New York City’s first-ever “Teen Slam” took place in April 1999. Thirty high-school aged poets competed in a mock-Olympic war of words, each poet’s performance ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 by judges picked from the audience. In keeping with the principles of slam poetry, the poets used neither props nor musical instruments, relying instead on the expressiveness of their bodies and voices, and no performance could exceed a 3 ½ minute time limit. The crowd actively participated in the poetry competition by hollering its approval and disagreement with the judges’ scoring. The teen poets paraded on and off the stage, dread-locked and pony-tailed, braided and buzzed, some squeezed into stretch pants and baby T’s, others, in the words of slam poet Patricia Smith, “drooped in drapery.” Iolet is tall, head-wrapped, and regal and told of police brutality. A boy from New Jersey dedicated his poem about being “surrounded by a raging sea called heterosexuality” to “anyone who has ever felt left out of societies’ categories, or been to a really boring sweet 16 party in Westchester county.” There was a Puerto Rican nationalist poem, an ode to a mother and another to a brother locked up, and many tales of sex and heartbreak.

Asheena McNeil, winner of the Teen Slam with a perfect score for her “125th Street Blues,” credited rap music, and hip hop culture in general, as having made poetry “cool.” Rap is the most widespread and commercial branch of a larger movement known as “spoken word,” a category used to describe forms of poetry and performance in which an artist recites (rather than sings) poetry, often to musical accompaniment that might range from a jazz ensemble to a bongo drummer. While spoken word had been confined principally to coffee houses and street corners, in the early 90’s it went mass-market and media as MTV and Much Music began to televise performance poetry, broadcasting clips of poets in-between music videos. Spoken word continues to take new forms: in December, 2001, HBO began airing Def Poetry Jam (co-produced by Russell Simmons and rapper Mos Def), a half
98

Poetry on MTV?

hour of spoken word poetry hosted by Mos Def that featured in its first few episodes
eminent African-American poets Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka, slam poetry
veteran Taylor Mali, and celebrities such as Jewel. In 2003 Def Poetry Jam took shape
as a Broadway play. Performance poetry also hit the road, touring the United States
and Canada with the music festival Lollapalooza and as the star of MTV’s “Spoken
Word Unplugged” concerts. This phenomenon of popular poetry is well documented
journalistically; media interest has focused on the dynamic and competitive slam
poetry movement. Started in the mid 80’s at the Get Me High bar in Chicago, poetry
slams now take place across North America, and culminate each year in the National
Slam. In 2004, 270 poets in 69 teams from cities across the United States and Canada
met in St. Louis to vie for the title of Grand Slam champions.

In this paper, I make the case that spoken word holds important lessons for
curriculum on how contemporary youth communicate, express themselves, and
make meaning, through practices constituting what might be thought of as a “counter-
literacy”—outside the formal practices of literacy, pedagogy, and curriculum,
and evolving out of exclusion, necessity, and improvised pleasure. But I also build
a larger argument for curriculum studies about popular culture as a central site for
understanding cultural change. I do both through a study of some slam poetry texts:
the film Slam (1998), which brought the poetic genre to a cinema audience; its ac-
companying anthology, which includes the screenplay and written versions of its
poetry; and the anthology ALOUD: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café (1994),
the first collection of slam verse, from one of the central performance poetry venues
in the United States.

Why has spoken word become such a cultural force? I propose that spoken
word is so topical, so central to the present cultural moment, because it anticipates
forms and theories of language and poetics, sets of communicative conditions and
relations, and in turn, new forms of identity and community which are not “quite
yet,” which are in the process of evolving, especially within proliferating contexts
of new information and communication technologies and under conditions of
by “clear evidence that the intellectual, laboring and signifying capacities of the
culture are in flux” (93), and attribute the flux to the

unprecedented and seemingly irresistible global and borderless flows of human
laboring and thinking subjects, of capital both symbolic and material, and of
information, discourse and texts having immediate and palpable impact on social
formations, on cultural practices, and indeed, on human development. (93)

Central to the anxiety is the uncertainty of the outcomes of such flows. For instance,
how is it possible to prepare students with the literate skills they will need to adapt
to evolving economies and social needs when we can only speculate on the nature
of these new formations? This uncertainty is compounded by the comprehensiv-
ness of the transformation; as Luke and Luke (2001) make clear, the very means
and modes of representation, and therefore what might constitute literate practices, are themselves in flux. Spoken word offers insight into the development of these signifying processes, and also, since human symbolization and subjectivity are so intimately related, a way of inquiring into the new youth identities attendant on such processes.

“Literacy Crisis” and the Popular

Despite the importance of language to spoken word, and of spoken word to youth culture, parents and teachers complain that today’s youth are increasingly “illiterate” and blame visual technologies like video games and windows-based computers for eroding adolescents’ interest in and ability to read and write. The well-documented rhetoric of “literacy crisis” (Gee, 1996; Graff, 1987; Street 1995) assumes that youth are less literate than previous generations. As Graff (1987) has pointed out, its current incarnations implicate “the impact of electronic media”; ‘youth culture’; ‘ethnic subcultures’; ‘standard English’; and ‘black English’; bilingual education; [and] oral skills” (391) in what is perceived as youths’ declining interest and ability in reading and writing. Graff (1987) argues that such concerns about literacy result from fundamental misunderstandings about the “relationships between the literate and the oral (and the visual, too)” (391) and fail to recognize changing communicative practices. New Literacy researchers have also argued for the importance of investigating the multiple and multimodal literacies that are required and cultivated by new media and information technologies, the proliferation of communication channels, and the representational forms of a media-saturated culture (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kellner, 2000; Kress, 2000). Building on this work, I propose that popular youth culture is a vital space of inquiry into new literacies, changing modes of communication, and cultural transformations more generally, for it both drives and reflects transformations to the larger culture—as in the case of spoken word.

This line of inquiry represents a shift in focus, if not in commitment, away from two principle approaches to the study of popular culture in education according to NCTE publications, which have been central sites of writing on popular culture and schooling over the last thirty years. The most common rationale for studying popular culture is the need to bridge the cultures of student and school (Boyd & Robitaille, 1987; Bruce & Davis, 2000; Daughdrill, 2000; Kirby, 1976; Sullivan, 1995). A second theory of popular culture, working in the Frankfurt school tradition, warns against forms of media representation and popular entertainment that offer simplistic and potentially harmful stereotypes and fantasies, and places the onus on educators to provide students with the means of critically distancing themselves from, and discriminating between, these representations (Aronowitz, 1977; Barth, 1976; Fay, 1995; Holbrook 1987; Holmes, 2000). While I agree that popular culture is usually of great interest to students, and that it is a messy space of conflicting values which needs to be viewed critically, I offer a third theory: it proposes that
the distinction between the popular and mainstream is fluid and transitional, that youth are often the vanguard of cultural change (as is currently evident in the case of new technologies) and that, as a result, popular culture and critical inquiries into it need to actively shape curriculum rather than just bridge it.

The interrelatedness of youth culture and mainstream culture suggests the complaints that the younger generation is less literate, found across history, stem in part from generational anxiety, for youth challenge and eventually make changes to the language, value-systems, and culture of their parents. One defense against such anxiety might be to transform competencies—new skills and interests—into deficits. (Luke and Luke (2001) make a similar point that early childhood intervention programs are rhetorical displacements of an older generation’s worries about the emerging adolescent “techno-subject.”) It might be that even relegating the cultural products of youth to the generationally specific, or even to popular culture, is a way of containing and diminishing them. The combination of opposition and influence also helps explain why popular discussions about youth culture are frequently polemical and heated.

A Poetics of the Moment

There is an irony to reading slam within the context of studies of popular culture in education, for these tend to grapple with the implications for schooling of the mass media—including television and film—and late-twentieth technologies such as video games, email, and the Internet. Slam, on the other hand, is a “low tech” genre, requiring only a stage, performers, and an audience. Slam draws on some of the most ancient forms of entertainment: competition, pleasure in language, storytelling, and self-expression. At the same time, slam is a creation of its technologized context. The live, intimate communion between poet and listener in slam is awash in contemporary communication technologies: the websites and chat rooms dedicated to publicizing slam events and sharing slam’s history; “electronic cafés” where poets slam online; the recordings produced by spoken word record labels such as Kill Rock Stars and Mouth Almighty/Mercury; films and documentaries that translate the intimacy and immediacy of slam’s storytelling onto screen and into larger dramas; and tv journalism reports that expand slam’s audiences and communities of participation and interest. Algarin gives a sense of slam’s imbrication in contemporary culture when he writes that the extensive media coverage of slam means “that it is now possible to cull from the endless articles a sense of the poetics that is being created in midair from one article to the other as these poets are made to think about content, quality, and craft” (22). This is a poetics of the moment, forged in cafés and bars as well as in the pages of Newsweek, and within which poets learn from journalists. Granted, despite the media attention, slam is still largely the stuff of grass-root and community forms of distribution and promotion (an instance of the Internet fulfilling some of its democratic promise),
and of independent film production companies, recording labels, publishers, and documentaries. Many teachers are not yet familiar with slam, nor are their students. However, as noted above, slam is but one manifestation of a growing spoken word scene that includes the Def Jam poetry series on HBO, and it is intimately related to massively influential hip hop culture. Slam might be considered the “B side” of increasingly corporate rap music. An inquiry into slam is also an inquiry into some of the dynamics of this larger culture.

My study of slam poetry takes up questions of aesthetic form. I assume that aesthetic form, and specifically poetic form, helps to shape the active, affective, individual, and communal experiences and investments of audiences, that there is a dynamic exchange between how and what words say and mean, and that aesthetic forms can reflect ideological, historical contexts. I am interested in exploring the politics of aesthetic choice and practice, and the social significance of form (or as Hebdige puts it, the “meaning of style”) as issues central to the education of students, including their understanding of the history of poetry and of language and of their own creative processes. To do this, I apply literary close reading strategies to popular texts whose status as literature is contested. I work within the parameters set by cultural studies which has since its inception borrowed reading practices from literary studies and applied them to popular culture (Johnson, 1996), unsettling notions of high and low art.

**Reinventing Language:**

“We Are the Public Enemies Number One!”

Spoken word has a passion for language. At odds with the rhetoric of literacy crisis, youth—and in particular the urban youth usually deemed most at risk in the rhetoric—are embracing cultural forms in which language matters a great deal. The film Slam (1998) tells the story of Ray Joshua, spoken word poet and subsistence-level marijuana dealer, and his experiences with both the criminal justice system and the redemptive force of poetry. Largely improvised and shot on location in the Washington, DC city jail, the Anascostia “Dodge City” housing project, and a genuine poetry slam at the Nuyorican Poets Café, the film, a “drama vérité” in the words of its makers, uses inmates and project residents as cast members and extras, and stars actual spoken word poets Saul Williams (Grand Slam national champ in 1996) and Sonja Sohn.

In an early scene, Ray (Saul Williams), on his first day in jail, hears a fellow inmate, Bay, drumming and rapping in the adjoining cell. Ray joins in the rap, and the two voices rise in conversation, weaving a freestyle tandem to the rhythm Bay which drums and Ray strengthens as he whispers under Bay’s lyrics—“Ba bam, ba bam bam. I had to be strong, I had to be real.” The rappers finally stumble, laugh, and stretch their hands through the bars, holding a handshake from cell to cell. “That shit was tight, mo,” says Bay (in the film and out, a seventeen-year-old
Poetry on MTV?

convict about to find out if he is jailed for life) to Ray. Of their rap, the screenplay notes: “the symmetry and rhythm are the culmination of two centuries of slave chants, prison work songs, and blues; a modern, hip hop slave song for the 90’s. And as long as they can hold it, they’re free” (Statton & Wozencraft, 200). Locating this rap within a tradition of black aesthetic resistance, the writers suggest that the scene encapsulates Slam’s larger theme of the power of poetry to help the socially marginalized temporarily transcend the prisons that constrain them: the prison of a political and economic system that discriminates against minorities and the poor, the prison of an individual’s life circumstances, and, in the moment of synchronicity with a fellow prisoner, the cell of the self. The power of the spoken word to reconcile and transcend is taken to its extreme in a later scene in the jail in which Ray defuses a confrontation mounting between himself and two rival gangs in the yard by blazing forth with his poem “Amethyst Rocks,” a diatribe against the system which ends with the lines, “i am the sun/ and we are the public enemies number one!/ one one one!/ one one one!” Here spoken word announces itself as the poetry of the margins, of the socially disenfranchised. The filmmakers’ commitment to working with extras and actors playing close versions of themselves as well as to shooting in real settings is thus not only a product of their limited budget, “guerilla” shooting-style, and cinéma vérité aesthetic but is also a marker of the relationship rap and slam poetry—and by extension the film—have to the “real” conditions of the lives of the disadvantaged. The film shares its emphasis on authenticity with the genre of spoken word, and with hip hop culture’s insistence on “representin’” and “keepin’ it real” in relation to the lived conditions of the urban blacks and other minorities who are rap music’s thematic centre.

Spoken word poetry is not the work of the poet-hermit, isolated from society in contemplation. It is a vehicle for exploring life stories, some of which are painful. Within the actual slam in the Nuyorican Poets café included in the film Slam, one poet tells of “life stories, purgatory as sickness had its stitches and knits my family a unit out of bad health no wealth” (167). Other poets here share tales of rape and violence, poverty, drug addiction, racism, and sexism. The confessional quality of much of the poetry performed at slams has been a source of criticism, as in the question posed by Sixty Minutes to teacher Gayle Danley: “Isn’t slam poetry, then, really therapy?” Her reply, “Yes,” and the question she writes on the board of the middle school classroom in which she is teaching slam poetry, “Have you dug deep?,” suggest that poetry as healing self-expression is not a designation shied away from by slam poets. However, slam poets are just as likely to speak out against social injustices as they are to explore their own feelings, and the confessional and critical modes are often connected. The ties between the personal and political are writ large, so that Jessica Care Moore’s discussion of her relationships with her lovers becomes a critique of the gender politics in black activist circles. In another mixed mode, her poem “The Sweetest Revolutionary” included in both Slam the film and anthology, is a hard-hitting social critique and yet also sexy.
The Poetics of the Vernacular

Slam’s language is unapologetically vernacular. ALOUD (1994) celebrates the forms and varieties of English spoken in New York City: the youth hip style of Care Moore’s (1998) “cool yeah right-right right-right” and “I’m trippin’” (158), or Beans’ (1998) “that’s on the REAL!” (167); and, Hattie Gossett’s (1994) version of Black English in her use of “yo,” “what da hoz iz?,” and “pussy sho nuff brings cash/ good gawd!” (199). The poets’ identities and stories also reflect the cultural diversity of cities. Algarín notes of slam that it forges a dialogue across differences, and that in so doing these poems “now create new metaphors that yield new patterns of trust, creating intercultural links among the many ethnic groups that are not characterized by the simplistic term black/white dialogue” (emphasis in original, 9). I suggest that one such metaphor is the word “Nuyorican,” said to denote (according to a footnote in ALOUD) an “originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York,” “A proud poet speaking Nuyorican,” “A denizen of the Nuyorican poets Café,” and “New York’s riches” (Algarín 5). The term is both culturally specific and inclusive.

Accordingly, Nuyorican poets often reject narrow visions of culture and identity. Take for example Regie Cabico’s (1994) response to government census polls that ask respondents to “check one” identity category: “How can you ask me to be one race?” / I stand proudly before you a fierce Filipino/ who knows how to belt hard-gospel songs/ played to African drums at a Catholic mass—” (emphasis in original, 47). Or Alvin Eng’s “Rock me, goong hay,” a hip hop ode to “The defest C-town B-boy you ever saw” (59). Both poems support Luke and Luke’s (2001) proposal that the postmodern notion of multiple, hybrid, and fragmented subjectivities “appears to have strong experiential and phenomenological, empirical, and even experimental corroboration” (94). In Eng’s work, as well as that of the many slam poets who draw on Spanish and “Spanglish,” words in other languages are not translated. This practice assumes an audience that is multilingual, and/or also one willing to accept the moments of incomprehension and dislocation from the familiar that characterize the everyday experiences of non-English speaking North Americans. Slam renders relations between language and individual and community identities increasingly complex, however, as “Spanglish” is emerging as an important element in the work of young African-American poets. As Algarín (1994) explains, these poets are now confronting languages other than English and involving themselves in the exploration of self-expression in other forms of speech . . . [They are] attempting complex intense communications in the Spanish language and are fearless about accents or mispronunciations. They are intent on diving into the endless possibility of multilingual expressiveness. (20)

One such slam poet is Tracy Morris, whose poem “Morenita” Algarín (1994) describes as “a bilingual sensual quest for love and precise definitions in relation-
ships”(20). But while the poem celebrates multilingualism, it also implicates language in society’s need to slot people into narrow racialized identity categories:

Which racist did you come from?
Asks the lingua local,
(not quite that way)
I smile and say,
“If you have to ask,
It don’t matter” in English,
Espanol or Portuguese.

Negra. No Latina.
From Savannah and other places
of the state in GA.

(in ALOUD, 104)

The poem moves in and between Spanish, English, and a “broken” English and in the process seems to expose the inadequacy of language as a means of making connections between self and other. The incoherent response also points out the inadequacy of the question itself for making sense of human experiences of identity and belonging. While for the poet language is mutable, the social questioning tries to fix her inside racial, ethnic, and linguistic categories. At the same time, she reinvents language as a tool up to the task of self-expression in twists such as the phrases “lingua local” and “which racist are you from.”

The Poetics of Orality

The linguistic inventiveness of this and other spoken word poems is characteristic of oral cultures; slam poetry can be read as a descendant of the oral tradition. Another traditionally oral element of slam’s poetics is the emphasis on competition. The particular forms of linguistic volleying which shape spoken word are descendants of long and rich African American competitive traditions such as the “dozens,” a series of creative put-downs about the opponent’s mother, as well as international traditions of poetic contest and linked rhymes. The competition builds community through the active interaction of performer, audience, and a handful of judges, who are randomly selected from the audience and whose evaluations are always accompanied by the larger audience’s response to these evaluations. Another element is the centrality of performance to the poem. Unlike, for instance, in the poetry “reading” in which the written verse often takes precedence, in slam winning poems need to be both lyrically powerful and skillfully performed. Although much of the poetry performed at slams has been written in advance (with the exception of the poetry produced in freestyle competitions such as the Sudden-Death Haiku designed to break a tied slam), it comes to life in performance and exists in the communion of poet and audience. The audience’s investment in the scores signals its commitment to the poetry, a tangible
show that here poetry matters, and that, as Toni Morrison (1995) tells it, language is understood as “agency—as an act with consequences.”

But this communion need not exist within an actual space; slams and other forms of poetry competitions increasingly take place online. Brawley (1994) explores the “poetics of virtual proximity” which are developing through interactive technologies, including the “neologistic, flamboyant typing that mimics the patterns and familiarity of words spoke face-to-face” (173)—for added to the challenge of typographically conveying performance, as faced by the editors of ALOUD, is the task of conveying online the intimacy and spontaneity which are a vital part of slam’s appeal. Slams can be found online on the Net at the Electronic Café International, whose poetry outreach program has poet Dan McVeigh attend Friday night slams at the Nuyorican Poets Café with his laptop computer and modem, and encourage poets there to participate in online, real-time slam improvisations such as three-way word association games with poets elsewhere (Brawley, 172); slams also take place on non-Internet computer networks such as Arts Wire (on the LitNet conference) and ECHO (Brawley, 169-170). It is in this sense that slam is an instance of what Ong (1982) called “secondary orality,” the orality of contemporary culture “in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print” (Ong, 11). In Ong’s formulation, secondary orality carries with it many of the traits he associates with primary orality, such as an emphasis on immediacy, a concentration on the present, and the use of formulas. The style is often spontaneous and casual; however, this is a self-conscious, cultivated spontaneity and informality. While the technologies foster the “participatory mystique” and sense of community of oral traditions, the audience is now McLuhan’s global village.

Revisioning the Oral and the Written

In the poetic tradition of ostranenie or “making strange,” slam poet Edwin Torres demonstrates that the more one studies language, the stranger it seems, especially when one works in the interstices of Spanish and English. His poem “I. E. Seducer” begins:

i.e. ‘DUSA’
me USED-TA be young
NOW
DUSA-me-DUSA-no-COSI-fan-TONGUE
SOY<COMMUNI-GATO>-
DAS A BAAD-DUSA…Mister R-R-R-RATTO!
SPE AK to these CATS…Mrs. ALL-R-R-R-R-IGHTO!
Can / YOU / ME / ca / to ?
Communi-GATO ?

(ALOUD 159)
Algarín calls Torres a “Nuyofuturist” whose poetics “depends upon the phoneme as unit of sound” (22). Algarín’s description of some of Torres’ performances helps answer the question that dogs the reader of the above passage: What could “I. E. Seducer” possibly sound like? As Algarín tells it, Torres “begins by hitting a sequence of vowels emitted at an extraordinary range of pitches and volume,” that are then accompanied by consonants, and that then evolve into syllables “which stretch from the lower register to the most extreme upper register,” eventually “congealing” into individual words and finally “recognizable sequential language” (22). Torres breaks language down into its smallest units and then begins a gradual process of reconstruction, mirroring the processes of language learning and development and emphasizing above all the phonetic force of language. In this way, Torres works in the tradition of sound poetry, exploring the range and power of vocal sounds. In the above passage, Torres also plays with phoneme, syllable, and word, but does so in the context of two languages in which syllables found in both English and Spanish weave the two languages together into a strange multilingual tapestry that is both and neither Spanish and/or English. In Torres’ vernacular, “i.e.” might be a shorthand for “I am” or “I am he” the seducer, “soy” seducer, that rapidly morphs into medusa and used-ta—a signifying game in which the possibilities of communication, especially across languages (let alone across human and cat species!) are repeatedly put into question. Torres radically defamiliarises everyday language and jargon, such as the jive expression “cats” and a Brit-sounding “all-righto,” asking us to consider how these work in daily communication and understanding.

Missing from this printed poem are Torres’ experiments with sound, his stretching of tone and register; instead, we have a visual artifact that looks like concrete poetry, with changing font styles and sizes and word placement. Because of the play on the typographic abbreviation “i.e.,” this passage also evokes some of the work of e.e. cummings. The textual markers both gesture towards the sound shifts in the oral poem, and add their own dimension to the poem’s interrogation of language and communication. The changing guises of the language (and the ease with which I was able to replicate them using a standard word processing program) speaks to communication in the era of desktop publishing and pervasive graphic design, in which what words look like can be as integral to how they mean as more traditional denotations.

Torres’ work foregrounds a problematic at work throughout ALOUD: what does orality look like on paper? How to transcribe performance? Holman and Algarín’s (1994) opening statements to ALOUD give no details of the anthology’s editorial process, including the making of crucial decisions about font and layout as oral poems are turned into text. Did these particular choices belong to Torres or to the editors and printers? The challenge facing the slam poets in this collection and editors Algarín and Holman is to convey typographically the sound of the poetry, a particularly difficult project in relation to the many poems that capitalize on the alternative meanings of the sounds of words. Torres’ poem argues that Holman’s (1994) prefatory command to “Hear this book with your eyes!” brings with it some challenges. In turn, all of
the poems in ALOUD lie somewhat uneasily on the page, and so fulfill Holman’s elliptical prediction that when “the mouth marries the eye, the ear officiates”: they announce themselves as vehemently oral products, and yet are still textual ones. The poems in these collections cannot rest on either the oral or written side of the divide; instead, in experiments such as Torres’, they query the interplay of and boundaries between print and voice, asking the reader to question the nature and limits of both. Even in the live poetry performed at the slam, the distinction between orality and writing cannot be fixed: slam artists usually write first, then memorize and perform. The act of composition, even when private rather than collective, generally involves “speaking” the words silently to oneself or aloud. In these ways, slam poetry challenges what have been termed “great divide” (Finnegan in Graff, 1987) theories of orality and writing as intrinsically different modes of expression and cognition, and thus as oppositional models of culture. As Street (1995) has argued, there is no “one universal account of the oral’ or the written’”; instead, their relationship changes according to the social and material conditions that make up their context (1). A study of spoken word suggests that just as the contemporary context is in radical flux, so are its modes of communication.

**A Poetics of the Rapidly Evolving Present**

One slam poet in particular, Paul Beatty (1994), seems to bear the imprint of the information age in his own poetics: Ginsberg has called his verse “‘microchips bursting with information,’” while a critic in the Village Voice heralded him as “‘the first poet to transcribe the language of the telecommunications age onto paper’” (in ALOUD, 22).4 However, I think that the genre of spoken word can itself be read as the poetry of the digital information and communication era, with its blend of past, present and future, its oral roots, virtual realities, and ever-expanding channeled universe. Spoken word sounds and looks like the present. It is a noisy collection of competing voices and genres that combines the high and low-tech, mocks high and low art distinctions, and mixes languages and cultures. The simultaneity of the forms spoken word takes—even within this paper’s study of the filmed and written versions of the poetry performed at a live slam, of poetry on the net and poetry on the page—calls into question notions of the real, and in this way raises a number of aesthetic, as well as epistemic and ontologic, questions posed by new technologies about the implications of the “virtual.” Does the text lie in the exchange between poet and reader, performer and audience, or is it in on the airwaves, on MTV, in hyperspace, or the film screen? If the text exists in different spaces at once, is it still the same poem? The same poet? What does publication on forums such as Internet chat rooms do to notions of authorial property and uniqueness?

In my close readings of the spoken word texts in this article, I have drawn upon the poetic concepts of linguistic defamiliarisation and renewal. The making strange and reinvention of language have long been central to the work of poetry. However,
I am beginning to think that they are also unintended consequences of the social, cultural, geographic, and economic processes of flux and transformation under conditions of globalization and new information and communication technologies. Digital information technologies allow for the ready manipulation of words and sentences, the possibility of instant translation, fragmentation, and reassembly of sounds and words and sense. The merging and collisions of people, languages, and ways of life expose the fragility and chance nature of communication, and the arbitrariness and contingency of language practices—while at the same time they reveal the transformative possibilities of multilingual, multicultural, multinational expression and identity. All of this helps to explain the ease and confidence with which slam poets and other spoken word artists reject traditional language rules and hierarchies, and instead play with language as the raw matter for self-expression. Spoken word reminds us that language is a place for the invention of ideas, identities, and communities, not just their reproduction.

Might these aspects of spoken word not only reflect contemporary culture, but also help to prepare students to participate in it in meaningful ways? Ulmer (1989) suggests that the synthesizer and its capacity for digitally encoding and then manipulating sound samples, which “leads to the invention of a new world of sounds and the musicalization of new areas of experience through abstract/imaginative synthesis” (14), might be an apt metaphor for the processes of academic work, of thinking and research and writing within the age of television and video. Ulmer places a priority on the “euretic” or inventive mode as a “‘productive human thrust into the unknown’” required in an age in which “‘fixed forms—whether in metaphysics, art, poetics, cultural patterns, and so forth—are under attack’” (LeFevre in Ulmer, 16). This idea that spoken word’s irreverence towards linguistic and cultural hierarchies might be an increasingly valuable skill is reinforced in Lankshear and Knobel’s (2000a) discussion of the current “attention economy,” in which originality, and therefore imagination, are the means for success; premium knowledges in the “informational mode of development” are “epistemologies of innovation which stress rule bending, rule breaking, and sheer inventiveness” (2000b, np).

I have some thoughts about what these practices might mean for understandings of curriculum. The first is that educators must resist the move towards an easy adaptation or accommodation of popular texts into existing curriculum (the “have the students perform a rap at the beginning or end of class” pedagogy of popular culture), for they pose some fundamental challenges to existing curricular practices. For instance, for the Language Arts, spoken word troubles the separation made between units on media literacy and lessons on literature and composition, for as Holman (1994) exclaims in an epigraph to ALOUD, “And lo: there are poets, poets from this book, on MTV! It’s the nineties! Poems are being written with television cameras, composed in recording studios, downloaded via computer networks . . . .” Even in classrooms which value the importance of oral expression to student learning, teachers and textbooks tend to rely on relatively fixed notions of what
orality is; spoken word demands that we keep questions about the nature of and relationships between orality and writing, and about their implications for cognitive, meaning-making processes, as open-ended subjects of inquiry. In response to the rapid evolution of culture and its “intellectual, laboring, and signifying practices” (Luke & Luke, 2001, 93), I propose a curricular model of popular culture in which teachers and students become co-investigators, drawing on their different experiences and knowledge, in order to better understand the complexities of youth culture, and what they might reveal about cultural change. This avoids the impossible predicament in which the teacher is “teaching” students popular culture, recognizing instead the value of students’ insider experience in youth culture, which often includes an interest in and comfort level with new technologies that far exceeds that of their teachers. Within this model, teachers work with students to help them articulate a theory of what they already know as a practice, and to provide a history and context for student knowledge and skills. Teachers and students re-imagine together a curriculum responsive to the needs of the present and of imagined futures. For language and literacy educators and researchers, a study of the language of spoken word serves as a reminder that models of language and communication are only ever approximations of how language is actually lived, and that theoretical accounts of the state of language are always ten steps behind, trying to catch up. Which calls for a curriculum with an awareness of the limits of its own knowledge about evolving language practices, as well as a sense of wonder and curiosity about where these might go and take us.

Notes


2 These include: the official site of Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSI) and the National Poetry Slam www.poetryslam.com; Bob Holman and Margery Snyder’s poetry site www.poetry.about.com; www.e-poets.net/library/slam (with a thorough history of slam poetry); Marc Smith’s website www.slampapi.com; the official websites for the National Slams held yearly in different U.S. cities such as www.austinslam.com; international slam poetry websites such as the German www.estradpoesi.com.

3 The competitiveness is one of the contradictions that Holman holds is at the center of slam’s dynamism: just as the audiences tend to be both heckling and attentive, playful as well as very serious, the competition is both important enough to fight about and so insignificant that in his “Slam Invocation” Holman proclaims that “the best poet always loses” (133).

4 Here is an excerpt from Beatty’s verse:
Poetry on MTV?

b'liddly bop repetitious rot
don't forget to stop at my seddity sop co-op
listen to my loizada
lambada
toadstada
cholesterol-free blah blah blah poppycock

salt free nuts
salt free nuts

(from “At Ease”, in ALOUD, 33)

References


Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café (pp. 198-201). New York: Henry Holt.
“Bubblroth” by Patrick Fram, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia.