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### Tracing Orality: Examining the Roots of Patricia Smith's Slam Poetry

The declining readership of poetry has caused concern amongst scholars, leading them to ask questions: is poetry too difficult or too elitist? These concerns arise because of poetry's dependence on an audience in order to survive. Without an audience, the literary genre would not be read, listened to, or needed. Even Walt Whitman was concerned with the audience stating, "To have great poets, there must be great audiences too" (*The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 1). The creation of slam poetry answered the growing concerns of scholars by generating a new audience that appreciates lively performances of the poet's marginalized identity. No one has been more successful on the slam stage than four time National Poetry Slam champion Patricia Smith, as her performances harken back to poetry's roots in orality. Smith's slam poetry imitates the intimate relationship between the storyteller and the listener from oral cultures, drawing parallels to authorship and identity, performance and composition, and modern and oral audiences. By examining the similarities and differences between Patricia Smith's slam poetry and oral traditions, this new genre can be understood in a different context, adding value to slam poetry despite its operation outside of the academy.

### **Background**

Part of the allure and public approval of slam poetry was its creation and existence independent from the academy. Created by construction worker Marc Smith in 1984, slam poetry is a more democratic form of poetry in which poets do not necessarily need to have bachelorettes and MFA degrees to write (Woods 18). Rather, anyone can write a slam poem, which is the

allure that provided Smith with an opportunity to continue to write. Patricia Smith found the slam scene to be welcoming after she had been stripped from her American Society of Newspaper Editors award for her journalism because of her fabrication of people, events, and quotes (Heinz n.p.). If slam poetry had not been accepting, Smith may never have been given a chance to exhibit her poetic abilities. During competitions, the judges are also randomly chosen from the audience without concern in regard to their qualifications, and they judge the performances on a one to ten Olympic scale. As a result, how the audience engages with the performance becomes increasingly important. Despite its public popularity, slam poetry has not been respected by intellectuals for two reasons: slam poetry emerged outside of literary life, and it is not a part of print culture.

### **Medium**

Slam poetry's roots in orality creates criticism because of its independence from the printed page. As a result, slam poetry is often labelled as "low brow literature," hurting the genre's perception by the academy and making slam poetry a product of the low culture that embraces it. Since the shift from oral mediums to print mediums, individuals who encompass high culture have been differentiated as consumers of books, whereas those confined to the oral register are a part of low culture (Goody 162). Many ignore the aesthetic and value of slam poetry performances, mistaking it as purely entertainment which results from slam poetry's rebellious tones and similarities to Hip Hop. However, in oral cultures, poetry also had ancient links to music (Graham n.p.). By categorizing slam poetry as "low brow," the genre must endure similar repercussions that orality endures today since many people view the spoken word as barbarous in opposition to printed literature.

The primary medium of slam poetry is orality and the genre's acceptance by the public reflects the shifting mode of communication from print to the spoken word; society begins to depend more on sound. Sound exists when it is going out of existence; therefore, sound is not permanent but rather momentary (Ong 32). The moment a word is spoken is the moment it leaves; however, written text remains permanent and unchanged. Since oral cultures had no knowledge of writing, or even the feasibility of writing, words held great power. Today, print is not the primary means of communication anymore (Goia 1). As society moves into a culture that is favoring orality instead of print, the strength and power words hold is being remembered once again. Smith's poetry has contributed to the twentieth century's resurgence of the spoken word, allowing marginalized individuals to express their social discontent. These performances, often referred to as identity poetics, allow the speaker to share their experiences and perspectives and persuade the audience to care, finding their ideal medium to be the stage.

### **Authorship**

The concept and understanding of authorship has never been static, changing based on society and the form of the narrative. In oral societies, the concept of the author meant nothing because there was no original text or fixed norm, considering that tales were passed down orally and varied as a result of this oral transmission. Thus, epics were anonymous and privilege was given to the singer who performs the text, rather than the author (Lord 101). In slam poetry, the poet is both the author and the narrator, thus complicating the distinction between reality and fiction during the performance. A slam poem has a relatively short life span since it is contingent on the author's life, whereas, in oral cultures, the story was contingent on the storyteller and the listener's memory. Slam poems can only be performed by the creator because the slam performer's identity and experiences belongs solely to them. For example, Patricia Smith's slam

poems can only be performed by herself during competitions. So, after she dies, her poems will be no longer performed in front of a live audience. However, the use of media allows the genre and Smith's poems to not only continue to live, but gain popularity through a different form of representation: YouTube. Regardless, the concept of the author is crucial to understanding slam poetry; therefore, one must rely heavily on the literary theory of New Criticism which emphasizes a work of literature's function as an object independent from authorship.

In fiction, the writer creates the desired illusion that there is no author behind the text, requiring the writer to disappear behind the text he or she creates to produce a false belief that reassures the reader of the literary work's aesthetic value (Booth 26). Plato refers to writing as "inhuman," as the printed page works against the natural spoken utterance of oral literature, objectively distancing the reader from the oral story's empathetic and participatory mode (Ong 45-46). By comparing slam poetry to the print medium, the oral and print cultures that these genres inhabit demonstrate the similarities between slam poetry and orality in opposition to the printed page. Literary critics, spurred by Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," asserted that the author was dead in order to separate the author from the text, providing the reader with authority instead. As a result, New Critics have made the author seem an effect of the critic's interpretation rather than the creator and cause of the work, declining the authority of the author on the printed page in modern society. Essentially, New Criticism has discouraged the reader's natural inclination to associate the author with authority over the text the writer produced, disempowering the concept of the author.

The reader's role of analyzing literature without regard to the author is a requirement created in print mediums in contrast to oral mediums, since the assertion of the death of the author is only applicable to print mediums. Part of the difficulty in keeping the author and the

narrator separate for the reader is because of the similarities between the two. In slam poetry, the performer is both the author and the narrator responsible for creating and telling their story to the audience, allowing the listener to give into their desires to analyze not only the performance but the writer too. Literature separates the writer from the reader, never allowing the reader to read while the writer is writing (Lunden 11). As a result, slam poetry highlights the presence of the speaker and the listener from oral traditions.

### **Identity**

In slam poetry and oral storytelling, the poet and the audience must simultaneously be present in order for a performance to occur. Therefore, the identity and physical presence of the slam poet is crucial as exemplified as the “I” on stage, which communicates that the speaker is in a position of authority in regard to socio-political issues that surround the marginalized. Much like the slam poet, the lyric poet and oral storyteller both draw attention to their identities through using the concept of the “I” in addition to their expression of powerful private and emotional experiences, drawing the reader into their personal worlds. Slam poets capitalize on their presence and identity to make their oral performances more persuasive and meaningful for the audience; Patricia Smith is no different.

In Smith’s poem “An All Purpose Product,” performed in 2016 at the Get Lit Classic Slam, she demonstrates her awareness of her African American identity as she articulates the need to cleanse the black pigment and identity from a child. “Can I use this to scrub the uncontrollable black from the surface of my daughter? To make her less negro and somehow less embarrassing to me?” she asks the cleaning product, taking the persona of a concerned mother (00:01:08-00:01:13). The response of the product is a resounding “yes.” Later in the performance, Smith also takes the persona of the daughter saying, “Mama, can't you read it? Do

you want me to read it to you? I can't help being my color. I am black, I am not dirty" (00:03:30-00:03:38). The "I" Smith refers to is herself and as the poem continues she discusses ethnic cleansing, the removal of ethnic groups, and the consequences of doing so, emphasizing the theme of sterility. As a result, Smith is using her identity as part of the marginalized African American population, which has historically been oppressed and regarded as inferior to white people. Smith's personas bring racial problems into the audience's conscious, allowing them to understand the difficulty of living in a world in which the pigment of your skin is considered dirty and a disadvantage that one must scrub off. However, Smith's performance of "An All Purpose Product" demonstrates resemblance between her identity as the author and her identity as the performer of her narrative.

According to New Critics, a literary work is not a reflection of the writer's life and the same is true in regard to slam poetry, but the slam poem is reflective of the poet's experiences as a result of their identity. In an interview, Patricia Smith said, "my mother in particular believed that the whiter I could be, the better" (Mcilroy n.p.). Audiences typically view the slam poet's performances as reflective of their life and experiences which would be verified in this example of Smith's poem "An All Purpose Product." Based on the interview, the poem is representative of Smith's personal experiences, as she becomes the daughter in the poem, pleading with her mom to accept her skin color as not being dirty. As a result, the physical presence of the slam poet's marginalized identity becomes increasingly important. In slam poetry, part of the slam poet's job is to convince the audience of the authenticity of their performance, requiring viewers and listeners to keep the author intertwined with the narrator in their oral performance.

The slam poet's identity, as demonstrated by the poet's race, social class, sexuality, and/or mental illness, tends to be crucial to their performance, evoking more of a response from

the audience. In fact, sometimes the slam poet uses their race and identity to connect with the audience and gain more points for a better score. As a result, slam poetry exploits these identities, which the form celebrates too. Regardless, the most common expression in slam poetry is the poet's marginalized identity, thus highlighting the interesting dynamic between the author and speaker. As both authors and performers, slam poets, like Patricia Smith in her performance of "An All purpose Product," are conscious of their identities and how their experiences in the world differ from those privileged in comparison. In novels, the reader is supposed to keep the writer independent of the book, whereas in slam poetry the author and implied author are intertwined. This relationship invites the slammer to share their marginalized experiences whether these experiences are partially fictitious, exaggerated, or from real world experiences and events. Patricia Smith's identity and physical presence on stage exemplifies the connection that slam poets make between their audiences and keeps the audience engaged and empathetic, thus impacting reception of the poem.

Patricia Smith also explores other identities by using personas in her poetry, releasing slam poetry from the confinements of the poet's identity. At poetry slams, the recurrence of marginalized identities in performances can become mundane and repetitious, but Smith takes on different personalities from her own in some of her most popular slam poems. The job of the storyteller was also to engage the audiences by performing narratives, allowing the audience to interact with the story in a new way even though the audiences were familiar with them. Her talent for becoming a different entity on stage is demonstrated by her performances of "Skinhead," "Katrina," and "Medusa" embodying the hatred of a white supremacist, personifying Hurricane Katrina's power and restlessness, and capturing Medusa's destructive nature. Smith's signature style breathes more life into slam poetry, pushing past typical

conventions of what poet David Graham calls “identity poetics.” In an interview, Patricia Smith said “poetry can sometimes come from recreating voices” (Chertock n.p.). Before Smith, slam poets’ performances and poems were confined to their identities, but Patricia Smith has shown how to create personas which transcend her own identity, crossing racial, historical, and class boundaries to show the audience a diverse set of perceptions and experiences.

In her poem “Skinhead,” Smith becomes a member of the working class who explains his worldview and experiences, thus exemplifying her use of persona on stage. Smith introduces the audience to skinhead immediately saying, “They call me skinhead, and I got my own beauty. It is a knife-scrawled across my back in sore, jagged letters, it’s in the way my eyes snap away from the obvious” (00:00:08-00:00:22). Smith successfully portrays his aggressive nature through the rhythm and power of her words: “I’m just a white boy who loves his race fighting for a pure country” (00:02:11-00:02:15). The persona masks Smith’s own identity as she takes on and assumes the skinhead’s role, acting as his mouthpiece. Through this technique, Smith exploits the man’s white supremacist beliefs and how these feelings drive his actions, capturing the man’s enthusiastic racial discrimination. At the end of the poem, the skinhead persona says “I’m your baby, America, your boy, drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin’ beautiful. And I was born and raised right here,” illustrating his belief that beauty is defined by one’s skin, placing white men at an advantage (00:03:04-00:03:26). However, Smith also creates this persona through performance: the intonation of her voice, hand movements, pacing, her speaking rhythm as she speeds up and paces the poem, and her presence on stage. Smith is able to successfully present the audience the view of a white supremacist and how he experiences the world.

Slam poetry harkens back to oral storytelling in regard to the telling of experiences as discussed by Walter Benjamin. In his essay, “The Storyteller,” Benjamin states, “the storyteller



tells from experience-his own or reported by others-and turns it into the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (87). In oral traditions, stories were transmitted by the storyteller who relied on the memory of those listening to retell the story. Benjamin further explains oral transmission and the form’s reliance on memory, as the listener’s tendency to integrate their experiences into the story becomes a mnemonic device, increasing the likelihood of the story being repeated later (91). As a result, oral stories were never static, constantly changing based on the storyteller, and perpetually unfinished, unlike novels. The slam poet uses their performances to share the experiences they have encountered as a result of their marginalized identity. Since the slam poem can only be performed by the slam poet, Smith’s performances share her personal experiences, whereas in oral traditions, stories encapsulated collective experiences.

The oral storyteller also kept stories alive by transmitting them by word of mouth; therefore, each storyteller would retell the narrative in a new way because their personality and experiences are added. Patricia Smith holds a similar power as her personality shines through her poems, especially since, her voice is the sole speaker of the poem, because only slam poets can perform their own works. Her poem, “Terrell’s Take on Things,” shows Smith’s personality on stage as she includes humorous lines in which the gossiping and opinionated barber, Terrell, talks about every person who faces the misfortune of walking by his window. Smith talks about Thomas’ wife saying, “Man, she spend all day in [the butcher shop], going behind the counter like she all of a sudden interested in the butcher’s business. What she intrested in is the butcher’s *business* and you better start asking yourself why” (00:19:55-00:20:07). Smith comes from the streets of Chicago, making her voice, especially Terrell’s voice, distinctive as her poems encapsulate her bold energy, humor and attitude each time she performs. Much like the oral

storyteller, Smith allows the audience to engage with her slam poetry in a new way as her personality becomes incorporated into her performances.

### **Performance**

The slam poet's performance of their identity must be perceived as original and authentic to the audience in order to receive a good score; thus, marginalized identities are often rewarded, especially African American racial identities. Remember, slam poetry utilizes a competitive format in which selected judges evaluate the quality of poems, on a zero to ten scale, not only based on the text but also the performance. Professor of Humanities, Maria Damon, wrote, "the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of 'realness' - authenticity...that affects a 'felt change of consciousness' on the part of the listener" (*The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 53). As a result, there tends to be a strong correlation between one's performance of their identity to create authenticity and the slam's success. "Skinhead" highlights how identity is performed on stage, allowing comparisons to be made to Judith Butler's theory that gender is a construction or performance created through stylized repetition (Butler 519). Similarly, the poet's self is performed on stage during poetry slams and is judged based on its success and failure, or this can be thought of as authenticity and inauthenticity (*The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 57). Although, in "Skinhead" Patricia Smith does not perform her identity, the contrast between her identity and the persona she creates is striking, allowing her to communicate a powerful message to the audience.

Patricia Smith utilizes her identity differently than other slam poets, as exemplified in her performance of "Skinhead," as her performance identity works in opposition with her personal identity. Smith's poem is more powerful in performance than when read on a page, not only because of paralanguage-her tone, pitch, and intonation, facial expressions, and body gestures

and movements-but also as a result of her identity. As a black woman, Smith's job of taking on the persona of a white-male extremist is even more difficult, considering that the skinhead's beliefs oppose her own. However, the rewards of a successful performance are large as Smith presents the views of the man in a convincing manner, making her words powerful. In a way, Smith creates sincerity, getting closer to the truth that motivates white supremacists because of the subjectiveness of the poem. In response to authenticity, American poet Ron Silliman says, "many audience members are evaluating not only the writing and performance of a poem, but also the scripting and performance of identity" (*The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 53). As a result, there tends to be a strong correlation between one's performance of their identity to create authenticity and the slam's success.

As a performer, Patricia Smith, like oral storytellers, directly addresses the audience, inviting the viewer to think about and discuss racial discrimination and its function and presence in society to establish communication with the audience. The fourth wall is an illusion and performance convention used in theater in which the audience is separated from the actors by an invisible wall that the audience can see through but actors cannot. This barrier can be broken as exemplified through various forms, such as theater, literature, and slam poetry. Charlotte Bronte's book, *Jane Eyre*, is illustrative of the novel's violation of the fourth wall which Jane Eyre frequently addresses the reader directly saying "dear reader" (478). When Jane is searching for someone she addresses the reader hoping for them to understand her life, creating a strong bond between the reader and the character. In both the book *Jane Eyre* and Smith's performances, addressing the reader or the audience creates an urgent tone and builds upon the relationship between the speaker and the audience. As a result, the slam poet's performance becomes more meaningful and persuasive, which is increasingly important considering the

competitive nature of slam poetry. This blending of worlds makes sense since slam poetry is not purely fantasy, rather the subject matter of slam poetry deals with racial, economic, and gender injustices as they are experienced in everyday life by the speaker.

The fourth wall is meant to separate the reality associated with the viewer and the fantasy created by the actor; however, Patricia Smith's slam poetry blends reality with fantasy through breaking this convention. Through the persona of a white supremacist, Patricia Smith exemplifies how the slam poet breaks the fourth dimension, making her poem "Skinhead" more powerful. Smith eliminates the distance between herself and the audience: "I like to say, listen to this, I like to say, 'Hey, nigger, Abe Lincoln's been dead a long time'" (00:01:40-00:01:44). When Smith says "listen to this" it is clear she is speaking to the listener to grab their attention, breaking the fourth wall as a way to connect with the audience. As a result, slam poetry's continual performance of undermining the fourth wall acts as a means of persuasion to capture the viewer's attention and exploit pathos by awakening the viewer's emotions. Slam poetry's direct confrontation with the audience allows the poet to effectively communicate with the audience in a way that parallels oral storytelling and human beings' natural instincts..

In the true form of slam poetry, the poet's live performance, the audience must pay attention to his or her words since the spoken word cannot be reread. In this form, slam poetry is contingent on the audience's listening skills and memory much like oral traditions. Unfortunately, many things are lost in this transmission, similarly to when oral cultures moved to print in which exact reproduction of long recitations was difficult if not impossible. As a result, printed texts of slam poetry are not the ideal form to preserve Patricia Smith's poetry just as print texts did not adequately preserve oral culture. This movement from orality to print was not readily accepted, but written texts became a way to preserve oral culture, not eliminate it (Goody

36). Despite the desire to replicate oral texts, the process of writing down oral literature transforms the myth, not just transferring it to a different register, but changing the myth because of the new medium. Today, slam poetry has received larger audiences and popularity because of videos, such as Youtube that record the performance; thereby preserving the content, structure, and language of the slam poem. However, the direct interaction between the audience and speaker are lost. Based on these trends, it seems as though the twenty first century is demonstrating phonocentric views, privileging spoken language and its immediacy, instead of printed words.

In addition, aspects that the slam poet uses to create a performance are lost when slam poems are transferred to the medium of print, making the poem less powerful. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* Robert Walton wants to share Victor Frankenstein's story with his sister through letters and says, "I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling" (15). Even Walton knows the limiting form of writing in comparison to the voice, physical presence, and performance of the storyteller. Similarly, when a slam poem is transmitted through print text, the performance aspects are lost, diminishing the power of the poem as a result of the disappearance of the speaker and their paralanguage. Even reading the slam poet's reading from the printed page creates consequences, as demonstrated when Patricia Smith read her slam poetry from a book at Ripon College in 2014, after having been absent from the slam world for a number of years. Although her intonation remained the same from past performances, her eye contact, hand movements, and interaction with the audience lessened, showing the consequences of reading from the printed page to an audience and the losses of transmission. As a result, the speaker is less important in print text, leading the reader to read the

poem using the ingrained lense of New Criticism in which the author's influence on the poem is forgotten.

The performance aspect of slam poetry that is shared with orality, is highlighted when examining composition which focuses on the performer, the art form, audience, and setting. Performance uses a set of communicative means which folklorist, Richard Bauman, identifies as inclusive of figurative language, parallelism, and features of narrative performance which were prevalent in oral traditions. Figurative language is crucial to communicate with the audience as this adds an expressive intensity that is otherwise difficult to achieve. In her poem, "Medusa," Smith takes on the identity of the Greek monster as she explains her behavior with Zeus to Athena who would punish her. To describe her interaction with Zeus, Medusa says, "I made him bend his back for me, listened to his screams break like waves" (00:00:15-00:00:21). As a result, Smith's comparison demonstrates the consensual sex between the two figures in mythology and adds to Medusa's characterization, as Smith performs the poem in a bragging tone. Smith also elongates the word "waves," pausing before she begins the next line for emphasis. Therefore, she is also utilizing features of narrative performance, specifically stress and tone of voice. Like other slam poets, Patricia Smith uses figurative language to help the audience visualize the poem, eliciting emotion, allowing the story to come alive, and to impact the audience. Smith's use of figurative language, demonstrated through her "waves" simile, allows her to pack more meaning into the poem. As a result, Smith's performances become more memorable for the audience which is important considering the three minute constraint placed on slam poetry performances.

By using verbal repetition, referred to as parallelism by Bauman, Smith creates verbal structure which corresponds to the structure, sound, meter, and meaning of her poems. For example, Patricia Smith structures her poem titled, "An All Purpose Product," about ethnic

cleansing, in a question and answer format, in which a woman asks Lysol a series of questions and the product's label responds. Therefore, when Smith breaks from this format this divergence is highlighted and given emphasis, as demonstrated when a daughter says to her mother, "Mama, can't you read it? You want me to read it to you? I can't help being my color! I am black, I am not dirty" (00:03:29-00:03:38). Parallelism is also used as the daughter continues to repeat that her skin color does not make her dirty, highlighting that her skin color is out of her control and cannot be scrubbed off using Lysol as if her skin is a stain that needs to be removed. In oral poetry, parallelism serves as a mnemonic device to aid the memory of the speaker, which tends to be the part of the narrative that is preserved as the poem is orally transmitted. The verbal repetition in Smith's poem, "An All Purpose Product," is used as a helpful memory device but it also exemplifies the persuasive quality that repetition employs.

The qualifications for orality is often made based on stories being spoken aloud instead of read from a page; however, this belief is a misconception. Albert B. Lord writes in *The Singer of Tales* that the singer's moment of composition is in performance when the singer and the listener are present simultaneously. Slam poetry similarly relies on the communication between the slam performer and the audience as both the oral singer and the slam poets are performers and composers which, according to Lord, are all aspects of the same act (13). The slam poet prepares before the actual performance by writing and practicing the poem, but the moment of true composition does not occur until there is an audience to interact with and to attempt to persuade. Much like the singer in the oral tradition, the slam poet also relies on the audience's presence. Whereas, when reading a book, the writer is not present while the reader reads and when the writer writes the reader must be absent.

Performances of slam poetry are not static; each time a slam poet performs their poem the performance changes. Therefore, true composition of slam poetry occurs when the poet is performing in front of the audience, drawing parallels to oral poems that were composed orally in front of listeners. Performances of slam poetry are different, creating variations of poems just as the singer in oral traditions created variations of narratives because of oral transmission, composition, and creation. Therefore, there is no “original performance” as there is no stable creation in art (Lord 101). Similarly, there is no original version of a slam poem because the slam poet’s performance of their marginalized identity is not a fixed text, inviting more plurality of versions than a written poem. The difference between slam poetry and oral traditions is that since only the slam poet can perform their written piece, the author is easily traced and given attention and praise for their performance in contrast to the singer in which authorship was a nonexistent term.

### **Audience**

Since slam poetry is an oral performance instead of written in print texts, it is important to examine the audience that listens and views this new poetic form. Audiences tend to be progressive and hold the same viewpoints, and members of the audience may have marginalized identities too, making the poet’s job of persuading the audience with an impactful poem less difficult. As a result, the audience that attends poetry slams imitate oral tradition’s relationship between the singer and the listener as the audience is familiar with the narrative or themes. Audiences also expect to be engaged and entertained; therefore, this is reflected in the judges’ scores. Since poetry is timed at slam competitions, constrained to three minutes, poets must use their identities to capitalize on the audience's emotions and responses effectively as poems must be concise.



Audiences of slam poetry judge the poems just as readers judge print works; therefore, the demography of the audience must be taken into consideration. According to Somers-Willett, the national audience of slam poetry has been largely middle-class, white individuals under the age of forty (“Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity” 40). Her rationale is based on a number of reasons: slam venue’s locations in white middle-class neighborhoods, the cover charge to help pay the winners, the aesthetics of hip hop and rebellious tones, and the transmission outside of slam competitions that relies on the use of media. However, it is difficult to know the specific characteristics of audiences who view poetry through social media and other technology sources. Considering that the majority of slam poets are African Americans, these individuals must be interacting and enjoying slam poetry through forms of technology, otherwise, there would be no poets to perform their marginalized identities.

Since slam poets often have marginalized identities, “Otherness” is created not only by the performance’s use of the poet’s marginalized experiences but also because of the relationship between the minority slam poet and the privileged white class in attendance to watch and listen to these competitions. The majority of slam poets tend to be African-American; therefore, by white audiences rewarding their performances, there is an assuage of “white liberal guilt” as described by Somers-Willett (“Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity” 59). The high scores and popularity of Smith’s poem “Skinhead” resulted out of the audience’s attempts to demonstrate their anti-racist viewpoints. Smith confronted the white audience with a persona of the same race as them but with extremist viewpoints that differ from the audience’s viewpoints, attempting to create understanding of the man’s experiences and how the audience and persona took different paths in life. Smith’s use of personas also draws parallels between the oral and slam audiences. The slam audience is familiar with this repetitious performance of the

poet's marginalized identity and the oral audience is familiar with the myths but both storytellers allow their listeners and viewers to explore the narrative in a new way.

These white audiences are familiar with the marginalized identity, but do not live the identity; therefore, slam poetry allows them to experience the world through the slam poet's relaying of experiences. In contrast, the audiences in oral traditions were familiar with the stories they were told. For example, if a storyteller told Homer's *The Iliad*, the audience would come to expect Achilles' death and the fall of Troy but would be entertained and engaged by the storyteller's portrayal of the myth, allowing the audience to interact with it in a new way. As a result, the audience finds enjoyment in how the story is told and the new way the storyteller reimagines it. Even though the slam audience is not familiar with the slam poet's narrative they are familiar with the marginalized identity they expect to be performed on stage; therefore, the presentation of the narrative is similarly important which creates high scores. Somer-Willett refers to the marginalized slam poet's performance and the audience's as exemplifying the binary between the different experiences between the two, opening up a dialogue about identity, leading to "the politics of the 'other'" (63). As a result of the differences between the identity of the slam poet and the identities of the audience, the slam becomes a performance not only meant to persuade but to educate the audience on controversial matters.

Unlike oral storytelling, Smith's slam poetry focuses on taboo matters and personal experiences, demonstrating the genre's roots in confessional poetry. Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and W.D. Snodgrass are associated with this 1950s and early 1960s writing style, as their poems discussed subject matter that was private and not openly discussed in American poetry. The admission of the poet's personal experience was the reason why the genre was devalued and diminished because critics claimed the poet's life overshadowed the work

(Schetrumpf 117). The lyric address of the confessional poet mimics the address of the slam poet, allowing the reader to confront both personal and global sources of human suffering (118). Confessional and Smith's slam poetry both create communities where the marginalized can find a sense of belonging, as their poems work against the academy's traditional poetry. However, Smith's poetry allows her to engage in intimate discourse with the audience, providing them with counsel.

### **Counsel**

The subject matter in a slam poet's performance is equally important to how the slam poet performs their identity. Both components are crucial to the popularity of slam poetry which has led to the creation of standards of writing, tone, subject matter, and style to emerge ("Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity" 51). Some poets use their subjective performances as what Somers-Willett calls a "political soapbox" while others create narratives using their protective and passionate voices and experiences (52). According to Somers-Willett, the plurality and diversity of poets participating in slams has led to not only personal but political subject matter, as the poet expresses their marginalized identity (7). Nevertheless, slam poets, like Patricia Smith, bring these problems into the public discourse, proving the poet's power and restoring the power of the spoken word that has not been heard since oral cultures. The slam performance of the marginalized identity undermines the academy's poetry which reflects cultural privilege and institutional power, making poetry accessible to everyone.

Patricia Smith's slam poetry often creates friction against past practices and her marginalized identities history of oppression. For example, in Patricia Smith's poem "An All Purpose Product," Smith is showing resistance against society's attempts to make African Americans ethnically homogenous to white people, suggesting that the color of the girl's skin

that is analogous to dirt poses a problem that one must disinfect and remove. Instead of accepting this, Smith portrays these racial beliefs to the audience, to demonstrate the suffering of those affected by these beliefs in order to spur viewers into action against past and present injustices. The persona of the young daughter shouts at her mother to accept her body's natural features, resulting from her racial identity: "What you have birthed upon me will not come off. My hair is black crinkled steel, too short to stay updated. My ass is wide and will get wider. You can pinch my nose but it will remain a landscape. You cannot reverse me" (00:03:45-00:04:00).

This poem shows the powerful quality of slam poetry as the new form gives a voice to the marginalized to provide commentary on controversial issues that benefit those in positions of privilege. As a result, the daughter is able to voice her beauty that cannot be changed and Smith is able to educate the audience through the poem to discourage body shaming, giving her role as the storyteller power.

Poetry holds power for both the poet and the audience, much like the story held power for both the storyteller and the listener. If poetry held no power, then Plato would not have argued that poets should be banned from the Republic. The compact words of the poet are filled with meaning, allowing the reader or listener to examine the world in a different way. On the radio show "To the Best of Our Knowledge" Patricia Smith said, "I can pick points in my poetry career when I realized that I had a real responsibility and that I was wielding real power and I had to be careful with that" (00:04:00-00:04:10). By mentioning her accountability as a poet, Smith also highlights the power she has over people with her words. In her poem "Building Nicole's Mama," Smith conjures a poet who is regarded as a savior to these children who want to learn poetry in order to learn how to heal from all of the loss they have experienced.

On stage, Smith explores the concept of a poet as a savior:

Now this child with rusty knees  
and mismatched shoes sees poetry as her scream  
and asks me for the words to build her mother again.  
Replacing the voice.  
Stitching on the lost flesh.  
So poets,  
as we pick up our pens,  
as we flirt and sin and rejoice behind microphones--  
remember Nicole (00:03:27-00:03:53).

When Patricia Smith visited the sixth grade class of Lillie C. Evans School, Liberty City, Miami the children looked up to her as a savior, hoping that she would play the role of God and heal their pain as young children who have seen death. There was one particular girl, Nicole, who hoped poetry held the ability to save her life. As a result, the power of poetry is exemplified in the poem, leading Smith to remind poets of their power. Later in the poem, the children ask a question: "Can poetry hurt us?" (00:02:44-00:02:46). These children's vulnerability is shown through this question and the consequences of not being responsible with poetry as a slam poet. The sounds words make, the way they are read, and the meaning behind them are all important not only for slam poets but for all poets. Smith directly challenges poets and reminds them of the power of their words. Interestingly, "Building Nicole's Mama" is always the first poem Smith performs at readings outside of the competitive format of slam, as if to remind the audience of the power of the spoken word and her role in contributing to this before diving into her other poems.

The political nature of poetry, and its ability to yield more power and confront illegitimate authority, has been used and recognized by poets before slam poetry took the stage. Romantic poet, Percy Shelley articulated the power of poets in his essay “A Defense of Poetry” written in 1821 stating “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Rich n.p.). By recognizing the poet’s role as yielding power similar to a lawmaker, Shelley exhibits his awareness of his abilities and power to influence the behavior of his readers as a poet. For Walt Whitman, poetry was intertwined with his vision of American democracy as exemplified by his poem “Song of Myself” in which he attempted to capture the wide array of American identities and experiences. Poetry’s relationship with politics can be further explored since the poet’s ability to create social action depends on how the audience engages with the text.

Slam poetry, much like stories told by an oral storyteller, provide counsel, unlike novels, as each poem is meant to carry a memorable message that will resonate with the audience. Walter Benjamin expresses concern for the death of storytelling as a result of the rise of the novel, saying, “The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out” (87). Benjamin equates the counsel of storytelling with truth but he was not aware of how slam poetry would rejuvenate oral storytelling, reviving the story’s influence and instruction for the listener, creating a new form of epideictic oratory. Storytelling consists of the listener repeating it elsewhere, whereas, the slam poetry audience are meant to be spurred into political action, creating a different kind of counsel. American author and poet, Scott Woods describes the goals of slam poetry stating, “it hopes not only to open [people’s] senses to the beauty of language and the world around them but also to have people consider how they might affect the world around them through what poetry has to show them” (19). By speaking directly

to the audience, the slam poet uses their emotion-packed words and lively performances to create social change, providing the audience with the power to transform the world with their actions.

### **Persuasion**

Slam poets not only use poetry to share their experiences but to persuade audiences, distinguishing Patricia Smith from the oral storyteller's intentions of entertainment. The competitiveness of slam poetry created by the crowning of a poetry champion at each slam causes the speakers to look at their audiences for approval and purposefulness. As a result, the slammer may take into consideration their target audience and adapt their performance accordingly. In Greek society, they also had competitions in which one poet was crowned the winner. Poetry has historically been seen as threatening as demonstrated by Plato's concerns in regard to poets. As a philosopher who privileged reason and truth, Plato believed that poets were threatening to corrupt the minds of the youth through their deception. Plato even advocated for the removal of Homer's works, which were told orally, despite their popularity in an attempt to censor the public from poetry (*The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* 19). The fear that led to Plato's desire to censor poetry highlights the power and persuasiveness of the poet.

Slam poetry provides the poet with an opportunity to communicate with the audience; this communication is translated to persuasion, becoming a requirement for a good slam poem. Since the oral poet cannot control the audience, concentration is placed on the performer's ability to show dramatic and narrative skill in order to keep the audience attentive (Lord 16). The skill of the performer, demonstrated by Patricia Smith, is similar to the storyteller from oral traditions, as both performers keep the audience engaged in their stories. Richard Baumann, writer of *Verbal Art as Performance* states, "the audience derives enjoyment from the performance in proportion to the skill of the narrator (13)." To Baumann, an audience's perception of a

pleasurable performance is constitutive of the speaker's mastery and talent not only as an author but as a performance. Just as speakers are judged based on the affect they have on the audience, so are slam poets, making their primary goal to be convincing and evoke an emotional response from their performance. Typically, the most effective way to achieve this goal is through drawing on personal experience which slam poets consistently rely on when creating their poems. This dependence is shown through the exploitation of slam poet's identity in order to receive higher scores.

In an interview, Patricia Smith discusses the job of the poet:

“Truth telling is essential to slam [...] You're everyone's witness until they see the need to

be witnesses themselves. And once you've seen the power, the way spoken words can whip through a room and leave it changed, you don't only hear “out loud” when you write. You learn to live your whole life outloud” (Mcilroy n.p.).

To Smith, slam poets are meant to be observers, examining the world around them and speaking in the most powerful way possible: a slam poem. Therefore, according to Smith, the “truth” consists of the realities and experiences slam poets face which often demonstrate their marginalized identity in society. However, the slam poet's job of convincing the audience is made easier considering that the audiences tend to align with the speaker's viewpoints. Slam poets are often responsible for strengthening the audience's already existing viewpoint rather than changing their opinion.

Slam poetry uses devices to try to affect the thoughts, actions, and emotions of the audience. In order to be an effective slam poet, one must use two of the rhetorical appeals that Aristotle identifies in his text *On Rhetoric*: pathos and ethos. Patricia Smith's job as a slam poet



is to demonstrate her ethos, convince the audience of their credibility or that she is worth listening to. Typically, speakers gain ethical appeal by constructing an unbiased portrayal of themselves but slam poets' marginalized identities provide them with the authority to discuss controversial subjects such as racism and homophobia (Kennedy 9). Patricia Smith, like other slam poets, relies on her biased viewpoint as demonstrated by her marginalized identity, to persuade the audience through *pathos*, an emotional appeal.

Pathos is the most important factor in slam poetry as it is the speaker's ability to appeal to the audience in a way that is dependent on the audience's emotional or personal connection to the subject matter. If the performance is effective, the audience should feel empathy; therefore, Smith's performance of "Skinhead" is successful as it creates understanding of where the skinhead is coming from instead of directly criticizing him for his views. On stage, Patricia Smith is in control of the audience's feelings as she tells the audience her experiences each time she creates a persona, allowing the audience to interact with the subordinate social category defined as "the Other." In "Skinhead," Smith's persona eliminates her position as "the Other" or the radical white supremacist in order to create understanding by engaging her audience.

Slam poets are expected to perform with energy and enthusiasm which is referred to as vivacity, making slam poetry ineffective when read from a page (Campbell 41). The slam poet's performance is also judged based on the poet's manner of speaking during the performance. In their introduction of their anthology, *Bum Rush the Page: a def poetry jam*, Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera, state, "[slam poets] are not real writers because they're not busy publishing their poems until they disappear, creating a verse to decorate the parlors of the rich and bloodless" (xix). Medina and Rivera criticize the poetry studied by academy which lives on the written page, providing print with an enduring quality, and is considered superior to slam poetry

and works orally transmitted. However, these critics portray poetry's printed medium as lifeless because written communication eliminates face-to-face interaction between the poet and the reader. The performance of the poem allows the speaker to exploit vivacity in order to persuade their audience, speaking in a lively and animated manner that attracts the audience's attention. As a result, the poet's energy and enthusiasm allows them to align the audience's emotions with their intent.

For example, in the slam poem "Skinhead," Patricia Smith gets lost in the persona she created, fueling her performance with her energy. When describing the skinhead identity she takes on, Smith illustrates the razors he slides across his hair by running her hand over her own hair. The tone of her voice is aggressive and threatening, coming from a power of white privilege. Smith is lost in the persona, becoming the skinhead. On stage she says, "I look in the mirror and hold up my mangled hand, only the baby finger left, sticking straight up, I know it's the wrong goddamned finger, but fuck you all anyway" (00:02:47-00:02:56). As she says this Smith lifts her pinky finger up showing her mangled hand to the audience, causing a few to chuckle. There are multiple times when Smith briefly shuts her eyes, becoming lost in the persona, and increasing the intensity of the poem. Each line that affirms the skinhead's beliefs she says with conviction and slows down the pace of the poem for emphasis, letting the audience know as she states, "I was born to make things right" (00:01:16-00:01:19). These various elements of her performance demonstrate how Patricia Smith uses vivacity, making the audience feel her energy which makes the poem more powerful and more convincing as opposed to if this vivacity was absent. Smith gets lost in her persona of the skinhead in order to persuade the audience and show her authority, despite the obstacle of doing so, considering that the skinhead

has different beliefs than herself. Smith's use of paralanguage, specifically in "Skinhead," demonstrates her control over the narrative and performance, much like an oral storyteller.

Singers from the oral tradition demonstrated their control over the narrative by shortening or lengthening the song based on the audience's attentiveness and interest, resulting in variations of the poem (Lord 17). Similarly, Smith's slam poems change based on the audience too, creating a plurality of performances. In a personal interview, Smith articulates how vivacity, and the audience impacts her performance: "When I was slamming, the success of the poem depending upon the energy I received from the audience. In that way, that basically helped me create the poem. I would actually add or subtract words or lines, depending on the vibe I received from the crowd." Smith's performances of her poem "Terrell's Take on Things," are reflective of this shortening and lengthening while on stage. In her 2009 performance at Ripon College, Smith performed the whole poem, but in 2015 while performing at the Loft Equilibrium Supershow Smith skipped the beginning and middle parts of the poem as exemplified by the varying lengths. As a result, Smith's audience's attention was required for four minutes instead of seven minutes in the latter performance. Smith's varying performances also highlights the plurality of slam poetry that parallels oral storytelling in opposition to the novel's fixed text because of the poet and audience's simultaneous presence which is absent in books. Therefore, Smith is in control of her performance, actively deciding parts of her poems to include and exclude based on the audience, thus her role as the storyteller reflects poetry's roots in orality.

The effectiveness of vivacity resides in its memorable quality, acting as a mnemonic device not for the slam poet but for the audience. In oral culture, when a storyteller would share their narrative with a listener, the listener was expected to orally transmit the tale, thereby relying on memory. Certainly, not all listeners were successful in this task but the transmission of stories

were dependent on this. In slam poetry, vivacity also functions as a mnemonic device for the viewer; however, the viewer is not burdened with having to remember and transmit the poem. Instead, the viewer is expected to remember the message, as it should move them into action, or at the very least, it should draw attention to social problems that the marginalized face, leading to a discussion that brings the problem into the public discourse. Smith's poem "Skinhead" was created to startle the audience with the supremacist ideology she performed, causing the viewer to think about the impact of this man's actions and beliefs as he revels in beating up gay individuals on the basis of their sexuality and scares black adolescents in the streets.

Despite slam poetry's relatively recent creation, Patricia Smith's slam poetry harkens back to oral storytelling which is the oldest literary poetry, exemplifying similarities between the storyteller and the listener and the narrative told. Therefore, the public's appeal to the storyteller's spoken word and performances reflects modern audience's preference and transition from print to a more oral framework. The slam poem's operation outside of the academy and its independence from the printed page has created public allure, resulting in a plurality of performances, as exemplified by Smith's shortening and lengthening of performances. However, her slam poetry does deviate from orality as a result of the competitive venues and her need to persuade the audience to receive a high score. Patricia Smith's exploration of slam poetry's relationship with orality, as demonstrated through her performances, parallels authorship and identity and audience. As a result, Smith's poetry restores the power of the storyteller's spoken word which has not been heard since oral traditions.

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