



“A Book of Many Rooms”: Joshua Bennett as Personal Tour Guide through Decades of Spoken Word Poetry

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REVIEW OF

Joshua Bennett, Spoken Word: A Cultural History. Knopf, 2023. 304 pages.

“The history of spoken word is American history: a story about race, music, and the pursuit of human dignity,” writes Joshua Bennett in *Spoken Word: A Cultural History*, his half-decade spread stitched with threads from hip hop, poetry, academic prose, narrative nonfiction, and literary analysis (16). This volume “weave[s] together narratives of the men and women who brought spoken word into each of these spaces and helped create a global literary movement” (17). Alongside a close reading of excerpts and interviews with living legends, Bennett provides a personal tour through the streets of Brooklyn, a hometown he shares with spoken word poetry, before launching into a national tour from Miguel Algarín’s living room in the Bronx to coveted mics in Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco to even The White House and our own screens.

Bennett describes this project, telling of spoken word’s history, as collaborative and reclamatory in intent: “I hope to recover the larger human vision that these writers committed their lives to,” he writes. “At its core, Spoken Word is the song of their lifelong struggle and ultimate triumph. It is an homage, in paper and ink, to an origin story that once lived only in the air and the annals of memory: a collective, atmospheric account both of what we lost and what can never, ultimately be destroyed” (ix). Part scholarship, part story, and part homage, *Spoken Word* speaks to creative writing scholars interested in spoken word and slam poetry, Black art and artists, writing education, archival methods, and historiography.

Spoken Word's artful jacket brackets this history with visual remixes of spoken word legends LeRoi Jones, Ntozake Shange, Saul Williams, Nikki Giovanni, and Algarín. Inside, Bennett explains how his reclamatory project “evok[es] the spaces, moments, and scenes where the energy of this art form radiated out most widely to the culture at large. I’ll shine a light on the poetry slams, open mics, and street-corner performances that shaped my life and my voice as a teenager, and helped me grow” (16-17). The reader could ask for no better guide: Bennett has rocked these mics and bars, these beats and these streets, and he leads the reader through the pages to the archives, the classrooms, the Internet, these places he knows. An award-winning author of three books of poetry, winner of the 2015 National Poetry Series, and “someone who teaches poetry for a living,” the Dartmouth English professor earned his MA in Performance Studies as a Marshall Scholar at Warwick University in the United Kingdom, and his PhD from Princeton University (17). After an introduction, in which he defines spoken word as “an art form where written verse is crafted expressly with the intention of being performed for an audience,” he divides its history across three eras: The Nuyoricans, The Birth of Slam, and The Digital Revolution in Spoken Word (17).

Book I visits bars, living rooms, and other artistic enclaves for the activists, intellectuals, artists, and writers who first breathed spoken word to life. In this section, readers explore “one of the most integrated places in the world,” the *Nuyo* or Nuyorican Poets Café, as part of *El Nuevo Despertar*, or the New Awakening, a broader Nuyorican movement shaped by immigration during the 1940s and '50s. As Bennett describes, “The generation of Nuyorican activists, intellectuals, artists, and writers that was born out of this historical moment helped foment nothing short of a cultural revolution that was anticolonial in nature, global in its scope, and ultimately produced a Nuyorican sound, a Nuyorican aesthetic, that is still with us today, transferred through generations of avant-garde performances and public action” (35). At their cultural origins, slam poetry and the spoken word seek to speak to justice, participate in civil rights, and rehabilitate communities through literature.

Book II introduces “the period in which poetry slam as we know it was born: 1984-1986,” when construction worker and wordsmith Marc Smith debuted the poetry slam format that we are now most familiar with. His variety show at the Get Me High Lounge on Chicago’s West Side is equally historic as his Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge on the North Side. Bennett names as many poets as he can, recovering them, preserving their words, pressing them into the pages of a book through their contributions during the '90s and early aughts to major media, such as the documentary *SlamNation* (1998), film *Poetic Licence* (2001), televised series *Def Jam Poetry* (2006), and competitive circuits, including Brave New Voices, CUPSI, Youth Speaks, Louder Than A Bomb, and of course the National Poetry Slam. During this time, spoken word poetry makes enough waves to attract a rebuke from, for instance, Harold Bloom, who characterizes the poetry slam as “the death of art,” to which Bennett replies: “I like that. The gravity of the statement

feels like its own commendation. But I would like to offer more here, perhaps as provocatively and along a different vector, that poetry slam is more accurately described as the art of death—the art of dying to oneself” (115). Bennett spends time here applying literary theories to argue these highly confessional, “public acts of passionate utterance” belong in literary canons and creative writing studies (117).

Book III explores a lacuna in creative writing studies: spoken word mediated by the Internet. In this section, Bennett describes how, collaborating with fellow poets, and capitalizing on the advent of social media such as Facebook and YouTube, he started the virtual Strivers Row poetry show in 2010. In this section, Bennett spotlights Button Poetry as an example of an “expansion of those hundreds of small rooms—the bars, lounges, auditoria, and cafes that give this genre life all over the Earth—into the world of the Internet [...] Now there are simply more of us in here, millions more, than we ever could have imagined” (247). Bennett pivots in the Epilogue toward the futures of poetry, including expressions of Afrofuturism, by including poet Amanda Gorman, filmmaker Carlos López Estrada, actor Daveed Diggs, and Bennett’s own son. As Bennett imagines, “line by line, brick by brick, we are inaugurating new worlds. Every time we touch the stage, we are reaching out to one another. We are stepping out, on trust, into the darkness, that our dreaming might be the bridge between us” (266).

The terms “slam poetry” or “spoken word” have appeared in *JCWS* since its first issue in 2016. However, these thirteen articles only mention this art form on the sentence level or as itemized in a list of genres. Bennett’s portrait of the spoken word community as international, multigenerational, and community-engaged would be especially interesting to scholars and teachers like Rosalie Morales Kearns, David Mura, Naga & McGill, Mathew Salesses, and Felicia Rose Chavez, who have critiqued the lack of diversity in creative writing, and to imagine possibilities for a more equitable, socially just pedagogy. Once, at his first poetry slam in 1999 at his public library, 11-year-old Bennett realized that “I could indeed be unafraid to be known” (122). This insight and others studded throughout Bennett’s book serve as constructive reminders for creative writers and their students.

Spoken Word: A Cultural History is not without editorial, generic, and conceptual limitations. First, editorially, a section appears to be skipped (the fourth section is nowhere to be found between § 3 and 5, pp. 208-26). Also, more generically, although Bennett’s is “a book of many rooms,” the author acknowledges how its constraints may inadequately express the vibrant, aural art form and its oral history. This is not *the* history of spoken word, he reminds us even in the title, but a singular history. As Bennett elaborates, “Rather than a definitive, comprehensive account,” he writes, or “the final word on the matter,” this book invites the reader into a rich history (20). For a more sustained discussion on the commercialization of hip hop, for instance, or more on spoken word

and identity, read *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (University of Michigan Press, 2009). For how to integrate spoken word poetry into the teaching of writing, read Stacie Waite (*Literacy in Composition Studies*, 2015; University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); for an original source, check out Algarín and Holman's *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (Holt, 1994). But for a little bit of everything, read this book, which Bennett intends “to be an invitation: one point in a much larger constellation of stories” (20).