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Identity Performance and Space in the Albuquerque Slam Poetry Scene

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Identity Performance and Space in the Albuquerque Slam Poetry Scene

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ABSTRACT

Public spaces where culture is co-constructed and performed by a community of people are rich sites for research on identity formation. This thesis explores the poetry slam as a space where poets and audiences co-construct and perform individual and group identities. From a social constructionist approach to identity formation and through the theories and methods of performance studies, the research design combines participant observation, interviews, and focus groups to elucidate the values and performative acts that define the distinct identity of the local slam community in Albuquerque, NM. The analysis of data identifies five major themes (authenticity, affecting change, building community, representing multivocality, and becoming a poet) that convey shared values in this community. It also discusses eighteen performative acts that suggest how poets and audiences perform the values held central to the identity of the slam. These performative acts illustrate ways in which listening, sharing, and "performing" is wholly unique to the slam community. The research findings also suggest that complementary roles and interdependent relationships performed by poets and audiences construct and maintain the slam space as unique space where poets and audiences gain and affirm a sense of identity by doing. It is argued that the communication practices, relations and assumed roles described in this thesis are constitutive of the slam space and its performed identity.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Two people walk into a poetry slam venue in Albuquerque. The atmosphere is familiar. With one poetry slam a week (on average), there is a caravan cohort of "regulars" that attend these open-to-the-public performances across the city. At this particular venue, the owners are theater professionals who have a companion theater space a few miles east down Historic Route 66. The restaurant café is an extension of their own identity as members of an artistic community that supports live performance in a city being isolatedly lulled to sleep by screen names and reality shows. Local artwork hangs on the walls in an exhibit that rotates every four weeks or so. Students from the university file in and out to have lunch and dinner with their laptops in a room full of people and with the persistent hum of people mumbling to themselves and mumbling to their "date" in unison with the luminous screens and iTunes playlist.

The time is approximately 6:45 p.m. Unbeknownst to the casual café-goer, the slam is fifteen minutes from lift off, and this serenely caffeinated study hall is about to turn into a game show of free speech and free verse. As is the norm in Albuquerque, more poets fill in the space with barely ten minutes to start. In the land of mañana, 7 p.m. is a suggestion, and there is business to handle before the slam can even take flight. That business is being handled by the designated host of the slam (a volunteer host from the slam community), and is what charts very different experiences for these first two poets who initially walk into this poetry slam.

One poet decides to compete in the poetry slam this evening. Years of personal experience led her to write the original poems she will share this evening, and weeks of

memorization and performance practice prepared her for tonight's competition. The other poet has written his entire life and teaches at a local community college. However, he chooses not to slam. He has never slammed. He always comes to hear poetry and be in communion with other writers. Tonight, he was asked by the host (pre-slam) to be one of five judges for the evening's slam. Only armed with a dry erase board and a dry erase marker, each of the five judges is tasked with scoring the poems read on a scale from zero (0) to ten (10). He doesn't feel the need to participate in or win slams. He just feels the need to be part of a community. In that way, he feels like he has already won.

In the 45 minutes that have passed since our judge and competing poet entered the coffee shop, four more judges have been selected, and all nine poetry slammers have signed up to read and been instructed in the terms of engagement. Poets are only allowed to present their own original poems in three minutes or less (with a ten-second grace period before a half point deduction for each ten-second increment over time), and the performance can include nothing except the clothes they've worn to the slam, no props. It is also understood, as the host will later remind the crowd before presenting the first poet of the evening, that any inflammatory content about a person's gender, religion, sexual orientation, race, disability, etc., will not be tolerated and will be policed by the audience.

Judges have received their marching orders as well. They are advised that the ten points range within their power should roughly be divided between five points for writing and five points for performance. A zero should be reserved for a poem that should never have been written, and a ten should be reserved for the best poem of the night. The use of decimals is encouraged to avoid ties, and by no means should judges let the booing and cheering of the audience influence their personal valuation of a poem.

Then, the host turns to the members of the audience and gives them a similar piece of advice. The host tells the audience that it is their job to "look alive" and boo and cheer for poems they like in an overt attempt to influence the judges. Once the dynamic is perfectly set, the host kicks off the night with a calibration poet who offers up a poem for the judges to get one "dress rehearsal" attempt at scoring a poem before the actual competition begins. At this point, half of the coffee shop patrons have moved on to quieter study environments. They have been replaced by a standing-room-only crowd who has come to participate in the slam, cheer on their peers, read on the open mic prior to the slam, and hear something they've always thought (but never said out loud) from someone they've never met before. In between poems, there is a DJ with an mp3 player pumping music through the same two-channel PA system that powers the poets' microphone. Some poets use the mic for effect or to hide behind. Other poets sing their poems to the rafters and deliver their poem "in the round" as they stalk the crowd. At the end of the night, all the poets stand on stage in support of one another and in agreement of their most sacred shared value, freedom of speech…out loud.

It doesn't matter who wins, because there is a different winner every night. The audience is an ever changing composition of regulars, returners and rookies. Some of the unsuspecting coffee shop patrons will become converts, others will find another coffee shop that allows them to study uninterrupted on the second Wednesday of each month. Many poets and audience members will share a beer afterwards and talk about the ideas that were shared on the microphone that evening. They will talk about how those ideas were shared and who shared them. Then, they will talk about work, kids, love, sports, and the things that friends and family members talk about when the business is done.

This study focuses on the poetry slam, a public gathering that takes place primarily in coffee houses, bars, and other cultural centers where poets read their work in competition with other poets. During this competition, poets have their performances judged and scored by peers and an audience that is diverse across multiple social categories (age, gender, class, educational background, etc.). This research explores the poetry slam as a communicative practice through which poets and audiences co-construct a space for the performance of their identities. More specifically, this thesis elucidates the values and performative acts that define the distinct identity of the slam community. It examines how the values and practices performed by members of the slam community co-construct a space for shared identity and cultural membership.

I approached the slam as a unique space for the analysis of how identities are constructed through performance. The inherently rhetorical, performative, and interactive character of the poetry slam makes it a relevant setting to explore this problem. Via a concert of field research methods, I examined both the shared values within the Albuquerque slam poetry community and the performative acts routinely engaged in by both poets and audience members to co-construct the identity of the poetry slam community. Moreover, I explored how the relationships, roles, and practices of the slam community are used as an everyday resource to define individual and collective senses of identity, both within the community and in contrast to society outside that slam community.

One of the central concepts in this thesis is the relationship between space, performance, and group identity in postmodern discursive communities. Space has been conceptualized by Lefebvre as a social product, or a complex social construction (based

on values, and the social production of meanings) that affects spatial practices and perceptions. Thus, space, as conceptualized in this research, refers not just to the physical construct but to the creation and maintenance of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual relations in addition to points of identification that do not require nor are confined to a specific geographic location. Performance, on the other hand, is approached here as cultural events or expressions embedded in everyday life in which a culture's values are displayed for their perpetuation: rituals such as parades, religious ceremonies, and community festivals as well as conversational storytelling, performances of social and professional roles, and individual performances of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Counsell and Wolf 3). Within this framework, identity is defined as the performance of self in culture (Jung and Hecht 265; Mendoza et al. 312). I thus approach the slam as a co-constructed space where the identity of a discursive community is performed. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept, Lessa (283) defined discourse communities as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak." For the purposes of this study, the term "values" refers to the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of the members of the slam community while "performative acts" refer to courses of action or practices.

What is learned from this research about the Albuquerque slam poetry community cannot be generalized to other pop-cultural community phenomena; arguably, it can hardly be generalized to any other slam community (e.g. Denver, Los Angeles, New York, etc.). However, the ethnographic approach taken here—based on observation, interviews, and focus groups—seeks to create a richness of data that is valuable for cross-

contextual comparisons across slam communities and the practices of other groups who collectively and deliberately articulate their identity to the outside world. This approach could prove revelatory for research on relationships between space and identity in emerging music scenes (i.e. punk, trip-hop), extreme or underground sports communities (i.e. skateboarding, surfing), and other "subcultural" identity groups (i.e. piercing, graffiti art). In fact, similar studies have been previously conducted on the punk scene and body art/tattoo culture (Rademacher; Vevea). This research aims to contribute to that body of knowledge. Another contribution of this study is to the scholarly understanding of the local poetry slam community of Albuquerque in both its uniqueness and relevance as part of a national cultural phenomenon. In this sense, this research fills a gap in scholarly literature in both communication studies and cultural studies, and opens a space for the documentation of the voices and experiences of this vibrant local sub-culture.

An eight-year veteran of the Albuquerque poetry slam community, I have competed on two national champion poetry slam teams (Team Albuquerque 2005 and Team University of New Mexico in 2006) and traveled across the country performing poetry. As a result, I have access to community members that give me a research advantage. Additionally, I have a uniquely informed analysis and experienced eye for the participant observation portion of this research.

The Evolution of the Poetry Slam

According to Mark Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak (12), the poetry slam is "a blend of original poetry, performance, and competition that spawns a captivating event in which poets compete in front of an animated, electrified audience." Smith is recognized as the founder of the poetry slam, having organized the first slam in Chicago in 1986. The

"slam" prides itself on being a democratic, audience-centered space where anyone is free to read poetry of their own creation and everyone, regardless of background or educational level, is qualified to be a judge of quality. At the slam, "each poet takes his or her turn onstage to perform original poetry, and prove superiority as both poet and performer" (Kraynak and Smith 5).

Much like each individual poet that brings his or her own story and interpretation of life to the stage, the slam community itself has its own storied tradition. Oral traditions precede the advent of the slam by thousands of years; however, the slam stands on the shoulders of that tradition to offer current and innovative forms of communication as well as an appreciation of poetry. Kraynak and Smith began their documentation of this storied tradition with the ancient Greek god of fertility, Dionysus (5). According to them, Dionysus was believed to watch over his ecstatic worshippers as they drank the blood of animals and danced in an orgiastic frenzy during which poets/dramatists—such as Euripides and Sophocles—competed for first prize in local drama competitions. Poetry competitions were also recorded in Japan, where Samurai-turned-poet Basho wandered the countryside judging haiku contests in the fifteenth century, which means that there were poets desiring to compete as well as a demand for his judging services. In *Don Quixote*, published in the early 1600s, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote about "poetical tournaments." Kraynak and Smith documented public poetic jousts, or *Justas Literarias*, in Mexico at about the same time when Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* (24). The authors also outlined spoken word poetic traditions in West Africa, Jamaica, and Ireland. In their story of spoken word, they also include names like Homer and Guru

Nanak (of the Sikh religion). Kraynak and Smith finished their historical overview of poetic oral tradition with such Western works as *Beowulf* and the Bible.

Although Kraynak and Smith located the modern incarnation of this tradition at the advent of the World Poetry Association (WPA) in 1979, I personally would qualify this statement by stating that the WPA was a precursor to the slam only after the Jazz Poets the Harlem renaissance in the 1920s, the Beat Movement in the 1960s, and the Black Arts and Floricanto movements of the 1970s brought performance poetry into vogue in fringe and ethnic communities in the second half of the twentieth century. It is important to bring forth the historical progression of the poetic movements that created the conditions for value-centered plurality of the slam that focuses on ethnic and cultural diversity.

A discussion regarding the co-constructed identity of this community would be incomplete without highlighting how these movements have all been part of a history of collective and individual identity (De Armond; Wintz; Cáliz-Montoro). Much like the Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Movement, the "slam movement" is often characterized in terms of its historic impact and/or cultural inclusivity. This characterization is a categorical lens through which the slam community can be examined or discussed from the outside-in. However, like the Harlem Renaissance and the Beat Movement, the slam movement is a collection of local communities that compose a larger movement. Each community is unique and features individuals who identify with both the national and local group in different ways.

Thirty years ago, Mark Kelly Smith's group, The Chicago Poetry Ensemble, was the experimental performance group that laid the early foundation for the contemporary poetry slam. Smith described the ensemble as poets who were "criticized and scoffed at

by the academic insiders and the hipper-than-thou outsiders for daring to perform poetry like actors or clowns or singers" (Kraynak 11). In order to demonstrate the diversity of the slam scene when the Chicago Poetry Ensemble began, Smith listed the original members names and occupations as follows (12):

John Sheehan – ex-Roman Catholic Priest;

Rob Van Tuyle – High School Teacher;

Anna Brown – Performance Artist;

Jean Howard – Model;

Ron Gillette – Editor for a Floral Magazine;

Dave Copper – Paralegal;

Karen Nystrom – Student who Sold Ties at Marshall Field's;

Mike Barrett – Copywriter for the Chicago Tribune.

These were the individuals that began Monday night performances at the Get Me High Jazz Club in Chicago in November of 1984. In the summer of '86, this crew spun off the Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge on Chicago's north side. Currently, more than 80 slam-holding venues from across the nation convene on one city annually to hold the National Poetry Slam, which annually crowns a national champion in the poetry slam world. That means that there are motley crews of individuals across the country that come together in bars, coffeehouses, libraries, theater spaces, and laundromats to create space for poets and audiences to congregate. More than simply a space to gather, the poetry slam is a space where participants can read, write, articulate, re-articulate, and affirm their collective and individual identities.

Six years after Smith's group began meeting at the Get Me High Jazz Club in Chicago, organizers began making space for slam scene in Albuquerque, New Mexico. However, it wasn't quite ready yet. Some foundation had to be laid before erecting the house of slam. According to Albuquerque poetry slam predecessor, pioneer and pilot (more on that to come) Mitch Reyes, there were three University of New Mexico area bookstores that hosted live poetry in 1990 (McAllister et al. 22). Growing beyond the gravitational pull of the university, the following few years spawned Lisa Harris's weekly open mic at E.J's Coffeehouse and Jim Reilly's institution Poetry & Beer. Now, Poetry & Beer proudly boasts that it is the longest running poetry slam in Albuquerque, and it is. But it was not a slam at the time, it was still a straightforward poetry reading series. Bars, coffeehouses and other venues took notice as poetry readings began packing their businesses with customers and readings continued to pop up all across Albuquerque as entrepreneurs began to entertain the idea of profiting off of poetry.

Enter Juliette Torrez, who was fresh off of a summer organizing poetry for Lollapalooza, an annual music festival that is popular for featuring indie rock, metal, punk and hip hop acts. MTV had popularized Lollapalooza and all the poetry that came along with it, and Torrez brought her newfound know-how, excitement and black book of contacts back to Albuquerque with a mission to put the city on the national poetry radar. In 1994, Torrez organized the very first slam in the state of New Mexico at Jack's Lounge (McAllister et al. 23). Shortly there after Poetry & Beer made the poetry slam the centerpiece of their format, and in 1995 Albuquerque fielded its first slam team at a National Poetry Slam. That first slam team included the late Trinidad "Trino" Sanchez Jr., Dr. Bob Wilson, Matthew John Conley, Jim Stewart and Kenn Rodriguez (McAllister

et al. 58). At the time Torrez and Reyes were organizing the slam, and Reyes drove out to Ann Arbor, Michigan with the team for the National Poetry Slam. Eleven years after Albuquerque's first slam, another five-poet team representing the city brought home the national title in 2005. I was a member of this 2005 Albuquerque Slam Team along with Carlos Contreras, Aaron Cuffee, Esme Vaandrager and Kenn Rodriguez, long-time Albuquerque slammaster and member of the very first Albuquerque Slam Team. As the Albuquerque slam scene approaches nineteen years old, this study will examine how the slam space is constructed via the relationships of the individuals who convene to create the space, and how these relationships impact the performed identities of the parties involved.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter two will outline the theory that has informed my research on the Albuquerque poetry slam community as a site of identity performance. The theory presented will provide rationale for my research questions as well as support to my choosing performance studies as a lens for making meaning out of these data. The third chapter will outline my three-part method for data collection. I will support my assertion that a triangulation of data and data sources gives credibility to any research (qualitative or quantitative) attempting to ascertain values or meaning. Chapter 4 will summarize the analysis and discussion of the findings in this study, and the final chapter will present my conclusions.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, I discuss relevant theoretical and empirical sources that inform my approach to the slam poetry community as a space for the co-construction of identities through performative acts. It features a section on social constructionist approaches to identity formation, with emphasis on the performative dimensions of identity, followed by discussion of performance poetry in particular.

Identity, Social Construction, and Performance

A growing body of recent literature has challenged the old paradigm in the theorizing of identity and called attention to the notion that identities are socially constructed. According to Beck, individual identity or sense of self has existed as a topic of deliberate inquiry since at least the eighteenth century (9). He characterized that era as the "old paradigm" of Enlightenment thought when identity was "ascriptive" or imposed on individuals and groups by others (127). This ascription was based on pre-determined and seemingly stable and unitary categories such as social class, gender roles, locality, religion, or occupation.

More recently, postmodern theorizing has challenged that view to purport a concept of identity as fragmented, multiple, unstable, and in continuous process of (re)construction. From this view, identity is recast as something we, as symbol-making and -using creatures, create. For example, Heatherington has noted that identity has moved away from notions of determinism and essentialism to view identity as "a reflexive project, one in which individuals are consciously aware of and able to monitor

or change their own identities" (21). Tajfel and Turner associated identity with pastiche to stress the meaning that identity is not singular and unitary but a plural composite (33).

Other definitions stressing the agency and autonomy of individuals in constructing their sense of self downplay the dynamic tensions between self and society in the process of identity formation. As George Herbert Mead stated: "So the self reaches its full development… by thus becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and all others are involved" (158). Along these lines, Daniel Acorn noted "while self is something intimately belonging to an individual, identity is something that is given an individual by society" (3).

I would argue this tension between self and society is central in processes of social construction of identity. Some communication scholars have defined identity as one's self-concept informed by avowal (self perception of "who I am") and ascription (social categorization by others) (Mendoza et al. 315). Performance scholar Erving Goffman made a case for the co-construction of identity when he suggests that he and his body "merely provide a peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time" (253). He further explained that "the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside in the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down by society." Drawing on post-modern views of identity as fragmented and socially constructed, Hecht et al., has argued that identity has multiple loci designated as the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers. In this view, these four interrelated and interpenetrated layers are at the core of identity (257).

The notion that individuals enact these multiple dimensions in social interaction with others has lead scholars to define identity as the performed self-situated in culture (Carbaugh; Jung & Hecht; Mendoza et al). Identity as the performed self was the center of Corey's 1996 essay, where made a case for studying performance to elucidate processes of social construction of identities (148). Corey stated: "The study of performance provides a heuristic device for social constructionism" (148). Social constructionism is rooted in the idea that an individual's worldview (or sense of reality) is constructed through the interactions and experiences that she or he has with other people to reinforce or dismantle previously held perceptions. Performance, in this sense, is defined as a cultural practice, specifically the practice of representation (Counsell & Wolf 31).

Corey's study of queer, gay, lesbian, and homosexual performances in an Irish pub drew on de Certeau's ideas to explore how "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life" (96). A similar approach to performance and social construction of identity is Delgado's study of Chicano rapper Kid Frost. Delgado recognized that there is a general homogeneity in much of the "new brown" or barrio aesthetic in Chicano rap. But then he stressed that "Chicano rappers like Kid Frost do offer the opportunity to explore the construction of identity through the personal, social, and political dimensions of their lyrics and performance styles" (389).

Madison situates the idea of identity as a performance of a composite social construction within a resistance or oppositional model to suggest that we define ourselves by articulating what we are not. Madison quoted bell hooks to illustrate the point: "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality,

shaping their identity, naming their history, telling their story" (214). Rose related these ideas in the research on communication patterns in various symbol using, non-mainstream communities (in this case the Deaf community). Rose focused on the idea of "reiteration of [...] common themes" as a rite of passage or ritual in these "fringe" communities (333). Rose concluded: "Like other autobiographical texts [including slam poems], the ASL performance is a site of identity production that both 'resists and produces cultural identity" (333).

Leah E. White, in a feminist approach to identity, reiterated this position. In discussing Kathy Ferguson's concept of "mobile subjectivities" or multiple/fragmented identities, White described the challenge these identities pose as "ambiguous: messy and multiple, unstable but preserving" (80). For White, identity is always in the process of being constructed, never reaching the static categories built in modern and pre-modern eras. "Subjectivity is not an illusion, but the subject is a shifting and always changing intersection of complex, contradictory and unfinished processes" (80). But White cited Angela McRobbie to agree with the view that "living with fragmentation" permits us to proceed with "inventing self rather than endlessly searching for self." White also reiterated Ferguson's claim that "Identity is something one does;" that identity construction is an active process in which subjects exert agency to counter social, political, and linguistic constraints (80). White's research on Charlotte Salomon's play *Life? Or Theater?* reiterated the notion that performance is constitutive of identity. White also agreed with Covey's statement that, "The production of identity, negotiation of meaning, arbitration of power, and definition of self are constructs, to be sure, but these constructs are produced, refined and reproduced through performances" (81).

Gubrium and Holstein noted that in the performance of this composite called identity, talk or narrative is central (95). They argue that, ultimately, we "talk" ourselves into being. Noy's has further stated: "…if people are continuously (trajectorily) 'becoming,' then the pervasive and constitutive means by which people can articulate and experience their selfhood at any given point in time is through performing self-change" (118). In that performance, "narrators simultaneously index both the referred events narrated and the present event of narration, thus drawing an association between the two that is fundamental for identity claims and for a sense of self-change to be performed with credibility" (Noy 117).

The idea that people narratively perform their identities is in Linda Park-Fuller's 1995 article about her own narratization of her victory over breast cancer. She cited John Allison Jr.'s recent study on narrative time "which adopts a phenomenological perspective to argue that humans exist narratively and are better understood as storylivers rather than storytellers" (60). This approach is also present in a study by Gingrich-Philbrook where male performance of masculinity is conceptualized as "mythopoetic" and a stylized repetition of acts (21).

The aforementioned literature offers the theoretical framework and informs the research questions that guide this study. In my research, I conceptualize identity as constructed by way of performances of self that are narratively enacted in situated social interactions and contexts. To stress the narrative character of performance and address the particular subject of this thesis, the following section offers an overview of scholarly literature on poetry, with emphasis on the performance of identity through poetry.

Poetry is Identity Performed: Aesthetics and Politics of Performance Poetry

The literature on poetry as the subject runs the gamut of approaches, from content analysis to stylistic preferences, from semantics to symbolism, from authorship to reception. A conventional approach to poetry analysis has focused on the study of the author's intent or desired meaning/message. In this approach, there is an often understated motivation to find out who the author is and how biography informs what he or she means. The tools used in this regard are often contextual and historical, which is why English classroom teachers across the globe often discuss the cultural climate and environmental circumstances surrounding a particular author under study.

I suggest that interrelating subjects, authors, audiences, contexts, and aesthetics of poetry provides a much richer text for study that the poets both on the page and in the grave. But the particular phenomenon I aim to study is the slam poetry scene, which is a very young community (about 30 years old) and consequently, has not been widely undertaken as a subject of research in academia. The slam is considered a form of performance poetry, defined as poetry that is composed for the performance on a stage rather than reading off of a page. However, much of the literature on poetic performance and identity construction comes from studies of "page" poems and "page" poets. "Page" poem or "page" poets is a slang term in the poetry slam community for poets who practice the traditional forms of poetry and prioritize the goal of getting published over the goal of mastering their poetic performance. In this section, I review research on poetry and performance to highlight how artistic choices and expressions are tied to the process of identity construction. In particular, I focus on studies that explore how

stylistic preferences, politics, and history have shaped the identity of poets and communities in a similar fashion to that of the contemporary slam scene.

The majority of research that currently exists on performance poetry underscores how the tension between aesthetic choices and political context influence poets who construct their identity and the identity of performance poetry itself in resistance to dominant literary institutions. Athanases made the case for the relevance of performance studies in poetry when examining a poetic tradition that is more concerned with the presentation of poems than with the publication of them (116). Athanases cited Gwendolyn Brooks as one example of how a poets' choice of medium of expression and style are, in fact, a lucid representation of her identity as well as her perception of the identity of the intended audience. Brooks is one of many poets whose poems depend as much on sound and music as they do on words. Her poems are no more fixed in books than Bach's Prelude in C Major rests on the page that rests on the piano as the musician plays. Athanases quoted Brooks' view of herself in the composing process: "I'm trying to write the kind of poem that could be presented in a tavern atmosphere – on a street corner. I always like to use the tavern as my recitation's background symbol" (118).

But beyond addressing how the individual poet's choices and style construct identity, Athanases discussed a political dimension that affects the identity of performance poets: the tension between the institutional powers that rely on canonical standards to judge what constitutes poetry with "literary merit," and the poets who, as outsiders, produce and consume poetry but are marginalized in the dominant intellectual circles—particularly minorities and women. "At a national level, the Educational Testing Service has published a course description for twelfth grade Advanced Placement English

classes, specifying that these courses should concentrate on works of 'recognized literary merit worthy of scrutiny because their richness of thought and language challenges the reader. The list of specified texts includes few written by women or ethnic minorities" (116). This type of schism between the Albuquerque Poetry Slam community and formal institutional settings is a dimension that has helped define the identity of the local scene, as it will be discussed in the analysis chapters in this thesis.

Rodden's interview with poet Marge Piercy also delved into the interrelation between aesthetic choice and politics in performance poetry (366). Self-identifying as a performer, Piercy characterized her poetry as "chant in a quasi-rhythmic way" and described the poetry from her 60s stint in the Students for a Democratic Society movement as "part of the life of the cultural New Left, of anti-war life (380)." Piercy also talked about the lifestyle of the traveling performer and the unfair treatment of writers by academia when traveling on the university circuit: "Once you're dead, you can be a growth industry" (373). This view affirms the notion that many poets fashion their performed identity in opposition to institutional and societal critiques of performance poetry.

Strine's research on poet Jorie Graham explored the interesting predicament of how to meet social expectations that all public poets are thrust into. She positioned Graham in this predicament when she wrote, "Arguably, her uncompromising struggle to know the world with imaginative freshness through genuine lyric engagement, yet to resist the colonizing force of epistemic closure, centers her performative poetics" (5).

Kuppers research on the lyrical disability culture poetry within the performance poetry community also addressed the political tensions that shape the identities of

particular communities of poet performers. Kuppers explored how "literary lyrical disability culture poetry can perform the binding of community and the singularity of experience, sharing and isolation, stepping in and out of meaning" (90). In the article, Kuppers brought attention to dynamics within the disability cultures that draw similarities with the slam community's politicized approach to the craft of poetry. Kuppers quoted Gill to stress:

> It is not simply the shared experience of oppression. If that were all our culture was, I would agree with those who doubt the probability of a disability culture. The elements of our culture include, certainly, our longstanding social oppression, but also our emerging art and humor, our piecing together of our history, our evolving language and symbols, our remarkably unified worldview, beliefs and values, and our strategies for surviving and thriving. I use the word 'remarkable' because I find that the most compelling evidence of a disability culture is the vitality and universality of these elements despite generations of crushing poverty, social isolation, lack of education, silencing, imposed immobility, and relentless instruction in hating ourselves and each other. (89)

These connections between performance poetry and the telling of histories of marginalization were also addressed by Scott Dillard. In a study of poet Jane Hirschfield, Dillard argued that for Hirschfield "the poetry performance is a reliving of a past experience" (219).

In elucidating the aesthetic and historical/political dimensions of performance poetry race and gender have been foci of attention in some studies. For instance, slam poetry has been seen as a point in the evolution various African and African American oral traditions, or as the modern incarnation of the spoken word tradition that evolved out of the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, Floricanto and the more multicultural Beat Movement. In this sense, one can see the slam as the reconstitution of a forum to voice the history and experience of oppression of racial minority communities. However,

poet-turned-academic Susan Somers-Willett has argued that "Black slam poets capitalize, often unconsciously, on the commodification of slam poetry by white audiences as a purely black and urban form of expression… Slam may serve as a rare opportunity for white middle-class audiences to legitimately support black poets critiquing their very own positions of privilege" (106). Although this is a widespread opinion in the national slam community, researchers like Elaine Baumgartel and myself disagree with the generalization because it seems to serve a consolation of Somers-Willet's inability to achieve the success she desired in the slam community as a former competitor. However, more problematic is that it is a direct challenge to one of the core values that construct the identity of the Albuquerque slam scene, authenticity.

Strine's feminist approach to the work of a poet that traverses the chasm between "page" poetry and performance poetry, Adrienne Rich, highlighted how women writers redefine themselves by re-visioning history and writing themselves into it. This idea, in Rich's own words, is "an act of survival" (Strine 24). A female voice in the tradition of performance and activist poetry, Rich employed elements of the African American, feminist, performance and literary (publishing) traditions in her work. Applying the theory of Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin to Rich's poetry, Strine stresses "how self and culture are boundary phenomena…constituted and maintained primarily in and through dialogue or discursive interaction" (25).

According to Strine, Rich helped set the new standards for the "standardless" generation of poets to come when she aimed to "re-combine culturally fragmented aspects of human experience in order to 'de-naturalize' the patriarchal hierarchy of values, and to promote an alternative model of community life founded on mutual

openness and dialogue" (27). Strine argued that Rich accomplished this goal through: (1) the transformation of her poetic voice from that of an apolitical formalist poet to that of an intensely politicized feminist poet writing in open forms, (2) by poetically featuring and reflecting upon her own experiences in such a way as to give coherent and meaningful representation to a diversity of suppressed and silent conflicts and contradictions within women's lives; and (3) through the metaphoric reorganization of values so as to make an alternative culture enlightened by feminist principles an imaginative possibility (27).

In this research, I argue that by incorporating in its aesthetics and politics the vision articulated by poets like Rich, the slam community abandons an apolitical formalist poetic voice for a more critical one, gives complex representation of underrepresented populations often marginalized in canonical circles, and projects a value system that is representative of the cultural utopia sought by the members of the slam community. However, it is also important to approach the slam as a contemporary phenomenon with distinct features that differentiate it from other forms of performance poetry. In the following section, I elaborate on the theorization of the slam community as a performance space that enacts particular dynamics of postmodern discourse production.

The Slam as a Postmodern Space: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In the Introduction of this thesis, I defined the slam as a space where a postmodern discursive community is co-constructed by participants. This is a characterization of the space that calls for further elaboration. Henri Lefebvre defined space as a social product, or a complex social construction (based on values, and the social production of meanings) that affects spatial practices and perceptions (73). Space,

according to Lefebvre, subsumes things produced, and encompasses their

interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity. "It is the outcome of a sequence

and set of operations," he says, "and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple

object" (73).

Along these lines, Spry, for instance, has discussed how autobiographical writing

and performance can be in essence "a space of intense personal risk, it is simultaneously

a space of profound comfort" (361). In her view, autobiography became

> …a site of narrative authority; the blink of an eye is a comma, the wave of
> a hand is a period, the contraction of a torso is the turning of a page. The
> process of generating and performing autobiography offers me the power
> to reclaim and rename my voice and body privately in rehearsal, and then
> publicly in performance. (361)

According to LeFebvre, space production is composed of a triad: the perceived,

the conceived, and the lived. He labeled this particular triad the representational space:

"Space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space

of 'inhabitants' and 'users,' but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few

writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe" (39). This

research considers the poets' experience as the perceived, the audience/community

members experience as conceived and the (participant observation of the) space itself, as

the lived. This, however, does not account for the space or context that exists outside the

poets and the audience members.

In this thesis, I contextualize the slam as a postmodern discursive community.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept, I defined discourse communities as people who

share similar thoughts and ideas (Lessa 285). I contextualize this discursive community

within some of the aesthetic trends associated with postmodern cultural production and sensibility. In postmodernism, there is a rejection of totalizing narratives (meta-language, meta-theory, etc.) and an emphasis on the plurality of reality. David Harvey located this plurality specifically in resistance to power and suggested that postmodernity impacts identity as a result of the changing social and technical conditions of life in post-industrial, global capitalism (53). In his work, Jean-Francois Lyotard characterized the postmodern as fragmentation and eclecticism which is "the degree zero of contemporary culture; [where] one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong" (76). Gingrich-Philbrook reiterated the view that fragmentation is a characteristic of postmodernity and addressed the methodological challenge it poses for the researcher. In describing his subject of analysis, he stated: "The mythopoetic movement defies easy analysis; not because the bricolage which founds it is difficult to interpret, but because, true to its postmodern nature, it does not function, ultimately, as a coherent production" (21).

To navigate the fragmentation and eclecticism that characterizes the slam space, and in light of the concept of space informing this research, I made the methodological decision to move beyond the study of poems or poets to examine the relationships and practices that make up the space of the poetry slam scene in Albuquerque. In this way, I was able to examine multiple dimensions of this cultural phenomenon, from content of poems to intersubjectivities of poets and audiences, to performance and reception. I was able to see how poets and audiences formed a relation that defined an identity for the space and the individuals who make the space. In that vein, I followed Corey's model to

decenter the verbal script as the primary artifact of textuality and instead focus on "spatial practices" and "space-as-text in which refrains express both identity and history" (96, 148).

Dillard's has argued that the connection between the poet, poem, and listener constitutes community as the "community that is created at the festival has to do with audience identification with the poets and the poems they read on stage" (220). Dillard's article also connected this to creation of individual and group identity when he quoted poet and memoirist Mark Doty words: "So often after a reading someone will come up to me, someone who has just heard a poem or read one of my books, and say, 'You said how I felt.' We need that, I think, as a species; we are the creatures which represent, which long to be represented" (220). Noy also suggested that "in performativity, narrator and listener(s) are themselves constituted" (117). Likewise, Athanases has stated, "Reader-response critics have argued for some years that no 'poems' are actually in books, that poems are evoked in reader-text transactions, when readers [in our case the poets themselves] perform the verbal scores" (118). In this research, I argue that poets and audiences hold the relationships and performative acts that construct the community's identity by literally binding people to one another through a series of shared experiences. Informed by the preceding sources, the research questions that guided this investigation were:

Research Questions

1) What are the shared values that construct identity in the slam poetry space?

I define values as important and enduring beliefs shared by members of a culture or a community. In the research, I identified collective symbols and agreed upon values

that drive the performative acts that give meaning to this social event for both poets and audiences. I posit that if poetry is the blood of this discursive system, the people on both sides of the microphone are tissues interconnected by this blood. I was interested in the foundational values or common ground that allows people on both sides of the microphone to navigate, negotiate, and give nascency to their own identities within this space. Identity is defined here as the performed self-situated in culture. Space is a concept defined as a complex social construction (based on values, and the social production of meanings), which affects spatial practices and perceptions.

2) What are the performative acts that enact identity within the poetry slam space?

Performative acts refer to values performed through communicative practices by poets and audiences to construct a space for shared identity and cultural membership.

3) How do audiences and poets co-construct an identity for the slam community?

This research is based on the assumption that identity is co-constructed or constructed through social interaction among poets and audiences. I am interested in identifying the particular interactions that allow certain kinds of identity performance of individual and group membership in the slam community. The slam community refers here to the poets, audiences, sponsors, performance venues, and institutions that routinely congregate, participate, and support the slam events.

In the following chapter, I will outline the methodological procedures and analytical strategies implemented to explore these questions and interpret the findings of research.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This research explores the performative acts that define the distinct identity of the slam community. It examined how the values and practices performed by members of the slam community co-construct individual and shared identities and cultural membership. The methodological approach to this research problem is grounded in qualitative inquiry for two central reasons. First, as Lindlof has asserted, qualitative methods are particularly sensitive to the social construction of meaning ("The qualitative study" 23). This idea speaks directly to the theoretical assumptions and goals of this research. Secondly, intersubjectivity is another focus of qualitative research that is particularly relevant for my research on co-construction of identity and space. Gubrium and Holstein considered intersubjectivity the social accomplishment of how people co-construct and co-experience the interaction of social life and their rules for doing so (487). This research placed emphasis on the observation of interactions, relationships, and rules that define the slam community's identity.

Under the umbrella of qualitative methodologies, I selected ethnographic methods of research and the particular lens of performance ethnography. Ethnographic approaches privilege participant observation of naturally occurring phenomena that are unique in nature and impossible to reproduce in a laboratory setting (Lindlof and Taylor 14). Access and immersion or familiarity with the setting and culture studies is key in ethnographic research and gives the researcher the "discretionary eye" in the field. This eye is the researcher's ability to discern what data are relevant and likely to enrich the

study as he or she observes, participates, and records meaningful data in field notes. In this study, I applied, in particular, the methodological lens of performance ethnography.

Madison considered performance ethnography "a more detailed focus on the performative dimensions of language and the performative repetition of symbolic acts in the construction of identity" (161). Performance ethnography is an approach informed by postmodern theorizing on identity, in particular by Butler's theory of performativity that focuses on "stylized repetition of acts," Jacques Derrida's notions of "metaphysics of presence," and J.L. Austin and John Searles' theories of speech (Madison 162). For Madison, "What is important for critical ethnographers employing the analyses of (J.L.) Austin and (John) Searle is that words are indeed performative and do have material effects. Obviously, they do something in the world; and that something is to reiterate (in terms of Derrida) speech, meaning, intent and customs that have been repeated through time and that are communicative and comprehensible because they are recognizable in their repetition" (162). This approach is thus relevant for my research focus on the analysis of performance poetry, performance poets, and audiences to explore the construction of identity through repeated and ritualized forms of linguistic and social interaction.

The research design for this study called for the combination of various methods of data collection. It combined participant observation of slam events, individual interviews of poets, and focus group interview with audience members. In the following sections, I described the research design and the procedures followed for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

The Setting

This research defined the slam community as encompassing poets, audiences, sponsors, performance venues, and other institutional actors that routinely congregate, participate, and support the slam events. For the purpose of research design, I delineated the setting for my investigation as all slams events, venues, and slam poetry exhibitions held through out New Mexico under the auspices of organizations registered with Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI)—the governing body that administers the National Poetry Slam. This created a set of sites that followed the same rules, sanctioned by PSI, that mandate the format and structure that are emblematic of poetry slams.

This structure includes a 3-minute time limit on poems, the restriction against using props of any kind during the performance of a poem, the requirement that a poet must perform her or his own original work, and the random selection of five judges from the audience. Other components of the structure that shape the ritualized interactions of the slam involve: the designation roles and rules to a host, timekeepers, and scorekeepers; rules for scoring poems; rules for judging poems; and guidelines for audience expression of reactions (negative and positive) to poems, poets, and judges' decisions. The venues within the New Mexico slam scene, particularly those under the PSI affiliated ABQSLAMS.org, include coffeehouses, bars, lecture and university halls, clubs and performance spaces, etc., that draw different demographic groups. The physical spaces have different structural and acoustical characteristics and even decorative and symbolic ornamentation that affects the mood and dynamic of each individual slams.

The slams observed for this study took place in two of Albuquerque's primary performance poetry venues: R.B. Winnings Coffee Co., which hosts two monthly poetry

slams, and Blackbird Buvette, which host Poetry & Beer on the first Wednesday of the month. The two longest running poetry slam series in Albuquerque, Mas Poetry (third Wednesday's at R.B. Winnings) and Poetry & Beer draw different audiences. Though the poets in this study have consistently performed at both venues, R.B. Winnings tends to attract a younger audience because of its proximity to the University of New Mexico, and Poetry & Beer attracts an older audience because of the age restriction in Albuquerque bars. The three slams observed occurred over the course of two months at both venues. For the three poetry slams observed for this study, audience attendance (from low to high) was 36, 41, and 60. The number of poets competing (from low to high) was 7, 8, and 10.

Data Collection

The study involved three phases of data collection: (1) participant observation in slam poetry events, (2) individual, structured interviews with poets/performers, and (3) focus groups with audience members. This will approach allowed me to triangulate my analysis across three different perception frames: poets, audience, and ethnographic researcher.

Participant observation. I observed three slam events of approximately 3 hours each for a total number of nine hours of observation. Though my involvement in the Albuquerque Poetry Slam community dates back to February 2005, during this period of observation I was not an active slammer (not competing in that slam nor acquiring points to make the Albuquerque City Poetry Slam team in 2008-2009). According to Lindlof's categorization of participant observation techniques, I was in the position of "complete observation" (*Qualitative* 149).

During that time, I used field notes to record the dynamics of the space with respect to roles participants' played (poet, audience, host, etc.), the relationship between poets and audience, the physical space, the content of the poems, and the audience reaction to content presented by the poets. When observing audience response (behavior) I looked for verbal and non-verbal cues such as applause, snapping (a poetry slam convention that signifies support of the poet), physical engagement (active listening as a community norm), and interaction with the host. When observing the physical space I observed the composition of the audience, the business nature of the establishment, and the environment created for the poetry slam. When observing the poets, I paid special attention to their impact on the audience, the theme of poetry selected, and their style of poetic delivery.

As I observed the setting, I kept field notes, informed by Keyton's guidelines create "a continuous, sequential, record of what was observed" (262). More specifically, I produced field notes that addressed the questions suggested by Lindlof and Taylor in their method's book: Who are these people? What are their roles and their relationships with each other? What is this activity they are performing? How, when, and where is it performed? What artifacts are usually involved? What uses these artifacts and how is their use determined? I kept field notes during all stages of research, as I agreed with Keyton that "field notes should be completed for all qualitative research designs, even when the primary method of data collection is interviews or focus groups and the interaction will be audio- or video-recorded" (264).

Individual interviews with poets. Since I am approaching slam poetry as communication that is uniquely suited to convey individual and group identity, field

interviewing was an appropriate method of data collection. According to Keyton, interviews are a "practical qualitative method for discovering how people think and feel about their communication practices" and a "powerful method for understanding how people order and assess their world" (269-70). Madison has stated that field interviewing is a "window to individual subjectivity and collective belonging" (26). Furthermore, given my focus on co-creation of meaning, I followed the model of interviewing suggested by Madison for qualitative researchers when she wrote: "Interviewer and interviewee are in partnership and dialogue as they construct memory, meaning and experience together" (25).

Lindlof and Taylor outlined a list of six objectives that researchers trying to meet when employing field interview techniques. The three of these objectives were most relevant for my research: (1) gain an understanding of a communication event or process from the participant's perspective, (2) verify or validate data obtained from other sources (specifically my field notes), and (3) uncover the distinctive language and communication style used by participants in their natural communication environments.

I also followed Madison's guidelines in designing interview questions according to three categories of ethnographic interview questions. One type of question in my interview protocol for poets (see protocol on Appendix A) is the oral history question. Examples of this are: When did you first begin identifying yourself as a poet? or Can you talk about that moment in your life? This type of oral history question, according to Madison, "is a recounting of a social historical moment reflected in the life or lives of individuals who remember them or experienced them" (26). A second type of question is the personal narrative interview question, which is an expression of an event, experience,

or point of view from and individual perspective (Madison 26). My interview protocol

includes questions such as: Before you had an opportunity to attend a slam, what were

your perceptions of it? Finally, the topical interview question is Madison's third type of

ethnographic interview question. This question seeks "a point of view given to a

particular subject, such as a program, an issue or a process" (Madison 26). Examples of

this are: Do you think the slam scene is trying to convey a message to the larger world

outside the slam community? If yes, what is it?

I conducted one-hour, semi-structured interviews with five poets, experienced

slam poets in the Albuquerque slam scene at a location of their choosing (based on their

scheduling convenience). This purposive sampling was based on the wealth of each

poet's experience in the scene (consistently competing over a period of time longer than

one year), their popularity as quality poet performers (evidenced by their success in the

scene measured by their record of winning slams and earning a spot on city, collegiate,

and youth slam teams), and the diversity of writing style and performance styles across

the selected group. Purposive sampling involves selecting subjects most appropriate for

the study in order to provide conceptual richness in exemplar cases (Lindlof; Lindlof and

Talyor). Of the five poets interviewed two were women. Two of the male poets were

Anglo, and one of the male poets was Latino/Chicano. One of the female poets was

Latina/Chicana and one was African American and Latina/Chicana.

Individual interviews with poets were recorded on video to let the hour-long semi-

structured interview flow more like a conversation, which I later used the video to

transcribe. Poets also gave their consent for the video to be used in any future

presentations of this research. These video recordings will be donated to the archives of

the non-profit organizations that sponsors and promotes slam poetry events in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Focus groups. The third data collection method I will employed was the focus group. My focus group included slam audience members. According to Kruger and Casey, a focus group is typically a facilitator-led group discussion that has participant interaction and influence as one of its strengths (77). Carey has observed that the "group effect" is one unique characteristic of a focus group because the group setting dynamic brings about insights and stimulates cascading discussions that would not be easily discovered or accessible from an interviewer's questioning (225). This occurs when the participants respond to each other's comments rather in an unstructured way. The second unique characteristic that made it relevant for the study was focus group's power to generate information about the same topic from different types of people. It is a way to get a meaningful cross-section of qualitative information from an audience as demographically and philosophically disparate as the slam community, poets, and audience members alike.

D.L. Morgan has suggested scheduling three to five focus groups for a research study on the premise that past research has shown that conducting more groups does not usually result in additional meaningful insights (101). Keyton also noted that "fewer than three increases the likelihood that the researcher will miss an important aspect of the discussion" (279). Other standards of focus group design were employed: the standard 90-minute duration of the focus group and purposive sampling (Keyton 276).

A selection of participants for the focus group was conducted based on self-selection. Audience members were recruited via open calls (announcements) at poetry

slams and through an electronic call for participants through the ABQSLAMS listserv. The only criteria to be part of the focus group is having attended four or more slams in "past year" (between Fall 2008 and Fall 2009).

I conducted three focus groups with four people each. Two of the focus groups were conducted in the conference room at my place of employment. One of the focus groups was conducted at the coffee shop in the University of New Mexico Student Union Building (consequently, where the University collegiate slam team performs, however it was not a performance site used in this study). The focus group protocol included questions designed to incite group discussion over a 90-minute period (see Appendix B with protocol). Of the 12 participants, two were men (both white men). Of female participants, five were white women, two were Hispanic/Chicana women, two were Native American/Indigenous women, and one woman was of Middle Eastern descent. Per my IRB protocol and consent form, I gave the focus group participants aliases to protect their identity in this report. These interviews were audio recorded for transcription at a later date, so I could freely listen and facilitate the discussions.

Data Analysis

This stage of research was informed by the view of performance articulated by Myers to define performance studies as an illuminating heuristic device that enable researchers to account more fully for the dynamic interactions between socially and culturally located agents that constitute the experience of consciousness. As an analytical framework, performance studies allow us to take a particular communicative act, unearth the myriad of themes and relationships that construct it, and interpret it (Counsell and Wolf 222). One of the basic premises in performance studies is that one can understand

how people think, and might consequently act, by studying patterns displayed in their discourse. Functioning from Nancy Bonvillian's premise that "we learn about people through what they say and how they say it" (1), I examined word choice and saliency of particular clusters of ideas to identify the dominant themes in the discourse of poets and audience members. More specifically, I analyzed the themes that articulate values and practices performed in the slam community.

The data analyzed included field notes from participant observation and transcripts of individual interviews with poets and focus groups with audience members. These data were coded by the researcher to identify saliency, frequency, and intensity in language choice, themes, and sub-themes that related to the research questions stated above. The following chapter presents the five major themes and sub-themes that emerged from participants' talk and behaviors that relate to the principles, goals, and actions they value as members of the slam poetry community.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of a thematic analysis of the stories that local slam poets and audiences tell about the slam community and about themselves. More specifically, this thematic analysis offers insight into: 1) shared values that define a distinct identity for the slam community and its participants, 2) the performative acts through which members of the slam community communicate these identities, and 3) the particular ways in which poets and audiences co-construct identity and cultural membership. I will argue in this chapter that it is the deliberate and frequent enactment of these values and practices within the rituals of slam poetry what constitutes the performativity through which identity is co-constructed.

In the following sections, I present the themes that emerged in both focus group interviews with the slam audience and in individual interviews with the poets. These themes are: Authenticity, Affecting Change, Building Community, Representing Multivocality, and Becoming a Slam Poet. These five themes emerged as participants talked about their experiences, life stories, principles, goals, and actions they value as members of the slam poetry community. I contend that the prevalence of these themes across audience and poet responses, and the reinforcement of such themes in my analysis of field observations of the rituals and practices of the poetry slam, support my assertion that these are core values of the Albuquerque poetry slam community. I further contend that these core values constitute group identifiers and that their performance through communicative practices serves to define poetry slam's cultural identity and impart a sense of community among its members. The following sections of this chapter present

and explicate the salient themes as identified in data generated through observation, focus groups with slam audiences, and individual interviews with poets.

Authenticity

In the context of this thesis, authenticity refers to the valuing and enactment of a clustered set of qualities that include individuality, uniqueness, and truthfulness in the poems and performance of the poets. The interviews with the five poets suggest that authenticity is enacted through four interrelated performative acts: 1) "standing out" in public, 2) genuineness in performance, 3) being unapologetic, 4) telling untold truths.

Standing out. Perhaps the most obvious expression of authenticity in the poetry slam is in the public nature of this art; in the way poets and their performance are placed on display. Beginning with how the physical space is set for performance, the poets find that there is nothing to "hide" behind since there are no props or podium on the slam stage. The performer is left in a form of nakedness that poets' interviewed described as "standing out." As poet James Altamirano said: "Slam poetry affects me in terms of how it increases my willingness to stand out as an individual." It is evident to the observer that the amount of effort and intentionality required to "stand out" varies from poet to poet; however, their decisions regarding dress, dialect (language used in the performance), use of their leisure time, and personal belief systems, all inscribe a sense of authenticity or uniqueness onto the poets' public performance. Thus, the positive value attributed to the energy poets devote to constructing, performing, and reinforcing their unique individual identity is a salient theme in the community.

Focus group participants not only value the "standing out" of poets but also practice it themselves as members of the slam's audience. When enough individuals

make a conscious decision to turn off the television and seek live performance and community at a poetry slam, they find themselves in the same room as a number of individuals who make a ritual out of being "different." For instance, Helena, a native New Mexican and land grant heir who is a mother of three adult sons, described the kind of statement that individuals who attend poetry slams make about themselves: "That poetry matters, that art is important, that you're an educated person, that you're open to thinking for a night versus sitting in front of the boob tube and checking out. I think there's something about engaging and being part of something that's intelligent."

My observations in the field confirm this tendency of audience members to express their individuality and uniqueness through participation in the slam scene. Other than a core band of poets who attend the poetry slams as a group of "regulars," there is rarely a group dynamic present at the slams in Albuquerque. In other words, individuals that routinely gather at slams to be part of the audience usually show up as individuals and rarely in groups larger than three, unless they are a family. This suggests that members of the slam community perform their identity in communion with other community members but do so by routinely disengaging from their normal social circles. This brings up the seemingly contradictory idea that the slam community is a family of "family of individualists."

Genuineness. The second performative act associated with authenticity relates to the importance being genuine. In the specific context of the poetry slam, genuineness refers to the importance that both poets and audiences place on the idea that poets perform their true self on-stage. Being genuine is also linked to the expectation, primarily among audience members, that the poets' performed identity on stage mirrors their

identity off-stage. For instance, poet Carlos Contreras, who has performed for almost a decade, passionately described poetry and the poetry slam space as a place where he can just be himself, free from judgment. Contreras spoke about how his identification as a poet was met with resistance by those who had given him an identity as a member of the Contreras family:

> All my life I had walked in the footsteps of my two older brothers. I dressed like them, acted like them, liked the things that they liked, didn't the things that they didn't. Poetry was my first step out of the normal pattern of this life. I liked to write, and found poetry in high school. My older brothers thought it was dumb, for sissies, and showed a sign of being weak. I didn't relent though, I just pressed on. I told them, "If you don't like it, fine, but I do." Nine years later, they are two of my biggest supporters.

Seemingly in tension with the slam poetry's ritual emphasis on competition among poets, the emphasis on the non-judgmental character of the community relates to the in-group understanding that competition is for the sake of artistic motivation and entertainment rather than for the assessment of self-worth.

Contreras was not the only poet to speak to this idea of performing his "genuine self." Poet Jessica Helen Lopez articulated this idea using the term "purpose" to describe the reason why she is compelled to write about the authentic pieces of her identity. She said she feels a deeper sense of commitment to the authentic creation of messages because of her identification of a purpose for her poetry:

> So, if I am writing erotica, I feel like it's very purposeful in what I'm doing. Or if I'm writing something from the perspective of a feminist, I feel that I'm writing with a purpose. Or the immigrant plight, you know, from Mexico and South America and Central America. I've got to write about those things.

While Contreras described his "love to talk and never shut up" as part of what makes him genuine, and Lopez articulated the notion of being driven by a "purpose" as what makes her authentic, poet Jazz Cuffee described genuineness as "not being fake."

On this topic, Cuffee referred to the importance of maintaining authenticity when faced with a particular dilemma that slam poets encounter in their relations with audiences. In the larger conversation about performance poetry in Albuquerque and beyond, poets often decry the perception of some members of the audience who prematurely assume they have a deep understand of a poet after having listened to one poem. As a poet, I often view this treatment as different from the one generally given to an actor or a musician, whose stage or screen persona is not immediately assumed to be the character or belief system of the performer. In slam poetry, however, this audience-poet dynamic is built into the relations that constitute the slam. It is the case slam poets, unlike actors or musicians, do not have a firewall, backstage, or booth to disappear into after a performance to then emerge as their true self. In slam poetry, when poets finish their performance they immediately merge into the performance space to assume the role of audience members in the community. And thus it is taken for granted that the poet's voice and performance reflects the poet's own worldview because it is their original work.

This presents a question about authenticity for slam poets: How do you weave connections between the person you are off stage and the person you are on stage? And how does that complement or collide with the person you are as spectator? Cuffee said she approaches the dilemma in this way: "Where I am now as a poet, it almost always comes back to that idea of giving yourself permission to say those things and really

owning what you say, and being okay, trying to not censor yourself in that way." Yet Cuffee spoke of the difficulties poets can face with the example of her own mother. While praising her mother for regularly attending poetry slams in Albuquerque and supporting her and the scene, Cuffee also said she sometimes feels conflicted when presenting content that she is unsure her mother is ready to hear coming from her daughter. Thus she explained the conflict between performing her genuine self and dealing with the "positive surface" that people around her perceive as her identity. But in the last analysis, even if she asks herself whether audiences are ready hear "this raw kind of ugliness" in a poem, she values the authenticity of poets that allow themselves "to be ugly."

In focus group interviews, some participants reiterated the value of genuineness and associated it with the expectation that a poet's identity on stage mirrors her or his off-stage persona. Eva, for example, made certain to emphasize that "authenticity in performance"—more than any other aspect of performance in slam poetry, like rhythmic tendency of delivery—is the primary reason why she attends slams. Another focus group participant, Rachel, criticized disingenuous performance in poets: "Like they take on an accent and they might sound African-American or Hip-Hop-ish or something that is not normally them." She went on to express how she values poets that project authenticity in content and performance. This value was echoed by other members of her focus group, and reinforced in the other two focus groups, as well.

My observations of the poetry community rendered similar results. From my position as a poet within the performance poetry community in Albuquerque, I could easily see how the small size of the community allowed poets and audience members to

comingle in many different social environments. This comingling gives poets and audience members a significant number of opportunities to interact outside of the rituals, social practices, and structure of the poetry slam. It is in these interactions that audience members and poets can solidify their identification as members of a unique community. But once audience members assume this off-stage identity is the poet's authentic self, it creates an expectation that can result in cognitive dissonance when that poet performs a different voice or conflicting identity on the slam stage. As a researcher who is part of this slam community in Albuquerque, I was able to note when poets were acting "out of character" based on my familiarity with their performance style and interpersonal experiences with those poets inside and outside of the slam performance space. My observations of the behavior of the Albuquerque slam audience—which given its small size may not be representative of slam communities across the U.S.— confirm that audiences gave lower scores to poets who were "out of character" when performing on stage.

Being unapologetic. The third practice associated with authenticity is being unapologetic. Poets associated this practice with the training received from coaches in the poetry slam community as well as with the notion of being oneself. Cuffee, for instance, recalled numerous coaches who taught her to not apologize when she made a mistake on stage. It is relevant to note here that slam poets in New Mexico often assume the role of teachers in areas considered supplementary to education (like cultural enrichment). They spend a significant amount of time in classrooms with students who are still learning the finer points of public speaking and to be comfortable in front of a room full of peers. In that setting, poets find students apologizing when they fumble a line in a speech, thereby

announcing their mistake to an audience that otherwise would not have been the wiser.

Thus, teaching them not to apologize is a standard practice in performance coaching for a

slammer. In addition, Cuffee finds a deeper meaning in this performance technique, a

meaning that connects the act of not apologizing with being oneself:

> I find that I am a person who does apologize a lot, for either the things I
> say in like daily life or whatever. You know, I never want to step on
> anybody's toes. However, it's a place where you totally have control,
> maybe not the outcome, but of yourself out there in that space and to not
> apologize for that. It's almost like the practice of not apologizing for being
> yourself.

Among focus group participants, this notion of being unapologetic emerged as

relevant in three different contexts. First, in relation to the audience's acceptance of the

poet's right to speak freely and without audience interruption, as when Helena said:

"Keep your mouth shut while people are talking." Second, in relation to the audience's

endorsement of the poet's performance of poems that can be controversial without

apology. My analysis of over 20 hours of field notes confirmed that slams in

Albuquerque feature a significant number of poems that fall outside the realm of "polite

conversation," poems that critically address topics like sex, sexual violence, sexual

orientation, religion, race, gender, and politics by people who are not deemed experts by

traditional measures of hierarchy or authority. My observations also revealed that the

slam audience condones and encourages this type performance by cheering and

rewarding challenging poems with higher scores, thus making the "in your face" quality

of the slam a defining trait by practice. Third, the idea of being unapologetic also

emerged in the context of the rituals and practice of judging at the poetry slam. When a

judge scores a poem high or low based on her or his honest, personal appraisal of the

poem and performance, there are no apologies. In fact, the MC spiel given by the host at the beginning of every slam encourages the judges to stick to their guns and not be swayed by the audience. Here, some focus group participants applied the notion of unapologetic authenticity to their own role as slam judges.

For the judges, the main dilemma is whether their scoring represents their personal, sober judgment or the willingness to please the wishes of the audience. This conflict is even incorporated within the rituals of the slam, when the host addresses the would-be judges at the start of the slam to explain their role. It is an intentional performance designed to forge a relationship between the judges and the audience, which in turn strengthens the engagement between listeners and poets. The judge's dilemma was addressed in all three focus groups, but there was no general agreement on the "sacredness" of the task or standard procedures for judging. Whether one judges from a sense of personal taste or to numerically represent the feedback of the audience, the only agreement reached amongst host and judges in the slam community is not to apologize for their scores regardless of how they arrive at them. This is given further credence in part due to the fact that slam judges are often chosen because of their limited experience with the slam and there is not standard rubric by which slam poems are judged. In this sense, judges feel that they can be unapologetic when scoring a poem based on their own criteria for judging, particularly when their scoring dissatisfies the audience's preferences.

Telling untold truths. Lastly, the value of authenticity was also addressed through reference to the practice of telling untold truths. For the poets interviewed, it is important that slam poets engage in popular education of the community by telling untold truths,

particularly the truths generally omitted in the official history of the United States taught in schools. For example, Cuffee talked about her awakening to her own cultural heritage through the poetry slam, as a result of her affiliation with the Angry Brown Poets. Once she began to comprehend instances of historical injustice in the poems of fellow poets, she questioned why teachers did not teach that particular piece of history in her school. In her case, Lopez said that she has assumed a position as a keeper of Chicano history, stating that she was Chicana long before she ever had dreams of becoming a writer. She said that if she were to avoid that dimension of her identity, she would be presenting an inauthentic portrait of who she is. Who she is demands that she sees and shares history from a political and culturally specific position that is often silenced by mainstream society. Likewise, poet Rich Boucher's poetic discourse is rife with "revisionist history." He described it as not settling for what's on the "printed page": by directly challenging the history that is written by the victors, Boucher sees himself as becoming a purveyor of what U.S. social historian Howard Zinn once called "The People's History."

Poets Cuffee and Altamirano noted that slams tend to report truths that come from the mouths of people and go unreported by the media. Altamirano said that facts are plot points that the mainstream media connect in a particular fashion that they call "truth," and located the politial strength of the slam in connecting the dots in a different fashion that tells a different truth through the slam: "I don't think that there are many political writers [in media today], unless they're just writing straight facts, or whatever they're doing, just writing journalism. But as far as political art, I think that slam is incredibly valid."

An analysis of field notes indicated a significant number of poems whose content involve social criticism of the status quo, reinterpretation of history, and critical analysis of current events and contemporary cultural phenomena from poets who represent marginalized or fringe communities. These interpretations are very different from the accounts "of record" established by corporate media or government outlets. This telling of untold truths attracts audience members who are looking to have their own value systems reinforced, and supports poets who seek to have their interpretations validated in a space that functions as a marketplace of ideas.

Affecting Change

The belief that the poetry slam space can create some meaningful change in society is another value shared amongst poets and audience members. At cursory glance, it seems naive and idealistic to assume that a poem will have a quantifiable impact or reach to shift paradigms on a scale that would change policy or the socioeconomic condition of a population. However, poets and community members interviewed for this research perceived the slam space as more of a vehicle to create change to than an end. In their responses, I coded four salient practices through which the slam community identifies the slam's contribution to creating social change and thus locate their own sense of identity as members of the community: 1) raising awareness, 2) creating alternatives to mainstream media, 3) protecting public spaces for free speech, and 4) cultivating new leadership and alternative discourses in society.

Raising awareness. Slam poetry is seen as affecting change through raising social awareness at the individual level. Although awareness in and of itself is not sufficient to create social change, there is no successful social movement that begins without reaching

a tipping point of social awareness. And although sociopolitical change is often determined by the collective action of social groups seeking transformation, any meaningful change begins with personal decisions and actions of individuals. Participants in this study talked about awareness as a change that may begin at the moment a particular poet or poem connects an audience member to the idea or issue at the center of the poem. Amongst all three focus groups, participants agreed that audience members attend poetry slams with an intention to nurture an emotional connection with a poem or a performer.

Helena, a focus group participant, termed this the "emotional impact" of slam poetry on individuals. Another focus group participant, Barbara, explained that poets can promote personal change among audience members by setting an example. She stated: "I'm like, maybe if they can do that, I can go and put my words on paper and have the courage to do it in front of somebody else." By design, the framework of the poetry slam is designed to inspire participation, just as the content of poetry—its focus on telling untold truths, for instance--is designed to inspire social awareness and creativity within the individual who experiences it.

Creating alternatives to mainstream media. Another dimension of the slam's power to affect change was identified in the poets and audience's view that the slam is a space that offers a cultural and political alternative to mainstream media. For example, poet James Altamirano, who described slam poetry as a stronghold of political writing in the contemporary media landscape, contrasted the brevity and superficiality of the "sound bite" culture in journalism with the contextual richness and multiplicity of perspectives

offered in the slam poetry community. In his view, the slam space is effectively

positioned as alternative media space:

> So we live in a very non-literal time where sound bites, we're all based in sound bites. Everything we hear is based on sound bites or four-word sentences. This generation isn't the generation that's going to be basing its written work off of written work. We're gonna be translating what's already being said; it's all going to be based on what's being spoken. The spoken word is going to be here, it's been here before any written words, so it'll be here after any writing exists.

Poet Jasmine Cuffee noted that rather than boxing audiences into the very static

identity of consumers of media, the poetry slam is structured to allow for a fluid

transition from consumers to creators of messages. Cuffee reinforced this idea of the

changing positionality of the consumer into creator when she referred to the moment

when she gained this awareness herself: "I realized that I had a voice. So my perception

changed towards [the slam], it was not just something I saw on TV." A focus group

participant, Kelly articulated a similar idea when she referred to the difference between

slam and television audiences. In her view, attending a poetry slam sends a positive

message about the individual: "That poetry matters, that art is important, that you're an

educated person, that you're open to thinking for a night versus sitting in front of the

boob tube and checking out. I think there's something about engaging and being part of

something that's intelligent."

Protecting public space for free speech. Another theme associated with affecting

change relates to the way participating in slams makes poets and audiences realize their

role in protecting a public space where freedom of expression is exercised. Among

members of the slam audience, participating in the slam raises awareness about the

importance of sustaining this cultural space. Under the premise that political speech and

thought is a predecessor to political change, slam audience members see themselves affecting social change by actively creating public spaces for creativity and political discourse.

Some participants referred to idea that the slam audience fulfills a function of "stewardship" by making sure that this space continues to be available for future poets. Allan, a focus group participant, took this idea of vigilance and responsibility even further by saying he felt it was his "duty" to support this space of free speech and to make sure it stays protected. Allan was not the only focus group participant who adopted a protective stance towards the poetry slam space. It was suggested by a few that the audience comes to fulfill a function of stewardship in making sure that a space for political expression and dissent continues to be available for future poets.

The space, along with all the ideas, values, and individual identities that have an opportunity to flourish with it and act out in the world, is viewed as the most sacrosanct entity within a community that collectively values the sanctimony of nothing. Even when poets decry the imperfections of the poetry slam, as do the audience members and the community at large, there was unilateral agreement amongst poets and audience interviewed that the space itself is critical for the cultivation of emerging leaders and the dissemination of discourse that questions and challenges the prevailing paradigms.

Cultivating new leadership and alternative discourses. Perhaps the most significant change attributed to the slam community is its role in the cultivation of voices and new leaders that offer alternative and oppositional discourses in society. Poets spoke about their leadership role in the cultivation of future community leaders. Jasmine Cuffee, for instance, credited the slam with infiltrating her professional life and informing

her decision to take a position at the New Mexico Forum for Youth in Community. Seeing community work as inspiring, moving, and even "poetic," Cuffee said she wanted a career that involved more than just writing about social change. In her position at the New Mexico Forum for Youth, she cultivates the Public Allies Program that places young leaders in organizations that engage in "frontline," service-oriented community work.

Cuffee's passion to "bring up young leaders" was echoed by Carlos Contreras: "I don't compete that much anymore. Instead, I encourage young people to go out and compete to get their name and words out there, because they will change this world--not me." Jessica Helen Lopez used the term "welcome wagon" when she described her role with respect to encouraging the new voices that take the risk of making their voice and their views public for the first time: "My purpose is to give those identities voices." Lopez said the slam allows for the creation of safe spaces for LGBTQ poets to share messages that will challenge and change public discourse around issues of hate speech, hate crimes, and marriage equality.

Likewise, poet Rich Boucher emphasized that the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that is inherent to the slam constitutes an alternative to mainstream discourse that in and of itself counts as social change. Although he spoke directly of the poets, he indirectly championed the idea that the very existence of the slam space promotes agency with respect to society's status quo. According to Boucher, in a society where the social norm is to conform, the poetry slam creates a discursive "push back" that inverts the prevailing value structure and encourages community members to value attributes that are conventionally frowned upon in popular culture. At the same time, Boucher

challenged his poetic peers to take leadership to "affect change" beyond the sanctuary of the poetry slam:

> If your mission with the poem is to "change something," you have no shot of changing something it at a poetry slam. Because everybody that's going there is probably like you, probably thinks along the same lines as you. Whose thoughts and impulses politically are you going to change by doing a poem like that at a slam? Good luck. To me it just sounds like you are preaching to the choir. Do that poem in front of Sears Hardware in Newark, DE, where both of the Black people who shop there will hear you.

Boucher challenged poets to find an audience that is new in order to facilitate the sort of change that comes post-paradigm shift, that is, after an individual hears a poem to which he or she connects.

However, from my observations and focus group sessions, I found that more than the poets' interest in preaching, the audiences' willingness and desire to be part of a "choir" was salient. In focus group conversations, participants affirmed each others' desire to hear content that bridges cultural divides and offers some sort of universal messaging at poetry slams. One participant, Nina, described these cross-community messages as "things that are needed in this world." Kelly, in a different focus group, framed the slam space of worship for audience members who attend slams consistently to be a part of a "philosopher-thinker-artist-shaman type thing." Interestingly, slam audiences in Albuquerque are overwhelmingly middle aged while the performance poets appear to be 10 to 20 years younger in age. Based on my observations, poets are indeed seen as purveyors of a "next" generation that is developing and exercising new leadership and making the slam an incubator for democracy.

Building Community

One of the most interesting dynamics in the slam scene is how communicative practices serve to bridge the gap between the staunch individuality that is valued in the poetry slam and the poets and audiences' desire to be "part of something." The responses of participants suggest that negotiating the tension between individuality and the value attributed to community is one of the distinct features of the construction of identity in the slam community. In communicating a sense of identity for this distinct community, participants referred to practices like: 1) constructing familial relationships, 2) promoting inclusiveness, 3) establishing boundaries, and 4) co-creating space and identity.

If the slam poet loathes the "mindless sheep" behavior that is popularly cited as the byproduct of consumerism and a culturally vapid culture, why flock to a subcultural event that is trending away patiently towards its moment in the sun of commodification? The data suggest that this, in fact, is a question that many poets' ask themselves before becoming part of the slam community and situating their identity within it. James Altamirano described his trajectory in these terms:

> Before I was a part of it, I didn't necessarily have a great deal of respect for it, just because I was always stuck on the rap shit. And that was what I preferred, I wouldn't do anything besides that. So, I think that after becoming a member of the community you realize all the different tactics and all the different strengths of the other individuals and how everyone's different experiences and everyone's different way of learning, everyone's different way of creating is different, so their poetry is translated as such. And there's room in the community for a lot of different types of poets. So it's definitely a very inclusive community, and I think there's just a lot of mutual respect in the community.

Constructing familial relationships. In regard to acquiring a sense of belonging and community, the description of the slam community as a "family" was recurrent among poets. Jasmine Cuffee made an analogy between the family and the slam community. In her view, family, unlike friends and love interests, will be critical and candid in the times that things need to be said, even when feelings are at risk of being hurt. She spoke of the honesty and candor that characterizes the poetry slam community as proof of how it becomes a sort of family relationship for members. Jessica Helen Lopez also used the metaphor of familial relationships to describe the slam community when she asserted her comfort with the kind of people she gets to meet through the "extended" slam community or "slam family." Like Altamirano, she confessed to having no awareness of this community before she started performing and acknowledged her transition from apathy or antipathy to adoration and identification with the slam community. Lopez elaborated upon this point by expressing her comfort and security with the notion that poets will respect the diversity of voices, perspectives, and genres as a shared value within the community. Along this line, Cuffee pointed to the fluidity of poets' roles as both poets and audience members as contributing to the cohesiveness of the slam audience.

Focus group participant Kelly offered an analysis of the slam that positions it as familial unit where members place value on the ensuring the wellbeing of other members:

You have to just make a conscious effort to realize which part of this you actually want to be a part of? Which statement are you making when you go and attend these and you hang out with these people, and then you become friends with some of the people. I

think after a while you're going there with a personal statement that is, "Hey these people are really important, and I need to support them."

For poet Rich Boucher "the slam is a family, it is a community." But Boucher's definition of family, however, focuses on the dysfunctionality of the familial unit. In his view, it is dysfunction which engages family members to become active in preserving the familial unit and, ultimately, increase their identification with the family:

> My perspective of it now is that it's dynamic. It's a family, it's very dysfunctional, just like any community or family, it is very cliquey; there are shifting trends and tides of opinion. There are orthodoxies which, to me, are very unhealthy. But that simply means that the slam is an institution like any other. And it's up to those who really care about the slam to invigorate it and make it exciting in that regard.

This characterization of the slam as a "family" is one that is problematized by some of the poets interviewed. Boucher, for instance, noted that the closed circuit of the "slam family" is problematic when one considers the slam's political agenda to affect change. In his critique of the "round robin, circle jerk-ular" nature of the slam, Boucher invoked the "preaching to the choir" metaphor to argue about the futility of peddling values to those who already share the same values. He employed the example of a poet reading a poem about Mexican immigrants being treated inhumanely by "self-appointed white vigilantes on the border." He agreed that it is terrible that "rednecks from the Texas border have appointed themselves to do this." However, he considered it a waste of time to read such poem in a room full of people who share the same opinion. Boucher's critique is aimed at the poets' current comfort level with preaching to the choir because it is essentially a form of homogenization of poetry. Although Boucher was likely characterizing his "choir" as fellow poets, this contrasted with the audience members'

perception of themselves. The audience sees itself as a collection of like-minded

individuals making up a community with shared identities and shared values.

       Promoting inclusiveness. Focus group participants stressed the theme of

inclusiveness when referring to the qualities that made the slam space an attractive

community for individuals. According to participants, the slam community is an

inclusive space that places a high value on human-to-human interaction without making

distinctions. It promotes the notion that poetry or art is for everyone, not just for an elite

class of people; that intellectuality and critical thinking are for everyone, not just for

those privileged enough or old enough to have college degrees. Sarah, a focus group

participant, stated that by virtue of the growing artistic output of the community and

audience loyalty to it, there is a broad belief in the power of the word to influence people

regardless of party affiliation or lack thereof. All the focus groups discussed the idea that

the slam, through its very existence, inclusiveness, and popularity, puts forth a message

that art and poetry are "cool" and for everyone, and that there is an audience for poetry in

this day and age. This idea that the slam is an inclusive space--accessible to everyone and

intergenerational--was touched upon in multiple focus groups.

       The notion of inclusiveness as a practice that builds sense community and sense

of belonging was also put forth by focus group participant Brian, who stressed the

similarity between hip hop and slams as inclusive spaces where art is accessible to all:

I really think that the intersection of hip hop culture and poetry has been really essential

in keeping any sort of semblance of poetry alive. I don't mean amongst people like us;

but, generally speaking, a lot of people don't pay attention to poetry, and we don't go to

poetry readings. And the only reason we can make any kind of connection with it is

through some of these other media, through music and stuff like that, and maybe through the schools. But now I think, with slam, and the performance poetry is still, because of our culture, going to be the main avenue for people to be exposed to poetry and to relate to it, I think.

Establishing boundaries. When conceptualizing the slam as a community, poets also engage in the definition of the boundaries that define the community. In this regard, various poets defined themselves and the slam community in opposition to academic poets and recitals in the traditional spaces for the consumption of fine arts. Boucher said:

I have been asked to perform for benefits as well as shows; you could use the shorthand "academic" for. So I have sort of straddled the divide between slam poetry, slam poems, slam poets and their various dysfunctional behaviors and the more terrifying, because you don't see it so often, dysfunctional behaviors of academic poets.

Cuffee shared the experience of performing in more formal poetry settings and feeling like "a fish out of water," detached from the practices she is used to and feeling unlike herself. She said that the connection with the audience, the discourse (and sometimes disagreement) over the quality of poetry, and the content that accompany the poetry slam were missing at the "traditional" poetry reading. The "green room" treatment and being ushered out a back door after the performance was abrasive to her experience and identity as a slam poet, and she positions herself in opposition to that.

From their perspective, slam audience members across all three focus groups expressed that they enjoy taking part in the establishment of the cultural boundaries of the community in their role as active listeners during slam competitions. For example, audience expressions of approval or disapproval of a particular poem or poet—through

slam rituals such as cheering, clapping, booing, or scoring a performance – establish

boundaries of acceptable and objectionable performances. For this reason, I often

describe the poetry slam as the "first reality show," because if gives audience members a

stake in the outcome. In my participant observation of slams, I saw this to be one of the

key factors in drawing and sustaining an audience for poetry in non-traditional literary

performance venues such as bars. Sharing a high-energy level of participation and

passion for the performance is another aspect of the slam interaction that audiences

experience to build points of identification with the community. As focus group

participant Vicki said when referring to the scoring of poems and audience feedback,

"I've never been to where people like want to fight somebody at a page poet thing."

As participant listeners, the poets also establish certain social norms of the slam

space, norms that differ from those of the page poet space. For example, socially

acceptable behavior and artistically acceptable content that would be normal at a library

reading for a page poet would likely lose the poetry slam for a slam poet. Inversely, the

performance style (volume, choreography, intensity) of a slam poet in a bar, would likely

overwhelm and unimpress an audience at a page poet reading. I contend that these norms

set boundaries that reinforce the notion a family. The types of behaviors that a family

might engage in at home (in the comfort of the poetry slam space), they might not engage

in public. A family that will fight for each other is also a family that will fight with each

other—as my personal experience with the slam has shown me.

Co-creating space and identity. Lastly, the value of community was also

articulated by participants in their discussion of how the unique identity of the slam

community rests upon the shared construction of space and identity through fluidity of

roles and rituals. This co-creation of space is most evident in three practices: audience participation in the performative acts of the community—such as active listening, providing immediate feedback to poets, and taking a shared responsibility for maintaining the energy of the event, the co-authorship of poems, and the performance of coordinated and transitional roles as performer-listener-judge-host.

The level of seriousness and passion with which audience members consider their duties in co-constructing the poetry slam space was most evident in the focus group dialogue around the role of judges. The continuum of opinions never really settled a consensus around the two most interesting and intentional ambiguities in the slam construct: Is the judge's duty to represent the broader opinion of the audience when scoring a poem or simply to represent their individual feeling about the poem when scoring? To represent oneself or the wishes of the audience is the inherent conflict presented to the would-be judge at a poetry slam, a conflict that is ritualized and made part of the host's spiel at the start of the slam. Through participant observation, I witnessed this dynamic, intentionally designed tension as a tactic to forge a relationship between judges and audiences; a relation that in, in turn, strengthens listeners' engagement with the poems.

While disagreeing on the finer points of "slam judging," focus group participants had an easier time reaching consensus on the roles of audience members at a slam. These are roles that help construct the unity and identity of the community. Regarding the question of what are the roles the audience plays in the interaction with poets, the salient themes across all three focus groups were providing feedback (positive or negative), expressing encouragement, and offering critique. In terms of creating relations among

audience members, participants said that acting with decorum or the self-policing of audience members when a poem is about to begin was another role of audiences.

Although there was considerable discussion in one focus group around how decorum is dependent upon the venue of the poetry slam (i.e. bars differ from coffeehouses), participants maintained that it is still the role of the collective audience to decide the rules for a particular venue and then enforce those rules amongst them. Focus group participant Anna even suggested that audience members help construct the poetry slam space with their expectations of being "wowwed out of [their] socks" by the performances. This, again, speaks to the role of the audience as setting the atmosphere for the poetic offerings they have come to experience.

From their perspective, poets also located the co-construction of the slam space in their relations to audiences and other poets. James Altamirano, for instance, spoke about the "workshop" function of the poetry slam that provides poets inspiration, peer review (through reaction of judges, poets, and audience members), and a snapshot of the state of the craft to its participants. In this sense, he stated that his identity as an individual poet does not exist independent of the community and the poetry of the slam space. For Boucher, the community and the space exist as co-authors of his poetry by informing his decisions on content and literary devices. He also pointed out that the slam structure is a factor in the slam experience, and this experience plays a large part in an individual's identity. For example, he said the hosts' job is to get the audience engaged and keep its energy level high because this impacts directly the quality of the show and therefore the identification of members with the community:

> You're not doing your job, you're not being exciting enough, you need to
> put your ass out there as well as the poets. If you don't, what's going to
> happen is that'll be subtle permission for the audience to be lame and tired
> and non-participatory. Every performer will tell you that the energy level
> impacts how they deliver the work.

Cuffee addressed the expectations that the slam audience has of the poets and her

desire, as a poet, to meet those expectations. She described the relationship between the

poet and the audience as somewhat similar to that of fans with a sports team. When a

person identifies as a fan of a particular professional sports team, they often speak in

terms of "I," "us," and "we"—pronouns that include the performers (players) as well as

the fans (audience). But Cuffee stressed the fluidity of the poets' position as both

audience and authors as a key point of distinction between poetry and sporting events.

As she stated: "[In basketball] You can't like go next week and play a basketball game

with Lebron James after watching his performance. But [in the slam] you can go next

week and get up on that stage."

Cuffee also referred to the duality of the poets' roles as audience and author as an

essential part of the co-construction of familial relationships that ultimately define the

poetry slam space. She said that the fluid roles played by the poets/audience and the

audience/judges deepen their connectivity to the community and further align them to the

values of the community:

> I think we're not just performers that do poetry and it's one dimensional;
> we are slammers, so we go back into the audience. So they [audiences]
> also develop friendships [with the poets] or at least the idea of who
> somebody is so they may also get the idea of true community, which isn't
> always that positive either. Sometimes people have little snafus with one
> another, and I think they also come to be a part of it, you know. And then
> maybe, if we're lucky, they become really a part of it and help organize
> and do poetry and all that stuff.

Playing these interconnected roles is a seminal experience shared by both poets and audiences. And the experience can become the genesis in the trajectory of sporadic slam attendees who later turn into consistent audience members and eventually assume roles as judges and hosts that are critical to the infrastructure of the slam space. The assumption of responsibility and deepened relationship with existing community members is the beginning of negotiating the process from outsider to insider, from individual to community member. It is essentially the path of the identity formation process of becoming a "poetry slammer" for both audience and poets.

Representing Multivocality

The poetry slam community will often take and be given credit for having a diverse representation of people from every demographic sector, protected class, performed gender, and sexual orientation. In the discourse of members of this community, representation has multiple dimensions and operates through different practices. It can refer 1) to the act of re-presenting multiple voices and opinions in one's discourse; 2) to the act of speaking from oneself, 3) how participants in the community are representative of larger populations; and to 4) the actual inclusion of new and dissenting voices. Multivocality is intricately connected to values and practices discussed above, such as telling untold truths, cultivating alternative discourses, and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the open structure and value of the space as a forum for free speech make the expression and enactment of multiple voices a central focus of the community.

Re-presenting multiple voices and opinions in one's discourse. When referring to the multidimensionality of representation, some poets mentioned that by valuing the diversity of people and voices represented in the slam space, they felt a responsibility to

have their own voice counted as part of that diversity. For example, James Altamirano referred to the practices of representation and multivocality in these ways:

> [The slam] tries to represent a group of people that aren't typically represented. Which are the average workers, the average people in society that are looking for free entertainment, are looking for whatever, an outlet, a free outlet that doesn't really take anything expect a microphone that someone else is providing.

This poet also highlighted how the audiences appreciate the multivocality of the slam:

You're going to see something that you like. You're going to see something that you don't like. I think that people come just to be accepted. People come to be represented.

Further, Altamirano pointed out how the multivocality and inclusiveness of the slam space allows for the poets' cultivation of their own, authentic voice. He mentioned how through his experiences in the slam community he realized all the different tactics and strengths of the other individuals, as well as everyone's different experiences, different ways of learning, and different ways of creating.

Speaking from oneself. Cuffee also shared her firsthand experience with self-representation and identity formation in the slam community. She recalled how her coming of age in the poetry slam informed her perception of herself as a multiracial child.

I would like to say that I had friends from all different kinds of races, and I could really put myself in that situation. But being mixed and hanging out more with my Black friends, you know what I mean . . . And them coming up to me like, "You're not white, why you act white?" or "Why you listen to rock music?" Like "That's so weird." And you are wondering, why does that make me different from you? And realizing that, it's okay that those differences are there.

Formative experiences like Cuffee's grappling with her own racial identity are critical pieces in the development of an individual's identity and the poet's unique voice. Nonetheless, the effect of the slam on the self-acceptance, memory, and personality of an individual poet has a much larger effect, as a shared a poem about their personal experience is an opportunity for "outsiders" and participants to identify with her and thus with the poetry slam community.

In the slam scene, the interconnectedness of inclusiveness, representation, and multivocality is facilitated by the structure and ritual practices of slam poetry. In the open and participatory structure of the slam, there is place for everyone to have a voice regardless of the content of the poem and how it is constructed or performed. Jessica Helen Lopez metaphorically compared some traditional poetry environments to a "church" in order to demonstrate the ethno-cultural rigidity and homogeneity of the audiences that attend those events. She contrasted that environment with the spontaneous character of the slam: "Just because we are just chillin' in our shorts or something doesn't mean the art isn't incredible and valuable." She stressed how slam poetry creates possibility and opportunity for any person to walk in and add his or her voice to the milieu.

Demographic diversity of the slam. Carlos Contreras observed this dynamic when discussing the poetry slam practice of integrating young poets into the competition. He noted that the Albuquerque slam scene's practice of having "our kids jump in the shark tank and slam with the adults" is not frequent practice in slam communities around the country. He endorsed this practice of inclusion by crediting it as the leading factor in the

development and well-documented achievement of the Albuquerque Youth Poetry Slam Team.

With respect to the representation of age demographics in the slam, there was an emphasis in all three focus groups on the tendency of the slam to appeal to a new generation of poets. Anna said she though the slam was unique because of the diversity of people who attend, as opposed to the homogeneity of a page poetry reading; however, she considered page poetry readings more diverse in age (i.e. inclusive of more than just a youth demographic). Vicki disagreed, saying that when she went to the National Poetry Slam there was much more diversity of age, even going so far as to say "it seemed ageless." She expressed the view that younger poets seemed wise beyond their years and elder poets seemed to exude an energy that belied their years. Kelly said she perceived the energy and intensity of the poetry slam to be young and even more unique in the sense that the poetry conveys a worldview that is dogmatically younger:

> I think until you're in your 30s things are black-and-white and you believe strongly and there's only one way to look at this and it's my way. And slams very hit-you-over-the-head with what I think. Past 30 I think the subtlety of life and the realities of life bends around those corners a little bit and you realize there's multiple ways to look at things, and it tends to make more subtle but less performing, "get a good score kind of poetry."

Poet Rich Boucher shared Kelly's perception of the youthful perspective in the slam; however, he also affirmed that the inclusiveness built into the practices of the slam is a unique value that defines the community.

> I'm seeing people who are 17 coming out with the "world is ending poems because you broke my heart." And I get to be the one who has to hear what is the verbal equivalent of someone drawing a bow across the strings of the violin for the first time.

As a participant observer, I noticed how the inclusion of the voices of youth in the slam scene builds a sense of shared experience. For example, Boucher mentioned how the writing of "amateur" poetry is an experience shared by many in the slam scene. Furthermore, Boucher said that the fact that there is no rule to exclude a person from participating in the poetry slam differentiates it from the gatekeepers in academia, corporate publishing, and literary journals:

> Every single person that wants a voice can have a voice. Even if you just want to go up there for three minutes and talk about your dog, or whatever you think is right or wrong in the world. That's valid, that's just as important as everyone else's point of view is.

Altamirano also validated the practice of integrating young poets and the youth's perspective into the Albuquerque poetry slam scene. But in contrast to Boucher, he positioned young poets as not only unique messengers but also as innovators that will change the way messages are produced. In his view:

> This generation isn't the generation that's going to be basing its written work off of written work. We're gonna be translating what's already being said, it's all going to be based on what's being spoken.

Inclusiveness of dissenting voices. But more than the inclusion of young and amateur voices, the prominent representation of critical and oppositional voices gives the slam its counter cultural identity. For instance, Cuffee addressed how the inclusiveness of the community leads to the validation of multivocality through alternative discourses:

> In a given round in a slam, you might get the perspective of vastly different demographics, ethnicities, perspectives, all kinds of stuff. So I think the people go to a slam and keep coming back to a slam because they expect, not only to be entertained, but to be informed on things that they may not often think about.

For Altamirano, the voices represented in the slam scene give it an identity that is "further off the edge" than literary or academic poetry, but "not quite rebellious enough to be bombing trains." He also compared slam with Hip Hop as another space that elevates the rebel voice. In that regard, Altamirano claims that the poetry slam enjoys a progressive and constructive image that constrasts with the negative misrepresentation of Hip Hop.

However, a focus group participant, Anna, brought attention to how the desire to represent multiple voices can also lead poets to appropriation. Anna was specific in her observation of some "put on" vocal affectations that she felt were indicative of a disingenuous performance trend, as when: ". . . they [poets] take on an accent and they might sound African-American or Hip-Hop-ish or something that is not normally them."

Becoming a Poet: Connecting Individuality and Community through the Slam

After coding the poets' responses and cross-referencing them with focus group responses, there was a theme in poets' accounts that was absent in the audience's observations of the slam poetry community. This theme was aligned with the focus of research—the co-construction of identity—but did not resonate in the comments made by audiences. It relates specifically to the lived experience of becoming a slam poet, to the process of identity formation. Two performative acts that emerged within this theme were: 1) the bridging of a gap between the poet's individuality and their sense of belonging to a community, and 2) co-construction of a poet's sense of identity in close interaction with the slam community's values and practices. Poets spoke about this process when they shared their perceptions of the slam before they began identifying as slam poets, and their gradual integration into the slam community. For some of them, a

negative perception of the slam poetry scene changed as they became more familiar with the slam community and began to be influenced by the particular practices and rituals of the slam, namely competition, authenticity, inclusiveness and multivocality, in the construction of their identity as artists and sense of belonging to this community.

Bridging individuality and sense of belonging. An example of this performative act was offered by Cuffee. Before participating in slams, Cuffee thought the slam would be about "a lot of old people" with a pretentious chip on their shoulders. As her initial perception of the slam was proven wrong and she joined the slam scene, Cuffee—who now identifies herself as a poet—learned that the work involved in maintaining a career and creative output as a poet ended up defining her: "If you put that much work into something, that's what you are. That's what you do." In Cuffee's case it was the amount of time she spent continuing to engage in the performative act of slamming that changed her view. Over time, she came to see the slam and the slam community as a significant part of her identity.

In the case of Boucher, he remembered that he "failed miserably" at the first slam he participated in. He said he went around for the next year and half bad-mouthing the slam. "I had nothing but ill will and negativity for the slam," he said. He went as far as calling it "the Gong Show-ization" of poetry. Today, Boucher says he slams because there is fun and there's an excitement to it that comes from the connection with others, as when "people feel as though there is a stake in it." For Lopez and Contreras, reaching a comfort level with the idea of identifying themselves as poets was a gradual process, as well. Contreras said: "I was 17 years old, and at a time in my life when all young men are 'looking for something to be . . . I now define myself as a poet, before anything else,

it is in every sense of my being." Lopez said that she didn't call herself a poet for a long time, "just somebody who wrote poetry." Then, one day, she finally got rid of that cumbersome title and said, "Yes, I'm a poet."

By becoming the embodiment of change, each of the poets are doing more than affecting change, they are becoming change as Noy suggests (2004, 118). Altamirano 's self-change is more aligned with the earlier theme of building community. Altamirano spoke about this process of identification as a poet as one driven by the interaction with other poets and participants in the slam community:

> I think that after becoming a member of the community you realize all the
> different tactics, all the different strengths of the other individuals, and
> everyone's different experiences, and everyone's different way of
> learning. Everyone's way of creating is different, so their poetry is
> translated as such.

This sort of shared personal experience and trajectory towards becoming a poet is significant because any shared history or experience defines a community's cultural identity. In the poets' narratives of becoming, rituals and practices that define the slam community were highlighted as being particularly influential on the formation of their identities as poets: the ritual of competition within the slam format, and the values of authenticity, inclusiveness, and multivocality that define the slam as a community of "misfits."

Altamirano, for example, said that he is "all about the competition level of the slam." As a former high school athlete, he found that the poetry slam filled the void of competition that was left after he was no longer able to identify as a high school athlete. "Well, if you think you are a better writer than me, then let's do it," he said about the attitude he brings to the craft of poetry writing and performance. Likewise, Contreras—

also a former athlete, said he finds the competition attractive. Cuffee, however,

approached competition in a different manner: "I may be the victor and I may not, but I

live to slam another day." Cuffee said that she performs the identity of a competitive

slammer even when she's reading her poetry in a non-competitive format (i.e. open mics,

art galleries, libraries, etc.). "I am still taking my art as a slammer and using my poetry

produced from there in venues that are not slam venues," she said.

    Co-construction of identity in interaction. Furthermore, many of the poets

interviewed celebrated the idea that they belong to a community or "family of misfits"

where the value of inclusiveness, authenticity, and multivocality predominates. Lopez

referred to the diverse demographic composition and inclusiveness of the slam

community as an element that influences her performance:

> I chose to perform at poetry slams because I definitely feel it's a rag tag
> assortment of who ever want to slam. Albeit their age, their sex, their
> sexual preference, their economic status, whether they have a degree or
> not, anyone can slam at a given slam in Albuquerque or at any slam across
> the nation for the most part.

    Cuffee credited the slam audience with the power to create the interactions that

allow poets to be authentic. She identified the audience as people who want to see

something different: "Maybe weird, awkward, kind of eccentric. [Audiences are] People

who definitely can't shut up, [both] poets and audience members." Cuffee employed this

metaphor of the "pizza pie" to describe the slam community of poets and audiences as the

sum of its parts, distinctive yet collective. Yet, she stressed their common experience

with marginalization: "You know, they've never really quite felt like they fit in anywhere

else. That's how I feel. Nobody ever called me a writer before I started going to slams or

a performer either."   Along these lines, Contreras called slam poetry a "fringe art" and

celebrated the idea that people who are often not validated or represented in mainstream society get to feel "listened to" at a poetry slam:

> The audience comes to slam to "hear" poetry that they understand, something from the mouths of common normal people that they can relate to. Poetry slam is fringe art. People from all walks of life are drawn to this free sport for people with nothing else to do. We are a family of misfits. We take in all the strays and make them our own.

Likewise, authenticity drives Boucher, who aspires to stand out amongst his misfit peers, and his work is shaped by a desire to produce work that is "very far apart from what other people are doing."

Although Altamirano's view of the identity formation of a slam poet was apart from other poets interviewed, his comments brought back into perspective the power of language and communication to define identity and community. He said: "I don't define myself by [slam poetry], which I think a lot of slam poets do." Altamirano identified himself as a writer. Though he is well known in Albuquerque as a musician/rapper, he maintained that we define ourselves by what we call ourselves, and what we call what we do. Yet, he referred to the force that brings diverse individuals that find a sense of belonging in the slam audience and makes it unique: "A lot of this wouldn't translate at a hip hop audience," he said. "People who come here are coming here for poetry."

Discussion

The idea that social interaction and performance co-constructs space and identity is a central argument of this research. Research findings suggest that in the slam community, this process is most notably represented through the complementary roles and interdependent relationships performed by poets and audiences in the slam. Those

relations construct and maintain the slam space as unique, and within that space, both poets and audiences gain and affirm a sense of identity. These relationships and assumed roles are indeed constitutive of the community. They are maintained through shared values that are performed through communicative practices. These practices are both formal, as in the structured and ritualistic character of the slam contest and the roles assigned to participants, and informal as members of the slam community create space to interact spontaneously.

The themes discussed in the sections above are illustrative of how a sense of individual identity is co-constructed through interaction with audiences. This is evident in, for instance, in the value placed on the individual authenticity of poets and the audiences' appreciation of the performative act of "standing out;" on the value of Building Community and the practice of co-creating space and identity; in the value placed on Representing Multivocality and the practices of speaking for onself and representing others voices; or in the process of Becoming a Poet in the context of the slam's unique structure and dynamics.

Interviews with poets are particularly telling of the significance of self-other interaction to processes of identity construction through performance and narratives. For example, the discussion around Becoming a Poet and the narrated life experiences of poets speak to the idea of identity posed by Heatherington, who stated that people create and change their identities through language and performance. In this sense, a performative dynamic of identification illustrated by this research is Noy's argument that autobiographical storytelling is "fundamental for identity claims and for a sense of self-change to be performed with credibility" (117). Noy noted that people simultaneously

narrate *referred events* and *present events* when telling stories. This process is illustrated in the discussion of the theme Becoming a Poet. It has become emblematic of the practice of slam poets to articulate their individual and group identities (via group "piece" poems) through narratives of self change, growth, and difference. This performative act of slam poets as they talked about becoming "poets" further supports the idea that we ultimately talk ourselves into being (Gubrium & Holstein 95). This practice also seems to affirm Park-Fuller's notion that humans are "storylivers" rather than storytellers, meaning that we self fulfill the identities that we articulate (63).

The narratives of poets also resonate with Rose's argument that autobiographical texts are a site of identity production that both resist and produce cultural identity (332). Rose's work centered on fringe communities, a label that can be applied to the slam poetry community in Albuquerque. I found that references to the autobiographical were important rhetorical ways in which participants spoke of acquiring a sense of both individuality and common values. Ferguson has also fused the notion of "searching for self" in interaction with the idea of social constructionism of identity, but how does one find themselves within a sea of common values? Beneath this ideological framework there is an inherent contradiction in the idea that Albuquerque slam poets are, as Contreras described them, a band of misfits. This group is invested in a group identity in which the only similarity is the high placed value on being different. This value is affirmed through the ritual of performing and the need to distinguish oneself as a performer and a writer within a field of other performers and writers. I submit that this is a tension rather than a contradiction.

In effect, the narrative, autobiographical performance of self is not solely predicated upon the poets' perception of their individual trajectory of becoming a poet. This identity is an identity sanctioned and reinforced by the community. Narratives of self-change through performance also indicated the importance of social structures in self-identification. I cited earlier the work of Mead—who suggested that our individual identities reflect patterns of group behaviors to which we align ourselves—and the work of Acorn—who asserted that identity is something given to an individual by society. The findings of this research illustrate this dynamic as well, when the poets acknowledged how the rules and roles of the slam, shared values, and political commitments of the slam community were determinants in the developing of their individual poetic voices. For example, Lopez and Contreras said they performed poetry for years before calling themselves "poets," though they were considered such by the poetry community long before self-identifying. Embedded in this commentary is the idea that being a poet is more than a habit of performance. This identity is something that all the poets in this study said they had to arrive at, even after performing poems for years. This arrival had to happen within a community that reinforced their notion identity, both ascription and avowel at play. Even though earlier in the research Cuffee makes the case for identity creation through practice ("You are what you do"), she also later gives credence to the perception of the community as a force in self-identification.

The tension between individuality and collective identification is further mediated through the emphasis on multivocality as a shared value and performative act. On the one hand, built into the practice of the slam is an incentive structure that places value on individuality quite literally, as in the form of giving individual scores in competitions. On

the other hand, the slam community places collective value on building community through multivocality. As a significant shared value that is seen as integral to the performance space itself, inclusion of diversity of voices is institutionalized via slam rules. Yet, in the Albuquerque slam community, poets are not aligned to a particular ideology or singular shared story, but by the desire and encouragement to share their singular, different stories. In this sense, the slam community values inclusivity but not assimilation. This allows for the encouragement of individuality while promoting identification with respect for diversity and difference as a value that binds the community. Multivocality is one of the distinguishing character traits that marks the poetry slam as an artistic movement, as opposed to a literary genre or (in the case of a location or region) subgenre. The presence of such diverse voices with not stylistic standard or approach, lends the slam to something more time based and location based. I would even suggest that a movement is more heuristic and epistemic, contextualized in culture and only loosely having some thematic connectivity around contemporary events and popular aesthetics. This understanding bookends the slam within a period of time that has an end date yet to be determined, and only to be determined in hindsight. Most importantly, a genre of poetry can exist in a vacuum as a template. A movement of poetry only survives *in vivo*, in practice and in community.

Again, Contreras's depiction of the slam as a "family of misfits" comes into play. These are misfits who value their misfit status, and also value interactions with people who do not fit in; they come to a poetry slam in order to standout. The slam community encourages people from underrepresented communities to share their poems, which often challenge dominant ideologies by offering an alternative explanation of the social world

through unique, marginalized voices. Strine's work offers some insight into this "diversity of difference" in the poetry slam community. She suggested that poets set out to re-combine culturally fragmented aspects of the human experience in order to resist patriarchal norms and hierarchy of values (Strine 67). This reorganization of values is evident in the Albuquerque poetry slam community's preference to value individuality while at the same time seeking identification with marginalized social groups.

Another dimension of identity performance that is illustrated by the research for this thesis is the notion of identity construction through opposition and resistance. Madison has stated the notion that poets resist by identifying themselves as subjects in opposition to a media and celebrity culture that undermines the significance of poor, middle, and working class narratives (227).

Through the process of collecting data from poets and community members, I observed a recurring practice of identity being articulated in difference or opposition to other social groups, practices, and values. For example, in the discussion of authenticity, the idea of being a misfit was frequently mentioned in poet interviews. Contreras used the term "misfit," while Cuffee used the words "weird" and "eccentric" to describe poets and audience members alike. Lopez identified the community as a "rag tag assortment," and Boucher characterized himself and his work as "very far apart from what other people are doing." As Kuppers argued in her study of the lyrical disability culture, the role of poetry's role in binding the community while celebrating difference and singularity of experience stands out in this community (92). In this sense, although Tajfel and Turner submit that social identity consists of the aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which they belong, I found that in the slam community an

individual' self-image was articulated mostly in opposition to social categories in which they do *not* belong (39).

In addition, I posit the argument that poetry slam participants and attendees are "intentional intellectuals" resisting certain forms of mainstream culture and actively filling and holding a space for social change. I use the term "intentional intellectual" to describe the slam community member whose self-image is defined by their valuation of poetry and live performance art, as well as their practice of attending poetry slams, in opposition to consuming mainstream culture. In this sense, the slam participants' self-identification as "misfits" applies to people who chose not to fit into popular media trends. Watching television, for instance, was discussed as a practice that can gradually distance and ultimately alienate people from others who have different values. Focus group participant Helena articulated this idea directly when she identified slam attendees as people who are "open to thinking for a night versus sitting in front of the boob tube and checking out." In poet interviews, valuation of resistance to dominant or mainstream values was also seen as integral to how they identify themselves and as a group. For example, poet James Altamirano depicts the Albuquerque slam poetry community in opposition to the "sound bite" atmosphere of contemporary society, courtesy of television media and journalism.

Beyond opposition to mainstream media, members of this slam community claim a sense of shared identity in their political commitments to change, as the discussion of the themes Affecting Change and Representing Multivocality best illustrate. For example, the creation of a space of inclusion of dissenting and oppositional voices and the

protection of free speech are performative acts that impart a sense of shared membership through resistance and opposition.

Lastly, in identifying the performative acts in the slam community, this research affirms the idea proposed by Corey that the performance of identity is something that one *does* (155). For instance, in the context studied the values of authenticity and genuineness are not only affirmed in discourse but something practiced though acts like "standing out," "telling untold truths" or "being unapologetic." Likewise the value attributed to free speech and protection of alternative discourses is practiced through the sustained commitment of poets and audiences to create and fill a space with poetry, performers, and listeners. This performative dimension of the relationship, on and off the microphone, is what firms the social contract between poets and audience members. This is inclusive of poets and audiences, who engage each other during the poetry slam and outside the poetry slam by committing to performing, attending and participating actively, and supporting the community's sponsored events. However, this notion is problematized by the notion of scale. None of the poets, audience members, judges or host can simply turn the different parts of their identity on and off like a light switch. The fragmentation of a person's identity is on display at the poetry slam as different actors slip in and out of different representations of self. It is normalized and made commonplace to watch a host or poet walk off stage and literally transform from their staged self to their regular self, without any sort of turbulence. Audience goers make a practice of observing the transitory distance between the interpersonal self and the staged self, and persist to comfortably couch that in their community values of authentic self. It is this shared understanding that really constructs the space for the rituals and practices to

occur, repeat and have meaning. It is the institutionalization of these ritualized practices that slam community members engage in that routinely build the space (physical and relational) for the poetry slam.

In this regard, one may argue that this research also illuminates some of the dynamics in the construction of social space. Prominent in the literature review was Lefebvre's theory of space, which posited that space is a complex social construction based on values and social production of meanings that affects spatial practices and perceptions. The slam space is only made consistent and through a sharing of values and performative acts across the diverse the physical space in which it performed. This constructed, non-physical space not only allows for consistency for participants, but also undergoes a metamorphosis from venue to venue. Ultimately, studying the slam community as a space for performance of identity gets at the heart of the problem posed by McIntyre (qtd. in Conquergood, 182): "For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity…The self has to find its moral neighborhood, the city, and the tribe."

Chapter 5

Conclusions

In this research, I set out to explore the poetry slam as a cultural space where poets and their audiences co-construct identity through performance. The performative acts that enact this identity are oftentimes ritualized communicative practices and always rooted in shared values. In concert with the web of relationships that connects individuals within the community (including the institutionalized relationship between poet and audience), the repetition of performative acts paints a vivid picture of Albuquerque poetry slam scene's identity, including the process by which it is constructed and maintained. To answer the research questions posed, I identified salient themes in the data and discussed how they convey the shared values and performative acts that co-constructed identity in the Albuquerque slam community. The analysis identified five major themes that emerged from participant observation, interviews with poets, and focus groups with audiences: Authenticity, Affecting Change, Building Community, Representing Multivocality, and Becoming a Poet.

The first research question asked: What are the shared values that construct identity in the slam poetry space? In the data, the first four themes (Authenticity, Affecting Change, Building Community, and Representing Multivocality) encapsulate the shared values of the community at large, since they appeared in the discourse of both poets and audience. To note, participants' answers suggests that both poets and audiences are acutely aware of their identification of these particular values as those that make the slam community distinct. Furthermore, these themes refer to interrelated values that only in their interrelatedness allow for the existence and distinct identity of the slam.

For example, removing the authenticity of the poets' work, would in fact invalidate the rules of the slam since the poet must have complete authorship of their poetry, and further, it would erode the value placed on genuineness and multivocality as two other central values. Even the fifth theme discussed—Becoming a Poet—which was exclusive to the responses of poets and did not resonate with audiences, demonstrated this point. This theme was present in the poets' narratives about the craft of writing and performing. However, their autobiographical narratives highlighted how interaction with the slam audiences and the sharing of key values was instrumental in the process of "becoming" a slam poet.

Some may argue that values do not necessarily relate to action or social transformation. In fact, many cynical poets do not believe that the poetry slam will change the world or the community. It could also be argued, on the other hand, that by simply convening and creating interactions, the poetry slam is changing the community by creating "community." Furthermore, by valuing multivocality the slam community is opening ritualized opportunities for inclusion of multiple, diverse voices to the public sphere. Within the scope of this firs research question, other theoretical frameworks kept resurfacing. The notion of fragmented identities within poets' and audience members' individual representation of themselves in the data, as well as the fluidity with which different actors in the slam community can change roles was more than fodder for poems, it was actually at play within the construction of the slam. Fragmented identity was not just something that poets talked about, it was some that poets practiced during poetry slams. It was equal parts construction and deconstruction, which speaks to the post-

modern sensibilities of the slam community under observation. This connection between values and practices was also addressed by the second research question.

The second research question asked: What are the performative acts that enact identity within the poetry slam space? The discussion in Chapter 4 describes 18 practices that emerged from the discussion of the five major themes and refer to how poets and audience members perform the values held central to the identity of the slam. These performative acts refer to practices of delivering, listening, and interpreting messages and illustrate ways in which listening, sharing, and "performing" is wholly unique to the poetry slam community. For instance, what in a traditional poetry reading might be described as interfering with the reading of a poem by a poet, in the poetry slam is valued as Authenticity and being unapologetic through active and attentive listening. In the poetry slam community the theatrical performance that enacts authenticity, desire to affect change, build a multivocal community, and promoted dissenting voices is practiced. For example, poets in this study spoke of the routine writing, rehearsal, and performance that becomes a way of life for practitioners. This way of life is valued by both the poets and the audience members, who described this as discipline and dedication as something they look for in their favorite slam poets. Poets spoke about how their performances were acts of becoming mentors and teachers. Slam attendees also have an expectation that the poets they see are available and competent to translate and transport what they do at the slam to a classroom. This idea that poets *are* what they preach blurs the line between the representation of "the real" (authentic representation) and the performance of "the real" (authentic performance). But as many a slammaster will attest, the slam is ripe with contradictions and that's what makes it so entertaining. Poets are

rewarded on the stage for both who they *are* on and off the stage. The space that the

community has created allows for both identities to exist simultaneously. In sum, all the

performative acts discussed in this thesis are seen as the enactment of values that define

self and community and as forms of active participation in the poetry slam community.

The third research question asked: How do audiences and poets co-construct an

identity for the slam community? Research findings suggest that in the slam community,

this process is most notably represented through the complementary roles and

interdependent relationships performed by poets and audiences in the slam. Those

relations construct and maintain the slam space as unique, and within that space, both

poets and audiences gain and affirm a sense of identity by doing. The relations and

assumed roles described in this thesis are indeed constitutive of the slam space and its

performed identity. These are maintained through the different performative acts

discussed earlier. These practices are both formal, as in the structured and ritualistic

character of the slam contest and the roles assigned to participants, and informal as

members of the slam community create space to interact spontaneously. For instance, the

themes discussed in the sections above are illustrative of how poets gain a sense of

individual identity through interaction with audiences, and audiences reaffirm their sense

of being "misfits" in a community of misfits through interaction with poets and other

members of the audience; these interactions are made meaningful through particular

performative acts discussed in Chapter 4.

As I stated in the Introduction, one of the limitations of this research project is

that it offers a limited view of the local Albuquerque poetry slam community at a

moment in time. Although I do not believe that different poets and different focus group

participants would have drastically altered my findings, the community has undoubtedly changed since I began this research. Some poets who used to slam regularly are no longer regulars. The audience has a high turnover rate as well, as folks relocate, graduate, have children and explore other interests. Another limitation of research was the emphasis on identifying common values and performative practices that bind the community, an approach that obscures the tensions and contradictions that may divide and also contribute to the dynamics of identity construction. In this sense, further research with a different focus and revised interview protocol to address internal differences may build on this base of knowledge to enrich our knowledge of the slam community as a site of cultural struggle.

However, the research findings of this thesis can be helpful for others studying emerging cultural spaces before there is enough literature or history to contextualize their existence. Emergent discursive communities of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e. Punk, Hip Hop, etc.) now have courses and degree programs in institutes of higher learning. They've outgrown their criminalization stage by the status quo, and now governments, civic institutions, and parents are forced to reckon with the notion that what once was a fad is a growing position of identification that is here to stay. Distilling a community like the Albuquerque slam scene down to values, relationships, and performative acts demystify counter culture to outsiders. This also makes it easier to see the essence of what is a thriving movement to preserve and produce democratic values. This sort of research makes it easier to learn from movements that have not yet finished becoming movements. In that respect, performance studies can be a useful lens for analyzing any cultural group that performs its identity out loud.

One additional insight of this study that I would pose for further research is the exploration of the narrative trajectories of poets or the process of "becoming a poet." In my participant observation, I would say that a poet's "origin story" of how they got started in the poetry slam is a requisite cultural marker, much like a person's recollection of their 21st birthday in contemporary American culture. These origin narratives are as close as the slam community gets to a rite of passage and offer rich and contextual material for performance studies in the field of communication.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol for Poets

1. In your own words, describe the process of becoming a poet.

2. When did you first begin identifying yourself as a poet? Can you talk about that moment in your life?

3. How would you describe your journey as a poet since then?

4. How long have you been performing poetry?

5. How does being a poet influence other roles you may play in society?

6. How those other roles influence your poetry?

7. Could you talk more specifically about your purpose as a poet in the particular context of the poetry slam?

8. Why do you choose to perform here at poetry slams instead of elsewhere? What, if anything, makes the slam a unique space?

9. What kind of people is drawn to the poetry slam (both poets and audience members)?

10. As a poet, how does the slam audience contribute to your performance?

11. What do you think the audience comes to get out of a slam?

12. Before you had an opportunity to attend a slam, what were your perceptions of it?

13. How did your perceptions change after becoming part of this scene?

14. If you were to describe the slam as a person with certain physical and personality traits, how would you describe it?

15. Do you think the slam scene is trying to convey a message to the larger world outside the slam community? If yes, what is it? If no, explain your view.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol for Focus Group

1. What kind of poetry do you like to see performed at the slam?

2. Describe the characteristics that make a slam poet appealing?

3. How would you explain the role of audience members in the slam (in relationship to the poet and to themselves)?

4. What, if anything, makes the slam a unique space?

5. By attending poetry slams, what sort of personal statement are you making?

6. Do you think this space for expression is important in contemporary society? Why?

7. Do you think the slam scene is trying to convey a message to the larger world outside the slam community? If yes, what is it? If no, explain your view.

8. If you were to describe the slam as a person with certain physical and personality traits, how would you describe it?