

## Why ‘Poetry Worlds’?

Jen Vernon & Bill Marsh

What is poetry? Who makes it and why? How is poetry produced, and who determines the terms and conditions of its production? These questions are based on the rather broad premise that poetry is, in fact, made or produced by individuals and groups working with particular goals in mind. Often such goals intersect with broader issues of community construction, group membership, inclusion and exclusion, identity making and personal and social empowerment, all of which manifest in various forms of poetic practice. Poetry, in other words, is a social activity that involves any number of people, organizations, resources, routines and conventions configured in various ways to support different forms of poetic production. In short, poetry happens within poetry worlds.

We are indebted to sociologist Howard Becker (1982) and his concept of ‘art worlds’ for the concept of ‘poetry worlds’ and its organizing principle. Drawing on examples from music and the visual arts, Becker argued in *Art Worlds* that “all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people” (p. 1). The usual results or products of that activity—paintings, sculptures, photographs, books, song albums, musical performances and so on—show “signs of that cooperation” and “patterns of collective activity we can call an art world” (p. 1). Becker argues further that what we often take to be the definitive mark of artistic work, the artwork itself, exists as a particular instance of art world activity assuming a given form in the context of much broader collaborations and interactions. *Art Worlds* is thus a primer on how to study the “core activity” of artistic work by looking at the contributions of all those who participate in an art world’s “characteristic conventions” (p. 35).

By examining the ‘core activities’ of particular poetry worlds, we can learn a

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great deal about how poetry is performed and produced in different locales and under widely different circumstances. Exposing these core activities helps foreground the cultural politics of poetry communities, the ways in which poetry world participants or members define poetry and performance, the communicative mediums through which poetry and poetic discourse are expressed, and the cultural, social and political meanings of poetry world production in relation to larger social forces and concerns, such as race, class and gender. In short, we opt to use the word 'world' to connote a wide range of human interactions among specific groups of human actors. The term also conjures a given imagined space and a corresponding set of worldviews, and it is through the production of poetry that these worldviews are created and sustained within larger cultural contexts.

In short, we define 'poetry world' as an emergent cultural constellation of individuals who come together around a particular form of poetic activity in particular times, places and spaces. The different kinds of 'coming together' that lead to poetry world formations are not necessarily limited to pre-existing social networks, groups or communities of practice. A 'world' can imply either a broadly imagined space whose inhabitants share an assumed sense of size, borders, completeness and wholeness or a very particular space or locale equipped with a contingent set of conventions, practices and rituals that may or may not resemble those found in other domains. Moreover, a 'poetry world' subsumes multiple forms of community interaction while remaining open and inclusive enough—as both conceptual framework and metaphor—to allow for wide-ranging responses to and interpretations of poetic activity that pivot on a range of media—from newer digital, online and televisual acts, to older face-to-face acts and text-based forms. Popular poetry movements in recent decades—the challenge of spoken word to the canon, for example—underscore the limitations of tracking the meanings of poetry as an individual and/or book-bound event.<sup>1</sup> More than ever, we need new tools to explore the meanings of poetic activity that are in step with the historical moment, dubious of traditional authorship models and reflective of the range of media in poetic interaction and production.

Our own personal stories as poets and editors exemplify the multiple 'core activities' that define poetry world interaction. When I (Marsh) first ventured into poetry production, I did so as 'pure product' of white suburban privilege, spending much of my free time at home reading the books on the family bookshelves, in particular the revered poets—dead white guys mostly, some European, some American—collected in the dusty hardbacks that my dad had inherited from his father. I started writing poetry at the age of twelve but never thought of myself as a 'poet,' a term I figured was reserved for the canonized few I pulled

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this issue, see Somers-Willett's review of Charles Bernstein's (1999) critique in this forum.

down off the shelves. As a college sophomore, I landed a part-time job in the university library's rare books room, and it was there—hiding out in the musty subterranean stacks, flipping through mimeographed chapbooks, one-off poetry journals and crumbling manuscript pages—that I first encountered poetry not as bound printed volume but as messy recursive process. Later, a good friend introduced me to Language Poetry, and I began to question the cherished conventions of my literary forebears as well as the favored aesthetics of my former and current teachers, most of whom railed against 'experimental poetry' as elitist, cold-to-the-touch, devoid of emotion, and too cerebral.

My poetry life remained anchored to the written word, although at one point, while living in San Diego, I tried my hand at a poetry off the page and on the stage. I met people whose access to and involvement in poetry had nothing to do with the poets I'd read before or the ones I was reading then. In the mid-1990's I embraced the desktop printing revolution and started publishing chapbooks in small print runs. I also worked in web design and multimedia and was an early dabbler in computer-based (electronic, digital) poetry. I continued to work in publishing in the early 2000's and, in collaboration with another poet/publisher, co-founded a project called Factory School dedicated to grassroots education and activism, community service and small press publishing.

As with earlier associations and friendships, my editing work has served as a constant reminder that poetry, whether printed in books or performed on street or stage, is always a group activity involving multiple players. In the world of small press publishing, players may include authors, editors, printers, the author's friends and families, the publisher's spouse and kids, the printer's marketing department temp workers, postal carriers—the list goes on. The layers of backstage participation that add up to book making are not always so obvious, are sometimes concealed behind a fascination with the book as the final sign of creative output, but this multi-layered participation—the "joint activity" of poetry world members—is crucial to the act of production. In designing book covers, for example, I sometimes spent hours in front of my computer screen developing what I thought was an effective look only to have my ten-year-old daughter swing by and add the one or two definitive strokes that made the whole thing come together. Family involvement in the design process became a ritual over time, and there isn't one book I've edited that doesn't bear the "signs," to quote Becker, of that cooperation.

As a graduate student at UC San Diego (UCSD), I read *Art Worlds* and books by other second-generation Chicago School sociologists (e.g., Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman) whose work, grounded in American Pragmatism, stressed both the contingent, conditional nature of knowledge production and the importance of looking at larger social structures when studying individual human behaviors. I soon grew enamored of the deceptively simple idea—essential to social scientific approaches grounded in Pragmatism—that all action

is interaction, and thus actions that we might want to construe as solitary and individual (such as writing, reading, composing, creating) are in fact interactions of a very special sort. In thinking about poetry, I came to understand that the question we started with above—*What is poetry?*—could not be answered effectively without introducing follow-up questions like *Who makes it and why, and how, and under what conditions?*

I (Vernon) came into poetry by watching and listening to the many adults in my family tell stories. I grew up in a rural, working class community in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. As a young person, I had a larger than usual love of stories and I would sit quietly, out of center view, and listen to the old people talk. I had the good fortune to grow up with six grandparents—both of my parents' parents and two great grandmas, ten great aunts and uncles, eight aunts and uncles, both parents—married since they were sixteen and eighteen, three brothers and sisters, and a gaggle of cousins, all us living within about a ten-mile radius. We did not have television, and beyond the thrill of the arrival of the giant Sears catalog, one of the main sources of pleasure, learning and magic came through storytelling. The oldest generation would tell stories, some about work in the logging camps, living on potted meat and mustard during the Depression, making homemade liquor and root beer in the bathtub, and others about the boldness of my mother's mother—doing things like marching up to a relative's volatile husband, as he wagged his finger and pointed a gun at her, and breaking his index. That finger had a permanent crook in it. Sometimes, he would be made to sit quietly as my Grandma told the story. Him, laughing some to shrug it off and muttering, you're lucky I've got a sense of humour. But everybody already knew how bendable he could be in even his fiercest moments. The telling of that story in the public space of the big family was important because it helped keep his wife safe when they were home in private. In addition to the content, their voices and expressions and gestures were velvet. In this forum, Urayoán Noel quotes Peggy Phelan's (1993) important claim that acts of performance teach us to value what is lost: The ways of speaking, the expressions, the shrugs, particular to each individual, never again to be exactly redone. These people were the first poems I read.

In considering *what poetry is*, in my view, its instantiation on the page is only one turn in a production process. If it weren't for the vernacular language and vivid expressions and local rhythms that particular people in particular places create, this poet would have had nothing to work with. My book of poetry *Rock Candy* (West End press, 2009) draws on true stories told to me by older relatives, and language and rhythm of their work and era in a section called "the misery whip years." A misery whip is a long crosscut saw with a handle on each end that two people work to fell a tree. This rich word given the tool conveys the experience of working it in the view of workers. In my view, poetry starts in spoken conversations among particular people in particular places, through acts

of storytelling and creative use of spoken language.

In discussions of artful forms of spoken communication, Richard Bauman's (1977) concept of "verbal art" is useful. The term includes forms such as storytelling, oratory and poetry. Verbal art is distinguished from ordinary talk and recognized as artful by the cultural groups that practice it. In the context of my family, acts of verbal art often happened around a kitchen table or in a living room. The story would take on a force, like a small fire on a cold night, and draw the listeners to the teller in a deeper and more binding sense. When I came to San Diego, California in the fall of 2000, I saw a poetry world that was crackling in nightspots of the city. Poets and audiences gathered around the practice of a unique kind of verbal art, live poetry, in open-mic events held at coffeehouses, black barbershops, bars, taco shops and non-profit art spaces. As a graduate student in Communication, this poetry world became my refuge and my object of study.

As a refuge, the poetry world in the city was a diverse, cross-class space that included working class people and their voices, views, and cultural sensibilities. The events fostered an inclusive and welcoming sense of community; far different from the sense of community conjured by the wealth and whiteness of La Jolla, California and the university's culture within it. Participating in the poetry world in the city bolstered me to succeed at the university, through the PhD program, as a first-generation college student. As an object of study, I became interested in poetry as a generative form of communication that drew people together through the act of performance and created a rare forum for diverse working class voices alongside others. From 2000 to 2007, I participated in and observed weekly poetry happenings in San Diego's poetry world, writing fieldnotes, interviewing poets and audience members, and documenting live happenings.

One question I heard on occasion from colleagues at the university in relation to my research went something like this: How can you stand listening to all of that bad poetry? Never once did I get a question that implied the poetry in the city might be better than the poetry discussed, written, and performed at the university. In my essay in this forum, I take up this question by raising the ways in which some of the primary participants in the poetry world of this place and time define their art and its aesthetic criteria. Like rubrics we use as professors in evaluating work, my hope is that making plain the distinct criteria at play in the views of participants in popular poetry forums will complicate dismissals and disregard for a diverse, working class art. Indeed, all of the contributors in this forum complicate views of poetry lifted off of bodies and out of hands, as if it ever could have been a disembodied practice devoid of sounds and expressions and cultural meanings, as if it ever could be valued and understood out of context.

We (Marsh and Vernon) came together on this project as an outgrowth of

our shared commitments to critical communication studies and poetic practice. In the early 2000s, we met as members of a graduate cohort in Communication at UCSD and went on to collaborate with others on projects at the intersection of communication and poetry. In developing our respective 'poetry world' orientations, we find inspiration not only in our past experiences but also in the questions these experiences raised (in our minds, over time) about human interaction and the social contingencies and consequences of knowledge creation in particular times and places. Viewed within a broader social philosophy context, the kinds of poetry world participation we describe above are all examples of the ways human beings "operate in association," as John Dewey (1927) wrote in *The Public and Its Problems* (p. 23). For Dewey, human association defines and qualifies the democratic project writ large; it is through various forms of "conjoint action" that human beings come together to solve problems, build communities and share responsibilities (69). From Dewey, therefore, we inherit a democratic imaginary that stresses the importance of communication as communal or cooperative interaction. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey develops this idea further by defining the "work of art" as the "only media of complete and unhindered communication"—the only means we have, in other words, to bridge the epistemic "gulfs" that separate us as human beings (p. 105). Art communicates because it "expresses" meanings we all share, but communication is not a simple matter of announcement or statement, of meaning disembodied and conveyed from sender to receiver. Rather, as Dewey often stressed, communication "is the process of creating participation." The "miracle" of art, Dewey concludes, lies in this experiential collaboration among those who "utter" and those who "listen" (p. 244).

We also work from the social anthropology of George Herbert Mead (1934), who extends the arguments of Dewey and James by linking the individual—and what is "unique" about the individual as a thinking being—to larger reflexive social processes. When an individual communicates, Mead argues, he or she "inevitably seeks an audience"; the action of thinking is tantamount to "social action," an anticipated encounter with a wider world that reflects back to us our sense of self as an "object" among other communicating beings (p. 206). C. Wright Mills (1959) also stressed the importance of understanding "the intimate realities of ourselves in connection within larger social realities" (p. 15). These and other moves in sociology toward studying individual actions in relation to "larger social realities" recall the grand lesson of Pragmatism—that behaviors previously understood as individual and solitary are, in fact, collective and contingent on larger systems of human interaction.

With its emphasis on the social construction of poetry, the 'poetry world' concept also intersects with cultural studies approaches to, and definitions of, poetry as a "social form" (Harrington, 2002) and a particular kind of "cultural work" (Damon and Livingston, 2009). Harrington's definition of the "genre of

poetry” as a composite of historical meanings, institutional norms, readerly judgments and textual and contextual markers is useful here as a reminder that cultural categories, which tend to change and shift over time, inform our received understandings of poetry at different historical moments. Defining poetry in a cultural studies context, Damon and Livingston admit that any question about what poetry “is” must address “the prior question of what it means for its creators, distributors, or consumers to *claim* it as poetry or to attend to its poetics” (p. 3, emphasis in original). As our narratives above and the articles in this forum demonstrate, the “claim” for poetry, or for the genre of poetry, is often a construction from within, a situated act of naming poetic activity within and against other social and cultural categories for purposes of creating or sustaining a given poetry world.

### Article Previews

In the first essay, Corey Frost takes on questions of exclusion and inclusion in the construction of poets and poetry communities in online forums. He investigates border/boundary management and, through a close reading of recent “skirmishes” between spoken word poets and their critics, demonstrates some of the ways in which poetry communities often maintain hierarchies through exclusion. As Frost shows in this piece, poetry communities tend to become territorial and tend to mark their territories according to various protocols of style, politics, or lineage. In other words, they generate identities, and there is always a certain violence involved in that project. Frost also discusses possible ways of exiting this loop of community-building, identity-construction, exclusion, and oppression through Giorgio Agamben’s concept of ‘whateverness’: not apathy or indifference, but an existentialist refusal to submit to essentialist categorization.

In the second essay, Jen Vernon uses ethnographic methods and a critical communication approach to shed light on the ways in which poetry collectives in San Diego, California have created poetry as an embodied performative practice that enunciates a diverse working class ethos and generates community. The article asks, how did the poetry collectives’ style of organization, cultural politics, and poetic practice give voice to a diverse working class ethos? Their symbolic use of language and participatory performative practices generated ephemeral spaces in which to re-imagine the world through a poetic working class sensibility in which blue-collar bodies are mindful, class hierarchies are eclipsed and new kinds of relationships come to the fore. Broadly, this article interrogates the relationship between communication and culture and the ways in which emergent communicative forms generate new cultural forms.

In the third essay, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett compares the U.S. National Poetry Slam competition and HBO’s Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, addressing issues of poet-audience interaction, poetry commodification and po-

etry performance as a form of public message delivery. In migrating between these two worlds, Somers-Willett argues, poets are presented with a quandary: to participate in a commercial system and potentially change the minds of a larger mainstream public, or to be heard by fewer people in more open, democratic counterpublics. In comparing the kinds of publics formed by poetry slams and the Def Poetry projects, Somers-Willett helps clarify the critical and cultural exchanges these poetry communities enact, as well as what possibilities they present to poets and audiences. Though the poetry performed as part of the HBO series is largely tied up with commercial trappings, Somers-Willett argues that Def Poetry performances appearing in less regulated online communities such as YouTube can create “viral counterpublics” where mainstream audiences can more freely engage in critical social discourse.

Urayoán Noel begins the fourth article with a reading of Miguel Algarín’s 1981 essay, “Nuyorican Literature” (1981), contrasting Algarín’s “Nuyorican” performance identity to the “Out of Focus Nuyorican” postulated in Pedro Pietri and Adal Maldonado’s irreverent and Dadaist web installation *ElPuertoRicanEmbassy.org* (1994). With these and other texts in the background, Noel defines and challenges performance identities associated with the Nuyorican Poets Café and Nuyorican poetics more broadly, reflecting as well on his own ongoing collaborative performance project, *Noricua*, which, in Noel’s words, “embraces an anti-foundationalist, deterritorialized, and practice-centered Puerto/Nuyo Rican poetics/politics.”

In the fifth article, Helen Gregory examines youth poetry slam in the UK, analyzing this phenomena in relation to arts education and young people’s empowerment. Drawing on work in psychology, sociology, education and elsewhere, she presents a social scientific analysis of *WordCup*, a UK-based national youth poetry slam program run by performance poetry organization *Apples & Snakes*. Gregory uses this case study as a departure point to explore the nature, impacts and challenges of youth slam programs more generally. A key focus of this analysis is the student-centered learning (SCL) approach favored within these projects. Gregory argues that this approach serves to construct a supportive and friendly community, within which many students develop, not only a love for poetry, but also the confidence and ability to express themselves and approach difficult life issues in new ways.

These articles should make abundantly clear that poetry cannot be defined or meaningfully explained outside of the contexts, people, places and spaces in which poetry is performed and produced. Each piece suggests new opportunities for further poetry world research and methods for conducting that research. Across them, themes emerge of community, identity, power, voice, race, class, culture, commodification, public(s), and inclusion and exclusion. In sum, a poetry world research orientation investigates the layers of social and communicative interaction that inform poetry making in multiple forms — as performance, publi-



cation, transaction and interaction. Like others in poetry studies committed to an ongoing exploration of poetics in a changing world, we do not claim that our framework is definitive or comprehensive. We do believe, however, that performance poets and scholars of poetry and performance will benefit from this conceptual framework, which begins in the idea that poetry “operates” in the joint actions, interactions and associations of people working together. This together-work is our primary point of departure for poetry world research.



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