

From Slam to *Def Poetry Jam*: Spoken Word Poetry and its Counterpublics

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Poetry slams—raucous poetry competitions where poets perform their own compositions and judges selected from the audience score them from 0.0-10.0—are practices rooted in the public sphere. These local performance poetry competitions, which originated in the mid-1980s in white working-class Chicago bars as the brainchild of ex-construction worker Marc Smith, have spawned national and global competitions. Now, over twenty-five years since the birth of slam, the National Poetry Slam (NPS) annually hosts teams from nearly eighty cities across the U.S. and Canada. As slam entered the twenty-first century, its poets started to appear on larger and more public stages, including documentary and feature films, cable television, Broadway, the White House, and the Opening Ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics. This exposure has, at times, ventured toward the cliché; in 2004, slam poetry garnered the dubious honor of becoming the subject of a book in *The Complete Idiot's Guide* series (M. Smith & Kraynak, 2004), and parodies of and references to poetry slams have appeared on MTV, *The Simpsons*, *The Daily Show*, and *Oprah* to name a few. Both parodies and serious critiques of poetry slams caricature their poets as soulful loudmouths with a grudge—against either mainstream society, a specific oppressor, or the

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ever-elusive “man.” The most oft-quoted of these critiques came from Harold Bloom, who remarked in *The Paris Review*, “I can’t bear these accounts I read in the *Times* and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn’t even silly; it is the death of art” (Bloom et al., 2000, p. 379).

Although such images of the poetry slam and the poets they attract are reductive—for slams attract a range of people from sonneteers to slacktivists, and both Pulitzer Prize winners and National Book Award finalists have passed through its ranks—it does bring to the fore the poetry slam’s characteristic stances against dominant culture and the academy. First designed, according to Marc Smith, to stand in contrast to dry, exclusive, and author-reverent readings organized by some academics (2003, pp. 117-18), the poetry slam has evolved to create a populist model for poetry’s reception while rallying its audiences around liberal political stances and support for marginalized poets and identities (Hoffman, 2001, p. 49; Somers-Willett 2009, pp. 3, 68-95). Through a unique combination of open participation, political exchange, and public critique, the practice of slams in the U.S. can create what scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) calls *subaltern counterpublics*—“discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses ... to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67).

The concept of counterpublics offers a more specialized understanding of Jürgen Habermas’s *public sphere* (1989), a discursive space created when private citizens come together to engage in public rational-critical debate and through which “political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (Fraser, 2009, p. 57). In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as open, self-organized communities formed through attention, the circulation of discourse, and expression of a world view while also being “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” and “maintain[ing] at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (pp. 118, 119). They are also spaces in which their members, through open critique and exchange, hope to transform certain paradigms of dominant culture, not merely to replicate that subordinate status. In this regard, counterpublics can be discursive arenas where their members’ identities are both formed and reimagined (pp. 57, 122).

Even as counterpublics are formed in the interest of marginalized groups, participation in a counterpublic is not always limited to those with marginalized identities or statuses, as Fraser’s definition may suggest. Warner notes some youth culture and artistic communities work as counterpublics even as many of their members may not otherwise identify as subaltern (p. 57). Such is the case with poetry slams. Even as there may be an emphasis on social and cultural

marginalization in the slam community itself, both slam poets and their audiences hail from a variety of backgrounds including dominant ones. Audiences for the National Poetry Slam, for example, tend to be predominately white and/or middle-class (Somers-Willett, 2009, pp. 78-79). On a more local level, Jessica Simon's 2005 survey of the three largest New York city slam venues found about 42% of audiences identified as white, 64% had incomes over \$30,000, and 69% had at least a college degree (pp. 90-97). Thus, although the slam is posed in direct contrast to more exclusive academic practices that its poets claim are less welcoming to marginalized people and their writing, its larger community is comprised of people from both subaltern and dominant groups. Rather than be organized exclusively by and for marginalized people, the poetry slam seems to be organized by a shared value of difference, expressed primarily through identity performance and its reception. This shared value is evident in the diverse array of identity missives poets commonly perform at slams; it is also evident in the audience's critical engagement with these narratives through applause, boos, rowdy behavior, and the practice of scoring. As I discuss in a moment, the exchange of sociopolitical values between slam poets and audiences seems to be its most important extraliterary aspect, one that galvanizes its counterpublic potential.

The value of difference and sense of subalternity enacted at poetry slams is also at play in contemporary American spoken word poetry. The term *spoken word* itself has a number of different referents (radio performances, coffeehouse musings, audiobooks, avant-garde sound experiments, etc.), but I use *spoken word poetry* here in the more specific way many popular American audiences currently use it: to indicate cadenced, performed poetry that engages both commercial culture and, increasingly, the aesthetics and tropes of hip-hop. In this article, I consider the counterpublics formed by the practice of slams, using evidence from independently produced anthologies and films, close readings and descriptions of iconic slam performances by Patricia Smith and Beau Sia, and my own perceptions as a participant-observer in the National Poetry Slam community since 1996. I compare this to the kinds of publics formed through the longstanding Home Box Office original series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, citing performances by repeat *Def Poetry* cast members Black Ice and Suheir Hammad.

Through the media of live performance, television, and the Internet, the *Def Poetry* cable series creates discursive spaces where poets and audiences come together to celebrate difference, marginalized identities, and engage in critique of dominant culture through the performance of poetry in ways similar to the slam. In fact, several poets have migrated from the National Poetry Slam stage to appear on *Def Poetry*, performing the very same poems in each venue. Nevertheless, I believe the discursive space *Def Poetry* creates is more tangled than that of its competitive counterpart, a fact complicated by its commercial roots and its consumption across several different types of media. Simmons's series mimics

the sound and sensibilities of the slam's open counterpublic, yet the counterdiscourses *Def Poetry* presents are also painfully tied up with the interests of commercial culture. *Def Poetry* is rife with product placements of Simmons's own clothing line and very consciously brands its poets with the "Def" label to correspond to Simmons' Def Jam recording label and other projects including *Def Comedy Jam*. Even as it is filmed in front of a live studio audience, the selective, branded format of the program offers the audience few opportunities for discursive critique. However, when these performances are wrested from their commercial context and released in more open, publically permeable spaces, *Def Poetry* can also create a counterpublic. This is done for the most part through the Internet, where fans have gathered on message boards and posted bootleg clips from the *Def Poetry* series on video services like YouTube. In these virtual spaces where open critique and debate about a poem and its subject matter can occur, a counterpublic emerges. In comparing the kinds of publics formed by poetry slams generally and the *Def Poetry* series specifically, a better understanding of the critical and cultural exchanges these poetry worlds enact, as well as what possibilities they present, can emerge.

Poetry Slams as Counterpublics

From its beginnings, the poetry slam has adopted an open-door policy: anyone can sign up to slam, and anyone in the audience is qualified to judge. Poets in the film *SlamNation* describe the poetry slam as "a representative democracy," a "level playing field" in which equal access is granted to those denied more traditional poetic recognition such as publication by esteemed presses and participation in academic writing communities (Devlin, 1998). Furthermore, slam audiences are invited if not expected to respond positively or negatively to a poem's performance as it happens, and in this respect, I believe is relevant to talk about how the poem exists in the discursive space *between* the poet and his or her audience rather than treat a slam performance as a kind of top-down delivery from author to listener. The kind of critique that takes place at a slam goes beyond the scores given to poets. Slams often take place in rowdy atmospheres where audience participation is fostered—ranging from simple boos and applause to the more irreverent "feminist hiss" and "masculine grunt" encouraged at Chicago's Green Mill venue. The kind of dynamic, discursive space the slam creates is somewhat different from the one created at more traditional poetry readings, where audiences maintain the expectations of silence and reverence, reserving applause for the beginning and end of a reading. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Audiences at a Billy Collins reading, for example, often respond audibly to Collins's poems through laughter and applause, but rarely does such a response take a critical form, nor are the poems overtly or publically evaluated through this hospitable exchange (Jones-Dilworth, 2010, p. 75). By contrast,

the slam audience's opportunity to evaluate, praise, and critique a poet's performance (rather than simply consume and appreciate it) fuel the slam's dynamic exchange of ideas and lyrics, which Warner acknowledges "creates a counter-public hybrid discourse" that spans both text and performance (p. 82).

The poetry slam's open and democratic model of participation performs two main oppositional functions, both of which serve to critique dominant structures and enact (or at least imagine) counterpublic alternatives. The first deals with poetry's enshrouding in academic institutions, a complaint made fresh twenty years ago by Dana Gioia's 1991 essay "Can Poetry Matter?" which argued that the proliferation of academic creative writing programs and the career tracks it created had contributed to the erasure of poetry from public view (Gioia, 2002, p. 2). Slam poets and audiences similarly resist the literary world's seeming insularity. The target of this resistance goes by various handles—"the canon," "academic poetry," "MFA programs"—and although a good number of slam poets have gone on to achieve academic credentials and institutional praise, many competing slam poets and their audiences have claimed their independence from such institutions, figuring themselves as populist underdogs countering the cultural hegemony of the literary canon and academic practices. In the 2007 *National Poetry Slam Poet's Guide*, for example, slam champion Roger Bonair-Agard remarks, "We know 'canon' is narrow-minded and for all its beauty needs to be sacked and overturned if it is to be made more [culturally] expansive" (p. 4). Poet Jeffrey McDaniel (2000) comments that to slam, poets "don't need a degree or a letter of recommendation," citing the community's multiculturalism and openness (p. 36). Another sign of this resistance to the academy is the physical home of many slams: they commonly occur in coffeehouses, bars, or bookstores but rarely take place in academic venues (with the exceptions of the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational and some youth slams).

So although some slam poets and audience members may come from academic backgrounds, poetry slams are usually (truly or falsely) established in resistance to what Charles Bernstein (1999) has called "official verse culture"—the cadre of institutions including academic creative writing programs, literary journals, and conferences that create a "tyranny of taste" in contemporary American poetry. In addition to fostering a countercultural atmosphere and disseminating poetry in non-traditional or grassroots venues, the slam has thrived through the exercise of certain democratic ideals meant to counteract exclusive or elitist academic conventions. Marc Smith (n.d.) describes slam competitions as places where "any and all are welcome" and which produce "poetry of, by and for the people." The poetry slam is continually welcoming new audiences and practitioners into its ranks, all of whom can have a say in what is rewarded at the slam and where the artform is going. This last impulse is why Miguel Algarín, co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, dubbed the practice of poetry slams "the democratization of verse" (1994, p.14). In addition to the slam's open-door poli-

cy, the accessibility of a poetry slam is facilitated and perhaps demanded by the medium of performance, which is bounded by time, space, and—perhaps most importantly—an audience’s attention span. In nationally-certified slam competitions, poems are limited to an approximate three-minute window, which poet Bob Holman notes is the length of a pop song (2000, p. 17).

The second oppositional function of the poetry slam’s counterpublic is sociopolitical. Several poems performed at slams show resistance to dominant public culture by critiquing white suburban culture, jingoism, conservatism, or corporate interests. Many slam poets seem deeply invested in speaking from and about marginalized social positions—those of women, queers, the underclass, people of color, or otherwise oppressed groups—and slam audiences seem deeply invested in supporting such expression. Exactly why this happens supersedes the scope of this article, but the phenomenon itself is nevertheless key to understanding slam as a counterpublic. For over a decade at the NPS, readings specifically showcasing Asian American, African American, Native Americans, Latino, female, and queer poets have been held in addition to the regular bouts. Recently, self-proclaimed “nerds” have also claimed their place in this spotlight on subaltern identities (and which, it should be noted, is the one NPS-designated event in which straight white men claim a marginalized identity).

As the grouping of these readings might suggest, the slam community’s larger discourse about marginalization has often been organized around issues of race and ethnicity. Poet and musician John S. Hall remarks, “issues of race are really important in slam poetry.... [I]t has attracted a lot of blacks and Latinos who want to do personal identity poetry” (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 296). Slam’s relative openness to and support of poets of color also translates to its winner’s circle. Of the nineteen NPS Individual Champion titles awarded, for example, fifteen were awarded to people of color. Such an emphasis on marginalized racial identity is not always present in local slam venues, but slams in large urban centers tend to reflect a similar pattern. A canvas of one New York City slam venue over nine months revealed about 65% participation by poets of color; as the field narrowed to the venue’s slam-off to determine a local team, almost 84% of the finalists were of color (Gonzalez, 2000). Of course, a poet’s talent and resonance with an audience plays an integral part in determining these statistics—not everyone can write or perform a poem well. Still, I believe the extraliterary factors at play here are inherently wrapped up with the literary ones. In *Voicing American Poetry*, Lesley Wheeler (2008) writes of slammers’ anti-academic attitudes that “mainstream literary establishments, while far more inclusive than formerly, still demonstrate the superior cultural power of white people, heterosexuals, and men” (p. 151). In this regard, the “perceived hostility between the poetry slam and academia” (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 316) is part and parcel with the slam’s sociopolitical emphasis on multiculturalism.

The impulse to perform and celebrate marginalized identities in ways that

resist dominant culture and the literary establishment appears fundamental to the slam, and the interactions (judging, applause or booing, playful banter, post-performance discussion, and critique) between poets and audience members, or between audience members themselves, can enact discursive moments of counterpublicity. As I have argued in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (2009), slams enact not just artistic renderings of one's identity in culture; they are cultural stages where marginalized identities are constructed, negotiated, judged, and affirmed or re-figured (p. 9). In this regard, the poetry slam should be considered—as creator Marc Smith once suggested—both a literary movement and a social movement (Lewis, 1998, A20), one particularly linked to the performative nature of identity itself.

Slam's focus on identity is enabled by NPS rules stipulating that individual poems can only be performed by their authors. Poets also for the most part perform work written in the first person, encouraging the audience to receive a poem as a personal confession of the author even as it may be fictionalized. With this in mind, slam poets don't just write and then speak the poem aloud; they doubly perform the voice of a poem and a sense of self at a slam. As Wheeler (2008) notes, poems performed at slam often “intensify audience attention to the speaking body” precisely because of the physical demands of live performance. So, “[w]hen Joshua Fleming jokes about his own obesity, we can visually confirm it; when Ragan Fox refers to himself as ‘gay and lispy,’ we register his physical performance of homosexuality; when light-skinned Aaron Cuffee recounts how airport officials refused to believe that a black man could be his father, we must notice the poet's coloring, his hair, his features” (p. 151). With the poet and his or her body as a referent for the poem's voice, audiences often experience little or no distance between the speaker of the poem and the author speaking the poem. The use of persona is an important exception in this one-to-one relation, but persona poems also rely on the visual marker of the body in the slam context. In performance, the identity of poet performing, along with all of the physical and vocal markers of identity he or she embodies, becomes an integral part of a slam audience's experience of a poem, either as a foil to the persona (as in an ironic performance) or a complement to it (as in an actor's rendition of a dramatic monologue).

Proclamations of identity abound at slams, but I would like to consider a particularly well-known and powerful example: “Skinhead,” by National Book Award Finalist and four-time National Poetry Slam Champion Patricia Smith. In her performance, Smith, an African American woman, embodies the persona of a male white supremacist.

I sit here and watch niggers take over my TV set,
 walking like kings up and down the sidewalks in my head,
 walking like their fat black mamas *named* them freedom.
 My shoulders tell me that ain't right.

So I move out into the sun where my beauty makes them
lower their heads,
or into the night
with a lead pipe up my sleeve, a razor tucked in my boot.
I was born to make things right.

(P. Smith, 1992, pp. 67-68)

Even as it is a dramatic monologue written in the voice of a skinhead, the performative effect of the piece still hinges on Smith's own identities as black and female. When performing this poem, Smith stands solidly, almost muscularly, in front of the microphone and makes few movements. The tone of her speech is in line with her character's—aggressive and tinged with her subject's sense of anger against blacks.¹ Smith reflects on this piece: "I wanted to understand a man who unconditionally hated what I was [W]hen I perform the poem, audiences are jolted by his voice coming from the mouth of a black woman" (P. Smith, 2000, p. 73). The clash between this persona and Smith's visible race and gender characteristics can be shocking, creating a powerful space for identity's critique and play. Of course, having a black female perform a white male skinhead's voice has a unique effect; this exchange of voices would prove awkward if not socially inappropriate for many others to perform at a slam. Such was the case at a 1998 NPS tribute reading, when white male poet Taylor Mali performed "Skinhead"; though the poem was delivered in the voice of a persona, the contrast between identities was lost and the audience balked (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 93).

One of the reasons this poem reads so powerfully to a slam audience—besides Smith's powerful writing and performance of the poem, of course—is that it makes the slam poet's construction and negotiation of identity overt. Smith makes this purpose clear by shifting from the Skinhead's persona back into her own voice at the end of the performance, asking audience members to consider the nation's, and perhaps their own implicit, support of the skinhead's views on race:

I'm riding the top rung of the perfect race,
my face scraped pink and brilliant.
I'm your baby, America, your boy,
drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful.

And I was born

¹ My observations of Smith's performance of "Skinhead" are based on seeing the poem performed live on several occasions in the slam context and at readings. To view representative performances, see Smith (2008) and Lathan (2003).

and raised

right here.

(P. Smith, 1992. p. 69)

In performance, Smith makes an unscripted addition to her poem, pausing dramatically after “I was born / and raised” and tossing her head back in malicious laughter, then dropping the amusement and saying “right here” with urgency and anger while pointing to the ground in front of her. The addition is slight, but it immediately and effectively puts her own identity and the skinhead’s in sharp relief. It is as if Smith has chosen to speak the very last line in her own voice, suddenly driving home the nearness of the skinhead’s threat and recasting her aggressive physical stance as Smith’s own bristling response to that threat. In a dramatic turn, the audience is offered a moment of revelation, confronted with their own implied complacency in allowing such prejudice to exist. In this moment, she pairs her social commentary into a moment of counterpublicity, where she not only imagines but reimagines the meaning of the identity she invokes through a skillfully nuanced performance.

Beau Sia is another poet famous for re-figuring narratives about identity. An Oklahoma-born Chinese-American, Sia commonly performs lightning-quick, breathless, and humorous missives about Asian stereotypes which parody or invert those stereotypes. An example is his irreverent “Horse Cock Manifesto,” a tongue-in-cheek response to an imagined rumor that

“asian men are hung like horses!”

i don't know why these things happen,
as someone had to reveal that we are great with laundry
and convenience stores
and someone else let loose how we all know martial arts,
and just recently I found out that everyone knows how goddamned
good at math
we are,

but now

I face the most humiliating release of our culture,
as the woman who has sworn vendetta on us has claimed that
“asian men are hung like horses.”

(Sia, 2000, 174-5)

Performed in an exclamatory, incredulous manner, “Horse Cock Manifesto” enacts a comedic counterpublic critique.² Through sarcasm and parody, Sia is able to playfully invert a racist stereotype (that Asian men have small genitals) and invoke a gender stereotype (that penis size is related to masculinity and virility) in order to show the faulty logic of both. Sia’s performance is one of loud, breathless incredulity at news of the rumor, and this exclamatory style in both his writing and performance serves as a cue to his audience that he is poking fun at the myths he is invoking. He treats this “rumor” with the air of an unauthorized leak of confidential information, lamenting how now that everyone knows about Asian men’s secret sexual prowess, he and his counterparts are barraged with sexual requests by women—“marked men” with “phalli rubbed too raw for description.” Treating well-known racist stereotypes—that Asians are “great with laundry / and convenience stores,” or are good at “martial arts” and “math”—in the same manner as this newly rumored sexual stereotype lets the audience in on the joke as cultural conspirators. Sia makes a more serious nod to this in the conclusion of his poem:

I don’t know how to act around people anymore,
as eyes remain fixated
on my crotch,
and now I fear the day that someone
starts spreading the rumor that

“asian men have narrow eyes!”

because I don’t know how we’ll go unnoticed again.

(Sia, 2000, p. 176)

Closing the poem with this mention of a phenotypic trait brings the poem home. In shifting from one subjective physical trait (being “hung”) to another (“narrow eyes”) that has so often been used to debase Asians, Sia makes visible the faulty logic and rhetoric of stereotype itself.

Notably, Sia’s critique hinges on an imagined woman releasing the secret, a “vindictive whore” who has a “vendetta” against Asian men and who must have announced the rumor “at a really big party, very loudly.” He mentions the anonymous woman twice in the poem as the source of the rumor, and alongside the discussion of women around the world who are disgruntled by their male sexual partners—“women in sweden” lamenting their “blonde,” “blue-eyed beau’s

² My discussion of Sia’s performance and his audience’s reaction is based on his presentation of “Horse Cock Manifesto” at the 1996 National Poetry Slam, chronicled on *SlamNation* DVD (Devlin, 1998).

miniscule proportions”; “girls in africa” who are “disgusted / at the lack of feeling / between legs”; or “southern belles” wishing for more than “the triteness of red-neck penetration”—Sia frames his parody in a strictly heterosexual paradigm which itself relies on ethnic stereotypes. Citing women’s desire to be pleased by Asian men (itself an inversion of the fetishization and sexualization of Asian women), Sia incites the logic of eugenics, saying that Asian men’s sexual prowess has “ruined ... the breeding patterns of the whole world.” Furthermore, given the poetry slam’s sense of liberalism, the use of the word “whore” might strike some listeners as unsettlingly misogynistic, threatening the comedic effect of the poem. Yet, when done in the service of race-based critique, humor at the expense of other marginalized groups is not unheard of as the slam. Performance artist and slam veteran Ragan Fox (2005) suggests that the performance of a marginalized racial identity at a slam can “trump” the performance of marginalized gender and sexual identities: “I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard racial identity poems that score well bashing women and queers. It’s as if the claim to racial identity neutralizes homophobia and misogyny There seems to be a definite performative mechanism that is woven into the judging process and its *excessive* co-optation of a *certain kind* of liberalism.”

The poetry slam community has not been insensitive to the privilege of racial discourse above those of gender and sexuality. In response to a string of incidents in which competing poets allegedly engaged in acts of sexual harassment against women or threatened other poets with violence, Poetry Slam, Inc., the non-profit governing body of the National Poetry Slam, adopted a “Code of Honour” stating poets should “comply with local, state and federal laws pertaining to individual civil rights and physical or sexual harassment” and refuse to let the competition lead them to “violence, interference, or direct threats” (Beaubien, 2011, p.2). Women of the slam also organized around issues of gender through a group called SlamSisters, which held its inaugural meeting at the 2000 NPS. Yet, as Fox’s comments highlight, this organizational awareness does not always translate to all poets or audience members, and this can be reflected in the scoring process. With race dominating the organization of its counterpublic, other aspects of identity continue to compete with and be negotiated through the slam’s performative mechanisms. The seeming privilege of race over other social issues appears endemic to the U.S. poetry slam; as other contributors to this volume suggest, the slam can transmute other social and cultural priorities on a global stage.

Smith and Sia’s poems underscore the potential of the poetry slam as counterpublic, albeit with the complexities of sometimes-competing, sometimes-cooperating aspects of marginalized identity. Through the performative exchange of the poem, the poet (in his or her delivery) and audience (in their reception, discussion, and evaluation of the poem) engage in a critical response not just to the poem but to culture, creating a shared the value of difference and im-

aging social values outside of the dominant models of power, even as that imagination comes with its debates about privilege within its own counterpublic circles. Performance studies scholar Jill Dolan (2005) coins such effects “utopian performatives”—small but profoundly hopeful moments in which an audience envisions the possibilities of alternative culture (p. 5). Although the counterpublics formed by slams seem to me to be less than utopic (a fact made plain by the competitive aspects of slam and Sia’s reliance on heterosexist representations to enact a critique of racial marginalization), it is relevant to ask what happens when a counterpublic like slam, either through independent means or through appropriation, tries to engage the realm of official public culture when it enters the commercial sphere. This is the pressing question, I believe, that arises when considering Russell Simmons’s *Def Poetry* series.

***Def Poetry* and the Commercialization of Slam Poetry’s Counterpublics**

In the midst of the poetry slam’s burgeoning popularity at the turn of the twenty-first century, Def Jam recording label CEO Russell Simmons explored mixing the work of slam poets, hip-hop artists, and celebrities in a media format that would reach a mainstream public. The result was *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, a series that ran for six seasons from 2002-2007 on the cable channel Home Box Office (HBO). Soon after the series debuted, a live stage version of *Def Poetry* opened in San Francisco, a show which eventually rounded out with a cast of nine poets (Beau Sia, Black Ice, Staceyann Chin, Steve Colman, Mayda del Valle, Georgia Me, Suheir Hammad, Lemon, and Poetri) to run on New York City’s Broadway circuit from November of 2002 through May of 2003. The HBO series won a Peabody award, and the Broadway show garnered a Tony (Simmons, 2003). The cable series advertised its performers as “Def Poets,” and several of them have competed in one or more National Poetry Slams. According to Bruce George, former Co-Executive Producer of the HBO series, the producers initially considered naming the series “Def Poetry Slam,” but decided to go with “jam” after running into resistance from Poetry Slam, Inc. (personal communication, July 14, 2002).

Simmons’s branding proved consistent across the HBO series, as well as on the DVDs of the series, which continue to be widely available today. Aside from the Def label, which audiences recognize from both the Def Jam recording label and the successful *Def Comedy Jam* series, the *Def Poetry* logo is very similar to that of the recording label. The host of the HBO show, popular rapper and actor Mos Def, opens every episode with a title segment in which he steps up to a vintage, chrome-plated microphone and recites the lines of a well-known poet before announcing the author’s name in this fashion: “Langston Hughes, Def Poet.” Some syncopated cello riffs accompany his recitation, and directly after he bestows the title “Def Poet,” a driving hip-hop beat strikes up, launching a slick

title sequence in which the recitation of selected lines from poets echo over the music. The camera then cuts to a hip, young, multicultural live studio audience applauding as Mos Def takes the stage to introduce the evening's poets. Mixed among the up-and-coming poets featured each half-hour episode are TV stars (such as Jamie Foxx, Cedric the Entertainer, and Dave Chappelle), recording artists (such as Common, Kanye West, Talib Kweli, Alicia Keys, and Jill Scott) and established poets (such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Sharon Olds, and Yusef Komunyakaa) performing poetry of their own. Several poets on the series wear clothing bearing prominent logos from Simmons's fashion line Phat Farm or Kimora Lee Simmons's line Baby Phat, which are given to them gratis to wear on the show. Simmons himself makes a brief appearance at the end of every episode of the HBO series, always dressed in Phat Farm clothing, and always delivering his customary lines—"Thank you. I hope you were inspired. God bless,"—stamping the episode's poets and poetry with the signature of his presence. Episodes typically premiered late on Friday nights in the HBO lineup and the series developed a steady following through on-demand programming and re-runs (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 261)

Many poets crossing over from slam to jam performed the same kind of counterdiscourses about marginalized identity (and in some cases, the same poems) in both venues. Much of the work selected to appear on the series also had ties to hip-hop. Poet and slam historian Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz writes that with the emergence of *Def Poetry*, "the marriage between hip-hop and spoken word was finally consummated. It was no longer unusual for poets to perform with a strong hip-hop influence, and conversely for rappers to call themselves poets" (2008, p. 262). Black Ice, a poet performing on both the *Def Poetry* cable series and Broadway show, employs the tropes of identity and hip-hop in his performance of "410 Days in the Life." A former cocaine dealer from Philadelphia, Black Ice expounds on his own difficult position as a young African American male from the projects faced with the dilemma of hustling either drugs or words:

I
 gotta be a nigga
 that's how I pay the bills,
 and I'll do that
 if I have to sling coke
 or exploit these rhyme skills.
 See,
 America makes you an opportunist
 and at the same time,
 they institutionalize you.
 So,
 the fact that niggas get

big record deals,
big money,
and
then go to jail
shouldn't surprise you.
.....
They got us choppin', baggin', and servin' that shit
to niggas sixteen bars at a time.

(Black Ice, 2003, pp. 20-21)

Performed in a semi-regular cadence that reflects but does not perfectly reproduce the strict tetrameter of rap, "410 Days in the Life" makes plain Black Ice's criticism of record labels and hip-hop artists who capitalize on the image of the thug and his violent, consumptive lifestyle. His criticism is evident in the parallel he draws between his own former lifestyle "sling[ing] coke" and that of rap performers who "get big record deals" and "chop" "bag," and "serve" their hip-hop rhymes like a drug "sixteen bars at a time" to the black community. He uses this parallel throughout the poem to underscore the lack of choices African American underclass men have, decrying the detrimental effects of some mainstream rap that promotes "thugs, drugs, and killing" and lands its rappers in jail. In a very self-aware moment, he frames obtaining a record deal as both an opportunity and a way for America to institutionalize young black men.

In the first half of the poem, Black Ice seems to put himself in the same position as these rappers and hustlers, using the first person frequently and proclaiming himself a "nigga," as in the passage above. Toward the end of the poem, though, he comes to the realization that

WE'RE NOT GROWING!!!
Nigga I give a fuck how
slick you flowin'
if you ain't showin' nothin'
to these kids
or
adding nothing positive
to the Earth...
Black Ice been destined
to touch the world ever since
I was born,
to be real,
fuck a record deal...
God
Gives me what I'm worth.

(Black Ice, 2003, p. 22)

Black Ice explicitly refutes the materialistic and violent image of the thug rapper

with a record deal, creating a new identity for himself as a spoken word poet and adding something “positive to the Earth.” This is both compounded and complicated by his appearance on *Def Poetry*. A number of artists appearing on the HBO program make similar critiques of hip-hop artists and recording labels, citing the glorification of materialism, misogyny, or violence that can circulate in mainstream rap.³ The irony, of course, is that Black Ice is presenting this critique under the auspices of recording label CEO Russell Simmons himself, and so is branded as a “Def Poet.” In effect, Simmons is collecting from both sides of the rhyme aisle: he is profiting off of the dominant cultural model of rap, while also profiting off of its countercultural foil, spoken word poetry. Here, Black Ice is disavowing one form of commodification (the rapper) for another (the Def Poet), one he claims is more politically positive.

Another *Def Poetry* cast member who re-figures marginalized identity within the hip-hop context is Suheir Hammad. A Palestinian American raised in Brooklyn during its hip-hop boombox upstart, Hammad’s work melds urban idioms and wordplay with hard-nosed critiques about being Muslim and female in America. In her poem “Mic Check” appearing on Season 5 of *Def Poetry* and as part of the Broadway show, Hammad recounts being selected for a post-9/11 airport security check:

Mic check 1
2 can you hear me mic
check 1-2

Mike checked my bags
at the airport in a random routine check

I understand Mike, I do
You too were altered that day
and most days
most folks operate on fear
often hate
this is mic check your job
and I am always random

(Hammad, 2003, p. 94)

Hammad opens her performance with a phrase known to hip-hop audiences—the familiar “1-2” test to check the volume of a microphone—and with a street-smart Brooklyn accent. Considering that no microphone appears on stage, the “mic check” isn’t literal; rather, by repeating this phrase throughout her perfor-

³ For representative examples, see Jessica Care Moore’s “Hip-Hop Cheerleader,” Sekou da Misfit’s “The Rapper,” Black Ice’s “Front Page,” or Shihan’s “Poemcee.”

mance, Hammad hails her audience as fans of hip-hop. Affirming this hailing, her Def Poetry audience responds “yeah!” when she asks, “can you hear me”? This figurative “mic” becomes the Aryan-looking, cross-wearing TSA worker “Mike” selecting her for a screening at airport security, which the poet suggests is racially or religiously motivated through a sarcastic delivery of the line “and I am always random.” Alluding to the 9/11 attacks and her own Muslim heritage, she muses almost apologetically, “I understand it was folks / who looked, smelled maybe / prayed like me” but then states firmly:

Mike check
folks who looked like you
stank so bad the Indians smelled them
mic check before they landed
they murdered 1-2 1-2
as they prayed,
spread small pox as alms

(Hammad, 2003, pp. 94-95)

Using the same criteria for profiling (skin color, hair color and texture, religious signifiers) that she imagines Mike has used to single her out for a search, Hammad draws a striking parallel between those orchestrating recent attacks on the World Trade Center and Anglos invading Native American lands during in the colonial period—one which her audience interrupts her performance to applaud. Hammad ends with a potentially counterpublic moment in which she inverts her language to change the power dynamic between herself and the TSA agent; “Mic check” literally turns to “check Mike” as she closes with the question, “Hey yo, Mike, Who’s gonna check you?” (p. 95). The word “check” in the hip hop idiom means to dress down or critique, and in this regard, the poem moves from describing the poet’s feeling of marginality in dominant culture to imagining a place where her identity is normalized and the male Anglo Christian’s identity is scrutinized.

Engaging the discourses of identity marginalization and centrality in ways similar to those of Sia and Smith, Hammad and Black Ice level sociopolitical critiques of dominant culture. But do these poets create counterpublics when performing in the *Def Poetry* context as opposed to the poetry slam? The studio audience response to the poets appearing on *Def Poetry*—applause, moments of call-and-response, laughter, audible interjections of support—might suggest a discursive space in which alternative publics are imagined. However, *Def Poetry*’s constructed and edited nature, relative lack of openness, and limited methods of critique (for poets are not scored or evaluated by the audience, merely appreciated) figure the *Def Poetry* space otherwise. For example, producers made open calls for audition tapes via the HBO website, then invited a number of artists to audition (Aptowicz, 2008, p.262). One poet auditioning for the cable series re-

ported being told by the production staff that poets would be selected on the bases of ethnicity first, gender second, and on the quality of their poetry third (personal communication, May 4, 2005). While this doesn't suggest that the poetry performed under the *Def Poetry* marquee isn't quality work, it does suggest that extraliterary factors are important if not primary reasons for a poet's selection for the series. This also might indicate that the *Def Poetry* series was looking to reproduce the same sociopolitical, counterpublic effect of poetry slams, but did so by divorcing such effects from an audience's critical role in forming them.

Of course, the live studio audience of the cable series provides a level of critical engagement based on their response to performers in the form of laughter, applause, and audible comments to poets like "Alright," and "Preach!" and "Love you girl." Post-performance discussions and threads that appeared on HBO's *Def Poetry* online discussion boards—many of which expressed appreciation of the poets' messages, and where aspiring poets would post their lyrics in hopes of getting on the show—also signal a kind of critical engagement of a counterpublic nature. Yet some of these moments of counterpublicity happen in ways that serve the interests of HBO and Def Jam themselves rather than spark open, public debate. Many core cast members of *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, for example, appear multiple times on the HBO series, sometimes two or three times a season. The quality of their writing and performance is presumably an important factor in their frequent appearances; still, no other poets appear as frequently as the Broadway cast members, and their appearances also have the effect of promoting the show and Simmons's brand. This is compounded by Russell Simmons's unabashedly pro-commercial stance. Reflecting on the poets appearing in his *Def Poetry* projects, he said, "These niggas are honest as the day is long. They are commercial as the day is long. They are commercial niggas like me, and there's nothing wrong with that" (Fuller & Henry, 2006). With this in mind, it appears *Def Poetry* has taken the discursive model of the slam where poets and audiences critique dominant culture and each other and replaced it with a model of consumption where audiences buy and appreciate poets' countercultural narratives but cease to have a discursive, critical relationship with them.

Recontextualizing *Def Poetry* Online: Viral Counterpublics

The shift one sees from slam to jam—one that I've tried to highlight in considering the work of Smith, Sia, Black Ice, and Hammad—is a crucial shift in how the discourse of marginalization circulates, one that can change that discourse's reception and meaning. The democratic exchange, negotiation, critique, and support of marginalized identities that circulates at the National Poetry Slam—the very discourse which constitutes the slam as a counterpublic—shifts in the *Def Poetry* context with its motives of profit and branding to constitute an extension of commercial culture masquerading as a counterpublic. Even as the poetry

or poets in both venues may be the same, the relationship between poets and audiences in each case are markedly different. When comparing the poetry slam with the *Def Poetry* series, the methods of circulating performances of marginalized identity, as well as the motives behind circulating them are key, marking the difference between an open, discursive counterpublic and a closed, for-profit, product of dominant corporate culture. This is not to say that poets appearing in the *Def Poetry* context are disingenuous about their discourses of resistance. On the contrary, the *Def Poetry* stages afford poets a larger and more mainstream audience than the slam, and the wider a counterdiscourse can circulate, the more potential it has to change minds. My critique here is of the *Def Poetry* enterprise itself, which seems to capitalize on the counterdiscourses its poets circulate while simultaneously profiting off of its relationship to more dominant systems.

In this regard, I respectfully differ from Jill Dolan (2005), who views *Def Poetry on Broadway* as a form of utopic “public sphere in which social relations might be rehearsed” between poets and audiences (p. 92). Although I agree that there is potential and validity in the resistance many of the Def Poets perform and that audiences can experience transformation through them, one also must remember that these are highly constructed expressions selected to serve the Def Jam enterprise. For the Broadway show, audience ticketing is open (to the public who can afford it), but the cast is selected and the show edited to deliver a particular kind of countercultural narrative, one branded by Simmons and dominated by select discourses and artists. In the HBO series, the lineup of poets and the studio audience are constructed in the same way. So, although I admire Dolan’s scholarship on the subject of imagining utopia at the theater (for I too think real transformation can occur through the medium of performance), I find the actual communities and representations formed through *Def Poetry* politically fraught because of their overbearing commercial interests.

Since the first whispers about the *Def Poetry* projects, poets in the slam community have weighed the benefits of reaching a larger mainstream audience with the negative associations conjured by going commercial; but for the majority of these poets, the former outweighs the latter. For instance, Steve Colman and Mayda del Valle, two performers appearing on the cable series and in the Broadway show, are reportedly “happy to see their brand of spoken word performance in its ‘commercial infancy,’ despite the fact that some might consider them sellouts” (Katz, 2002). Simmons himself makes no apologies for his or his performers’ commercial intentions, remarking in another interview that spoken word poetry “is evolving to where it is very commercial. So it’s just the natural growth of the movement that merited a vehicle” (Ferguson, 2002).

This line I am drawing between counterpublic and commercial culture begs the question: Can one still be subversive while operating within the commercial framework? I believe the answer is yes, but not without making compromises and relinquishing some of the autonomy (and certainly the openness) afforded

by a counterpublic. I don't want to suggest that it is impossible for poets and audiences to engage in imagining alternative publics and social debate through the *Def Poetry* projects. I do, however, think that their exchange can be fraught as it is mediated (sometimes invisibly) by commercial interests invested in promoting certain types of counterdiscourses. Queer poet and activist Staceyann Chin, who appears on both the HBO series and the *Def Poetry* theatrical production, characterizes the dilemma this way:

The dance of survival in this new world of art and money is the dance of the middle ground—one has to straddle the commercial/mainstream and the not-for-profit/underground.... I am walking a tightrope between poetic prostitution and art—and that, my dear, is the only way not to die as an artist. (Chin, 2004)

Further complicating this dynamic is the fact that *Def Poetry* continues to find new and ever-widening audiences through multiple media, and in these venues it finds greater counterpublic potential. Beyond its initial live studio audience, *Def Poetry* also reaches “for-profit” cable television audiences through re-runs and on-demand services, and it continues to circulate on DVD—all formats that invite few opportunities for critical exchange. *Def Poetry* also has had a persistent audience online, where critical exchanges are possible. Message boards in which audiences post their thoughts about poems were hosted during the life of the series on the HBO website, which also pointed audiences to purchase DVDs of the series. The boards, retired at the conclusion of the series, provided an important critical outlet for the audience, although they commonly devolved into advertisements for aspiring poets wanting to appear on the show rather than engaging meaningful critique.

Perhaps the audience with the most counterpublic potential is one that continues to grow: legions of fans have broken U.S. copyright law to post their favorite *Def Poetry* segments to online video services like YouTube. Black Ice's poem, for instance, has received well over a 1.3 million views since it was uploaded to YouTube in March 2006. In the comments to these videos, discourse between *Def Poetry* audience members about the poems and the sociopolitical issues they engender has blossomed, sometimes in uncritical ways but at times sparking extended and meaningful discussions about the poet, identity politics, and reception. Take for example the following online conversation, which took place between three viewers in the comments of Black Ice's *Def Poetry* performance of “410 Days in the Life”:

JRCKFSH: Wow, that was weak. Why do they call it Poetry? This is pathetic. "Whitey's racist and everything's rigged against you." That's what y'all call poetry?? What a disgusting message. How about get an education and work hard? The is the largest economy in the world. The easiest country in the world to make a living More opportunities than anywhere in the world People

sneak in here and can't even speak and they can make a living uneducated and illiterate no one told them they couldn't make it

ImSoIntoYou2011: @jrckfsh i agree with u about blacks having more opportunities than most. lack of oppertunty is not the problem its ones mind state. and this rap music that corperate America is pumping into these kids ears is what black ice is talking about...

ScoobyBBS: @ImSoIntoYou2011 i disagree mano, i think the regression of the poor, poverty stricken black community started with the whole 'separate but equal' solution back in the early-mid 1900's. Of course nothing was 'equal', healthcare through hospitals were worse off, the literacy rate through poor education at their poor schools was more detrimental than anything else in the history of the black community. Another massive blow was how big business America started copping out for cheap labor...

(Black Ice, 2011)

Such substantial critical conversations on YouTube are rare; most commenters either post simple praise or send links to their own videos and poems. Still, these comments suggest the counterpublic potential of spoken word poetry in such a platform. In this case, Black Ice's poetic portal on YouTube serves as virtual space for people to congregate, debate, and put forth alternative social histories and identities. This online discourse can be just as democratic and critical as the kind at poetry slams; YouTube users are invited to "like" or "dislike" videos—a less nuanced version of the slam's scoring system—and some comments, such as the one quoted above, resemble conversations that break out among audience members at slams.

Recontextualizing Black Ice's poem on YouTube has also opened up a virtual conversation in which the poet himself negotiates the poem's counterpublicity through another video, linked by a YouTube user in the comments. In this video, Black Ice performs "410 Days in the Life" at the University of Delaware some eight years after the initial television airing of the poem on *Def Poetry*. Free from the format and the commercial imperatives of the television series, Black Ice offers his live and virtual audiences insight into the poem's composition, which he reveals was written after a meeting with Russell Simmons.

At one point, I was pissed off at him [Simmons] because I was broke and I went to the nigga because he discovered me. I figure you discover me, you're gonna make some money. You made me stop working, and I'm running around with all this new Phat Farm shit on—I don't like Phat Farm but I'm wearing this shit....So I wrote this mission statement, and it was really like my "fuck you" to the industry thing. I was like, fuck it, if I'm going out, go back to cutting hair—and I'm cool with that—I'm going to go out with a bang....This is called "410 Days in the Life" because it was approximately 410 days since I had met Russell Simmons. (Black Ice, 2011)

Within the *Def Poetry* context, Black Ice's poem can certainly be read as an indictment of recording labels and the social entrapments of black underclass men. But here, the indictment becomes much more specific to Simmons, and the full weight of the subversive gesture of his *Def Poetry* performance is revealed to his audience. Doing so creates a kind of "viral counterpublicity" where multiple conversations and debates are possible in ways that both capture and supercede the live context. The videos—which can be paired, linked, sent, embedded, and most importantly commented upon at all stages of its viral distribution—create a diffuse network of people in which counterpublic exchanges occur. As evidenced by Black Ice's eight-year gap between videos, these exchanges can occur over more sustained periods of time. Key to the formation of these real counterpublics (as opposed to imagined or "staged" counterpublics of the commercial context) is that such platforms are democratic and permeable; like the poetry slam, anyone with Internet access can participate, evaluate, and comment. In these online communities and platforms where the performances are wrested away from their commercial origins and circulate freely (albeit illegally) among audience members, *Def Poetry's* counterpublic potential seems most fully realized.

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