The Difficulties of Questioning My Assumptions:
An Exploration of Genre, Form, Race, Culture, Authenticity, and Signifyin(g) in Slam Poetry

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April 26, 2011
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This is a Poetry Slam & this is the Official “Emcee Spiel”
Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a Poetry Slam. My name is [say your name clearly] and I will be your emcee for the evening. The poetry slam is a competition invented in the 1980s by a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith [“So what!”] in which performed poetry is judged by five members of the audience. Poets have three minutes to present their original work and may choose to do so accompanied by other members of their team. The Judges will then score the piece anywhere from 0 to 10, evaluating such qualities as performance, content, and originality. The high and low scores of each performance are tossed, and the middle three are added giving the performer their score. Points are deducted for violating the three-minute time limit. We beseech the judges to remain unswayed by the audience - audience, try to sway the judges - and score each poet by the same set of criteria, ignoring whatever boisterous reaction your judgment elicits. Audience: Let the judges know how you feel about the job they are doing, but be respectful in your exuberance; there could be no show without them. Now let me introduce you to the judges!

(Somers-Willett, 149)

Abstract
In this essay, I begin with what I thought was a simple thesis statement, and investigate my assumptions about race, culture, and identity in the context of slam poetry. I engage critically with slam poetry as a genre and as a cultural event, while probing my assumptions with a combination of psychology and literary theory. In the end, I realize that my original goal was impossible given the language I was operating in, and posit that a new language is needed to explore these complex issues.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents and friends for their support throughout this process. I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish as much as I have without all of you behind me, backing me up all the way. But most of all, I want to thank Professor Linda-Susan Beard, who pushed me to think harder, think deeper, and think further than I thought I could. This would have been at least twice as hard and not half as rewarding if I had done it without her.

All poems mentioned in this essay can be found on the attached USB drive, along with a digital copy of this essay.
Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an essay on Slam Poetry. My name is Joshua Samors, and I will be your emcee for the evening.

I first developed an academic interest in slam poetry while I was investigating texts for my final Methods of Literary Study paper. I had already discovered slam as entertainment years before, when my brother brought home a Taylor Mali CD from a poetry reading at his school. My whole family would listen together, and laugh and marvel at the clever rhymes, the quickly-spoken, well-enunciated lines, and the literally constructed images. I was amazed one three minute poem could do so much simultaneously. So when Professor Beard told us to write about a text of our choice, and I realized slam poems counted as texts, I gravitated towards slam poetry as my subject. It was the first academic paper I was truly passionate about. I spent hours online, tracking down videos, interviews, articles, reviews, and any media I could find. I enjoyed writing the paper, and when I was finished, I realized I had more to say.

I knew that the senior essay was right around the corner, and I thought “why not slam poetry? There isn’t a lot of scholarship about it, you could go out and try to say something new.” And that’s what I set out to do. I went with my gut, started talking about something that I had always wondered about: why do White people imitate Black people? The question solidified in this case around Taylor Mali. When I first heard a recording of Taylor Mali, for reasons I still can’t really understand or identify, I thought he was Black. I was 12 at the time, and definitely hadn’t evolved the critical faculties to parse exactly why I thought that, but the idea stayed with me; the idea that White poets were successfully imitating Black poets. And I wanted to know why.

Of course, I didn’t realize at the time what I was embarking on. This project turned out to be large, with a scope far beyond my original intentions. With some nudging from various professors, I started questioning my assumptions. It started with my word choice, and progressed
to the point of questioning everything. This senior essay is less of an academic paper, and more a charting of my progress through unfamiliar waters and my process of grappling with difficult concepts. Parts of it are disjointed and occasionally at odds with each other. I am attempting to reconstruct the narrative of my experience as an English major.

**In the Beginning...**

With a lip curled in contempt, the poet throws out the accusation: “They call me skinhead. And I got my own beauty. It is knife-scrawled across my back in sore, jagged letters. It is the way my eyes snap away from the obvious... I’m your baby, America. Your boy. Drunk on my own spit, I am goddamn fucking beautiful. And I was born, and raised...right here.” That would be surprising enough to hear in poem delivered to a studio audience on HBO, as it was on *Russel Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, but even more shocking is that this poem is performed by the Black female slam poet Patricia Smith.

Smith performs this identity poem as a male White supremacist. Her body language is tense and violent; she moves in short jerks, hands quick to clench into fists, seemingly just inches from striking the audience. Her face is a grimace of disgust overlaying contempt concealed by violent rage. After she tells the audience she was “born, and raised,” she lets out an absolutely chilling chuckle, full of sinister purpose.

The poem, “Skinhead,” was praised by slam audiences and slam critics alike. She won the National Poetry Slam Championship with that poem. About a year later another slam poet, Taylor Mali, performed “Skinhead” in tribute to Patricia Smith. He perfectly copied her gestures, her tone of delivery. He did everything he could to make it an exact replica to express his admiration for her ability. Mali’s performance was not well received. Most of the audience thought that Mali was performing a poem about his own thoughts and opinions, and were
horrified by the racism and bigotry they thought he was professing. The portion of the audience that knew that this was a tribute to another poet still thought it was in incredibly poor taste. Why is the reaction so varied? What does it say about race relations in slam poetry that a Black woman performing an offensive poem is praised while a White man is criticized?

White slam poets use Black performance tropes to promote their own success as slam poets, and this promotion requires and causes a simultaneous acknowledgement of Black culture as ‘other,’ and reintegration of that ‘other.’

Before I begin addressing the claims underlying this statement, or even the statement itself, there are a few terms that need to be defined:

1) White and Black: I am using White and Black as cultural and racial identifiers instead of African-American or Caucasian for several reasons. First, I want to emphasize the exclusive relationship between White performance and Black performance. Second, when a poet’s race is visually interpreted by the audience, it is perceived as either White or Black. Until the poet in some way labels themselves with a specific ethnicity, it is skin color that dictates audience response, and it is this audience response that I am interpreting (Somers-Willett, 8).

2) Performance: there are two types of performance involved in this discussion:
a) Stage Performance: the gestures, words, and actions of a slam poet undertaken while on stage that inform or impart meaning to the audience, especially a particular racial or cultural identity.
b) Cultural/World Performance: Those which proclaim the identity of the subject, such as clothes, music, speech, or posture.

3) Identity Poem: a slam poem delivered in the first person, in which the poet assumes the identity of the speaker delivering a poem. This style is comparable to monologue or soliloquy
in dramatic performance. The identity of the speaker and the identity of the poet may or may not be the same.

The third inherent claim that I need to substantiate is that there does exist a Black ‘other’ in the realm of performance. To that end, I will be basing my justification on bell hooks article “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition.” The main thrust of her argument is that performance has been a means of decolonization and reclamation for the Black community. This act of decolonization positions the Black community, and especially Black performance, as the outside or the minority, reclaiming intellectual and cultural ‘territory’ from a dominant or mainstream majority. In this case, because the reclaiming party is being defined in terms of race, it is safe to assume that White is the majority in question. I’m basing this statement off of general census data in the U.S. that records Blacks as a minority, and from the video found in SlamNation, where the audiences at the slams were mostly White.

This was the thesis statement I had in mind when I started. To sum it all up: “In Slam poetry, White poets are appropriating the performative tropes of Black poets, and using them incorrectly.” There are several claims underlying this claim, several steps to the process of proving this thesis. In order to pursue those claims, I had to delve deeper into what makes slam poetry a genre, and the background of words like Black and White, and culture. And along the way, my original statement of intention got...complicated.

**The History of Slam [“So what!”]**

The first step in defining slam as a genre is to understand the history of slam. Slam was started in a jazz club in Chicago called “The Get Me High” lounge in November 1974 (Glazner 235). At the “Get Me High Lounge’, it was more of a performance poetry series, and had not quite evolved into the slam format as it exists today. It moved to the “Green Mill Scots Club” on
July 25, 1986, also in Chicago (Glazner 235). It was here that the *Uptown Poetry Slam* was born. The first rules implemented by the founder Marc Shelley Smith. He started the tradition of judges chosen from the audience, and cash prizes for the winner of the slam. Marc Shelley Smith was a former construction worker who started the slams because he was tired of poetry readings where the audience was expected to sit and listen, receptive and agreeable to the poet’s art. In an interview with Marc Smith in the documentary film *SlamNation*, he said that he wanted to involve the audience in the art, give them a chance to react the art as it was happening (*SlamNation*).

From its birthplace in Chicago, slam poetry spread. Between 1987 and 1990, slams started in Ann Arbor, Michigan (1987), New York, New York (1989), San Francisco, California (1990), and Anchorage, Alaska (1990) (Glazner 235). It was around this time that the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the East Village became another slam poetry center (Glazner 235). The first National Poetry Slam, held in 1990, was not actually called the National Poetry Slam. It was produced in San Francisco, with a team from San Fran, a team from Chicago, and a single poet from New York competing. Chicago won the team competition, and Patricia Smith won the individual competition (Glazner 235). The first official National Poetry Slam took place the next year in Chicago. The name was coined by Marc Smith. There teams from eight different cities, including Boston, Cleveland, and New York (Glazner 235). The NPS was also the first time the three-minute time limit rule was introduced, which at the time was judged by an on-stage clock. The clock has since disappeared, but the time limit has stayed.

From this point on, each year Nationals got bigger and bigger. In 1993 there were 23 teams, including teams from Victoria and British Columbia, Canada, and Finland. 1993 is also the first year that side events occur at the slam, including the haiku slam, the sonnet slam, erotic
and midnight non-competitive poetry readings. In 1996, filmmaker Paul Devlin shot the documentary *SlamNation* at Nationals, following the Providence, New York, and Chicago teams. The Providence team, with Taylor Mali, beat out 26 other teams in the 1996 Nationals (Glazner 235). The National Poetry Slam has continued to grow; at one NSP, there were 80 teams competing (poetryslam.com).

I have given some detail on the history of slam to make clear that it is a growing, changing, almost-living genre. Unlike most other forms of poetry, the rules of what makes “slam” have been only recently developed – the genre was born less than a decade before I was. Slam poetry has several binding elements that make it a genre of its own. I mentioned several rules and traditions that were put in place by Marc Smith; the first comes from him: slam poetry is a competitive art form.

**The Rules of the Slam (At least, those we can agree on)**

From *The Official Poetry Slam Rulebook 2007*

Slam is a difficult genre to define, as it has the potential to be any form, any style. In fact, the first rule of Slam Poetry in *The Official 2007 Poetry Slam Rule Book* is “1) Poems can be on any subject and in any style” (Somers-Willett, 141). It raised the question: How can I find similarities and use them to label one poem part of the genre and another poem not if the poems can be any style, on any subject? For most forms of poetry, there are either distinguishing stylistic or formalistic characteristics or common subject matter that labels a poem as part of one genre or another. Poems like sestinas and villanelles have set rhyme schemes, or a certain number of syllables in a line, possibly with a particular order of stressed and unstressed syllables. Poems can also be classified by similar content, like the element of nature in haiku, or the general principles that tie the Romantics together. But Slam purports to have none of these
similarities, or at least provides the option that a slam poem may be completely unlike any other slam poem, and still be considered a slam poem.

The answer to this predicament is to look at the binding limitations that govern all Slam poetry: the rules. Each piece of poetry performed at the Slam is subject to the same rules, conditions, and restrictions. These rules are:

1) Poems can be on any subject and in any style.
2) Each poet must perform work s/he has created.
3) No props.
4) No musical instruments or pre-recorded music.
5) No costumes.

(Somers-Willet, 141-2)

In addition to these rules governing the content of the performance, there is also a three minute time limit for any poem performed. Any poem that goes over the time limit is subject to point deductions based on how far over the time limit the poet went. The rule which is most pertinent to my purposes is the requirement that poets must create and perform their own work. I will revisit why this rule is so key later on.

There are more specifics to the rules, determining how many points are deducted for how many seconds over the limit, and how many are deducted for props, music, and costumes, but the central issue to understand here is that one of the key elements of slam poetry, the one that gives it defining characteristics, is the context of the competition. The poetry can be anything on a stylistic or formal level, from a series of nonsense syllables to a matching set of rhyming sonnets, but all slam poetry must adhere to these rules.

**Now Let Me Introduce You To The Judges!**

Another unique element of slam poetry as a genre is the audience participation. The audience is encouraged by the Emcee Spiel to engage with the poets: “Audience: Let the judges know how you feel about the job they are doing” (Somers-Willett 149). Because slam was

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specifically developed away from the kind of poetry readings where the audience was expected to sit and accept the poems as read by the poet without any feedback beyond mildly positive applause. Not so in slam poetry; poets at slams can be booed, cheered, heckled, and praised by the audience at any moment. The audience is, in fact, encouraged to do so.

This audience interaction with the poet is not limited to a simple critical response. The audience is responsible for awarding points to the poets; not just points of praise, but actual literal points. Poetry slams are competitions, and the winner is determined by the poet who ends the competition with the most points. These points are not decided on by a show of hands; judges are chosen at random from the audience.

There are five judges, and they are given a basic grounding in the criteria they should use for judgment, but they are essentially lay persons. Not academics, not fellow poets. Slam poetry’s judges used to be just as likely to be someone who came to the bar for a drink rather than the performance; and that democratic notion of who decides “worth” still holds true in Slam competitions.

The judges are told to judge poems on their “performance, content, and originality” in the official “Emcee Spiel” that starts every Poetry Slam at the regional and national level (149). Points are assigned on a scale from a zero, “a poem that never should have been written,” to a ten, “a poem that causes simultaneous orgasms throughout the house” (Slammation). Of the five scores, the highest and lowest scores are dropped, and the remaining three are added together, giving the poet their score for the bout (Somers-Willett 146). There are various intricacies to scoring for teams and group events, but these are the basics for judging individual competitions.

If I define slam poetry as a genre by the rules of the competition, I must also accept the competition’s definition of a successful poem, i.e. one that scores the most points. And because
these points are awarded on a completely subjective basis by random audience members, it is fair to say that a successful slam poem is one that appeals to the broadest audience population in the most effective way.

To summarize, slam poetry as a genre is defined by the rules of the slam competition, particularly the rules limiting the performance to the poet’s body (without props, costumes or musical accompaniment), stating that a poet must perform his or her own poetry, and the time limit. And as a corollary to the definition of the form by the rules of competition, the criteria for a successful slam poem are based on the point system that is also part of the competition. A success poem is one which the judges have decided is the most well performed, best written, and original.

Notice that the rules are almost all about the performer: no rules about the content or form, except that there are none. Unlike the sonnet form, there are no rules about rhyme scheme, iambic pentameter, and there is no centuries-long history to be aware of and play against. But there are very definite rules governing the body, the appearance of that body, and what it can do. This is one of the major ways slam poetry differs from other forms of poetry – even poetry readings, which are not generally as concerned with limiting the “performative” nature of their participants, because poetry readings are usually just that, readings, not full-blown performances. Performance is many things. It is a one time event. The performance of Romeo and Juliet you see today will not be the same performance you see tomorrow, even if all the lines, actors, props, costumes, set pieces and lights are the same. Performance as an art form is inextricably tied up with time, which means that it is affected by time.

This element of performance separates slam poetry from every other form of poetry. Performance is an integral part of the piece of art that is a slam poem. Some might contest that
claim by pointing to books of slam poetry. Yes, this is the text of the poem, but it lacks all the audio and visual cues that are a part of the slam poem.

To put it another way, look at plays and their performances. No one who has read Macbeth would claim to have a complete and full understanding of the play. In order to truly see the work, you have to see it performed. If you’ve read a book of slam poetry, you haven’t seen the whole poem. You miss out on the visual and audio cues that are an integral part of the poem.

For example, in Taylor Mali’s poem “Like Lilly Like Wilson,” Mali emphasizes and illustrates the word ‘like’ by pulling his head to the side every time he says it:

Lilly Wilson, the recovering ‘like’ [pull] addict / The worst I’ve ever seen / So, like, [pull] bad / That the entire 8th grade started calling her / “like [pull] Lilly like [pull] Wilson [like]” / Until I made my classroom a like free zone [crossed hands], / and she could not speak for days. / And when she did, it was to say, / “Mr. Mali, this is [pull] so hard! Now I have to think before I say anything!” / Well imagine that, Lilly. / It’s for your own good, even if you don’t like [pull] it.1

(Mali)

There are three points at which Mali plays with the visual script of his performance. The first is when he makes his classroom “a like free zone.” Instead of pulling his head to the side on the word like, as he does every other time he uses the word, he crosses his hands in the shape of an X. This gesture reinforces the like-free zone in two ways. The first is that the X shape summons up images of blocking, stopping and preventing, reinforcing the words. The second is that this gesture is used instead of the pulling of the head. But this is more of a reinforcement of the words of the poem, and less of the visual score of piece impacting the meaning of the poem itself:

The second use of the expected like [pull] combination comes when Lilly says “Mr. Mali, this is [pull] so hard!” The comedy of the moment comes from Mali breaking the audience

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1 The inserted [pull]s, line breaks, and punctuation are my interpretation of the recordings I have seen and heard. This is true for most of the slam poetry I quote in this paper, which only goes further in proving that slam poetry as an art form is integrally linked to its performance and reception by an audience.
expectation of the word that goes with the gesture. Another fact that is not present in this transcription of the performance is that Mali pauses while he pulls his head to the side for exactly the amount of time he would use if he had actually said “like.”

The third play on the gesture is one of breaking the expectation of grammar. In the last sentence, Mali uses the word ‘like’ with the same inflection and head gesture he has used throughout, when ‘like’ served as a filler word. But in this case, Mali is using a different meaning of like. In this case, like is synonymous with prefer or enjoy. Mali creates humor by stressing the multiple uses of the word ‘like’ and the appropriation of the word as filler despite its meanings.

All of these things would be completely lost on someone who just read the poem, or only heard an audio recording. And this is just one small example, from one poem, by one slam poet. Every slam poem is filled with visual cues, elements that are entirely based on watching the performance as it happens.

So to summarize, slam is a genre based on competition and performance. The poems are explicitly defined by the rules of the competition, specifically the time limit, the rule of authorship, and the limitations on the performance. The success of a slam poem is determined by the point value assigned by the judges. The performance of the poem is also integral to the genre, especially the performance at the competition.

Identity Poem

Now that I had a functional definition of slam as a genre, I was ready to proceed on to the more substantive questions inherent in my thesis statement, yes? No. While I had developed a functional definition for the entirety of the genre, I was still focused too broadly. I needed to choose a particular form to examine within the genre of slam, the same way another scholar
might focus on poetry by Percy Shelley while studying the Romantic movement. I decided in this case to focus on the form that had first interested me in slam poetry: the identity poem.

In an identity poem, the poet speaks in the first person, often as a narrative. The poet-performer creates a narrative “I” within the poem, and then aligns their identity with the poet-performer. There is a similar phenomenon in rap that Adam Krims talks about in his book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. In his words: “One of the principal authenticating strategies of early gangsta rap has precisely been the symbolic collapsing of the MC onto the artist – the projection that the MC himself is the persona” (Krims 95). In almost the exact same fashion, slam poets collapse the persona of their poems, the “narrative I” with their own historical, physical, performer-poet self.

This narrative style encourages audiences to treat the performance as a personal confessional. From the audience’s perspective, these slam poets are performing their own personal stories. From there, it follows that the audience tends to reward poems seen as “authentic” or “true.” Thus when an audience is judging a poet, they are judging the poet’s ability to both perform their identity, and to perform it authentically.

Of course, not all identities are equally authentic in the eyes of the audience. The most rewarded poems at slams are the ones that are authentic portrayals of a marginalized identity, be it a class, gender, sexual, or racial identity. The majority of slam poets belong to such marginalized communities with an estimated 85% of successful slam poets being persons of color (Somers-Willet 59). The reasons for this specifically targeted rewarding of authenticity center around the political dynamics inherent in the relationship between the poets and the audience. The majority of slam audiences are White, middle class, and generally heteronormative. Slams tend to be held in clubs in middle class White parts of town, and middle
class Whites are generally the people with enough discretionary income to afford a night of poetry (Somers-Willet 59). The majority being heteronormative is simply a function of the ration of heterosexual to other sexualities in a given population. There is an element of “White guilt,” and political liberalism in rewarding marginalized identities that Somers-Willett explains in her article more fully. But for my purposes, it is enough to say that in slam poetry, the majority of successful poets are those who can effectively and authentically perform marginalized identities.

**Emcee Aside**

I don’t feel that I have successfully demonstrated a link between authenticity and points being awarded for successful performances. I thought such a link existed while I was exploring slam as a genre, and I still do, but I have failed to prove that link to my satisfaction. However, the question of authenticity is one which does have major bearing on the cultural terms I will be using and trying to explore later on, so I’ve decided to explore it even though I can’t quite tie it to the rest of the essay.

**Authenticity**

But we must establish what the audience judges positively and negatively. Somers-Willet talks about audiences rewarding performances that are perceived to be authentic. It is this drive towards authenticity that motivates white slam poets to try to imitate and appropriate black performance tropes. Authenticity, in this case, is defined as how closely the performance of a poem is perceived by the audience to match up with a slam poet’s actual identity. For instance, if a black male slam poet performs a poem about being a black man, the audience will reward his authentic performance, even if the facts that he portrays as his in his poem are not actually accurate descriptors of his life. And this search for authenticity is not limited to performed identity, it also pertains to ideas. The audience is looking for a performance of truth, something
they can identify as “real.” If a poet goes on stage to go on a political rant, the audience perceives these beliefs to be the personally held beliefs of the poet.

In this case, I am claiming that the audience perceives Black performances to be more authentic than White performances. Joel Rudinow addresses a similar concern in his article “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” For Rudinow, authenticity is a “value” of a piece of art (Rudinow 129). The value in this case is credibility, “the kind of credibility that comes from having the appropriate relationship to an original source” (Rudinow 129). According to Rudinow, authenticity is used to “distinguish from a forgery a work “by the author’s own hand” (Rudinow 129). How does this affect slam? This is the breakdown in my linkage. Considering the first rule of slam (poets must perform their own work), and the collapse of the “narrative I” and the poet-performer, there must be a place for authenticity, but I’ve been wrestling with this connection for a year and I still don’t have a satisfactory answer.

**Expect Scornful Contumely**

It is acceptable for a poet to incorporate, imitate, or otherwise “signify on” the words, lyrics, or tune of someone else in his own work. If he is only riffing off another’s words, he should expect only healthy controversy; if on the other hand, he is ripping off their words, he should expect scornful contumely.

From *The Official Poetry Slam Rulebook 2007*

In the rest of the poetic world, poets exchange their poems, comment on each other’s poetry, and in general interact with the other poets in their artistic sphere. But because of the format of slam, poets competing directly against each other, there are occasions when two poets work will interact in the moment. For instance, at a Chicago poetry slam in 1991 (SlamNation), Taylor Mali and Daniel Ferri were on two different slam teams. Dan Ferri has a poem that begins:
“Now. Now, when you’re a teacher you always start everything you say by saying now. Okay? And when you’re a teacher, you always end everything you say with okay? Okay?” (SlamNation)

He put his poem on as the last person to perform for his team. Taylor Mali was the last person to perform for his team. He ended with his poem “What Teachers Make.” However, on this night, at this slam, Mali started his poem by saying “Now, I’m an English teacher, okay?” in reference to Ferri’s poem (SlamNation). In an interview in SlamNation, both Taylor Mali and Daniel Ferri talk about their rivalry as poets. Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward wrote back and forth as rivals, but I doubt they ever wrote poetry about each other while they were standing in each other’s presence, competing in front of an audience of judges. By tipping his hat to Daniel Ferri, Mali is reminding the audience that he, too, can claim the identity of teacher – and is reinforcing this reminder by picking up a trope used by an earlier poet.

This act of using another poet’s work in your own work, referred to as sampling in the Official Rulebook, is an example of a far older process, one that reaches as far back as the beginnings of jazz, and even further. In various art forms, it has been called sampling, improvising, and riffing, but in its most original sense, it was referred to as signifyin’, or “signifying on”. This phenomenon was theorized by Henry Louis Gates in his book The Signifying Monkey. Gates refers to the process as Signification.

Gates’ term Signification is based on the Saussurean term signification, but the meaning is different. Signification, in the Saussurean sense, describes the relationship between a signifier and a signified, or a sound-image (word) and a concept. This is generally a one-to-one relationship, where one word is attached to one meaning. Often, one word will have several meanings, but in “Standard English”, an explicit connection between one word and one idea is
necessary for information to be relayed. In conversation, when speaking Standard English, two speakers agree to a mutual definition of tree for the duration of the conversation.

They also set up other signifiers that relate to each other; the words of a sentence relate to one another and impart meaning to each other. Saussurean signifiers relate to each other in a chain of meaning along a proverbial “X-axis” of meaning.

Signifyin(g), on the other hand, is not a description of the one-to-one relationship between a word and a concept. Instead, Signification is the labeling of an action, the action of applying rhetorical figures, specifically Black vernacular rhetorical figures, to signifiers. In the words of Roger Abrahams, as paraphrased by Gates, “one does not signify something; rather, one signifies in some way” (54). Signifyin(g) labels an action, rather than a relationship.

Signifyin(g) does, however, function in relation to the structure of signification, just as Black vernacular functions in relation to “Standard English”. Signification functions on an X axis of chained meanings, each signifier impacting the meaning of the other signifiers; Signifyin(g) makes use of the homonymic relationship between various signifiers, as well as the unspoken meanings, the additional signifieds that could potentially be connected with a given signifier.

Prime examples of this are terms that are considered slang, like ‘baby’ or ‘cool.’ In “Standard English”, these words have certain signifieds (generally an infant, and a description of temperature). But in ‘baby’ can refer to an infant, or it can refer to a young woman, or a girlfriend. Cool becomes a description of temperature, becomes defined as hip, with it, socially on top. These terms are removed from their Standard English meaning, and given culturally significant meaning based on the culture of Black vernacular. The distancing is not total, however, as meaning remains integral to the word. Even as ‘cool’ is changed, it still retains the
semantic orientation of its Standard English use. So instead of a word that has been completely co-opted, we have a word that retains the form of its original use, but is put to a new meaning.

In this way, Gates reclaims the term *signification* itself. He takes a term that already has an established meaning, empties out that meaning, and ascribes to it a more culturally significant meaning for him, arriving at the idea of Signification. It is this process that is mirrored in slam poetry. Poets

**Identity and Performance of Identity**

I realized that what I needed to be talking about/examining and exploring was actually a definition of culture and a theory of cultural identity, because if I’m looking at how identity poems work how individuals perform their identity when that identity is cultural, then I needed to understand how identity performance functioned

To get at the simple part first, psychology and psychiatry deal with identity, specifically with the performance of identity, that is to say, the actions by which individuals broadcast their identity so that other individuals may apprehend it. Even more specifically, these fields have a long history of exploring cultural identity as a specific offshoot of personal identity, and the methods of self-identification, both internal and external, that define personal cultural identity. The major reason I use so many psychiatric texts and experiments is that the definitions used in psychiatry tend to be concise and explicit.

In discussing cultural identity, several related and sometimes conflated terms must also be discussed: personal identity, ethnic identity, and racial identity. Also related is a more concrete and exact definition of culture, but that is a larger and more difficult issue. These four terms are the basis of cultural identity, and must be examined individually.
The most wide-ranging and simultaneously the most explicit source I have discovered is the Clinical Manual of Multicultural Psychiatry by Russel Lim. The stated goal of the manual is to help mental health practitioners “[evaluate] patients belonging to diverse minority groups” (Lim, xiv). As a result, the various diagnostic tools and lists of “essential components of culture” are wide-ranging, but have a practical goal, namely giving the reader the vocabulary and tools to appraise an individual’s cultural identity and the way s/he relates to that cultural identity (Lim 6). This first list is six items long, and provides the bare bones of a definition of culture:

Table 1.1. Essential components of culture
- Culture is learned.
- Culture refers to a system of meanings.
- Culture acts as a shaping template.
- Culture is taught and reproduced.
- Culture exists in a constant state of change.
- Culture includes patterns of both subjective and objective components of human behavior (Lim 6)

While the characteristics of this table are broad, in my opinion they do provide a bare-bones method for defining culture, or labeling a particular group as having a culture that does or does not function in these ways. In addition, other definitions for culture fit comfortably inside this table, providing means for more specificity without excluding potential groups.

In another psychiatric study, culture is defined as “a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group,” which is even broader, but still fits within the confines of Lim’s definition (Mezzich, 452). Lim goes on to define culture as “a set of meanings, norms, beliefs, and values shared by a group of people” (Lim, 6).

Lim also deals with the potential conflation of the terms culture, ethnicity, and race, and highlights the differences between the three. Ethnicity has been used “to refer to an individual’s sense of belonging to a group of people who have a common set of beliefs and customs (culture),
and who share a common history and origin” (Lim 7). Race, on the other hand, is most often “used to refer to a group of people who share biological similarities,” especially physical appearance (Lim 7). Lim also differentiates between culture and ethnicity, two words which are often used interchangeably. Ethnicity “typically refers to one’s roots, ancestry, and heritage,” while culture “captures more active elements, such as values, understandings, behaviors, and practices” (Lim 11).

There is a second table listing all the various aspects of cultural identity (Lim 10). The list is far ranging, including identifiers such as ethnicity, race, gender, age, religious/spiritual beliefs, education, and migration history, among many others. But in my eyes, the key aspect of cultural identity is the last one on the list: “degree of affiliation with above” (Lim 10). Cultural identity is at its root determined, in this study, by an individual’s level of association with their particular cultural group. Although there exist many definitions of cultural identity, this element of personal connection remains constant.

Lim also actively differentiates between racial identity and race. Racial identity is probably the definition that is the least ambiguous, but also one that is the most actively redefined. In the Clinical Manual, racial identity is “focused on racial consciousness, a collective interpretation of group experience that includes grievances concerning disadvantaged status and continuing power differentials” (Lim, 46). This “group experience” that Lim refers to is the common experience of being judged by skin color or other racial phenotypes. Cokley’s study relates another researcher, Parham, who has tried to shift counseling and psychiatric techniques “from racial identity to ethnic and cultural identity,” particularly when discussing African-American identity, because “racial identity makes phenotypical traits the most salient feature of African American identity (Cokley, 518). In the table of aspects of cultural identity, race is listed
as separate from ethnicity and as a sub-aspect of cultural identity, but other researchers and thinkers have not drawn the line as clearly (Lim, 10).

In his study, Kevin Cokley notes that in the history of multicultural psychology, ethnic identity is “similar to the construct of racial identity” (Cokley, 517). As Cokley continues to outline the confusion surrounding these two terms, he notes that the two terms are “frequently used interchangeably” (Cokley 517). Cokley provides the example of a search on PsychINFO, a psychiatric journal and article database. If one uses racial identity as a search term, one is redirected to a second page where one must choose among various foci, to provide more specificity to the search (Cokley 517). On this page, “Ethnic identity is usually the first foci listed, which suggests that ethnic identity is subsumed under racial identity” (Cokley 517).

Another psychiatrist, Jean Phinney is quoted heavily in both Cokley’s study, and the other psychiatric articles I’ve read. Cokley lays out Phinney’s definition of ethnicity as consisting of three psychological aspects: culture, ethnic identity, and minority status. The first aspect, culture, “refers to adherence to values, beliefs, behaviors and norms associated with one’s cultural group” (Cokley 517). Ethnic identity is “the extent to which one identifies with one’s ethnic group,” and minority status is “the extent to which one has the differential experiences and attitudes that are associated with minority status” (Cokley 517).

While I agree with the definition Phinney has laid out for ethnic identity, I find myself in disagreement with her definitions of culture and minority status. As for culture, what Phinney is describing is what the Clinical Manual, and Schwartz, Zamboanga and Weisskirch (2008) would define as cultural identity. I also agree with Lim, Phinney, and Schwartz, Zamboanga and Weisskirch. Culture is a construct that exists separately from the individual, while cultural
identity is determined by an individual’s adherence to, or to phrase it differently, association with that construct.

Cokley uses this definition to draw connections between Phinney’s concept of ethnic identity and another set of researchers' (Cross and Helms) concept of racial identity. In Cross’s and Helms’s conceptualization, “the development of a racial identity is a result of minority status” just as Phinney’s ethnic identity is also the result of minority status, according to Cokley (Cokley 518). Cokley does go on to outline differences between the two constructs, which can be useful to us in separating the two concepts. According to Helms, “identity models are racial when they describe reactions to societal oppression based on race and are ethnic when they describe the acquisition and maintenance of cultural characteristics” (Cokley 518). Cokley best summarizes Helms’s definition of ethnicity as the collection of historical culture, such as ancestry, religion, and language, as well as culture and history, that a group attaches special meaning to (Cokley 518).

Helms goes on, according to Cokley, to argue that “race is not ethnicity,” and that “race has a clear meaning in psychology and American society whereas ethnicity is ill-defined and remains a proxy for racial classification” (Cokley 518). Cokley finishes this argument by logically realizing that if “race and ethnicity need to be treated as related yet separate constructs,” then racial identity and ethnic identity must be treated the same way. But at the same time, in the same paragraph, Cokley lays out Phinney’s opposing argument, that “ethnicity subsumes race” and that the two should be combined. This type of confusion and mixing of meanings is common when discussing cultural identity. For example, I started my discussion of Cokley discussing racial identity, and ended discussing ethnic identity.
To shift gear briefly, I would like to shift to cultural identity. For the purposes of this paper, there are in truth two parts of cultural identity. On the one hand is everything that makes up culture, all the things in table 1.5 of the Clinical Manual, the meanings, norms, beliefs, and values. On the other hand is the individual’s relationship with that culture. The degree to which they acknowledge that culture, the degree to which they participate in it, and the degree to which it impacts their life and choices; that is what defines an individual’s cultural identity.

Racial identity and ethnic identity are subsets of cultural identity. Racial identity primarily refers to race, and the degree of identification with that race. In this instance, race is a combination of outward appearance (skin color, phenotypical traits) and self-identification. Racial identity does not include racial consciousness and racial memory, as it does in Lim’s definition. For me, that falls under the classification of cultural history, or more accurately, ethnicity. In this context, ethnicity refers to the roots, ancestry, history, and heritage of a particular group, including linguistic heritage. Ethnic identity is again the degree to which an individual identifies with the ethnicity of their group.

**Aggregate Cultural Entity**

If cultural identity is the result of personal re-evaluation, appropriation, and refashioning, then how do larger cultural movements and cultural identity groups form? I'm tending towards the theory that individuals with similar, but not the same, identities gravitate towards one another. These similarities can be their geographic location (New Yorkers, as a whole), or a common history (Jewish culture after the holocaust, Israeli, European and American), or some ideal they all ascribe to (The Tea Party), but regardless it starts around strong individuals who either broadcast or live their cultural identity in a relatively public way. Then, as more and more people ascribe to this culture in their personal fashion, the cultural identity gains enough
members that it begins to exist outside the founders, and can often move in directions they either
don't want or don't anticipate (the beginning of the rap/hip-hop movement, as compared to
modern hip-hop).

Then, instead of individuals engaging in self-definition, there is a large entity, an
aggregate composed of all its individuals, but with cultural inertia beyond the power of those
individuals. And it is this aggregate cultural identity that is the subject of conversation when we
talk about "African-American" culture, or "White suburban" culture. Cultures gain inertia in the
same way that movements, or revolutions do. Rather than existing on their own as concrete
concepts that individuals choose to participate in, or not, movements, like the Civil Rights
movement, begin with the actions and thoughts of individuals, and gain inertia, momentum, and
seemingly concrete shape, from the participation of a larger group. Eventually cultures exist as
concrete concepts, but only through the accretion of the thoughts and ideas from individuals

African-American culture did not simply spring into being as complete kernel for every
African-American to ascribe to. It is instead the result of constant personal revision, re-
evaluation and to a certain extent, appropriation. As Clifford says, culture is “not an archaic
survival, but [is] an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished... a form of
personal and collective self-fashioning” (Clifford, 9) Clifford rejects the old definition of culture,
culture as a particular group’s static association of values and customs. According to Clifford,
prior to the 20th century, culture was viewed as a continuous set of traditions, passed down from
one generation to the next. I would posit that we have instead shifted to a system where
individuals can assess their own traditions and decide which traditions to accept, which to
refashion, and which to discard.
In this way, cultural identity is not derived from a particular culture; it is not a mark or badge an individual is given. Instead Culture is an individual, personal experience derived from shared history, and other shared, objective/factual experiences, such as economic status. Cultures are built on the foundation of a large group of individuals ascribing to the same culture. This model provides for individual difference within what is often perceived of, and talked about as, a monolithic structure. My original understanding of culture was dichotomous. White and Black were not entirely mutually exclusive but differentiated enough to be identifiable as separate entities. After much research into psychology and communications, and cultural identity theory, I’ve realized that it isn’t two separate cultures. Instead, it's determined by personal actions taken in relation to perceived culture.

Instead of two separate cultures, we've got individuals choosing elements of culture to perform which means that the signs of cultural identity, the tropes and signals, can be used by any individual.

**Ramifications and Conclusions**

This is the point of the paper where I start drawing connections between the things I’ve proved and my thesis statement, trying to draw conclusions that support my original argument, or at least, that’s what I’m going to try to do. I started this process with what I thought at the time was a simple thesis statement: “In Slam poetry, White poets are appropriating the performative tropes of Black poets, and using them incorrectly.” But in searching for the information I needed to validate my opinion (which is what it was to begin with), I’ve complicated my assumptions, and in many ways, destroyed them.

I do feel that I’ve successfully answered the question of “what is slam poetry and how does it function as a genre?” Slam is inherently competitive. It is bounded by the rules of the
competition governing the time limit, the performance, and the authorship of the poem. From there, I moved through identity poems and authenticity, which seemed at the time to be an excellent set up for a paper exploring the interactions between poets of different races.

But it was at the point of examining race that the whole question fell apart. My original theory, of White poets borrowing or even stealing from Black poets rested on the assumption that the two sets of poets came from different cultures and backgrounds that were mutually exclusive. But to explore that, I needed to define race and culture. While I think the psychology answered some of that, I still haven’t gotten at the more central issue: what defines race? What defines culture? How can I talk about White and Black cultures as monolithic entities when I’ve arrived at the conclusion that it’s a group of individuals?

And the answer is, I can’t. My original intention was flawed. There is no dichotomous relationship. These cultures overlap and intersect in ways that were too complicated for me to parse in this paper, with my abilities as an analytic thinker. And I think that points to the problems inherent in the language we are using to talk about these issues. The confusion of the terms race, ethnicity, culture, racial identity, ethnic identity, and cultural identity is one that must be reconciled before a more in-depth investigation of slam or any other art form can be undertaken. These Signifyin(g) interactions are occurring, and they do link up with issues of authenticity and identity, but I think the language is too problematic to talk about them at this point in time.
Bibliography


