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Marc Smith, the Uptown Poetry Slam, and the Establishment of a Poetry Community

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ABSTRACT :

Marc Kelly Smith (born 1949) is an American poet and founder of the poetry slam movement, for which he received the nickname Slam Papi. Smith was born in 1949 and grew up on the southeast side of Chicago. He attended/graduated Charles P. Caldwell Elementary School and James H. Bowen High School. Smith spent most of his young life as a construction worker, but has written poetry since he was 19. He considers himself a socialist. Smith started at an open mic night at the Get Me High lounge in November 1984 called the Monday Night Poetry Reading. Even as poets scoffed at artists "performing" their work, rather than genteelly "reading" it, the event grew in popularity. Smith saw his approach as an "up yours" to establishment poets he considered snooty and effete, because at their events, "no one was listening. "Pull the Next One Up," one of the poems that slam poet Marc Smith included in *Crowd pleaser* (1996), is preceded by a prose introduction that describes a performance he gave at a "high-class country club on Chicago's North Shore" Smith, who founded the Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill, had been invited to this country club in order to bring some "off beat street culture" to Chicago's elite (ibid). It is clear from Smith's introduction that he perceives this audience to be unflappable and perhaps a little too well bred for the slam. He describes the audience as "seated sedately at their gourmet dinner tables--starched, stern, and ready to be bored" .

KEYWORDS : Poem, Dreams, Audience, Performer, Marc Smith

I. INTRODUCTION :

"Pull the Next One Up," one of the poems that slam poet Marc Smith included in *Crowd pleaser* (1996), is preceded by a prose introduction that describes a performance he gave at a "high-class country club on Chicago's North Shore" Smith, who founded the Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill, had been invited to this country club in order to bring some "off beat street culture" to Chicago's elite (ibid). It is clear from Smith's introduction that he perceives this audience to be unflappable and perhaps a little too well bred for the slam. He describes the audience as "seated sedately at their gourmet dinner tables--starched, stern, and ready to be bored" (ibid). Given the venue and the audience (not to mention the mandate to bring "street culture" to the country club set), Smith's decision to perform this particular poem is noteworthy. "Pull the Next One Up" is a critique of the myth of rugged individualism. Using mountain climbing as an allegory for upward social mobility, this poem posits socioeconomic success as the result of collective action: the men and women in the poem get to the top of the mountain because someone else has pulled them up and, Smith suggests, it is their duty then to help those below them to reach the peak.

When you ask how high is this mountain
With a compulsion to know
Where you stand in relationship to other peaks,
Look down to wherefrom you came up
And see the rope that's tied to your waist
Tied to the next man's waist,
Tied to the next woman's waist,
Tied to the first man's waist,
To the first woman's waist
. . .and pull the rope!
Never mind the flags you see flapping on conquered pinnacles.
Don't waste time scratching inscriptions into the monolith.
You are the stone itself.
And each man, each woman up the mountain,
Each breath exhaled at the peak,
Each glad-I-made-it . . . here's-my-hand,
Each heartbeat wrapped around the hot skin
of the sun-bright sky,
Each noise panted or cracked with laughter,
Each embrace, each cloud that holds everyone
in momentary doubt . . .
All these inscriptions of a human force that can
Conquer conquering hand over hand pulling the rope
Next man up, next woman up.

Sharing a place, sharing a vision.
Room enough for all on all the mountain peaks.
Force enough for all (*Crowdpleaser* 6)

In response to the audience's sedate reception of this poem, Smith steps off stage and begins touching audience members and pressing close to their bodies. He thinks about climbing on the tables but decides to hold off. Smith goes on to define this performance as transformational: by transgressing the boundary between the stage and the floor, he breaks down the barrier between these wealthy suburbanites and himself and establishes a connection with his audience. As he finishes his performance, Smith realizes that "under the crust these well-heeled people were no different than me; day-to-day folks who had lived their dreams and made their money just as I someday hoped to live mine and make a little too" (ibid).¹ For Smith this performance becomes emblematic of what he's identified elsewhere as the slam's role as a counter public forum, a "civic house, a place where a community can gather to hear a lot of voices and to be honest and take risks.

Although I remain skeptical about the revelatory nature of this particular performance, Smith's description does nicely illustrate the community-building function of live poetry events such as the poetry slam, the open mic, and the poetry/music show. The performance that Smith describes here reflects what Victor Turner has identified as the transformational potential of reflexive social dramas such as ritual, carnivals, and rites of passage. In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Turner defines these ritualized" performances as the aesthetic equivalent of the subjunctive mood. Rather than realistically reflecting social relations in a given culture at a given time, the performance is "used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility" .As such, social dramas are not simply critiques of existing social hierarchies and institutions; they are also ritualized spaces through which a given community tries out new cultural forms and new modes of social interaction. By spontaneously leaving the stage, performing from the floor, and touching the audience, Smith undermines the hierarchical structure of the conventional poetry reading. The poem becomes a public art, one that is composed in the chance interactions between performer, venue, and audience.

It is this interdigitation of chance, text, and community formation that I am most interested in analyzing in this chapter. In the pages that follow, I provide a brief introduction to the

Uptown Poetry Slam, the ritualized poetry competition that Smith founded at the Green Mill Lounge in Chicago. Maria Damon's "Was That Dissonant, or Different?" and Christopher Beach's "Poetic Screams of I Am," both of which have been published in the past two years, are insightful introductions to the poetry slam movement. Neither author, however, provides much information about Smith or the poetry slam's roots, choosing instead to focus on two diaspora slam communities (the Twin Cities and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, respectively). By focusing on Marc Smith's career and the Uptown Poetry Slam in this chapter, I hope to fill in some of the missing history and contextualize Smith's work as Slam Papi (founding father of the Slam Family Collective) within the emergence and proliferation of the slam poetry movement.

My primary interest here, however, is analytical rather than documentary. While both Damon and Beach describe the poetry slam as engaged in the act of community formation, neither fully analyzes the relationship between the elements of the show and the show's community-building function. In "Poetic Screams of I Am," Beach claims that audience interactivity and community are intrinsic to the slam poetry movement. However, while the early pages of the essay introduce the reader to the slam scene at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, the second part of the essay lapses into conventional poetic analysis. Beach includes close readings of poems by Maggie Estep, Hal Sirowitz, and Paul Beatty, poets who began their careers performing at the Cafe. Although he claims a connection between these poets' work and the Cafe, his analyses do not place them within the poetry community that he is so adamant about addressing in the early pages of the essay. Damon, on the other hand, surveys a number of dissident poetry events, most notably the poetry slam and the open mic night. She also calls for a new kind of reading practice that is attentive to the poem in performance. According to Damon, "This public poetics deserves a 'close listening' that differs from, on the one hand, the close reading we have been taught (since the 1940s at least) to associate with a proper reception of poetry, and on the other hand, from the 'generalized' or master-narrativizing (instrumentalist) listening that current cultural studies--which is sympathetic to the popular registers of culture slams purport to reach, but not to poetry itself--brings to such a phenomena". While Damon introduces the reader to specific performance events around the Twin Cities area and while

her analysis situates the performers within a specific cultural context, her essay does not include close readings/auditions of the poetry performed at these events.

By enumerating these criticisms I do not wish to detract from the important preliminary work by enumerating these criticisms I do not wish to detract from the important preliminary work that these two essays accomplish. Rather, I hope to bring into focus the difficulties facing scholars who write about performance poetics. Just as these community poetics call into question commonly held notions regarding textual authority and authorial "ownership," they also defy conventional forms of exegesis. If the show is a constitutive element of the poem, akin to formal elements such as meter, line breaks, and diction, then how do we develop a hybrid critical vocabulary for talking about the interaction between the poem-as-text, the poem-in-performance--including the interaction between poet and audience--and extra textual elements such as audience demographics and location? Can the tools of textual analysis be applied to a hybrid art form, one that combines the textual and formal aspects of poetry with oral and kinetic elements such a voice, gesture, and dance? How do we determine authenticity and authorship when discussing an art form that is the product of a collaborative composition process, one that involves not only the show's creator and the performers but also audience members?

II. CROWD-PLEASER: POETRY, PERFORMANCE, AND THE "ART FORM OF THE SHOW"

Marc Smith's work at the interface of theater, popular music, and poetry exemplifies the blurring of literary and vernacular cultures that typifies contemporary performance poetry. Like David Hernández, who is discussed in Chapter Two, Smith is a seminal figure in the local (Chicago) poetry scene and the national performance poetry movement (both Bob Holman and Patricia Smith cite him as an influence on their poetry careers). And, like Hernández, Smith has been a tireless advocate of a place for poetry in the public life of the city. Annex-construction-worker-turned-poet, Smith began performing his poetry at various poetry venues around the city in the mid-1980s. His early work with poetry and performance centered around the syncretizing of poetry and popular cultural forms--the circus, rock music, and jazz. One of the founders of the Neutral Turf Poetry Festival, Smith has also designed

and emceed performance poetry events for the Field Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and a variety of colleges and universities (in fact, he designed and emceed the show at the Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis that Maria Damon discusses in her 1998 essay). He founded the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, the poetry performance group that preceded the slam, in 1985. In 1988, Smith founded the Bob Shakespeare Band, a jazz ensemble for voices and the precursor to the polyvocal "group piece" performances at the National Grand Slams, and Pong Unit, the rock/jazz/funk/poetry fusion band with which he still performs.³ Although Smith remains a purist about performance, he did publish *Crowd pleaser*, a cross between a collected works and a history of Chicago's nascent performance poetry movement, in 1996. He is most well-known, however, as the founder and emcee of the Uptown Poetry Slam, the poetry mock-competition that inspired the slam poetry movement. As the "Slam Papi" of the Slam Family Collective, a position that seems to include overseeing operations of the newly formed Poetry Slam, Inc. and presiding over the annual Slam Masters' Meeting, Smith remains the guiding force behind the movement.

III. CHICAGO POETRY ENSEMBLE'S PERFORMANCE SERIES (1985-1986) :

The Chicago Poetry Ensemble's performance series (1985-1986) anticipates the interactive, chaotic performance style that typifies the Uptown Poetry Slam. Like other early experiments with poetry-performance hybrids--Bob Holman's Double Talk Show or his Panic*DJ! Series, for example--early Chicago Poetry Ensemble shows tended to be more scripted than the typical poetry slam. Circus Chatter, one of the CPE's early poetry performance shows featured Smith and other members of the ensemble in character as members of a traveling circus, complete with costumes and props. And like these other early poetry shows, the CPE's shows emphasized a carnivalesque, participatory atmosphere. These early CPE shows ensured the interactive aspect of the show by featuring guerilla performances designed to deflect attention away from the stage. For instance, Circus Chatter included insurgent performances by members of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble who worked the door and "broke the ice with the audience" and guest performers planted at the bar who would interrupt the action on stage by spontaneously standing up and performing a poem. The structure of these

shows, like the structure of Holman's early shows, reflects a conscious attempt by the show's players to subvert the hierarchical dynamic of a conventional poetry reading by making audience participation an integral aspect of the performance.

IV. CONCLUSION:

This research paper is an attempt to address the critical and theoretical questions that are generated by this vibrant, multiform poetry. It is also an attempt to theorize the connection between the textual and extratextual elements intrinsic to Marc Smith's Uptown Poetry Slam and this poetry event's community-building function. What follows is not meant to be a definitive analysis of the poetry slam as a poetic form. Given the variation between Smith's weekly shows, not to mention the variation between venues and slam communities, this strikes me as foolhardy. Smith's description here is similar to what Charles Bernstein has theorized as the "fundamentally plural existence" of the poem (*Close Listening* 9). Like Bernstein, Smith calls into question New Critical modes of poetic analysis and challenges the primacy of the text over the performance. And, like Bernstein, he subverts common presuppositions about textual authority and originality. In his essay, Bernstein is most interested in analyzing what he calls the a/oral dimension of the text. Smith, however, chooses to emphasize "the show," a poetic form which, as his definition above suggests, encompasses text and audio text as well as extra textual elements such as whether the performer is miked, the relationship between performer and audience, and the size and nature of the venue.

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