingston 2009, 4). Through the act of performing poetry they communicate the form and simultaneously make an ephemeral cultural form of emergent community.

Simmons put his hand out toward Scotch, pulled it back toward his chest and out again, then said, “There’s different forms. There’s different forms of it.” He tapped his wind-breaker against his stomach with both hands, “I have one form of expression with the poetry, you have another form of expression. You do yours in a different way. You’re words come out different.” He stepped back and smiled at Scotch. “True dat,” Scotch sighed, looked around, and then said, “Ok. I guess I could do—a *love* poem? Let me think—um, a *lost love* poem?” Feeling small, Scotch began

Down off that three week high, I am down off that three week high
I am lost and lacking love, tortured minds scream, su ra rye,
Who I am, us, and where is my sweetness? My sweet-est,
My sweet relief I lack, I said I am down off that three week high
I am lost and lacking love...

¹⁴Nazareth Simmons, video-interview by author San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

¹⁵Scott Perry, a.k.a. *Scotch*, video-interview by author San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

Then Scotch paused, forgot the lines and said, “Cut tape, dude! I fucking lost it.” Then we all laughed because it is hard to be on the spot delivering a poem from memory before a public audience on the sidewalk, especially if one believes he does not have something important and valuable for the audience.

Scotch stumbled a bit on the request to give a poem that would be as large and oriented towards collective purpose as Simmons’s piece. That is why he said that he could not “follow” Simmons’s performance. He understood the difference between poetry that *beautifights* and generates openings and a rearranged sense of community and poetry oriented toward personal experience, and at that point in his poetic practice, he only had the latter type.¹⁶

When Simmons encouraged Scotch to do a poem after he delivered his he said, “There’s different forms of it. I have one form of expression with the poetry, you have another form of expression.” Through this statement and simultaneous hand gesture of tapping his chest and belly, he explains that he has a way of doing poetry that stems from who he is as an individual with a particular embodied voice and point of view. Simmons explains further to Scotch, “Your words come out different.” Words come out differently because creative expression is particular to the individual, and because our bodies are different, the sound of our voices are different, and the lived experiences and knowledges we reference in our poetries are different.

The act of performing poetry publicly in which each poet is assumed to have a unique voice worthy of respect bolsters poets as they take up the process of coming to voice. This horizontal view of poetic worth plays an important role in working class communities, reminding all that they have as much ability to imagine and create poetry as those with knowledge gleaned from higher education. Further, through the credence afforded to embodied deliveries in this genre of poetry, voice becomes palpable and sutured to the poet. This has an affect of empowering poets and drawing audiences closer to them during the act of performance. In this intimate exchange, poets and audiences fortify each other and experienced poets move the audience in a transformative sense.

The poetry crews invigorated the local world of poetry in San Diego by retooling the meaning and practice of poetry. Their embodied deliveries of poetry and poetic use of language in relation to the diverse, working class context in which they performed helped make the poetry more interesting, exciting and relevant for local audiences. Behind the scenes before the poetry crews engaged the audience with their live acts, they created poetry with the audience in mind and generated aesthetic criteria, names, and performative practices that enable the expression of a diverse working class ethos. Through their culturally produc-

¹⁶ Scotch continued to do poetry and in 2003, he won a position on the San Diego slam team to compete in the national competition held in Seattle that year.

tive activity, they expanded the meaning and purpose of poetry as it is practiced in public forums at the local level.

Finally, in order for us to gain deeper insight into the cultural meanings and the classed salience of emergent communicative forms such as live poetry, more critical ethnographic studies should be conducted into local worlds of poetry that inquire into the definitions primary participants ascribe to their performative practices. Only in this way, will we begin to hear marginalized voices that are not always spoken through verbal and written registers or made plain against all contexts. Only in this way does a working class ethos spoken through aesthetic criteria and embodied voices become audible.

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