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Making Community with the Deep Communication of Popular Live Poetry
in San Diego, California at the Millennium

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the Requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication

by

Jenifer Rae Vernon

Committee in charge:

Professor Carol Padden, Chair
Professor Michael Davidson
Professor George Lipsitz
Professor Chandra Mukerji
Professor Olga Vasquez

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008

DEDICATION

To the dead but not forgotten:

My teacher, Rob Proudfoot, *"In this world there are very many deadlines
And very few lifelines . . ."* You live on in us.

My Grandma Vernon, for always being proud of me for trying to go to college
I hear your hum on rocky mountain.

To all of my kin, both dead and alive

For the work you have done with your bodies

Here's to the first generation of the recognized work we do with our minds.

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Communication, ethnography of performance, popular live poetry, working class studies, folklore, popular culture and poetics

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Making Community with the Deep Communication of Popular Live Poetry
in San Diego, California at the Millennium

by

Jenifer Rae Vernon

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Professor Carol Padden, Chair

By way of ethnography, this dissertation reveals the deep communication of popular live poetry and the public ritual of its event in a post-industrial urban center of the United States at the millennium. This genre of poetry is carried out through face-to-face communication between poets, audiences and hosts during free, publicly oriented events at venues such as coffeehouses. The form of poetry around which participants gather is rooted in the verbal art of oral, spoken poetry, draws inspiration from popular published poets, and performative practices from hip hop culture, slam poetry and storytelling. Popular live poetry reflects a working class ethos: in its form, its collective organization of poets in poetry crews, the bottom-up organization of its open-mics and slam events and the culture that comes to the fore through its activity. Yet, as a popular

forum, it includes both working class and middle class participants. The communicative production of the form of live poetry draws poets and audiences together in ephemeral moments of complex, affective, intersubjective community. These moments are instructive: in combination with the public ritual of the event that safeguards against hierarchical inequalities across participants, they guide the diverse, cross-class participants in the imagination of new constellations of community and the rehearsal of an urban polis yet to be.

My findings are based on research conducted from 2000 to 2004 and again from 2006 to 2007, in San Diego, CA, and to a lesser degree in Tijuana, MX and Austin, TX. I use methods of participant observation as an audience member and poet, ethnographic videography, and open-ended interviews with poets, audience members, event hosts and venue proprietors. I video-interviewed eight hosts of primary poetry events, forty poets, thirty audience members and video-recorded thirty-five acts of live poetry. I focus on the most popular event in the San Diego/Tijuana region during the first half of the decade of 2000 to ground my inquiry into the cultural and political meaning of popular live poetry at the millennium.

INTRODUCTION:

Gathering Round the Urban Campfire of Popular Live Poetry

In the following pages, I inquire into the public ritual of *popular live poetry* and its delicate framework of communication. This kind of poetry is carried out through face-to-face communication between poets, audiences and event hosts who come together around its practice in coffee houses and other publicly oriented venues. There is no cover charge and no requirement such as a published book or a college degree to participate. These factors combine to encourage the participation of diverse working class adults and youth alongside middle class others. Together, they make this dynamic form of poetry.

During the live act, poets stand before the audience and deliver their poetry: some read their poems from slips of paper while others recite from memory, looking out at the audience and sometimes choosing to walk among them. They learn to speak their poems with deliberate rhythm and inflection and a few incorporate singing into their live acts of poetry. The work they do is original and the recitation of others' poetry is uncommon.

Both new and experienced poets participate in popular live poetry events through the vehicle of the *open-mic*. They sign up with the host to deliver their poetry on the open-mic for a few minutes each and there are often many poets who perform over the course of the two to three hour happening. These events are commonly called *open-mic poetry readings*. I use the word "event," rather than "reading," because live poetry is not always read and because the constituency of poets within this world who chose not to read do so for significant reasons.

In addition to open-mics, there are also slam poetry events. They emerged in the mid 1980s out of Chicago, Illinois and soon after spread to other locales. Construction worker and poetry host, Marc Smith, designed the slam to draw working class audiences and a broad public to poetry by organizing the event in such a way as to make it more salient and worthwhile for them (Schmid 2000). The slam raises the role of the audience in the event by making them judges of the live acts of poetry. Slam has influenced open-mic events at local levels as poets and audience members steeped in slam experience participate in them too, and bring their ways of doing poetry and thinking about it into the event. In most major cities in the United States today, there are open-mics and poetry slams that meet regularly each week.

The world of popular live poetry's tenet that everyone has the right to become a poet regardless of class background and its value that diverse, working class lived experience can be transformed into some of the best poetry combine to produce a vibrant popular art. Further, the inclusive organizational structure and diverse, cross-class participants of popular live poetry events enable the expression of non-dominant standpoints beside others. Through the backdoor, the event is a space for the practice of democratic ideals such as equality and inclusion, and in a deep and colorful sense, free speech. Poetry carried out in this way is culturally productive activity.

I am interested in the ways in which popular live poetry draws people together like an urban campfire across the boundaries ordinarily heeded in daily life. How does live poetry cull a sense of diverse community across participants and simultaneously illuminate the particularity of each poet who steps into its light? Further, how does popular live poetry communicate the lived experience of class through its performative

practices, poetic content and organizational structure? Specifically, how have poets, audiences and event hosts come together in a poly-vocal semblance of community through the public ritual of popular live poetry in San Diego, California at the millennium?

My dissertation sheds light on the complexity of the ritual of live poetry and the communicative structure on which it hangs. Further, it describes the cultural and political salience of popular live poetry as it is enunciated through diverse participants' live acts and the meanings they ascribe to their activity. In so doing, it contributes to a greater understanding of the performance of popular live poetry. Through the praxis in the live poetry event over time, participants learn to speak for themselves, to the larger culture in which they are located, and to each other to build new kinds of community across borders in urban centers at the millennium.

John Dewey (1927) was one of the first scholars to point out that communication functions to generate community. The kind of communication afforded by popular live poetry events, coupled with poetry's knack for the expression of the deepest of sentiments, makes it a prime site for the investigation of communication in the service of community building. Yet, critics of poetry have often overlooked the central role of communication between poets and audience members during these events. And the discipline of communication has been occupied with more mediated and digitized forms of performance in recent years that often obscure the human relationships between communicators and scatter questions of power along a maze-like path of mediations.

As a kind of communication, popular live poetry stakes its claim as a whole-bodied, face-to-face form that generates a deep and complex sense of community. The

live act asserts the non-exchangeable value of each individual poet through their particular corporal presence and through the lived experiences they express in their poetries. The performances often unsettle stereotypes about disenfranchised subjects as poets framed in these identities expand themselves and audiences' conceptions of them, with the many topics and sentiments they express during their embodied live acts of poetry that are discordant with their visually marked identities. In relation to the broader context in which these particular poets and audience members live, the event is a space to challenge the dehumanization many experience in their daily lives.

In *Freedom Dreams*, historian Robin Kelley (2002) cites Aimee Césaire's 1945 essay, "Poetic Knowledge" in which Césaire states, "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" (2002:9). Kelley reflects upon the practice of poetic knowledge and considers the ends towards which it might lead. He states, "In the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folks, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born" (2002:10).

The popular live poetry event rests heavily on the epistemologies of ordinary folks and the poetry they create from their lived experience. As such, it is a site of the articulation of poetic knowledge. It blooms at the millennium in post-industrial urban centers in an era of late capitalism and transnational corporate flight that have made strikes and picket lines increasingly uncommon and spaces in which to learn about the possibility of solidarity, rare. The popular live poetry event teaches participants about the affective experience of solidarity as well as the limits to its binding force. The event does not lead to the transformation of society in the way that large-scale social movements do,

but it does foment hope and the ability to imagine other ways of being that are necessary to envision personal and collective change.

In performance critic Jill Dolan's terms, the live performative moment between audiences and performers operates as a performative that produces *hope*: she terms this dynamic, the *utopian performative* (2005). Applied to popular live poetry, the utopian performative manifests during the ephemeral moment of recognition between poet and audience, during which it makes its ultimate productive turn. This moment is culturally fruitful: it enriches the poet, the audience and the collective whole. I consider the ends towards which the utopian performative operates in the popular live poetry event conducted at the local level.

Inquiries into popular live poetry require an interdisciplinary framework to make sense of the form and its culturally productive activity. In my analysis, I draw on scholarship from critics of poetry who conceive of it broadly as a cultural form (Beach 1999) and social force (Schmid 2000, Gregory 2007) that influences the public (Harrington 2002), and manifests through ephemeral forms in daily life outside of academia (Sullivan 1997). In his treatment of poetry broadsides from the 1960s, literary historian, James Sullivan, argues that the perspectives on poetry held by people outside of academia and literary discussions should be considered in the analysis of ephemeral forms of poetry. He states:

Implicit here is an argument about the object of literary history- that it understand poetry as a cultural practice, a practice engaged in not only by those who master the art, but also by a host of lesser talents... a key project for historians of literature, therefore, is to ask what poetry *is* at a particular historical moment. The uses people find for poetry include the uses they find for poems in all ranges of quality. The lesser products may, in fact, be a more precise indication than the more accomplished work of

what people think poetry is and what they think it can do- from the point of view of a public without an advanced literary education- poetry as seen from the outside, rather than, as in most critical discussions, from the inside. (1997:11)

I follow Sullivan's lead in my consideration of the point of view of a public of whom the majority does not have an advanced literary education to inquire into why the ephemeral form of poetry around which they gather matters at this time.

My approach differs from Sullivan's however in that rather than privileging academic poetry as the best, I use ethnographic data to shed light on the aesthetic criteria of popular live poetry and why some cultural producers of poets and audiences in this world view it as equal and/or better than academic poetry. Yet, popular live poetry at this time is not a reaction against academia as much as it is a voice of popular culture and in its subterfuge, an expression of diverse, working class lived experience. My inquiry into the aesthetic criteria of the form allows me to open up a larger discussion of class in the world of popular live poetry. In this dissertation, I consider themes of class, identity, voice, power, the practice of democratic ideals and the possibility of community.

I take up the relationship between community and popular live poetry through the analysis of three related objects of study. I analyze the nature of the form and the ways in which its production generates a sense of community. Further, I describe the emergence of collectives of poets and the ways in which popular live poetry operates as a social force. Finally, I open up the event and the ways in which it is a forum for the practice of emergent community by detailing its affective dimensions, its transformative activity and the public ritual on which it rests. These objects of study surfaced as salient through ethnographic work I conducted in the world of popular live poetry during the first half of

the decade of 2000. Through ethnographic study of one international slam poetry event, broad participation in the San Diego and Tijuana worlds of poetry from 2000 to 2007, and deep weekly multi-modal participant observation in the largest popular live poetry event in this region from 2000 to 2004, I tease out the ways in which the above themes play out in the world of popular live poetry.

I came into the world of popular live poetry in San Diego, California, in the fall of 2000 when I was new to San Diego, in my first quarter of doctoral studies at the University of California, San Diego and a student in Chandra Mukerji's, *Popular Culture* seminar. In her class, I was afforded an opportunity to do primary research on a popular culture phenomenon and I chose live poetry. It was through this combination of framing and ethnographic fieldwork that I began to conceptualize the form.

Definition of Terms

I use the phrase *popular live poetry* to call attention to this genre of poetry's location in popular rather than high culture indicated by the combination of working class and middle class people who carry it out and the location of its events in free and assessable spaces. Further, I do so to assert that the content of this poetry and its performative practices reflect beliefs rooted in popular culture. In communication critics' Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson's terms, "...popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population. This includes folk beliefs, practices and objects rooted in local traditions, and mass beliefs, practices and objects generated in political and commercial centers" (1991:3).

Popular live poetry is based in popular culture through its folkloristic style of poetic delivery and its references to more recent, mass-mediated forms such as rap music and slam poetry signaled by some poets' performative practices and the content of their poetry. Popular live poetry reflects a combination of working class and upper class beliefs about the purpose, content and best delivery of poetry that points to its popular form. Class identifications map on to the ways in which poets craft their work and perform during the live act before the audience.

The event includes poets who privilege the live moment alongside poets who privilege the text. This latter constituency of poets believes good poems generally take a long time to come to fruition. The lines must be meticulously considered, challenged and often rearranged before the seedling of the poem develops fully into a poem. Like a painting, one poem can take years to complete and indeed, some poems are never finished in the view of the poet. Poets of the page work their poems over-time, in private workshops with other poets whose opinions they esteem, hashing out each chosen word, each line break, and the meaning of the shape of the poem on paper.

Spoken word poets on the other hand believe the best poetry is immediately relevant to the audience, and the larger social and political context. During the event, if a poem has been recently composed, the spoken word poet often mentions this before beginning the delivery by saying something like "I just came up with this on the bus this morning..." For these poets, the brand-newness of the poem makes it more valuable and pertinent than a poem that may have perfect line-breaks and demonstrate keenly chosen language, but might be too far away from all of the participants shared space and time to matter as much. By being on time in the view of the audience, these poets are able to

crack time open in ways that poets oriented towards the page are hard pressed to achieve. For spoken word poets, the art of their poetry is made with the audience during each live act rather than spent on the page.

Performance critic David Román draws on Marxist historian and art critic, Walter Benjamin to argue that performance is a form especially suited to intervene in time. Román draws on Benjamin's historical materialist concept of "the time of the now" and argues that during the live act, "...the relationship between history and the present moment is put under pressure, demystified and fully explored" (1998:12). As a kind of performance, popular live poetry draws much of its social force from "the time of the now," shared between performer and audience. Spoken word poets take this notion a step further by reckoning their poetry, as well as their live performative practices in accordance with this principle. The urgency of the "time of the now" shapes the content of their poetry.

I use "live," to assert that this genre of poetry hinges on the live moment of communication between poets and audiences rather than a mass mediated exchange in its first instantiation: this aligns the form with live art. I extend performance critic, Catherine Ugwu's use of the term *live art* to arrive at *live poetry*. In her view, "Live art [is] incessantly concerned with images of the moment... the raw and naked exposure of the art is bound up with the live presence of the viewer" (1995:9). Applied to live poetry, the poet and audience are *bound up* during the ephemeral moment. This moment is the ultimate site of the production of live poetry. Finally, as a medium of spoken poetry it is rooted in the oral form of *verbal art*: a concept delineated by folklorist of oral communication, Richard Bauman (1977).

Verbal art includes spoken artistic forms based in oral tradition and carried out through face-to-face communication such as: spoken arts, oration, recitation and storytelling. Verbal art requires that both the performer and the audience share a degree of cultural understanding with each other so that the audience is able to comprehend the verbal art of the performer and so that the performer knows how best to convey it so that it be understood. Bauman explains that verbal art is defined as *art* and separated from other kinds of verbal communication by degrees of intensity within a given context.

In the communication of verbal art the audience is keyed that something special is about to happen when the performer changes speech from ordinary talk with inflection, rhythm, phrases and particular language that indicate the performance is verbal art and perk a different kind of listening among the audience. Bauman states:

I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display... performance may be understood as the enactment of the poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry. (1986:30)

Bauman's definition highlights the performative quality of verbal art and makes it possible to track poetry as a spoken form rather than as a piece of paper with text written on it in the first instance. Moreover, it implies that there are different cultural understandings of poetry that surface through its communication as a spoken form of verbal art between particular poets and audiences. The ethnographic method is well suited to come into cultural worlds and listen to the meanings participants ascribe to their practices to reveal emergent forms of verbal art such as popular live poetry.

I entered the local world of popular live poetry through an event called, *Poetic Brew*. Poetic Brew took place every Tuesday night at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse in the neighborhood of North Park. I was drawn to the form of live poetry I witnessed and the community of poet and audience participants gathered around its practice. The communicative style of live poetry resonated with my interest in face-to-face practices such as story telling and oral history. I had done oral history projects in the past: in Ireland with labor activists (1998), Morocco and Spain with feminists (1989-1990), New Orleans with Afro-Atlantic religious artists and community organizers (1991), and with elders in a logging town in the Pacific Northwest (1992). This last place is where I am from.

In some ways, I saw the face-to-face and expressive communicative style of live poetry and its narrative content as a continuation of this work. Both oral history and live poetry afford the verbal artist opportunities to narrate their lives and the world with their uniquely sounding voices, particular ways of gesturing, and one and only faces. In the expression of live poetry the individual is part of it and this makes it more difficult to forget them than stories that have been separated from their makers, pressed into typeface and bound in books. Moreover, performance critic, Dwight Conquergood (2002) explains that acts of performance enable the expression of epistemologies gleaned from embodied and lived experience and differ from the ways of knowing conveyed in written texts.

I grew up in a large, multi-generational family as dense with stories as an old growth forest. I learned from the contradiction between knowledge gleaned from academic text-based learning and the verbal art of storytelling practiced by my old relatives that the communication of spoken stories opens up a special space between the

speaker and listener and conveys a special way of knowing. These ways get lost in books as the speakers and their embodied lived experience and actual personhood are omitted from the telling.

When I first came home from college making new claims to knowledge, I recall my Grandma's voice. She is standing with hands on both hips demanding, *what do you know about that?* Great Uncles sit around kitchen table, sip whisky ginger ales, smile and shake heads. Usually, I never really knew: not in my guts, not in my lived experience. I knew from something I had read and that was not enough. As the boss of my big family, my Grandma had to block me before I trampled over the ways of knowing sitting in the vinyl chairs and looking patiently at me through scraggly eyebrows and beards, calloused fingers rapping table top, some missing, eaten by saws and work speed-ups in the timber industry.

Popular live poetry is a spoken and embodied face-to-face form that enables the expression of epistemologies rooted in the personal and collective, immediate and historical, lived experience of class. The performance of the verbal art of spoken poetry makes possible the communication of embodied lived experience. It is important that the body be there in the communication of live poetry: as performance critic Joseph Roach states, "bodies bear the consequences of history" (1996:26). During the live act of poetry, the history that weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living is given pause when experienced poets and ready audiences come together in the ephemeral moment to express collective pain and redirect what the body knows.¹ Working class grief and

¹I reference Karl Marx's ([1852] 1978), discussion of the problem of history in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in which he powerfully and poetically states, "The tradition of all the dead

humor are often communicated together, and this keeps the transformation of the emergent collective moving.

During live acts of poetry unlike story telling, poets have to be fast. I remember a night of Poetic Brew, when an older, poet-folk singer who went by the name of Slim, was called to the stage on the open-mic.² As a folk singer, an older poet and a country type of man, he was likely to be practiced in the craft of story telling. From the stage, he introduced his piece into the microphone and started to discuss it, but then realized the clock was ticking. He said, "I better hurry up, I only have three minutes left!"

Slim sang and spoke a piece that questioned the meaning and end result of materialism and invited the audience to participate in its chorus: "*Stuff, stuff, stuff, a million kinds of stuff, a ten foot ceiling in my house ain't nearly high enough,*" and the audience quickly fell in.³ He delivered other lines such as, "*Walking round if I see a trinket or a locket, next thing I know I've got to put in my pocket,*" he paused and looked out at us with an eyebrow raised and a down turned grin to teach us something when he had us all tightly there in the fun. Then he continued, "*One thing for sure I know, I won't take it with me when I go!*"

Slim's piece reflects a sensibility contrary to materialism around which local worlds of popular live poetry turn. Ordinarily, these sentiments are not expressed so pointedly in the lines: instead, they rest in the production of the form that draws the

generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living," (1978: 595). A break with the past is necessary to imagine something new.

² Slim performing at the Poetic Brew event held at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse, video recording, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

³ The use of italics in quotes indicates that the spoken words were delivered in a poetic (rhythmic, sing-song, inflected) rather than ordinary tone.

performer and audience together in ephemeral moments of mutual exchange. José Limón explains:

I suggest that verbal or material crafting as 'gift giving' metaphorically evokes the most fundamental Marxian concepts- use value, non-alienated labor, and the denial of commodity fetishism...performances may be displays of 'the possibility of hanging on to the use and value of things'... in the face of those who would turn all of life into acts of consumption. (1983:50)

During the popular live poetry event, performers gift their verbal art to the audience and the audience gifts them recognition as poets. In these moments, performers and audiences come together in sensuous non-alienated labor to make the form that in turn becomes the seedling of community.

The song, "Cold Dog Soup," sung by Guy Clark, written by Clark and Mark D. Sanders, and released in 1999 on an album entitled by the same name expresses the economics of the production of poetry in its chorus:

Ain't no money in poetry
That's what sets the poet free
I've had all the freedom I can stand
Cold dog soup and rainbow pie
Is all it takes to get me by
Fool my belly till the day I die
Cold dog soup and rainbow pie

The position of poetry on the edge of the market contributes to its ability to serve oppositional ends when poets direct it in this way. Further, it gives the poet greater freedom to think and imagine. While it rarely enables its makers to glean tangible sustenance such as a real bowl of soup or an actual pie, its peripheral location allows it to hang on to the sensuous feeling of pre-capitalist shared labor and affords it power to do deep cultural work. While it does cultural "work," it is often pleasurable rather than

miserable.

Performance critic Richard Schechner asserts that performance events oscillate between poles of "entertainment" and "efficacy" (2006:80). The popular live poetry event reflects this dynamic as it amuses and generates a sense of community across participants that allows for critique of dominant cultural ways. The younger poets in the world of popular live poetry, identified with hip hop or slam poetry and urban culture, were just as likely as older, country poet-singers such as Slim, to have oppositional messages in their poetries. They were faster and slicker, however, at action-packing their live moments on stage. These poets are commonly called, *spoken word poets*. Their arrival points to a change in the world of popular live poetry. Indeed, all kinds of poets who participate in these events speak poetry but spoken word poets are unique among them.

Spoken word poets make use of the old practice of oral spoken poetry yet, their emergence was propelled by the synergy of two important popular arts movements: hip hop that came to the fore in the late 1970s in New York (Rose 1994) and slam poetry described briefly at the beginning of this Introduction. Hip hop culture produced a few important art forms among which include, rap music. Seminal hip hop critic and historian, Tricia Rose (1994), describes rap music as a rhythmic, narrative form that emerged through hip hop culture for the expression of black voices from disenfranchised locations:

Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music. It began in the mid-1970s in the south Bronx in New York City as part of hip hop, an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, breakdancing, and rap music. From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America.

Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator. (Rose 1994:2)

Rap music has influenced popular live poetry of the current era by creating new, nearby audiences with an eye and ear for clever rhymes and an understanding that the artful spoken word can function as a social force. In addition to helping create audiences of poetry, it has helped create poets. Poets with experience in the craft and purpose of rap have brought their ways into popular live poetry events and influenced the style, content and purpose of this genre of poetry. Rap expresses a black working class oppositional voice and sensibility that is felt in spoken word poetry, with which many identify. Slam poetry critic, Susan Somers-Willett writes in 2003, "Today, popular understandings of the spoken word are leaning increasingly towards the crossover between poetry and rap" (2003:126).

Together rap and slam poetry have functioned like oppositional currents in the world of popular live poetry, informing its content and purpose and combining to influence the form of spoken word poetry. These forms are not ordinarily included in definitions of poetry created in literary institutions. This is due in part to the construction of critical and (social) discrimination by the upper class. Even though the working class has the ability to discriminate too, they do not have the power to institutionally enforce their views. Popular culture critic, John Fiske explains:

Indeed, implicitly if not directly, popular culture has been denied discriminatory ability, for the concept of critical discrimination has been applied exclusively to high culture in its constant effort to establish its superiority over and difference from mass or popular culture... the ability to discriminate is the one quality that best distinguishes the 'cultured' from the 'uncultured'-whether these be... the new working class who had no culture and were thus a potential source of anarchy and social disintegration. The concept of critical discrimination has always

contained, however repressed, a dimension of social discrimination. (Fiske 2005:215)

The mass-mediation of spoken word poetry through influential programs such as HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, first aired in 2001, have further popularized spoken word poetry and tightened the interweaving of slam and hip hop to the form. Popular live poetry of the current era is so inflected with these cultural forms that when I begin to tell acquaintances and colleagues about my research they assume that I am studying *slam poetry* or *hip hop poetry* and significantly, they use these terms interchangeably. Further, their comments are often followed by disparaging remarks about the poor quality of this genre of poetry.

Some of the disdain towards popular live poetry indicates a lack of belief in the creative potential of the diverse, working class people who make this form of poetry. Popular culture includes middle class people but the participants who trouble the high cultural linkages of poetry are its working class members and especially those who live in black bodies. To date there has been little research done on the topic that might trouble the usually, uninformed, disdain of the form by tackling the role of class in the world of popular live poetry. This is a contribution my project makes.

There are a few excellent studies on popular live poetry of the current era. Julie Schmid's (2000) dissertation in literature treats slam poetry through a set of case studies of seminal slam performance poets and the founder of the event to unpin its cultural politics. She considers the event in relation to working class people, democracy, voice, identity and community and I take up these same themes in my research. Likewise, Ramón Sibley's (2001) dissertation in speech communication treats slam poetry, but

through an ethnography of a regular event in Louisiana. As I developed my ethnography, I learned from his use of Bauman and his keen attention to performance. Maisha Fisher's (2002) dissertation in education treats culturally specific open-mic poetry events in Los Angeles as sites of African diasporic community and literacy. Her subtle reading of the feeling-tone of the events she treats have encouraged my thinking and writing here.

Susan Somers-Willet's (2003) dissertation in literature on performance, black identity and slam poetry has helped me to distinguish the culture of open-mic poetry from the slam event and the complex ways in which identity is performed within them. Moreover, it has given me historical background on the role of popular performance poetry in the United States and while I do not reference it here, it has influenced what I have chosen to include in this text. Lastly, Helen Gregory's (2008) recent article on slam poetry in the UK raises the ways in which slam poets and working class perspectives combine to challenge academic definitions of poetry. Like Gregory, I consider the role of class in the world of popular live poetry.

Apart from these scholars, I locate open-mics and poetry slams as two rooms in the same house between which spoken word poets in the world of popular live poetry move. Further, I allow "poetry," to be entangled with popular culture and the forms of rap, slam, folkloristic styles of delivery and the diverse, working class epistemologies nested in these performative practices that lie beneath the screen of popular culture. Within this world, my findings indicate that a salient distinction exists between spoken word poets from poets oriented more towards the page even though both perform and speak poetry in these events. Among the spoken word poets, I pay attention to the poets who choose not to read and analyze their performative practices.

Through their performative practices, spoken word poets challenge the authority of the written word and the historically rooted bourgeois elocutionary practice of public reading in a practiced middle class voice. Performance critic, Dwight Conquergood explains that in the late 1700s in the United States, the public performance of this style of speaking began to be modeled in churches and schools, and came to have broad influence on social life and comportment among middle class aspiring people:

The pulpit and the lectern were the loci classici, exemplary sites of demonstration, but these capital sites extended to everyday speech and presentation of self. Elocution was practiced by professional public speakers and readers but was also embodied as a general social sign of gentility as the bourgeoisie conversed, read aloud, and entertained in their parlors. The hegemony of the pulpit and lectern extended into the habitus of the class-conscious home. (2006: 143)

Spoken word poets of the millennium draw on diverse, working class sensibilities, vernacular language, and often memorized rather than read deliveries in their live acts of poetry. In so doing, they reference a popular form of elocution that signals diverse working class audiences that the poetry underway is for them.

Some of the most influential spoken word poets in the region and time period I treat come from working class communities, have gone through the system of higher education and hold literary degrees. They function like "organic intellectuals," in Antonio Gramsci's terms (1971) in their efforts to make poetry by and for the people who continue to hold their hearts.

Throughout this dissertation, I interpret and explain the diverse, working class cultural sensibility that surfaces in the world of popular live poetry. I pay attention to the whole-bodied delivery of the form and describe the epistemologies it conveys. I raise the ways in which the live moment of poetry between poets and audience is constitutive of an

affective sense of community. I untangle the ways in which the form both enunciates class difference, and other differences, and draws participants together in community.

In the first Chapter, I probe into the relationship between popular live poetry and community, and detail the production of the form. I describe how the practice of popular live poetry culls a sense of community through an example of spoken word poets making poetry on a sidewalk, and then inquire into the tools of their trade. I borrow language from film and video to explain the pre-production of their poetry and the production of it in the live moment. Finally, I point out that the production of the form is generative and begin to detail the cultural work that it does. In the second Chapter, I describe the ethnography on which my research is based. I move between San Diego and Tijuana and give an account of the ways in which poetry is carried out in the two cities. Through this discussion I map popular live poetry and ground it as a popular form in particular events that meet particular material conditions. I engage ethnographic theory in this Chapter as well as literature on cultural geographies and cognitive borders with which the poetry event intervenes. At the end of this Chapter I describe an international slam poetry event and analyze the communication of class and community in the event.

In Chapter Three, I describe the collective spaces and physical places of popular live poetry in San Diego, California at the millennium. In this Chapter, I analyze the ways in which local collectives of poets discursively stake space with their poetry, and I consider their relationship to popular culture and language. I describe the primary poetry events in this time and place, and the context of the buildings and visions of the small business tenants under which they occurred. Through a recent historical account of the quick shifts in venues as tenants lose their leases to processes of gentrification, I make

plain that the weekly live poetry events held for a few hours each week within them are fragile. In Chapter Four, I present a case study of the most popular live poetry event in the region during this period, an open-mic event with an important constituency of regular spoken word poets, many of whom were organized in collectives. I shed light on the ways in which the event drew the diverse local participants in the world of popular live poetry together and became a site of an emergent public. Finally, my discussion reveals the symbolic role of the open-mic and the meaning of the public ritual of the popular live poetry event.

ONE:

Making Popular Live Poetry and Community across the Contradiction of Class

San Diego based poet and founder of the *Able Minded Poets* collective, Nazareth Simmons, reflects on generalizations about poetry as if there was only one right way to make it:

You know, in *ac-ad-emia* they are always like, *oh my god, Ginsberg, oh my god, Kerouac, Barraka--* They act like they're GODS or something! And we're not trying to be like them, we're just trying to be ourselves and do our thing the way we do it. I want *them* to understand what *we* do, the way *we* do it.⁴

Simmons's comment reflects a belief among spoken word poets in the world of popular live poetry that poetry should be a means for creative expression for everyone, regardless of whether or not they read or recite from memory, and regardless of whether or not they have learned how to do poetry in college or gleaned their abilities elsewhere. Rather than direct him and his peers towards a greater appreciation of the poetry esteemed in academia, Simmons' wishes academics would learn to better understand the poetry he and his peers do.

In this Chapter, I open up the meanings spoken word poets ascribe to the purpose of live poetry, inquire into the production of the form and explain the values they articulate through their performative practices. Conceived of broadly, popular performance poets work between the spoken word and the page during their live acts of poetry. In so doing, they call forth different epistemologies that reference the contradiction of class. Still, the production of the live moment of poetry has a propensity

⁴Nazareth Simmons, video-interview by author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

to bind and poets and audiences still often come together across differences in the making of the form. Finally, Simmons's statement above exposes a small gap in the literature on popular performance poetry of the millennial era. This form makes use of oral, spoken and performative practices.

Oral poetry scholar Ruth Finnegan (1977) explains that contemporary forms of oral poetry have often gone unnoticed by critics of poetry. She states:

It is easy to overlook such oral poetry. This is a special temptation to the scholar and those committed to 'high culture' whose perceptions all tend to direct attention toward written literature as the characteristic location of poetry. Oral forms are often just not noticed-- particularly those which are nearby or contemporary. (5)

Finnegan points out that critics have not taken up the study of oral poetry as rigorously as they have considered written forms associated with high culture. Indirectly, she suggests that nearby and contemporary forms of oral poetry are located in popular culture and by further extension still, practiced in part by diverse working class people.

The orientation within academia towards written literature as the site of poetry and away from oral forms is indicative of what performance studies critic Dwight Conquergood (2002) terms its *textocentrism*. This concept illuminates the ways in which the written text and the epistemologies it enables have been historically privileged over and above performative modes and the epistemologies they convey. Conquergood cautions against an interpretation of the text and performance as polar opposites and instead encourages an interrogation of their interplay as they emerge during performance events. Considered apart from the event however, the differences between them can be teased apart. For instance, the text conveys abstract, scientific, fixed and objective epistemologies valued in academia while performance conveys embodied, subjective,

emergent and other epistemologies grounded in lived experience. The privileging of the text and the kinds of knowledge it conveys in the context of academia has contributed to the oversight of contemporary oral forms of poetry by critics.

The distinction between oral and text based forms of poetry is muddied during the creative process of making poems by many popular performance poets and in the ultimate performance of the poem to an audience. Critic of oral communication, Kenneth Sherwood (2006) points out that poetry is rife with "oral/literate cross-pollinations." He explains:

A brief list of American writers from the vast catalogue of oral/literate cross-pollinations would have to include: Walt Whitman, seen as an originator of distinctively American poetry, who drew upon contemporary speech forms and the Old Testament; Ezra Pound, who studied and translated the troubadour poetry of Provence (as did his apprentice, Paul Blackburn); Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and James Weldon Johnson (among other poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance), who drew upon vernacular oral genres, blues lyrics, and African American sermons, as did writers associated with the Beats, like Jack Kerouac...
(119)

While many poets have drawn on both oral and literate forms in their written poetry, Sherwood argues in a line similar to Finnegan that the oral dimensions of their work have been insufficiently analyzed and afforded little import. In his view, literary criticism has not dealt sufficiently with the "oral/textual dynamics relevant to orally produced poetries" (120).

Sherwood analyzes the relationship between the text based poems and the performances of three widely known, published poets: Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite and Cecilia Vicuña. Through his discussion of these poets work he "considers the implications of situating literate, postmodern poetry in a performance context"

(2006:120). Sherwood demonstrates that each of these poets makes use of classical oral forms such as "versioning" and "elaboration" off their written poems during the performance event. The performance of the poem is an emergent happening in which the fixed poem as a noun becomes a performative action and transforms into something beyond the page during the event. Sherwood states, "...these poems break through into performativity; literary criticism cannot be content to receive them as conventional texts but must consider their emergent dimensions" (121).

The poets whom I treat in this dissertation are literate and perform their poetry to audiences yet not all of them choose to read from text-based poems in their deliveries or write their poems down. Further, unlike the poets Sherwood discusses whom have publication records, the majority of the poets active in the world of popular live poetry are unpublished. Moreover, a significant number among them have assumed a stance against writing and reading their poems altogether. They deliver their poems by memory and improvisation during the live event and scant reading and writing of poetry is done in the public eye.

Adrian Arancibia, a doctoral candidate in literature at the University of California, San Diego, a published poet and a performance poet in the first and most influential poetry collective in San Diego in recent decades, *The Taco Shop Poets*, considers these poets' performative ways and in a flabbergasted tone exclaims, "They won't even read!"⁵ They choose not to read during their live acts to identify with popular rather than elite culture and the diverse, working class adults and youth among the popular audience. Moreover, they do so to heighten the communication of their poetry as a direct face-to-

⁵Adrian Arancibia, personal communication with author, San Diego, CA, Jan 16, 2008.

face performance that moves from embodied rather than abstract epistemologies. While they are not against reading and writing or academic learning in general, they let go of the text during their live acts to stand by the people as popular speakers.

In a discussion of the performance of slam poetry in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, speech communication critic and poet Ramon Sibley (2001) sets up his analysis with the following statement:

What this study attempts is to develop a framework for understanding the poetry of the poetry slam performance as 'a species of situated human communication' rather than as a written artifact of poetic communication measured by literary standards (Bauman, 1984, p. 8). This is not to say that the written poetry texts of poetry slams are necessarily different in quality or kind from any other written poetry, but rather that the performance of the poetry in poetry slams is the rendition of that poetry in another communicative mode. (3)

Like Sibley, I too draw on folklorist Richard Bauman's work on verbal art (1977) and his definition of performance as a species of situated human communication in my analysis.

Contrary to Sibley, my findings indicate that the relationship to the written text among spoken word poets is distinct from poets in the main, and from other popular performance poets who do not problematize the public performance of their relationship to the text. Among spoken word poets in San Diego, California, some claim to not write their poetry down at all and most memorize their poems prior to the live act. Others still, read a few pages of their poems from the stage and crumple the others in their fists, shifting from reading to memorized delivery midway through their live acts. By memorizing their poetry, they are able to make eye contact with the audience and stand empty handed before them. Moreover, by crumpling up the pages of their poems, or dropping them to the floor and then, also collecting them at the end of the performance

because they indeed have value, they symbolically communicate to the audience that the embodied ways of knowing between them matter.

Popular performance poets at the millennium communicate poetry to audiences by drawing on poetry as a multifaceted oral form of verbal art during the live act of its delivery. Some memorize their poems rather than read them during the live act to signal diverse, working class audience members within the general popular audience that they identify with them more than a literary establishment that values reading and writing above working class peoples' communicative ways.

The form includes vernacular language, direct rather than heavily metaphorical and round-about speech, and cultural content that triggers epistemologies from daily life and lived experience. These communicative practices are meant to ratchet the attention of audiences identified with art forms in popular culture such as hip hop and slam, and more deeply the cultural ways of diverse working class people that give these forms their edge. At the same time, the form generates a sense of community across contradictions as a humanizing force. In the next section, I use ethnographic data to describe the ways in which the performance of live poetry generates a palpable and embodied sense of community.

Producing Live Poetry and Ephemeral Moments of Community

Nazareth Simmons addressed his friend and fellow poet, Scott Perry, of the poetry collective, *Goat Song Conspiracy*, outside of an open-mic poetry event in San Diego in

2002.⁶ Perry is white and Simmons is African-American. Both were in their early 20s and active in the local poetry world at the time. Simmons delivered a poem on the sidewalk to my fellow producers and I, at my request, for a documentary video we were making about poetry in San Diego that came to be called, *Your Wrds R Welcome*.⁷ I asked Simmons if he would do a poem and he said, “Sure, I’ll drop a piece on the sidewalk for you,” he turned towards Scott Perry and called to him by his chosen name, “Hey, *Scotch!* Come drop a piece with me on the sidewalk! He’s from *Goat Song Conspiracy*, another poetry group,” he explained.

Not all poets invite others to share the limelight and special attention afforded by a video crew, but those who do, indicate that they are more community oriented than those who seek individual fame. This is a real, albeit, small possibility to which some performance poets dedicate them selves since the form has been popularized and televised in recent years. In Russell Simmons's words, in a comment referencing performance poets and his HBO programs’ *Def Poetry* and *Def Comedy*, “...I think there is a chance to develop careers like we did with comedy.”⁸

Scotch sidled up beside Nazareth Simmons, we got into position to video-record, and then Simmons delivered his poem. I quote a segment from his three and a half minute piece in which he rallies a broad public to rise:

⁶Nazareth Simmons and Scott Perry, video-interview and recording of acts of live poetry by author with support from Ge Jin and Ricardo Guthrie, Claire de Lune coffeehouse, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

⁷*Your Wrds R Welcome*, DVD, produced and directed by author, Ge Jin and Ricardo Guthrie, San Diego, CA, November 25, 2002.

⁸Russell Simmons, video-interview on "Bonus Feature: The Making of Def Poetry," *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, season one, HBO Home Box Office, DVD, 2004.

*Witness the rebirth of constant artistic expression and riots of positivity
 Understand that we will not fall as long as we realize
 it is our destiny to rise! To rise above
 Hover like hawks above mountaintops
 Riding winged currents with exercised skill, skill, we need to build!
 We need mental advancement, not population expansion,
 but unfortunately the most destructive force on earth is man,
 with his kill-or-be-killed or eye-for-an-eye mentality...⁹*

Simmons's piece generates a large vision of collective purpose and the transformative possibility to which poetry can be directed as a "skill" to "build," more mentally vibrant and humane ways of being. He uses words that are meant to be universal and open such as "man" to key diverse audiences to enter his poem, and soaring "hawks" as a poetic body for watchful-listeners to imagine themselves stretched out in wingspan and cawing throat, seeing the problems of the world below and hope on the horizon. Through the words, rhythm, his embodied voice, and the content and message of the poem, it works a bit beyond him and invites audiences to come into its imaginative space on the sidewalk. Together, they construct a moment of emergent community.

After Simmons's poem was finished, and the crowd that had gathered dispersed a bit, he turned to Perry, AKA, Scotch, beside him and said, "Drop something Scotch!" He pointed one hand down towards the sidewalk and swung it right, and then swung it left and then swung it right again, sweeping the space for his delivery. "You're the man!" Simmons said. Scotch replied, "*Nah!!!* Dude, I can't follow that up right now, Dude! That was *fine!*" He explained that Simmons's poem went "to the heart," of why they do poetry.

⁹ This poem was delivered from memory rather than read and there was no reference to a written text of the poem. Therefore, the line breaks should be understood as a translation of a spoken piece to a text. I use italics to highlight the poem's spoken word form.

Scotch referenced the *Beautifight Coalition* of which Simmons is a founder and said, “A lot of my poems have nothing to do with beautifighting, its just like me speaking my art, whatever,” he put both hands to his chest and then opened them towards Simmons and I. “You know? So, we were talking about the beautifight, and he just *spoke* that.” Scotch looked at Simmons in his last phrase and put one hand to chest and then dropped it towards him, returning the reverence that Simmons had extended to him. When Scotch said that Simmons “just spoke that,” he meant that he enunciated the purpose of poetry in the service of making beautiful community through his delivery of spoken word poetry. He spoke it, and in so doing, he called it into being.

In speech critic, J.L. Austin’s terms (1962), through the performative act of speaking an utterance, one makes things happen. Austin coined the term “performative” to describe the ways in which “...the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (6). For instance, he explains that the utterance, “I do” in a wedding ceremony transforms two people from single to married. Spoken word poets believe in the performative power of their activity. When Scotch explained that Simmons “spoke,” in this instance, he meant that Simmons called the *Beautifight Coalition* into being during his live act of poetry as an affective experience and palpable space of ideal community. Further stated, by making the above claim with the more formal term, “spoke” rather than “said,” he grounds the central concept of the form in the ephemeral moment we had all just experienced.

bell hooks extends Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of *beloved community* as a space of equality and mutuality in which race is transcended. She argues that creating beloved community amongst diverse people requires an affirmation of difference rather

than a disavowal of it. She states, “Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where beloved community can be formed- where loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences. We can not surrender that longing- if we do we will never see an end to racism...” (hooks 1997:432).

Through the communicative practice of making popular live poetry, popular performance poets and audiences make something like hook’s elaboration of King’s *beloved community*. However, they toughen the talk about it to extricate it from its affiliation with politically correct discourse, they keep it fun through what they share in popular culture, and they ground it in relation to what matters to them in their time, place and lives.

Simmons put his hand out towards Scotch, pulled it back towards his chest and out again, then said, “There’s different forms. There’s different forms of it.” He tapped his stomach with both hands against his wind-breaker “I have one form of expression with the poetry, you have another form of expression. You do yours in a different way. You’re words come out different.” He stepped back and smiled at Scotch. “True dat,” Scotch sighed, looked around, and then said, “Ok. I guess I could do-- a *love* poem? Let me think-- um, a *lost love* poem?”

I encouraged Scotch, too, and he began.

*Down off that three week high, I am down off that three week high
I am lost and lacking love, tortured minds scream, su ra rye,
Who I am, us, and where is my sweetness? My sweet-est,
My sweet relief I lack, I said I am down off that three week high
I am lost and lacking love...*

Midway through the poem Scotch forgot the lines and said, “Cut tape, dude! I fucking lost it.” Then we all laughed because it is hard to be on the spot delivering a poem from

memory before an audience on the sidewalk. The audience was multilayered: as a video crew, the imagination of the future audience of the recorded material, the general public passers-by, and the poets and audience members standing around smoking cigarettes and talking out for the event happening inside the coffeehouse.

Scotch stumbled a bit on the request to give a poem that would be as large and oriented towards collective purpose as Simmons's piece. That is why he said that he could not "follow," Simmons's performance. He understood the difference between poetry that beautifights and generates openings and a rearranged sense of community and poetry that simply expresses, and at that point in his artistic development, he only had the latter type.¹⁰

The most respected poets of this genre are meant to gift poems to the audience that are more than poetry in general: the poems are meant to matter to them and move them in a transformative sense. These poets create with audiences in mind and aim to bring about a change of thinking and feeling among them in regards to issues that are given scarce airtime in mainstream channels. In this sense, they are like journalists but the truths they convey are mediated through their lived experiences and visually marked bodies. Often they beckon audiences to identify with aggrieved communities and to see social and/or economic justice issues from the bottom-up. This is challenging poetic work because of the stakes at hand and the skill it demands.

Performance poet and activist in the US and elsewhere, Mary Oishi, a Japanese American woman, adopted and raised in the Appalachians, explains:

¹⁰ Scotch continued to do poetry and in 2003, he won a position on the San Diego slam team to compete in the national competition held in Seattle that year.

Poets are the priests and priestesses of our time, we take a helicopter to the ceiling and look down to perceive what's going on. We need all of these different ethnicities and experiences to know how to proceed, because you can't perceive by yourself. Oppressed communities suffer *toxic shame*... tremendous grief. We transform that pain into art and action.¹¹

Oishi points out that the feelings poets move are not only their own individual sentiments, but also those of others. In anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's terms (1986), poetry is a "discourse of sentiment." As such, its event is a space for the communication of feelings between poets and audiences. Further, in poet Alvah Bessie's terms, quoted by poetry critic Cary Nelson, poetry makes possible "the concise expression of emotion under pressure" (2001:3). Bessie made this claim while incarcerated in prison but poets and audiences outside of prison can relate through the more generalized experience of oppression from living in disenfranchised bodies and/or as members of aggrieved communities under the silencing and constraining force of hegemony.

The proclivity of poetry to function as a vehicle for feeling is extended through the performance event during which the "structures of feeling" in Raymond Williams terms, on which culture and its constellations of community rest, can be temporarily rearranged (1977:130). José Esteban Muñoz (2000) illuminates Williams's concept as it manifests in performance events and calls attention to the ways in which feelings and emotions are experienced collectively, rather than solely at an individual level, as they are analyzed in Freudian discourse. Skilled and experienced poets use the performance event to redirect the organization of feelings that underpin notions of community.

¹¹Mary Oishi, "Poetry and Politics" [roundtable, "Albuquerque Cultural Conference," Harwood Art Center, Albuquerque, NM, September, 2, 2007].

Like the metaphor of "hawks" in Simmons's poem, Oishi's metaphor of "priests and priestesses" draws old and new poets up from the ground to the "ceiling" to look down and assess the world. In so doing it reflects the ways in which popular live poetry is a bottom-up form. In the helicopter sit the poet priests and priestesses of our time. They are not unordinary people who have wings and fly up to the ceiling like angels, *they just take a helicopter*. In their ritual roles, experienced poets transform fear and shame through poetic action.

Oishi points out that the perspectives of "all of these different ethnicities and perspectives," are necessary in order to know how to move forward. This is a poly-vocal multi-cultural view of making poetry as culturally transformative activity. When Simmons encouraged Scotch to go on with his delivery of poetry, he demonstrated this belief. He said, "There's different forms of it. I have one form of expression with the poetry, you have another form of expression." Through this statement and simultaneous hand gesture, tapping his belly, he implies that all forms are equally valuable and fuses the body of the poet with the poetry. He says, "your words come out different." Words spoken in live acts of poetry come from individuals with distinct bodies, voices, inflection and poetic content from the stories of their lives. In Oishi's synthesis, poetry has a visionary purpose in relation to aggrieved communities.

Oishi explains, "you can't perceive by yourself." The production of poetry as a face-to-face practice in the diverse context of popular culture affords participants a more multidimensional view of reality based on the various standpoints poets convey in their live acts. Moreover, poets take on a role like nuclear waste workers in the capacity of moving the "toxic shame" and "tremendous grief," in Oishi's terms, which members of

aggrieved communities carry. The Latin root of the word “aggrieved” is “aggravare,” which means, “to make heavier.” Further, the meaning of the word in English is “to oppress or wrong grievously; injure by injustice,” and secondarily, “to afflict with pain [and] anxiety, etc.”¹²

It makes sense then, that producers of popular live poetry in hip hop culture and the slam poetry movement have developed language to speak about it as something with a tangible weight with expressions such as *dropping a piece* and even using *piece* and *poem* interchangeably. In the vernacular language of this time a piece is both a poem and a gun. In light of this heaviness and severity the most delicate and precise communication of poetry in the live moment is key and poets work it between themselves and the audience like a dandelion-gone-to-seed.

Critic Jill Dolan’s (2005) concept of the utopian performative discussed in the Introduction posits that the performance event produces an affective sense of hope between performers and audiences. The live moment of poetry opens possibilities to carry out transformative cultural work. There is a sense of urgency and fear (in addition to hope) sutured to it because the poet is speaking against larger social forces that objectify and silence members of aggrieved communities. There is always a possibility that the audience might not recognize the poet as more fully human than a stereotype. Experienced poets work the shared live moment hard to resonate with the audience and remind them that they are historically and presently joined from the bottom-up. They do

¹²*Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1), Random House, Inc., s.v. “aggrieve,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/aggrieve> [accessed: August 19, 2008].

so by tapping their shared subterranean humanity in the eerie space-time of the live moment.

Experienced performance poets communicate their meanings in their spoken poems with voice and gesture and heighten their embodied presence before the audience to challenge dominant notions of space and time. For example, an African American poet gestures upwards towards his throat in a poem about the history of racism and lynching. In so doing, he calls into question the idea that the past is not implicated in the present by laboring the live moment and the embodied presence between himself and the audience. As he crafts the live act of spoken word poetry he aims to drag them through the needle's eye of his imaginary and change their views. He heightens the attention of the audience and beckons them to recognize him in this light, and if they do, together they intervene in the dominant story of space and time.

Popular performance poets hone their craft in gesture, tone and spoken poetry to do transformative work once they are finally in the most important site of the production of the poem: the live moment before the audience. New York based performance poet, Saul Williams, and star of the influential film, *Slam*, bemoans the inattention to the power of the live moment by some performance poets.¹³ He states:

When you rhyme you get people's attention and if you have all the peoples' attention and all you can do with that is say, 'Yo, put yo' hands up,' you just fuckin' wasted that fuckin' moment! You wasted it! Do you realize what you could have done?¹⁴

¹³*Slam*, DVD, dir. Mark Levin, [Trimark, 1997].

¹⁴Saul Williams, *Blu Magazine*, no. 10, [2000]: 29.

In fact, most new poets do not realize what they could have done. Over time, however, by delivering poetry before the live audience at weekly poetry events held in coffeehouses and other venues (a cluster of poets and audiences on a street corner happens too irregularly to be a serious training ground), they become more skilled and courageous, and better able to wield the flood of feeling in the house. They learn to trust the heart of the audience to fire them on. Through the dialectical communication between poets and audiences during the event, they come to know more about the meaning and possibility of emergent and inclusive community. Beyond the actual event, some popular performance poets aim their poetic production towards community generating ends.

In San Diego, Simmons and the collective of poetry of which he belongs: the Able Minded Poets, and other local artist/activists formed the Beautifight Coalition to direct their poetry towards community building ends. Simmons explains, “We’re just trying to build a community for poetry and artistic expression.”¹⁵ Scotch added:

There’s a lot of opportunities in this town to get out and go party, get drunk... but there’s not enough stuff going on around here for people to do positive energy kinds of things. So, I think that has to do with why a lot of us are bringing it out into places like this, you know. What’s not positive about the arts? What’s not positive about self expression- and getting out there, and saying your piece in a peaceful way? You know? That’s what we’re all about-- being a counter-point, to everything that has no heart.¹⁶

Other popular performance poets in San Diego have directed poetry in a similar way. Some have organized in collectives of poets and others participate in regular, weekly events that direct the practice of spoken word poetry towards the fortitude of particular

¹⁵Nazareth Simmons, video-interview by author San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

¹⁶Scott Perry, a.k.a. *Scotch*, video-interview by author San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

aggrieved communities. Their activity has marked popular live poetry carried out in San Diego as a space of emergent community.

Beyond the direction to which poets direct popular live poetry as a means to make community, the form itself generates community. Poets and audiences experience an affective sense of community through its embodied communication and its ability to open possibilities to imagine kinship with others. Further, through the example of Scotch and Simmons's poetic activity I have pointed out the ways in which the form relies on whole bodies. It is communicated through its performance in a way that resonates with audience's bodies and touches upon affective epistemologies among them. Finally, in this section I gave the example of Scotch and Simmons making live poetry on the sidewalk to move closely through the construction of its live moment and also to lay bare its minimal productive criteria.

The communication of the verbal art of popular live poetry requires a live moment between poets and audiences to make its ultimate productive turn. This moment is culturally generative: it enriches the poet, the audience and the collective whole. It hinges on a kind of labor that is conceptualized well by the Irish word, *saothar*, which means both the fruits of labor and labor itself.¹⁷ In an English dictionary definition of "labor," the first meaning is "productive activity, esp. for the sake of economic gain," and the fourth definition is "physical or mental work, esp. of a hard or fatiguing kind; toil."¹⁸

The communicative labor of making poetry together gives to its producers rather

¹⁷ Charles Callan, dir. *Irish Labour History Society*, interview with author, Dublin, Ireland, October 29, 1998.

¹⁸ *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1). Random House, Inc., s.v. "labor," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/labor> [accessed: August 19, 2008].

than depleting and taking away from them. The live audience does not buy the poem from the poet on stage or his or her performance of it. Further, the performance poet cannot sell or transfer their poetry as is possible with other kinds of art, such as painting. More plainly, the production of popular live poetry fosters interdependence between poets and audiences because they need each other. If it were not for the watchful listening of the audience, there would be no forum for the poetry of the popular performance poet. In sum, the production of this genre of poetry hinges on the live moment and at the local level, this moment is free. The production of the form does not require material resources or even a permanent place to be made.

In the Introduction, I cite Guy Clark's lyric that there is no money to be made in poetry to raise the peripheral location of this art to the market. I drew on Limón to point out that the economics of verbal art allows the relationships of species-being and performance as gift giving to remain intact. The peripheral location of popular live poetry to the market has facilitated working class people's ability to take up the form.

bell hooks explains that live poetry has historically thrived among African Americans because it has not required material resources. She states, "The voice as instrument could be used by everyone, in any location" (1995:211). While hooks treats African Americans exclusively in her discussion, in my view, the fact that the voice can be used by nearly everyone as a spoken and/or gestured, embodied form of communication has allowed diverse, working class people in general to artistically develop the voice in their verbal arts.

Popular live poetry is an inclusive and practical form. Moreover, making art is extra, *it's for special*, if it costs more than the weekly laundry quarters or the groceries: it

cannot be done on a regular basis. It is an important criteria of the form that it be free because this condition relaxes working class people and allows them to claim it as poets and audience members if they are so inclined. This distinguishes the form from other arts such as filmmaking or oil based painting that require production space, equipment and supplies.

Without the monetary worry, new poets are able to imagine and create their poems easily in their daily lives. When they have a moment, lines can be written on napkins, or in one-dollar notebooks, or recited to memory while walking around the block. The form is handy. In addition to the spoken and written words of popular live poetry, it is gestured and connected to palpable bodies. These readily available resources are integral to the ways in which poets and audiences make the live act of poetry during its ultimate productive moment. This moment is the site of the utopian performative in Jill Dolan's (2005) terms. She explains:

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (Dolan 2005: 5)

As a kind of performance, popular poetry makes thick moments during live acts that garner a complex sense of the utopian performative across participants. This is the hope of the form: the dandelion-gone-to-seed that poets and audiences rock between them during the ephemeral moment of the live act of poetry.

I consider the ways in which the notion of the utopian performative falls out in particular live poetry events, snags up in raced and classed identities, and unravels

altogether when events turn sour through a misuse of power. Still, participants doggedly return to the event rather than resign themselves to the private practice of poetry. This reflects their hope in a shared sense of human community across difference that might be felt through the event, and might enable them to be recognized for a moment by others as multidimensional subjects of their own design.

Using the method of ethnographic study, I problematize Dolan's concept of the utopian performative by locating it in particular embodied perspectives and applying it over time to a poly-vocal popular live poetry event. In so doing I extend the meaning of the concept and the affective vision of how the world might be better that comes to the fore through it, according to a range of diverse working class and middle class identified, subjects. As my work shows, I am forced to describe the ways in which the performance event is hard-pressed to sustain a fair and equitable space amongst them against hierarchical differences that locate some above others. Yet, without this sense of fairness and equality, and a faith by participants in its possibility, the utopian performative does not function. Finally, while critics have not inquired into how the production of poetry and its transformative live moment generates a complex sense of community across diverse subjects in particular events, nor consistently charted its production in the same event over-time, they have made note of the link between poetry and community.

In a review of popular performance poetry of the late 1990s, such as a national slam poetry competition in the United States and Robert Pinsky's, *America's Favorite Poem Project*, communication critic Scott Dillard notes:

In each of the projects that are discussed in the books reviewed here, there are some overlapping themes. Preeminent among these themes is that the performance of poetry creates community. (2002:226)

Others have made similar claims about the relationship between doing poetry publicly and generating community during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Thulani Nkabinde Davis (1981) describes the ways in which poet/activists in this Movement chose to move poetry from private, individual readings of texts to public performances at community events to bolster the aggrieved, African American community to whom their art was directed. The late June Jordan (1995) perhaps more than any other poet/activist/critic in recent years, drew attention to the popular role of performance poetry as a means to come to voice and generate diverse, democratic community from the bottom-up.

Popular live poetry of the current era extends in part from popular performance poetry developed by poets of the Black Arts Movement and other social movements. This affiliation links it to social change and personal and collective transformation. It marks it as a vehicle for disenfranchised subjects to come-to-voice and together in an affective sense of community. Moreover, poetry's practice at the local level during free publicly oriented events as well as its mass-mediation through television and Internet based programs draws new people to it across class and extends the meaning and scope of its community within the broader frame of popular culture.

Writing of the emergence of popular performance poetry in recent years, literary critic Kathleen Crown (2002) argues that the emergence of the form points to a popular demand for embodiment and voice able to bring about a richer sense of personhood. She states:

The recent groundswell of poetry in public locations-spoken word, underground, and performative-testifies to a popular demand for a return

to 'voice' and 'presence' as fundamental principles of lyric poetry. In new venues such as cafes, bookstores, churches, and community centers, poetry is inextricably bound up with bodies- not just the body of the speaker but that of the audience- and thus with voice, which belongs to the body and is produced by it. (216)

Crown argues here that the recent popularity of spoken word poetry is tied to the bodies of both speakers and audiences through the ways in which it makes use of voice and presence. She explains that the voice of the performance poet is more than an expression of "individual will." Rather it is a collective practice in that poets of this genre direct their work towards, "a public, activist and community oriented poetics" (217).

Crown discusses the poetry of well-known, African American, female, national slam champion, Tracy Morris to exemplify and ground her argument. Crown argues that voice is a medium that brings about personhood, "Morris's poetry asks us to understand voice, instead as a medium, a medium of being, a medium of history, and a medium through which language and personhood occurs" (Crown 2002:220). Through the performance of poetry, poets begin the process of coming-to-voice and into a changed sense of personhood. This activity conducted through the live act of the popular live poetry event draws in the audience and reshuffles their sense of themselves, too.

The practice of popular live poetry has a propensity to generate horizontal relationships across poets and audiences. Poetry carried out in high cultural spaces is organized differently and brings about a different affective sense of community. Outside of popular culture, there is an assumption that art should shock and be difficult to understand. In this line of thinking, the audience is never as intelligent as the artist. If the audience understands the art then it is not very good because the artist has not challenged them. When artists developed these practices they had in mind communication with elite

audiences whom they believed needed to be shocked (Román 1998:xxviii).

Popular audiences however, the majority of whom are diverse working class adults and youth have different desires and needs and very few poets choose to insult them because this is considered inappropriate. It is more customary for the audience to challenge the poets. Why do they stand for it? Because they hope for the honor to speak by the power of the people. Kathleen Crown explains that among poets of the avant-garde an orientation towards the people is understood as naive. She states:

Many avant-garde poets and critics dismiss the contemporary lyric or 'voice poem,' in part because it offers the reader the illusion of a natural voice or self-presence. In combating mainstream poetry's emphasis on voice, the avant-garde has tended to value language over lyricism and written experimentation over vocal expression. This rejection of poetic voice inaugurates a new relation with the poem's audience. Whereas the oral roots of the lyric tradition require the poet to conjure the 'voice' or 'presence' of an authentic and representative self with which the reader can identify, even to the point of total or absorptive, identification, language writing actively disrupts and complicates this identification between audience and speaker, deflecting the reader into language and away from the poet. In this way, language-based writing avoids the naive assertion of 'natural speech' as truth, recognizing how such speech has been co-opted by the very commodity culture it aims to critique. Yet the de-centered 'I' and active 'non-sense' found in language-based poetics can be too fragmented to connect readers and build a community and insufficiently representative to bear poetic witness and thereby to effect social change. (Crown 2002:216)

The popular performance poets I discuss direct their poetry towards the community and aim to effect social change with their poetic activity. In order to succeed at this work, they must have the audience beside them. Rather than succumb to nihilism, they deal with commodity culture in innovative ways to safeguard their poetry and the special communication of it with the people that matter to them. They do not give up to commodity culture and let it have the last word. They lay their bodies on the poetic line.

Tools of the Trade: Words, Lineages and Performative Practices

Mikhail Bakhtin ([1934-1935] 1981) argues in *The Dialogic Imagination* that within any account or telling, there is an assemblage of discourse. He terms this dynamic *heteroglossia*. The context in which any script is delivered “refracts” it adding to, or subtracting from the meaning the speaker intends to convey. He argues that language only becomes meaningful through dialogue and exchange in particular contexts. He explains:

[The] word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property... many words stubbornly resist... expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981: 294)

Popular poets lay claim to spoken language as a kind of *free verse*, based on the common knowledge that words cannot be owned by anyone any more than anyone else. In the words of Nazareth Simmons:

I guess you could say I started out as an MC, but then, I figured out I don't like rap because I don't like rhyming that much. I wasn't gonna' change what I had to say just to be rhyming. I wanted to be sure that what I said was *exactly* what I wanted to say. And to me, with poetry, you can say anything. You can't tell someone how to write poetry, it just comes from you.¹⁹

In this discussion, Simmons links rap and spoken poetry as related forms. In his view, rap is a more limited form of expression and communication than poetry due to its mandate to rhyme. The point is not to rhyme, necessarily, but to say precisely what one means, from both heart and mind.

¹⁹ Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

Poetry, as it is taken up and put to use by individuals in popular culture, is an open and un-policed form. This view of poetry reflects a popular interpretation of free verse, a belief in individual voice, and a dynamic struggle over spoken word. Popular poets seize language and intervene in the concept of private property during the live act of poetry with the special, unordinary-ness of poetic speech and by tying it to their whole bodies as a performative enunciation. Further, the aesthetic criteria of the form is such that no one else can do anyone else's poetry and keep it intact, and this shields it from seizure.

In a video-interview conducted in San Diego outside of the Chicano/a performance space, *Voz Alta* (Loud Voice) in 2004, I provoked a member of the influential poetry collective, *The Taco Shop Poets*, Tomás Riley, by asking him if anyone had ever performed his poetry for him. He said, "MY WORDS?!" Fellow Taco Shop Poet, Adrian Arancibia, who was standing nearby said, "Oh no, no, no, no, we don't do that! Lost in translation!" Riley continued, "It's not acting. You can't do anyone else's words."²⁰ Nazareth Simmons responded to the same query in another video-interview conducted on the same night at the same place. I asked, "If you were sick, do you think someone else could do your poems for you? Do you think that would work?" He looked skyward, then dropped his gaze

No. Because even if it's laid out on paper, it's not the way I'd want it to be delivered. You know, cause I don't read off paper in front of any audience, I memorize my poems. On paper you can read it and you'll understand it, but when I do it, it's completely different. There's certain spots where you're gonna have emphasis, or where I slow down, or I'll speed up, there's just a whole different rhythm that you can't see on paper. There's a

²⁰Tomás Riley and Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

rhythm that you can't see on paper that I developed just from saying it, and writing it, and saying it over and over to myself, you know, it gets into this rhythm. So, to give it to you on paper, and have somebody else read it, it wouldn't come across the same way at all.²¹

Simmons's discussion teases out the differences between poetry on the written page and poetry voiced by the poet during the performance.

Simmons's raises the communicative nature of spoken word poetry by pointing out that it is important for the poem to closely convey the poet's feelings. Further, he points out that each poet crafts his or her own poetic: rhythm, emphasis, cadence, and order of time, for the live delivery of the piece. He has strong views on the performative practice of reading poetry publicly. He explains:

I don't believe in reading other people's poetry-- you won't see me on stage reading someone else's poetry. I don't care how famous they are. That's just something I won't do. Because I don't know how they want their poetry read. I'm not into that. I think when somebody does their own poetry there's a big difference between they're *there* (pointing downwards) and they're presenting it the way they felt they *feel* it. You can't get that from somebody else reading someone else's piece. You never know the feelings behind it or anything.²²

In Simmons's account, he holds that it is unethical to read someone else's poetry, publicly, because doing so implies that the speaker knows the poet's precise feelings and intention, behind his or her poetic words. This knowledge is felt, embodied and personal and cannot be reproduced by another. One must listen to the poet directly to gain insight into the poem's meaning. As Arancibia states, it cannot be translated.²³

²¹Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

²²Ibid.

²³Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

In the aesthetic criteria of the form, the performance of poetry is part of the art, and the exclusive domain of each poet. This art form reflects the view that each individual has the right and ability, to speak for him or herself better than anyone else can. In a loud-talking, discursive context that silences, aims to subjugate, bundle up and lay claim, performance poets intervene in spoken language with the courageous and vulnerable act of speaking for themselves and to each other with embodied poetry. Finally, in the beginning of this chapter, I referenced Dwight Conquergood's concept of textocentrism and how it relegates writing above performance based practices and the epistemologies that they convey. Spoken word poets perform through this contradiction with their live acts of poetry.

In the world of popular poetry, all poets value the *words* of poetry, and the practice of speaking and listening to its delivery, but they differ on the value and purpose of performance. Broadly, poets who choose not to read publicly, do so to identify with *the people* in a popular sense rather than the establishment and the elite by circumventing the communicative practice of reading to the audience and its alignment with textocentric ways. They clear a space to speak in a fresh way without the baggage attached to public speakers who read to audiences such as police officers reading rights, school teachers reading assignments, and in San Diego, United States, Border Patrol officials reading state-mandated identification documents over the direct spoken words and heart-felt feelings of the individual.

Poets choose to deliver poetry from memory rather than read because they believe it affords them more power to resonate with the audience, opening an opportunity during the live act to carry out culturally transformative work. The attention of the audience is

perked when the poet enters the stage with hands hanging loosely to sides rather than papers or a book in hand, or midway through a poem, decides to drop the pages of the poem and stop reading to recite from memory, looking out directly at them. This type of communication is often understood by diverse, popular audiences of working class people, new English speakers, and youth, as more respectful, more familiar, more intimate, more fun and more understandable than being read to, and this affords the poet greater power to resonate with them.

On an evening in San Diego, outside of the weekly Claire de Lune poetry event in 2002, I asked African American poet, and at the time, member of the local slam team, Salim Sivaad, why he performed his poetry publicly. He said:

Oh, because the gratification is so immediate-- when you get the energy from the crowd-- it helps to sustain you, (making circular gesture in front of chest with one hand) you know. There's definitely a thing where there's a synergy happening, between you and the audience (moving index finger side to side), *the audience is feeding your art and you're feeding the audience art*, it works both ways, and its the best thing, man! I mean art in isolation for art's sake is dead! Art is for the upliftment of society. *It's for people...*²⁴

Sivaad describes the dialogical process of communication and the mutually reciprocal gift exchange that underpins the social form of popular live poetry. Through this communication, the popular poet is gifted a tremendous feeling of community in his chests when he moves the audience.

In relation to the delivery of poetry from memorization or from the page, the poet chooses his most powerful approach to resonate with the audience. Most often, Sivaad delivered his poetry from memory, but, unlike Simmons, he also wrote his poetry down

²⁴Salim Sivaad, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

and carried self-published chapbooks to local poetry events in his shoulder bag, to trade with other poets, or sell for a few dollars.

In Sivaad's account, he states that "poetry is for people." The performance of direct delivery rather than reading to the audience, summons a popular form of communication that affords the poet more power to resonate with the audience. Going to the trouble of memorizing the poem is worth it for some poets because the people praise them in a special way, for speaking beside them and with them, rather than talking down to them. In a sense, the poet who chooses not to read aims to speak by the authority of the live audience.

It must be said that the choice to dedicate oneself to poetry of the spoken word rather than poetry of the printed page is not an entirely free choice. I asked Simmons if he ever sent any of his poems in to journals or publishing houses that they be considered for publication and he said, "No. I don't send any of my poems in because I don't think I'd be published. I'm not an academic type of poet."²⁵ *Page poets* on the other hand are free to move between the live event and the written page, and if a publisher chooses to publish them, the published text. Further said, it is difficult to be published in general. But, it is harder still to strive for it without the cultural capital that enables one to imagine oneself as a published poet.

As I have argued in the Introduction, I use the terms *spoken word poets* and *page poets* to describe a salient difference between poets in the world of popular live poetry. I use the term, *page poets*, to refer to the normative category of poets who direct their poetry towards the written page and publication, evinced by publications and practices

²⁵Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16 2004.

such as workshopping written poetry. In terms of their poetry, page poets use the popular live event as a means to refine their written work. I use the term, *spoken word poets* to refer to popular performance poets of the millennial era who have experience in slam and hip hop and have drawn influence from these forms.

Spoken word poets direct the production of their poetry towards the live event. Most often, their live acts are memorized, and they have a direct, communicative style in which they make eye contact with the audience. The content of their poetry aims to move the audience. The primary site of production for the poetry of spoken word poets is the live event. In actuality however, most poets are not so clearly typed. It is possible to be a spoken word poet: committed to performance and the live audience, and a page poet: oriented toward writing and publication at the same time.

Many poets who aim to be published also seek a public audience, and in this way, they share aims with spoken word poets. Further, page poets can be identified with working class people more than spoken word poets. The important distinction between them for my discussion here is the ways in which their public performances in popular live poetry events, and in their public roles at local levels as popular performance poets, communicate class difference at the millennium. During the popular live poetry event, some poets read and write, and some speak directly and memorize. These performative modes communicate distinct class meanings through the middle class or working class cultural literacies they reference. Reading and writing references high culture and institutionalized education, and memorized and direct deliveries reference popular culture in the forms of hip hop, rap and slam, and diverse, working class knowledges. To arrive

at these performative live acts of poetry before the audience, spoken word poets craft their work differently than poets oriented towards the page.

San Diego based poet Sunflower Dubois describes his creative practice and his introduction to poetry in the following way: at the time he was a member of the Goat Song Conspiracy of which Scotch, previously introduced, was also a member. Dubois states:

In fifth grade, I had a friend who came to school one day with a tape. He got to play it on a little, small, old-school, tape player, with a little handle and the five buttons. It was *Eric B and Rakim*. And he was just playing it, and I was just listening, and then I heard this line, “*She thought I was a donut and she tried to glaze me!*” (laughs) and that was the first line I ever heard that caught me.²⁶ And right then I thought, *Wow! This is some cool shit!* So, that’s when I started doing it.... I just like to write. I have a recorder. I spend a lot of time walking. I walk from North Park to school every morning, and I just chill out and things come to me. So, I just record it real quick, ‘cause I don’t remember everything. I use the tape for a few ideas, write more, listen to it, and build from there.²⁷

In this discussion, Dubois describes listening to his friend’s hip hop tape as a special event, that they *got to* listen to, apart from the ordinary day and the sound of the teacher’s voice. Instead they heard Eric B and Rakim. As audience members in the classroom, the children listened.

Dubois points out that these hip hop artists drew him into poetry. The line he quotes that moved him in fifth grade uses plain language, and a metaphor of something tasty and understandable: a glazed donut. A donut is more commonly understood than exclusive or obscure foods like escargot or millet. This locates the poetic line within the

²⁶“Thought I was a donut, you tried to glaze me,” Eric B and Rakim, lyrics from song, “Eric B is President,” album, *Paid in Full* (1987).

²⁷Sunflower Dubois, a.k.a *Sun*, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

scope of popular culture. In his discussion, Dubois describes walking around North Park and "school" where his lines come to him. North Park is a neighborhood near downtown San Diego where the Claire de Lune coffeehouse is located. School is *City College* in his account, the most centrally located community college in the region, about two miles from North Park.

Dubois's use of a recording device in his production of spoken word allows him to walk and make poetry at the same time, not by a gurgling stream, but by traffic, Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Check Cashing business, Check Express. An urban landscape informs this poetry. In Arancibia's terms, "The important thing for us is to be the pulse of the city. That's the important thing."²⁸ Further, it follows the suit of his artistic hip hop Inspirations, whose work is heard and seen through recording devices more often than it is read in books.

I have argued that spoken word poetry is more aligned with rap and slam historically, than poetry in the main, and than the live acts of poetry delivered by other kinds of popular performance poets who participate regularly in popular live poetry events of the millennium. Finally, while many spoken word poets have been influenced by these forms, they do not claim these names for what they do. Nazareth Simmons states, "They call me a hip hop poet, and I don't even listen to hip hop anymore."²⁹ Ryan Peters of the Able Minded Poets sings from the stage during a group performance with their band at an Anti-War and Day of the Dead event held at the World Beat in Balboa Park, San Diego in 2002. Together they sing, "*We're Able/ Minded/ Poets,*" Peters

²⁸Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

²⁹Nazareth Simmons, video-interview by author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

interjects, “*We’re not rappers, ya’ all!*” and the rest of the vocalists fall in, “*We’re Able/ Minded/ Poets...*”³⁰

Peters is African American. She was in her early twenties and a track star of a local university at the time of the interview. She was about five foot four inches tall and lean. During the above performance, Peters, Simmons and Dean sang and delivered spoken word poetry with their band, against stereotypes and the new War in Iraq. The World Beat was dimly lit and candles, in sand filled, lunch-sacks, lined the path to the entrance. A large altar commemorating the long-time gone and the more recently Dead: of US soldiers, and thousands of undocumented migrants traveling north to the land of promise from south of the Borderline, were symbolically represented on the altar table.

B.E. Dean, a member of the Able Minded Poets in 2002 adds further, “I don’t even hardly write. I just memorize. So, without the audience, there wouldn’t be much point. It’d just be me spitting my words to myself.”³¹ Dean points out the dialogical nature of spoken word and the crucial relationship between audiences and poets during the live act. By stating that he rarely writes, he describes his productive practice and makes a performative statement, aligning himself and his poetry with the people and away from dominant culture in general and its textocentric ways.

At the time of the video-interview in 2002, Dean was thin, about six feet tall, and in his early 20s. He is white. On that night, he wore a black flight jacket and a baseball hat. He remembers when he first came into the local world of poetry in San Diego

³⁰Ryan Peters, video-recording of live performance with the Able Minded Poets, by author with production assistance from Ricardo Guthrie and Ge Jin, San Diego, CA, November 1, 2002.

³¹BE Dean, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

through the popular Tuesday night event held at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse. Through this experience, he began to learn about the difference between *spoken word* and *just poetry*, in his terms. He mentions well-known, local, performance poet and mentor to many new poets, Chris Vannoy. Dean explains:

The first time I was at Claire's, Chris Vannoy- He started over by the bar and walked all the way around and stared at *ME*- the WHOLE TIME! He brought all kinds of things out of me like fear, and like it was kind of cool that I was a part of it. All of these different emotions were happening to me. That's when I started to get a feel for what spoken word is as opposed to just poetry.³²

On another night, I asked Vannoy why he sometimes moved around the venue when he delivered his memorized poems, rather than stay on the stage. He laughed, "To get them to listen to me!"³³ Vannoy is white, about five feet five inches tall, has a wiry build and is in his early 50s.

Vannoy began the practice of moving around the venue rather than staying on stage when he was performing poetry, regularly, at a local bar. The bar was the venue of an open-mic poetry event. As the night progressed, and some of the congregation became increasingly drunk, it grew more difficult to hold their attention. By walking among them, and making eye contact, as Dean describes, Vannoy delivered his poetry in a way that had greater odds of interesting them. Further, by choosing to move through the space of the audience rather than stay in the space of the performer on stage, or in a marked apart space of the venue, the practice troubles notions of personal space, startling private worlds in the minds of audience members and drawing them more directly into the communication of the live act of poetry. In Dean's account, spoken word is a

³²Ibid.

³³Chris Vannoy, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, August 3, 2004.

performative event that draws the audience into the experience of poetry by the feelings the poet is able to pull from them. In his assessment, spoken word has a greater ability to draw feeling from audiences than private readings of poetry.

Spoken word poets use language to describe their writing practice differently than page poets. Some describe the delivery of their poems as “spitting”. The term refers to an act of disrespect: the poem should circumvent authority in some way and challenge unwritten hierarchies. The content of the poem and the poet should not, however disrespect the audience. Spoken word poetry often includes angry poems that rail against some kind of injustice. Spoken word poets raise their voices loudly during these types of pieces and work the whole stage, pacing around it as they speak and gesture in cadence with the poem. This style is more customary with slam poetry carried out in slam events, and on Def Poetry, than it is in open-mic poetry events which are the majority of events carried out at local levels.

Still, the popularization of this type of poem expands the scope of the emotions from which poets are able to draw in their work. Poetry is not only for the expression of beauty and the soft side of love. Further, it makes room for “ranting” in popular poetry, aligning it with earlier practices of soap boxing and struggles for free speech. The performance of poetry allows it to be more than poetry alone as it butts up against other performative practices with which it bears a likeness.

In the HBO series, Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, during a live act of poetry about the stereotyping of Asian Americans, Asian American performance poet Beau Sia states, *“Am I RANTING???! FUCK YEAHHH!... And I am NOT STOPPING*

until the EGGROLL is an AMERICAN FOOD!!!”³⁴ Sia, like many of the other spoken word poets on the show, wore a sweatband on one wrist, on the one that he used to hold the microphone. That way, all of the sweat that he expended during his three minute performance would not get the microphone wet or worse, cause his hand to slip. He sweated a lot, as do many spoken word poets, because they put their whole bodies to the poem’s use during the live act.

A televised performance of poetry that challenges injustice and through its doing, references soap-boxing, is not the same as performances of this type carried out during free live events. Still, the message gets through. Local practitioners take it home and know what to do. Chris Vannoy, reflects on popular poetry as a space of both occasional ranting and poetry. He states, “At a lot of the open readings you have to listen to a lot of stuff that’s not really poetry, it’s more ranting and raving and people’s views on stuff.”³⁵ Poets of the page and of the spoken word, at times, use the popular event as a space to rant, marking it as a forum for free speech unlike smaller, more exclusive, literary forums of poetry. In sum, poets in the world of popular live poetry produce it between the page and the spoken word. This contradiction is also symbolically conveyed to audiences through treatments of popular live poetry in mass-mediated spaces of popular culture.

Between the Text and the Spoken Word on Mass-Meditated Sites

On Def Poetry, the host, well known hip hop singer and performer Mos Def, recites poetry during the first twenty five seconds of the show. In Season One the show

³⁴Beau Sia, live performance of poetry, HBO’s *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, episode one, season two, 2002.

³⁵Chris Vannoy, audio-interview with author, March 5, 2007.

begins with a close-up on Mos Def's face as he speaks a poem of a famous published, poet, directly into the camera. In each episode, he recites a different poet's poem. After he finishes his recitation, he gives the author's name of the poem that he has delivered and says, "Def poet, ya all. Let's get it on." For example, "Walt Whitman. Def poet..." the poetry of the poet he has just recited for the audience verifies that the poet is *def*(initely) a poet. In this opening oration, Mos Def performs a resuscitation of the poetry of the poet by speaking it.

The show then cuts to opening graphics, louder music and the stage at the New York based Supper Club and Mos Def walks out to greet the audience. He speaks for less than two minutes, recognizing the audiences from the New York-based neighborhoods, sometimes rapping about the night and the event, and sometimes very briefly framing the event to them by pointing out that the spoken words they hear will change or elevate them, then he delivers a version of "Are you ready for some poetry!?" and the show begins. In total, the program lasts for thirty minutes.

In Season Two of Def Poetry, the opening shot is of Mos Def walking towards the viewer on a dark stage, lined by gleaming hot pink stage lights. The shot is cut quickly five times, fragmenting the walk towards the viewer/camera and holding the shot and raising the light as he comes into view and reaches the silver, 1950s-Elvis-style microphone similar to a 1050 Shure, model 55, microphone. The audio of his spoken voice and the opening Def Poetry music of string instruments begin as he walks towards the microphone. He stands before the microphone and the camera zooms in, "Henry

David Thoreau. Def Poet, ya' all. Let's get it going!" He pushes the microphone away and walks towards the backstage.³⁶

In this particular episode, Mos Def recites, "*Love equals, swift and slow, and high and low, racer and lame, the hunter and his game,*" in this last phrase, he smiles, grips his lapels and straightens his jacket, adding inflection when he says, "The hunter *and his game,*" whose game? Mos Def's game, as he writes himself into relation with the poem by speaking it. Further, it is the game of hip hop identified audiences who envision the metaphorical meaning of this word as the activity around one's life in an urban landscape rather than a hunt in a forest. In this sense, Mos Def is a translator.

By not reading in the sight of the audience, he privileges spoken word over the practice of reading poetry. However because he recites other poets' poems, his performance is that of a middleman who speaks between published poets and spoken word poets. The Def Poetry show features both of these types of poets. The published poets are often older than the spoken word poets and in the first season of the series, the older poets' performances were edited with a sepia-toned filter, marking them as *old*, yet, *classic*. Among the poets included in this category are Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Barraka. These poets read and used their voices performatively to work the live moment with the theatre audience and deliver strong messages to their rare, television audience.

America's Favorite Poem Project is another significant forum of the communication of popular poetry in the United States that reflects the contradiction in

³⁶ HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, episode one, season two, 2002.

popular poetry between the page and the spoken word. America's Favorite Poem Project was founded by United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, shortly after he was appointed to the position by the Library of Congress in 1997. Pinsky post a one-year open call to the public to submit their favorite poems. The website of the Project states:

18,000 Americans wrote to the project volunteering to share their favorite poems- Americans from ages 5 to 97, from every state, of diverse occupations, kinds of education and backgrounds. From those thousands of letters and emails, we've culled several enduring collections.³⁷

Among the collections of note are fifty, short documentaries, produced by different crews that treat some of the submissions. In the documentaries, the individual who chose the favorite poem is featured, reading and/or reciting his or her favorite poem and describing how the poem is personally meaningful in relation to his or her life story and home. Sometimes, the individual describes carrying a copy of the poem on a folded slip of paper in their wallet, or growing up with a memory of it framed on the wall in the kitchen.

The first and the last shot of each piece is an image of an open book, with white pages and a black cover. The first shot introduces the piece. The font on the pages is calligraphic and black and on the left page it states, "Favorite Poem Project." On the right of the open-face book it lists the title of the poem, its author, and below, "read by," and then the reader's name, occupation and place of living. In the last shot, the end credits are listed on the pages of the open-faced book. In this presentation of popular poetry, the book rather than the spoken word, is afforded highest value.

The poets whom the individuals claimed as their favorites had to be published poets, rather than spoken word poets. In Def Poetry, while the older poets sometimes read

³⁷Robert Pinsky and staff, "Favorite Poem Project," Boston University and the Library of Congress, <http://www.favoritepoem.org> [accessed July 15, 2008].

and it is likely that Mos Def reads the poems he recites from off-camera stage-cards, reading is downplayed and the spoken word is raised. As popular live poetry is carried out on these sites, it too draws on performative practices to speak across contradictions and cull a sense of community. Finally, the mass-mediation and commodification of popular performance poetry, most influentially through the Def Poetry program, has troubled the definitive attributes of the form.

The Def Poetry event is a hybrid mass mediated and face-to-face space of popular (live) poetry. In addition to its different communicative structure, the economic structure and the space of the event are different from a free event conducted in a publicly oriented venue at the local level. These dynamics constrain the species-being relationships that emerge between popular performance poets and audiences during free popular live poetry events conducted at local levels.

Power in Live Moments of Poetry

In popular live poetry events conducted at local levels, the practice of the form summons a pre-industrial kind of labor in which the audience and the poets together produce the poetry. The poet gifts the audience their poetry, the audience gifts the poet recognition and together they make live poetry. The practice of the form is a binding force that draws them towards each other across contradiction. Def Poetry, on the other hand, operates through relations of consumption like most other kinds of popular culture. The face-to-face communicative exchange on which live poetry depends takes place on Def Poetry between studio audiences and poets on stage. The relationship between them during the intimate and transformative live act of poetry is commodified as audiences

purchase tickets to attend the show and as consumers purchase a rendition of the event after the fact on video.

Filmic treatments of live poetry often frame the form as if it is “live,” even though poets are prepared for the cameras and shot by crews in such a way as to appeal to an imagined television audience and the footage is edited in post-production to make a seamless thirty minute television show. Sports documentary filmmaker of *SlamNation: The Sport of Spoken Word*, Paul Devlin reflects, “That’s the problem in general with putting performance poetry on tape because most of the point is the live experience so, how do you translate that to video?”³⁸ (1998).

On Def Poetry as the show progresses into its second season, spoken word poets are laced with discrete microphones and enter the stage empty handed under bright light to deliver their memorized pieces. They perform a really-there-ness, often of identity based poems, that are live for the immediate audience and at the same time, an integral part of the program’s show-business.

The bodies and spoken poetry of the poets are never completely commodified but the sale of their live acts gives the consumer too much power rooted in capitalist exchange to keep the form intact: in the way that it manifests in free, publicly oriented events. The audience cannot rise up and become poets on stage in the way that they can in popular live poetry events at the local level, nor can they give the poets counsel on breaks and from the floor after their performances to help shape their production of poetry. Still, even with these constraints on the form, Def Poetry has played an important role in popularizing performance poetry and drawing new poets and audiences to its

³⁸Paul Devlin, "Filmmaker Commentary" *SlamNation*, DVD, dir. Paul Devlin, [Docurama, 1998].

practice. In sum, in the analysis of the ability of popular live poetry to generate empowered community it is important to consider if the event is free, if a popular audience is central to the event, and if it is live and local rather than mass-mediated and far-away. Finally, the community constructed during moments of popular live poetry is not homogenous or seamless: it works across class difference and reflects the identities and cultural identifications of its makers. In the next chapter, I describe the ethnography on which this study is based and head deeper into the world of popular live poetry.

TWO:

Mapping a World of Popular Live Poetry from the Bottom-Up

In the fall of 2000 I came into the world of popular live poetry in San Diego and more broadly, the border region that extends between San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico. I was directed towards conceiving of the local poetry world in this light by some of the primary performance poets in San Diego because they imagined the world in their poetries and in their public performances as a cross-border space. Through the process of doing participant observation however, I learned that while live poetry was gaining popularity in San Diego, this was not the case in Tijuana.

The poets that directed my gaze towards Tijuana were part of the Chicano movement and identified with Mexico, the Spanish language and Latin America, broadly. These poets are central to the world of popular live poetry in San Diego and I describe their activity in greater detail in the next Chapter. My aim here is to delimit and define popular live poetry as an object of study that is identifiable by its event structures, the relationships between poets and audience members, and the particular poetic activity that extends from it such as collective organizations of poetry crews. I define these objects of study through ethnographic findings, interviews and the scholarship of others.

I look at popular live poetry as a social movement that swelled local worlds of poetry in the United States during this period and locate San Diego as one node on its map. More than a social movement, this poetic activity opened up a cultural space for the expression and communication of diverse working class experience through poetry. The primary contradiction at play in the world of poetry that cordons the popular from the

elite is class: as a raced, gendered and otherwise othered lived experience. Popular live poetry events allow poets from different classed backgrounds to stand beside each other on an equal footing during the ritual of the event. Class influences the communication of poetry during the event and complicates its binding and community generating force.

Popular live poetry moves between acutely local sites of bodies in performative moments, specific cultural and geographical places and beneath a popular, mass-mediated and starry night sky. In the previous Chapter, I inquired into the form of popular live poetry and how poets make it. Here I open up the culture that emerged around it and the movement that brought it to the fore. I address the ethnographic dimensions of the study first and then consider influences from further a field that shook up the local world and played a role in making it.

In keeping with ethnographic practice, I describe here my entrance into the field and delimit the edges of the ethnographic site based on where popular live poetry was happening during the period of my research. The primary geographical location of my research is San Diego and within the city one large coffeehouse that was the site of the most popular poetry event in the San Diego/Tijuana region from 2000 to 2004. The event took place once a week on Tuesday nights. I participated and observed in it nearly every week during this period. I lived on the same block as the coffeehouse, in the field of this small emergent world. In so doing, I came to know the neighborhood and to an extent (as a newcomer) become a part of it. The particular neighborhood is called North Park, as I have previously mentioned, and the coffeehouse, *Claire de Lune*.

I also participated and observed in other popular live poetry events on a regular, weekly basis in the region and in three international poetry festivals. What I learned from

my participant observation at Claire de Lune became my primary knowledge base as I maneuvered through a world with scant literature written about it. When I went to poetry events in Los Angeles and Seattle, I was quickly reminded of the unusual diversity of the Claire de Lune event and the way in which it drew the diverse local participants of poets and audiences in the region together for its popular event. In other cities, as in San Diego, the local poetry world did important work through culturally specific events bolstering aggrieved communities, but a single central event that drew all of the diverse constituencies together was uncommon. Such a site as Claire de Lune provides a testing ground for a robust consideration of the *utopian performative* when considered over time and in relation to diverse participants.

I work from a grounded theory approach articulated in the works of (Buraway 1991 and 2000), *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* and expanded in relation to *forces, connections and imaginations in a postmodern world* in *Global Ethnography*. The later text is a compilation of case studies that illuminate these processes in everyday life. It indicates that any urban center can provide a backdrop for ethnographic study of the aforementioned themes.

In my framing, the poetry world is a space of *imaginations* through the expression of poems, and of *connections* across participants at events, and through the more diffused participation of living within the scope of popular culture. Popular live poetry is impacted by the force of post-industrial late capitalism: the ways in which it breeds contradictions rather than harmony across diverse people and turns relationships into those based on power over and consumption rather than mutuality, and everything it can hold onto into private property. Understood as a social form, popular live poetry responds to the

contradictions from which it arises. How have critics written about poetry as an emergent form that keeps it intact, and contributes to a deeper understanding of its purpose and cultural meaning?

José Limón (1992) treats poetry as a social form in his discussion of Chicano border poetry. Critic Michael Sáenz describes Limón's attention to the socially symbolic nature of Chicano poetry and primary poets of the Movement. He quotes Limón's analysis that these poets "...became both 'models of' culture change and 'models for' the production and resolution of change" in the Chicano community (Sáenz 1993:668). Limón writes from a subjective, experiential voice as well as an objective, critical voice in his analysis in *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems, History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry* (1992). He draws on the work of Américo Paredes, among others.

In "*With his Pistol in His Hand, A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, Paredes (1958) describes the historical emergence of the Mexican corrido (ballad) as a counter-narrative to dominant narratives of exclusion. In Paredes text, *the corrido* ballad form, literally, *the run*, moves north-south as its hero, Gregorio Cortez lives the story from which ballads will be later spun. The corrido crosses the east-west borderline between the United States and Mexico and leaves a crossroads, a symbol for major transformation in its trace. Paredes's style is subjective, objective, poetic and critical.

In these works, the authors make a two-fisted argument through the dynamic narrative structure of the writing that indirectly works the reader and their analysis of the subject matter that they stitch to the story. Limón and Paredes texts are discussions of emergent, poetic art forms. They demonstrate that they understand their topics through

their analysis as is expected but they do more, reflecting the depth of their understanding by the way in which they write. In *Expressions of Ethnography*, communication critic Robin Patric Clair calls on:

...ethnographers to consider taking an aesthetic approach- 'a rigorous and creative manner, a vulnerable, sensitive, dynamic and pulsating engagement with cultural ways of being in the world' in hopes that 'poignant portrayals and mesmerizing images of cultural practices' might touch all our lives. (2003:xii)

In this sense, the ethnographer's task is to describe a world to outsiders in a way that touches them; thus opening possibilities for greater empathy towards the particular people on which the ethnography rests. In relation to the discipline of communication, the ethnographer's task is to illuminate forms that have yet to be sufficiently chronicled and to tease out the ways in which practitioners set them to use in relation to larger questions considered in the discipline such as the problem of community.

Locating Ethnographic Voice

In short intervals throughout this text, I use performative writing to open up the experience of the affective community of popular live poetry across a range of diverse subjectivities and to describe this world through the lens of class. This writing has a narrative quality and it reflects a way of making sense of things that I learned from listening to the old people in my family tell stories about life, sitting together anywhere, in the logging town where I was reared. Further, it reflects a way of thinking about ethnographic practice.

In her influential essay, "Situated knowledges," Donna Haraway (1988) critiques disembodied academic voices and suggests that scholars ground their epistemologies in

bodies and locations. She describes the disembodied academic perspective as a "God's-eye" view, over and above one's subjects and locates it on a historical trajectory rooted in the construction of scientific knowledge. In a similar line, David Román (1988) proclaims in his book, *Acts of Intervention: Gay Culture and AIDS* the now commonly held view that neutrality is a myth and that critics should make plain their political orientations and intentions in writing about others. The style of writing I use reflects their influences among others. I engage in a type of writing called *autoethnography*.

Autoethnography is performative, ethnographic writing that includes the ethnographer's experience and affective insights as a participant in a given performance event. Sociologist Norman Denzin states, "Autoethnographers insert their experiences into the cultural performances being studied" (2003:191). Denzin cites Dwight Conquergood's view that ethnographers are "coperformers" alongside those they study (191).

The view of ethnography as a coperformance and the writing practice of autoethnography troubles the traditional position of the ethnographer as detached and above those she studies and the subsequent, far-away and above writing voice that can stem from this way of thinking. Further, taking up a position in the field and in one's writing practices over and above others is not only unwarranted but also uncomfortable for ethnographers with working class hearts.³⁹ I use autoethnographic writing to locate myself in relation to others, to open up experience in relation to the world I treat, and overall to add depth to my analysis.

³⁹ This use of "heart" references Dwight Conquergood's ethnographic video, *The Heart Broken in Half*, DVD, dir. Taggart Siegel & Dwight Conquergood [Collective Eye, 1990].

Richard Schechner (2002) asserts that in the field of performance studies, ethnographers are customarily members of the communities they study, rather than outsiders. This view challenges the historical position of the anthropologist as an elite outsider looking in on a world of subjects and translating them and their cultural practices back to other outsiders. In recent years, however, qualitative researchers have problematized the clean notion of insider and outsider and called attention to a consideration of power between the ethnographer and the people by whom he or she speaks. They have looked critically at how degrees of insider or outsidership and differentials of power afford them access and insight into the field or limit their views and produced excellent studies (Foley 1995, Frankenberg 1993, Fordham 1996, Kaplan 1997). The point in my view and many others is to be cognizant of power and to consider oneself in relation to one's subjects and how people located with less power beneath might look up and see you.

Still, insidership can afford the ethnographer insight into the meanings of cultural practices that otherwise might go unnoticed. I come from a logging town and in that context some adults refer to middle class people as *suits*. They say this in a joking way but also with a tone of unfairness, under the breath, like *suit-* downcast-ed, as if saying it could throw it down to the ground and get it dirty in the mud. There is a bitter sweetness to it because suits have not had to work with their bodies like blue-collar working class people have had to. The dream of higher education from working class communities is to have the privilege to work with one's mind rather than one's body. In an indirect way, this sensibility comes through the communicative practice of popular live poetry.

Rhetoric foundational to the *American Dream to pull yourself up by your*

bootstraps takes on different meaning when one actually wears boots and knows that such an action would make a person fall to the ground. In sum, it is important to consider the ways in which hierarchical power operates in one's role as an ethnographer because privilege can obscure one's understanding of those located below. It is always more difficult to talk about privilege than it is to talk about marginalization when it implicates the speaker. However, it is not that hard and I aim to do both as I move through the ethnographic writing in this text. Finally, I locate myself in relation to others and direct my ethnographic gaze from the bottom up.

Ethnographers always have one foot out of the world they study because of the work that they do. They record fieldnotes, conduct interviews, collect data, do research and ultimately, tell a true but partial story that bears in mind many voices. Finally, they frame their account in relation to the academic fields it touches upon. As skilled and professional craft workers, ethnographers also belong to the world of academia. Historically, this has been where their work has been housed and other academics have been the readers of their ethnographic tales.

In recent years, major search engines such as *Google Scholar* have uploaded published academic texts from the smallest and most quiet corners of the world to the Internet (Willinsky 2005). This practice is democratizing academic scholarship, extending the boundaries of university libraries and making its texts available to anyone who has access to the Internet. At the same time, it is problematizing the ethnographic audience. The Internet is disseminating academic knowledge such as ethnographic writing, making it a more publicly oriented practice, regardless of the intentions of the given ethnographer. To whom does the ethnographer speak?

Increasingly, ethnographers must imagine the possibility of audiences beyond the university and the ways in which the subjects of their studies will weigh the ethnographer's accounts and assessments. In my view, this is a positive shift that will make ethnographic work stronger. At the same time as ethnography has become more publicly oriented and available, the publicly oriented performance poets and event organizers I treat have also become more connected and public through the Internet.

Of the larger communicative context in which poetry is situated, San Diego poet and event organizer Marc Kochinos, of the weekly poetry happening at Claire de Lune, states:

Through email and websites there's a grassroots communication in the arts right now, in general and in poetry specifically that is allowing what is really a movement... just by being able to communicate. I know what's going on at readings in New York, Chicago, Seattle, Ireland, Africa, because I'm in communication with people on the Net. Also people who would never have heard of Claire de Lune come to feature here. In fact on *poetry-host-list-serve*, a really well known poet off the East coast, Georgia Popoff from Syracuse, she was talking about different venues and said, 'This venue's wonderful, and that venue's wonderful- and my favorite's Claire's in San Diego,' and my jaw dropped.⁴⁰

In addition to the increased popularity and broader public orientation that networking through the Internet can bring to local producers and events, the practice of poetry at local levels carries with it a responsibility towards the public.

Local performance poets and organizers of events who gain respect in the views of the community overtime cannot take off their roles in the public eye. The public performance does not end for them when the ritual of the poetry event finishes on a given night nor does the line between performing one's identity as a poet or organizer, and

⁴⁰Marc Kochinos, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

one's identity as a local citizen dissolve. They are *on*, all the time: the stakes in their activity are higher than those of performers who are viewable only on the Internet or television by audiences from afar.

Methods

From 2000 to 2004 and again from late 2006 to early 2007, I did ethnographic research on live poetry in San Diego and Tijuana at coffee houses, performance spaces, libraries, cultural centers, bars, barbershops, street corners and festivals wherever I found it happening. I used a multi-modal fieldwork approach in which I participated and observed as audience member, ethnographic videographer, poet and critic. This method afforded me perspective from different locations on the cultural production and meanings of live poetry.

My participation in roles both as a poet and an audience member gave me insight into the dialectics of the live act and helped me develop insider questions for fellow participants that would enable them to describe the meanings of the event in rich detail. By assuming different roles in the field and using a few ethnographic methods, I hope to convey a round view of the world of popular live poetry. Each method provides a specific vantage into the topic, yet each is also limited: ultimately, a combination strengthens the study (Zinn, 2001:165). In total, I video-interviewed eight hosts at key local poetry events, forty poets, thirty audience members, and video-recorded thirty-five acts of live poetry.

In 2002, I produced a twenty-minute ethnographic video on live poetry in San Diego with two of my colleagues, Ricardo Guthrie and Ge Jin, called, *Your Wrds R*

Welcome (Your Wrds). In it, participants at local venues such as the *Malcolm X* Library, the Chicano/a performance space *Voz Alta* and the *Claire de Lune* coffeehouse discuss the purpose and meaning of doing live poetry. It includes performances of live poetry on stages and street corners, and sequences of poetry events. Participants discuss the social quality of this form of poetry as one that moves people more than private readings of a text. Further, they describe the ways in which it bolsters a sense of community, provides an in-between space in which to re-imagine identities and nourishes positive and oppositional thinking.

During the production of *Your Wrds*, my colleagues and I were graduate students in sociologist and anthropologist, Bennetta Jules-Rosette's, *Ethnographic Film* course at the University of California, San Diego. She instructed us to center whole body acts in-situ in our videos. This approach reminded us to shoot the whole bodies of poets and audience members and directed our attention towards what they were saying. Production techniques in much of popular culture on the other hand, fragment bodies with shots zoomed in on body parts and fast-paced editing: a style exemplified by many MTV videos. The ethnographic film approach draws attention to whole acts and whole bodies carried out by particular people in particular contexts. My theoretical understanding of the form of popular live poetry was encouraged through the praxis of doing this kind of ethnographic work. I learned that popular live poetry comes to the fore through the embodied dialectical and intersubjectively intense, communication between poets and audiences.

Delimiting the Field-Site and Bringing Objects of Study to Light

In this section I draw on the border that marks the landscape in San Diego as a metaphor to talk about the contradiction of class that complicates the affective sense of community in the world of poetry. I describe my process of entering the field and my preliminary work in both San Diego and Tijuana to describe the broad context in which the study is situated. I also use the metaphor of the border to describe the creative in-between cultural space of poetry. Finally, as I work through the tropes of place, space and class as they lace through the study in the next few pages, I lay down some foundational underpinnings of popular live poetry.

When I came into the poetry world in San Diego and Tijuana in 2000, I entered from the San Diego side of the Border, and the world was conveyed to me as a cross-border space. Michel de Certeau (1984) holds that acts of storytelling transform places into spaces, and the world narrated by the poetry community was boundless. I met the Taco Shop Poets during this time. They emerged in 1994 as the first collective of poets in the region in recent decades. They began by performing their poetry in taco shops to reach a Chicano/a, Mexican American, working class and linguistically sophisticated audience, practiced in the mix of Spanish and English code-switching who would understand the poetry they had to deliver.

The Taco Shop Poets did important work staking out space for this type of cross-border cultural production. Ultimately they expanded, securing the local Chicano/a non-profit performance space, Voz Alta, in which to build Chicano/a community through the arts, and moving into mainstream coffeehouses and bringing audiences with them with their bilingual and bicultural poetic expression intact. They charted a path that made it

easier for later poets to use Spanish and other non-English languages in their live acts: making the practice of poetry feel better for poets' whose hearts speak more than English. Further, they stretched audiences to come into an in-between cultural space during the event in San Diego.

From the Tijuana side, influential poets such as the all female collective, *La Linea*, crossed the Border northbound, to participate in weekly poetry events in San Diego. Their name translates directly to *the line*, but in the common vernacular understood in this context, La Linea means the US/Mexico Borderline. It makes cross-border collaboration among poets and audiences on a regular basis at the very least, cumbersome, but the imagination of its possibility is kept alive in the Region's world of poetry.

Poets at work within it turn the dominant meaning of borders as exclusionary lines of *inside* and *out*, and a story of two countries separating the same brown dirt, into an in-between space of vernacular language and creative potential. In the words of Adrian Arancibia, a founding member of the Taco Shop Poets, there is more than one way to understand a border. This interview was video recorded in downtown San Diego in 2002, outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art. He states:

I tell you, you go to galleries here and you read in Spanish and everybody's like, *doo-doo-doo-doo-doo!* (alarm noise). THE WALLS-- and you know, "*I don't understand it,*" (said in a whiney voice) Well, *tough shit!* That's part of living in the Border. You know? Sometimes you're not gonna understand what's going on. I mean there are times, when I hear people from Tijuana, (Arancibia is from Chile) and they throw in so much slang, or sometimes I'll go to National City (predominantly African American, working class area of San Diego at the time) and they'll throw in so much slang and it's like, *what-what-what-what-what?* I mean you kind of listen to it, two or three times in order to make sense of it. But that doesn't mean I put *girders* around myself

(motions hands up and down along sides of face, blocking peripheral view) or bars around myself- or walls around myself- because I can't hear it. It becomes a flux, a change, an interchange, you know?⁴¹

Arancibia's poetic definition of the fecundity of in-between-ness differs markedly from the dominant way in which borders are defined in this region, not in the plural, but as La Linea, the mono-cultural, historical material fact that runs three fences deep on the edge of the city.

Critic-artists have theorized borders as a site for creativity that warbles along the edges of their drastic limitations (Anzaldúa 1987, Gomez-Peña 1989, Paredes 1958, Limón 1992, Fox 1994, Holling and Calafell 2007, and Saldívar 1990). Among them, José David Saldívar (1990) defines borders in relation to cognition in a line similar to Arancibia's "girdered" vision. Saldívar posits that borders are "...the invented lines along which different groups work and live with divergent understanding" (252). The poetry event creates the communicative space in which borders often shift and expand as poets and audiences stretch to understand where each other are coming from through embodied spoken poetry and their symbolic use of language.

Communication critic Vicky Mayer calls for a change in research approaches to get at emergent cultural production. In her discussion, she considers Latino/a culture. She states:

...The crossing of intercultural and international research agendas seems imperative as Latinization implies new communicative processes both within and across national borders... Garcia Canclini's (1995) term the 'glocal' is useful here for it describes a fusion of global and local processes, which then cannot be reduced to the singular framework of the nation... (2004:120)

⁴¹Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, production assistance from Ricardo Guthrie, San Diego, CA, October 24, 2002.

The notion of the glocal, conceived of from afar as a transnational space that rolls between San Diego and Tijuana is interesting. However, during the formative period of my research, I recognized that the contradiction between the material and imagined view of the poetry world as both an exclusionary and an inclusive transnational border space, presented problems for its study as one glocal site. Further, I saw that there were differences in the public practice of poetry in the two cities.

San Diego was in the throes of a popular poetry movement in which new poets were being born through the event. Long-time San Diego poet and former host of a few local poetry events, Chris Vannoy, reflects on the popularity of open-mic poetry events prior to the change in 2000. He explains that most of these events would, "...dwindle down until there are just two or three people coming and the guy gives up!"⁴² The fact that an event in San Diego was drawing consistently large crowds of over one hundred people to its weekly happening was unprecedented.

In Tijuana on the other hand, this movement was not underway nor were there any events that allowed audience members, regardless of status to become poets. The particular structure of the events in San Diego set them apart from those in Tijuana and signaled distinct orientations. In San Diego, they took shape as open-mics and less frequently, but significantly, as poetry slams. In the rules of the open-mic, anyone can be a poet who elects to participate and everyone is afforded the same share of time. In principle and in practice, it guarantees a horizontal form of communication in which all participants are given equal power regardless of statuses held outside of the event.

⁴²Chris Vannoy, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, March 5, 2007.

The more recent poetry slam builds on the horizontal principles of the open-mic event and elaborates upon it with a game in which audience members judge the live acts of poetry. At poetry slams, three audience members volunteer to judge the poets. They are selected by the host according to two criteria: that they reflect the "...demographic make-up of the audience and that they are not representatives of the poetry establishment (no literature professors, literary journal editors, book publishers, etc.)" (Schmid 2000:27). Like the US based, San Francisco Beats and poets of the Black Arts Movement, poets of the slam poetry movement critique white, middle class culture (Somers-Willett 2003). Poetry events in Tijuana in the first years of the decade of 2000 did not have the oppositional feeling tone of poetry in San Diego, nor the event structure of open-mics or slams.

Through fieldwork, I learned that poetry in Tijuana was practiced more often in private poetry *talleres* (workshops) inside poets' homes, at events directed towards other poets rather than outsiders, and at poetry readings given by invited poets and *official poets* at public institutions. By official poets, I mean those who are recognized as poets by the literary establishment and to varying degrees, by the general public. In the United States, poets of this ilk have most often had their poems published by a publishing house recognized by the literary establishment. They do not need the popular event to become poets or to have a forum to continue their art. This distinguishes them from poets who take on the role during the popular event, but then like Cinderella after midnight, go back to plain clothes and day-jobs, unrecognized as creators with a gift of spoken poetry.

Still, official poets can direct their work to popular audiences and unknown popular performance poets can gain greater esteem at local levels than official poets.

Activity in the world of popular live poetry raises the value of the popular performance poet overtime, turning some into heroes who are revered by their peers beyond obscure official poets who have not dedicated their published work to the people.

In the realm of popular culture according to Stuart Hall, “What matters is... the state of play in cultural relations: to put it bluntly and in an over-simplified form- what counts is the class struggle in and over culture” (2005:69). Critic Susan Somers-Willett draws on Stuart Hall’s discussion of popular culture as a space in which struggles over meaning are hashed out in relation to dominant culture and links it to poetry. She argues “...‘popular verse’ is not bound to a particular style, but is poetry which performs an attitude of resistance to a literary elite” (2003:22). She explains:

... this resistance is evident in US performance poetry movements in two specific ways: first, by representing ‘the people’ or ‘folk’ in the poems themselves, and second, by attracting and entertaining popular audiences through the medium of performance. Poets and supporters of these literary-performative movements often argue that voices underrepresented by the literary elite hold the same value than their institutional counterparts, if not more value. Similarly, these poets attribute value to seeking non-academic audiences (i.e. seeking an audience ‘of the people’). (Somers-Willett 2003:22-23)

In San Diego during the first years of the decade of 2000 its world of poetry became increasingly popular and drew in the oppositional currents Somers-Willett describes, at the same time as it fostered a burgeoning sense of community across its participants. In Tijuana on the other hand, its world of poetry remained calm.

I participated at events in Tijuana as a poet and audience member through my relationship with Mexican poet and poetry event organizer, Olga Garcia. I met Garcia at a

small open-mic event held at the *Other Side Coffeeshouse* in San Diego in 2000.⁴³ She delivered a haunting piece in Spanish, then looked up and gave a crooked smile when she saw that I was listening. A few years later, a colleague and I made a short documentary video portrait of Garcia as a border-traversing poet. She lived much of her life in Tijuana and later moved to South San Diego. Through Garcia I met others such as Tijuana based poet and poetry event organizer, Aida Mendez. Mendez has organized events in recent years under the name, *Acanto y Laurel (Laurel and Thistle)*, that bring poets from San Diego and Tijuana together to perform at venues in Tijuana such as CECUT and El Bar West Fargo.

While Tijuana's poetry world provokes interest on its own terms, I was drawn to the practice of popular poetry underway in San Diego and the large numbers of participants who gathered around it. Across San Diego and Tijuana, the events in San Diego happened more consistently in addition to drawing larger crowds. At that time, it was possible to attend an open-mic poetry event every night of the week in San Diego and a slam, twice a month. In Tijuana on the other hand, poetry events happened less frequently and drew much smaller audiences. For this reason, active Tijuana poets traveled to San Diego to participate in events.

Politically, I was interested in how the event made possible a kind of bottom-up communication in which everyone had the same, fair, deep, right to speak, through embodied poetry and the vehicle of the open-mic. Culturally, I was pulled by the popular,

⁴³Olga Garcia, performance of live poetry, *The Other Side Coffeeshouse*, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2000.

working class worlds that many poets expressed during the event and interested in how it was a forum for the communication of the diverse, lived experience of class.

Beyond the edge of San Diego, the slam poetry movement, hip hop culture and popular performance poetry were coming together and beckoning the city's young people to come into its practice as new poets and audiences. Popular performance poetry that bore the influence of slam and hip hop began to be channeled through internet and television-based programs such as Def Poetry. Some new poets of this period in San Diego list hip hop artists among their influences. Others organized themselves as collectives and called themselves, *crews*.

Tricia Rose (1994) describes crews as new kinds of family and seedlings of social movements in bleak, post-industrial, urban centers. In my view, the term also references blue-collar work and the family-like, solidaristic bonds of empathic identification that can emerge among those who work side-by-side, producing something together. Poetry crews work together making poetry, unseating the view that poetry should be a private and individualistic practice. Of this orientation, Mayra Luna, a poet and former member of Tijuana's, La Linea states, "...I don't think poetry should be like the Lone Ranger."⁴⁴

By calling themselves crews and referencing hip hop culture and a working class aesthetic, the poetry collectives in San Diego signaled diverse, working class audiences and hip hop identified youth that the poetry was a part of their world. Further, by

⁴⁴Mayra Luna, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 23, 2004.

organizing themselves as collectives, they ran parallel to the collective organization underway through the slam movement's poetry teams and reverence for group poems.⁴⁵

In 2002, San Diego's local slam chapter sent its first slam team to compete in the national competition in Seattle, Washington. This activity generated a more collective, more youthful, and in some ways, more oppositional face to poetry happenings in the city. Former event host, poet and local poetry scene organizer, Marc Kochinos, reflects on the activity among young poets who organize as collectives rather than operate exclusively as individual poets. He considers a change, from when he moved to San Diego in 1994, to 2000:

When I first came into town the Taco Shop Poets had just started. I didn't learn that until later, but it was just about a month after their first reading. Until two years ago, they were the only poetry group in town. This isn't just a San Diego phenomenon, you go to Chicago there are poetry groups, you go to New York there are poetry groups, you go to San Francisco there are poetry groups.⁴⁶

In 2000, eight collectives of roughly three to seven poets each, formed in San Diego, after a long hiatus in action. They gave themselves names such as: *The Able Minded Poets*, *The Folkalists*, *Goat Song Conspiracy* and *Elevated*. It was a vibrant time of making popular live poetry north of the borderline. Tijuana told another story. Even in the case of close proximity and increasingly globalized times of transnational flows of information, culture, and people, cultural producers making worlds of poetry in particular cities and nations still differ. I accepted the US/Mexico boundary as the edge of my ethnographic

⁴⁵Conversation with Paul Devlin, Marc Smith and Taylor Mali, "Filmmaker Commentary," SlamNation, DVD, dir. Paul Devlin, [Docurama, 1998].

⁴⁶Marc Kochinos, video-interview with author, production assistance from Ricardo Guthrie, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

site and zoomed in on San Diego. I kept Tijuana poetry like a purple dream in my back pocket and after awhile, I took off my critic cap, and just came at it whole poet.

From 2000 to 2004, I participated and observed in the regular poetry events in San Diego. I learned that the Afrocentric *R-Spot Barbershop*, the *Malcolm X Library*, the Chicano/a, *Voz Alta* performance space and the Lesbian *Flame* bar focused on sustaining their communities, generating alliances with others and expressing oppositional messages in their poetries, while at most of the coffeehouse venues, the events were less popular in terms of numbers, predominantly white and less linked to the social and political world. I describe these spaces in greater detail in a later section.

Across events, there was one held in a coffeehouse with a large capacity, in a diverse, working class neighborhood that drew all of the poets and audiences in the region together for its Tuesday night happening. As such, it became a diverse poetry venue and a space for the imagination of new constellations of community. It was the most popular event in San Diego and Tijuana from 2000 to 2004, garnering crowds of about 100 people while the other venues drew about 10 to 20 people. The event took place in North Park, San Diego in a coffeehouse called, Claire de Lune.

Most of the people who came to the Claire de Lune event came to listen to the poetry rather than perform as poets. The event was structured around an open-mic. In a given night, only fifteen to twenty poets would perform and most of the time, every poet who wanted to participate in the open-mic was called to the stage. This distinguished the event from some others and oriented it more towards the public. The title of the ethnographic video, *Your Wrds R Welcome*, is based on the opening oration given by the host of this event, during which he would lean into the microphone and in a deep and

resounding voice say: *whether you read at Slams, or write Sonnets, perform Hip Hop, or Homeric verse, your words, are welcome, on this stage.*

This oration referenced the different identities of the poets associated with these styles, and marked the stage as an equal and inclusive space for the practice of poetry. Further, through the delivery of this oration, he articulated a larger cultural belief among participants that the event be a forum for community. Still, there were edges to the feeling of community across its participants. Some made up the regular sidewalk audience, watching through the storefront windows rather than coming inside, while others sat happily inside and sipped cappuccinos. My father is a carpenter and praises *Seven Eleven's* coffee for its flavor and price, but I know that he likes mochas and other sweet things. I asked him once why he preferred to wait in the truck rather than go into Starbucks with me to get our drinks, and he said: "They disrespect my boots."

Working Class People, Culture and Classed Identifications in the Event

While the sidewalk audience is made up of some work-boot wearers, it is not because of their own boots that they do not relax inside the coffeehouse space. Instead, they stay outside to identify with blue-collar, working class people that in some cases are the communities from which they come. Still, others do so to align with popular forms such as slam or hip hop that build from a diverse, working class aesthetic. The unusual diversity of this event provided a rare opportunity to inquire into the production of an affective sense of community across difference through the practice of poetry, and to observe the necessary conditions by which it is sustained.

I loom large to explain happenings in popular culture in the main that I reference earlier that influenced the ways in which San Diego's world of poetry grew during this period: such as slam poetry, hip hop culture and Def Poetry. I probe into the working class cultural aesthetic veiled beneath these forms and tease out the centrifugal affective sense of community on one hand, and the contradiction of class on the other that come to the fore through its communication as these dynamics are grounded in the ethnography.

The community of the popular live poetry event is both fuzzy and barbed. It pierces hearts in weird feelings of giant love, it makes people feel bigger than they are alone, and it hurts when poets or event organizers on stage, in its sanctified ritual space, reject the hopes of audiences' straight to their faces. The form is not separated from those who make it and this deepens the stakes of its communication and makes the whole thing undeniably personal. At the same time, the event illuminates impersonal social forces such as class and race: as they are lived and experienced and reworked into live acts of poetry. Finally, Hall cautions against an oversimplified analysis of the dynamics of class in popular culture that neglects to consider other contradictions. For instance, race, sexuality and gender intersect with class and further frame the ways in which it is lived and experienced.

In my view, it is possible to look deeply at class as it plays out in popular culture without falling into over-simplifications that leave it as a normative category and floating as an imaginary of white, male, heterosexual factory workers. Workers such as these are nearly extinct. In the words of Irish labor union leader of the predominantly female grocery store sector in the Republic of Ireland, Kay Kearnes, they are "... *dinosaurs*-- I

mean they're on the way out!"⁴⁷ Class is a complex, shape-shifting and persistent contradiction that rears its head in popular culture.

I use the phrase, "diverse, working class people," to grab hold of the imaginary of the white working class factory working man. Indeed, the working class includes many more people than him. Among working class people, those who have worked the hardest for the longest time under the toughest conditions across all of their kin are those most respected. By this criteria, African American people's experience of slavery locates them as the quintessential hardest workers in the United States. Native American people's experience in blue-collar work as high-rise iron workers in the North East is another image that expands the conflation of working class people and whiteness. Mexican agricultural workers, Chinese miners, eastern European loggers and Irish dirt workers are all part of the story of class in the United States. In the current era, the nature of the working class shifts as more workers find themselves in low paying service work and white-collar jobs that injure them with insidious subtlety.

Popular culture critic and historian, George Lipsitz (1994) argues that the term, *working class* is useful because it makes sense of the empirical fact that a vast number of people sell their labor power in exchange for wages in order to live. He states further that the shared experience of class results in "some common ground" and mutual understanding of the world based on an "ideological perception and a historical experience" (1994: 12). The popular live poetry event gives voice to the poetry that extends from diverse working class lived experience.

Poets in the world of popular live poetry perform class identity as a cultural

⁴⁷Kay Kearnes, audio-interview with author, Dublin, Ireland, October 22, 1998.

sensibility and way of looking at the world that reflects the lived experience of their mother, or family or broader community as often as they convey their individual experience. The event is a space of the performance and communication of the lived experience of class, and other differences. It is propelled by the desire among participants for open-ended poetic expression and the hope that common ground might be found with others.

I turn now to describe the culture of popular live poetry and the ways in which it expresses class meanings and draws out a sense of community. I then discuss slam poetry. While popular live poetry is rooted in verbal art, it has been popularized by slam and hip hop and channeled through the mass-media. These movements and mediations have impacted the form and the emergent culture that comes to the fore through its activity.

The culture of popular live poetry draws people together through its use of vernacular language, and its references to shared symbols and understandings about the world, that combine to make people *feel at home*, in a way that is better than actually being at “home.” Popular performance poets endeavor to get in closely with the audience during the live act, and hug or tackle them poetically by drawing on the *familiar*. This word is instructive in that it shares the same base as “family,” popular performance poets draw out the binding relationships on which the best families rely. George Lipsitz explains:

Unlike “high culture” where a dogmatic formalism privileges abstraction over experience, the effectiveness of popular culture depends on its ability to engage audiences in active and familiar processes. (1990:14)

In popular live poetry, poems that are understood by the audience as overly abstract are accepted less warmly than poetry that clarifies and elucidates and rivets concepts to the heart and mind. Teddy Bear, a middle-aged, African American poet who performed at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse in San Diego in 2000, implied his poetry would remain with the audience when he braced his jaw and coarsely spoke the line, “*WORDS*, that stick in your *mind*-- like Crazy Glue!”⁴⁸ Crazy Glue sticks because it is familiar and can be pictured in memory from a television commercial. The familiar unity of popular live poetry relies on shared symbols mediated by common household communicator’s such as television.

Teddy Bear’s line works further, because it references the palpable body, from the inside out, something we all know in a universal sense. Even though he uses the word, “mind,” sticking requires the tangible form of brains. Bear conjures an image that turns ordinarily abstracted words into chunky block letters dabbed in crazy glue, and fixes them to the brains of individuals sitting in the audience. This is part of the entertainment quality of popular live poetry and it leaves the people feeling goofy and rearranged.

In a reflective comment on the difference between popular and academic poetry, influential, San Diego based poet, Nazareth Simmons states:

A lot of times with the academics, in *ac-a-de-mi-a*, it’s hard to follow their train of thought! They put so much effort and energy into being *academic*, they use these words- *big old words*- that you gotta run and get your thesaurus or dictionary for...⁴⁹

In general, poets active in popular live poetry events use language and symbolism that the audience understands because the point of the performance is communication and

⁴⁸Teddy Bear, performance of live poetry, San Diego, CA, October 31, 2000.

⁴⁹Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego CA, June 16 2004.

because the poets come from the same communities as the audience. Popular poetry is organized along horizontal and bottom up lines, rather than hierarchically and top down.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) claim that "...cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic... [and] the physical body and geographic space are never entirely separable" (Stallybrass and White 1986:2). They explain further:

The ranking of literary genres or authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes is a particularly clear example of a much broader and more complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low. The high/low opposition... is a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures. Divisions and discriminations in one domain are continually structured, legitimated and dissolved by reference to the vertical symbolic hierarchy which operates in the other three domains. (2-3)

Popular poetry events intervene in the dominant high/low binary by drawing participants together across hierarchical differences in the horizontal practice of embodied live poetry in an event that unsettles dominant sense making about the order of things. It shakes up the body as a site for mental activity too, instead of just the head and distributes poetry across it as a site of heightened communication during the live act. It opens consciousness to consider social engagement beyond high/low binaries of white over black, upper class over working class, men over women, English speakers over non-English and other contradictions spurred by post-industrial late capitalism. In terms of space, the events trouble the boundary between the audience and the stage, and equalize the hierarchy of the artist raised above the audience below. The name of the poetry *slam* sheds light on its event in this regard.

The Slam Performative

Poetry slams reference the bottom-up power associated with the earlier use of the term *slam*, in popular culture, as well as its youthful, energetic, fierce claim to public space. Poets slam poems from the stage, using language like a machete to clear an unyielding discursive spot in public space. They win or lose rounds, a battle is underway and the audience critiques and sharpens their blades. Slam terminology references the punk rock dance of slamming in which audience members hop up and down and fall against each others' bodies in the area closest to the stage, called *the pit*. A dancer sometimes dives into the dense group from the periphery, the group catches the dancer and lifts his or her body over-head horizontally. From this position, the dancer can punch the air in victory: having made it to the top, clap, or do dance moves with arms but the body must be kept like a plank to stay afloat.

Often the dancer is delivered to the stage, runs across the front and jumps back into the pit to be caught by the collective again. After a short while, of about one minute, the dancer is dropped back into the collective because it is difficult to maintain the spontaneous synchronicity of many people equitably lifting for long. This dance performs the possibility of bottom-up power as the dancer is lifted over-head. While the dancer is horizontal rather than upright, the body symbolizes an egalitarian rather than hierarchical structure of power in keeping with anarchist principles that inform punk-rock culture. The culture of popular live poetry draws on a range of styles from diverse, popular traditions and adds them into its inclusive, burgeoning form.

When construction worker and poet Marc Smith founded slam poetry in 1986 at the Green Mill Tavern in Chicago, Illinois he aimed to make it salient for working class

audiences (Schmid 2001). The form draws on working class values and communicative ways that speakers should recognize the people to whom they speak. In this view, poets should not pontificate without considering if they resonate with the audience. To keep the poets cognizant of this, audience members volunteer to judge them on a scale of one to ten. As I mention earlier, the judges must reflect the poets demographically and they cannot be of the poetry establishment. Winners proceed through a set of rounds, and some go on to win other events to be ultimately selected as members of local *slam teams*.

Slam's popularity has achieved broad reach, as most urban centers in the United States host regular, weekly or monthly events and send slam teams to national and international competitions. They are practiced in cities in Canada, Western Europe and Israel.⁵⁰ More than any other development in poetry in the last two decades, slam has invigorated its practice. Along with hip hop it has brought new audiences to poetry and helped create new poets. It has raised the ability to perform and communicate with the audience as key aesthetic criteria by calling them out through the process of judging. Importantly, it has turned poetry into a verb in addition to making it a noun through its event structure.

To slam is to distribute a poem across one's body and deliver it to an audience. This activity is necessary in order for it to become poetry. Poetry is given legs and extended in this view, from the fixity of the written page and the practice of private reading, to the live event. This distinguishes it from ordinary poetry in that the latter does not have a verb form: one can not "poem." The word, "slam," understood as a verb, is a

⁵⁰Marc Smith, "Marc Kelly Smith: Slampapi," Poetry Slam founder: Marc Kelly Smith (so what!!) <http://www.slampapi.com> [accessed August 20, 2008].

vernacular concept that calls attention to poetry as a distributed form across the individual poet's body and as a form of communication between poets and audiences. The concept highlights the communicative practice and production that underpins popular live poetry in general.

As a style of performance, popular live poetry of the post-slam era points to a style of delivery that is commonly memorized rather than read, that makes use of gesture rather than speaking exclusively from the head, that has an urgency in tone and content of poetry rather than not, and that has a more flat and forceful rhythm than the lilt left at the end of each line associated with academic readings of poetry. In reference to this recognizable lilt, a local poet pondered the backgrounds of privilege that could have influenced such a style of speaking, and then offered a metaphorical comment, "Maybe they weren't potty trained at gun-point."⁵¹ Class backgrounds make a difference in the kinds of poetry poets make and in the way poets communicate: some create out of personal and collective lives of ease, and others from hardship.

Communicating Class with Truths of Bodies, Speech and Lived Experience

In critic Simon Frith's (1996) discussion, the Industrial Revolution cultivated a belief that the head is for mental activity and the body is for labor and pleasure. This view leaves blue-collar, working class individuals and their communities, with a heavy archive of experiential knowledge from embodied work experience, and no critical form of expression. Frith argues that popular musicians have raised the role of the *mind* in the body and in so doing, counter the belief that the head is the exclusive site for mental

⁵¹Popular performance poet, conversation with author, San Diego, CA, September 15, 2007.

activity. Likewise, the form of live poetry responds to this problem by turning the body into the site of the poem during the performance event. Poets practice inscribing their bodies with poetic gestures for the moment of live poetic delivery, and audience members learn to see the working class body as capable of poetry, too.

During live poetry events, poets engage the audience on deep, embodied registers such as the lived experience of class. They open up epistemologies that have no language with a communicative flood of embodied voice, gesture, accent, vernacular language and the symbolic and narrative content of the poetry. If all goes well, an affective experience of community comes into being for one moment. This constellation emerges through the dialectical, densely communicative relationship between the audience and poet during the live act.

Popular poetry events create a discursive space, as poets imagine audiences and aim to communicate with them. During poetry slams, communication with the audience and the judges among them is key in order to win rounds of the slam competition. In Kenneth Burke's terms, "You persuade a man only in so far as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (Burke 1969:55).

Poets do this during live acts of poetry in a way that works at an almost unconscious level, for both the poet and the audience members, through their spoken accents, through their use of vernacular speech, through the way they hold themselves on stage and through their performance style of direct address. Audience members recognize a class kinship or class estrangement by these communicative ways. Literary critic Janet Zandy (2004) explains that class is "...most visible in juxtaposition or in relationship to

something else. You begin to know your class identity when you cross class borders and see your own circumstances through someone else's eyes" (10).

Poets use direct communication and de-emphasize the written text in a style that incorporates working class ways by circumventing the written word with the embodied, gestured word, conveyed in the live act of poetry. This style asserts the working class cultural practice of giving one's word. To give one's word is a performative speech act that requires a simultaneous, face-to-face communicative act during which the speaker makes eye contact with the listener, and the listener looks back into the speaker's eyes, and gives them recognition. This strategy avoids the risk of talking down disrespectfully, to the audience. Further, by using voice, poets are able to communicate class along more registers.

In a discussion of film, Christopher Beach (2002) explains that the introduction of sound to the visual medium of film in the 1920s made it possible to communicate class with more subtlety. He explains, "In addition to the use of gesture and physical appearance, filmmakers could now convey social distinctions through such linguistic signs as accent, diction, vocabulary, grammar and verbal proficiency, as well as the sound of the voice itself (rough vs. smooth, raw vs. refined)" (2).

Like film, performance poetry foregrounds both visual and audible fields. These communicative modes are ratcheted open during the live act and expose class signifiers. The live performance requires the voice of the poet and opens it to be read for its class meaning. Experienced performance poets bare in mind the ways in which they are likely to be understood by the audience, according to the way they look and sound, and aim to make poems that will be understood by their audiences. In addition to form, the content

of the poem is another way in which class is expressed.

Working class poets identify with audience members that they imagine have an understanding of hardship and ways of living associated with working class life. They describe blue-collar and service-work experiences that beckon humiliation, pain and glee when the boss is tricked. At other times they reference ways of eating that conjure working class lives such as standing in the Food Bank line to be issued blocks of government cheese and rotten produce donated from Albertson's, or they reference better things, like fried Spam sandwiches. And they reference mass mediated forms of popular culture television shows, styles of dance and music that the audience claim as their own. They take ordinary things from daily life and make poetry of it in order to strike a chord with the audience and resonate with them when they hit common ground.

During the live act, poets know they have done this when the expressions on the faces of the audience members change, when the audience tells them so by clapping or yelling encouraging words towards them from the floor, or when audience members come talk with them after the performance to share something from their lives that was pulled out by the poem. During the live moment of poetry, working class poets and audiences come together through communicative styles, vernaculars and narrative content. From this location, they are able to grapple with the limitations of working class stereotypes and re-imagine ways of being.

In a discussion of the culture of popular live poetry, and poetry slams in particular, critic Christopher Beach states, "...poets are expected to be talking about their 'real' lives, and if not, to own up to the fictional nature of the work" (1999:131). For instance, if a middle class poet performed a poem about living in his car and then drove

home to his house in suburbia, this would be wrong. At the local level, values such as these are put into practice over time, through the relationships regular participants have with each other. Participants know each other outside of the event and they hold each other accountable. This sets it apart from poetry carried out in other domains that has no mandate to tell the truth. Further, it reflects the ways in which its producers have developed it over time as a genre of poetry meant to challenge the culture of domination in bell hook's (1994) terms. She states, "A culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial" (28). In turn, Cornell West argues that "...bold acts of truth-telling" challenge the culture of domination.⁵²

The public, truth-telling element of the form makes it a vehicle by which to engage the process of coming to voice, by being challenged to speak truthfully under witness of public audience. Further, it sanctions free speech and dissent against larger social forces as part of its purpose and turns acts of poetry into sites for bottom-up public speaking. In Beach's terms, the "current poetry scene," draws on "populist," communication (1999). He describes this communication and links present day practices to the San Francisco Beat poets of the 1950s. Michael Davidson (1989) points out that the populist attitude of the Beats brought them "critical dismissal" yet "it was this kind of attitude that enabled the movement to believe in itself" (6). Likewise, popular poets today are emboldened by the credence afforded them from the popular audience. In the next section, I describe an event to exemplify my discussion.

⁵² Cornell West, public lecture, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, Jan 15, 1998.

Principles Applied to a Slam: Austin's International Poetry Festival

In 2006, I attended the Austin International Poetry Festival (AIPF) in Austin, Texas. The Festival was held at local coffee houses, bars, bookstores and colleges over a five-day period. I attended the event as a participant-observer in the capacities of poet and critic. I delivered poetry at two Festival venues and I participated and observed as an audience member at six different venues, taking notes in a journal and talking with other audience members, most of whom were also performance poets, about their views on the meaning and purpose of doing poetry publicly.

I also participated in a workshop on performing poetry and attended a panel on the role of poetry at the millennium, on which sat headlining Festival poets from Russia, China and Texas. Former national slam champion, Joaquin Zihuatanejo, led the workshop I attended. He read a poem about his relationship with his Chicano grandfather and then explained that the task of the slam poet during the live act is to get the audience to identify with the *grandfather* in the poem, so that they in turn identify with the poet, and the poet wins.⁵³ In this way, experienced poets play a role in constructing the emergent constellation of community that comes to the fore through the slam event, rearranging collective feelings and drawing audiences into closer affinities with aggrieved communities.

The Austin Festival is one of a few annual international poetry festivals to have emerged in recent years such as San Diego's *Border Voices Festival* and Medellín, Colombia's *International Poetry Festival*. These festivals bring a diverse, international constituency of poets and audiences together to expand the scope of poetry. They frame

⁵³Joaquin Zihuatanejo, [lecture, Austin International Poetry Festival, TX, April 21, 2006].

themselves as events organized around principles of diversity and democratic ideals such as free speech, equality and inclusion. Further, they are popular. The Austin Festival took place during free, publicly oriented events at local venues and it included both readings by published poets and a few slams over the course of its event.

The timing of the Austin Festival takes place in conjunction with the publication of a local poetry journal called, *Di-verse-city*. The name conveys the hope that through the diverse poetic *verses* of diverse poets, diverse community can be fostered in *cities*. Read through a lens of class in the United States, the spelling of the word "verse," in French references the French upper class rather than the French working class and a bourgeois appreciation of poetry. This is the black berets, long, thin cigarettes, perfume and fine wine of poetry, the scarves and beauty for its own sake of poetry, the ballet, the symphony, the romance, the caviar dream. It is easier for diverse, working class women to pick it up and put it on for special occasions without being mocked by their own, than it is for men. This sensibility operates in popular poetry, too, as an integral current that runs like a quiet stream alongside its more boisterous oppositional tendencies.

Finally, in its French sense, popular poetry civilizes and brings about a light-touch interest in all things diverse, without a consideration of power or inequality. While often not stated, a diverse community would have to deliver a modicum of equality across participants for most to want to be a part of it. The space of popular live poetry events, provide a forum to speak across contradictions that generate disunities and reshuffle the feeling of community amongst participants.

At the Austin Festival (Festival), the highlight was a Friday night poetry slam, held at a popular coffeehouse and bar, called, *Ruta Maya* (Mayan Route). The venue has

a balcony, a large main floor and a raised stage. The poets read on stage, some of them moving through the crowd during their performances. The audience included regular Austin poetry slammers, out for the ordinary Friday night event held there, and outsiders, present to witness and participate in the Festival. The event was promoted as a special Festival showcase, highlighting international poets from around the world. Slam teams from other cities in Texas were present in the audience and as poets, and most of these team members were African American.

I sat at the bar and observed the happenings. From my visual and auditory reading of accents, racial signifiers, wrinkles and gendered identities, the poets and audience members present at the event ranged from teenagers to senior citizens, and across racial and ethnic identities. African Americans, Chicano/as, British, Chinese, Asian Americans and white Americans were present: on the whole, about half of the roughly 200 participants were people of color while the others were white. There was an equal representation of people in gendered roles as women and men.

Before the event, I spoke with a black female poet from Arizona while we sat at the bar, about the venues in which we had performed and our thoughts on the Festival. She was very funny and quick witted. A member of one of the Texas slam teams looked over at us and saw a white woman guffawing, sitting next to a captivating black woman and approached us to chat. He was African American, too, and shared interesting views on doing slam poetry that I might not have had privy to if I had not been sitting in a half black conversational space.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Critic/activists have detailed the social and historical construction of *white* identity (Frankenberg 1993, Daniels 1997), the making of the white working class and its relationship to white supremacist capitalism (Roediger 1991, Ignatiev 1995) and its persistent impact on white people's

At the popular live poetry event, identity on the outside matters quite a bit, especially if participants do not know each other. Poets and audiences are all out in a loose sense of community, but they come together more deeply around identities they share with others outside of the ritual space of the poetry event. Still, the lived experiences poets reference once on stage afford poets and audiences opportunities to hear where each other are coming from in ways that challenge stereotypes and open a possibility to identify with each other across raced, classed, and gendered logics. Popular poetry events operate on a crossroads as poets enter the stage to address the audience, asserting contradictions among participants and opening wounds that they be salted and salvaged. Not knowing what will happen during these moments, but holding out, is part of the utopic hope implicated in the event that draws participants across difference to it.

The African American, Texas Slam Poet explained that he had been “called” to do poetry. Then I knew where he was coming from a religiously, charismatic Christian church: "I give them a love poem at the beginning to warm them up, but then I get in and do what I've been given this gift for- we got no time to waste!" He was a father in his late 30s, about 6' 2", stocky, with a deep voice. His face was rough as if he grimaced or thought hard a lot, rather than a calm face like a painting of a Hindu God. He worked as a social worker.

Later during the event, he performed a tense and detailed piece about a sex offender molesting a young girl, the demolition it made of her life, and walked the audience step by poetic step through the torture he wished upon the offender. I felt

consciousness and black peoples historically grounded distrust of them (Baldwin 1965, Frankenberg 1993, Daniels 1997 and hooks 1989).

churned up and sick to my stomach. I did not want to torture the offender as a co-producing audience member. I wanted the little girl to get the guy back, but not like that. My own stories from friends intersected with his poem and another view surfaced. He exited the stage and his team members slapped his back, shook hands and hugged him. He was smiling and he looked more at peace. He had done his deed, *God's work*, he spoke truth, even though it hurt.

The audience members who had been selected as judges at the beginning of the event scratched their scores on scorecards and lifted them up for the host to tally. He counted them up, along with the audience, hollering out totals, discarded the high and low scores, as is the custom in slam competitions, and gave him a score. There were many poets and three rounds of competitions that night.

Another poet to slam that evening at Ruta Maya was a white, male, British poet who appeared to be in his 50s named, David Johnson. Johnson performed a satirical piece on the problem of his identity in relation to winning slam poetry competitions. In the piece, he identifies as upper class, aligns with the status quo, and praises patriarchal, nuclear families and his life of ease. He wore slacks and a button-up shirt, and stood upright on the stage, with his arms to his sides. He spoke in a British accent in a loud, clear voice. I include the poem, "Competing in Slams in the USA," in its entirety here:

Poor me! I'm at such a disadvantage
 When I stand up to compete in a US slam
 My fellow performers can rage against history
 Adversity, inheritance, poverty and misery,
 I was born - with a silver spoon in my mouth-
 My parents were generally pleased.
 (At least today they could have sued the hospital
 For leaving a foreign metallic object in my body)

My poems can not storm about deprivation
 Poor education, a second-class nation.
 The only crack in my life is the crack
 In the ceiling of my bedroom.
 My parents were married before I was born.
 They're still married now 60 years on.
 I've been married nearly thirty years
 And we still sleep together,
 Eat together and are sweet together.
 I haven't fought in Iraq, My house is not under attack
 My dental treatment's so good I haven't got plaque.
 I don't even have an Apple Mac!
 I have a PC but I am not PC in everything I believe
 I'm not particularly interested in gay poets, women poets, black poets
 I'm simply interested in good poets.
 My life is no tale of rag to riches
 My nights are not full of "ho's and bitches"
 I did not work to pay my way through college
 There are no large gaps in my general knowledge
 So now, you see why life's so unfair, to me
 When it comes to US slam poetry.
 My grandfathers, both of them, fought the First World War
 And lived to tell the tale.
 When millions of young men were cut down by a hail of murderous lead.
 It's so unfair that I can't yell about hardship, brutality and pain
 That all that I can rage about is being given a seat on the plane
 Next to a large man with unfortunate breath
 I can't even rail against premature death
 If only I could tell you about all my disadvantages
 But all that I can think of is that sometimes there was not enough smoked salmon
 in my school sandwiches.
 It's so unfair that I am so superficial
 My only real run in with the officials
 Was for a parking violation. Damnation
 How can I compete when I seem so effete.

This poem garnered some laughter from the crowd, but the feeling-tone during the performance was tense. Unlike the other performances there was no loud roll of praise after the last word. This may have been because the audience did not know the meaning of "effete". Through the use of this word, the poem works contrary to the un-written rule of popular live poetry that it be easily understood. Further, there was a disjuncture

between the cultural competency of the poet and audience in terms of what would work as a joke. In Bauman's definition of verbal art defined at the beginning of this chapter, its communication requires a shared cultural understanding between the performer and the audience. The audience may not have found the joke of the poem funny because to do so they had to identify away from gay poets, women poets, black poets, and working class poets: some of whom experientially know, "poor education," "no dental treatment," and the strain of working through college.

The type of humor taken up in the poem: irony, is not always funny to working class audiences in the same ways it is to upper class audiences, and vice versa, because they begin from different sites of departure and wind back to different class locations. Yet, it is a joke, but at the same time it is not, because the narrative of his poem and the way he looks and talks indicate that he is status quo: where is the humor for those below? To return to the last word of the piece, "effete," according to Webster's first listing, it is *characterized by decadence, over-refinement, or over-indulgence*. The second listing is *loss... of ability to get things done* and the third listing is *no longer able to reproduce*. Interestingly, the term, *effete*, points to the trouble with poetry oriented towards over-refinement, it is not able to get anything done in a transformative sense for the majority who practice the form.

By not being particularly "PC," Johnson's poem-in-performance points out the ways in which slam poetry in the main is a vehicle that conveys specific content that reflects the experience of hardship known through living in disenfranchised bodies on the underside of power. It indicates that if the poet does not have diverse, working class lived experiences from which to draw in creating his poetry, he is at a disadvantage in slam

competitions. Indeed, it is these epistemologies that slam and popular live poetry, broadly, have enabled.

Rather than downplay bodies, performance poets include embodied ways of knowing and deal with the ways in which their identities are likely to be read because these are the conditions of the public performance event, and because this enables the expression of experiences of living in disenfranchised bodies. The ritual structure of the event carried out by regular participants turns the tables on the ordinary power outside that would privilege Johnson's voice over others. Instead, the performance and the poetry that comes from the lived experience of a white, male, British, upper class fellow is not better than others, but equal.

Finally, Johnson stakes a claim in his poem that hits the rap nerve in the world of popular live poetry. It crackles quietly, being *not-poetry* in the corner, at the ready for black working class poets, other working class poets of color, white working class urban poets, and other poet members of aggrieved communities to draw. Rap does not speak outright in the event, but it guides the purpose of the poetry. The poetry of the slam event and the world of popular live poetry of this period in general, is not a space of poetry conceived apart from bodies and the lived experiences of its makers. Identity is acutely salient. Johnson states in lines twenty two and twenty three: "I'm not particularly interested in... black poets/ I'm simply interested in good poets." Tricia Rose argues that rap represents black voices from the margins. Rap's logic continues in popular performance poetry and influences the aesthetics of the form.

The good poetry that Johnson inquires about cannot be separated from the bodies of the popular performance poets who carry it out. This is the nature of the production of

the form. Poetry carried out in the event is not only universal, but also particular. When audiences identify with poets during the live act, and when they disidentify with them the palpable and affective sense of community they experience is embodied.

The diverse, working class constituency of poets and audiences within the world of popular live poetry have not had access to other channels of communication by which to distribute their poetry than their bodies. The mass-mediation and commodification of the form on Def Poetry has limited the ability of slam poetry to function as a medium by which to come-to-voice and remake identities.

Johnson's performance makes a contribution through its meta-critique of the problem of stereotyped identity-based poetry in the world of popular (live) poetry of the post-slam era. In this sense, his poem reflects the commodification of key elements of the popular live poetry movement. In the words of Executive producer of Def Poetry, Stan Lathan:

One of the things that I've found, in doing research for the show and preparing for it, is that poetry has already made a comeback. Poetry is already out there- many people are enjoying poetry shows and clubs, and the venues in the various hometowns, there are many people writing poetry and many people performing poetry. I think what we're doing is trying to expose an already existing movement to a far larger television audience.⁵⁵

Lathan states that Def Poetry drew on a poetry movement underway at local levels and extended it to reach a broad television audience. The films' *Slam* featuring performance poet, Saul Williams (1998), and *SlamNation: The Sport of Spoken Word*, a documentary of the 1996 national US slam poetry competition (1998), have also played a role in

⁵⁵ Stan Lathan, video-interview on "Bonus Feature: on the Making of Def Poetry," *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, season one, HBO Home Box Office, DVD, 2004.

popularizing the form. Mainstream newspaper sources such as the New York Times and CNN began to cover slam events in the 1990s (Somers-Willet 2001:38).

Slam's mass-mediated portrayals have made the form recognizable to a broad, public audience in a stereotypical way, like the view expressed in Johnson's poem. Recall that the form hinges on truthfulness and making poetry out of lived experience, Stan Lathan states further, "The key to Def Poetry is writing poetry that is *truth* as you see it. What we are seeing and feeling on the show are poems that generate from people's lives..."⁵⁶ Unlike events carried out at local levels, audiences are less able to discern whether or not poets are being truthful in relation to their lived experiences.

Experienced slam poets with a long history in it see calamity in the absorption of their art. One such poet, relegated to the revered status of "slam elder," Danny Solís states, "I think we need to kill it..."⁵⁷ *and make something new again*. The stereotypic, slam style may eventually come to pass, but not popular live poetry in general. Even when it travels through popular culture, it resists containment. It is a creative vernacular force, sutured to poets' bodies: not ever entirely for sale. In Stuart Hall's terms, there is always a double-stake in activity carried out in popular culture:

Popular culture is neither, in a 'pure' sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes [the long and protracted process of the 'moralisation of the labouring classes, and the 'demoralisation' of the poor, and the 're-education' of the people]; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked. In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably

⁵⁶Stan Lathan, video-interview on "Bonus Feature: on the Making of Def Poetry," *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, season one, HBO Home Box Office, DVD, 2004.

⁵⁷Danny Solís, conversation with author, *Albuquerque Cultural Conference*, Albuquerque, NM, September 1, 2007.

inside it. (Hall 1981:228)

Popular poetry's location in popular culture links it to larger issues, and drives cultural producers at local levels to speak more boldly and loudly, lest they be trampled and hushed out. It changes the terms of the work because the poet cannot relax and be sure her lines will still be spry tomorrow.

The challenge for poets at work in popular live poetry is to resist the containment of stereotypes and keep making new poetry against larger forces that aim to gobble it up and pigeon-hole styles of delivery. Slam poets are faced with more difficulties in these regards than poets active in open-mic events because the latter do not have a style of poetry that has been commodified. In the analysis of popular live poetry, it is necessary to consider the site, the particular participants, and the means of its production in discussions that link it to larger cultural work such as remaking identities and generating emergent community.

In this Chapter, I have argued that popular live poetry has particular features that express a diverse, working class ethos. I have shown the ways in which the form moved into San Diego at the millennium and changed the map of the local world of poetry: propelling some individuals to take up poetry for the first time as new poets and audience members, and others to form poetry crews. I have explained that popular live poetry conveys a diverse, working class sensibility through the open-mic structure of its event, the slam performative, its link to rap and verbal art, and its working class participants. Finally, I have described the ways in which poets communicate their poems along embodied class registers to move audiences with whom they identify. In the next

Chapter, I look at how popular live poetry took shape in San Diego at the millennium in collective space of poets and events.

THREE:

Staking Out Discursive Space for Popular Live Poetry in San Diego:

The Role of the Poetry Crews and Central Events

“The thing that I really like about poetry at the Malcolm X Library is that nine out of ten people are coming from the heart-- this is really a community based form, forum that we have here,” explained Victor Patton, the host of the *Open Expressions* poetry event held at the Malcom X Library in Encanto, San Diego.⁵⁸ His slippage between the terms: form and forum, points to the community generating link between doing popular live poetry and the affective sense of community that emerges around it and makes a space. Patton’s explanation of the feeling-tone of the event and the orientation of the poetry as one in which most people are *coming from the heart* rather than coolly and abstractly from the head reflects the value and purpose of popular live poetry conducted during free, publicly oriented events at the local level.

In the Introduction, I quote Robin Kelley's (2002) discussion of poetic knowledge, a form distinct from scientific knowledge that rests in the ways of knowing of ordinary people. The expression of poetic knowledge opens possibilities for the imagination of new ways of thinking. How have collectives of poets and collective spaces of poetry carved out discursive and physical territory for the practice of popular live poetry in San Diego, California at the millennium?

⁵⁸ Victor Patton, video-interview by Ricardo Guthrie, Ge Jin and author, *Your Wrds R Welcome*, DVD, 2002.

The Open Expressions event, like other open-mic poetry events, is a free, publicly oriented forum that brings diverse, working class and middle class participants together through their shared interest in spoken word poetry and locates them on an equal footing during the ritual of the event. Yet, the Open Expressions event rearranges public space around a black, Afrocentric locus. Patton adds, “You have political poems that are welcomed here that you’re not gonna have welcomed in other venues. You have a very Afrocentric kind of a feel here at the Malcolm X Library that you’re not gonna get anywhere else-- a real positive place!”⁵⁹ Unlike the other venues I discuss in this Chapter, the Open Expressions event at the Malcolm X library is public and this allows it to sustain its poetic space with greater ease than those that are private.

The events I consider are publicly oriented yet apart from the public Malcolm X Library, they take place in venues with more volatile economic structures such as independent coffeehouses, a black bookstore and barbershop, non-profit performance spaces, an Afrocentric gallery, and in spaces that have another purpose altogether more likely to earn money such as taco shops. The collectives of poets I consider are comprised of popular performance poets skilled in spoken word poetry. They are unfunded as are most popular performance poets at local levels, and nomadic. They operate extra-institutionally, moving through the city with their *bag full of word-things*, stopping in venues and spilling out their sack to seize space for the exchange of poetic knowledge.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Victor Patton, video-interview by Ricardo Guthrie, Ge Jin and author, *Your Wrds R Welcome*, DVD, 2002.

⁶⁰ This is a phrase from a well-known spoken word poem by Chris Vannoy, “Poet Man,” delivered at local venues in the first years of 2000 in San Diego.

I describe the imagined collective space of popular live poetry, consider its discursive work and ground it in collectives of poets and particular places. Broadly, I describe the ways in which participants in the world of popular live poetry in San Diego create spaces for the practice of poetry by organizing themselves into collectives and by designing culturally and politically, broad and inclusive venues for its practice. I argue that these spaces make possible cultural and political work that bolsters aggrieved communities and opens possibilities for outsider audiences interested in the people and the poetry event to develop greater empathic identifications with them.

In previous Chapters, I have discussed the ways in which the live poetry event binds poets and audiences in complex moments of intersubjective illumination through which mutual recognition across boundaries can occur. But the construction of regular poetic spaces for such generative cultural activity takes the concerted effort and the desire by poetry event organizers, regular weekly poet and audience participants, poet-activists and venue proprietors. Further, it requires the credence by the regular poetry participants in the fair and equal practice of the open-mic that underpins nearly all of the free, publicly oriented, live poetry events practiced at the local level.

I have described in Chapter Two the ways in which the diverse constituencies of poetry came together in the most popular event in the region and time period through Tuesday night's open-mic poetry event, *Poetic Brew*, held at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse in North Park, San Diego. I lay out differences and commonalities among the local publics to complicate the notion of community in the world of popular live poetry, and to explain the culture of possibility that manifested when they came together through the horizontal and inclusive ritual of its event.

Long-time performance poet, former poetry event host, primary poetry scene organizer and delivery truck driver, Chris Vannoy of San Diego, California, reflects on the greatness of Poetic Brew as an event that drew different kinds of poets together: "If you just have the academic poets-- it's good. And if you just have the hip hop poets-- it's good. But you mix them both together-- you get a cross-current that's excellent!"⁶¹ In Chapter Two, the discussion of Johnson's performance of poetry in the Austin International Poetry Slam depicts an academic type in that in addition to being a slam poet, he is also a published poet and a poetry professor.

Yet, Vannoy has in mind academic poets who respect poets who have devoted themselves to the craft outside of its walls as much as they respect poets within the culture of academia. Vannoy told me a story during the interview about a retired, bicycle-riding poet who used to participate regularly in local poetry events. When Vannoy first mentioned him he asked me, "*Downtown! Downtown!* Remember that one?" I did not because he was before my time. Vannoy explained that he performed a poem on a regular basis that began with this opening line. When the poet died eight years ago Vannoy was invited to his funeral, "That's when I learned he was a retired professor-- from UCSD, I never knew."⁶²

To come together across hierarchical differences in the popular live poetry event, participants have to first respect each other's cultural ways of knowing and the live acts of poetry that extend from them. This is remarkable cultural work. It involves the rearrangement of discordant spaces of ivory towers and urban streets symbolically

⁶¹Chris Vannoy, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, March 5, 2007.

⁶²Ibid.

spoken through these types of poets. Popular performance poets use cultural resources from oppositional currents in popular culture and from the cultures of diverse, working class people to intervene in discursive space and claim space for popular live poetry. Academic types of poets who choose to participate in this world come into events organized around these popular principles.

The Taco Shop Poets: Claiming the Symbolic Space of the Streets

In the fall of 2004 I video-interviewed three members of the Taco Shop Poets: Adrián Arancibia, Tomás Riley and Miguel Angel Soria on the sidewalk outside of the Chicano/a performance space, *Voz Alta* (Loud Voice).⁶³ I asked Soria what distinguishes the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets from poetry in the main. He said that it comes from the “street.” In this sense he aligns the group with oppositional currents in popular culture of this time such as underground hip hop and punk rock that reference city streets, diverse working class youth and rabble rousing.

By aligning with the street Soria speaks to the tension Vannoy mentions between academics and hip hop poets. I asked the Taco Shop Poets about the nature of their poetry and Arrancibia and Riley responded to my query in English. Soria on the other hand responded in Spanish. Through this performative act, Soria points out that there are no culturally and linguistically neutral spaces on bodies: his choice to use Spanish was influenced by the way he read my identity. Moreover, even the space of the asphalt roads beneath the street lamps are cluttered with proper English in signage and wrappers on packages in garbage cans. He uses Spanish to make plain that it is a culturally specific

⁶³Taco Shop Poets, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

working class space that he claims through his poetic work, and a Chicano audience he beckons to come most closely in to sit by its fire. Other audiences are welcomed to participate on the edges of its space to learn about a different cultural organization of power.

Like Patton's discussion of the live poetry event at the Malcolm X Library at the beginning of this Chapter, the Taco Shop Poet's poetry aims to generate a particular affective sense of community among an aggrieved group. These live poetry events use cultural resources made salient through class and race based distinctions. I unpack Soria's act further and explain it in relation to the meaning of the space of popular live poetry and the symbolism of the street while attending to its cultural specificity.

Soria's delivery took place during a video-interview conducted on an evening outside of the Voz Alta performance space in downtown San Diego in 2004. On this night, I did a set of interviews with the Taco Shop Poets and the Able Minded Poets who were gathered there to perform. I had a large Sony DSR 200 television style video camera pressed to my face as I video-interviewed. I always used these kinds of cameras because they were wonderfully available to check out free from my university. One of my friend's and her eight-year-old son took turns as the audio-person wearing the headphones and pointing the shotgun microphone in the performance poets' direction.

Soria listened and watched fellow Taco Shop Poet, Tomás Riley explain the cultural meaning of their poetry to me. Riley used some "academese," a term coined by Chicana feminist literary critic Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) in his explanation. He said,

“What we're doing is incorporating a vernacular of a culture...”⁶⁴ Soria raised his eyebrows and furrowed them when Riley used academese and in so doing, said things that would not be understood by all people who make up popular audiences. Soria wore a cowboy hat and kept his arms crossed. Arancibia stood to the left of him. Soria came into the interview space on the sidewalk and joined Riley and Arancibia about fifteen minutes after I began interviewing them.

Before he arrived, Riley talked about their collective as a diverse group that expresses a range of Chicano identities and experiences to audiences during their live acts of poetry. He explained:

It's really validating, especially for Chicanos, to be a Chicano group and represent so many different traditions, musically and artistically. It becomes a truer representation of what it means to be Chicano really, so variegated, the experience is not easily quantifiable, or commodified. And we represent that for people I think- get a little bit of that punk flavor that Miguel-Angel brings, or the hip hop influence of myself, all of that comes together, to be more representative of what Chicano community is about.⁶⁵

In Riley's terms, Chicano identity and community of his time seamlessly incorporates oppositional elements of popular culture from punk rock and hip hop culture. He points out that their poetry is particularly meaningful for Chicano/a audiences as they witness a range of ways of being Chicano during these young men's live acts and come together through the special communication of the un-commodified event.

Finally, when it came Soria's turn to respond to the query on the nature of their poetry he said, “*Bueno*, nuestro poesia viene de la calle-- nuestro poesia siempre tiene una espiritu callejero...” (*Well*, our poetry comes from the street-- our poetry always has

⁶⁴ Tomás Riley, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

a spirit of the street...)⁶⁶ By explaining what he meant in Spanish and aligning the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets with the street, he located it in greater opposition to the mainstream than if he were to speak in English and use academese. Further, my presence as a co-performer in the interview event is likely to have influenced Soria's performance.

Soria read my identity as a speaker of English as a first language and a graduate student researcher from a prominent university, and considered the fact that I was using a video camera. His eyes twinkled. This latter factor brought out his inner performer, which as a community performer is almost always out, and the former presented him with a challenge to teach outsiders about the meaning of Chicano poetry. He chose to show me and the potential future audience what he meant by doing it: not poetry in this instance but Chicano activist movement in microcosm, by claiming public space with the Spanish language and the content of his spoken message, and with two Taco Shop Poets beside him. At the end of his statement he said that they have always kept their poetry in step with the Chicano movement and the Lucha (struggle). To demonstrate this under the conditions of the event, he needed to operate in Spanish.

Rearranging Discursive Space with Acts of Popular Live Poetry

In communication critics Kent Ono and John Sloop's (2002) terms, Soria drew on "outlaw" and "vernacular" discourse in this instance. They explain:

The first distinction, then, is between communication available to people in general, *civic discourses*, and communication that is assumed to be for the direct purpose of supplying information to more limited demographic groups within that larger community, *vernacular discourses*... *Dominant discourses* are those understandings, meanings, logics, and judgments that

⁶⁶Miguel Angel Soria, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

work within the most commonly accepted (and institutionally supported) understandings of what is just or unjust, good or bad. *Outlaw discourses* are those that are incommensurate with the logic of dominant discourses. (Ono & Sloop, 2002:13-14)

He drew on outlaw discourse by speaking Spanish in this context and challenging the dominant discourse that English is the only appropriate language to use in public spaces and institutions such as universities. By orienting his communication from the viewpoint of a particular demographic group of Chicanos, he made use of vernacular discourse and challenged civic discourse by speaking directly to it.

Finally, in Ono and Sloop's discussion of discourse they develop their argument around "contemporary rhetorics of immigration," articulated through California's Proposition 187 in 1994. They argue that the rhetoric produced on Proposition 187 will have "long standing effects," on what is said about Mexican immigrants by the media and on "perceptions," of immigrants in general in the United States, and of borders and nations (Ono & Sloop 2002:5). They argue that daily, mass-mediated forms of communication through the newspaper, television and email reach more people, more profoundly than "literary works" that lack "public audiences" (6).

The Taco Shop Poets have been a roving collective of *literary works* that have cultivated a public audience for their work and the work of others who have come after them in San Diego. They are not read every morning like some read the newspaper, but what they communicate when audiences do see and hear them often resonates more profoundly than any of the above mediums. In poetry critic, Joseph Harrington's view, "the discourse of poetry is a small, but symbolically deep, pond" (2002). Popular performance poets of the millennium play an important role as voices that ring like a bass

drum against the discursive mass-mediated din. To intervene in the dominant civic discursive frames and its textocentric and digitized ways, they must use their bodies in the performance of poetry. Adrian Arancibia states, “If you can scream louder than the hurricane to the north of us which is LA-- *the digital media hurricane* that is LA, you’re doing something right.”⁶⁷

With live collective acts of performance poetry, the symbolic use of Spanish and references to Chicano culture, the Taco Shop Poets intervene in the English-only-ness of public space. Soria said that the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets’ comes from the street but the way that he said it marks it as a performative act that works politically as it butts up against the unspoken discursive rules of the larger context. Our visually marked identities are implicated in relation to this context and become variables in the space of the spoken word event. Finally, the meaning of the street in relation to poetry bears further mention.

The alignment of poetry with the street ties it to the space of working class culture rather than the space of upper class culture. The latter conjures comfort, indoor environments and white-collar work and the former summons roughness, outside urban space, and blue-collar and subaltern work. At the *Border Voices Festival* one year, headlining fiddler poet, Ken Waldman, shed light on the conundrum of being labeled a *street poet* as a pejorative in the context of academia, due to his performative practice of poetry and his incorporation of music.⁶⁸

Ken Waldman is both a folk poet and an academic poet. In 2004, he was a featured poet at the Border Voices Festival in San Diego. He wore a flannel shirt and has

⁶⁷Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 24, 2002.

⁶⁸Ken Waldman, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 23, 2004.

longish curly hair, and he is white. The Festival was held at San Diego State University in east San Diego. I video-interviewed him at a table near the lobby of the event. Waldman orients his work towards the public and incorporates fiddling into his performances of poetry. Like many poets active in the world of popular live poetry, he works between the spoken word and the page.

In the video-interview, Waldman tells a story of preparing to go to a college campus to perform his poetry. A literature professor at the campus with some clout told him he would have difficulty scheduling performances on the campus because they did not normally feature “street poets.” Waldman explained that he was labeled a street poet, even though he had been “published in journals,” has an “advanced degree” and works as a poetry professor. He said that this was because he includes music and aims to entertain as well as illuminate during his performances of poetry. Waldman said, “I mean it’s entertaining because I put fiddle music with it, but its good work!”⁶⁹

The entertainment quality of poetry locates it within the space of popular culture rather than in academia where the craft of poetry is carried out as intellectual work and not as play. If it is playful, then it is not work. But performance poets in popular culture have developed a set of aesthetic criteria around their practices and a whole world of poetry that operates on a parallel to the world of poetry produced in the space of academia. Poetry in the space of popular culture can be humorous and intellectually and politically challenging at the same time.

In general, popular poets make use of everything they can get their hands on in their aim to move the audience, which might include references to Emily Dickinson,

⁶⁹Ken Waldman, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 23, 2004.

Tupac Shakur and Maya Angelou in the same poem. They draw from both popular and canonical artists of the spoken word who are rappers and poets. In this sense, they work in an interdisciplinary way drawing relationships between the content, metaphor and form of the spoken arts of rap and poetry and referencing them in their genre of poetry. They creatively make use of available forms that will resonate with popular audiences. As such, they are poet-bricoleurs. In a discussion of Haitian art, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown (1996) draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1966) concept of *bricolage* to describe the sequined flags and metal art of Haiti as forms that draw on practices of bricolage by making use of materials at hand. Popular performance poets draw on a broad field of forms and resources as they create and aim to communicate their poetry to popular audiences.

In general, popular performance poets of the millennium have an inclusive style of poetry. Most do not have academic positions or publications, yet they are not reacting against academia or in opposition to it. They do not carefully exclude references to high culture and canonized poets, or the fine wine of poetry, as I describe it through the example of a popular live poetry festival with Austin's International Poetry Festival. There is a disjuncture between the imaginary and the reality of cleanly demarcated classed spaces, however.

The binary imaginaries of a dirty and loud street on one hand, and a gleaming ivory tower where the fine wine of poetry is tasted on the other, mark out classed spaces that signal different worlds of poetry. Yet, the edges of classed spaces are porous and class identity, shifting, as it speaks most acutely in contexts that call out class difference. Often, as Waldman's position attests, poets work between the classed spaces of popular

and academic forums of poetry if they have the official cultural capital or the connections that grant them the ability to do so. Poets gain insight through their travel between these spaces of differing values and performative ways around the practice and purpose of poetry more acutely than poets who work exclusively in academic spaces, or exclusively in popular spaces. Through this process, Waldman learned that entertaining and adding music to poetry jeopardized its value among some academic poets.

Using Whole Bodies, Lyric and Chosen Names to Stake Poetic Space

In a discussion of popular music, critic Simon Frith (1996) discusses the mind/body split. Frith's argument can be extended to popular poetry to explain the predicament Waldman describes. Frith states, "The musical equation of aesthetic/mind and hedonistic/body is one effect of the mental/manual division of labor built into the Industrial Revolution" (125). Frith points out that in keeping with the mind/body split of the Industrial Revolution, popular music is often considered "mind-less," with its engaging rhythms, readily experienced by the body, while classical music on the other hand is considered less bodily, more cerebral and more intellectual.

Frith challenges these views and points out that music and in particular *rhythm*, is both a mental and physical process. An artist must think about when to pause, speed up or halt in musical performance in his view. Frith states: "All music making is about the mind in the body; the 'immediacy' of improvisation no more makes un-scored music 'mindless' than the immediacy of talking makes unscripted speech somehow without thought" (128). His discussion maps onto popular live poetry in that the form begins from

a location of the mind in the body. It differs from the thoughtfulness of unscripted speech in that it is poetry and more deliberately and artfully crafted.

The form of popular live poetry is delivered through whole body performances and received by whole body audiences. Contrary to the dichotomy between the head and the body, it distributes poetry across the person and challenges the view that the body is the place for manual labor and hedonism and the mind is the place for reason. The root meaning of the word “manual,” is “hands,” and if one works with them then one does not use one’s mind in the ideology propagated during the Industrial Revolution.

The mind is not in the hands in this belief, but located above the nape of the neck and behind the forehead. This signals intellectual work rather than blue-collar work and masks the class identity that can be read by pen-holding hands or laboring-hands. The delivery of poetry in academic spaces is more often done from behind a podium than in popular settings. This style of performance directs attention to the head and keeps the body and what its hands have done, or not done, a secret.

The name of the poetry collective, *Los Able Minded Poets* (“los” was added in 2004 to reflect the new Chicana member, Irene Castruita and to identify with Chicano culture), talks back to the rhetoric begun in the Industrial Revolution and perpetuated as the dominant voice from the military and blue-collar world of work. This master-voice calls working class youth to professions based on their ability to do physical work. They are taught to aspire to service and blue-collar lives, rather than intellectual and artistic lives (Fordham 1996; MacLeod 1995).

The name *Able Minded Poets* in relation to the context of popular culture and the diverse, working class people within it, functions as a performative that challenges the

mandate to be able-bodied only. It talks back to this mandate through its name, and also through their embodied and mindful, live acts of poetry.

Irene Castruita of Los Able Minded: Entering Imaginations

Irene Castruita describes her role in Los Able Minded Poets and explains their work:

I do both, poetry and singing. You know, I used to sing at church, and that's kind of how I started... I don't really go to church anymore... I was younger and I have a different way of thinking, just growing up, reading books, learning about history, learning how religion pretty much came to my people (*hand to heart*) through a way of conquering and killing... And once I got older I thought, wait, it shouldn't really be like this, and that's what started my journey, elsewhere, pursuing more political and socially conscious things... We're trying to say something, we're trying to convey a message, and the youth is so used to hearing the radio and seeing people dressed a certain way and portraying themselves a certain way. We influence with the music and we try to influence the youth with what we talk about, letting them know that *there's a better way to live- a different way of thinking*. You know, because we're fed just one thing, you know, the media, the internet, the tv, the radio-- we're just fed things a certain way, and that's not really how it is.⁷⁰

Like Castruita and Los Able Minded Poets, popular performance poets in general incorporate music into their art when they see it as a complement to their poetry that will resonate with audiences and serve their social, popular and/or activist aims to expand imagination among them.

Poets of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s "...made conscious efforts to reach people who listened to music more often than they read books" (Davis 1981:75). The inclusion of music can make poetry more embraceable to audiences with little poetry

⁷⁰ Irene Castruita, video-interview with author, August 16, 2004.

reading experience and extend the form more readily across diverse constituencies.

George Lipsitz (1994) describes this phenomenon in the context of the post-WWII era in reference to popular music: “Music became one of the main vehicles for the transformation of particular working class perspectives into general mass cultural articulations offering leadership and guidance to all” (300). Popular live poetry at the millennium has a musicality through its lyricism and spoken rhythm, and through the inclusion of musical accompaniment by some popular performance poets. Finally, open-mic poetry events rarely limit the use of musical instruments or singing as components of the performance of poetry but they are not allowed in slam events.

The rhythmic and lyrical quality of spoken poetry opens the communication of it to new comers to poetry in general, and diverse working class people in popular culture in particular. The line between the audience and the poets is often thin as many of the poets in this world come from the audience. Through a keen attention to the audience and a subtle delivery of poetry to them, as a form with musical properties whose purpose is to communicate, they reference cultural ways understood in the context in which they operate.

The highlighted body in the performance of popular live poetry, in experiential, communicative exchanges of spoken rhythms, accompanied by music, moving about on the stage in full view often without a podium, and sometimes moving through the audience, relegates the form to the street. Still, from their less institutionalized location, poets at work in popular forums are able to do much with poetry. At times, popular performance poets incorporate spoken riffs from popular culture characters, artifacts and styles that audiences recognize and enjoy. At other times, they play roles like

mockingbirds while being poets, mimicking dominant rhetoric, news-speak and disembodied televised narrators.

For instance, Victor Patten, host and poet of the Malcolm X poetry event delivered the following lines, changing his voice to mimic an announcer and a newscaster, “...*Damn, I gotta get paid! Black people are being taken as slaves, in Sudan/ BLACK PEOPLE are being taken as slaves, in Sudan/ B-E-T-- Video Marathon! Six hours of your favorite hip hop, rap and R & B videos/ No news, no smiling interruptions!*”⁷¹ The piece conveys concise, compact meaning and evocative rhythm: it is a poem. But at the same time it incorporates mass-mediated rhetoric. Patton is able to talk back to it through the medium of performance. His example reflects the incorporation of news-speak and rhetoric from popular media and the practice by popular performance poets of performative juxtaposition during which they convey opaque social forces and raise the relationships between them from the bottom-up. The form of popular live poetry and the space it generates is fertile yet, unwieldy.

San Diego poet and poetry scene organizer, Chris Vannoy, who has the most cross-group appeal of any poet in San Diego, referred to by young poets, old poets, black poets, brown poets, women poets, male poets, academic poets, homeless poets, and in-between poets as the one who brought them into the scene and told them where it was at prior to the widespread reliance on the internet and afterwards explains that the inclusive

⁷¹Victor Patton, video-interview with Ricardo Guthrie, Ge Jin and author, *Your Wrds R Welcome*, DVD, 2002.

nature of popular live poetry can be difficult for some academic poets. He states, “The academics like it tight.”⁷²

Ken Waldman raises the statuses necessary to be judged an official poet by academic standards: to be published and have an advanced degree. These criteria help the poetry find shelter from the street. Yet, many of the poets active in the world of popular live poetry lack the statuses that would allow their poetry to come inside. Further, once there, the required performative practices would be constraining for some. Popular performance poets must deal with the class distinctions that run through the world of poetry. Some claim the imaginary of the street as a kind of cultural capital that makes their poetry’s head cock, and earns them respect among popular audiences. Soria’s account attests to this practice.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is useful in terms of the ways in which the imaginary of the street has salience in this context. Popular music critic, Simon Frith (1996) points out that while Bourdieu did not treat the production of cultural capital in popular culture audiences and producers of popular music rank their artistic productions and have a set of aesthetic criteria by which they evaluate its worth. Frith’s proposition extends well to the world of popular live poetry.

The symbolic use of the term *street* is one way producers of popular live poetry draw on resources from popular culture to distinguish their poetry from poetry carried out in the high cultural space of academia. In general, street is a codeword that signals audiences who align with disenfranchised African Americans, Chicano/as, other people of color, and poor and working class people. It does not have to be stated in a poem in

⁷²Chris Vannoy, interview with author, San Diego, CA, March 5, 2007.

order for a poet to align him or herself with its imaginary. An identification with the street can be carried out through hip hop styles of poetic delivery. Poets can draw on the street imaginary and street styles of poetic delivery to embolden their status and to claim the right to speak over and above a more privileged poet in the space of popular culture.

The Taco Shop Poets I quote here: Arrancibia, Riley and Soria, all have college degrees yet they identify with the street, in Spanish, as part of the cultural politics of their performance poetry. Like Waldman, they too work between the spoken word and the page. They negotiate these classed spaces cognizant of the ways in which culture and language imbricate them. The streets with which they identify speak Spanish and Chicano culture rather than English and Eurocentricity.

In Tijuana, where Soria was reared, there are a few street signs on the major highways of the city that give a meta-message on large yellow triangles, “Obedezca Las Señales” (Obey the signs). The Spanish-speaking working class streets are full of vendors and foot travelers who obey the signs of their own rhymes. The cultural landscape in which they locate their work is larger than this though. The Taco Shop Poets identify with people of color and especially with Mexican and African American aggrieved communities.

In 2004 The Taco Shop Poets themselves were comprised of poet members who are African American; Bennie Herron, Thai and Mexican; Paul Phruksukarn a.k.a. *ThaiMex*, Chilean; Adrián Arrancibia, Filipino and Mexican, Tomás Riley; as well as Mexican; Miguel-Angel Soria. The Chicano movement poetry of their collective in San Diego at the millennium reflects a cultural logic that supersedes ethnicity without disavowing difference.

Claiming Chicano Space for Poetry and Audiences

When the Taco Shop Poets began, they had no official space in which to make their poetry. Riley explains:

The Taco Shop Poets started off as a reading series in taco shops-- partly in response to the fact that poetry had become a largely academic or bohemian kind of phenomenon. It wasn't representative of the sort of Latino flavored literary landscape of southern California. We would come to readings and find that your bilingual expression is not appreciated. Maybe not *appreciated* is not the word, maybe just not *understood*. And part of that was the context. So by moving the poetry readings into an already culturally flavored space like the taco shop then it becomes more of a cultural event, an ethnic event, if you will-- a more Chicano centered event. That's how it got started really.⁷³

The Taco Shop Poets base their name in the place where they were born. The taco shop was the space in which they were understood and recognized as bilingual and bicultural Chicano poets by the special taco shop audience. Of the audience at taco shops and the experience of doing poetry in this space Arancibia explains more. This video-interview was recorded in 2002 outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown San Diego after the Taco Shop Poets had performed there.

I took turns with my production partner, Ricardo Guthrie, alternating between interviewer and cameraperson. Guthrie is in his forties, African American, a poet and at the time he was my colleague in Communication. I asked Arancibia to explain how the Taco Shop Poets got their name. He states:

Well, obviously, we're here at a Museum right now, and this is where you come and check out "art". But the reality of it is that most people in our communities, in Chicano and Mexicano communities-- they normally

⁷³Tomás Riley, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

don't come to galleries, or they don't come to galleries to hear readings, or they don't go to coffee shops to hear readings, so what we try to do, we try to stage events within the community, specifically, in taco shops for people to come and check out poetry readings and music and see what people are doing with art and with our collective, to just produce events there. And it's kind of an interesting meeting place too, because if you notice you have upper class people, you have working class people, you have homeless people, you have middle class people and they all arrive at the taco shop-- be they black, white, brown, yellow, whatever, red, orange, blue, and they all meet there in one spot, in search of the perfect carne asada burrito. What we try to do is use that intersection to explore other avenues and other discourses that are happening within the taco shops.⁷⁴

In Arancibia's assessment, the taco shop space draws Chicano and Mexicano communities as well as a broad popular audience across race and class. On the whole it is a more inclusive space than the official art space of galleries and museums.

I witnessed the Taco Shop Poets perform in 2001 at a poetry event they staged at a taco shop on El Cajon boulevard in North Park, San Diego. The event took place in a taco shop called *Bahia*. It is located at the most western point of El Cajon Boulevard, by the large neon sign in the median of the double lane road that reads, "The Boulevard" in hot pink cursive. The Bahia taco shop is in a mini strip mall next to a laundry mat. During the event, audience members who had heard about it through flyers and emails sat at tables in the taco shop.

A group of musicians who played with the Poets at that time had set up a drum-kit and there was a guitarist, a bass player and a microphone stand. Taco shop customers came in and walked with wondering looks on their faces to the counter to order food. The cashier and the cook grinned. When they began their performance, the Poets positioned

⁷⁴Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author and Ricardo Guthrie, San Diego, CA, October 24, 2002.

themselves across the taco shop. They delivered call-and-response poems and moved around the venue involving the audience with lines from long poems such as *you be you/ and I'll be me/ so let's build universally...*⁷⁵ These lines work like choruses through their rhythm and with the accompaniment of the band. New and experienced audiences quickly learn them and become participants in the collective live poetry event.

In a reflective comment on the communication of the cultural meaning of the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets, Arancibia states further, “We were writing poetry about San Ysidro, about the swap meet... and we wanted to take the poetry where it would be understood.”⁷⁶ In this phrase, he means “understood,” as a cultural way of knowing that is experienced and lived, rather than a kind of understanding that is gleaned from indirect learning. San Ysidro is a place located near the US/Mexico border in south San Diego. Driving through the area the shops speak Spanish and the majority are Mexican.

The particular swap meet Arancibia references takes place every weekend in east San Diego in a place called Lemon Grove. One may buy pleasurable, useful, inexpensive items such as burnt CDs, sliced mango with chili and salt, shirts, toys and a pair of pliers, and/or one may sell catchy things by bringing a blanket and laying out wares. The majority of people who frequent swap meets on a regular, weekly, basis are working class. Some frequent swap meets regularly because this is where they make their living. In the context of Lemon Grove many who come to the swap meet are Mexican, African American, Chicano and other people of color.

⁷⁵The Taco Shop Poets, *Your Wrds R Welcome*, DVD, 2002.

⁷⁶Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author and Ricardo Guthrie, San Diego, CA, October 24, 2002.

By making poetry about the swap meet and San Ysidro, Arancibia references a context and a shared experience that the audience he hopes to reach, intimately understands. This poetic practice can boost people's spirits and make people feel at home. The sense of feeling at home is political cultural work when viewed in relation to the US state's language that marks some people, especially Mexicans in the context of San Diego, as "Alien" and "Illegal." The Chicano spoken word poetry of the Taco Shop Poets does important cultural work generating a space for people who live a cultural experience of feeling split in two to feel culturally whole.

Bi-cultural, US/Mexico border experiences can extend to other border experiences among audience members such as new immigrant's identifications with far-away diasporic communities and a sense of estrangement with the local community in which they currently live. They make the poetry event more salient for the many people who live life between two worlds. By border experience, I mean a cultural way of being and thinking between two worlds where one is not fully home. There are many people who experience this alienated way of living and the live poetry event can temporarily salve the wounds that contradictions of hierarchically structured differences inflict.

Live poetry is able to do this because of the kind of communicative medium it is and because it can be staked out and grown, anywhere. Anyone can make someone feel at home when they come into their kitchen or living room, but popular performance poets and the audiences who support them are able to transform space and make it feel like home in places as un-cozy as sidewalks. The Taco Shop Poets have expanded the poetic space in San Diego and crafted it as an inclusive, bicultural spot. And after much

organizing and collaboration with others they secured a place for Chicano artistic expression and founded a non-profit performance space in Voz Alta (loud voice).

Voz Alta is located on Broadway in downtown San Diego. It has been in this location since 2004 and prior to this it was a few blocks away at another rented location for two years. The Taco Shop Poets and the Chicana writer and activist, Stephanie de La Torre were primary organizers in garnering support for the space, securing it and sustaining it through organizing events and getting the word out about them to audiences in the first half of the decade of 2000.

One of the long-term goals of the Taco Shop Poets and their supporters was to rent a space where Chicano/a artistic expression and community building could be better cultivated than if it were left exclusively to events held in taco shops and other temporarily secured spaces. Voz Alta on Broadway is a narrow, rectangular room with white painted walls, concrete floors and a slightly raised stage on the far wall. In the early 2000s, the walls often displayed changing exhibits of a range of Chicano art. The room has a storefront of plate-glass windows. Next door, during this period there was a popular bar called, *Landlord Jim's*.

On the Voz Alta website in 2004, the heading prior to a description of the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets proclaimed, *taco shop poetry/ lo que es what it is*. The second line demonstrates the common practice by the Taco Shop Poets and other Chicano/a poets active in the local world of poetry of using a combination of Spanish and English in their poetry. In this case, *lo que es* means simply, *what it is*. Below this caption another declaration read, "With feet on both sides of the border, we declare that cappuccino and poetry are no more! Long live salsa and the spoken word!" Miguel-Angel Soria states

that the poetry of the Taco Shop Poets is different from other poetry collectives and from poetry carried out in academia because it is grounded in Chicano culture and the Movement to empower and create conditions of greater social and economic justice for Chicano people. He explains that they worked closely with taco shops because they wanted their poetry to stay connected with the Chicano community the struggle of Chicano people.

In Soria's view in academia they "...traten de jaolar a la palabra, que para nosotros es algo pues, semi-sagrado" (...try to cage the word and, well, for us [*the word*] is something almost sacred).⁷⁷ In his view, the poetry they do has a sacred quality that would be impinged upon if it were pinned down in an academic context, perhaps on the page rather than spoken in live deliveries. This view couples with his definition of their poetry as a community oriented form that lives through their spoken poetry and their actions as activists, in roles as teachers and mentors to disenfranchised youth, and as poet-speakers at rallies and community events.

The Taco Shop Poets expanded the public space of Chicano poetry and popular live poetry in general in San Diego. They changed the expectation that poetry be an individual practice conducted in the space of academia by organizing as a collective and bringing poetry into new, diverse, cross-class, Spanish spoken and Chicano culturally flavored spaces of taco shops and then into Voz Alta. Further, they enlarged popular live poetry in general through their regular participation in mainstream coffeehouse poetry. Another influential poetry collective that helped popularize socially oriented poetry,

⁷⁷Miguel-Angel Soria, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

expanded its world in San Diego, and influenced mainstream coffeehouse poetry was the Able Minded Poets.

The founder of the Able Minded Poets, Nazareth Simmons expresses a similar view on the social purpose of poetry as the Taco Shop Poet's with the statement, "We gotta be out there at the protests doing it, I mean being a poet's a full time thing!"⁷⁸ In this regard, the poetry they do corresponds with a working class value conveyed through the saying, *walk your talk*. In the general view of both poets and audiences, the values the poetry collectives express in their poems should match their public comportment.

On this night at Voz Alta, the Able Minded Poets performed. One of the poetic lines Nazareth Simmons spoke from the stage called for a change of thinking that would lead to social change, "...rearrange the thought processes of a nation/ until the foundation for change/ is laid."⁷⁹ Such utopic hope expressed through poetry must be evinced through actions for public audiences to give poets credence and stay excited and interested in its practice over time, as they did in San Diego during this period. Finally, when I conducted the interview with the Taco Shop Poets in 2004, they commented on the Able Minded Poets whom they had watched me interview that evening from afar.

Under the streetlamp on Broadway, across the road from Voz Alta, standing by the Goodwill parking lot where it was quieter, they reflected. I asked Arancibia and Riley how many times they had been interviewed. They laughed. Then when neither of them had an answer, Riley turned towards Arrancibia and raised his eyebrows, then turned back towards the camera and said, "Wow! More than we can remember, obviously." I

⁷⁸Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, October 29, 2002.

⁷⁹Nazareth Simmons and the Able Minded Poets, performance of live poetry, video-recording by author, June 16, 2004.

smiled and Riley continued, “It’s interesting-- we were just talking about how Able Minded are being put in front of the cameras and it’s their turn in the limelight. It’s great to see this tradition that Taco Shop was able to get started in San Diego, to see it move on, to another generation of poets, really.”⁸⁰

The Taco Shop Poets were the first collective and the instigators of the local tradition. They have played an important role in San Diego as an exemplar to which new collectives could turn and consider how they might take up similar and distinct performative practices in their own poetic work. Further, the Taco Shop Poets (TSP) made plain that the public practice of poetry is a practice that can be directed towards cultural and political struggle.

Finally, Miguel-Angel Soria’s reference to the street as the origin of the poetry of TSP segued into a larger elaboration of the community generating role of poetry that comes into fuller bloom when it is carried out with others, rather than as an individual practice as is customary in the space of academia. The street is the space of community and collective power in this sense. When the poetry crews emerged in 2000 they extended the local tradition set forth by TSP of collective organization and expanded the imaginary of the street as a site of power in their poetic practice.

Space Bodyguards: the Role of the Poetry Crews in the Primary Event

In relation to the most popular poetry event during the first half of the decade of 2000, Poetic Brew at Claire de Lune, the poetry crews entered the coffeehouse space and

⁸⁰Tomás Riley, interview by author, San Diego, CA, June 16, 2004.

dragged street logic across the coffeehouse carpet. As long as their shoes were not muddy, the owner of the coffeehouse, Claire Bell, liked it. She ran her coffeehouse like an outpost on the frontier: “Poetry? I could tell you about the types of beer! *I had to learn to like poetry* (laughs)...”⁸¹

Bell’s down-to-earth and bawdy style spiced the venue and its poetry event, drawing people to it that might be off-put by poetry framed as high art. The expression, *down-to-earth*, signals a class identification and an orientation. Next to where Bell stood at this point and time, the poetry crews were metaphorically nearby in the streets. Ultimately, the sidewalk space outside of Claire de Lune's, Poetic Brew became a home base for the crews. They played a key role stretching and supporting the cultural and political work that came to the fore through the event.

At Poetic Brew, the poetry crews functioned like space bodyguards. During the ritual of the event, they were soldiers in the war of position against unseen, but powerfully experienced hegemonic forces in the guts of disenfranchised poets and audience members. They flipped the top-down rules and held back narrow definitions of what poetry can be, such as English-only and music free and they challenged who has the right to claim themselves a poet.

The poetry crews off-stage and around-about collective deliveries of poetry and their collective performance of power, taught them through the praxis of doing it, and the audience as co-performing witnesses, that public space can be staked out and rearranged. They used their loud voices and bold audacity to make cocooned spots for more shy types to talk, encouraging them to step up into their own voices and begin the struggle towards

⁸¹Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 16, 2007.

empowerment. Their collective organization and critical social orientation enabled them to be helpful as space bodyguards, holding open the emergent imaginative space generated by the many new poetic voices in the event.

Hip Hop and Blue-Collar Ways Influence the Poetry Crews

The poetry crews such as Able Minded that emerged in 2000 expanded the family-like community and street sense of popular live poetry set forth by the Taco Shop Poets in San Diego. To recapitulate, the emergence of the crews at the local level six years after the formation of the Taco Shop Poets, was propelled by factors underway in popular culture. The slam poetry movement and hip hop culture practiced through spoken word events at local levels, and the later fusion of elements from slam and hip hop by spoken word poets on Def Poetry, perked the attention of young people and drew them out and into the practice of popular live poetry.

The notion of collective organization was popularized through slam poetry's structure in which each city sends a "team," of poets to the national competition and slam's reverence for collaborative poems. Hip hop culture's "crews," of musicians, dancers and spoken word artists also significantly popularized the idea of making art together in small groups, rather than exclusively as individuals. I discuss this in an earlier section. Here I elaborate upon the blue collar and hip hop roots of the poetry crews. Significantly, the poetry collectives of 2000 called themselves "crews" and others referred to them as such. In putting the term to use and through their performative practice, the crews continued an old tradition of collectivism grounded in working class culture and historical necessity.

In her treatment of rap music and black culture, seminal hip hop scholar, Tricia Rose, defines, “crew” as it is used in hip hop culture. She describes the common usage of the term demonstrated by her fieldwork data and then defines its significance:

The crew, a local source of identity, group affiliation, and support system appears repeatedly in all of my interviews... These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements. (1994:34)

Rose points out that the term *crew*, in hip hop vernacular means a *support system* and a *new kind of family forged with intercultural bonds* which may be seedlings for new social movements. This definition is instructive but it omits the productive activities in which members of crews most certainly engage and out of which unifying relationships also emerge.

Poets who organize together and form crews work together reciting, memorizing, writing, recording, practicing and performing live poetry. As such, they are “crews” in the blue-collar sense of the term. A crew is a collective of people with whom one works and shares work experiences. According to the first listing in a dictionary definition, a “crew” is “a group of persons involved in a particular kind of work or working together: the crew of a train; a wrecking crew” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

The hip hop meaning of the term: crew, raises the family like inter-cultural bonds between members who come together against a harsh context with few resources or support institutions. The English dictionary definition of the term signals the productive activity members of crews carry out in making poetry that strengthen their relationships with each other. Rap artists use the term, crew, to convey the family-like relationships

they have with each other. The sense of family that they mean to convey in their use of the word crew, is rooted in a longer history under capitalism of emergent relationships of solidarity that arise from working together to produce something.

Poetry crews demonstrate collectivism as new kinds of families and by their productive poetic activity. In this latter sense, those who work together can develop solidaristic relationships through the shared experience of work (Fantasia 1988). Yet, while blue-collar workers use the word crew to describe whom they work with, they do not call each other, *my crew*, with the same endearment and enthusiasm that poetry crews use to describe their new kin. Hip hop culture's seizure of the term from the under-belly of the misery of work: not as a plain crew of mechanics or construction workers labeled as such by their employers, but as a crew from its sweetest spot of standing up together and belonging, rears the persistent possibility of solidaristic unity and collective power.

Nazareth Simmons recollects the moment the name "Able Minded Poets" came to him and why he organized as a crew rather than perform his poetry alone:

Before there were any *Able-Minded Poets*, it was just me (he smiles) I used to sign it on the bottom of all of my poems, I'd put my name, then I'd put *Able Minded Poets*. I had the idea that I wanted to do it with some of my friends, but some of them weren't motivated enough, so I had to get out into the community and make it happen. I never even thought about doing poetry alone. I don't like being all up in the spotlight. And I love being around my friends. My friends have always been my family, because the other kind of family-life doesn't really exist for me. So, I had to get out into the community and make it happen.⁸²

In this comment, Simmons' family is his friends and some of them are his poetry crew.

The form of collective organization he describes is based on more than a shared style of

⁸² Nazareth Simmons, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, 2004.

poetry. Rather, it is based on affinities deep enough for members of crews to consider each other family. By working together as crews in publicly oriented contexts, poets shift from an individual sense of themselves rooted in individualistic practices to a larger sense of themselves as members of collectives and in relation to audiences, that challenges the idea of individual authorship and generates a larger affective sense of community among them.

Difference in Poetic Community: Ryan Peters and the R-Spot Barbershop

Ryan Peters of the Able Minded Poets performed a poem in 2002 outside of the Claire de Lune coffeehouse on an evening of Poetic Brew at my request for the documentary video my co-producers and I were making.⁸³ The poem she delivered was called, “Til the Beat Stops”. Peters thought about which poem to do for us and said, “I’m gonna do a poem that we do...” I found it noteworthy that she did not say which of the Able Minded Poets wrote the poem and instead claimed the poem through the shared collective doing of it at multiple performances.

Peters is African American, and at the time, she was a college student and a track star at a local university. She wore a long-sleeved, yellow shirt, blue jeans and had her hair in short dreadlocks. She delivered the poem from memory on the sidewalk and held nothing in her hands. She closed her eyes to focus but by the end of the poem she opened them and raised her index finger upwards on the line, "*My people need to know where they belong!*"

⁸³Ryan Peters, video-interview with author and recording of live act of poetry, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

The following version of “Til the Beat Stops,” is based on a transcription from the video and audio recording with line-breaks placed in consideration of the spoken pauses and conceptual units. I have broken it up into stanzas and made choices on where to capitalize and where to punctuate. Recall that the Able Minded Poets do not ever read in public or use text-based poetry in their live performative practice. The poem should be read as a translation.

If I speak, I mean truly speak, will the folks be ready?
 Within these inquiries I vow to keep my mind steady
 as my tongue rocks the place

Watch these utterances paint faces with confusion,
 jaundiced revelations of disillusionment

Meant to teach the lessons my past lives taught,
 oh no I might not cause it just wouldn't be fair
 to those whose lives have been so bare

That they can't see past the right now and into efforts before
 who won't understand that each day is simply God's little metaphor,
 that there is more

More beyond imagination's reality, more than just 24-hour finality
 more, so much more than to me
 2002's vitality has become a war

Because you see I exist in the ancient future,
 centuries gone by only to resurface, function as sutures in the skin of time
 and time has been the sustenance of my persistence,

And persistence is the reasons for my existence
 but I am certain to you this makes no sense, which is why I shall remain
 no less insistent, down right belligerent and go on

My people need to know where they belong!
 So I'll continue like David and sing my psalm,

Until the beat stops,
 until the beat,
 stops

After Peter's finished her delivery, she shook her arms out, rolled her head, laughed, and said, "Thank you, thank you!" to the clapping crowd that had stopped to watch and listen. In this poem, the Able Minded reference the biblical story of David. David was a youth and a shepherd of large faith who went to battle against a tremendous grown-up warrior named, Goliath, on behalf of his people and against all odds, killed him with a slingshot.⁸⁴ David went on to write many psalms of praise and parable delineating God's greatness for the delivery of his people.

The Able Minded deliver poems rather than psalms, meant to deliver people from hopelessness during the ritual of the event, rather than the afterlife. They use the biblical metaphor because it is readily understood in the hearts and histories of many who make up the poets and audiences in the world of popular live poetry. The poem addresses the limiting force of dominant time that makes it difficult for aggrieved communities to imagine a better way of being in the future, and also makes it difficult to imagine any emancipatory elements of the past that could be summoned to illuminate the present. Through the live act of poetry, the Able Minded step into the surreal quality of the ephemeral moment in poetic faith with the audience that they have the power to imagine and create something better together.

Finally, I asked Ryan Peters why she personally decided to do poetry live and in public, rather than write for herself, privately. She explained that she hoped to move specific audience members with her poetry that identified with the lived experiences she conveyed in her poetry. She mentions a poet who featured at Poetic Brew earlier that

⁸⁴ I draw on experiential knowledge gleaned from charismatic Christian church, summer camps, and intensive bible study from age five to fifteen.

night named Stacy Tolbert. Inside, the host of the event introduced her to the audience: “Ladies and Gentlemen, without further ado, Miss Stacy Tolbert, a.k.a., the *Brown Suga Poet*, please, make her feel welcomed!”⁸⁵

Tolbert is an African American female poet whose poetry speaks to lived experience that resonates with Peters. Peters explains why she decided to do poetry live as a way to speak to particular audiences that include but are not limited to; African Americans, females and youth:

Just like every poet, or artist, I think I have something to say, not to be cocky about it-- but I think I might spark somebody. Just like Stacey, she’s one of my idols, and some of the things she says might not hit *the masses*, but it resonates with me deeply. I wanted to be in that position and be able to do that, even if it’s just for one person.⁸⁶

Peter’s touched her chest when she said “resonate” as if her body were a drum. This gesture reflects the interiority of spoken poetry and its musical, affective quality that is sounded and felt on the inside of audiences.

As a special form of communication, crafted and directed towards specific audiences, its performative enunciation does something that can “spark” particular audiences uniquely when spoken by particular poets. Peters states that Stacy Tolbert might not resonate with the masses as much as Tolbert resonates with her. This statement indicates that culturally specific spaces of poetry are important and necessary to speak to particular audiences and bolster members of aggrieved communities. At the same time, Peters says that Tolbert “might,” not resonate with the general audience. It is important also to have large spaces, able to draw a diverse constituency of poets and audiences

⁸⁵Marc Kochinos, video-recording by author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

⁸⁶Ryan Peters, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

together to experiment with the possibility of mutual recognition across difference through the popular live poetry event.

Finally, Peters discussed her decision to turn towards the public with her poetry.

For a long time, I'd been a real selfish artist. I had to kind of protect myself as a performer, in the off chance that I wasn't received well. But as of late, I'm just looking to put out energy in the crowd, and hopefully get it back-- (she smiles) It's great to have two people flanking you that are like minded or like spirited and ready to put out their energy, for the sake of the crowd. We're ready to be exhausted, every time we step to the mic, we're just ready to let it all go... When I'm up there on stage and we're at a peace rally or an anti-war rally, I just feel like it's a big family and we're just sharing the same kind of emotion.⁸⁷

Peters describes the labor of making collective poetry here, as a reciprocal exchange between poets and audiences that create the form during the live act. She indicates that performing with fellow poets as a collective enable her to be more courageous and generous, with her poetry and herself, in relation to the audience during the live act.

In addition to collective organization, the venue plays a key role in fostering the higher work of popular live poetry. Both culturally specific venues and those that cull participants across cultural groups, provide important forums that enable popular performance poets to direct the form towards larger cultural work. Like the Malcolm X Library, the R-Spot Barbershop held regular poetry events oriented towards the African American community meant to do the sparking work Peter's describes. As a business rather than a publicly funded library, it faced challenges.

The R-Spot Barbershop was named the "R" Spot for the owner's last name, "Richards" and for "*our* spot," a special place for African American art, poetry,

⁸⁷Ryan Peters, video interview with author, Ricardo Guthrie and Ge Jin, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

haircutting and empowerment.⁸⁸ They held Afrocentric poetry readings on Friday nights and ran a full service barbershop. While these events are Afrocentric, they welcome participants from other cultural backgrounds. I interviewed the owner of the R-Spot Barbershop in the summer of 2004. There was a large mural of poetry from local African American and Taco Shop Poet, Bennie Herron, painted on the wall and black and white photographs of Black artists.

In one photograph, former California Poet Laureate, Quincy Troupe, read poetry at a microphone. There was a blackboard sign by the front door that announced the next poetry event, featuring: *Taco Shop Poet, Adrian Arancibia*. Four male barbers worked at chrome and grey swivel-chair stations on male, plastic caped men on one side of the room. One barber came-out-of-the-woodwork on seeing the large video camera on my shoulder and tossed his dusting brush in the air like a baton, to his client's impatient irritation as he sighed with his cape on.

I turned to the owner, James Richards, and asked him how he decided to combine a Black barbershop, bookstore, art, and poetry reading space into one venue. He said that he combined them to increase the odds of his business's success. He explains that growing up in San Diego there were few spaces for "Black culture and Black literature." He gestured at the bookshelves of Black literature and the photographs on the wall as he reflected, and said:

As a kid, it's important for you to understand the greatness and the accomplishments-- to have something to emulate yourself. So, I really did it [opened the R-Spot] to incorporate poetry and literature, mixing it with the everyday people who come to a barbershop. And it all works-- none of

⁸⁸James Richards, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, July 31, 2004.

it interferes with the other functions... Barbershops are places in the Black community where everybody gets together and talks about relevant issues, and so I felt like putting in the bookstore, and infusing some knowledge into the conversation that takes place here, made perfect sense.⁸⁹

Richards opened the R-Spot in January of 2003. Prior to this he worked as a forklift operator. He kept haircuts at a price comparable to barbershops without art on the walls, books to peruse, or disc-jockeyed music. This latter activity of setting the tone with the music was part of Richards's work.⁹⁰

In 2005 as the neighborhood continued to gentrify, the cost to rent the space grew too high and he had to close the business. An article from the city newspaper quotes

Richards and poet Benny Herron on the closing of the R-Spot:

Richards said he's disappointed that the shop's closure comes down to the owners charging what he considers too much money. "We touched a lot of lives and we would have touched plenty more," he said. "This was a nice addition to the community, and it just turned into a money thing." Customers, such as Bennie Heron, say they will follow Richards wherever he ends up. The regular customers have come to see themselves as a family, he said. "The community we built here is actually too big for these walls," Heron said.⁹¹

In relation to poetry, the R-Spot was a popular and important space among African American poets, and in a different way, among poets and audiences in general. As Bennie Herron states, the regular participants built a community that extends beyond the walls of the place.

Producers of popular live poetry have created it in such a way as to ensure its survival regardless of institutional support or a permanent place for its practice. They

⁸⁹ James Richards, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, July 31, 2004.

⁹⁰ *San Diego Union Tribune*, 28 May 2004.

⁹¹ *San Diego Union Tribune*, 17 July 2005.

have tied it to their bodies, memories and spoken deliveries and made it handy for travel. At the same time free, publicly oriented regular welcoming spaces in which to practice popular live poetry are a marvelous thing that allow poets to grow and improve, and all participants to learn about the possibility of community.

Early Events that Fueled Poetic Brew of 2000: Gallery 504 and Poetic Brew under Cheryl Latif's Stewardship

From 1997 to 2000, the most popular live poetry event in San Diego was located in downtown San Diego at *Gallery 504*. A local magazine reports that Gallery 504 was housed in a large 10,000 square foot building, built in 1857:

The gallery is a collaboration of four San Diegans who wanted to create an atmosphere where a diverse and eclectic array of artists, "not only from San Diego but from all over the country," could showcase their work, notes gallery owner Susan Clark. The grand opening is June 6, 5 to 9 p.m., at 504 13th Street.⁹²

Gallery 504, named by its address in downtown San Diego, became a very popular venue for live poetry over its three-year run; able to hold large crowds by its tremendous size, and draw diverse crowds through the inclusive and open way the organizers framed its event.

More precisely than "diverse," the venue was really an Afrocentric space. The artwork it featured was African and African American. At the same time, its events were organized with a welcoming and inclusive tone towards non-African decent people and the aim was to build a racially and sexually diverse, cross-class, community of artists,

⁹²*San Diego Metropolitan Magazine*, June 1997.

poets, audiences and buyers of art. The impetus to find a space was driven in part by the lack of spaces for art produced by people disenfranchised in some way from the dominant art world. When Voz Alta formed, they organized along similar principles. Adrian

Arancibia comments:

When we decided to take on the idea of having a non-profit it was so the next generation of writers-- and the next generation of artists-- won't have the same kinds of problems exhibiting or reading their work! They're going to have the capability to read whatever they need to... So, Voz Alta is that, where we can do those kinds of things, where we can do those kinds of performance, and people can feel confident reading their poetry in Spanish. We had an Argentinian guy that came in and read and he goes, 'there's no place to read in Spanish here-' and I go, 'no, on the contrary,' and he goes, 'but everybody reads in English.' I don't care! The idea is an open space for everyone, EVERYONE, you have African Americans, Asians, white people, Euro-American, if you want to use the more politically correct term, that come in and participate in the space. That's what we want to be able to do, to have different cultural groups come in and take ownership and onus in the work.⁹³

Gallery 504 organized along similar lines but from an Afrocentric, rather than Chicano center. The size of the building, the organizers behind the venue, and the regular poet and audience participants, combined to make it the most popular event during this period.

I was only able to observe the poetry event at Gallery 504 downtown once. On that night, the Taco Shop Poets performed poetry and I have fragmented memories of Bennie Herron and Tomás Riley on stage. One of my friends who had come with me to the event, put her name on the list to deliver poetry at the open-mic under the name of *Heavenly Skies*. I was surprised when the name was called and she walked confidently forward, grasped the microphone and shook the place with her poetry and calm and exacting performance. I had never known this part of her, publicly.

⁹³ Adrian Arancibia, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, Oct. 24, 2002.

We grew up in the same place, but she is African American and had been living in Los Angeles in recent years. She came into a culture of art and reverence for blackness that was a long time coming from the logging town we knew and she grew more powerful through it. The audience claimed and praised her. Venues such as Gallery 504 helped poets in disenfranchised bodies subjectively transform against powerful social forces such as racism. Through their live acts of poetry and the recognition from the audience, they come into their own embodied, poetic voices.

At the same time as Gallery 504 opened, another venue in San Diego opened with the same intentions in terms of its poetry event, in a building that was also large and interesting: Claire de Lune. The coffeehouse opened in 1997. A warmly remembered, host (and poet) came forward shortly thereafter, introduced herself to the owner, discussed the weekly poetry event happening in the venue that had no host but the owner at the time. The owner was very pleased to meet her and impressed with her ideas, cultural politics and general warmth and happily gave her the post. Her name was Cheryl Latif and she was the host of Poetic Brew from 1997 to 2000. Under her stewardship, the event became very popular, diverse and inclusive. She collaborated with the coffeehouse owner, Claire Bell and wrote grants to get funding to pay for big name, far away poets to come to Poetic Brew and feature. At the same time, she organized the event in such a way as to only feature the same poet once a year and to boost new, local poets.

Latif left her post as host of Poetic Brew in the fall of 2000 due to health issues and relocated to the Northwest of the US. Interim host, local poet, Lizzie Wann, sets the tone of the event on her leaving in an entry she posted at the time to the Poetic Brew list-serve. Wann describes a night of Poetic Brew during this transitional time and mentions

poet, Nazareth Simmons, of the Able Minded Poets. Wann writes, “Open-mic highlights included Nazareth who started off the evening with a poem for Cheryl and called on all of us to ‘treat every day like Tuesday until poetry is life.’”⁹⁴ At this time, Simmons was a new poet. Wann’s description reflects the ways in which Latif was valued: Simmons began the night by giving a poem to her from the stage so that the audience could be a part of it, too.

Regular, weekly poetry events organized around inclusive, diverse and democratic principles provide crucial space by which new poets learn from more experienced poets and together with audiences are afforded opportunities to come together in a deeper sense of community. In the Poetic Brew newsletter, near her last night as host, Cheryl Latif writes:

We have a wonderful community of poets here and I am honored to walk among you, to hear your words, to share mine. The fact that this reading draws the diverse audience it does is phenomenal. Look around the room and you see folks among you of all ages, all cultures, sharing all form of poetry. Poetic Brew has served and will continue to serve, as a safe place for new poets to take the stage and spread their wings. For the unseasoned to learn from the seasoned. For all of us to learn from one another on so many levels. It’s rare that a poet new to any reading is welcomed as quickly as all of you welcome folks at Poetic Brew. We have been honored to have some truly great features in the nearly two years we have existed. And I say ‘we’ with all my heart. Because this reading would never have become the success it is without you. And though I say this often, I cannot express to you enough the role Claire has played in seeing that we have a welcoming, workable venue in which to share spoken word.⁹⁵

Latif ordinarily ended the newsletter by encouraging readers to come the next week, listing the line-up of featured poets and closing with the following phrase, “*Poetry is the*

⁹⁴ *Poetic Brew Newsletter*, 17 July 2000.

⁹⁵ *Poetic Brew Newsletter*, 29 Nov. 2000.

promise.” What did Latif mean by this phrase? It seems poetry meant: dream, the tallest hopes, and a space to stoke belief in the possibility of a more genuine community.

Marc Kochinos became the host of Poetic Brew shortly after Latif left and aimed to stay the course she charted. He states, “The thing that was really strong about Claire’s as a venue-- before I started hosting, and what has been really my kind of goal with this venue, is to make sure it’s a very diverse reading...”⁹⁶ Poetic Brew continued to grow in the year 2000. Gallery 504 on the other hand lost its lease that year to its downtown space.

Locals commented on the persistent gentrification of downtown as a reason for rising rents and contested eminent domain processes that ultimately claimed the block on which the building sat. Plans to construct a new ballpark stadium on a seven and a half acre parking lot, and to redevelop the twenty-six-block radius surrounding it were granted by the City government to the new owner of the Padres baseball team.⁹⁷ Gallery 504 packed up the warehouse and moved northeast, relocating to a smaller space on University Avenue in North Park. Once there, they changed their name to *Gallery 504 North*.

Marc Kochinos recalls Gallery 504 during a video-interview conducted inside Claire de Lune. Claire de Lune is located on University Avenue also, two blocks west of Gallery 504 North. Kochinos comments on the most popular events in San Diego in 2000. He begins with Poetic Brew and then mentions Gallery 504. He states:

⁹⁶Marc Kochinos, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

⁹⁷*San Diego Business Journal*, 14 June 2004; *Wall Street Journal*, June 11 2007.

If I walk into a group of poetry hosts, and I have, and they say, ‘So, how many people do you get at your readings?’ And I say, ‘Oh, anywhere from eighty, to one hundred and sixty on a week,’ and their jaws drop. They ask me to repeat myself because they don’t believe it. It really surprises me how many people come out. One of the things that’s unusual at this particular reading is we do get a relatively high percentage of people who do not want to be poets, who come here to listen to the poetry... And *Gallery 504 North* over here (gestures down the street) is still rebuilding its base. But when they were in downtown, on Friday nights, if they had a feature there, they’d have 200 plus people. It’s pretty startling.⁹⁸

After Gallery 504 relocated, they did not rebuild their poetry base to as great a scale as they did when they were downtown. They did not have the size to do so. Still, they held poetry events infrequently in an intimate space upstairs in Gallery 504 North and larger events downstairs on occasion. They directed their energies towards artwork in the forms of African and African American paintings and sculpture.

Recalling the poetry event at Gallery 504, owner of Gallery 504 North, Greg Tate states that of the 10,000 square feet of the warehouse building, 5,000 square feet were devoted to the poetry area and still, it would be “packed like sardines.”⁹⁹ He spoke softly remembering the event as I talked with him about it inside the quiet, bright space of Gallery 504 North with its displays of iron African sculptures on pedestals and glass storefront windows folding into grey sidewalk and the diverse passers-by of North Park. Across the street sat *Hip Hair* and *Ace Hardware*, and a few doors down: the large, *African Alliance* thrift store and the metaphysical shop, *Our Lady of the Lake*.

Tate said that they decided to have a poetry event after they saw a film called, *Love Jones* (Witcher 1997). Standing behind the counter by the register, he unfolded his

⁹⁸Marc Kochinos, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

⁹⁹Greg Tate, conversational interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 2, 2007.

arms and opened his palms, “It’s about relationships,” he said. He continued, “And we said, *ok . . . let’s do this.*”¹⁰⁰ *Love Jones* is a dramatic film with a predominantly African American cast that takes place in a black bohemian milieu. Its tale begins at an open-mic poetry event in a dimly lit Chicago nightclub called, the *Sanctuary*, and within it at a table of audience members who know each other closely.

A relationship between two is kindled at the Sanctuary as one of the audience members at the table delivers a poem directed towards a woman in the audience, and she delivers one towards him on another evening. The poets speak to each other indirectly through the poems they deliver to the audience. The popular poetry event is a space in which people come intimately together: in one-on-one relationships, in disconcerting recognition of differences between them, and in constellations of ephemeral, and sometimes enduring, community.

In sum, Gallery 504 played an important role in San Diego providing a grand space in which new poets and audiences could be cultivated, and when they were made to relocate, Claire de Lune’s, *Poetic Brew* grew from the spillover effect. The poets and audiences who had been cultivated through the weekly event at Gallery 504, now homeless, with no regular, weekly place to go, yearned for a big, inclusive space to make their poetry: they found it in Poetic Brew. Performance poet and San Diego slam team member, Salim Sivaad states in a video-interview recorded in 2002, “Claire de Lune is

¹⁰⁰Greg Tate, conversational interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 2, 2007.

the *premiere* poetry venue in San Diego!”¹⁰¹ In the next chapter, I detail the magical work that took place at Claire de Lune through the ritual of Poetic Brew.

¹⁰¹ Salim Sivaad, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, Oct. 29, 2002.

FOUR:

Poetic Brew: A Case Study of the Cultural and Political Significance

Of the Popular Live Poetry Event

I begin by describing video footage I recorded in the summer of 2004 of poet Bennie Herron performing as the featured poet on an evening of the weekly poetry event, *Poetic Brew*, at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse in San Diego, California.¹⁰² In this footage Herron ends his half hour performance. He is sweaty and he has dropped all of the pages of his poems to the floor, paper slip by paper slip, opting to perform for the audience directly, charismatically, face to face, body to body, during the most salient points of this act of live poetry. Finally, he says, *and . . . now . . . CHURCH begins!* He turns to the drummer on stage behind him, his friend Kevin Moore, an accomplished percussionist and a trained poetry drummer, and while Moore keeps working his sticks and thumping the bass drum he-- *quick*, passes a tambourine to Herron.¹⁰³

Herron begins to play the tambourine and the audience shifts from still listening and occasionally hollering out to his spoken poetry to clapping along as he continues to heat them up and ratchet them in for his last lines. But where are we anyway? We are not in church. We are in a coffeehouse . . . with all of the good church feeling and power to sanctify but without having to dedicate it all to the *After-Life*. The time is *now!* The now

¹⁰²Bennie Herron, video recording of live performance by author, Claire de Lune, 15 June 2004, San Diego.

¹⁰³ Moore learned how to accompany poets on the drums from "*Master Drummer*, Billy Higgins," (Interview with author, 15 June 2004, San Diego). The late renowned jazz drummer, Billy Higgins (1936-2001), conducted workshops at the *World Stage*, a music and poetry organization he co-founded with poet, Kamau Daaood in 1989 in Leimert Park, Los Angeles.

of the live moment between the poets on stage and the audience bound by the tight ritual of the popular live poetry event. Where will they direct this burgeoning shared feeling and experience of *communitas*? They will move it towards the making of new identities and from liminal dreams, towards constellations of communities not-yet-to-be.

I use concepts developed by anthropologists, Victor and Edith Turner (1982) and the cultural critic, Walter Benjamin (1969) in this introduction. The Turners' elaboration of liminality and articulation of *communitas* convey the experiential meaning of rituals according to participants. *Liminality* is an in-between space experienced by participants during the ritual process in which there is more freedom to "juggle with the factors of existence" (Turner & Turner 1982:205).¹⁰⁴ *Communitas* is the intimate sense of fellowship that emerges between liminal subjects during a ritual (1982:203). Liminal subjects experience rituals as zones of "sacred space-time" rather than "mundane space-time" (1982:202).

I reference Walter Benjamin's concept of the "time of the now," in which a heightened awareness of the present moment opens possibilities "to blast open the continuum of history" (1969:263). As a form of live art contingent on the ephemeral moment of recognition between poets and audiences, live poetry is especially suited to intervene in ordinary time. Moreover, the meticulous attention to the amount of minutes (from three to five) that each open-mic poet is allotted as well as the vigilant time-keeping practices maintained by the host's of open-mic and slam events, call Time out: it hovers there, awkwardly, until popular performance poets learn to lay claim to it. They

¹⁰⁴ Victor Turner roots his discussion of liminality in earlier work published in 1909 on the concept by folklorist, Arnold Van Gennep (1969).

learn through their participation in the ritual space-time of the event and the affective guidance they receive from the audience during the live act.

In Turner's view, rituals express the "subjunctive mode" of a given culture (1986:101). He explains that while the subjunctive mode is not commonly used in English, the ways of thinking that this grammatical form conveys are communicated through the practice of rituals. The subjunctive mode operates in the shadows of the indicative mode. In this sense, the ritual conveys the what-ifs and the what-would-you-do-if-you-could-do of a culture. It taps a more flexible way of thinking and being distinct from the flat plain of commonly understood reality expressed by indicative sayings such as *that's just the way it is*. Who says? The ritual practice of the popular live poetry event marks it as a special space apart from the quotidian for the conduction of culturally and politically transformative work.

In this chapter I ground my claims in a case study I conducted from 2000 to 2004 of Poetic Brew. I argue that this popular live poetry event functioned to generate a complex sense of *communitas*, remake identities and teach participants through the praxis of their participation that a poly-vocal polis based on democratic ideals is possible. Its ritual took on these various meanings in part because it was a free popular live poetry event made up of a diverse cross-class constituency and carried out in the publicly oriented venue of a coffeehouse.

Opening Imaginations in the Public Ritual of Poetic Brew

The primary mechanism of participation in most popular live poetry events is through an open-mic. In principle and in practice, the open-mic affords the same amount

of time and the same respect to each performer regardless of status or prestige held outside of the event. The case study of Poetic Brew indicates that this unusually fair and equal mode of communication made it possible for the diverse, cross-class participants of audience members and poets to come together across hierarchical differences and carry out their poetic activity as a community during the ritual of the event. The equalizing dynamic of the event corresponds with the kind of liminality it brought about.

Poetic Brew was a site of "public" rather than "sequestered" liminality (Turner & Turner 1982:202-203). In sequestered liminality, "novices or 'liminaries'," are stripped of statuses to be fitted to a higher rank. In the case of public liminality on the other hand, "...everyone in the community is a liminary, and no one is elevated in status at the end of the rites" (Turner & Turner 1982:203). Yet, the keen attention given to individual poets by the audience during the live act on stage and the embodied delivery of this genre of poetry create moments that highlight differences in identity and open possibilities for poet members of aggrieved communities to remake them during the ritual of the event. These poets actually rise in rank through the event as if it were a sequestered rite of passage and some poets located closer to the status quo feel a small demotion of rank through a loss of hierarchical privilege. Finally, public liminality signals that the ritual itself is public.

Public rituals talk back beyond the events in which they materialize to the larger context. Turner & Turner state, "Just as important are the ways a society finds in these public rituals of depicting, commenting on, and critiquing itself and its social environment" (1998:203). They add that public rituals, "...portray turnabouts of normal social status..." (1982:203). In relation to the popular live poetry event, more status quo

participants in the audience often experience a degree of *communitas* with disenfranchised poets during the event and are guided in an affective and cognitive sense of how being together in diverse, horizontal community could be. At Poetic Brew in particular, the diversity of participants coupled with the equalizing structure of the open-mic enabled its ritual to function as a site of turnabouts more robustly than homogeneous events and those that do not allow audience members to self elect to become poets.

Popular live poetry events highlight the diverse particular bodies and identities of poets on stage and differences among the audience(s). Yet, over time the disunity that differences can inculcate often fade. Poetic Brew's diversity, popularity and long tenure make it an optimal site to test such a claim. The larger story of Poetic Brew is a parable that runs counter to the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, referenced recently by the popular and much lauded film, *Babel*.¹⁰⁵ While the story of the film depicts a global tapestry of diversity across a range of locales, its vignettes of difference convey atomized life-worlds impervious to the possibility of mutual recognition and equality with others beneath an omnipotent hierarchical geo-political social order. The tale of Poetic Brew on the other hand is non-fiction and grounded in an actual event. It teaches that diversity does not irrevocably lead to discord, suffering, and the need to be ruled, as long as the diverse community is organized around principles and practices of fairness and equality.

Finally, while the Poetic Brew event was organized horizontally through the mechanism of the open-mic, its weekly event included a "featured" poet. Many open-mic poetry events include a featured poet; this poet is invited to perform in the event by the

¹⁰⁵*Babel*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and authored by Guillermo Arriaga Jordán, [Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Vantage, 2006].

host prior to it. This arrangement could topple the egalitarian organization of the event by raising one poet above the rest. However, as long as the regular participants find the selection process of the featured poet representative of their constituencies and fair and reasonable, the event continues without incident.

The types of poets to be featured at Poetic Brew were systematically and equitably chosen by the hosts across class, race, age and other differences. Young poets educated through poetic knowledge gleaned from hip hop or slam were regularly featured poets in the event. Further, middle aged working class poets whose poetry reflected biblical knowledge, rich vernacular language and popular culture references were as likely to be featured as published poets and/or those with advanced degrees in poetry.

I shed light on the ways in which Poetic Brew challenges hierarchies ordinarily heeded in daily life and affords participants a means to come to voice. The event provides a stage to raise poetic challenges to the dominant logic that disenfranchised youth and adults cannot be imaginative creators of their own identities and destinies. Poetry is a communicative tool wielded through the ritual of the event that opens up the imaginative space between poets and audiences to conceive of such things.

Working class cultural critic and historian Studs Terkel refers to the diminished ability to imagine among working class people as a “horrible obscenity”. He states, “...blunt imagination, and you blunt humanity. If you blunt humanity, you blunt a feeling outside of yourself” (1991:43). The ritual of the poetry event fosters feeling outside of oneself with others through the emergent affective sense of community that comes to the fore as *communitas*. Participants learn palpably, how moments of shared humanity feel.

Further, they come to think of themselves as individuals as more fully human, too, through moments of reflexivity and their praxis in the event.

BE Dean of the Able Minded Poets recounts an incident in which he was fired from his position in a machine shop for being late too many times to work. He explained, “I can’t go to sleep after I do poetry, I’m too keyed up. So my boss said, ‘you’re either gonna have to quit doing these things or quit work.’ And I told him, ‘well, I guess I quit then,’ you know?” he shifted from side to side and made a goofy grin, “because, I’m an *artist*.”¹⁰⁶ He made fun of himself for claiming the title in a way that a young man from an upper class background would not: yet claim it he did. The event is a forum to do imaginative creative work through poetry that counters the fixity and limitation of *identities structured in dominance*. Louis Althusser (1971) describes the ways in which identities are structured within the scope of capitalism in this phrasing.

Feminist performance studies critic Judith Butler (1988) draws on Simone de Beauvoir to argue that, “the body is a historical situation.” She explains, “gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is read only to the extent that it is performed” (1988:521). While Butler discusses gender, her claim extends to the performance of other socially constructed identities such as race, sexuality, culture, and as I have argued in previous chapters, class. The ritual conditions of the popular live poetry event provide a space to open up the ways in which the body is inscribed upon to imagine it anew. The poetry event is dream time, not ordinary time but through participation on a regular, weekly basis, it can expand the ways in which poets and audiences view themselves, each other, and the world.

¹⁰⁶BE Dean, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

Contextualizing the Ritual: A Public Sphere, a People's Place, and a
Neighborhood in Transition

The particular context of Poetic Brew in the diverse neighborhood of North Park, the Odd Fellows building in which it was situated, and the Claire de Lune coffeehouse within it all influenced the nature of the event. Claire Bell, the owner of Claire de Lune, played a key role shaping the feeling-tone of the coffeehouse as one of exuberance, adventure and open-endings: through her personality, identity and by the people she drew to the venue as employees and customers. I describe this setting with ethnographic detail in the next section. Importantly, the location of the event within a coffeehouse signals a connection to the public sphere.

Coffeehouse "salons" of the eighteenth century in Europe were a site in which the bourgeois public sphere conducted its business. Men gathered to reflect on the news and hash out ideas about politics and society. Through this activity they contributed to the construction of a public sphere better able to hold the democratic process accountable to its citizenry. The Claire de Lune coffeehouse was not a bourgeois cafe of the sort political theorist, Jurgen Habermas ([1973] 1989) had in mind in his seminal articulation of the public sphere. Nor was the constellation that emerged at the coffeehouse a site of only many public(s), the important concept put forth by political theorist, Nancy Fraser. Fraser (1990) complicates Habermas' notion of one public by calling attention to the diversity and inequalities across members within it. She argues that the notion of one public is an ideal rather than an actual reality. The Poetic Brew event conducted within the Claire de Lune coffeehouse was exceptional in that it drew the many diverse, culturally specific poetic publics in the city of San Diego to its event to operate as one diverse public.

I point out that the coffeehouse was a site of the performative enactment of a "post-bourgeois public sphere," to borrow Fraser's phrase (1990:77-76). Fraser argues that the public sphere should not be conceived of as a culture-free zone or as a space in which identities do not matter. She argues instead that the culture and identities of those in power masquerade as neutral. In this Chapter, I describe the performance of identities among the people in the coffeehouse, detail a bit of their cultural world-views as they are expressed during live acts of poetry and mention briefly the ways in which the State, at the local level, aims to constrain the activity of the coffeehouse according to participants.

In the Introduction, I reference poet Bennie Herron performing at Poetic Brew in 2002. In Chapter Three, I describe a mural painted on an interior wall at the R-Spot Barbershop of a stanza of one of Herron's poems. The Poetic Brew event took place just one block west of the R-Spot Barbershop. Here I take up the context and the making of a people's space in the Odd Fellows building and the Claire de Lune coffeehouse within it, to set the stage of Poetic Brew. In a later section I describe the shift in space-time from the ordinary coffeehouse to the sanctified space-time of Poetic Brew and then sketch five liminal acts of live poetry conducted in the thick of the event. Through the ethnographic narrative I focus on the culture and particular people of the space to argue that the coffeehouse was a site of an emergent public and a locus for a neighborhood in transition. The public ritual of Poetic Brew within it was a sanctified space for the deep cultural work of free expression, remaking identities and imagining open-ended possibilities. The event played a key role in generating the glow that came to emanate from Claire de Lune in the bleakness of North Park at the turn of the millennium.

I historicize the Odd Fellows building and the actual *Odd Fellows* as a collective organization rooted in the lived experience of class. I loosely link their story to the contemporary popular community that gathers at the coffeehouse and to popular performance poets who use the epistemologies of their bodies in the delivery of their poetry. Unless otherwise stated, my account in this section describes the context and place in the year 2000.

The *Odd Fellows* building is a square two-story place that lumbers on the corner of Kansas Street and University Avenue in North Park, San Diego. On the exterior of the building on the Kansas Street side there is a hot pink neon sign that states, “Sunset Temple.” Below it, in smaller, green neon letters posted over a door that leads to a large ballroom another sign states, “The Odd Fellows.” The Odd Fellows Sunset Lodge #328, as well as five other Odd Fellow Lodges of San Diego county meet regularly in this ballroom, in the northwest section of the Building.

The Odd Fellows began in England in 1796 as a “friendly benefit society” made up of autonomous collectives called, “lodges.” Each lodge practices initiatory rights and “mystic signs of recognition and communication.” This secrecy was first developed to protect members from punishment because they did not have the freedom to associate.¹⁰⁷ Their purpose has been the welfare of their members, especially the care of widows and children in the case of the serious illness or death of their wage-earning husbands.

¹⁰⁷Independent Order of Odd Fellows and Rebekahs of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee, "The Odd Fellows," <http://www.ioofn.org/history.htm> [accessed April 27, 2008].

The name “Odd Fellows” is attributed to the laboring occupations of its first members.¹⁰⁸ These workers had no unions, unlike carpenters and other tradesmen who had unionized and socially constructed themselves as skilled workers. Instead they worked odd jobs with very little security. They may have owned a work tool such as a spade, but their main tool was their body. Their body was their livelihood.

The Odd Fellows still use their Lodge as a means of mutual aid. And they use it for expressive culture, like the poets and others who meet on the corner in Claire de Lune. The Odd Fellows know the difference between the working body and the dancing body and young poets learn the difference between them, too, albeit differently, in their time and place. On stage the schooled and worked body is not the same as the poetry body or its dancing brain.

Sometimes the Odd Fellows square dance. I have seen ladies in full satin skirts and beauty shop curls walking arm-in-arm with gentlemen in cowboy hats and shined-up boots, turning into the double-doors that lead to the ballroom. This door is discreet and painted the same color as the Odd Fellows building. There are all-ages, improvisational dance-jams to live bands from seven to nine o’clock in the evening every Friday in the same ballroom where the Odd Fellows dance. The cost to participate in the dance-jam is seven dollars. On the University side of the building east of Claire de Lune, there is another discreet entrance. It leads downstairs to a dank, vast basement. In the past few months, local comedians have organized a Saturday night stand-up comedy show in this space. The cost to attend is five dollars.

¹⁰⁸Independent Order of Odd Fellows and Rebekahs of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee, "The Odd Fellows," <http://www.ioofn.org/history.htm> [accessed April 27, 2008].

On most evenings of the week in Claire de Lune, there is something happening. On Thursday nights there is a Middle Eastern band and belly dance performance that features a few professional female dancers. Often they come off of the stage and walk through the crowd, jingling charms off of their hips and accepting dollar bills in their skirts and sequined brassieres. The event draws a large crowd of families, delighted children, and adult men and women who come by themselves or in groups of friends. At the end of the night, a band member usually passes a hat through the crowd to collect tips to be distributed among them.

On Friday and Saturday evenings there is often live music: jazz, acoustic or alternative country. And on Wednesday nights in the early years of the coffeehouse it was *Women's Night*. The owner of Claire de Lune, Claire Bell, recalls:

Wednesday was our 'W Night,' and the 'W' meant it was *Girls Night Out* at Claire de Lune.... there was a group called the *35 Transgenders*-- the transgender support group. And they would come out here and they would get dressed up and feel comfortable in a public place where they're accepted and where they can be themselves. And I always made sure I had the cutest boys working that night!¹⁰⁹

Tuesday night was reserved for poetry and the ritual of Poetic Brew.

The contractors of the building had none of this in mind in 1929. Builder and investor, Edward Newman and William Gibb secured permits to begin construction that year of what is now called the Odd Fellows Building. They envisioned a four-story department store but stopped short after pouring a steel reinforced basement and raising two floors. There is no record of why they changed their plan, but the most likely explanation is the Wall Street crash of that period (Covington 2007). The building has

¹⁰⁹Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

seen much since its birth in 1929, and the odd fellows who have laid claim to it and made it a people's space have expanded and changed. In 1996, Claire Bell signed a lease for a corner of the Odd Fellows building that would become Claire de Lune a year later.¹¹⁰

Claire Bell hired designers and contractors to restore some of the original Spanish Revival and Roman Arcade references such as the arched windows,¹¹¹ and was ready to open the Claire de Lune Coffee Lounge in 1997.¹¹² Bell explains that she did not have a background in how to design a coffeehouse or run a business when she started. In the early 1990s she states, "All I wanted to do [was party], life was about drinking, and partying and meeting people." She explains further:

I'm a great net worker because I'm a party girl and everybody loves a party girl... and I started hanging out with Gay guys cause I'd always get hurt. I met some very motivated Gay men that were working at Fortune 500 businesses, career men. And here I am, little ghetto girl from La Mesa, drug addict-- *meth*. [raises eyebrows] I was super cute when I was younger, thin, and I ended up becoming their dates for these corporate functions! ... And these men treated me very well-- Military balls with captains. So, that's where the flavor of the taste of the coffee shop, [came from] all of these great hotels I'd been to, I was like, 'oh, I love this chair, I love this look, I love colors, I love wrought iron!' So, that's how the Claire de Lune was developed. I became a date to all of these men. I was booked through Christmas time.¹¹³

Bell learned much about high culture through her participation in gala events as the date of Gay businessmen of whom she was a friend. Together, they moved through the

¹¹⁰Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

¹¹¹Architectural discussion gleaned from Donald Covington, *North Park: A San Diego Urban Village: 1896-1946*, 2007.

¹¹²Claire Bell, audio-interview by author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

¹¹³*Ibid.*

glimmering light of these spaces masquerading as straight couples and in Bell's case, as upper class.

Bell points to her working class background with the self-description, "little ghetto girl from La Mesa." La Mesa is a working class area of San Diego and the word *ghetto* means, in brief, not upper class and not "white". Further, she signals her class identity by not hiding her history of drug addiction to methamphetamine. An upper class performance of identity would not permit an open discussion of past drug addiction, especially a drug that is associated with the stereotypic image of *poor white trash*. Bell herself is ethnically Filipina and Irish.¹¹⁴

The narrative performance of working class identity troubles the social force of stereotypes to silence and constrain because the individual's story inevitably spills beyond its frame. At the same time, there are some recurrent themes in working class life stories that make them recognizable, especially if one is to class climb. In these tales of rags to riches, there always has to be an account given of the miracle of the money. David Johnson's slam poem delivered at the Austin International Poetry Festival in 2006, discussed in Chapter Two, referenced the lived experience and performance of upper class identity in contradistinction to working class identity when he delivered the line, "*My life is no tale of rags to riches...*" Class identity is symbolically communicated through the performative stories we tell about ourselves. In upper class tales there is a sense of stability and general ease that stems from economic stasis, unlike working class narratives.

¹¹⁴Claire Bell, audio-interview by author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

Bell describes her travel from being kicked out of her family's house as a teenager, "I was such a *jack ass!*" being made homeless for a brief while, securing a position as a receptionist, and over the course of a few years, moving up in the company to the position of account manager which enabled her to save money. To build up this small pot she added loan money: she went to the local library, learned how to apply for a small business loan to open the coffeehouse, made application and was awarded some start-up funding. During this time of her life she made amends with her parents. She was surprised to learn that they had savings they had stowed away to help any of their children who might go to college. They loaned their daughter some money from this source. With all of this money put together, Bell had fifty thousand dollars, which was enough to open the coffeehouse.

Conversely, a local business a block from Claire de Lune that opened in 2006, *Heaven Sent Desserts*, required three hundred thousand dollars to open, she explained.¹¹⁵ While Bell hustled and pulled together contractors herself and did some of the labor on her own and this lowered her opening costs, the neighborhood has also gentrified since she opened. It is more expensive for small businesses to come in and lay claim to broken down spaces with a glint of promise in North Park in the middle years of the decade of 2000 than it was in 1996 when she began.

Bell remembers the fears voiced around her when she decided to open the coffeehouse in North Park, "What are you gonna do, *here--* in a depressed neighborhood full of drug addicts? My Gay friends were all like, 'Claire! We're scared for you! How

¹¹⁵Claire Bell, audio-interview by author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

could you open a coffee shop there? We don't even like *driving* through North Park!' And I was like, *that's what I'm talking about!* Because the people were just like us! I sat on the bus benches and did all the people watching in the neighborhood. It was crazy. Super crazy. But everybody was like me!"¹¹⁶ The coffeehouse quickly became a popular place among locals and among others who traveled to it from further away.

The Claire de Lune coffeehouse emitted a welcoming feeling-tone in large part by the way in which Bell structured the business. In her assessment, "You know, I always say *the fish stinks from the head down.*"¹¹⁷ To make sure that Claire de Lune smelled right she chose poetry hosts who valued diversity and believed that everyone should be treated with equal amounts of respect, and while she trained her employees in the many jobs of running the coffeehouse, she taught them simultaneously in how to do respectful customer service of diverse clientele.

Bell states, "I'm a very diverse coffeehouse... I just make sure that we cover all bases on our side, so that we can service everybody and make sure everybody's happy."¹¹⁸ She recalls how this belief was put into practice in relation to the Wednesday, *women's night* event at Claire de Lune in the late 1990s and first years of the decade of 2000:

Oh . . . it was so much fun on *women's night*. I would make sure that it was mostly all men working that night, all these straight guys. So, I had to educate these guys [because] they were all young. So, I said, 'Guys--' because I was an over-weight woman also, 'Guys, you know what? When you're laughing when people are walking by and they have insecurities-- you can't laugh-- because they're gonna think you're laughing at them.

¹¹⁶ Claire Bell, audio-interview by author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

So, *there's no laughing on Wednesday nights*. When a woman comes up to the counter, even if it looks like a man-- she's wearing a wig, she's wearing make-up, she's wearing women's attire, I want you to address her as, 'mam'. So I said, 'If it looks like a woman, or trying-- then she is a woman.' And I had all my guys getting very personable with this transgender community. So, the next thing you know it, the BBW show up! [Big Beautiful Women] the women all over two hundred, three hundred pounds, and they were all dressed up! So on Wednesday nights, it was all Trannies, they were all 6'4"! In heels! ...There was *Jennifer 2000*-- she had a website, she converted in 2000... So, *that's how that comfort started* [italics mine]. There's a huge community of BBWs. And I trained my crew, to just look at faces, once again, no laughing, they can *be flirty*-- I'd even hire guys that were straight out of prison that were so closeted with anger, but they were all converted. They are all open-minded now.¹¹⁹

Bell uses the term "converted," to talk about a change in thinking among some of the ex-con employees who have worked at Claire de Lune towards members of the BBW and transsexuals, and she uses the term in conjunction with a change in identity from a man to a woman by Jennifer 2000. Even though Bell discusses an ordinary Wednesday night at Claire de Lune and not a Tuesday night, which is when Poetic Brew took place, some of the Wednesday night clientele participated in the poetry event too, and Jennifer, who was also a writer, was one of them (remember her).

The environment Bell cultivated at the coffeehouse met the disapproval of some, and on at least one occasion, a San Diego County Inspector of the Department of Environmental Health Food and Housing Division. In this account, she references Gay employees who have worked at Claire de Lune. She explains:

My inspector wasn't too Gay friendly. So, he nailed me. He told me, 'you need to wear hairnets or hats. You need to do inspections on all your employees hands, hair, if they have diseases--' and I thought, isn't this a privacy issue? But he was thinking about HIV-- I don't know if that's true... actually, what it said was "social diseases." So, what? *'Does anybody have Gonorrhoea? Anybody have--'* you know what I'm talking

¹¹⁹Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

about? *'Does anybody have Chlamydia?'* I mean those are all social diseases. And HIV is one of them. It was that kind of stuff. And I was like, 'You know what? He's riding us,' [directed towards employees]. So, we got the hats, and I made sure that my Drag Queen employees who dress up as women kept their nails trimmed. That's my policy. See, some of them had long nails. That ticked off the Inspector. So, no acrylics and no nail polish.¹²⁰

I said to Bell, "Well, women employees can have nail polish and acrylics, can't they?" and she replied, "No, they can't. It's a rule. It's in the books." I responded, "Probably never enforced." She said, "Yeah. I mean he was really pissed off. Who said what to him, you know? So, I said, now, everybody's wearing hats. I didn't want to spend any money on hats! So then we got a new inspector and I said, 'Are we gonna still have to wear hats?'... 'No, you don't have to wear hats.' So, it depends on who the inspector is."¹²¹

The performance of some identities at Claire de Lune by employees and clientele troubled the unwritten rules against bodies comporting in public space: that they be *men* or *women*, in line with their biological, concealed genitals, and not in-between. The county official cannot directly address this predicament to dominant normative order, but in Bell's account, his talk about "social diseases" and the restrictions he levied against them exposed his aversion. To a degree, the coffeehouse was a border space in that individuals living in liminal identities were ordinarily in the house.

While I have described the ways in which Bell's values played out in relation to gays, transsexuals and big heterosexual women to make the space welcoming for these constituencies; African Americans, Mexicans, Chicano/as, people from beyond the US, working class people, people of color in general, lesbians, homeless people, elderly, and

¹²⁰Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

¹²¹Ibid.

disabled people in wheel-chairs were also regulars at Claire de Lune. Across these groups, there were some who were student, artist, and writer, regulars; more customarily associated with the high culture image of a coffeehouse that claimed the venue as their own. Through the diversity of the clientele and employees, and the inclusive tone set by the owner, the coffeehouse quickly became a popular people's space.

Yet, even in the inclusive, liminal space of the coffeehouse and its feeling-tone so contrary to norms such as heterosexism, patriarchy and white supremacy, Claire de Lune was still a business operating within the confines of capitalism. As such, the owner and the employees were located in a class-based relationship in addition to the other intersecting relationships of difference and commonality between them. Bell had to operate by the rules of the game in which she was located if she hoped to keep the coffeehouse afloat which meant prioritizing economic success, and not utopic communicative public spaces rife with revolutionary potential. That is why she said, "I didn't want to buy hats!" when the Health Inspector indirectly penalized her for the oppositional, sexed and gendered, performative identities of her Drag Queen employees. Money matters influenced the order of the coffeehouse and employees felt the brunt of this more than others.

Claire de Lune workers can sometimes be seen on the Kansas Street side of the building. They sit leaning forward with forearms on thighs, they scan the sidewalk; sometimes they lean back and close their eyes. They take their breaks at a table and chairs on the sidewalk near the kitchen door. They smoke, drink coffee, talk to friends, or eat a sandwich. Some put their feet up because legs start to throb and veins varicose after day in and out of eight hours of standing.

The kitchen door has a metal exterior screen door and an interior door. Usually, the interior door is open and the screen door left cracked. Coffeehouse sounds stream out of this door and onto the sidewalk: the clanging of dishes being washed in a deep utility sink by a dishwasher's soapy hands, the espresso machine's crescendoing roar as a barista pulls a cool tin up and down to foam milk, or the ring of ceramic saucers placed to counter-top.

Claire de Lune has a large presence on the block. It is a tall, brightly lit building. On the University side of the building it has a roughly five foot neon sign of the coffeehouse name written in funky font. It is painted gold and up cast lights placed along the exterior walls above the arched storefront windows accentuate its height and make it luminous against the night. All along the periphery of the building there are small sidewalk tables and chairs, like the one I mention that the employees sit at on the Kansas side of the street.

The tables on the periphery of the building are often full with coffee drinkers and their dogs, or folks playing guitar, others talking with friends or just spaced out, pondering, waiting for a poem to talk to them. There is usually a man who travels with a large parrot on his shoulder who sits outside. The bird sometimes defecates on his shirt but neither bird nor man mind. The shirt comes clean in the laundry later, when they are home and the bird hops back to his roost. The bird might shift his feet but he is not rattled by the cars and city buses, or by the neighborhood youth walking down the sidewalk popping arms out towards each other play fighting, and filling the air with the music of their boom boxes. In the still heat of east San Diego's summer, mists fog cool water from a sprinkler system mounted to the overhang above the outside patio tables.

On the University side of Claire de Lune across the street there is a large discount beauty shop, *Chito's* shoe repair shop and the *Big City Tattoo* parlor. Just east of Claire de Lune is a small antique store, and beyond that, the *Salvation Army*. Directly across from Claire de Lune on the University side sits an old theatre that has been deemed a historical landmark. In 2000, it was in the process of being remodeled. West of Claire de Lune there is a carpet store and beyond that, a branch of the temporary day labor corporation, *Labor Ready*. At 5:30 in the morning, workers start arriving in the hope of securing a day's worth of work for which they can be paid at the end of the day for a small fee. They stand at the sidewalk and wait to be picked up. If they are still there after dawn, they are not likely to get work that day. Looking back east from Labor Ready down University Avenue the *North Park*, sign stands in the shape of a capital T in the median. Further east a check-cashing business blinks neon yellow, "instant money," and the *International Discount Fashions* store displays multicolored printed fabrics in their storefront windows on the far corners of University and 30th Street.

A few doors west of the International Discount Fashions store, back down University Avenue, past Salvation Army and the antique store, is the main entrance to Claire de Lune. The door swings shut behind a customer entering the venue, in a jam framed by someone seventy five years ago, someone who knew lumber and plaster well, someone who may have took coffee-break with his fellow crew. Such a man would be awestruck by Claire de Lune's choice of latté syrups.

Inside Claire de Lune the walls are painted gold and the ceiling lid dark blue. Red velvet drapes hang belted at the waist against the windowless stage wall. People sit at tables in the balcony and brightly lit, six-foot tall blackboards above the espresso

machine behind the counter post white, hot pink and lime green chalk descriptions of espresso drinks, pastries, soups, waffles and other foods and beverages. Claire Bell is often behind the counter alongside her employees making mochas and often she comes out on the floor to pick up dishes and socialize with regulars, letting them know that she remembers and values them.

In addition to the general types of regulars I mentioned earlier, there were regulars who were members of *Narcotics Anonymous* and *Alcoholics Anonymous*, ultra-out Gay men and un-sheepish Dykes, He-She's *going through the change* and Gothic-Punks with implanted fangs, corsets and Betty Page or 1950s rockabilly outfits. These kinds of regulars were also commonly the types of employees to manifest behind the counter: along with the Drag Queens, the ex-cons, and the young, straight men.

Another, daily group of regulars was a crew of fifteen uniformed local firemen who came to take their afternoon coffee break. Some of the employees from the Salvation Army were also regulars and came to take their breaks and order coffees routinely. Other types of people in the ordinary space-time of the coffeehouse included small groups of businessmen and businesswomen, Left-leaning political organizers collaborating, college and high-school students studying and others reading books or the newspaper. Certainly, there would be a homeless man or woman snoozing or talking with others, sitting in one of the comfortable, overstuffed chairs.

Uncommonly, the bathroom at Claire de Lune had no *Customers Only* sign, nor was there any special restroom key by the cash register that prohibits those without money from its use. Folks from the nearby bus stop and sprinting small children with trotting behind guardians came into Claire de Lune to use the bathroom as a regular order

of course. On the whole, Claire de Lune was a bawdy and regal place, from the riff raff to the literati, and the poet could be in the guise of either one. In the next section I open up the ritual of Poetic Brew that took place within it.

Transportation and Cultural Change in the Public Ritual of the Poetry Event

Richard Schechner (1988) argues that performance events are sites of transformation. He states that transformation occurs, "In the drama, that is, in the story, [among] ...performers whose special task it is to undergo a temporary rearrangement of their body/mind, what I call a 'transportation,'" and among the audience (170). In relation to popular live poetry, unlike a scripted theatrical event, the transformation that occurs through the story is emergent. It takes shape in the composite of poetic voices that speak its poly-vocal narrative over time. Yet, its collective voice does not occlude the individual voices raised through each live act of poetry: these are the transforming voices that propel the event.

Schechner's use of the word "transportation," highlights the nature of transformation in the performance event as an activity that moves. In my discussion of Poetic Brew, I give examples in which poet performers undergo a transformation of body and mind during the live act on stage. In the case of new open-mic poets, they are rearranged through the process of coming-to-voice and in the case of more experienced poets they become better able to move the audience.

Poet-critic-activist, June Jordan, and creator of the influential community poetry workshops, *Poetry for the People*, instructed her students with the following command, "Tell it. Tell us. Choose your words carefully, say it simply, but be precise. *Move me*. We

got work to do" ([remembered by former student, Kelly Navies] Jordan 1995: 22).

Experienced performance poets in popular live poetry events aim to engage the audience during the live act in a manner that moves them resoundingly and pointedly to affect change. The poets I discuss at Poetic Brew are skilled in this capacity.

By participating in the popular live poetry event over time, performance poets are changed in ways that spill over beyond the confines of its ritual. During the live act, the whole body (and mind) of the poet becomes poetry on stage. In this regard, the name of the *Able Minded Poets* is salient. It poignantly expresses a transported state of the body and mind by performance poets of aggrieved communities and with "Los," added as its denominator in 2004, of Chicanos and Spanish speaking and spoken though poet members of aggrieved communities. More than a temporary transportation, by taking on a name, they remind themselves that through the performance event conducted under the witness of the audience they have transformed permanently into more than the dominant culture intended them to be.

Schechner's model of transformation in the performance event is important to my discussion in that it sheds light on the meaning of the stage and the role of the host in the ritual of Poetic Brew. The stage is a crossroads for the transportation of the performance poets who conduct their live acts of poetry on it. Crossroads symbolize intense transformation: often of something dying and something else being born. The host regulates the edges of the crossroads like a traffic light, slowing cars eager to get on the freeway and into the wild embrace of the audience. He counts the minutes of their comings and goings and soon enough Time, too, rises through its exacerbation to become

a character in the event. On the crossroads of the stage and its exhilarating *free* way, poets enter an expanded space-time that enables them to function as cultural movers.

Lastly, transformation is a volatile force in the popular live poetry event. The open-mic, highlights the open-endings of each live act, an anything-goes-ness to the content of the poetry and full-stop inclusion. The event is a means of bottom-up power as poet members of aggrieved communities transform over time through their praxis in the event and as audience members and poets come together during live acts in an affective sense of emergent community.

The popular live poetry event's power can be misunderstood and feared by people located on the periphery who observe it percolate and grow yet do not actually experience it in the same participatory and interior way, from the bottom-up, as poet and audience producers. As the only authority figure on the inside of the ritual of the event, the host is located in a precarious position in relation to the emergent community's power. Considered against larger social forces that constrain and limit the event however, the host's power is small. In the following pages, the narrative account of Poetic Brew makes the dialectic of transformation and containment in the ritual of the event plain and reveals the tall order of its equilibrium to be sustained.

Setting Up Poetic Brew: Making the Ritual and Open-Mic

Poetic Brew happened in the evening time every Tuesday inside the golden space of Claire de Lune from 1997 to 2004. It began at eight o'clock and lasted until about ten thirty. I came to Poetic Brew for the first time in the fall of 2000, about a half hour before the event began. As people began to arrive, they greeted friends and talked and joked

together outside on the sidewalk. Standing amongst them, I saw a thin, white, forty-something man in a felt hat and bulky coat, smoking a cigarette and he saw me; an average sized, white, thirty-something woman. He welcomed me to the event and introduced himself as Chris Vannoy. I learned that he was a long time local performance poet, delivery truck driver and a mentor to many new open-mic poets. He too encouraged me, to go public with my private poetry. Conversationally, he is a man of sparse speech. His mentoring went something like this, "You got a poem? Go sign up." But he would always be there to watch when it came a new one's turn on stage.

In the fall of 2000, Vannoy was working with poets in *HAWK* (Homeless Artists and Writers Collective) and some of the poets from this collective delivered poetry regularly at Poetic Brew. Vannoy introduced me to Nazareth Simmons and BE Dean of the Able Minded Poets. I liked their name. In a Bhaktinian sense, "able-minded," talked back to the command that blue collar, working class communities produce *able-bodies* for laboring trades. One block west of Claire de Lune, the Labor Ready sign aimed to speak in contradistinction to Simmons and his crew through the subtext of its flat, blue, sign. Simmons smiled, his dread-locks were short at this time, tucked under his hat. Inside Claire de Lune through the storefront windows we could see the host, Marc Kochinos.

Kochinos is Greek American, in his forties, usually wore black and kept his head shaved. Ordinarily, he would arrive at the coffeehouse at seven o'clock. He would eat a light supper on the house and collect himself for the event. Usually, he sat in a blue upholstered chair in the middle of the main floor facing the stage. There was a coffee table in front of his chair and to his left there was a couch. Directly in front of him on the

other end of the coffee table there was another chair. To the right of where he sat there was a bench built around the base of a large center pole. The center pole functions as a ceiling support beam. Ritualistically, center poles conduct energy. During Poetic Brew, people would sit squished together on the bench and some would lean their backs against the pole.

After Kochinos finished eating; he would return his plate to the counter, talk with the baristas about how the day had been, find out if there were any problems he might need to take into consideration such as a plumbing or electrical issue or any real life drama amongst the employees, customers, or neighbors. Claire Bell was usually not there in the evening time because she worked long days starting in the pre-dawn hours. Kochinos would ask a barista to pass him the microphone. It was kept behind the counter in a black zippered bag. During his tenure he instituted a rule that he be the only one to handle it. In his position as host he was soundman, producer, narrator, and poet framer as he introduced and commended each live act. He was also the drawer of names.

Kochinos would take the microphone in its bag and walk towards the stage. The stage is a circular ten-foot radius on the east, windowless side of the coffee house. It is raised about two feet off of the ground floor and it has a ledge of two steps around its circumference. It is carpeted in a thin, blue rug. Two large speakers are tucked against the wall on either side of the stage. He would take the microphone stand from where it stood next to one of the speakers against the wall and place it in the front and center of the stage. He would extend the stand, screw it down, place the microphone firmly in its grip and then plug the cable into the base of the microphone. He would drag the cable back into the sound system against the wall, being careful to lay it down in such a way so as no

one would trip over it, especially, nervous and stumbling, new open-mic poets. Then he would turn the power on the speakers and the microphone.

He would place a tall end table on the stage from the coffeehouse floor and put a square handleless basket that was about three inches deep on top of it. He would then set a pen and small slips of torn paper next to the basket. From the stage he would survey the crowd and then begin speaking into the microphone: going over how to participate in the event and welcoming new and old poets and audience members coming into the coffeehouse as they milled about and got settled into chairs and found spots on the floor nearby the stage. On one ordinary evening of Poetic Brew in 2002 at about seven forty-five, he said:

Good evening, for those of you who are here for the poetry reading for the first time and are wondering how to sign-up for the open-mic, all you have to do is come up, and put your name on a piece of paper. It's already up here and there's a pen up here, too. Just drop it in the basket and we'll be starting just about eight o'clock.¹²²

Kochinos would walk off of the stage and talk with people as they continued to arrive, and tend to any last minute details prior to the start of the event. People who wanted to participate in the open-mic walked up to the basket, wrote their names on a piece of paper and dropped them in the basket.

As people began to arrive for the event, I saw that there were young and old African Americans, Chicano/as and whites, and a group of three middle-aged, transsexuals: one of whom would later give her poetic testimony on the open-mic. I would learn that Claire de Lune was a large, inclusive venue for live poetry on a map of other

¹²²Marc Kochinos performing as host, video recording by author of the Poetic Brew event at Claire de Lune, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

venues such as the *Malcolm X* Library, the Chicano/a performance space *Voz Alta* (Loud Voice), the lesbian *Flame* bar and the Afrocentric *R-Spot* barbershop and bookstore. The local poetry collectives were almost always there such as the Taco Shop Poets, Goat Song Conspiracy, Los Able Minded Poets and sometimes the all female Tijuana based collective, La Linea were there: in the audience, on the open-mic as poets, and on a few occasions as featured poets. The collectives of poets and their friends and the culturally specific venues were like tributaries that flowed highly skilled, often politicized poets and audiences out for the Tuesday night happening.

Poetic Brew drew regular poets and audiences to its event of about 100 people. Based on the weekly count of attendees by the Host that I often witnessed, the number of participants fluctuated from eighty to one hundred and sixty people. Most of these people came to listen to poetry rather than perform it. Just before eight o'clock Kochinos would walk back onto the stage and count the names written on the slips of paper in the basket. He would motion to a barista behind the counter to dim the lights. Then he would begin to speak into the microphone again.

Customarily, Kochinos would ask Chris Vannoy to do the "sound-check," by coming on stage and delivering a poem. This allowed Kochinos to check the sound based on a familiar voice and also functioned to warm up the stage, the microphone, and the crowd through a live act of poetry delivered by a poet whom most of the regular poets and audience members liked. On this same ordinary evening in 2002, Kochinos said, "How you all doing? We're gonna do a sound check and we are so fortunate to have Chris

Vannoy- who has been a veteran of the San Diego poetry scene for a *long* time, to do the sound check for us. Please give it up for Chris Vannoy!"¹²³

Vannoy went on stage and did three poems from memory, one of which was his locally well-known piece, *Caffeine*. He would work this poem in a call-and-response style, praising caffeine and whipped cream mochas, sometimes coming off of the stage to circle through the crowd and in his verse until he riled the crowd and drew them tightly into the poem. Relatively assured of the communicative presence of the live audience, he asked them, "*De-caf?*" And a call of the poem's refrain rang loudly back, "*I don't/ drink/ de-caf!*" Vannoy's poetry was fun. It tumbled the participants together and primed them for the intimate cultural work of community making that warbled between them during the event. Vannoy exited the stage as the audience clapped after him and Kochinos stepped back on. He thanked Vannoy and then turned to make his last remarks before the official start of the event.

Next Kochinos would introduce the featured poet and then detail the rules of the open-mic. In the organization of the event, the open-mic would last for thirty minutes, and then the featured poet would perform for thirty minutes, and then the open-mic would resume for one to two hours. In the following statement, he describes his "really strict," timing of each poet during the open-mic. He mentions a "list," which refers to the list that he would make from the names that he drew from the basket. Poets were listed in hierarchical order from the first name he drew to the last. He would leave this list by the basket a little while after the beginning of the event so that participants could see when

¹²³Marc Kochinos performing as host, video-recording by author, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

and if they would be included in the open-mic. Further, if there were only a few names on the list it let latecomers know that they still had a chance to participate.

In the statement below delivered from the stage in his role as host of the event, Kochinos performs the random drawing of names so that the audience is able to witness and judge his fair practice. Kochinos spoke:

Welcome to Poetic Brew. We're gonna get the open-mic started. I just did a quick count of the names-- the number of names that are in the basket. Right now there's. . . twenty. . . which means, if everybody is *cool* about taking five minutes on stage when it's your turn, we should be able to get through the entire list. So, I'm gonna give it a try. Umm, if you're wondering, 'what is he talking about?' We do have a really strict time limit on the open-mic for five minutes. Not because I'm into time limits, because actually it's a chore to time the reading, but to give everybody a chance on stage. So, at four minutes and thirty seconds into your reading I will be standing, right over there (pointing) by that plant and those two lovely people, to let you know that you're just about out of time. And to please *show your respect* for the other folks who want to come up on stage and let them have their chance.¹²⁴

During a poet's five minutes on stage, Kochinos stood by the tea counter behind the plant and inconspicuously kept time. If a poet neared the limit, he would touch his wristwatch, then raise his finger to indicate to the poet that he or she needed to end the piece. If a poet did not notice his signal, or saw it and went on anyway beyond the time limit, Kochinos would loudly and swiftly call them off of the stage: usually against the poet's wishes and sometimes also against the audience's wishes. In this capacity, Kochinos reflected, "I'm basically a traffic cop, you know, I have to make sure everyone gets a fair chance at the mic."¹²⁵ Through the ritual of the event the stage became a

¹²⁴Marc Kochinos performing as host, video-recording by author of Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

¹²⁵Marc Kochinos, interview by author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

crossroads for transformation and a liminal border space, and the microphone a wand of power. Kochinos viewed his role as host as a traffic cop that regulated the flow of people through it.

Policing the Border Space of the Event

In a roundtable discussion of poet critics of which I was a participant, poet critic Anya Achtenberg reflected on borders. She considered global cultural geographies of diasporic peoples that circumvent inside/out logics of nation/states, and binary notions of identity that prohibit in-between ways of being. Then she said emphatically, "Borders *must be* un-policed."¹²⁶ Most agreed that poetry should be aimed in this direction. In practice however, this ideal can be difficult to sustain. The protective role Kochinos assumed in the event as "cop," points to his precarious location as host of a large popular event and the tension between the power he assumed to enforce fairness on one hand, and the power of the people to police their own borders writ large on the other. Kochinos continued with his opening announcements of Poetic Brew:

Let's see, what else, there's a few other announcements I gotta make. Oh, speaking of respect... please show your respect for the poets and all of the people who came out to listen to poetry tonight by keeping your voices *down...* (spoken as he stirs the names in the basket with one hand while looking at the audience) *Get ready-- to come up on the stage--* (pause) *Ms. Telafaro!* You'll be first on stage tonight...¹²⁷

Ms. Telafaro is a middle-aged, African American poet, Sylvia Telafaro, who at that time was President of the San Diego based *African American Artists and Writers*

¹²⁶Anya Achtenberg, field notes, "Poetry and Politics Roundtable," Harwood Art Center, Albuquerque, NM, September 2, 2007.

¹²⁷Marc Kochinos performing as host, video-recording by author of Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

Association that meets regularly at the Malcolm X Library. One of the poems Telafaro gave on this particular evening was about *the calling* to do poetry. She looked out at the audience and fixed her gaze on some of the newer poets among them during her delivery of the piece and spoke, “*I see you! Ancestor over your head!*”¹²⁸ In so doing, Telafaro recognized the poets in the audience as special and unique, even though they looked like ordinary people.

In my understanding of the view expressed in her poem that night, poets are summoned by their ancestors, God, and the Spirit of Justice to take up the staff of poetry. When poets are *called*, they are compelled to create poetry and share it. Telafaro’s address made sense to many of the poet’s who participated at *Poetic Brew* and it encouraged them to hold steady to the sanctified, political path towards which they directed their poetry. But Telafaro came on the stage after Kochinos had finished his announcements and he was not yet done.

During the actual event Kochinos was still on the stage and he only let her know that she would be up soon so that she could prepare herself for the performance and so that the event would move along smoothly, without a long gap between performers. In the few minutes of time given to the poet that he or she would be up next, the poet could make any last minute decisions on which poems to read or recite from memory, use the restroom, drink some water and take long slow breaths.

From the stage Kochinos elaborated further. He pointed out that the parking lot behind the carpet store across the street towed vehicles regularly and he encouraged

¹²⁸Sylvia Telafaro, video-recording by author of live act of poetry at Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

anyone who was parked there to move because it cost a couple of hundred dollars to get a vehicle out of tow. At the end of another night of Poetic Brew when I said goodbye to Kochinos, he motioned towards some people and explained that he would be driving them home because their car had been towed. Further, from the stage in his capacity as host Kochinos would ask the audiences in the balcony to keep their voices especially low because the acoustics of the building sent them traveling.

Finally, he would ask everyone to refrain from walking through the space in front of the stage when a poet was performing. This area was the site of the face-to-face relationships between poets and audiences during the live acts of poetry. The rule kept the emergent stuff between the poet on stage and the audience during the live performance, sanctified, because we were all going around *it*. Performance critic, Richard Schechner explains, "Performance isn't 'in' anything, but 'between' ... [it] only exists as actions, interactions and relationships" (2002:24). The form of live poetry is made in the palpable moments between audience members and poets and as the host of the event, Kochinos aimed to protect them. In addition to the rules of the poetry event ascribed to it from within, there were regulations that constrained the event from further afield.

On the particular night in 2002 to which I have been referring Kochinos said, "Ahhh, the part that I don't like to say but that I have to say every week-- *Because the City of San Diego has decided that all entertainment is a police regulated business!* (spoken in a loud authoritative voice) There's a few things we have to be careful of..."¹²⁹ He reviewed the fire-code regulations: to leave space by the doors, the counter, and to

¹²⁹Marc Kochinos performing as host, video-recording by author of Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

refrain from sitting on the stairway. And he explained that as a *police regulated entertainment business*, Claire Bell could be ticketed for any misconduct that happened within the coffeehouse or around the building within a hundred foot radius. The regulation went even further beyond these constraints. BE Dean of the Able Minded Poets referenced the ordinance behind these rules and what it meant for poetry in a poem delivered on a night of Poetic Brew in the fall of 2000.

Dean was a thin, blonde, tall young man in a flight jacket and a baseball hat. He stood with his arms hanging loosely at his sides on stage before the audience and delivered his poem to them from memory. The poem ended with a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Junior and his vision of a beloved community. He looked out at the audience on the ground floor and up in the balcony and declaimed, "*Communication is gonna save us.*" In so doing, he pointed to the poetic communication happening at that moment between them in the coffeehouse. He included a line in the poem indicating that what they were making was so powerful that, "*They're gonna pass an Ordinance and try to shut us down.*"¹³⁰ In this poem, Dean references the 0-2001-7 Entertainment Ordinance.

This Ordinance is described in detail in an article written by Marc Kochinos in 2000 and published in *Espresso*, a free local newspaper distributed at local coffee houses in San Diego. Kochinos explains that the Ordinance allows the local vice squad to search the businesses and homes of the business owners included under the language of "police regulated businesses," without a warrant. Some of the businesses that are included in this ordinance are pawnshops, massage parlors, dance halls and coffeehouses. Under the

¹³⁰BE Dean, performing a live act of poetry at Poetic Brew, Claire de Lune, field notes, San Diego, CA, October 10, 2000.

Ordinance, businesses are required to buy permits for themselves and their employees that must be renewed annually and can be revoked for up to five years at the police department's discretion. Finally, one of the reasons the owner's permit to have "entertainment" can be revoked is if minors are in the establishment after the ten o'clock curfew.¹³¹

In 1997 the city of San Diego implemented a youth curfew law that mandated all minors under the age of eighteen be out of public spaces by ten o'clock in the evening.¹³² Youth were an important constituency of local poetry events but as the night grew on their bubbly bodies turned sinister for tenuously situated *police regulated businesses*. Claire Bell kept good relations with the local precinct that took their coffee break daily in the venue, and a smiling picture of them in baseball uniforms hung on the wall behind the counter.

Sanctifying the Stage for the Public Ritual

Finally, Kochinos would deliver his opening oration that signaled the official start of the event. He would pause at the microphone, look out at the audience and say, "*Whether you read at slams/ or write sonnets/ perform hip hop/ or Homeric verse/ your words/ are welcome/ on this stage,*" (slashes indicate pauses).¹³³ Actually, slam poets are more likely to recite from memory than read. No one read Homeric verse at Poetic Brew

¹³¹Mark Kochinos, The San Diego Observer, *Espresso*, November 2000, 5.

¹³²Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, Executive Summary, *The Impact of Juvenile Curfew Laws in California*, Daniel Macallair, <http://www.cjcj.org> [accessed May 6, 2008].

¹³³Marc Kochinos performing as host, video-recording by author of Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, October 29, 2002.

and sonnets, too, were rare. The point of this oration was less about forms of poetry and styles of delivery than it was about the diverse identities of participants, the hierarchical differences between them and the necessary precondition of the event to demarcate a fair and equal space in which to conduct the ritual.

By referencing these different kinds of poetry and modes of delivery, Kochinos referenced the different raced, classed and gendered identities of the poets who might perform these poetries, then united all poets through the common ground implied in their poetic *words*. In so doing, he marked the stage and the microphone as an inclusive and equal space in which all were welcome. This oration, carried out at the beginning of the ritual of the event, sanctified the stage and the microphone as a special space in which participants could come to voice and remake themselves under witness of the live audience with their different, embodied poetries, on equal ground. Kochinos explains that when he became host of Poetic Brew he wanted to cultivate the event as a space in which all participants would feel equally respected. He states:

The thing that was really strong about Claire's as a venue-- before I started hosting, [referencing former host, Cheryl Latif] and what has been really my goal with this venue-- is to make sure it's a very diverse reading that anybody can come in and read, no matter what style they're working in... The other thing that's been one of my goals with this particular reading-- I've heard people talk about how artists don't get respect in this culture and I've thought 'Oh, ok, here's a venue where whether you're a poetry professor or you've been performing for a few years, or you're internationally known, you'll be treated with the same respect as somebody who's just coming up and taking their first tentative steps on stage as a poet. Everybody gets respect. Just for the fact that they're coming up on stage, and doing it. I might not agree with what they say but *you as a fellow poet*, I'm going to grant you that much respect.¹³⁴

¹³⁴Marc Kochinos, video-interview by author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

Kochinos was able to organize the event around these values and set a tone that challenged status quo hierarchies in his role as host. By leveling the distinctions between poets with statuses such as *international recognition* on one hand, and poets *taking their first tentative steps on stage* on the other, he encouraged the leveling of class hierarchies during the event.

Moreover, in his voicing of egalitarian and inclusive values during the opening oration and during brief intervals between poet's live acts on stage, he reflected the beliefs of the regular Poetic Brew poets and audience members. The poets and audiences did much to shape the values of the event through their live acts of poetry, the conversations they had during breaks, and the relationships that grew between them. On the whole, the participants of poets, audiences and Host at Poetic Brew set the event apart from ordinary life and marked it out as a sanctified space. Kochinos explains further:

One of the things that's unusual at this particular reading is we get a relatively high percentage of people who do not want to be poets, who come here to listen to the poetry just because they enjoy hearing the work. One of the things that a poet can do, is give voice to other people's feelings, things they'd like to express and are not sure how to put it into words-- whether it's dealing with injustice or dealing with the fact that he or she treated me wrong, you know? When it comes together, it's really a beautiful thing. And I don't like to define spirituality but I've heard half a dozen poets say about various readings, *it feels like church right now*. There are moments when it's like that, when there's something amazing going on.¹³⁵

The process Kochinos references here that feels like church, are the sensuous, relationships that emerge when poets and audience members are bound together in ephemeral moments of live poetry during the ritual of the event. These live moments of

¹³⁵Marc Kochinos, video-interview by author, San Diego, CA, November 8, 2002.

poetry were the communicative heart that generated the experience of *communitas* among participants and sustained the ritual of Poetic Brew.

Born-Again Poets: Live Acts of Poetry at Poetic Brew

On a night of Poetic Brew in the fall of 2000, I witnessed the Able Minded Poets perform.¹³⁶ All of them delivered their pieces from memory rather than reading from the page. They stood on stage with nothing between themselves and the audience but the microphone on the stand. At the time, the members of the Able Minded Poets (Able Minded) were Shannon Perkins, Nazareth Simmons and BE Dean. They were all in their early twenties, Perkins and Dean are white and Simmons is African American.

Simmons was the first poet to deliver his poetry. He stood solid, center-stage and delivered a poem about *feeling like the island of Nazareth, elevator on my chest*, and trying to raise himself up against the drag down of suicide. He spread his fingers and touched his chest when he spoke the line about the weight of the elevator. He kept his eyes closed during much of his piece but opened them and recognized the crowd when they applauded him loudly at the end. He wore loose jeans and a plain, solid colored tee shirt. Perkins went on stage after him. At the time, she had piercings in her lips, lots of bracelets, and clips and twists in her black hair. She wore a tight tank top, belted baggy jeans and her wallet chained to her back pocket. She delivered a fast, winding poem about being raped on the military reservation, *its been three years and I still can't walk alone*. She gave this narrative poem under witness of the big live audience and all I could hear from them, was breath. They were listening.

¹³⁶Field notes recording during Poetic Brew at Claire de Lune, San Diego, CA, Oct. 10, 2000.

BE Dean delivered a poem that night, too and I mention it earlier. His piece challenged the Ordinance that made coffeehouses police regulated businesses. He spoke against racism, dead-end streets and urban poverty, invoked *Doctor Martin Luther King Junior's dream of community* and tied it up with a promise, *Communication's gonna save us*. The crowd gave back hoots and clapping clatter. Dean beamed back at them, then looked down embarrassedly, as if he forgot he had chosen to stand on stage before them, with the poem now over, asking to be looked at for no good reason. He stepped down and Perkins and Simmons hugged him, just as he had hugged them when they came off stage.

In this example of Able Minded, the poets intimately engaged the audience with the content of their embodied poetries as they stood before them as liminal subjects on stage. During the live poetic moment between audience members and poets, they provoked strange unities: men in the audience had the opportunity to learn from Perkins narrative about the meaning of rape, some of them felt sick to their stomachs, then sad. Perkins got under their skin. Women in the audience who had shared similar experiences and been silent felt the hair follicles on their bodies stiffen. In listening to Perkin's poem they identified with her and this gave them a kind of voice, too.

Like most of the other poets at Poetic Brew, Able Minded used their lived experiences and their identities as one source from which to draw to create their multifaceted poetry. They were among the poets most revered at Poetic Brew, especially by the youth, for their poetic skill and courage to speak truthfully. In the beginning, new open-mic poets must develop both of these abilities in the process of becoming poets and coming to voice, publicly.

During this process many poets find they must put out painful lived experiences because they are shaming them into silence. It is by transforming these experiences into poetry that they are able to dislodge them from their bodies. They are compelled to express these kinds of poems like an exorcism of demons. Poet Mary Karr (1994:3) conveys this lucidly in her poem, "Incant Against Suicide:"

Buy neither gun nor blue-edged blade.
 Avoid green rope, high windows, rat
 poison, cobra pits, and the long vanishing point
 of train tracks that draw you to horizon's razor.

Only this way will another day refine you. (Natural death's
 no oxymoron) Your head's a bad neighborhood:
 Don't go there alone, even if you have to stop
 strangers to ask the way, and even if

spiders fall from your open mouth.
 This talk's their only exit. How else
 would their scramble from your skull

escape? You must make room first
 that the holy spirits might enter. Empty
 yourself of self, then kneel down to listen.

In this poem, Karr addresses her readers as new poets. She instructs them to ask strangers to help them find the way out of the bad neighborhood of their heads when they are lost. The Poetic Brew event created the conditions that enabled this redemptive work by bringing together a public audience and poets in a ritual setting. Strangers on the street did not need to be troubled by poets with demons in their throats: the live audience was present to bear them witness and encourage their transformation. By participating in this activity, the audience was also affected as I have described, and sometimes the poetry spoken was a balm that salved them, too.

On another night at Poetic Brew in 2000, I witnessed a tall white woman deliver a piece for the first time, that I would see perform many times in the future.¹³⁷ She wore a loose button-up sweater, large thick glasses and pink lipstick. She had blonde, shoulder length hair and it draped around her head in hot-rolled curls. As she stood, I saw that she was about six feet tall and her shoulders were broad. She held her notebook against her chest and hung her other arm along her side. Her hand looked heavy at the end of her sweater sleeve. She walked to the stage deliberately and stood before the microphone. She opened her notebook and began to read in a deep and breathy voice, pausing at intervals to look out from her magnified eyes. As her poem wound to the end a nurse came into her first-person narrative and met her in a hospital room where she lay bandaged in bed: fluorescent lights, antibacterial scrubs, in a hospital in Sweden, spoken words that sound like percussion instruments down the corridor and have no meaning for her.

She leaned in more closely to the microphone so she could whisper the last line of the poem in which the nurse wakes her into a new identity. The poet spoke like a caress, *Good Morning, Jennifer* . . . she smiled, pushed her glasses back and closed her notebook. I thought: we, share a name. She walked down from the stage as the audience clapped, back to her chair on the ground floor of the coffeehouse to sit amongst her friends. It was a testimonial poem about her sex-change operation, delivered under witness of live audience. This was Jennifer 2000.

Jennifer 2000's poetic work demonstrated to herself, her community of transexuals, and the broader community of poets and audiences at Poetic Brew how to be

¹³⁷Field notes of Poetic Brew event at Claire de Lune, San Diego, CA, December 12, 2000.

born again through the live act of poetry: in her case, from man to woman. Further, her poetic testimony within the context of the sanctified space-time of the ritual opened possibilities for outsider audience members to develop a keener sense of empathy and understanding. The live acts of poetry delivered by poet members of aggrieved communities functioned as deep inter-cultural and cross-cultural acts, drawing insider audiences and poets together in a more fortified sense of community, and outsider audiences into cross-cultural identifications with others.

Bennie Herron Conducts Communitas in a Live Act of Poetry

Lastly, on yet another important night of Poetic Brew, Bennie Herron delivered poetry as the featured poet.¹³⁸ I describe his performance briefly in the introduction to this chapter and I track back through the last few minutes of his half hour performance here. Herron delivered his last lines in litany. He said, "*My mama drives--*" and then he paused and waited for drummer, Kevin Moore to fall out. He stood before the audience in silence then began again. "*My mother drives... down Market, strapped with a double-barreled responsibility, and a gospel soliloquy and me in the back...*"

Herron curled his hand and raised it as if he was hanging over the car seat from the back like eager children sometimes do, and pointed his thumb on his other hand towards himself. In so doing, he showed the audience that he was one half of his working class, African American, Mother's double-barreled responsibility. His Mother sings a gospel "soliloquy," an act of speaking alone as if no one is listening. But as a small child

¹³⁸Bennie Herron, video-recording by author, performance of live poetry at Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, June 15, 2004.

growing up with a poetic sense, Herron heard. His Mother drives down "Market," a street that runs east to west through a working class, majority Black and Brown part of the city, through downtown to the tourist-zone of Seaport Village and lips of the Pacific.

Herron says, *"And now, church begins,"* the music builds and descends. *"This is the movement, this is you,"* he taps his chest and points upward and out towards the audience. *"This is me,"* he puts his hand to his chest, *"This is not poetry. This is not me. This is through me."* He moves side-to-side, limbering his body, telling the audience that the feeling that is coursing between him and the audience is larger than him, larger than poetry, something between them, something sanctified-- *"This is God."* He motions his arm towards the ground loosely in a circular direction. The thin, blue-carpeted stage, the wooden floorboards against which some sit, cross-legged, jeans to the face of God, the stocky chair-legs, charged, balancing the bodies of the watchful people in the audience. Altogether in the sanctified space of the live act of poetry they became warbly and extraordinary.

Those who are standing by the storefront windows and those leaning near the counter-top, feel their tennis-shoe soles heating up. *"This is funk. This is flesh."* He culls the people in mutual recognition of how much they like the feeling of the funk between them. *"This is my Mother. This is my Grandmother. This is my Ancestors."* He summons the past and troubles the idea that it could ever be cleaved from the present. He is the sum total of those who have gone before him and he falls in step extending outward from his Mother's line. He blasts open the continuum of dominant time.

"This is a gun, this is a spear." He makes a fist out to his side, as if he is holding a spear beside him, planted on the stage. *"This is Zulu. This is Igbo."* He announces the

presence of these powerful south African and west African indigenous nations and the pantheon of Gods that ride beside them. The word, *Zulu*, calls forth the multi-colored beads of the Zulus, flashing in the light flying through the air from floats and into the hands of revelers in New Orleans Mardi Gras parade, *Zulu*, carried out by Black crews in Louisiana every year. Herron summons an Afro-Atlantic diasporic world view that is global and local. It materializes in a five mile radius around the Claire de Lune coffeehouse: in the *Chango Botanica*, the *Botanica Santa Barbara* and the *Mama Roots Botanica*, where healers cast cowry shells, counsel, and provide people with tools to remember that they, in the largest sense of themselves, are capable of much more than they have been mandated to be.

The feeling of *communitas* during the live act of poetry is intimate and when Herron pauses between the poems he laced together for the evening, he talks to the audience. When they were silent after he came to an ending, he said, "There you go with that silence again!" A female voice from the audience responded, "You wore us out!" and a male voice called back, "Keep it hot!"¹³⁹ The phrases and expressions thrown between the audience and the poet at pauses and endings during a performance reflect the coming together of participants in *communitas* that produces the sense of community between them. The kind of *communitas* that comes to the fore during this ritual is a kind of lovemaking. The language that is used between poets and audiences is flirtatious and metaphorically linked to sex. However, rather than materialize as a sexual act during the live act of poetry it spills out across participants as a distributed experience. The

¹³⁹Video-recording by author of female audience member at Poetic Brew, San Diego, CA, June 15, 2004.

lovemaking of live poetry is spiritual: it illuminates the individual bodies of the participants in the event and draws them into a larger sense of themselves as a collective.

In 2000 at Poetic Brew, one new open-mic poet used to gaze out at the audience with expectant eyes and a wide smile from the stage. Some of us came to anticipate what he would say before, after or even in the middle of his poem, which was, "*I love you!*" He was a funny teenager, uninhibited by the self-imposed containment to gush not in order to be cool. With refreshing frankness, he verbalized the general feeling of Poetic Brew. On the outside he was white, tall and lanky, and usually wore cowboy boots and a floppy hat. When he delivered his poetry, we learned a about where he was *coming from* in the same way as we learned from every open-mic poet. The colloquial, *where are you coming from?* is constructed with its verb in present participle as an active doing rather than as present tense. It indicates that where one comes from is not a finished business and if this is so, nor is the future. The performative live acts of poetry opened possibilities to imagine as poets and the audiences who identified with them became as identities-in-process. Bennie Herron did community work by rearranging the feeling of being in diverse identities and culling a desire across the whole collective to come together during his live acts of poetry.

Herron made the coffeehouse feel like being at home in an imagined living room none of us had ever yet known. Some of the African Americans in the audience felt a kinship with Herron and his Afrocentric references. In relation to the Mexicans, the Chicano/as, the elderly, the local Indigenous, the transexuals, the teenagers, the lesbians, the miscellaneous, everyone in the audience who somehow falls between the cracks, he speaks from an in-between, border space. Some of the audience will take the heat to

exorcise the demons of the collective history between them because it is worth the radical possibility of being together in bottom-up communion.

Herron states, *"This is Time. This is Fear,"* he points towards the audience. *"This is Hate,"* he closes his eyes hard and points to forehead. He tells the audience and shows them through his gestures to turn inward past their fears to reckon themselves with who they are in relation to this past and this emergent present. *"This is the beginning,"* keeping his eyes closed, he says, *"This is life."* He opens his eyes. *"This is race."* He opens his palm, part way. *"This is black. This is white. This is everything."* He opens his hand more and starts to smile. *"This is the beginning-- and this is the end!"*

Herron points downward, to this time and place, definitively: the radical now crunched open through his live act of poetry and the ritual of the event. The stage is a crossroads: one way dies and another way is born. He opens a space for the emergence of a new constellation of community grounded in a deeper sense of mutual recognition. He looks out at them and says, *"I love you. Because I love myself."* He puts his hand to his heart then extends it towards the audience, *"Peace."* The ritual is complete.

After Herron's performance, the audience applauded and then everyone went on the customary break before the return to the open-mic. Herron stepped outside for a minute, then went back inside and talked to audience members who approached him excitedly to talk about his performance. He hugged and kissed people and thanked them back for the thanks they gave him. He brought CDs of his poetry to give away, and he gave me one.

The CDs he gave away on that night were called, *Churches and Liquor Stores*. The CD case is black and on the front of it is there is a graphic of a clear glass liquor

bottle with an image of a narrow white church with a steeple squeezed inside of it. These institutions dot the landscape in diverse working class neighborhoods and symbolize limitation and truncated hope for some. However, as Herron's work indicates poetry can be a transformative tool. In relation to the image on his CD, charismatic, embodied understandings of spirituality gleaned from church and extra-institutional spaces are transferable to poetry. Further, they find a forum for their communication through the ritual of the popular live poetry event.

The body is a temple in charismatic understandings of God(s). New Orleans based Santaria priest, Lazaro X. states, "*You!* (pointing towards the listener's chest) *You* are your own church!"¹⁴⁰ During the ritual of the live poetry event, going to church means most acutely stepping on stage and into oneself as a liminal subject to be filled with the spirit of one's best imaginings and/or one's toughest and most visionary ancestors and Gods. More broadly, church was the whole happening of Poetic Brew and the experience of *communitas* felt between audiences and poets.

As the break was coming to an end Herron walked back to the stage. He kneeled down to pick up the many sheets of paper on the stage floor. The papers were printed with pieces of his poems and during the most salient parts of his performance he had dropped them to the floor. He stacked them together and pressed out the crumpled pages of a few he fisted up and shook like a metronome when he moved from reading to memorized delivery and needed to keep time.

Herron builds his final constellation of community for the night by paying homage to the Dead, to African ancestors, to his mother and grandmother, and to the

¹⁴⁰ Lazaro X., audio-interview by author, New Orleans, LA, October 3, 1991.

warriors endured to him. When Herron states, “This is not poetry, this is not me, this is *through me*,” he tells the audience that he has been a medium. When he says "church" has begun and instructs the audience to clap with him as if in church, he tells and shows them that a ritual is underway. Through this embodied poetic activity carved out in the ritual space of the coffeehouse, they come together through the palms of their clapping hands.

Analysis of the Ritual: Rewiring the Senses to Imagine the World Anew

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander argues for forms of praxis that will “rewire the senses” (2005:328). The ritual of Poetic Brew taught participants to have faith in the possibility of diverse, egalitarian community by giving them a deep, affective experience of it. Moreover, the ritual was a forum in which embodied, spiritual epistemologies lingering in the collective conscious could be tapped by experienced poets and shifted towards cultural transformation within the scope of the event.

Victor Turner states, "Performative genres have the function of letting a community's consciousness know periodically what its sub-consciousness... is up to" (1978:586). While all performance poets have the potential to trigger something underway in the collective subconscious, some poets at Poetic Brew, such as Bennie Herron, consciously directed poetry towards these ends. Herron was one of a few activist performance poets who did subterranean surgery during his live acts of poetry by ratcheting the past into the palpable present.

In another stanza of Herron's live act of poetry described in the previous Section, he referenced the history of lynching and slapped his chest in cadence with the spoken lines of poetry lest the non-African American audience members think history should not

be reckoned with personally. In this sense, Herron worked like a cross-cultural doctor, cutting out tumors of denial that might be buried in the bodies of participants and coiled in the roots of a shared multicultural past.

Writer and cultural critic, James Baldwin explains, "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations" ([1965] 1998:320) The poetry that moved through the past at Poetic Brew such as Herron's was a step towards bringing the diverse participants together in the present tense of the event in a more genuine sense of community. At the same time as the event resonated across participants in a collective sense and pulled them into empathetic identifications with each other, it benefited individual members of aggrieved communities. Poet members of aggrieved communities were afforded opportunities to re-imagine themselves and the world through their live acts of poetry. They grew stronger and more deeply sutured to the collective through this process.

Performance artist and cultural critic, Guillermo Gomez-Peña (1995) describes a piece he created and performed with collaborator, Roberto Sifuentes in San Francisco in 1994 called the "Cruci-fiction Project," in which among other things they hung from crosses in public space. Gomez-Peña explains, "...vulnerable communities are in fact being symbolically crucified by the state" (1995:129). In a discussion of the purpose of creative activity elsewhere, Gomez-Peña asserts, "We need to re-baptize the world in our own terms" (1989:115). The ritual of Poetic Brew was a space to re-baptize the world in

the emergent collective's terms as individuals came to voice as poets and cultural creators.

Marxist performance critic, David Román draws on Victor Turner's (1969) and Richard Schechner's (1998) work on performance and ritual to assert that the performance of rituals in a given culture can foment hope in the resolution of social dramas, and sustain communities. Román states:

For Turner, hope is possible in the ritual process of culture. The performance of resolution-- the always temporary and fragile outcome of any social drama-- allows members of a community to take stock of an event momentarily until the ritual process begins once again... The performance of our lives in these social dramas constructs our subjectivities and our social roles, and this ritual process is what constitutes the survival of a community. (1998:218)

The ritual of Poetic Brew allowed participants to take stock in the possibility of coming together as an urban community across difference and inequality. Yet, this performance of resolution was inherently delicate.

The Last Days of Poetic Brew: The Revelation of the Open-Mic

Over time, some of the participants in Poetic Brew with the greatest faith in its ideal community and the greatest stakes came to blur the boundaries between the liminal space/time of the ritual and the mundane space/time of daily life. They took the ideals enunciated through the ritual practice of the poetry event seriously rather than bracketing them as a special way of thinking and being reserved for Tuesday nights. This meant that the way they felt as poets in the space of the event: bound with the audience during the live act and able to imagine a world of possibility rather than limitation spilled into the way they felt as individuals in ordinary life in the city of San Diego. They began to ask

why the mundane plane was so paltry. Regular spoken word poet at Poetic Brew, Sun Dubois, explains:

All there is *work-time* and *school-time*! There is no time to be real. If you were being real you'd have a lot better time doing what your doing. But we spend too much time faking. I only have three hours a week to be real, only three hours a week to express-- for creative expression. Only three hours! And if you are going to school to *attempt* to better yourself, that leaves no time to create, and that's what sucks.¹⁴¹

Dubois worked as a full-time, Living Skills Aid with severely handicapped people and attended the local community college, San Diego City College, at the time of this interview. He raises the contradiction between the "real" space-time of Poetic Brew, that takes place within the "three hours" he mentions, and the "fake" space-time of "work" and "school." Moreover, he calls attention to the injustice of this social organization and the dismal way in which attempts to better oneself through more work and more school means less creativity, and in the subterfuge of the statement, less time for open-ended possibilities.

In 2002 Dubois was a member of the poetry crew, Goat Song Conspiracy and by 2004, he was also a member of Los Able Minded Poets. The poetry crews (crews), their friends, and other spoken word poets made up the sidewalk audience of Poetic Brew. I describe these types of poets in earlier chapters and their identification with hip-hop culture and an urban "street," aesthetic. By staying on the sidewalk rather than in the interior space of the coffeehouse, they performed their class allegiance. Further, these participants point of observation from the outside looking in, afforded them the distance and space to comment upon the event. Overtime, they became keen critics of the misuse

¹⁴¹Sunflower Dubois, video-interview with author, San Diego, CA, October 22, 2002.

of power and the difference between truthfulness and hypocrisy. In its last days, the crews found themselves obliged to pull back the robes of Poetic Brew to reveal its communicative mechanism.

Popular vs. Bourgeois Decorum: The Requirement of Open Descent and
Horizontal Power

Folklorist and performance studies critic, Richard Bauman (1992) asserts that performance raises the act of communication to the surface for scrutiny. He states:

In contrast to notions of performance as any doing of an act of communication are conceptions of performance as a specially marked mode of action, one that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of communication is to be understood. In this sense of performance, the act of communication is put on display, objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to scrutiny by an audience. (1992:44)

The audience that brought the communication of Poetic Brew to light was comprised of the crews and spoken word poets who watched the event through the storefront windows, on the sidewalk outside of Claire de Lune. They raised the symbolic meaning of the open-mic for all participants to see and reflect upon through a fight with the host. This conflict played out in the event like a parallel performance in the public ritual of Poetic Brew. Ultimately, it demonstrated that the survival of Poetic Brew hinged not only on its ephemeral live acts of poetry, but also on the right to dissent, equality across participants, and inclusion of all.

As the host of the event, Kochinos was located in a difficult position in relation to the crews. In the first instance, their location outside of the interior space of the coffeehouse presented a logistical problem of communication. In an interview conducted

years after the end of Poetic Brew, Kochinos explains that some of the poets that he called to the stage for the open-mic often missed the announcement.¹⁴² The poets most likely to not hear or see his call were those outside. In the last year of the event in response to criticism he received from some of these participants, Kochinos reworked his organization of the open-mic. Most of the participants to raise objections were spoken word poets and members of poetry crews, yet there was one central player among them who operated more as an individual than as a member of a crew. For ease of writing, I refer to them as 'the crews' of Poetic Brew but bear in mind that one member of this oppositional constituency ordinarily performed in the event as an individual.

When Kochinos became host of Poetic Brew in 2000, he instituted the practice of drawing names from a basket and later incorporated a list. The host of the event prior to Kochinos, Cheryl Latif, whom I discuss in a previous chapter, posted a sign-up sheet and poets who wanted to participate in the event wrote their names on it, one after the other. The order was thus determined by who signed up first. The sign-up sheet was posted in plain view and there was no further intervention by the host. Kochinos on the other hand added both a basket and a list based on his drawing of names. He instituted this list three and a half years after he became host and only after the crews voiced their concerns of being excluded from the open-mic.

Like a sign-up sheet, the list allowed poets to have a sense of when and if they would participate on the open-mic based on how many names were on it and where their names were in relation to others. If they were placed far down on the list, they might elect to leave after awhile and not participate as poets, if for instance they had to wake up early

¹⁴²Marc Kochinos, conversational interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, January 28, 2007.

the next morning. For those poets who were called, they had five precious minutes to do their live poetry.

Kochinos felt that by posting the list of names that he drew from the basket, he would assuage the crews. Yet, the contradiction between the crews and the host was deep, and they were dubious of his fair oversight of the open-mic and his drawing of names. The crews and the host took on roles in the event that located them on opposite poles: the crews represented horizontal, collective power and the host hierarchical, individual power, the crews identified with an oppositional hip-hop aesthetic and in its subterfuge, working class cultural ways, and the host with a tenuous middle ground.

Further, in terms of the fair distribution of time, as the host, Kochinos was on stage longer than any other participant, introducing poets to the stage and commenting after their departures, and in his announcements and oratorical framing of the event to the audience. He had many more minutes than the five allotted to open-mic poets. Yet, in his position he rarely was able to perform his own poetry because when hosts perform their own work they appear self-aggrandizing. James Richard's, of the R-Spot Barbershop, comment that he does not believe in "grandstanding," quoted in the previous Chapter, reflects this common belief. The community demands that the host of the popular live poetry event have a Mother Theresa like ego the size of a pea and this is a hard place for many hosts to be.

Kochinos responded to the persistent challenges from some members of the crews that he was (indirectly) excluding them from the open-mic by directly excluding them from participating as poets. It happened first with a revered spoken word poet named, Friday. Although he operated on his own, he was a friend of the crews and a regular

member of the sidewalk audience. The crews respected him and his expert skill. Friday is African American, medium sized and in 2004, he was in his late twenties. He usually wore all black; a black flight jacket, a tight black cap, black pants and black tennis shoes.

In the post-Poetic Brew interview, Kochinos argues that he called Friday to the stage on a few different nights of the event. On those particular nights, however, Friday could not be found. Other participants at Poetic Brew told Kochinos that Friday had left the coffeehouse to go do something.¹⁴³ Friday would come back to Poetic Brew and wait for Kochinos to call him, but in his understanding, Kochinos never did.

Friday never read during his live acts of poetry like many of the other spoken word poets. He gestured and used the rhythm of his voice with expert skill: stopping the audience from shifting a muscle during his performances, and the verbal part of his poetry was insightful, often oppositional and cleverly rhymed. The audience on the inside of the coffeehouse liked him, too. Yet, regardless of whether a poet was liked or not the rules of the open-mic are that *all* poets should have the same fair chance to participate. But for "twelve," consecutive weeks of Poetic Brew according to regular crew members and "many weeks" according to other regular participants, Friday's name was not drawn.

Friday tried to participate in the open-mic by writing a pseudonym on a slip of paper and putting it in the basket. This practice got him on stage one last time when Kochinos unwittingly called him. Once on stage, Friday delivered a poem to the big audience called, "The Basket Case." In it he described Kochinos' corrupt use of the basket, played on the double meaning of *basket case*, and raised his hypocrisy as a

¹⁴³Marc Kochinos, conversational interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, January 28, 2007.

mediator of an *open-mic*, that had not been open for him. Chris Vannoy states that Friday delivered a line directed towards Kochinos in "The Basket Case," poem that said something like, "I'm gonna pop a cap in him." He explains further, "He was just rapping, but Marc took it all too seriously."¹⁴⁴ Indeed, Kochinos believed his life had been threatened and he assumed a defensive stance.¹⁴⁵

During a few climactic moments of Friday's performance of the Basket Case, Sun Dubois cheered his friend Friday from where he stood on the floor of the coffeehouse among the inside audience. On that evening, Kochinos outlawed both Friday and Dubois from doing poetry at Claire de Lune ever again. Across the general participants of poets and audience members at Poetic Brew, this action was not received well. Surely, many participants were not following the mounting tension between Kochinos and the crews, but they paid attention when they were made to by the public exclusion of two poets during the ritual, and it cast a pall over Poetic Brew.

This act of exclusion troubled the event's affective sense of community in general and the sidewalk audience of spoken word poets and poetry crews in particular. Moreover, it challenged the values articulated through the open-mic that everyone must have the same fair and equal right to participate. And pointedly, it blocked the ways in which conflict was dealt with in the event through the mechanism of the open-mic.

Conflict among participants was mitigated through the open-mic by the customary practice of responding to poets and/or poetry with which one disagreed by making a response poem and delivering it on the open-mic. In this way, poets could talk back to

¹⁴⁴Chris Vannoy, conversational interview with author, San Diego, CA, August 3, 2004.

¹⁴⁵Marc Kochinos, conversational interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, January 28, 2007.

each other, and the audience in their role as witness would serve as judge. This communication was particular to poets and audience members in conflict and it often went unnoticed by newcomers and infrequent participants at Poetic Brew, yet it was an important practice that enabled poets to voice disagreement and dissent.

Cultural critic, bell hooks explains, "...progressive politics must include a space for rigorous critique, for dissent, or we are doomed to reproduce in progressive communities the very forms of domination we seek to oppose" (1994:67). The ritual of Poetic Brew could not withstand the silencing of any of its poets. Like pulling a domino out of a castle arrangement, the constellation of Poetic Brew began to tumble.

It happened in slow motion over a few weeks. On the second to last night of Poetic Brew, Goat Song Conspiracy (Goat Song) were slated to perform as the featured poets. They were in the practice of delivering collective poems, sometimes in call and response style and sometimes by moving around the coffeehouse rather than remaining on the stage. Goat Song practiced together before their feature at Poetic Brew. Both Dubois and Vannoy were members of Goat Song at this time. Vannoy states that they had prepared a "really nice feature, everyone had their part," for their featured performance on that night of Poetic Brew.¹⁴⁶

All members of Goat Song entered the stage to begin their performance, including Dubois. Kochinos stood up and told the crew that Dubois had to step off of the stage. According to Vannoy, Claire de Lune was thick with people and many of the audience members looked confused. Goat Song conferred amongst themselves and decided to leave one of their six members and the only female on the stage to do the feature: Cristina

¹⁴⁶Chris Vannoy, conversational interview with author, San Diego, CA, August 3, 2004.

Contenelli, because it was her birthday. The rest of the poets agreed to step down together. This night ripped any last binding threads of fellowship that may have accrued between Kochinos and the crews through the *communitas* of Poetic Brew in earlier years. Furthermore, it strained the sense of *communitas* between Kochinos and the general audience and troubled their faith in his leadership as the conductor of the ritual.

A few weeks later, on the last night of Poetic Brew, Nazareth Simmons was called to the stage as an open-mic poet. As a primary poetry crewmember and founder of the Able Minded Poets, Simmons decided to share his five minutes with other crewmembers and specifically, with Dubois. As crewmembers, they all agreed that it was wrong that he had been excluded. They discussed what they would do before going on stage while they were outside on the sidewalk. When “Nazareth’s” name was called to the stage, the crewmembers were in strategic locations across the coffeehouse space as if they were ordinary members of the audience.

They started the poem from the balcony: one member beginning the piece, another member followed from below by the counter, and a third called back from the doorway. Two other members called back from other spaces in the coffeehouse, all the while Simmons stayed on the stage staking space, speaking words in deliberate cadence into the microphone. Kochinos responded by intervening with regular speech and walking into the space in front of the stage: both prohibited practices at Poetic Brew. In terms of regular talk during the event, participants were encouraged not to even whisper. From where he stood on the ordinary coffeehouse floor he told the crowd Poetic Brew was over.

The crew raised their eyebrows and some shook their heads. Audience members began talking, asking each other what happened, and approaching the crewmembers for explanations, some spilled out onto the sidewalk, others moved around the inside of the coffeehouse, and some sat still, worried in their chairs. During this time, Kochinos went and found a quiet spot and called Claire Bell. Bell states:

I got one call too many, and I came down here-- and I was pregnant-- coming down here to break up a brawl, and I told Marc, you get on that stage and you tell them, 'due to all of these unfortunate things that have been happening-' we had all these predators, too- predators started coming, a bunch of freaks, and next thing you know, women were being followed to their cars. It wasn't safe. I won't run my place like that. And I said, Marc, I'm so sorry, but the poetry reading will be cancelled indefinitely.¹⁴⁷

In Bell's account, she describes the conflict between the crews and the Host as a *brawl*.

The ways in which their dispute was resolved says something about class and calls attention to the popular rather than elite nature of this poetry. In a discussion of bourgeois decorum, bell hooks states, "Suppressing critical comments or making them in private one-on-one settings where there are no witnesses are deemed more appropriate ways to handle dissent. Bourgeois decorum upholds this means of dealing with conflict. Lying is often more acceptable than speaking truth" ([Outlaw]1994:68).

The crews confrontation of Kochinos drew on a working class mode of conflict resolution while Kochinos, in his tenuous middle position as the Host of a diverse, cross-class constituency, relied on both working class and bourgeois ways to manage dissent. Ultimately, Kochinos and the crews met on working class terms in a face-to-face confrontation over the issues between them. It became clear at the end that the other

¹⁴⁷Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

regular participants of Poetic Brew valued the open and direct resolution of conflict through the comments they made.

Lastly, Claire Bell adds another important factor to the causes that led to the end of the event: the arrival of sexual predators to Poetic Brew in its final days. These masked participants grew mythic as poets and audience members talked about them lurking outside and among the audience, and following women to their cars. While it is unclear how many there were, even if there were only one, that was enough to make the open expression, intimacy and necessary vulnerability of doing live poetry publicly, dangerous for women. And it was enough to rot the sweetness of Poetic Brew.

The presence of sexual predators limited the free and open participation of women and shook the necessary condition of the ritual to be fair and equal for all. Further, the ritual required the good intention and honesty of participants to care for each other in a broad sense. It relied on the assumption that human beings will be kind and compassionate with one another if brought together in ideal conditions around the best communicative practices.

For nearly all of Poetic Brew's history, it worked this way. In the end however, the actual and mythic sexual predators, the silencing and exclusion of poets by the Host rather than allowing criticism and talking out miscommunication, and the overall loss of the event's ability to maintain stasis as a sanctified space in which hierarchical differences and cruelty were bracketed, resulted in its undoing. Moreover, the regular, diverse, long-time participants of Poetic Brew that gave the event its cultural feeling-tone lost faith and hope in the ritual by reflecting upon the aforementioned good reasons. The general flow of *communitas* and feeling of sublime love through the hearts and bodies of all

participants in the event became a delusion rather than an ideal as the ritual spun like a top from sanctified ways of thinking and being in utopic community back to the mundane order of things.

External Constraints on the Utopic Hope of the Poetry Ritual

Poetic Brew ended in July of 2004 after years of tenaciously balancing utopic principles of equality, inclusion, free speech, and wild-card acts of live poetry across all of its diverse, cross-class participants. I went into Claire de Lune in October of 2004 and saw Claire Bell working behind the counter. I asked her at that point why she had canceled the reading. She sighed and patted her six-month pregnant belly. She explained that the Host of Poetic Brew and some of the poets had been fighting on every night of the event for a few weeks until it reached a level of conflict the café-space could not tolerate.¹⁴⁸

As for Kochinos, he moved away from San Diego shortly after the end of Poetic Brew and hopes to not host a poetry event again.¹⁴⁹ The regular poets and audience members who had been organized through their participation in other venues prior to Poetic Brew rolled back into them at the Malcom X Library, the Flame bar, the R-Spot Barbershop, and Voz Alta. The collectives of poetry crews continued to make poetry across these venues and at other smaller coffee shops, in taco shops, at parties and in alleyways; and to use their collective form to stake out poetic space where there was none. The form of popular live poetry lives on through the bodies and lives of individuals

¹⁴⁸Claire Bell, informal discussion with author, field notes, San Diego, CA, October 6, 2004.

¹⁴⁹Marc Kochinos, conversational interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, 2007.

who dedicate themselves to its practice. Still, the loss of Poetic Brew in particular is cause for pause.

The event made participants more keenly aware of the cultural and political significance of their poetic activity. Its long life and large number of poets and audience members is a testimony to their commitment to sustain the ritual because they found it valuable. Their work reflects a belief in their fellow human beings to inspire and challenge their poetic practice as audience members and performers of poetry, and as makers of culture. The public ritual of the event safeguarded against abuses of power and demonstrated to participants that an inclusive and equitable community could be. The event did not need to last forever or happen all of the time to be culturally and politically salient. Instead, it taught participants through the contradiction between the cultural space of the poetry event and that of ordinary life: and the disjuncture made them wonder and want for more.

Public rituals of popular live poetry burn like urban campfires that need constant stoking and protection: from the State and its desire to regulate *the people*, from the persistent force of capitalist development as it moves through neighborhoods and buildings sowing contradictions and disunity in its wake, and from the cultural forces of hegemony that limit imagination. Even though these public rituals are up against much, they resist containment through their ephemeral quality and their reliance on gift-giving rather than consumptive exchange. In the year after the passing of Poetic Brew, the neighborhood of North Park began to visibly reflect changes that had been underway in the background of the event: in board meetings among the *North Park Organization of*

Businesses, Inc., city government officials, developers and civic arts organizations with clout.

The Birch North Park Theatre (Theatre) on University Avenue was purchased by an organization with an uncanny resemblance to live poetry, *Lyric Opera San Diego*, with their like-minded reverence for lyric and performance. The building transformed from a dark and boarded up yet regal structure built in 1928, to a golden, gleaming sisterly looking place: painted in the same color with the same kinds of exterior architecture, directly across the street from Claire de Lune. Popular live poetry draws on traditions of lyric and performance, but not opera: that has yet to be claimed by the people in San Diego as a popular form. And even if the people wanted to claim it through its manifestation at the Theatre, it would be hard: the tickets to the Lyric Opera cost from thirty to fifty dollars. In contradistinction, Poetic Brew was free. Granted, participants were sometimes encouraged to buy coffees and pastries and to tip the baristas if they did, but they did not *have to buy* anything and indigent poets and audience members could easily participate in the large crowd without feeling singled out or ostracized as poor people. Further, poor people's diverse, working class lived experiences and poetic sensibilities were honored rather than obscured during Poetic Brew's years.

Around the corner from Claire de Lune, on 30th street, a large structure of condominiums called, *Renaissance at North Park* arrived through the swinging hammers of construction workers and soon enough, it came to claim half the block. Two blocks north of University on 30th street, the local *Vons* grocery store underwent a major remodel, following a boycott of the store by union supporters and a bitter strike in which older workers with union benefits ultimately found themselves with less than before,

working beside younger workers with little understanding of the loss. Vons put on new paint and held big sales to draw customers back and forget about everything. Above the new expanded floral section, a sign went up in wooden bubble letters declaring, *Poetry In Bloom*. But there were no living bodies in the letters on the wall, and no people being born in deep communion in the baskets of carnations.

Back at Claire de Lune, sitting in an easy chair and gazing out the wide storefront windows: onto the sidewalk, University Avenue, and the large Theatre building, one sees businesses on the ground level in spaces rented by the Theatre owner's to tenants below. A fine-dining restaurant sits to the right. Shortly after it opened, the owner committed suicide but a partner took over and the business continued without incident. And to the left of this restaurant: *Starbucks*.

The culture of Starbucks is distinct from the nearly liminal, border culture of Claire de Lune that operated like a post-bourgeois space during Poetic Brew. Starbucks is a space for business conversations, not the cultivation of netherly poetic sensibilities, or for that matter, belly dancing. And employees there wear uniforms, hide tattoos and remove or conceal jewelry on faces, and on ears if they are men. Bell's business too has undergone changes that reflect the gentrification of the neighborhood and the values of the new status quo clientele. Bell states, "When I see these people that come in the coffeehouse, I think, gosh! Would we be friends if I didn't own this coffee shop?" Claire de Lune now has a *Restroom For Customers Only* sign and a lock on the bathroom door.

She explains, "I've had to change with the neighborhood some... I'm an evolver. But I'm just hoping the diversity still stays-- because real estate is so expensive [now]".¹⁵⁰

The ritual of Poetic Brew was both delicate and powerful in relation to the larger context in which it was situated. It was culturally emergent as it transported new poet members of aggrieved communities into subjects of their own design and challenged hierarchies with its horizontal order. Moreover, the communication of popular live poetry at the heart of the ritual set the timbre of its fragile force. Businesses that appropriate it in signage or cultural rhetoric are able to speak near the form, but cannot reproduce it. Popular live poetry requires the actual people who make it and the working class cultural ethos of its formations to come to the fore in the special way that it does.

¹⁵⁰Claire Bell, audio-interview with author, San Diego, CA, April 6, 2007.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have brought together literatures from fields such as cultural studies, performance studies, and folklore in combination with a deep ethnographic study to argue that the form of popular live poetry bears the cultural imprint of diverse working class people and culls a generative sense of community. In my ethnographic work, I used ethnographic film as a method and made a short documentary with two of my colleagues about the local world of popular live poetry. I burned DVDs of the project and gave copies to the poets who appear in it and gave the staff at the Claire de Lune coffeehouse a copy to lend out to interested parties who came to the venue for Tuesday night's, Poetic Brew.

In addition to participant observation at Poetic Brew, I participated and observed at other weekly popular live poetry events and conducted open-ended interviews with key participants. I draw on local periodicals and websites to further historicize the oral accounts of interviewees and to archive the main events and the primary participants: of poet organizers, event hosts, venue proprietors and poetry crews who have created the world of popular live poetry in San Diego, California at the millennium.

A key contribution of the writing of this research has been to archive the unofficial history of the cultural production of poetry among diverse working class people. The majority of participants in the world of popular live poetry lead working class lives in which they are unrecognized as creative thinkers and makers of poetry. I unravel the role of class in the world of popular live poetry by analyzing it in performative modes of delivery during live acts of poetry, explaining it in the collective

organizations of poetry crews as a blue-collar formation and hip hop identification, and describing the horizontal organizational structure of open-mic and slam poetry events.

Popular live poetry events encourage participation from the bottom-up and level hierarchical differences of class status across participants as it is enunciated through educational rank. Moreover, I describe a working class cultural ethos that runs through the world of popular live poetry through poets' use of symbolic language, communicative styles and poetic content that references diverse, working class cultural world-views and lived experiences. Yet, this study is not only one that extends understandings of working class culture.

I use the concept of popular culture because the performative practices, styles and heightened popularity of the poetic activity I treat in the ethnography is not an exclusively local phenomenon. Many of the youth in the local world of poetry in San Diego share performative practices, styles and affinities with other poets and audience members who gather at slams and open-mics in cities elsewhere.

Beyond the local level, a hip hop inflected, popular style of poetic delivery can be viewed on the influential mass-mediated site of HBO's Def Poetry. In commentary about the making of this program, executive producer Stan Lathan states that "poetry [was] already out there..." happening in cities everywhere prior to the creation of Def Poetry. Lathan explains that as producers of Def Poetry, they catalyzed "an already existing movement," and brought it to a "far larger television audience."¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹Stan Lathan, video-interview on "Bonus Feature: on the Making of Def Poetry," *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, season one, HBO Home Box Office, DVD, 2004.

In the poetry movement Lathan references, hip hop and slam poetry came together through the cultural production of youth who integrated them in their poetic work. Rather than simple fads, hip hop and slam practiced at local levels often include an oppositional quality and critique of power. The popular verbal arts that have emerged from them mobilized a diverse working class, street identified, aesthetic and heavily influenced popular live poetry of the millennium. Through the work of Marxist cultural theorists and critics of performance (Hall 1981, Lipsitz 1994, Williams 1977, Román 1998), I have argued that the cultural struggle over class plays out in the sphere of popular culture and popular performance events. From this point of departure, I analyze the expression of class in the popular live poetry event and treat it as the central contradiction that bears consideration.

Popular events, unlike those of the elite, can become forums that convey the diverse working class cultural sensibilities of their working class constituents. Such a statement needs a caveat in that popular events are not the exclusive purview of working class people: they include middle class people, too. However, elite events usually do not include working class people because they do not have the economic, social or cultural means to participate in them. This contradiction, rooted in class inequality, makes the presence of working class people and diverse working class cultural ways more apparent in popular events. With this classed understanding of popular culture, it follows that its formations might express something about this contradiction. I have argued in this dissertation that the live act of poetry carried out in the popular event communicates classed meanings. One of the ways that class plays out during the live act is through the performative practices poets use.

To arrive at this claim I observed many acts of popular live poetry. Over time, I began to see a pattern of shared performative practices, and to inquire into their meanings. I focused my attention especially on poets who delivered their poetry from memory, rather than by reading from a text. These poets were among the most popular. They brought audiences of friends and fellow poets to the event and during their live acts of poetry, they garnered the most robust responses from the crowd. Further, I was interested in them because they were doing poetry in a way that was different from the ordinary style of reading poetry at open-mic events. They were combining performance and poetry in a way that pulled poetry from the page more rigorously than their counterparts who only read.

The video-recording of Bennie Herron's live act of poetry that I discuss in Chapter Four, exemplifies the ways in which poets deliver their pieces from memory and read during the live act. While some poets only deliver from memory and others only deliver by reading, Herron does both. He moves between reading from the written text of the poem and delivering the piece from memory. I do not unravel the performative practices Herron uses in my discussion in Chapter Four because my focus there was on the cultural content of the words of the poem and its ritual significance across the audience. In Chapter One, however, I tie the contradiction of class to performative practices poets use, and include interviews with poets who do not read poetry publicly and claim to not write their poetry down at all.

I ask why poets do things such as drop the pages of their poems to the stage floor to recite from memory during the most salient moments. In Herron's case for instance, he crumples a page of his poem at a point in his live act and shakes it in his fist like a

metronome as he recites the lines from memory. At the end of his delivery, he carefully picks up all of the pages of his poem that he has dropped onto the stage floor, smooths them out and places them carefully back in his book bag. I draw on Dwight Conquergood's (2002) concept of *textocentrism* to unpack the ways in which poets intervene in the texts written against them through these performative practices. Located alongside poets who read, as they are in the popular event, poets who do not read raise questions. Why are they against the public performance of reading and writing poetry? In large part, the practice of reading and writing poetry has been culturally affiliated with the edification of the bourgeoisie. If they aim to edify each other as an emergent popular culture, they must choose other modes of delivery. By circumventing the text and the practice of poetry reading, they are able to communicate the messages of their poetries towards the audiences with whom they identify with greater social force.

Conquergood explains that practices of reading and writing are historically linked to empire building and colonization. Moreover, these modes are linked to epistemologies of scientific abstraction, objectification and hypothetically, timeless ways of knowing that can be fixed in texts. Conquergood argues that reading and writing are afforded more value than performance in the context of academia. I argue that in popular settings, which include diverse working class people and their cultural sensibilities, that which is communicated through face-to-face communication and verbal art are afforded equal or greater value to that which is written in a text and/or read to an audience.

Conquergood holds that performance enables the expression of epistemologies that are lived, affective and embodied. In my interpretation of the performance of popular live poetry, poets use gesture, face-to-face communication and delivery by memorization

in attempts to resonate more intimately with audiences with whom they share embodied lived experience and cultural world-views as fellow human beings in general and in particular as classed, raced and otherwise othered senses. Experiential, embodied knowledge is not counted among those worthy of discussion in school, but it is this kind of knowledge that political candidates in the United States use who aim to draw the working class vote, when they make statements that they know something in their “guts.” Guts are code for lived experience and outside of academia, these ways of knowing are given great credence, and the Republican Party is well aware of it.

Spoken word poets do not communicate exactly like this of course, referencing their guts and acting like politicians during their live acts. They do however engage a diverse working class way of knowing that floats about the popular event waiting to be called out, in this case it is summoned through the performative practice of *not* reading. Where do such practices lead poets and audiences of the popular live poetry event? Spoken word poets and the audiences who have loved them are not against reading and writing in general but they recognize a power in standing before their peers empty handed, with only spoken poetry and breath between them. The popular live poetry event is a forum in which experiential embodied kinds of knowledge are afforded communication and directed toward new ends.

During the first months of my fieldwork in the fall of 2000, I made note of the link between the communication of live poetry and a sense of community. I also made note of differences in the affective community of the event. During the various live acts of poetry, poets communicated identifications that drew similar constituencies within the popular audience to tighter attention with them when they were on stage. These

differences did not mount and unravel the event because it was structured to guarantee that all participants be afforded the same time and in principle, respect, through the vehicle of the open-mic.

In the temporary events in which I participated and observed such as San Diego's Border Voices Festival, and Austin's International Poetry Festival, many poets and audience members did not know each other. During their live acts of poetry, poets cast classed identifications towards the audience that generated a unity, and a disunity, in the constructed community of the event among those who were excluded from binding live moment of poetry. These disunities were more pronounced in infrequent events than in regular, weekly events. In regular events, participants form a semblance of community across the differences between them. For instance, at the weekly Poetic Brew event that I treat in Chapter Four, regular participants began to make a popular community organized around principles of equality and respect for all that generated a forum for a diverse working class cultural ethos to emerge.

The unusual diversity of Poetic Brew provided a rare opportunity to analyze poetry in relation to cross-cultural communication, to observe the production of an affective sense of diverse community and to interview participants about this experience. In Chapter One, I describe two poets outside of the event making live poetry and simultaneously a palpable, embodied, diverse, ephemeral moment of community. In my discussion of Poetic Brew and the public ritual of the event, I raise the ways in which participants experience a sense of *communitas* and become more liminal in the space of the event. From this location, they are better able to remake identities under the witness of the audience during their live acts of poetry.

I argue that the ritual of the poetry event opened imaginations of participants to a greater sense of humanity. In the case of Poetic Brew: with its broad ethnic, sexual and classed diversity and its commitment to equality and mutual respect during most of its years while its public ritual was intact, it opened possibilities for a more richly diverse egalitarian community to emerge.

I developed a line of inquiry into the relationship between the communication of popular live poetry and community. I critically engaged the face-to-face communication of the form between poets and audiences and teased out the ways in which popular live poetry produces a palpable and affective sense of embodied community among participants in the event. In order to address this topic it was necessary to use the ethnographic method. Only through participant observation in the event, repeatedly and overtime, is it possible to analyze the form of live poetry.

Popular live poetry only becomes meaningful to the audience through the live moment of its delivery. The audience rarely sees the written poems of the poets who read during the event, and many of the young poets choose to deliver their poems only from memory as I have stated. Where exactly is the poetry in the popular live poetry event and how does the audience engage it? The audience responds to the feeling-tone cast by the delivery of the poem, the narrative content of the poetry, and the memorable lines that resonate with their feelings and thoughts. Further, they respond to the ways in which poets take on power: to create subjectivities, cull new constellations of community, and poke fun at dominant rhetoric.

The audience of the popular live poetry event has an important role. The slam poetry movement did much to raise their centrality to the event by praising them and

making them judges of the poetry. The respect for the audience in the popular live poetry event has influenced the large number of audience participants. They are one half of the dialectical communication that makes live poetry. They help new poet members of aggrieved communities come-to-voice and they bear witness to the truth claims they stake in their poetries.

In essence, my project has been an ethnography of the live performative moment of poetry. By watching and listening to live acts and participating as a poet myself I experienced a feeling of intimacy and a general sense of community with fellow audience members and poets that beckoned my attention. What was special about the communicative form of popular live poetry that managed to draw us, a diverse public new to each other, so intimately together? In relation to the context of mass-mediation and digitized forms of performance, live poetry is a form of verbal art, akin to balladry and storytelling that hinges on face-to-face communication and the sensual and palpable presence of whole-bodied-poets before whole-bodied-audience members. In relation to the hyper-mediated context, its form points to a persistent desire for a palpable human community through the old, performative forms of verbal art.

In the Introduction of this dissertation, I refer to popular live poetry as a campfire that has a propensity to pull people together around it across boundaries ordinarily heeded in daily life. The campfire is not the poet. Rather, it is the dialectical communication of verbal art between poets and audience members that together bring live poetry to the fore, and enable its subsequent cultural work. I have teased out the relationship between the communication of popular live poetry and community as it manifests during the live moment, and drawn on interview-based data to crack open the

elusive affective meaning of its experience. I describe the dialectical production of live poetry as a special relationship based on an un-commodified exchange between poets and audiences. I draw on José Limón's Marxist folkloristic concept of *gift giving* to theorize the reciprocity between poets and audiences during the live act and tease out its productive quality (1983). I use interview data gleaned from audience members and poets to describe the ways in which their shared sensuous labor produces the ephemeral moments of live poetry that in turn become seedlings of community.

The communicative production of live poetry draws poets and audiences together in ephemeral moments of complex, affective, intersubjective community. These moments are instructive: in combination with the public ritual of the event that safeguards against hierarchical inequalities across participants, they guide the diverse, cross-class participants in the imagination of new constellations of community and the rehearsal of an urban polis yet to be.

In sum, in the analysis of popular live poetry it is necessary to bear in mind four criteria: the material conditions of the event, the role of the audience, the communication between poets and audiences at the point when the poetry becomes meaningful, and the form of the poetry. In addition to its archival contribution, this research intervenes in a debate within working class studies between the class-based concept of solidarity, and identity politics.

By combing carefully through the embodied communication of popular live poetry by diverse subjects and the affective sense of community it produces, I shed light on the practice of *embodied solidarity* that recognizes difference and kinship in the same ephemeral moment. I have extended my reach beyond myself and climbed inside live acts

of poetry that convey lived experiences and identities beneath the boot of power to explain over the course of a few pages, the important cultural work that is done by poet members of aggrieved communities in a few ephemeral minutes. These live acts of poetry are usually not recorded but they are not wasted, they fall out like gifts on the collective to return in their memories as spoken voices, faces and imaginative messages.

In relation to communication, popular live poetry generates an imaginative space in a densely mass-mediated context in which participants are able to begin the process of coming-to-voice, reimagining themselves and their futures, and using poetry to challenge dominant rhetoric in innovative ways. Moreover, the form addresses the lack of community in urban centers by drawing people together through its practice. Future work should inquire into the cultural and political significance of popular live poetry events elsewhere.

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