

2010

The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America (Book Review)

Matthew Oware
moware@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/socanth-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oware, Matthew. Review of *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, by Susan Somers-Willet, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Volume 34, Issue 4 (2010): 473-474.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology and Anthropology at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology and Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.



The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America

AUTHOR: SUSAN B. A. SOMERS-WILLETT

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS, 2009

PRICE: \$22.95

ISBN: 978-0-472-05059-8

REVIEWER: MATTHEW OWARE, DEPAUW UNIVERSITY

Susan Somers-Willett writes a compelling and intriguing examination of Slam Poetry. She chronicles its beginnings, originating in a white working-class neighborhood in 1980s Chicago, to the genres current deployment in movies from Hollywood and the Broadway stage in New York. Through her examination of the genre, Somers-Willett manages to take the reader through the fairly complicated and nuanced life of a Slam Poet and Slam poetry. In addition, she masterfully dissects how this genre informs our understanding of racial and ethnic identity politics in America.

Slam Poetry is competitive performance poetry. Poets are expected to perform short three to five minute poems with audience members ultimately determining the winner by scoring factors such as quality of performance, content, and originality. Furthermore it is interactive, with poets expecting, sometimes

demanding, active audience participation. Crowd participation was deliberately instituted because the genre was seen as a counter to traditional poetry sets where poems were read to audiences with little, if any, audience involvement. At traditional poetry readings crowd members are considered neophytes who listen to the master. This role is reversed in slam poetry—the audience determines “good” material.

Somers-Willett explores how, although started by a working-class white male, the genre became primarily associated with marginalized individuals, specifically, people of color and women, and how identity and political views became the primary rhetorical frameworks that poets employed; for example, emphasizing sexuality or racial/ethnic identity. At points throughout the book Somers-Willett seems to affirm the emphasis being on these sorts of identities; yet, there are other times where she seems skeptical of identity being the primary and most prominent aspect of Slam poetry. Indeed, as the genre evolved, the author expresses concern over commercial forces pushing identity politics to the forefront; for example, hip hop mogul Russell Simmons’ Def Poetry Jam routinely features artists who discuss the importance of their marginalized statuses.

Yet, it is clear from Somers-Willett analyses that audience members themselves also reward poets who highlight their oppressed and marginalized statuses. In this interactive genre, a give-and-take exists between the mostly white, liberal viewers or audience members and minority, often black, poets. Somers-Willett speculates that whites who reward or select minority winners who emphasize their identities or political views, are being allowed to assuage their own white guilt, even as poets highlight the oppressiveness of whiteness or heterosexism. What results as a by-product of the inter-play between audience and poet is the validation of a performed authentic self, a self that in some cases reaffirms and concretizes the belief that distinct differences exist between, for instance, blacks and whites or heterosexuals and homosexuals. Therein lies the strength and weakness of Slam poetry and Slam poets. A venue has been created that provides a voice or view that is not normally heard or espoused in traditional poetry, however, these voices, unfairly or not, become the supposed views of entire communities; thus, “blackness”, “gayness”, “liberalness” become narrowly defined and promoted by all parties involved. Presumably, all in an attempt to “keep it real.”

Somers-Willett produces a well-written, thought-provoking, and an all around good book. It is particularly useful in popular cultural courses, or courses

pertaining to African-American culture (she writes a chapter that explores the precursors of Slam, including Black Arts, minstrelsy, and Beatnik culture). Although the book focuses directly on Slam Poetry, Somers-Willett does an excellent job of delving into the overlap between this genre and rap music, pointing to the role that commercial entities played in linking the two to create a greater fan base for Slam. Indeed, these sets of analyses, by and far, are the strength of the book.