

Slam Poetry:  
Ambivalence, Gender, and Black Authenticity  
in '*Slam*'<sup>1</sup>

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One of the things that struck me when I came out of the construction worker mode into the poetry scene was the falseness of a lot of the work because it had nothing to do with what everyday people do.

— Marc Smith, originator of the poetry slam, *Slamnation*

You will not hear highbrow poetic structure over here  
I do not proscribe to nor do I give a fuck about iambic  
pentameter  
I laugh at the alphabetical order of the Shakespearean  
sonnet  
A sestina?  
Is a bitch I used to date  
I write what I feel and I spit what I know  
I am the rose bloomed fresh in the midst of ghetto con-  
fusion  
I am ghetto angst personified  
I am a street poet

— from “Street Poet” by GNO

Poetry slams, competitive versions of local poetry readings, have emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a literary-performative genre of protest and celebration. Although its roots are traced by poets from troubadours, griots, and the “dozens” (Algarín 1994:16), its 20<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors and most immediate influences include the Beat Movement, the Black Arts Movement, jazz, early rap, and hip-hop. The poetry slam as we know it today originated in the mid-1980’s as the brainchild of Marc Smith, a Chicago poet and ex-

construction worker who wanted to liven up local poetry readings. Today, poetry slams are held not only in urban centers like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but also in areas as distant as Sweden and the U.K. or as remote as Fargo, North Dakota. In slams, poets perform their own work in three-minute time slots, which is in turn judged Olympic-style from zero to ten by randomly-chosen members of the audience. It is likened by one author to “a lyrical boxing match that pits poets against other poets” (Woolridge 1998:51). After several rounds of elimination, the poet with the highest score is declared the winner and is awarded a cash prize or title, much like ancient Greek poetry competitions. Once a year, local poetry slam winners form four-person teams and traverse the country to compete in the National Poetry Slam, now in its twelfth year. In addition to team bouts, the annual competition also sponsors a competition for individuals. The growth of the poetry slam on a national level has increased dramatically during its tenure, growing from a two-team competition with one individual slammer in 1990 (Glazner 2000:235) to a 56-team competition with 14 individual slammers in 2000 (Davey 2000).

Although the slam proper began over 15 years ago at a grassroots level, national attention to slam poetry as an artform has only surfaced in the mid-nineties, most notably in mainstream media sources such as the *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Ms.* and *The New Yorker*. Most recently, slam poetry has been the focus of two feature-length films: *Slam* (1998), an experiment in *drama vérité* which combines scripted dialogue with documentary-inspired footage and poetic improvisation by its stars, and *Slamnation* (1998), a documentary which chronicles the 1996 National Poetry Slam competition. Reviews of these films, and of poetry slams in general, express a novel interest in the genre, usually playing up its competitive aspects and contrasting the popular estimation of slam poetry to what sources deem “stuffy” standards of literature. Both films feature the same African American poet, Saul Williams, in a leading role, and it is the first of these movies, *Slam*, with which I take up the questions of how the tenor of slam poetry, the image of the black poet, and “authenticity” are produced and received.

Another distinct focus of some media sources is on black performers and the ties of slam poetry to African American traditions and culture, particularly rap. More significantly, the makers of the film *Slam* focus on representing the realities of the black urban male experience through slam poetry, in particular through the main character's poetic representation of (and ambivalence with) gangsta-style crime and imprisonment. Perhaps because of *Slam's* painstaking efforts to represent a "real" black urban experience through the genre of *drama vérité*, reviews of the film seem driven to compare the film with the "reality" and "authenticity" of black culture, in particular with the scripts of black masculinity and criminality. The question at hand is this: *for whom* are these images of the black slam poet being constructed, and *to whom* are the film's reviewers writing? Precise demographics of *Slam's* audience are difficult to calculate, but I contend that the discourses of "authenticity" and realism used by reviewers suggest that the image of the black slam poet is geared towards white bourgeois audiences. A secondary audience is also a black audience for whom black identity, social justice, and music are of interest and which help to lend *Slam* an ambivalent political nature. I will return to the issue of ambivalence in a moment.

If poetry slams themselves may give us an indication of a majority audience for the film, it could be what slammer Alix Olson calls "a monolith of white, heterosexual couples" (2000:69). In an informal survey I conducted of slam poets and organizers across the U.S., many reported that their local as well as national slam audiences are predominately white. According to Michael Brown, Slammaster of the Cantab Lounge in Boston, the audiences of national slam competitions are predominately white because of the location of the competitions<sup>1</sup> and the "greater appeal of slam to white folks." (Brown 2001). Yet, at least on the national level, African American slam performers have proven the most successful in competition. As I will discuss, proponents of slam also laud the genre as presenting a more "real" or "authentic" voice, one that is self-proclaiming without being false. Considering that black slam poets have been historically successful in slam, there appears a link between the representation of blackness and "authenticity" on behalf of predominately white slam

audiences.

Recognizing that black identity, like all identities, is both performed and performative in nature (Butler 1993, 1990; Goffman 1959), it is ultimately fluid. In the process of moving from page to stage to screen to audience, the image of the black slam poet and the performance of blackness itself can take on multiple meanings and is a space of possibility. And yet, in many places as I will show, it seems that urban, masculine representations of blackness are most often awarded “authenticity.” On this issue, Wahneema Lubiano suggests that “the idea of authenticity—a notion that implies essence—can derive from the idea that a particular group and individual entities of the group can be recognized by the ways in which they are shown with some measure of the “real” or authentic or essential qualities of that group” (1996:186). Many reviewers of *Slam* suggest that black ghetto masculinity is what is recognizable, essential, “real,” or “authentic” about black identity, and this assumption is compelling. The elision of urban black masculinity and “authenticity”—an elision made by performers, filmmakers, film reviewers, and slam audiences alike—is what I term the illusion of “black authenticity,” and it is the focus of this paper.

I argue that, in both poetry slams and their representation in mainstream media, the illusion of “black authenticity” can be performed on several levels—from the scripting of a slam poem about black identity, to its performance, to its representation on screen, to its reception by film reviewers and moviegoers. The source of this elision (if there is indeed any one source) is complex and elusive, and although it is perhaps too large to conclusively address, I make some attempts at teasing out the illusion of “black authenticity” as it operates in poetry slams in the first part of this essay. In the second part, I consider how “black authenticity” operates in larger media through the example of *Slam* and its reviews. I ultimately come to view poetry slams and the media coverage of *Slam* as stages upon which the illusion of black essence is produced, consumed, and *authenticated*.

In both parts of this essay, I also consider what the elision of blackness and “authenticity” can politically signify. For some

audience members, the “authentic” vision of *Slam* may indeed affirm the current situation of many urban black males and even their own sense of black identity. It also may not—such is the conundrum of representation. My primary concern in this essay is the political effect of “black authenticity” as it operates for slam poetry’s predominately white audiences and the predominately white bourgeois audience of *Slam* assumed by the film’s reviewers. The discourse of “black authenticity,” particularly in the media, may in fact serve to generate and affirm black identity as “other” to white bourgeois audiences. And yet, this black Other’s “authenticity” is politically ambivalent: it may have both politically positive and negatively essentializing effects. That is, black performers may consciously or unconsciously perform “black authenticity” to gain praise and recognition under the rubric of Gayatri Spivak’s idea of “strategic essentialism”—the strategy of using essentialist means to politically advance a marginal position. White bourgeois audiences may consciously or unconsciously mark black performers as Other through the same process, rewarding black performers by fetishizing his/her “authenticity” and “realness.” Still more, audiences and performers of any color may oscillate between these positions, or even hold multiple perspectives at once. Thus the political significance of these representations are difficult to interpret conclusively. Instead of trying to predict precise, individual interpretations of black performativity, I conclude that the “othered” space the black slam poet can occupy for white audiences is politically ambivalent.

### **I: Authenticating “Otherness” in Slam Poetry**

Before investigating *Slam*, we might first consider how slam poetry defines itself and is perceived as a genre. In almost all of the literature written by mainstream media sources and slam poets themselves, slam poetry is regarded as a counter-cultural force, particularly when compared to more academic or institutionally-oriented poetry. It is—in its synthesis of performance and text, of narrative and liberal politics—characterized as the artform of the literary and social underdog. As such, slam poetry often features

overtone of political protest or social commentary. Against a backdrop of competition and often noisy or inattentive audiences, slam poets must convince their audiences they have something important to say, and more often than not, messages of counter-cultural complaint are awarded attention and rewarded by judges. As Charles Bernstein notes in his introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, “the cultural invisibility of the poetry reading is what makes its audibility so audacious. Its relative absence as an institution makes the poetry reading the ideal site for the presence of language—for listening and being heard, for hearing and being listened to” (1998:23).

This counter-cultural tone of slam poetry has often been criticized by the literary elite. For example, Harold Bloom remarks in a *Paris Review* interview, “I can’t bear these accounts I read in the *Times* and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other” (379). Whether “rant” is equivalent to “nonsense” is debatable. However, as Bernstein suggests, the counter-cultural spectacle of slam poetry is often what attracts its poets and audiences for several reasons. One of these reasons is that slam poetry implicitly challenges traditional notions of who has access to poetry; indeed, it can challenge traditional notions of who is a poet. The slam is promoted as an open forum in which anyone can read his or her work, regardless of age, education, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, poetic form or style. Poets in the film *Slamnation* describe slam poetry as “a representative democracy,” a “level playing field” in which equal access is granted to those denied more traditional poetic recognition such as publication and participation in academic writing programs. Slammaster Charles Ellick of the Starry Plough slam in Berkeley, California remarks that “while some of our audience is undoubtedly well-educated and wealthy, no one flaunts it. And while it is an extremely intelligent and political audience, very ‘conscious,’ there is an anti-intellectual undercurrent” (Ellick 2001). So, just as it is often counter-cultural in its style or subject matter, slam audiences may expect counter-institutional work, work that challenges the concept and position of “P”oetry.

Furthermore, by its performative nature, slam poetry can re-define what an audience understands as poetry. Perhaps to the chagrin of more traditionalist poets, this poetry ceases to be textually motivated and becomes not just a spoken but a *performed* medium. As a result, slam poetry becomes publicly rather than privately created and received. As Maria Damon argues in *Close Listening*, slams “offer an important venue for grassroots poetic activity that rewrites the privatistic lyric scene into a site for public discourse” (1998:326). Rather than the experience of poetry being about the private, author-to-audience act of reading print, slam poetry enacts a public, dialogic potential between author and audience. Slam poetry is also often specific to an author’s social or cultural condition rather than invoking “universal” themes and subjects. Co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café Miguel Algarín calls performance-oriented poetry “The Democratization of Verse” (1994:14) whose “aim is to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize human experience and make it meaningless” (1994:9). With these elements in mind, it should come as no surprise that first-person narrative poetry is the most popular mode chosen by slammers, or that well-performed poems dealing with a poet’s gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or politics are often rewarded with high scores. “Vague as it may sound,” Damon writes, “the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of ‘realness’—authenticity...that effects a ‘felt change of consciousness on the part of the listener’” (1998:329-330). This “felt change in consciousness” is indeed a powerful element in any kind of poetry, textual or performed. Ron Silliman notes that this change, perceived as “social resistance”:

occurs throughout all forms of literature, but that it is most amplified through the poem as confession of lived experience, the (mostly) free verse presentation of sincerity and authenticity that for several decades has been a staple of most of the creative writing programs in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than when this mask appears not in print but in person, at dozens of open-mike or poetry slam events that occur around the United States every day of the week....In such circumstances, a text as text is reduced to its most

basic features: perceptible surface characteristics, narrative or expository thread and a sense of ‘personality’ that is inseparable from the presentation of the reader him- or herself. (1998:362)

Silliman’s comments make a crucial connection for this project: the confessional, authentic, and sincere appearance of performed poetry facilitates the elision between the performer and his/her performative identities—the “personality”—expressed in a poem. As a genre, slam seems to promote this elision; indeed, in its fifteen-year lifespan, slam has evolved into an art of self-proclamation, of identity-cum-political statement through poetry. In this sense, slam is much like the feminist movement of the 1960s and ’70s which proclaimed that “the personal is political.” We should recognize the performative aspect of this self-proclamation as well as its claims to “authenticity.” How does the “authenticity” Silliman and Damon suggest is required of successful slam poets relate to the politics of performative identity? To pose the question more specifically to my project, how does slam’s sense of “authenticity” relate to the reception of black slam poets?

Much of the popular attention surrounding slam has gone to performers of color, particularly African American performers. In fact, many press articles focus attention solely on the genre’s ties to rap, a traditionally black artform. The national slam poetry community has resisted keeping track of its members’ ethnicities because its membership is largely (and proudly) liberal, under 35, and outspoken. Although the slam community has, up to this date, resisted recording racial demographics amongst their ranks because some performers reject being “pigeon-holed” in one particular racial category, it is safe to say that the poetry slam community not only attracts more racial minorities than institutionally-based poetry, these minorities are more likely to find success and recognition in the slam community. A canvassing of one New York City slam venue over nine months revealed about 65% non-white participation; as the field narrowed to the venue’s slam-off to determine a local team, almost 84% of the finalists were non-white (Gonzalez 2000). Although these percentages are specific to a particular region and venue, participation and



success on a national level confirms this trend. Of the nine individual winners of the National Poetry Slam to date, all but three have been African American (Glazner 2000:235-237). Still, the audience for slam on a national level has and continues to be predominately white and middle-class, just as many authors have noted of black popular cultural artforms such as rap and R&B music (Rose 1994; Ross 1989; Watkins 1998).

In unpacking the politics of authenticity in black music, Paul Gilroy asserts that the “dynamics of performance” are especially significant to black cultural artforms (1993:75) because they invoke an illusory racial “essence” and sense of the racialized self. For Gilroy, the “intimate interaction between performer and crowd,” even when separated by location and time, can produce the illusion of racial essence through “identification and recognition” (1993:102). That is, Gilroy suggests that the interaction between black performers and their audiences can produce the illusion of racial essence and that we must look toward audience reception as the constituting element of this essence. To clarify, Gilroy does not advocate racial essence; his point is that black performers can be received *as if* they represent racial essence. His analysis of black trans-Atlantic cultural artforms asks us to consider the ways in which black artforms are received as representing black “essence”—an approach I apply in the second part of this paper.

When considering processes of “identification and recognition,” however, we should avoid a model of performance that takes clear-cut identification or non-identification as its primary mode of assigning meaning. Indeed, we can think of several examples where an audience member experiences both feelings of identification and non-identification at once, such as when a straight woman attends a gay male striptease, an adult acquires a passion for cartoon characters targeted towards children, or when a white suburban youth takes on the slang of a black gangsta rapper. My examples here are random, but my critique of the identificatory dyad is not. Thinking about representation as a dyad can be reductive, and does not acknowledge “issues of voyeurism, objectification, and fetishization” which Kobena Mercer suggests extend “a seductive invitation into

the messy spaces in-between the binary oppositions that ordinarily dominate representations of difference” (1994:209). The reception of black performers by their audiences is more complex than the dyad of “that’s me” or “that’s not me” on stage. Instead, we must adopt a more nuanced model of reception which acknowledges the spaces “in-between” binary representation.

“Otherness”—a term used to conceptualize difference across the fields of linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and psychology and which has found a home in Post-Colonial Studies through the study of racial difference—has usually been placed within the frame of the binary and often serves as the basis for critical dialogue about representation (Hall 1997:229, 243). Yet the political significance of otherness is ultimately ambivalent; otherness can have positive and negative connotations. Stuart Hall recognizes difference “is both necessary for the productions of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as sexed subject—and at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the ‘Other’” (1997:238). One process by which this “double legacy” (1997:238) becomes clear is what Homi Bhabha calls “the articulation of multiple belief” via fetishism. Fetishism, according to Bhabha, “is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one the official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division” (1999:377). This concept of ambivalence or “in-betweenness” for which Bhabha is known offers an alternative to the identificatory dyad.<sup>2</sup> It “affirms difference while at the same time denying it” (Hall 1997:276) in acknowledging both the desire for and separation from an “othered” position. Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence through fetishism poses one way for us to highlight the multiplicity of desire.

Bhabha’s idea of ambivalent fetishism has proved useful for analyses of racial representation. For example, in an analysis of Mapplethorpe’s portraits of black men, Kobena Mercer concludes that the fetishistic white gaze of the photographs can be a source of

politically ambivalent possibility: “blacks are looked down upon and desired as worthless, ugly and ultimately inhuman. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere black bodies, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idealized as the embodiment of its aesthetic ideal” (1994:201). In this case, the fetishization of the racial Other can hold sway as “a deconstructive strategy, which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations” (1994:199). The spectacle of black performers proclaiming their identities to a predominately white audience can embody this ambivalent fetishization of “otherness” and is a way for us to decipher the nuances of the politics of desire implied by Gilroy.

The National Poetry Slam (NPS) community is concerned with the expression of difference in its ranks (Ashe 2000). At the most recent NPS, there were, in addition to the regular bouts and special readings by those in anthologies, readings specifically showcasing Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, women, and gays and lesbians. These were the most well-attended events outside of the competition itself, indicating that the performance of “othered” identities (specifically politically-defined ones beyond the realm of the white, heterosexual, and male) are an important aspect of slam and help to define the slam’s identity as a counter-cultural sphere. The liberal and well-meaning political concern with difference represented by these readings reifies the positions of “whiteness” “straightness” and “maleness” as the norm—as not worthy of attention, investigation, or showcase beyond usual competition. “Otherness” seems to hold more weight in this venue, and, I would suggest, carries with it the ambivalence of fetishism.

It is not a far leap to say that, in the arena of slam as it is often in our culture, “otherness” carries a sense of “authenticity” which displaces it from the norm. If slam judges, selected from predominately white bourgeois audiences, reward poets who are “authentically other,” or in my case, “authentically black” in certain ways—and if we can agree that what is deemed as “authentic” might actually be constructed through this process of reward—we can start to think of the slam itself as a representational practice which *authenticates* marginal identities. In short, performances of the slam

stage are a unique microcosm of what happens in culture: slam performances can generate and affirm the very identities their audiences have come to hear. In the case of black performers, white bourgeois audiences may reflect the illusion of black urban essence and “authenticity” through black performers’ common use of gesture, sound, language, rhythm, and form. Michael Brown remarks, “I used to say years ago, and it’s less true nowadays with a more global influence of Hip Hop, but ‘Slam was invented because white folks can’t rap’” (Brown 2001). As an authenticating practice, then, slams embody complex systems of desire. The fetishization of blackness in the slam community is one such example of this desire, whether it is in the general sense of marking slam as “other” than academy, or in the more specific sense of mainly white audiences rewarding the “authentic” voices and identities of African American poets.

This “authenticity” ascribed to black voices and narratives can signal not only fetishization on behalf of white bourgeois audiences, but also commodification. Amy Robinson notes, “exchanged...between proprietors and possessors of any and every ilk, marginal peoples take on the characteristics of commodity whose value is only relative to that of another” (1996:251). While on a year-long poetry tour, slammer and anti-corporate advocate Alix Olson encountered a telling experience:

What is the current lifetime of a grassroots art form? The seconds before a corporate executive hears about it. I receive an invitation to appear on an MTV slam poetry show pilot. I don’t do the show, but attend the studio taping with a few other poets. As we enter, the bouncer scolds us, “Are you on the preferred list?” Apparently, we are not. Finally, we’re escorted to “standing-room,” our heads bumping lighting equipment as we crane our necks to scan the seated crowd. Although the four performers are our peers, representing an assortment of ethnicities, races, and sexualities, the audience is a monolith of white, heterosexual couples. We learn later that models were invited to play audience members. “People at home want to relate to the audience,” I am told. (2000:69)

Olson's experience puts into relief acute troubles surrounding the reproduction, commodification, and consumption of slam poetry as it relates to a white mainstream American audience. Gareth Griffiths argues, "authentic speech, where it is conceived not as political strategy but as a fetishized cultural commodity, may be employed...to enact a discourse of 'liberal violence', re-enacting its own oppressions on the subjects it purports to represent and defend" (1995:241). Olson's experience seems to exhibit this type of "liberal violence," and it is not the only instance to display the ambivalence of fetishization. African American slam poet Gerry Quickly was approached by Nike to compose a poem for a television commercial.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing what rap did for Tommy Hilfiger products, Perry Ellis International presented black poets appearing in the movie *Slam* "Breakthrough Awards" in hopes of making a marketing link between their products and slam (Brown 1998:8). The commercial rubric under which slam poetry recordings are marketed—spoken word—shirks the identity of poetry all together, much less that of "slam poetry." Surveying the range of spoken word video and audio recordings which are not self-produced and which strive to find white mainstream audiences, one will find that most performers represented are of color and that the majority are African American. This trend seems to indicate that, like some brands of rap and hip-hop, commercial interests in slam are not wholly invested in promoting the phenomenon of slam poetry itself but are instead invested, at least in part, in capitalizing upon the black identities of its most successful poets and marketing them to white audiences.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of representation is acute for African American slam poets, as it is for most black artists in general. Mercer notes that because of the political nature of reclaiming "blackness" from the ashes of racism, black artists are "burdened with a whole range of extra-artistic concerns precisely because...they are seen as 'representatives' who speak on behalf of, and are thus accountable to, their communities" (1994:240). Like hip-hop artists who are frequently called to "represent" a neighborhood or African Americans in general through their music,<sup>5</sup> performances by black slam poets can similarly be called upon to acknowledge otherness (as in the NPS-sponsored

readings). As “representatives,” African American poets may be and often are received as embodying illusion of racial “essence” or “authenticity” surrounding black speech, gestures, situations, or themes which can be ultimately limiting for African Americans and slam itself. For example, GNO’s “Street Poet” is an illustrative declaration of the “authenticity” of the slam genre. However, considering the language and attitude expressed in this poem, we see too how this “authenticity” is commensurate with an “authentic” sense of black urban masculinity—of “ghetto angst personified.”

In a discussion with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Amiri Baraka contends poetry slams “make the poetry a carnival—the equivalent of a strong-man act. They will do to the poetry movement what they did to rap: give it a quick shot in the butt and elevate it to commercial showiness, emphasizing the most backward elements” (Gates 1995:40). With Baraka’s comments in mind, important issues of audience, “black authenticity,” and consumption come into relief. Is slam poetry, particularly the poetry of the black slam poet and the communities s/he comes to “represent,” being received according to the tastes of ghetto-chic—the consumption of the urban, “criminal” black male by white bourgeois audiences? If so, what are the political consequences of such representations?

## **II: The Ambivalence of “Black Authenticity” in *Slam***

In *Slam*, director Marc Levin depicts slam poetry as an extension of an urban African American poetic community and seems to offer it as an alternative to black criminality. Throughout the film, there are several places where the “freedom” represented by slam and its predominately black community is contrasted to the physical and mental imprisonment of African American males. The two main characters of the film, Ray Joshua and Lauren Bell, are played by slam poets Saul Williams and Sonja Sohn. The issue of racial authenticity is crucial when considering the movie *Slam* and how it represents the participation of African Americans in slam poetry. The movie’s protagonist, Ray, is a loner who peddles out poetic bits of wisdom as he conducts small marijuana sales in a D.C. ghetto nick-

named “Dodge City.” Ray is apprehended while fleeing the scene of a drive-by shooting and is incarcerated for narcotics possession. While inside, he turns his talent for wordsmithing rap-like, spiritually-conscious poetry into a response to prison violence. He comes to the attention of Lauren, an idealistic and outspoken young black woman who teaches a poetry class in the prison and whose brother died as a result of ghetto violence. When Ray makes bail and ponders the possible 2-10 year prison sentence that awaits him on his possession charge, Lauren invites him to a poetry reading and a romance ensues. After an explosive argument in which Ray reveals he is thinking about skipping bail, Ray meets Lauren at a poetry slam. She invites him on stage to read, and his poem about prison as the cultural memory of enslavement electrifies the audience. At the end, we are still uninformed about his decision regarding his plea, but we are presented with a final high-angle nighttime shot of Ray at the base of the ominous and brightly-lit Washington Monument.

Mired in the experience of prison, crime, and violence faced by many African American males in urban centers, Ray’s role seems crafted by the filmmakers to “represent” a version of the “authentic” urban black experience. One parent of this “authenticity” is the style of the film itself: the newly emergent mode of *drama vérité*. Like the French *cinéma vérité* movement of the 1960’s, *drama vérité* incorporates everyday people, situations, and dialogue into its film text at the discretion of the director. Levin, discovering that much of his documentary shooting techniques were being picked up by “a lot of gritty fiction work, such as HBO’s prison series *Oz*” (Rudolph 1998:116), collaborated with cinematographer Mark Benjamin to mix the possibilities of drama and documentary in *Slam*. Their efforts resulted in *drama vérité*: a style which incorporates a loose script with improvised dialogue by its actors and real-life subjects. Stylistically, *Slam* reveals its documentary origins, such as shooting with a hand-held camera or using Hi-8 film (which adds a grainy, video-like texture to its subject). *Drama vérité*’s “authenticity” also extends to its cast—although poet-actors were chosen for the lead roles, other slam poets act in non-poet roles (such as Bonz Malone as the inmate Hopha and Beau Sia as the trust-fund kid Jimmy Huang), and several

characters or extras are acted by prison inmates or ex-gang members. Finally, *drama vérité* also borrows the concept of real place from documentaries. As 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Cameraman John Kirby remarks, *Slam* is shot in the “*nonset* of the ghetto and the prison—genuine life locations as opposed to prefabricated sets” (1998:145, my emphasis).

In describing how realism functions in British working-class “Kitchen Sink” films of the late 1950s, Andrew Higson proposes films invested in realism of a particular class are deeply invested in the exchange between surface realism—the sincerity of the characters or landscape portrayed—and moral realism—a “moral commitment to a particular set of social problems and solutions” around which a filmmaker organizes the film’s style, narrative, and aesthetics (1996:136) and which are “authentically” displayed. We can think of surface realism as a term describing the physical accuracies of the landscape, acting, and *mise-en-scène* and moral realism as the set of political interests a filmmaker conveys from the film’s point-of-view. Transplanting these terms—surface and moral realism—to bear on the movie *Slam* can be helpful in understanding how a version of “black authenticity” is constructed, as well as how that “authenticity” comes to represent slam itself in the film.

Although the narrative of Ray Joshua and Lauren Bell is fictional, filmic elements of *Slam* such as real place and untrained actors mingle to give the film a heightened surface realism. In fact, the style of *drama vérité* is directly *invested* in and *constructs* this realism, and like the genre of slam, it is not without its moral-political assertions about authenticity. “*Drama vérité* is the cinema of freedom; it is the filmed voice of real people,” remarks Kirby (1998:145). He continues: “because of its populist method, [it] automatically stands opposed to hierarchy and rails against structures of class, race, and gender” (1998:146). Like slam poetry, the surface realism of the film text compliments its moral realism and vice versa. Its “gritty” style is indicative of a set of political values meant to challenge, provoke, and argue that the African American male is in a modern state of slavery. In his production journal, Levin asserts his mission is to “tell stories that reveal the truth of our time. It isn’t about movies, it’s about life” (1998:46). He also wonders if Will-



iams, who received his M.F.A. in drama from NYU's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts, can "be hard enough to pull off the street realism" (1998:28). The anxiety Levin expresses about Williams's performance is telling. If we give credence to Gilroy's thesis that black "authenticity" is actually an essentializing construction of a culture's vision of what is black, we can view the surface and moral realisms of *Slam* as a particular *version* of "real" urban blackness—that of the director, cinematographer, and crew who have put together the film. The anxiety Levin feels is a signal that the standards of black "street realism" are themselves constructions, behaviors which are repeated and perpetuated through performance as "real."

The exchange of surface and moral realism in *Slam* projects an overall sense of black "authenticity" onto the physical landscapes of the D.C. ghetto and prison, which is juxtaposed to the towering white structure of the Washington Monument (which by no stretch of the imagination comes to symbolize an oppressive white male government). Aside from this monument, the usual landmarks one associates with Washington D.C. are decidedly absent; Ray and Lauren's story unfolds for the most part against the backdrop of grey prison walls and the brick enclosures of the inner city. In doing so, the film creates a sense of "black authenticity" about these areas, as if it were, with the aid of its realist techniques, arguing, "this is where real black people live, work, and serve their time." The physical similarities between the D.C. prison and the Dodge City ghetto are not lost on the audience; it becomes clear that these are related landscapes which incarcerate their protagonists, if they are indeed not one in the same.

Furthermore, the "black authenticity" of this landscape comes to reflect on slam poetry itself. In *Slam*, a deliberate context is constructed to reflect on Saul Williams' poetry—it is carefully and painstakingly placed within the "authentically black" context of bullets, the black ghetto, and hard time, and thus comes to "represent" the voice of the disenfranchised African American male in these landscapes. "Slam" becomes a referent to slam poetry and the "slam" of prison bars on African American males. Although intimately soulful, textured, and mature, Williams' poetry in the context of the film serves as an extension of this "authentic" experience for

the character of Ray, the keystone for the controlling metaphor of the “slam” as a physical and mental lockdown on urban black youth. “i am that nigga,” Ray proclaims in his final poem performed at the slam; “my niggas are dying before their time / my niggas are serving unjust time / my niggas are dying because of time” (Levin et al. 1998:261, 262). His statement “i am that nigga” is, to borrow J.L. Austin’s term (1962), performative in nature; it not only describes his identity but it creates his identity—as black, urban, masculine, and self-defined in reclaiming and signifying upon racist vocabulary. Through his proclamation, Ray becomes for his slam audience within the film—and perhaps for the audience of the film itself—the urban black male which the film has made its focus. This performance of identity, as shown by the uproarious standing ovation his slam audience gives him, is deemed the most “authentic” by the film. In this way, the literary genre of slam represented in the film mingles with the ethnic, gender, and class signifiers of the film’s setting—that is, slam as it is represented here authenticates and is authenticated by the threatening<sup>6</sup> black masculinity represented through the real place of the D.C. prison. That is not to say, however, that Saul Williams’ performance is *unreal* or *surreal per se*, just that his performance may be targeted toward an audience who combines his poetry with the discourse of urban black masculinity. But who is this audience? And how has *Slam* been received?

For an independent film on a low budget (\$1 million) and done on spec, *Slam* has earned immense critical attention and praise.<sup>7</sup> Reviewers seem to imply a majority audience of white liberal bourgeois moviegoers who have an interest in independent film. In 1998, the film won both the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and the award for Best Debut Film at the Cannes Film Festival. In review after review, *Slam* is praised for its insistent, “authentic” portrayal of the difficult choices presented to urban African American males by an antagonistic legal system and which a liberal bourgeois white audience may appreciate. My point here is not whether or not *Slam* bears false witness to the situation (if there is indeed any *one* situation) of urban black males, but that reviewers assign “realism” and “authenticity” to the film merely

because it takes this situation—presented to this audience—as its subject. “The grit feels like real grit, not movie grit,” remarks *Houston Chronicle* reviewer Jeff Millar, “and it’s abrasive and nagging as grit is intended to be” (1998:6). To whom would this subject feel “gritty?” Millar’s language seems to imply that his audience would feel guilt (“nagging”) and find the film’s realism “abrasive”—i.e., antagonistically “other” than its own position. This, again, indicates a white liberal audience who is sympathetic to the concerns of African Americans, but who are also ensconced in the white bourgeois.

Furthermore, the film is also criticized for moments where the realism falters—that is, where the film text doesn’t fit with the “authentic” script of black urban masculinity when viewed by a white bourgeois audience. For example, one reviewer disparagingly remarks that the “paramount fake moment” of the film is when Sonja Sohn wears a tank top while teaching her prison poetry class (Tate et al. 1998:152), implying that the costuming disrupts the audience’s expectations of the “authentic” (read: sexually threatening) black male. Roger Ebert’s lukewarm review of *Slam* remarks the scenes shot in the ghetto and prison “were all filmed with realism,” but that the romance between Ray and Lauren as well as the final poetry slam “seem out of another movie” (1998:3). These comments suggest that an audience may agree the narrative of the “authentic” black male is contained and should remain within the boundaries of the ghetto and prison; when it escapes these settings, the traditional narrative of black urban masculinity cannot survive and ceases to be “real.”

Is, then, this movie’s success contingent upon its representation of a criminal or threatening black male “essence” geared toward a white bourgeois audience? Further examples seem to suggest so. In *Slamnation*, the documentary film chronicling the 1996 National Poetry Slam, Saul Williams and his poetry are featured prominently. In fact, in *Slamnation*, we see two of the same poems featured in *Slam*—“Amethyst Rocks” and “Sha Clack Clack”—yet they are placed within the context of the National Poetry Slam and Williams’ own life, not a “gritty” black D.C. ghetto. Although *Slamnation* could most certainly be deemed to have more surface realism than

*Slam* by virtue of its documentary footage (although we must recognize that a documentary is a constructed narrative as well), *Slamnation*'s distribution has been limited to a small number of film festival circuits, and has yet to be distributed widely in theaters.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, *Slam* has been released, according to the Internet Movie Database, in Spain, Argentina, Japan, and France in addition to its mainstream release in the U.S. This suggests that mere surface realism is not the key to predominately white bourgeois consumption. Rather, the release of these films seem on some level calibrated by whether or not they focus on an "essence" of urban black masculinity which white bourgeois viewers can consume as "other." An example of this is the tagline printed on *Slam*'s promotional materials and video boxes next to a high-contrast photo of Saul Williams' face: "All in line for a slice of devil pie." The line appears nowhere in the film's music, poetry, or script—it appears only in the promotional material. For a white bourgeois audience of independent film, the curious tagline may be interpreted as vilifying the film's protagonist and his situation, making them "evil" or "other."

But the tagline reveals, too, the film's marketers' search for a another audience: audiences of hip-hop and rap. The tagline originates from a song by black rapper and R&B artist D'Angelo entitled "Devil's Pie," which critiques both the U.S. justice system and the black gangsta lifestyle:

Fuck the slice we want the pie  
 Why ask why, till we fry  
 Watch us all, stand in line  
 For a slice of the devil's pie  
 Drugs and thugs, women wine  
 Three or four, at a time  
 Watch them all, stand in line  
 For a slice of the devil's pie  
 Who am I, to justify  
 All the evil in our eye  
 When I myself, feel the high  
 From all that I despise  
 Behind the jail or in the grave  
 I have to lay, in this bed I made

The tagline may be displayed on the video boxes of *Slam* because of the obvious overlap in subject matter and because Saul Williams and D'Angelo have collaborated in the past (Williams completed the liner notes of D'Angelo's 2000 Album *Voodoo*, which features the song "Devil's Pie"). But the promotional trail leads further. "Devil's Pie" was featured in *Belly* (1998), a film directed by black video auteur Hype Williams which was released concurrently with *Slam*. *Belly* is a film targeted at particularly black audiences and, secondarily, young white consumers of hip-hop. Billed as an "urban crime drama," *Belly* stars hip-hop artists in a black gangsta-style crime scenario. Its reviewers note a weak plot, but they also note the similarity of Hype Williams' film style to those of his popular black music videos. What all of this indicates is that the promoters of *Slam* were, perhaps, trying to attract a cross-over audience from *Belly*—specifically, consumers of black rap and hip-hop. This audience is more racially diverse than *Slam*'s predominately white independent film audience and indicates a market-based link between black popular music, the "authenticity" and "realness" espoused by this music (i.e., "keepin' it real"), and black identity in *Slam*. That is, to make *Slam* more marketable and expand its audience, its promoters may have relied upon the image of the black gangsta rapper and the "authenticity" of his music and lifestyle. On the other hand, the use of the line from "Devil's Pie," given the thrust of the song, may also be a *critique* of the gangsta's "authenticity." In any event, the use of the tagline also serves to diversify *Slam*'s overall audience, or rather, attract another diverse cross-over audience.

Finally, we must also consider the merits of *Slam*'s moral realism in addressing the condition of black urban males, prison inmates, and their communities. Although the film's makers and reviewers engage in the discourse of realism and "black authenticity" to describe it, *Slam* does make a powerful statement about the position of black males in prison society and the few options available to them. What would a film that attempts to accurately represent imprisoned urban black males look like? Probably much like one with the moral realism of *Slam*. One scene which puts this moral realism into relief is when a prison guard (who is played by

C.O. Lucas, an actual guard in the D.C. prison) gives Ray his numbers:

You know what that number represents, son? 276,000. Now listen carefully to me and you'll understand a little bit about what makes me so angry. We only have less than 500,000 people in the District of Columbia, son. And only 70 percent of them are black. Now what's 70 percent of 500,000? Do the math! We got about 350,000 black people in DC. Of the 350,000, half of them are female, aren't they? Well, what's that? Do the math, son, the math! Less than 175,000 people are males like yourself.... We are moving on down the line, son; by the time we cross 300,000, we'll be down to 16- and 17-year-olds. We're wiping out our race here in Washington, D.C., and here you are in here playing your silly little games. Well, we got something for you, son! Welcome to the D.C. Jail. You might make it out of here, you might not. (Levin et al. 1998:197)

The high rate of imprisonment for urban black males presented in this way may provoke audiences of any color to reflect upon and take action regarding the seeming lack of options these men have. The poetry performed by Saul Williams is similarly provocative, and may cause audience members to make more nuanced judgments about black urban men rather than rely upon the stereotype of black criminality. This exemplifies the political ambivalence of Mercer's fetishism: audiences may "other" the main characters or may valorize them (the dyad once again), but they most likely occupy several positions of desire at once. Furthermore, audience members may indeed feel *Slam* is an *accurate* representation of a black D.C. ghetto and black viewers may identify with Ray's situation and his critique of the black criminal lifestyle. However, accuracy and the discourse of "black authenticity," as I have tried to show with my discussion of surface and moral realism, are ultimately two different things and are not mutually exclusive. Ultimately, we must consider both the benefits and critiques of the discourse of "black authenticity" if we are to understand *Slam's* appeal to multi-racial audiences.

In *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks asks us to critique “a cultural marketplace wherein blackness is commodified in such a way that fictive accounts of underclass black life in whatever setting may be more lauded, more marketable, than other visions because mainstream conservative audiences desire these images” (1994:152). *Drama vérité* and the genre of slam poetry, in their engagements with performativity, realism, and “black authenticity,” continue to trouble and be troubled by the question of how to “represent” African Americans without encountering the dangers hooks suggests. Although African American slam poets continue to challenge the ethnic, class, and textual biases of “P”oetry by “representing” their communities, the politics of authenticity surrounding their reception can end up fetishizing or commodifying African Americans as “others.” By the same token, these politics can also bring attention to black voices and lend a complexity to black identity not often heard.

The ambivalent political nature of *Slam* highlights the nature of racial politics, performance, and the conundrum of representation in both mainstream and subaltern communities in the U.S. In this article, I have tried to trouble the readings of urban black masculinity by white and black audiences alike. Other readings are not only possible, but probable if using a framework of non-essentialist, multiple reception. In all of these we must consider the ambivalent political relationship between the black performer to her/his audience. Perhaps the main question I want to ask is not, in Ron Silliman’s words, “Who speaks?” but ultimately, “Who represents?”—black slam poets or their audiences who assign them “authenticity?”

## NOTES

1. Recent National Poetry Slams have been held in Seattle, WA (2001); Providence, RI (2000); Chicago, IL (1999); Austin, TX (1998); and Middletown, CT (1997). Many slammers agree that the 1999 Chicago competition had the most “mixed” audience, but that generally the NPS audience is overwhelmingly white.

2. See Bhabha’s 1996 article “Culture’s In-Between” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, pp. 53-60. London: Sage Publications.

3. Nike's sole requirement for Quickly's poem was that it include the word "Nike." He responded by writing a poem about the company's unpopular sweatshop policy—a poem for which he was paid, but which of course never aired.

4. A counter-example is Moore Black Press, a small independent press founded by slammer Jessica Care Moore who is featured on the 1996 Nuyorican slam team in *Slamnation*. Frustrated that the mainstream publishing industry would not take on her work, Moore decided to start her own publishing venture. Moore Black Press has published two books, Moore's *The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth* (1997) and Saul Williams' *The Seventh Octave: The Early Writings of Saul Williams* (1997). It must be noted that Moore Black Press also capitalizes on black identity of its poets, although it is not necessarily targeting white mainstream audiences. Williams' second book, *She* (1999), was picked up by MTV Books/Pocket Books—a press that *does* target a white mainstream audience. I would argue that Williams' second publication with MTV Books might be tied to his recent success with the audiences of *Slam* and *Slamnation*, as well as his burgeoning acting career in mainstream film. That is, he has become a particularly *marketable* black slam poet who appeals to MTV's target bourgeois white youth market.

5. For further reading on this topic, see S. Craig Watkins's book *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (1998), Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

6. I use the word "threatening" here to reflect both the threat of the stereotypical "criminal" black male toward white bourgeois audiences and the looming threat of incarceration felt by some urban black males.

7. For example, the production of *Slam* was not guaranteed release or distribution by a movie studio. *Slam* gained distribution only after winning praise at the Sundance and Cannes Film Festivals.

8. *Slamnation* has, however, recently been picked up by Home Box Office and occasionally airs as part of the cable channel's regular rotation.

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