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**The Role of the Poet:  
Poetry Performance at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century**

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**The Role of the Poet:  
Poetry Performance at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century**

**by**

**Mary Elizabeth Jones-Dilworth, B.A., M.A.**

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**The Role of the Poet:  
Poetry Performance at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century**

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Mary Elizabeth Jones-Dilworth, Ph.D.  
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This dissertation examines poets' public performances in order to understand the social role of the poet in contemporary America. In the twenty-first century, poetry is increasingly disseminated through live events and digital media, and a rising number of people publicly share their poems. These changes present challenges for authors looking to attain credibility in the eyes of critics and audiences. *The Role of the Poet* examines how four poets perform their differences from non-authors, and thus form relationships with their audiences. In constructing roles for themselves, poets also make claims about the ontology of poems—whether they are primarily written, oral, or performative works of art.

Each chapter focuses on an individual poet's strategies for performing the role of the poet, and by extension, constructing the role of the audience. The chapters examine the ways poets define poetry; they include discussions of poetry's ontology and how public poetry performances affect the artform. Performances of authorship are shaped

through the vehicles of poets' writings, poetry readings, interviews, teaching methods, and public programs.

Chapter 2 examines Robert Pinsky's performance of authorship as authority, relating that performance to Pinsky's canonical ambitions and his affirmation that poetry is an oral, but not performative art. Chapter 3 focuses on Billy Collins's performance of authenticity, investigating the apparent paradox of achieving popularity while maintaining artistic integrity. Beau Sia's political poetry is the subject of Chapter 4; his ability to affect change in his audience is considered, as well as his goal of an author-audience alliance. Lastly, Patricia Smith's performance of authorship as a means of survival is discussed in Chapter 5. Smith performs intimacy with her audience; by sharing details of her life she models the process of writing in order to deal with various kinds of trauma.



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## Introduction

In the summer of 2009, publisher Jonathan Galassi was asked whether authors need to be skilled at self-promotion. He responded:

Unfortunately publishers need authors to do some of that . . . We're selling authors, not books. We're selling people the illusion of an experience with an author. They want to know what the author looks like, what he smells like. They want the full experience. In the old days it was "Read John Updike's new book." Now it's "Meet John Updike" or "Listen to John Updike on the audio version" or "Watch John Updike give a reading" . . . I'm very sympathetic to authors who don't want to do that. It's not what they're best at. Their real talent is writing (38).

Contemporary authors are accessible to audiences through more mediums than ever before, including social media, digital recordings, interviews (on television and radio, in print and digital formats), and increasingly large numbers of live events—writing festivals, poetry slams, open mikes, university lectures, and bookstore readings. In the twenty-first century, American poets have many opportunities to hone their professional images, and many of these opportunities have little to do with writing. The ways poets perform—and sell—themselves as authors shape the ways poetry is understood as an artform.

### THE ROLE OF THE POET IN AMERICAN HISTORY

In the 2007 book *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*, historian Joan Shelley Rubin describes competing notions of the role of the poet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with Emerson, who took on the role of a seer and a sage. Both of these roles suggest that a poet has special wisdom, but they connote different kinds of knowledge. A sage is a civic leader, participating in public life by giving eulogies, commencement odes, and lectures; a seer exists in a place outside of society—"set apart from ordinary people by virtue of the ability to see the soul and the

order of nature more clearly than they” (20-21). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rubin finds another, dichotomous, role of the poet: sophisticate and innocent. Millay represented an “urbane, bohemian” woman as well as a girl “uncontaminated by modern values” (11-12). Rubin goes on to discuss how the reception of modernist poets brought out tensions between the idea of the poet as mysterious and confusing and the idea of the poet as friend and companion. She explains that these images of poets—seer/sage, sophisticate/innocent, and alien/intimate—were never completely displaced by one another in American culture: “these figures should be thought of as actors who, once they take the stage, stay there—sometimes in shadow, sometimes brought forward for a reprise—while a shifting spotlight shines on other members of the troupe” (11).

Focusing on the first half of the twentieth century, Joseph Harrington also traces the history of the role of the poet in *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics*, published in 2002. As Harrington points out, the social role of poetry is “frequently revised” (8). He argues that although contemporary literary historians and scholars focus on the dominance of high modernism—represented by Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens—poetry’s meanings were constantly debated in the period between 1900 and 1950 (3). Harrington approaches these debates by investigating the “poets, critics, publishers, and readers [who] have vied for the power to define what poetry ‘must be’ – whether through critical debate, pedagogy, or through the presentation of context and distribution of texts” (5). Harrington also examines the way the discussions of the early twentieth century have continued with New Critics defining poetry as “the domain of a private universal subject” while others understand “poetry to engage and intervene in public life” (11).

*The Role of the Poet: Poetry Performance at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* contributes to the ongoing conversation about the meanings of poetry by

focusing on the role of the poet in the twenty-first century. “The text’s physical context of presentation or publication” is changing (Harrington 4). Because poets appear more often, and to larger publics, than they did in previous centuries, the role of the poet has become increasingly important to understanding poetry as an artform. At earlier stages in history, many poets carefully crafted their thoughts on the poetic art into essays. Poets still do that, but they are also frequently asked to improvise answers to poetic questions in interviews and question-and-answer sessions after readings. A careless, inconsistent, or offensive performance at a live event could live on indefinitely as a video on the internet and impact a poet’s reputation. The rising numbers of public authorial performances—and the potential endurance of those performances—challenge poets’ flexibility as authors and compel them to evolve beyond being merely writers.

#### **PERFORMANCE STUDIES AND POETRY**

In the seminal 1988 book *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner defined performance as an interdisciplinary, inclusive term, encompassing “ritualization, everyday life, roles, play, sports, theatre, ceremony” (xiii). In spite of the broadness of this definition, there are ways to understand the difference between performance and non-performance: in performance, “a special place is set aside or constructed—a space not used constantly” (6). Poetry readings, for example, usually involve some kind of stage, although it may be simply an open space in front of classroom desks. The idea that performance occurs in a special place and time is supported by Patrice Pavis, a performance studies scholar who explains that “An actor is constituted as an actor from the moment a spectator watches him and considers him to be ‘extracted’ or ‘removed’ from the surrounding reality” (57).

These notions of performance put no limit on the size of the audience: it is possible to argue that someone reciting a poem aloud in an otherwise empty room is performing and spectating simultaneously. However, this dissertation concerns performances that are accessible to larger audiences: many of the performances discussed here can be found on a website; some were open to anyone who paid admission, and many were free and open to the public as live events. Public performances have a greater influence on the role of poetry in America because they are in theory available to anyone who wants to access them (although constraints of time, geography, finances, and internet access may prevent some audience members who wish to attend a performance from doing so).

In *The Performance Studies Reader*, published in 2004, Frances Harding defined the performer as “not herself” and also “not-not-herself” (206). Harding’s observation is especially telling in autobiographical performances, when the performer is not pretending to be someone else. For example, Charles Dickens appeared on stage as “himself”—a writer reading his own works. And yet, toward the end of his life he never revealed his ailing health on the stage, showing only the most charismatic and energetic aspects of his personality. Though Dickens’s performance wasn’t a lie—and it wasn’t exactly acting—it also didn’t show the audience Dickens as he was offstage. This dissertation focuses on poets as they reveal themselves to audiences—not the poets’ inner or psychological selves.

As Malcolm Andrews points out in *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings*, Dickens is part of a long tradition of authors and performers of literary works “negotiating acting and colorless reading” (75). Charlotte Canning explains why this negotiation was necessary in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America when she describes how Chautauquas (travelling shows meant

to educate and entertain the public with lectures, music, oratory, etc.) dealt with anti-theatrical prejudice. Many Americans viewed theater as “inherently evil”—a notion inherited from the Puritans that can be traced back even further to St. Augustine and Tertullian (Barish). Another common belief was that “theatre per se was not evil or immoral but that evil and immoral behaviors, people, and actions had been associated with it for so long that it had become an immoral enterprise” (Canning 310). In order to avoid the morally questionable trappings of acting and theater, platform readers and elocutionists avoided makeup, costumes, and props in order to make themselves seem merely a “professional extension” of the common familial activity of reading literature aloud (312).

As Canning, Rubin, and others have shown, in the nineteenth century many believed that poetry served an “elevating” function, and that one could improve oneself by listening to elocutionists or authors read fine poetry. Associating poetry with the immoral activities of theatre didn’t serve the interests of platform readers or elocutionists, who marketed their performances as educational and morally uplifting. In the early twenty-first century, understanding a poet as a performer does not seem as incongruous as it did one hundred years ago. Poets who perform, even in traditional theatrical productions, do not strike most contemporary Americans as immoral. Performing is considered part of poet’s job, as NEA chairman and poet Dana Gioia pointed out in his essay “Disappearing Ink:”

Poets of every school now reach more people through oral performance—in person, by broadcast, through video or audio recording—than they generally do through print. Books remain the basic medium for literary poetry, but paradoxically an author’s print readership now heavily depends on attracting an audience initially through oral performance (20).

Gioia actually undersells the importance of performance here: some members of poetry's audience access poetry exclusively through live or recorded performance and never through print. Still, many literary scholars and poets are not entirely comfortable with the idea of poets as performers. Shannon Jackson explains in her book, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*, that within humanities scholarship, theater has been associated with "more primitive" forms of culture than literature; meanwhile, since the early twentieth century, English scholars have generally not recognized the field of oral interpretation (a descendent of elocution) as part of their discipline (24). While many contemporary poets are comfortable reading or reciting their work to the public, many of these same poets are reluctant to be identified as performers or associated with theater. At the same time, performance studies-based inquiries have become increasingly relevant to poetry scholars.

#### **THE AUTHORIAL POETRY READING**

Many contemporary scholars have recognized the importance of examining a text's context of presentation. In 1997, Maria Damon critiqued poetry scholars in comparison to other types of literary scholars by writing that "Even in the wake of canon wars and poststructuralist or materialist critical incursions into the world of discourse, there remains an anachronistic reluctance to speak of poetry in other than formal or thematic terms" ("Postliterary" 36). Damon contributed to poet Charles Bernstein's anthology *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* in 1998. As the title suggests, the book's authors attempted to analyze poetry as it is heard, rather than practice the close reading of written texts.

Christopher Beach claimed in 1999 that "The poetry reading—as the most public site of poetry and the site of its oral performance rather than its written reception—is a



crucial index of the way poetry is defined within a given culture at a given moment” (123). Peter Middleton insisted on the importance of poetic performance by claiming that no matter how significant the poetic text, it cannot “transcend the contingencies of local cultural practices” (*Distant* 67). Yet, as recently as May of 2008, Marjorie Perloff pointed out that a series of articles entitled “The New Lyric Studies” in *PMLA* still does not allow “for the difference individual performance makes or for variants of individual and culturally determined reception” (750). All of the scholars mentioned here have recognized the need for poetry studies to accommodate different kinds of analysis.

As this summary of recent criticism shows, one question scholars of poetry have in the twenty-first century is how much individual performances of poems should influence poetry criticism. A debate not mentioned by Rubin or Harrington that has come to the fore for scholars in the twenty-first century concerns the ontology of the poem: whether it is primarily a written, oral, or performative art form. The orality of poetry is not new—what has changed is that contemporary poems exist in increasing numbers of contexts. In order to understand poetry in contemporary America, this dissertation analyzes printed and performed poems to discuss the changing roles of the poet and poets’ performances of authorship in light of these new contexts.

### **THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHORSHIP**

In order to define the performance of authorship, sociologist Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is useful. Goffman contends that all aspects of social experience involve performers and audiences: “when an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part” (242). Performance of authorship means the “dramaturgical effort” that makes up a poet’s self (252). When a poet appears before

others, he projects a definition of *poet*. According to Goffman, this performance includes clothing, gestures, facial expressions, and speech patterns (24).

Not every creator of a text employs the “dramaturgical effort” needed to perform the role of an author. Even if one defines authorship as publishing writing, the increasing numbers of people who self-publish in digital and print mediums make it an almost meaningless categorization. Most of these text-creators and text-publishers do not call themselves (or sell themselves as) authors. The role of author is created through comparisons to those who do not consider themselves authors—much as the role of doctor is achieved by performing tasks that non-doctors have not done and acquiring knowledge that non-doctors do not have. In the contemporary moment, full of more public texts and more makers of texts than ever before, to be defined as an author requires recognition of one’s role from one’s audience.

This dissertation discusses two senses of performance. First, there’s the projection of a social role that Goffman describes. Second, there’s the performance that takes place when the people present are clearly divided into performers and spectators (as defined by Schechner and Pavis)—for example, someone is on a stage speaking, and everyone else is sitting quietly, their bodies oriented toward the stage. This dissertation examines the second type of performance in order to discover more about the first: by analyzing the public performances of poets, one can learn about poets’ social roles.

“Performance of authorship” was coined by Middleton in 1998 to apply to authors reading their own work, regardless of whether or not they are conscious of their own performance. In his essay “The Contemporary Poetry Reading,” published in *Close Listening*, Middleton focuses on authors demonstrating their authority by reading aloud, thereby discrediting Barthes’s essay about the death of the author. He states, “The physical presence of the speaker” shows the relevancy of the words “to a specific body,

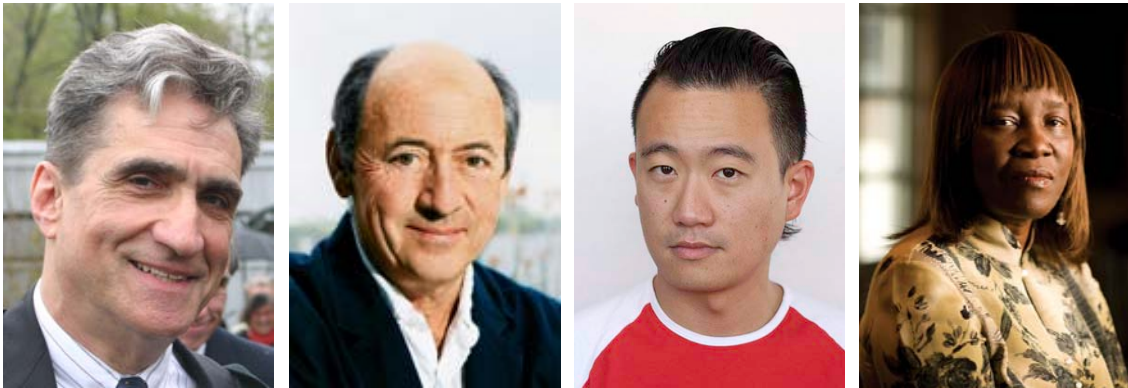
point of view, and history. Such effects are obviously greatly amplified when the speaker is the author, when the moment of reading acts as a figure of an imaginary moment of composition” (268). In Middleton’s formation, both the words and the one speaking them earn credibility and authority through live performance. *Authority* means not only the author-ness of the poet, but the ability to influence; the *OED* defines an authority as a person “whose opinion on a subject is entitled to be accepted.”

Middleton focuses on performing authorship to achieve *authority*, but Susan Somers-Willett uses his term to explain the way authors gain *authenticity*. In her 2009 book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, Somers-Willett discusses the way slams act as “cultural stages where poets perform identities and their audiences confirm or deny them as ‘authentic’ via scoring” (8). Like authority, *authenticity* implies being “entitled to acceptance” according to the *OED*; an authentic work of art is “true in substance” and sincere. For example, Somers-Willett discusses white audiences at slams rewarding performances of blackness that they believe to reflect the reality of African-American experience. Lesley Wheeler, author of *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*, extends the importance of authenticity to claim that at *all* contemporary poetry readings, poets need to seem “real, not good” in order to succeed (Poetry and Performance). Somers-Willett and Wheeler converse about authenticity as an *appearance* of truth, not as actual truth, which is the way the term will be used in this dissertation as well.

The performances of authorship discussed by Somers-Willett focus on poets who are overtly judged on their performance skills at slams. Many of the poems she discusses are performances of identities that work in concert with the content of the poems; the poems are about the identities the authors are performing. Yet the performance of

authorial identity is also important when it doesn't *seem* to be a performance—when an author sits behind a table at a festival signing books or answers questions in an interview. John Rodden's book on literary interviews discusses the "traditionalist" author interview as one that performs self-effacement while foregrounding the author's work (6). These interviews seem businesslike and "artless" but they actually perform "non-performance" in order to project a certain image of themselves as authors. The seemingly invisible performances in interviews or university readings make an argument about the role of the poet in American life, the meaning of poetry in our society, and the limits and potential of poetry as an artform. The way a poet relates to an audience is also a crucial component of the performance of authorship. Performances cannot exist without spectators, even if the author seems oblivious to those in the audience.

#### **PINSKY, COLLINS, SIA, AND SMITH: FOUR SEASONED PERFORMERS**



The four poets examined in this dissertation have several things in common. First, their performances of authorship take many forms—poems, live authorial readings, filmed performances, interviews, teaching, and public programs. Second, they share a concern with growing poetry's audience, and have distinct strategies for doing so. Third,

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<sup>1</sup> From left to right, the photos depict Robert Pinsky, Billy Collins, Beau Sia, and Patricia Smith. Their photographers are Jared C. Benedict, Steven Kovich, David Yuang (courtesy of Jeannie Management), and Jennifer May, respectively.

they are self-conscious about their styles of reading or reciting in public: they work at presenting poetry in ways they consider most effective and appropriate; they all claim to enjoy live events and none are camera- or audience-shy. Fourth, they have achieved financial success as well as critical recognition for their work as poets; they are well-known among contemporary poets and poetry enthusiasts. Finally, the poems they write are all relatively accessible—they mostly write verse in grammatical sentences that can be appreciated and understood by those who have not studied poetry widely.

The four poets were also chosen for their differences. One of the first questions to ask about performers when studying a performance, according to Pavis and other performance scholars, is the cultural implications of the performer's body (66). The bodies of these poets have very different cultural implications due to age, ethnicity, and gender. The strategies employed by poets to construct their texts and their audiences are doubtless influenced by their particular bodies. At the same time, it would be misleading to imply that the styles of authorship performed by these poets are dependent on their race or gender. Most, if not all, performance techniques chosen by these four poets have been successfully employed by American poets with very different-looking bodies.

These poets have different ways of understanding the ontology of the poem. Each locates a poem's native technology in a different place—as oral, written, performed, or some combination of the three. Each relates to his or her audience differently; they distinguish themselves from non-authors in different ways. The poets are also in different stages of their careers—in the year 2000, Sia had only been writing poetry for a couple years, while Pinsky was beginning his fourth decade as a professional poet. Though four poets could never represent the incredible diversity of poetry and poetic culture in contemporary America, taken together these four skilled, experienced poet-performers encompass many of the roles taken on by American poets in the twenty-first century.

This dissertation examines the performances of the four authors in order to illuminate different strategies for defining oneself as a poet. It does not make arguments about whether individual performances are authoritative or authentic, though it discusses poets' attempts to associate themselves with both qualities. Other terms associated with the poetic performances—including hospitality, integrity, honesty, alliance, and intimacy—are not defined absolutely, but drawn from the work of individual performers. In other words, the dissertation focuses on the qualities poets attempt to convince audiences that they possess, without ultimately arguing about the relative truth or convincingness of these performances.

Chapter 2 discusses the performance of authorship as authority. Poet Robert Pinsky consistently performs his expertise through public programs, editorial projects, poems, and poetry performance. Pinsky's expertise as a poet was attained through self- and formal education. His performance of authority complements his stated goal to write enduring, canonical poetry. His claim that poetry is primarily an oral art form reflects the way that contemporary literature is evolving. However, his conservative affirmation that poetry is *not* a performative art reinforces his authority by defining poetry as a single discipline, one that can be mastered in traditional ways.

Chapter 3 focuses on authenticity as performed by Billy Collins. Due to Collins's immense popularity as a poet, his integrity is questionable to some. *Integrity* may seem antithetical to a popular, financially successful artist because it implies a whole, authentic self which is uncorrupted by the influence of critics or audiences. Collins performs indifference to his audience during the composition process, claiming to write without thinking of performance or reception. At the same time, he affirms the value of literary hospitality toward poetry audiences, praising poems that welcome readers and are not

obscure or unnecessarily difficult. His performance of authorship reveals the difficulty of becoming a respected poet whose art brings him a great deal of money. Like Pinsky, his performance of authorship involves distancing himself from the art of performance, which is seen as a less authentic form of art than writing. Tracing the history of the division between high art and popular entertainment reveals why Collins's performance of authorship harkens back to a Romantic poet persona.

Like Collins, Beau Sia is interested in achieving popularity as a poet. Sia reconciles the difficulties of Collins's performance of authorship by emphasizing the messages in his poems more than the sanctity of his art. He performs authorship as an alliance with his audience, meaning that he takes a positive, respectful attitude toward spectators. Though alliances encompass many kinds of relationships, they fundamentally involve individuals who attempt cooperation but do not fuse into one nation, company, or family. Sia's goal is dialogue among different kinds of people, and many of his poems contain political themes. For Sia, the present-tense dialogue fostered by his poems is best achieved through performance, and he pays relatively little attention to the poem on the page.

Patricia Smith understands poems to be simultaneously part of many genres and mediums. An accomplished writer and performer, Smith promotes authorship as a means of survival, citing the poet's responsibility to share one's ability to create poems with others, and thus help them heal from various kinds of trauma. Smith fosters a sense of intimacy with her audience, threatening to diminish the distinction between poet and non-poet altogether. Intimacy relates to authenticity, in that creating a sense of intimacy means giving the audience access to one's true, "inner or inmost" self (*OED*). The appearance of intimacy allows Smith to model (and not just discuss) authorship as a means of survival.

Pinsky, Collins, Sia, and Smith show different possible strategies for gaining credibility in a society where ever-increasing numbers of texts circulate by ever-increasing numbers of authors. Performing a social role is not just a series of acts, but a process of becoming. To become authors, they attain credibility in very different ways, but all their attempts to define the role of poet engage with public performances, digital media, and the debate about poetry's ontology. Taken together, these four performances of authorship reveal the roles of the poet—and by extension, the roles of poetry's audience—in shaping the meanings of American poetry in the twenty-first century.



## Robert Pinsky's Performance of Authority

### THE BIRTH OF AN AUTHOR

Robert Pinsky recounts that his first poetic activity involved spending hours reading the dictionary as a young child. Dictionaries contain guides for pronunciation; they showcase the sounds of language one syllable at a time. Dictionaries also contain history—not only the history of the sounds of the language, but also geographical and etymological origins of words (and the objects those words represent). Dictionaries don't contain the history of *all* languages, but reflect one particular culture—and not the whole culture, but the words and objects that are, in some sense, official or sanctioned. The information available in dictionaries has informed Pinsky's poetry throughout his career; furthermore, his interest in language's history profoundly influences his performance of authorship. Dictionaries are also symbolic of education: both offer access and yet connote privilege. Pinsky became a poet by *learning* to be one.

One of Pinsky's other origin stories involves tutelage by the poet Yvor Winters. As Pinsky tells it (in *The Paris Review* interview discussed at length later in this chapter), he showed Winters his poems while in graduate school at Stanford. Winters asked him what he had read and discovered that Pinsky knew very little about poetry written before the twentieth century. Winters said, "No one who's only read that much can write a good poem." Pinsky intuited that Winters was correct, and immediately began studying literature under his direction. Pinsky learned to be a poet from Winters, who "claimed to have read every poem by every poet of any distinction who ever wrote in English" (Pinsky, Interview by Downing). Reading poets of distinction himself—and encouraging American audiences to do so as well—became a hallmark of Pinsky's career.

On one hand, Pinsky's origin stories imply that anyone can become a poet by acquiring certain freely available knowledge, though the process requires diligence. On the other hand, one can't be taken seriously as a poet without that knowledge. Though the idea that one learns to be a poet may appear to be common sense, the following chapters on Billy Collins, Beau Sia, and Patricia Smith reveal alternatives to that view. Some posit that poets are born, not made. Some argue that special insight allows poets to create messages crafted to transform society. And still others claim that trusting one's own voice is the key to becoming a writer. In his memoir *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes claims he never thought about writing until his high school classmates elected him "Class Poet" and required him to write a poem for his graduation, thus implying that a community elects its poets (24). The origin story a poet tells cannot reflect the whole truth of how he or she came to be a poet, but the details selected and culled into these stories dramatize the differences between poets and their audiences.

Pinsky's writing career has coincided with a rapid growth of creative writing programs designed to train and credential writers in the United States. In 1967, the year before Pinsky published his first book of poetry criticism, *The Associated Writing Programs* (now *The Association of Writers and Writing Programs*, or AWP) was founded to support creative writing programs in universities that were not always welcomed or well-supported by English literature departments. Since 1975 (the year Pinsky's first book of poems was published), Masters of Fine Arts programs in creative writing have grown from 15 to 153. Programs offering Ph.D.s in creative writing increased from 5 to 37 (Fenza). The rapid growth of these programs suggests that many writers attempt to authorize themselves through education, institutional networks, and diplomas.

Pinsky has taught in universities throughout his career, and is currently on the faculty of Boston University's creative writing program. In some ways his focus on

education as a means of creating writers corresponds with his historical moment. Yet Pinsky himself came to be a poet before these programs existed; he does not fully embrace them as a means to gain authorial authority. He advises would-be writers to stick to an educational program more closely resembling what is taught in traditional literature departments (where he learned to be a poet) rather than the workshop-focused creative writing programs (where he now teaches others to be poets).

### **AUTHORITY AND AUTHORSHIP**

Pinsky's career fits a particular model of the performance of authorship focused on authority. In fact, when Middleton coined the phrase "performance of authorship," he was describing poetry readings as a ritual to re-assert the authority of the poet (*Distant* 34). This assertion was necessary because of the famous and influential essay by Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." Barthes argued that those interested in literature were too obsessed with the character of the writer, complaining that "criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice." Barthes declared the author to be dead in 1967; Middleton resurrected him with equal fanfare three decades later:

A specter is haunting poetry readings. The "dead author," risen from the text again and trailing the rags of the intentional fallacy, claims to be the originating subject from which poetry is issuing right in front of your eyes. At most poetry readings the author reads the poetry and firmly occupies the first person (*Distant* 33).

As the Introduction argues, "performance of authorship" can have a broader purpose than demonstrating authority. However, as will be shown, Pinsky's career reinforces Middleton's argument: his performances at live readings do highlight his expertise and authority on the subject of poetry. (As contemporary poet-scholars, Middleton and Pinsky have one very obvious difference: Pinsky prefers poetry that has universal, enduring

appeal, while Middleton is devoted to avant-garde experimentation and innovation.) Pinsky indeed “firmly occupies” the first person at these readings, telling the audience about his personal history and opinions between poems.

This chapter starts from the premise that the role of poetry in America is “frequently revised” due in part to its changing “contexts of presentation” (Harrington 5, 8). The contexts in which Pinsky presents poetry include live poetry readings, interviews, television appearances, and his Favorite Poem Project, which he began in his first term as poet laureate of the United States in 1997. This chapter extends Middleton’s ideas in *Distant Reading* by suggesting that live readings are *not* the culminating performance of a poet’s assertion of authority: Pinsky uses other venues and genres equally effectively to promote his vision of authorship and his own expertise. By looking at “the difference individual performance makes,” we can see how the roles of poets, poems, and poetry audiences are formed in the twenty-first century (Perloff 750).

This chapter does not aim to do what Barthes critiqued: it does not attempt to show that Pinsky’s poetry is a product of his “failures as a man.” Because Pinsky is alive and writing as this chapter comes to be, it is especially important to make this distinction: there is no analysis here of Pinsky’s psychology. Philosopher Jorge J.E. Gracia, in his book *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience*, defines the “historical author” as a man who exists in the world with a complex history and personality. As Gracia explains, the audience can never fully know the historical author. Instead, they encounter the “pseudo-historical author”—“a composite of what we know or think we know about a historical author” (97). Parts of this composite include the persona the historical author creates—a persona designed to show the audience what the historical author wants them to see. Gracia’s pseudo-historical author is similar in many ways to Harding’s description of a performer being “not herself” and “not-not herself” (206). Because, as Goffman

explains, everyone performs in every social situation, performances *make* a person in some crucial sense: “the self is a dramaturgical effort” (253). At the same time, performances cannot encompass the totality of the historical author’s personhood.

Part of the composite of pseudo-authorship is beyond the author’s control. As Gracia points out, there is almost never a text that has been completely produced and controlled by one individual; editors and publishers and even audiences affect the text (and the performance of authorship) as well. The pseudo-historical author is largely the historical author’s creation, but the degree of correlation between the pseudo-historical author and the historical author is always unknown. This chapter is not concerned with Pinsky the man/historical author—only the physical, verbal, and written cues that form Pinsky’s authorial, pseudo-historical persona, and how that persona projects definitions of poetry and poets.

#### **CONTEXTS OF PRESENTATION: PINSKY’S “SHIRT”**

In order to understand the pseudo-historical author Pinsky, this section examines one of his poems on the page/webpage (divorced from his vocalization of it) before turning to different contexts of presentation. Many members of Pinsky’s audience encounter the poem through live and recorded authorial readings, and this chapter argues that the context of Pinsky reading his poem aloud does make a difference in how we understand it by outlining a relationship between poem, poet, and audience.

On a thematic level, “Shirt” gives a history of a shirt the speaker wears, which expands into a history of industry.<sup>2</sup> Pinsky uses the rhetorical figure of *partitio*—he describes the shirt by examining its various elements. Some of these pieces are physical

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<sup>2</sup> “Shirt” can be read and listened to on the Academy of American Poets website: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15479>. All links in footnotes can be found also on the dissertation’s companion website, <http://theroleofthepoet.tumblr.com/>.

("The back, the yoke"), and some are historical ("The infamous blaze / at the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven."). Some of the parts are people who have contributed to the history of the shirt: "The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter." Though the poem covers a great deal of imaginative terrain, it operates mainly in the literal realm, with only a few similes and no metaphors.

"Shirt" is written in tercets which contain about five feet per line. The meter is irregular, but the rhythm of the poem is nonetheless very prominent. Long, enjambed phrases alternate with short, obviously rhythmical ones. The rhythm is obvious in these sections because there's a very definite difference between the stressed syllables and the unstressed syllables. For example, in the first two feet, "The **back**, the **yoke**," *back* and *yoke* are emphasized much more than *the*; the commas make the heavily stressed words stand out even more. An example of a less-obviously rhythmical phrase is "Like **Hart** Crane's **Bedlamite**." The first four syllables are all relatively strong; in this phrase only the "la" in *Bedlamite* gets noticeably less stress, making the rhythm comparatively difficult to hear and feel.

The parallel structure in the more obviously rhythmical lines emphasizes the rhythm even more. Most of these phrases are three syllables, consisting of the article *the* and a two syllable noun with a heavily stressed first syllable: "The **wringer**, the **mangle**. The **needle**, the **union**." These lists slowly accumulate throughout the poem, gradually making the reader understand the sorrow and oppression behind the shirt's "cost and quality" by chronicling the poor labor conditions of farm, ship, and factory workers past and present.

The poem on the page contains several hints about Pinsky's conception of authorship and authority. First, it appears to have required research. Pinsky uses both historical details of a fire and vocabulary that is specific to the clothing industry, such as

“overseam,” “placket,” and “facing.” The poem also references two other poets from different eras, Hart Crane and George Herbert. A quick glance at its neat, consistent stanzas suggests that a practiced poet authored it, and further investigation of its rhythm reveals that it has been produced by a careful craftsman.

### **“A Conversation with Robert Pinsky” at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

David Thorburn, a classmate of Pinsky’s at Stanford who also studied under Yvor Winters, invited Pinsky to talk about several of his artistic projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.<sup>3</sup> At the time, Pinsky was developing a libretto for composer Tod Machover’s robotic opera entitled *Death and the Powers*, scheduled to premiere in Monaco in 2010. Thorburn also showed some Favorite Poem Project videos and asked Pinsky to read from his recent book of prose, a biography of the Biblical David. The event showcased Pinsky’s versatility as an author.

As in all performances, Pinsky’s body and its cultural implications influence his performance of “Shirt.” Pinsky is a white, Jewish, middle-class male who at the time of the performance was 65 years old. His particular age, gender, and ethnicity are so common in his poet and professor roles that they are invisible, or at least unremarkable. His type of body traditionally has authority in this context. Pinsky wears a mix of professional and casual clothing to the event—a black t-shirt under a grey suit coat. His hair is combed and parted on the side; he carries a black leather bag. There is a cordless microphone clipped neatly to his lapel, which he does not have any trouble using. In contrast to the stereotype of the disheveled and eccentric artist (or professor, for that matter), Pinsky’s appearance is well-put-together. His posture is impeccable.

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion can be found here: <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/354>.

Shortly before Thorburn asks Pinsky to recite “Shirt,” he and Pinsky discuss authorship. Thorburn remarks that Pinsky’s poems, over the course of his career, have shifted from “conversation” to “incantation.” Pinsky responds to this characterization by focusing on the goal of an author: to make enduring poetry. “It’s so hard to write a good poem—and you die not knowing if you ever have,” he says, adding, “what you are thinking about is how you can possibly approach that goal . . . desperately, you know, very intensely trying to make something that works.” By his use of the second person, Pinsky implies that these goals are not only his personally, but shared by many poets. He explains his shift in style not as an attempt to keep up with poetic fashions, nor a professional desire to conquer new horizons, but as part of his striving to create a poem that will survive him. Pinsky’s ideal audience is not a particular, contemporary one; it is universal and timeless.

To gain a universal, timeless audience, canonicity is helpful. And as John Guillory points out, “the problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum” (240). Libraries (and digital archives) save more or less everything—but a teacher can only fit so many poems onto the syllabus per semester. A canonical poem tends to have structures and ideas that readers can consider and re-consider, depending on changing academic trends. Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes that “paths to canonicity” require critics to value the text in new ways over time (48-9). Eventually, however, the very fact of the poem’s endurance gives it so much authority that critics will continue to find new ways to interpret it even if it doesn’t seem to fit with current literary values. As Charles Altieri explains in *Canons and Consequences*, readers admire not only their own favorite authors, but “those admired by the ones we admire” (35). (In “Shirt,” Pinsky does his part to keep alive poems he admires by referencing Herbert and Crane.) Pinsky’s performance of authority aligns with his goal of literary immortality. Developing his expertise and



craftsmanship is a strategy that works for Pinsky—he is a respected critic, teacher, editor, and poet laureate. He uses these avenues to promote poems he sees as worthy of canonicity and associate himself with an enduring poetic tradition. His career’s trajectory does not guarantee that teachers will choose his poems for syllabi in the coming centuries, but his performative choices as an author pursue that goal.

The second part of Pinsky’s answer to Thorburn’s question about his change in style is a performance of authority in the form of a very enthusiastic discussion of grammar. Through this conversation, he reveals that he as an author has a much deeper understanding of language than non-authors: “At some point, it is true, I fell in love with the substantive. And this is—I mean this grammatically. This is like talking about . . . nuts and bolts. I had been very much in love with very complicated sentences.” To demonstrate the kind of sentence he means, Pinsky quotes the first sentence of George Herbert’s poem “Church Monuments”—a sentence consisting of five and a half pentameter lines. In fact, he quotes the long sentence twice from memory, illustrating both his knowledge of canonical poetry and his affinity for complex grammar.

Pinsky jokes, “I once asked some Berkeley doctoral students, ‘what is the main verb [of Herbert’s sentence]?’ Some of them said, ‘drives?’ ‘No, F.’ It is entombs.” Pinsky displays a passion for syntax that sets him apart from most people in the room; he also inserts a bit about how he as the professor got the better of the graduate students at one of the best English doctoral programs in the country. Pinsky’s joke that he gave the students an “F” for failing to correctly diagram the sentence is light-hearted, but it nonetheless reminds the audience of his authority on these matters. Yet his authority, in this moment, does not seem to be driven by Pinsky’s accomplishments as much as the love of syntax that drives him to learn more about grammar. In fact, it’s that very passion for the nuts and bolts of language that leads him to the “incantation” style Thorburn

refers to. As he tells it, he had been so “in love” with complex sentences for so long that he began to realize the contrasting power of shorter phrases—or as he says, “the substantives, in the case of ‘Shirt,’ with the article. The *this*, the *that*.” He never says the more familiar word “noun” in place of “substantive,” further showcasing his expertise by using esoteric vocabulary. In order for Pinsky to explain a change in his poetic style, he gets technical, thereby telling the audience that his understanding of language is far more precise and sophisticated than that of a non-author. Pinsky’s performance of authorship here reveals that his poem is not only carefully crafted on a rhythmical level—it is fine-tuned on grammatical level as well. The grammatical symmetry of the poem’s lines was not the result of an accidental discovery of pleasing sounds, but conscious experimentation with grammatical structures.

If Pinsky has alienated any of his audience with his talk of the immortality he hopes to achieve or his passion for the substantive, he follows these remarks by taking himself down a notch or two, making fun of the vanity of authors. Thorburn asks him to recite “Shirt” and he puts it off for a moment to finish his remarks about grammar. The following exchange then occurs:

- Thorburn:** Since he doesn’t want to read it, it’s a kind of inventory—  
**Pinsky:** Oh, I’ll read it. [He reaches into his leather briefcase for his book.]  
**Thorburn:** See, he would be much more cooperative if I wasn’t his friend.  
**Pinsky:** It’s what friends are for, it’s so nice . . . [affecting false modesty] Oh, no, I musn’t! No, no . . . [Meanwhile, he grabs the book eagerly and grins widely.]  
**Thorburn:** He’s not behaving well. If he doesn’t behave better I’m going to recite some of his suppressed poetry.  
**Pinsky:** I said to David, “Keep enticing me to read ‘Shirt,’ and I’ll pretend I don’t want to. Keep begging me to do it.”

Pinsky wishes to become immortal through his poetry, but in this joking exchange, he admits to the vanities that complement that ambition. Pinsky pretends that he asked Thorburn to enact a fantasy of fame in which others “beg” him to recite poetry, even though his performance of authorship is generally not about popularity.

The desire for artistic recognition is something many people can relate to, though they may not overtly strive for it as Pinsky does. By tapping into (or pretending to tap into) his baser desires, rushing to grab his book so that he can read while pretending to resist the audience’s demands, Pinsky shows a sillier side to himself as an author. Through his jokes, the audience may realize that Pinsky is enjoying being the center of attention at this event, and not appearing out of duty to his friend or to the audience. Many of the people in the audience may be wishing they had an entire crowd of people listening to their opinions on art or begging them to perform in some way. In the essay “Author,” Donald Pease defines *authorship* as a “procedure whereby an anonymous agent turns into an individual” (105). Here, Pinsky reveals a daydream of being recognized for his individuality by a community, one likely shared by most members of the audience regardless of whether or not they want to be artists. In the process of this exchange, Pinsky establishes a kinship with the audience.

Joking aside, Pinsky appears very happy to share “Shirt” with the audience, and he seems to enjoy himself while reading. The positive energy comes partly from Pinsky’s slow pace in speaking—he never rushes through a poem the way many nervous or inexperienced speakers do. Also, he puts his body into reading the poem, giving the impression that he enjoys its sounds and rhythms. His head moves up and down in time with the beat, and at times he sways back and forth.

In spite of Pinsky’s skilled, practiced recitation, his choices are not those of a virtuoso performer. Lawrence Levine explains in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow* that many

arts patrons in the nineteenth century were suspicious of soloists in operas and choirs, fearing they would “encourage the audience to admire sensationalism rather than art” (138). Though Pinsky engages his mind and body while reading, his arms stay pinned to his side. There is something about reading poetry that makes Pinsky *not* gesture, as he gestures frequently during the conversational parts of the event. He holds a book in front of him, though he has much of the poem memorized. He does not significantly change his tone, pitch, or volume at any point. He does not squarely face the audience, choosing to stay seated at a diagonal angle to them. By staying seated, avoiding gestures, and keeping his facial expression neutral, Pinsky encourages the audience to focus on listening. Though he moves, demonstrating the physical nature of the poem, he gives the audience relatively little to watch. He avoids the appearance of acting, and never verges on sensationalism. He demonstrates to the audience that he is an accomplished poet, but not a virtuosic performer, perpetuating a divide between writer and performer that is frequently overturned in other performance (and poetry) venues.

### **Pinsky’s Poetry Reading at John Carroll University**

Pinsky’s performance of authority at MIT depended partly on context—he was invited to have “a conversation” – not simply to recite poetry. In fact, poetic recitation was a very small part of the event. But in the context of a more traditional poetry reading, at John Carroll University on February 10, 2005, Pinsky still shared knowledge and expertise with the audience as part of his performance of “Shirt” (Pinsky, “Poet Robert”).<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the lengthy introduction at this event by poet George Bilgere discussing Pinsky’s career, Pinsky begins his portion of the reading by discussing

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<sup>4</sup> Audio recordings of the reading can be found here: [http://www.jcu.edu/news/robert\\_pinsky.htm](http://www.jcu.edu/news/robert_pinsky.htm).

himself, his definition of poetry, and the Favorite Poem Project. After four minutes of talking, he jokes, “That was not the first poem; that was a sermonette.” (The audience laughs.) In the 65-minute recording of Pinsky speaking, he talks for 43 minutes (only about 16 minutes of that talking is in response to audience questions) and reads poetry for 22 minutes. Including Bilgere’s nine-minute introduction, three-quarters of the event involves experts talking about poetry instead of poets reciting poems. Pinsky only reads eight poems total.

Before reciting “Shirt” at John Carroll, Pinsky muses on the nature of history, saying that we are all descended from kings and slaves; we are all products of love and rape. He explicates one of the themes of the poem: that every object connects to a human history, and that history is simultaneously noble and base. After reading the poem, Pinsky says,

One of those things that always gets mixed up in my mind is inductive and deductive – that’s a confession . . . [“Shirt”] tends to start from the stitches on the object, and then think about the history of the object. [“Ginza Samba”] is about another object . . . and it sort of puts it back together from the other direction.

If Pinsky were truly embarrassed by his confusion over induction and deduction, he probably would not have mentioned it to the audience. He is not so devoted to his persona of expertise that he will not admit any ignorance. That at least a few members of the audience identify with this problem is evidenced by the fact that some of them laugh at Pinsky’s remark. Yet at the same time, the fact that his confusion is a “confession” draws attention to his status as a professor and expert.

Pinsky next introduces the poem “Ginza Samba” by giving a great deal of historical context for the poem: the invention of the saxophone, the names of black American men who made the saxophone famous, the meaning of the words “Ginza” and

“Samba,” and the recording history of the song “Ginza Samba.” The informative, professorial manner of Pinsky’s poetry readings is consistent in many of his public appearances. It’s not strange that a professor has a professorial manner, but Pinsky was invited to MIT and John Carroll as a *poet*, not as a doctor of philosophy. Other poets who are professors might choose to separate the two roles, but Pinsky fuses them together.

Pinsky’s performance of authorship invites the audience to see poems not as the result of a spontaneous overflow of emotion but of careful study. The great poem requires an expert’s meticulous hand to develop, and thus deserves to endure. Though Pinsky does not, in his performances of authorship, deny the importance of emotion in poetry, he emphasizes reading and research as tools to make great poems. “Shirt” is not a direct condemnation of sweatshops or slavery—its value, to Pinsky, relates to its insights into the nature of material objects and human history, as well as its sound patterns and syntactical innovations.

### **DEFINING AUTHORSHIP**

Ben Downing and Daniel Kunitz’s interview of Pinsky for *The Paris Review* in the fall of 1997 occurred at the beginning of Pinsky’s laureateship and during the nascent stages of the Favorite Poem Project. This interview is a particularly rich text in terms of Pinsky’s performance of authorship because Kunitz and Downing’s questions revolve around the central issues of this dissertation, including how to become a poet and the ontological status of the poem. According to John Rodden, author of *Performing the Literary Interview*, “the *Paris Review* interviews are collaborated on so that the interviewee can get his or her words exactly as he or she wants them, and present the portrait of their desires” (231). Though this interview was an improvisational one in some sense—Pinsky didn’t know all the questions that would be asked in advance—he did

have the opportunity to review and revise his statements. The interviewers also improvised some of the time, asking follow-up questions based on Pinsky's statements; in this way, they let Pinsky shape much of the conversation. Finally, the interview is a quality performance of authorship because it is thorough—thirty-three pages in its original print publication.

The published interview begins with an introduction to Pinsky's career by Downing and Kunitz:

When Robert Pinsky was named Poet Laureate of the United States earlier this year, it felt deeply appropriate. To an unusual degree, Pinsky has mulled, both on the page and off, over the relationship between American civic and private life. Although far from jingoistic, he's an unabashed patriot who embodies many of our more attractive national traits: ingenuity, open-mindedness, a certain stalwart optimism. His second volume is called *An Explanation of America*, and where Pinsky once helped poets make sense of their country, it's safe to guess that he'll now prove just as good at spurring the country to take stock of its verse; the art couldn't find a more effective advocate.

Downing and Kunitz characterize Pinsky as what Rubin would call a sage—a wise man engaged with civic life. They depict him as an American role model and an advocate for poetry. His commitment to his country—expressed in verse and other mediums—is only part of what makes him a good leader; his mullings over American life are worthy of attention not only because of the energy Pinsky has spent crafting them but also because of his credentials. The second paragraph of the interview makes the audience aware of Pinsky's accomplishments—a scholarship to Stanford University, thirty years of professing poetry, five books of poems, two poetry translations, three books of literary criticism, and six major literary awards. Pinsky's poetry has received acclaim; he has been educated and has taught at elite universities. Thus Downing and Kunitz make their

audience understand that Pinsky's ideas are worthy of respect; his commitment to civic life also makes them relevant to the populace.

Since Pinsky teaches others to become authors (in Boston University's creative writing program) and he even teaches other teachers how to teach poetry (in his Favorite Poem Project summer workshops for high school educators), his teaching style is part of his performance of authorship. When Downing and Kunitz ask Pinsky about how to teach non-poets to become poets, he focuses on examples. There is a direct correlation between Pinsky's origin story of learning from Winters and the way he teaches others to write. Pinsky quotes Yeats as saying: "Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence." He explains the quote this way: "Craft is something that you learn by studying models." His job as a teacher is to recommend and direct students toward the best models; he adds that as a teacher he can also "tell [one] what to look for, point things out."

Pinsky's method of teaching poets is not controversial or strange. However, his emphasis on learning by example is distinctive. When asked about becoming a poet, he does not advise writers to learn by writing, and he does not advise them to take writing classes or read books about writing. Pinsky speaks about other methods of improving one's poems very rarely, although in this interview, Downing and Kunitz ask him about collaboration:

**DOWNING AND KUNITZ**

. . . you do a lot of polishing with the assistance of friends, through the mail and on the phone.

**PINSKY**

At times it verges on collaboration. When I lived in California, there were a lot of heavy FedEx and phone bills. There have been times when Frank Bidart and I have actually written together on the phone. Consultation with poet friends like Frank, Tom Sleight, Thom Gunn, Bob Hass, Seamus Heaney, Jim McMichael, David Ferry, Louise Gluck and Alan



Williamson-to give a partial list-has been important to me; it's hard to imagine where I'd be without it.

Here, Pinsky affirms the importance of a literary circle, collaborative writing, and revisions. He even hints that he might not be a successful poet without the help of these friends. Yet, when Pinsky talks about teaching (in this interview and elsewhere) he does not discuss the role of the creative writing workshop. He does not explain how to foster collaborative groups of writers. He does not describe making comments about his students' poems. He says that his teaching style is based on examples of great literature, not dialogue about the poems produced for the class. Again, in this performance of authorship Pinsky suggests the importance of the literature curriculum for the poet, rather than the creative writing program, in spite of the fact that he teaches creative writing and not literature.

Pinsky's lack of emphasis on collaboration coincides with his interest in literary immortality. The canon currently consists of few, if any, collaborative pieces of literature. The people Gracia refers to as "the composite author," consisting of publishers, editors, agents, and anyone else who shaped a text besides the historical author, generally do not achieve immortality through their work. Even poems such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, known to have been composed by a process "verging" on collaboration, (in Eliot's case, with Pound) are still essentially attributed to one man.

### **THE POEM'S NATIVE TECHNOLOGY**

All of the poets discussed in this dissertation recognize that poetry can exist in many formats—none go so far as to call verse printed in a book by a different term than verse displayed on a website or heard on a CD. Yet many poets have a sense that poetry is *best* suited to a particular medium. "Native technology" is a term coined by Somers-Willett in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* that is similar to "ontology" but reflects

this notion of a best option among many possibilities. Pinsky explains in the interview that “poetry’s medium is the individual chest and throat and mouth of whoever undertakes to say the poem—a body, and not necessarily the body of the artist or an expert as in dance.” Pinsky distinguishes between the vocalization and performance of poems: a performer of poetry vocalizes the poem, but a vocalizer of poetry does not always perform. Vocalization is crucial to poem-ness, and performance is not. According to Pinsky, poetry’s “native technology” is the human voice—not the printed page, not the computer screen, not the stage, not the video. This section situates Pinsky’s views in the context of two histories of language and performance: Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* and Shannon Jackson’s *Professing Performance*.

Pinsky explains poetry in a way that makes the printed poem the visual sign of the oral text (Gracia 22). In other words, the print exists so that a reader will speak it aloud. Many other poets and critics have made the opposite assumption—that the oral text is a sign for the written one. Those greatly interested in line breaks, visual rhymes, and anagrams (the literary scholar Christopher Ricks comes to mind) may find a poem more difficult to appreciate if they cannot see its visual components. Though, as evidenced by the poem “Shirt,” Pinsky *does* attend to the visual aspects of the poem on the page, he rarely mentions how the poem looks in interviews or in his editorial notes about poetry.

Pinsky also does not “read” the line breaks by pausing or changing his tone at the end of the line when vocalizing poems. However, he does emphasize the accented syllables, especially when vocalizing “Shirt.” Not only does he say the accented syllables with more force and duration, but he pauses between the syllables of words to accent them even more: “The **press**-er, the **cut**-ter, / The **wring**-er.” Although this approach is inconsistent with Pinsky’s instructions for reading poems aloud in his prosody manual

*The Sounds of Poetry*, because it sounds artificial, it is consistent with Pinsky's insistence that poems are made of sounds, and their medium is breath. His audience can hear the rhythm in the poem's lists and potentially feel drawn to the physical, metrical aspects of the poem.

Though orality is crucial to Pinsky, he locates the art of poetry outside of the performative arena:

That physical tingle, that powerful, audible experience of poetry, has come to me not with poets projecting their own work powerfully to an audience, or with the John-Gielgud-reading-Shakespeare-sonnets records that friends have played for me on their stereos. It tends to be more intimate, less planned, than that. One is alone, or maybe with a friend or two.

His definition of performance does not match the one laid out in the Introduction, which separates two friends reading poetry in a living room into a performer (the one reading) and an audience (the one listening). Pinsky associates the term performance with rehearsal, polish, and artifice. He elaborates on this distinction, explaining that even a student reading poetry aloud to a full classroom often creates "real" poetry:

Though the vocal performance may be crude, that crudeness just throws the essence of the poetry into higher relief. Whereas the effective personality of a poet giving a reading or the rich expert tones of an actor reading "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" might muffle that essence by encasing it within the other art of performance.

Pinsky hints that the better a performance of a poem is, the less poetic he finds it (explaining his un-virtuosic performance of "Shirt"). Poetry to him is not gesture, not costume, and not staging in the sense of planned movements timed to certain phrases. Although breath is all-pervasive in the human body, Pinsky defines the poem as happening in the lungs, the larynx, the tongue—not the face, the limbs, or the fingers. Even the voice, as necessary as it is for the poem's creation, can be a detriment to a poem

if that voice is too trained or too rehearsed. There is a danger that the audience will be more aware of the voice of the speaker than the sounds of the poem.

In exploring the relationship between poems on a page and poems skillfully performed, poet-critic Kwame Dawes seems to address Pinsky directly:

If this is true, it then implies that one cannot trust the performance to demonstrate quality. It introduces a dichotomy between the performance and the poem itself—a disturbing dichotomy to say the least, but one that is tempting and one that has some merit. The truth is that the ‘street poem’ introduces another dimension to poetry that is not necessarily obvious in the published poem. That dimension, which becomes another element of the poetic experience, is performance (10).

In other words, one way to understand poetry and performance would be that when read aloud (and Pinsky insists that poetry should be read aloud), one can appreciate parts of the poem that are absent, or at least harder to notice, when reading silently. Dawes suggests that a skillful performer can bring out more dimensions of a poem. But Pinsky sticks to the idea that if performance skills are applied to a poem, poetry goes missing. His view can be traced back to New Critical methods of interpreting poetry, which focus on the poem in a contextual vacuum. The art of monologue, with its emphasis on character, injects a context into the poem that Pinsky claims is unpoetic. His separation between poetry and performance may have something to do with the cultural implications of his body and his background: the “street poems” Dawes discusses are part of black culture, and not part of the curriculum at Stanford University in the 1960s.

Though Pinsky doesn’t disparage the art of theater, his ideas don’t fit with the interdisciplinary tradition of performance studies, which allows events to be classified as

equally performative and poetic. The history of theatre and performance studies in the academy that Jackson outlines helps contextualize Pinsky's views:

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the rise of "professionalism". . . In traditional fields such as law and medicine, in newer fields of employment such as social work, and in changing occupations such as academia itself, the term professionalism was also synonymous with the concept of "expertise" and denoted an arena of rigorously trained experts. The modern concept of "discipline" thus arose when the discursive strain of professional expertise met the exigencies of a restructuring university. This meeting sustained a social transformation in the occupation of "the intellectual"—a figure who increasingly required university training and affiliation—and altered this figure's relationship to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge (16-7).

Through his performances, Pinsky has defined himself as an author who is also an expert. Jackson's history reveals that expertise and disciplinary affiliations are closely aligned with the history of the university, and may explain Pinsky's aversion to the interdisciplinary nature of performance in the early twenty-first century: he has not been rigorously trained in the art of performance, so he does not feel comfortable evaluating performance as poetry.

Performance studies scholars not only self-identify as interdisciplinary, they are "canon-busters"—and, insofar as they are successful, weaken literary authority (23). According to Jackson, "oral interpretation and dramatic literature have had marginal canonical status in the humanities," providing a further reason for Pinsky, with his hopes of literary immortality, to distance poetry from performance (24). In the mid-twentieth century, New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren developed a hierarchy of genres with poetry at the top and drama at the bottom (88-9). The trends in humanities scholarship that Clifford Geertz identified in 1980—genre blurring, emphasis on the particular, and cultural analysis—don't fit with Pinsky's goal of writing enduring

poems for a universal audience (146). Genre blurring is not desirable if it blends poetry with a less prestigious or enduring art form; poems with a particular audience dependent on cultural context for their meaning threaten the power of a universal, canonical poem.

Pinsky's interest in the history and discipline of literature helps explain his definition of poetry as an oral art form. Lyric poetry had its origin in song. While drama and epic poems incorporated musical elements as well, in lyric poetry "the musical element is intrinsic to the work intellectually as well as aesthetically: it becomes the focal point for the poet's perceptions as they are given a verbalized form to convey emotional and rational values" (J. Johnson 713). Lyric's association with music became more complicated during the Renaissance, when poets began attending more closely to the written, visual aspects of their work to suit the new technology of print. When Pinsky conceives of videotaping Americans reciting poetry for the Favorite Poem Project and hosting live readings where people recite their favorite poems, he embraces both new media and the trend of live poetry readings for disseminating poetry in a way that harkens back to ancient poetic traditions. However, the parallel consequence of digital media and live poetry events, which allow anyone to become an author, a performer, and a publisher, is resisted by Pinsky through a performance of authorship that focuses on respect for "great" authors and the serious study of canonical literature.

Walter Ong suggests that the interest in the differences between orality and literacy developed in the electronic age, which explains why the ontology or native technology of the poem has become a pressing question for poets and critics (2). Ong explains that print helped develop the idea of "context-free language" (77). Print allows language to be detached from its author, enabling the potential for the universal audience that Pinsky aims to reach. Print is identified with individual readers, who can exist anywhere in time and space. Orality implies community, participation, and

“concentration on the present moment” (133). Ong argues that sound and video recording have prompted the rise of “secondary” or “new” orality; in the age of secondary orality, people are still dependent on print, but they place increasing value on the qualities of oral communication. As discussed in the next section on the Favorite Poem Project, Pinsky embraces secondary orality’s sense of participation and community to some degree, but also promotes reading poetry aloud while alone, with no audience. The “concentration on the present moment” is not enticing to him because of his goal to make enduring works of art.

To understand the author that Pinsky is constructing in his performances, it’s important to understand the nature of the texts he creates. According to Pinsky, he writes books so that his audience can make sounds as they read them aloud. Seeing poetry is not as important to him as hearing it, and both print and theatre require what Jackson calls “seeability” (191). Audiences reading aloud complete, and even help create, the poem. Pinsky reads his own poems aloud, often in public, but that event is not primary for him, and it even has some dangers. There’s potential for the performance to eclipse the poem. His definition of poetry and performance as separate, possibly even competing entities, crucially informs his performance of authorship. He resists the affiliation of poetry and performance in order to preserve poetry as a separate discipline in an increasingly interdisciplinary world.

#### **DANGERS OF POETRY PERFORMANCE: *THE SIMPSONS* “LITTLE GIRL IN THE BIG 10”**

*The Simpsons* episode "Little Girl in the Big 10," in which Pinsky guest-starred, aired on FOX for the first time on May 12, 2002, about a year after Pinsky’s laureateship

ended.<sup>5</sup> This *Simpsons* episode pokes fun at all kinds of things: anthropology, Bubble Boy, Cathy cartoon strips, Chinese sweatshops, the nineties band Chumbawumba, gymnastics, intellectual culture, JFK, mosquito-borne diseases, physical education, vegetarianism . . . and the performance of poetry. Though Pinsky did not write the episode, it makes fun of poets and poetry readings that oppose his ideas about authorial performance.

Pinsky reads his own poem in the episode, although he does not sound quite like himself; his voice is a bit higher than usual. He begins his performance by saying, "Tonight I'll be reading a copy of my book I just checked out at [looks inside the front cover of the book he's holding] Atherton library." Like a rock star who knows the crowd will cheer if he mentions the name of the town he's playing in, Pinsky's character attempts to manipulate the audience's emotions. And it works: "I study there!" screams one acne-ridden boy in excitement. Pinsky murmurs to himself, "That's it Pinsky, you've got them right where you want them," emphasizing the cartoon Pinsky's need for self-aggrandizement. The audience is excited by a celebrity in their midst, not by the poem presented.

The meaning of Pinsky's poem isn't very clear (partially due to interruptions in the form of Lisa's inner monologue) and when Pinsky gets to the line, "Basho, he named himself. Banana man," the television audience may not comprehend what the poem is about. However, the audience within *The Simpsons* includes five half-naked young men with B-A-S-H-O painted on their bare chests in red paint. They bang their chests together and shout "Basho!" in a parody of drunken college students at a football game. This

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<sup>5</sup> The following website provides video of the episode illegally; there is currently no legal way to purchase or view Season 13 of the *The Simpsons* besides finding a re-run on television: <http://wtso.net/movie/67-The%20Simpsons%201320%20>.



spectacle is not part of Pinsky's definition of poetry; the half-naked men are much more compelling to the viewers of *The Simpsons* than the words Pinsky speaks.

At the end of the reading, Pinsky sits on the stage with a half-eaten pizza and five earnest young fans who listen to him with their full attention as he tells a bragging story about President Clinton demanding a poem from him unexpectedly. Pinsky claims to make up a poem on the spot, pulling material "out of [his] ass." Because the real poet laureate has no daily business in Washington, and the President does not rely on him for matters of state, Pinsky's anecdote is funny to the viewers of *The Simpsons*, even though Lisa and the other characters are deeply impressed. Pinsky's character is making things up to impress his fans. The poet as performer is not only vain, and not only hungry for fame—he's pathetic. He needs the worship of these students for his own self-esteem. The show implies that the poems he improvises are trivial. Meanwhile, Lisa and her friends are depicted as easily impressed and easily manipulated. They do not critique or discuss Pinsky's poetry—they are all over-awed by his performance.

When asked about his experience on *The Simpsons*, Pinsky said, "The show is very well written, and performed by superb vocal actors. The literary, cultural and political allusions tend to have engaging backspin. So supplying the voice for my character—a poet with my name and some of my attributes, but a jerk—was a large challenge" (Pinsky, Interview by *Every Writer's Resource*). The reason that Pinsky saw his character as a jerk was because he sought the limelight, and was more concerned with the audience's reactions to his persona than with his own writing ability. The depiction of the poet-as-performer in *The Simpsons* was extremely negative; the performer was stereotypically shallow and egotistical, and his persona affected his performance and diminished the seriousness of his poetry. Pinsky's authorial readings oppose the style of his *Simpsons* character's in almost every way. The audience is participating, and there is

a sense of community—but that community is built on celebrity worship, not shared ideas or an appreciation of beauty.

Pinsky displays the same sense of humor in appearing on *The Simpsons* as he does when affecting false modesty at MIT. He takes a performative risk by appearing on the show—because it’s likely some of the television audience will not realize the differences between Pinsky as he typically presents himself and the satirical version of Pinsky *The Simpsons* writers create. At MIT and John Carroll University, Pinsky is poised, engaged, and appreciative of the attention given to him—but he attempts to direct that attention to the knowledge he shares with the audience and the poetry he reads. The Pinsky character on the *The Simpsons* has nothing to say that could benefit the audience, but the Pinsky at MIT taps into his expertise to give the audience ideas to think about and sounds to enjoy.

#### **THE POET AND THE AUDIENCE: THE FAVORITE POEM PROJECT ANTHOLOGIES**

Pinsky does not overtly promote his own celebrity in the way that his *Simpsons* character does, and he also does not have as low opinion of poetry’s audiences. This section turns to the way Pinsky interacts with audiences through The Favorite Poem Project, begun during his first term as poet laureate (Pinsky, *Favorite*). The Library of Congress loosely defines poet laureate as “the official lightning rod for the poetic impulses of Americans;” Pinsky’s Favorite Poem Project was deemed so successful at this task that he was appointed to an unprecedented third term as laureate (“About”).

For the project, Pinsky asked Americans of all ages and occupations to tell him the name of their favorite poem, and briefly explain why the poem meant so much to them. He envisioned the collection of favorite poems as a time capsule—capturing what Americans were reading at the turn of the century. The collection was made available to the public through three printed anthologies, as well as fifty videos of respondents talking

about and reciting their favorite poems. These videos are on a DVD included in the third printed anthology, *An Invitation to Poetry*; they are also viewable on the Favorite Poem Project's website. The project allowed Americans to share their poetic preferences with each other in an anecdotal way. Readers could discover new poems under the guidance of other, non-specialist readers.

Pinsky describes the purpose of the project as curating poetry, and by doing so, keeping the best poetry alive:

In the diverse, rapidly shifting culture of the United States, arts like poetry are not cared for and handed on by a single, unifying folk culture. Nor is poetry curated by an aristocracy or a high bourgeoisie for whom art might have snob value. In place of the folk culture or the aristocratic curatorship, we eagerly improvise institutions: creative writing courses are one example; the Favorite Poem Project is another (Pinsky and Dietz *Poems* xxiv-xxv).

Part of this curatorial process involved publishing about 600 poems in the three anthologies. Most of these poems were presented with a short headnote written by one of the participants in the project. The series did not publish the most popular poems among American readers, however. The selections included met the literary standards of Pinsky and Dietz, which very often meant that the poems were canonical (taught in literature courses) and enduring (written by a poet of a previous generation). In fact, only 12% of the poems in the anthologies were written by a poet who does not appear in one of the most recent Norton anthologies of literature.

The editors had the most influence over the content of the second anthology, *Poems to Read: A New Favorite Poem Project Anthology*, published in 2002. About half of the two hundred poems in the book were not suggested by Favorite Poem Project participants, but hand-picked by Pinsky and Dietz. *Poems to Read* is indicative of

Pinsky's performance of authorship because it places his introductions to poems alongside those of readers (who are not authors).

Of the poems picked by Pinsky and Dietz, only about 25% have headnotes. As Pinsky states in his introduction to the book,

we found it important to present many poems with no headnote or commentary at all—neither the personal statements by participants nor our own incidental remarks. By no means did we want to imply that instructional headnotes are essential, as they might be in a different book. Our choices of when to add a few words of commentary have been casual, personal, and arbitrary (xxv).

*Poems to Read* is carefully distinguished from a textbook. Its goal is not to teach poetic interpretation skills or prosodic vocabulary. Pinsky attempts to steer readers away from the idea that one has to have a particular kind of intelligence or a particular skill set to read poetry. Rather, the book focuses on presenting examples of the kind that Pinsky refers to in the *Paris Review* interview, encouraging audiences to connect with those poems through various means.

The headnotes in *Poems to Read* can be categorized into four types:

1. Personal associations and memories related to the poem
2. Explication of the poem
3. Some combination of personal association and explication
4. Praise of the poem with no explication

Personal associations often take the form of “poem x makes me think about y.” Explication responses, on the other hand, are more analytical—unpacking the meaning of a word or line or describing the effect of the sounds in the poem. Some give the poem's printing history, the biography of the author, or the origin of the poem's themes in myths or folk tales. Finally, praising headnotes describe how the reader feels about the poem, without any explanation of what the poem means or what associations it holds for the reader.

The reader's headnotes chosen by Pinsky and Dietz fall fairly evenly into the first three camps—28% are personal, 28% explanatory, and 26% are some combination of the two. 18% are simply laudatory. There is a difference between how Pinsky and Dietz introduce poems, however; neither write any purely personal headnotes—and Dietz doesn't write anything personal at all. About 80% of Pinsky's and 93% of Dietz's headnotes explicate some aspect of the poem.

A quote from Pinsky's introduction to the third anthology, *An Invitation to Poetry*, helps describe this division: "what poets and teachers have to say about the art rightly has immense authority. The authority of experience, knowledge, expertise cannot be replaced" (xxiii). On the other hand, general readers offer "invitation, a gesture as simple as tasting something good and then offering it to another" (xxiii). Though a few of the contributors have developed expertise about the poem they selected or poetry in general, Pinsky and Dietz are much less likely than the contributors to make personal associations or praise the way the poem makes them feel.

A good example of the difference between the readers' contributions and Pinsky's descriptions occurs in the headnotes to Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Land of Counterpane" (Pinsky and Dietz, *Poems* 57). Donna Herz of Littleton, Colorado writes:

I can remember being sick as a child. My dad bought me a drawbridge to play with while I was in bed. I loved driving the cars over the bridge and raising and lowering it. This poem brings that memory back to me every time I read it. It is a pleasant memory from that pleasant land of counterpane.

Pinsky's headnote for the same poem reads:

This poem has hypnotized me since I was small. There's a trance-like quality to calling the soldiers "leaden": it's the metal they are made of, but also how a fever makes you feel. And in the last four lines the change from "was" to "sees," past to present, is like leaving the real world for the eternal present of the imaginary world.

Herz's note mainly consists of a personal memory that echoes some of the events in the poem. Her last sentence, which quotes "pleasant land of counterpane" merely hints at the meaning of that phrase, which Pinsky more explicitly defines as "the imaginary world" in his note. Pinsky's personal remark is very general—there is not an event he associates with the poem beyond reading or hearing it when he was young. On the other hand, his description of the poem is very specific—the double meaning of the word "leaden" and an interpretation of the change of verb tense. Pinsky's note has a didactic quality, even though it is, as he describes in his introduction, short and informal. Though there's a quality of "tasting something good and offering it to another" in Pinsky's remarks, they also bring to bear his experience of interpreting poems, and his expert way of making meaning out of ambiguity.

Though Pinsky invites a certain amount of collaboration with poetry audiences, encouraging them to complete poems in their bodies and share their thoughts about poetry with others, there is a point in the Favorite Poem Project where the experts take over. Poets have cultural authority that keeps Pinsky distinct from the audience by virtue of his extensive education and experience. At the same time, Pinsky both respects and enjoys the audience's contribution to the conversation, so much so that he creates a book in which his submissions and notes for the book are presented in the exact same format as those of general readers. The fact that expert and amateur share the space of a single book (albeit one in which Pinsky and Dietz decided which amateurs they included) shows Pinsky's belief that, in spite of the author's differences from the audience, authors and audiences both appreciate and learn from examples of great poetry. He takes great pains to convince poetry's audiences that they do not need special learning to read and enjoy poetry; to make a poem, on the other hand, one must have extensive knowledge of both poetic history and poetic craft. Doubtless many of the contributors to the Favorite Poem

Project also write poetry, but Pinsky does not consider them poets until they have acquired expertise and authority. His performance of authorship develops the widest possible audience while reserving the role of the poet for the very few.

## CONCLUSION

Pinsky performs the poet as civically engaged, with worldly responsibilities. The Favorite Poem Project supports the notion of poet as sage, as do many of Pinsky's career activities not discussed in detail here: editorials and book reviews, edited columns in magazines and newspapers, commencement addresses, appearances on National Public Television and Radio. Pinsky used his status as the nation's poet laureate to create an institution that allows him to curate, promote, and protect poems belonging to a literary, canonical tradition. Each of his public appearances finds him dispensing bits of knowledge and history to his audience, as well as reiterating his definitions of poetry and his instructions for reading it. His appearances as an artist are very much bound up in his performance of teacher, expert, and curator.

Pinsky's career echoes the Emersonian role of an "engaged, civic-minded intellectual," but yet he does not fit into the equally Emersonian role of the poet as seer or prophet (Rubin *Songs* 23). During his performances of authorship Pinsky never presents himself as a man with "extraordinary vision," capable of "discern[ing] spiritual laws and universal truth" (20). He is a mere mortal, who only claims to have developed specific skills through a long process of education and work. For those who wish to be poets, nothing in Pinsky's performance of authorship suggests that poets are endowed with mystical, mysterious, or God-given gifts of sight. Pinsky's performance of authority is indicative of a more secular, diverse culture in twenty-first century America compared to the America Emerson inhabited.

Pinsky's performance of authorship does, as Middleton suggests, assert the authority of the author in a world where literary critics might consider the author "dead"—and also where open mike readers and poetry weblog writers might believe they have an equal claim to the title of author. Yet, he attains his authority not so much through his physical presence during readings, as by staying publicly engaged with poetic issues and by staying, in public relations terms, "on message." Through appearances in books and magazines, on television, and at live events Pinsky consistently separates himself from his audiences by showcasing his acquired knowledge and expertise.

Pinsky's performance of authorship as authority is by no means an anomaly. As Rubin points out, the existence of such prominent sage-poets in the nineteenth century as Emerson and Whitman led many readers to expect uncommon wisdom from poets. In the July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry*, Clive James complained: "At a time when almost everyone writes poetry but scarcely anyone can write a poem, it is hard not to wish for a return to some less accommodating era, when the status of 'poet' was not so easily aspired to" (345). As it becomes easier to perform and publish poetry no matter what one's skill level, a person who has successfully established themselves as an expert can be a reliable filter for an overwhelmed audience, and can hope to influence the poems and ideas about poetry that become mainstream, and eventually canonical.

The authority Pinsky performs is a disciplinary authority: he claims that the poems he is an expert on are meant to be vocalized, not performed. They are not the material for a virtuoso singer or actress to showcase her talent; poems are not part of show business. For Pinsky, the advantage of defining poetry as "something that sounds terrific when it is read aloud" but is not "encased" in the art of performance is that the art of poetry is large but ultimately distinct (Pinsky, Interview by Kelly). If poems are



contextual and performative, their definition becomes muddier. If everyone is a poet, their definition becomes muddier still.

Pinsky claims that poetry audiences need no special knowledge or ability—they absorb poems physically by reading them aloud, and decide whether those poems “sound terrific” or not. The audience for poetry that Pinsky invokes through his performances of authorship is the widest possible one. Those audiences who read enough great-sounding poems can develop expertise over time, and that expertise allows one to become a poet. By defining a poet as an expert on the sounds of language and the history of poetry, Pinsky makes the status of poet distinguished and achievable at the same time. For a poet hoping to gain literary immortality, the (relatively) narrow parameters of poetry, the vastness of poetry’s audience, and the attainable expertise of the poet are all desirable.

Yet many contemporary poets and critics challenge the parameters for poetry defined by Pinsky, and some attempt to establish a poet’s authority on vastly different tenets. One of these poets is Billy Collins, who strives to attain authority through performing authenticity rather than expertise.

## **Performing Authenticity, Performing Hospitality:**

### **Billy Collins and the Poet's Paradox of Popularity and Integrity**

#### **FROM AUTHORITY TO AUTHENTICITY**

Billy Collins, like Pinsky, disseminates poetry in a variety of media: his body of work includes two audio recordings, he performs poetry frequently on National Public Radio, and he gives dozens of public readings a year. His poems have even been animated, and those animations have appeared on television and YouTube. Yet Collins does not call poetry primarily a vocal or performative art; according to him, the poem's native technology is the page. In this, and other aspects of his work, Collins's performance of authorship reflects Romantic perceptions of poetry.

Collins identifies the poem as inherently written partly because of his notion of poetry as a solitary activity. In the documentary film *Billy Collins: On the Road with the Poet Laureate*, he says:

There's obviously a separation between the composing poet who works in silence and is trying to create a bridge between himself and maybe one other mind, and then this smiling public figure—or not-so-smiling public figure, who goes to readings and stands around looking affable holding a glass of wine. I mean, I think the threat is that one overtakes the other, there, and that's something I think one has to be careful about.

The imaginative bridge that Collins mentions resonates with the Romantic definition of lyric poetry, which Perloff describes as “the mode in which a solitary I is overheard in meditation or conversation with an unnamed other” (750). The emergence of this idea during the Romantic era makes sense given the dramatic growth of print culture at the time. The degree of introspection that books allow is not possible in an oral culture (Ong 30). Unlike the communal activities of reciting and listening to poetry in the pre-literate

age, reading poetry from a book is a private “refined pleasure,” a pleasure that Romantic poets associated with great art (Belfiore and Bennett 20).

The writing process Collins describes resonates with Gracia’s discussion about authorship and audience: the first audience for any text is its composer, who continually switches between the role of the author (the creator) and the audience (one who attempts to understand the text) (143). Gracia claims that the *only* audience to have a causal role in making the text is the author-as-audience. Yet, as Gracia points out, even if an author claims not to consider any other audience, he still writes in the public medium of language, which always indicates the possibility of a readership (159). Therefore the claim to disregard one’s larger audience entirely is rather suspect, though the text may not be published or shown to others. Collins may ultimately agree with Gracia’s assessment, as one of early poems, “Purity,” jokingly suggests that a poet needs to remove his clothes, skin, and organs in order to write poetry free of outside influences.

Collins’s poetry has a large audience; the success of his live performances is one reason that his books are among the best-selling poetry volumes in America. In a live performance, Collins forms an immediate, comfortable connection with the audience that has proved to be very popular. Yet Collins claims to write with an imagined and unnamed other, rather than a large audience, in mind. David Lehman, poet and series editor of the *Best American Poetry* series, sheds some light on why a poet may not admit to writing for a mass audience:

. . . some poets share a resistance to popularity—other people’s popularity, above all—though they might bristle if you called them elitist. It’s a problem that afflicts us all to some extent. We say we want real readers, who buy our books not as an act of charity but as a free choice, yet should one in our party escape the poetry ghetto, we tremble with ambivalence, as if having real readers means a sure loss in purity. Inevitably the discussion turns to a question that seems substantive. What accounts for an individual

poet's popular appeal? Does popularity result from (or result in) a loss of artistic integrity? (x).

Unlike Collins, no major event or situation in Pinsky's career has undermined his authority or his integrity: poetry critics admire his work, literary organizations honor him, newspapers and publishers ask him to curate collections of poems, and scholars read his books. Collins's poetry is not as widely admired by academics, and his poetry is much more popular than Pinsky's. Collins says himself that there is a *threat* his public role as a poet could damage his composition process. The key to Collins's performance of authorship is not authority, but authenticity.

The most thorough scholarly treatment of authenticity in contemporary American poetry is Somers-Willett's *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*. Somers-Willett defines an *authentic* object as something that appears to be "original, unique, and reflective of a deeply true internal substance" (73). If, as this dissertation argues, selves are performative, and conceived through interactions with others, then the concept of a true authentic self is a shaky one at best. Yet Somers-Willett rightly points out that the *perception* of authenticity has a large impact on the way poems (and, indeed, many other works of art) are received. An artist deemed un-authentic is usually considered to be selling out—performing what he thinks others want to hear, rather than speaking a "deep truth." Somers-Willett is principally interested in the way racial identities are performed in slam poetry, arguing that slam audiences evaluate the performed racial identity of the poet as well as the poem (71). This is problematic in the culture of the poetry slam because it may lead to performers employing racial stereotypes in their work that seem to audiences more authentic.

But how do issues of authenticity affect a white male poet? Collins's racial identity is not marginalized in American culture, and therefore, his authentic white

maleness is not an identity that holds any mystery for most Americans. However, writing poems that are “original, unique, and reflective of a deeply true internal substance” also works as a definition of Lehman’s “artistic integrity.” The word *integral* adds a conception of wholeness, a suggestion that the self can be undivided. An artist seen as lacking integrity is perceived to place his own artistic vision at the mercy of what sells. This chapter argues that Collins performs authenticity by enacting the role of an artistic genius. Geniuses do not pander to their audiences, but speak the “deep truth.” In fact, Pease’s essay on authorship claims that the word *genius* implies the “ability to transcend the entire cultural milieu” (108). Though Collins’s performance of genius is more evident in works discussed later in the chapter, in the above quote his effort to keep his audience separate from his composition process suggests that he can transcend, or at least bypass, the expectations of others.

*Authenticity* and *authority* are in some ways closely aligned: after all, a poet considered authentically black is also a recognized authority on blackness. Pinsky’s performance of authorship does not focus on his originality or ability to convey deep truth—in fact, he does not discuss either quality. Pinsky instead focuses on the authority he has developed through education and work. Collins more boldly attempts to derive authority from his innate (authentic) talent—as a genius for whom writing great poetry comes easily. His performance of authenticity attempts to resolve questions about his integrity as an author. If Collins emphasized, like Pinsky, his Ph.D. in literature and his professorial status, that performance would probably not help him sell more books. (In fact, there’s no evidence to suggest that Pinsky’s performance of authorship helps him market his own verse, though the Favorite Poem anthologies went through multiple printings and his translation of Dante was a best-seller. However, historically high books sales do not necessarily correlate with canonicity, which is Pinsky’s primary goal.) To the

extent that Collins succeeds in performing the role of authentic poetic genius—someone who would never sell out—he can defy the paradox outlined by Lehman and take on the role of a popular poet who also has artistic integrity.

Concerns about popularity and its relationship to authenticity have their roots in the Industrial Revolution, when literacy rates increased dramatically, giving birth to a mass audience quite different in character from the previously elite group of literates (Railton 16-17). As printed texts became available to more and more people, Romantic writers emerged to critique industrialism: “Reacting against an increase in imitative, mechanical production, romantics fostered an idea of ‘Art’ as the domain of a ‘superior reality,’” separate from the marketplace (Rubin, *Making* 2). This chapter asks: how do Romantic ideas of art influence contemporary American authors who, on the one hand, want to make money from their art, and, on the other, want to preserve their integrity? How can one combine the roles of authentic poet and popular poet? How does Collins’s performance of authenticity affect his positions on the ontology of the poem and on the public performance of poetry?

Collins describes his authorial persona not as authentic, but as hospitable. After discussing the history of the tension between high art and mass entertainment, this chapter examines Collins’s performances of hospitality in the documentary film *Billy Collins: On the Road with the Poet Laureate*, as well as the written and performed version of his poem “Litany.” Next, the chapter investigates Collins’s performance of authenticity, both in his relationship with the Romantic poet persona and his attitudes about poetic performance and the ontology of the poem. Finally, close readings of Collins’s editorial projects, *Poetry 180* and *Best American Poetry 2006*, show how his performances of hospitality and authenticity form his relationship with poetry’s audiences. The chapter argues that while popularity may not carry quite the stigma in

American poetry that it once did, Collins's contradictory performance of authorship reveals that authenticity is still an important component of an American poet's persona.

#### **ART AS SUPERIOR AND ART AS HOSPITABLE**

In spite of numerous prestigious honors—including grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, poems published in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Poetry, The Paris Review*, and *The New Yorker*, and an appointment as poet laureate of the United States from 2001-2003—the worth of Collins's poetry is quite contentious. Literary critic Richard Eder called his poetry “humdrum and obvious” (qtd. in Weeks). Another review described Collins as “a writer who takes you for a walk on the mild side” (Fulford). Poet Mary Jo Salter wrote, “Perhaps Collins is most tolerable when one expects very little” (qtd. in Hilbert sec. III). Since Collins is consistently a best-selling poet, his work was almost certainly submitted to the Favorite Poem Project, but Pinsky did not include any of his poems in the anthologies.

On the other hand, poet Miller Williams said that Collins has the gift of being “clear and mysterious at the same time” (qtd. in Weeks). Headlines celebrated his pieces for being more clear and more enjoyable than most poetry: “The Work of America's New Poet Laureate, Unlike Most of Today's American Poetry, Is Wonderfully Readable;” “For Those Who Fear Poetry, These Are for You” (Coles; Donahue). An editorial in the *Daily News* declared, “He's the kind of poet you'd be if you were a poet” (Chafets). Journalist Julie Riggott said, “You can relate to Collins's poems and—dare I say it—enjoy them.” These journalists made the claim that in a sea of difficult, dull poetry, Collins's work stands out as accessible and agreeable to the non-expert reader.

Collins uses the term *hospitality* to describe the accessibility of his poetry. According to the *OED*, *hospitality* implies welcome, and is associated with the virtues of goodwill, generosity, and openness; it also suggests entertainment. Hospitality means that an insider (a host of a party, a poet) makes an outsider (a visitor, a reader) feel at ease. The greatest degree of hospitality is generosity toward strangers, and Collins focuses his hospitality on those who are uncomfortable around poetry, aiming to erase their insecurities about their ignorance. Treating guests well means behaving as if they are “part of the family;” an attitude that paradoxically involves reinforcing the distinction between host and guest. Guests have less access to the innermost workings of a household than actual family members do, but are treated with more deference. This aspect of hospitality applies to Collins’s performance of authorship because, as we shall see, he’s not interested in developing more poetry-writing peers, but he does express a warm interest in readers and tries to foster a sense of connection between poet and audience.

Poetry critic William Logan’s review of Collins’s 2003 poetry collection *Nine Horses* is indicative of what some find wrong with Collins’s hospitality: “Many readers complain that poetry is difficult to understand, the way they grumble when an opera is sung in Italian or resent a Czech film with subtitles. Art isn’t supposed to be such hard work, is it? Billy Collins writes poetry for those people, and they appreciate it” (85). Logan assumes here that Collins is liked *because* he is easy to understand, that his audiences don’t like challenging art as a rule, and that those audiences are lazy and possibly intellectually inferior.

Logan’s concerns about Collins’s accessibility support Christopher Beach’s argument in *Poetic Culture* that “we still live in a post-Romantic age in which the assumption is most frequently made that poetry is a type of aesthetic production with a



secure status independent of historical, social, and economic contingencies” (2). In the book *Is Art Good For Us? Beliefs About High Culture in American Life*, which chronicles the history of mass culture debates in America, Joli Jensen claims that this idea of the arts is “connected to deeper ambivalences about modern life, particularly about democracy, technology, and commerce” (8). Although most Americans theoretically support freedom for all citizens, sometimes democratic ideals are undercut by suspicions that individuals within the democracy may not know what is best for them, civically or artistically speaking. In *Poetry and the Public*, Harrington agrees with Jensen’s assessment, describing the conflict in the early twentieth century between modernists and those who wanted poetry to connect to a broad populace:

While these same divisions can be found in much European poetry and poetics, they are especially important in a nation sensitive about its cultural heritage (or lack thereof), uneasy about its multiple and pluralistic identity, and with a self-image (and, in some cases, image abroad) as the original and quintessential liberal-democratic society. “Poetry,” as a category of judgment and understanding, becomes an important term in the resolving or exacerbating of these conflicts and anxieties (13-14).

The hope that art can protect our society from the ills of mass production, the desire to have a robust cultural tradition, and the fear that the populace is not capable of choosing to consume the best art all lurk behind Logan’s suggestion that Collins’s poetry is too easy.

Since poetry is associated with high culture, some believe that it improves its audience in tangible and intangible ways. Art that is not uplifting—that is “bad”—threatens to damage our culture and our minds (Jensen 112). Jensen illuminates the ways cultural critics question popular tastes:

How can the American people (seemingly eagerly!) choose and enjoy unworthy material? Several possible explanations emerge in the debates: some people are innately less critical and less aesthetically sensitive;

people have been prevented from developing the necessary critical or aesthetic skills; people have been brutalized and transformed by exposure to bad art. The possibility that media fare may actually offer something of value is never considered (111).

Logan is concerned with audiences missing out on great Italian operas and Czech films, but he is also worried that audiences are not developing the intellectual abilities to appreciate these works of art: “Try to explain to [Collins’s] readers what “The Steeple-Jack” or “The River Merchant’s Wife” or “The Snow Man” is up to, and they’ll look at you as if you’d asked them to hand-pump a ship through the locks of the Panama Canal.” This statement hints at all the possibilities that Jensen mentioned: maybe people are not smart enough to interpret Moore or Stevens, or maybe their interest in Collins actually prevents or thwarts them (somehow) from understanding what is, in Logan’s view, better art.

Jensen challenges the notion that art is serious, difficult, and valuable while entertainment is fun, easy, and not worthwhile. The idea that art and entertainment cannot co-exist is the result of circular logic: “if art requires special gifts and training to appreciate, then art that is widely appreciated can never be art” (121). Because of the perceived dichotomy between art and entertainment, cultural critics rarely “explore, respect, or trust contemporary, commercially successful culture” (133). Instead, Logan and others display “the revulsion of academics and intellectuals at the actual literary preferences, forms of aesthetic enjoyment, and general modes of cultural consumption of nonacademics and nonintellectuals” (B.H. Smith 26). As Pierre Bourdieu points out, critics can never consider the general public to have good taste, because that idea would threaten the authority of those critics to decide what should be consecrated as art (*Field* 116).

When considering Logan's review in the context of Jensen, Harrington, Smith, and Bourdieu, one may be led to question whether Logan would dislike Collins so much if he was not so successful. Perhaps Logan, as a poetry critic for *The New Criterion*, increases his symbolic capital by dismissing the tastes of the ignorant masses. On the other hand, poet Liam Rector claimed (incidentally, in an article discussing Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project) that "Much of the populace at large . . . has little problem with elitism, in poetry or in such things as sports or cabinet-making, and it's primarily anti-intellectual jerks and educated members of the chattering class who so deride the pursuit and honoring of excellence" (10). Seen through this lens, Logan's review is perhaps a perfectly respectable, even selfless, attempt to "honor excellence" and steer his audience toward the best poetry.

Regardless of the merits of Logan's review, the tendency for popular artists to lack critical acclaim does suggest that Collins's popularity may sway some critics against him, even though he is only popular by a poet's standards, not by entertainment industry standards, and is not a household name. Bourdieu claims that the symbolic capital of artists and intellectuals is partially based on economic disinterestedness; therefore a commercially successful poet like Collins may be suspected of having business sense (which is supposedly antithetical to artistic sense) (*Field 75*). Catering to an audience seems to conflict with the integrity of one's creativity, although some poets, such as Robert Frost, do appeal to both critics and mass audiences. Beach describes the difficulty many poets have with the idea of poetry in the marketplace, even though contemporary university and publishing institutions make its status as a commodity difficult to ignore (54).

The work of Beach, Harrington, Jensen, and Smith reveals that scholars and critics have become less willing to dismiss popular audiences' tastes out of hand. Many

scholars agree that just because people like to buy something doesn't mean its creator is single-mindedly focused on attracting consumers. Commercial success does not necessarily relate to quality, either in a direct or inverse correlation. Yet in twenty-first century America is it still incredibly difficult to perform the role of both a popular and authentic poet, and Collins's performance of authorship illuminates this difficulty.

### **“The Habit of Laughing:” Collins’s Accessibility and Integrity on Film**

The hour-long documentary film *Billy Collins: On the Road with the Poet Laureate*, directed by Richard B. Woodward in 2003, both celebrates Collins for his accessibility and defends him from it. Though Collins does not fully control the performance of authorship in the film (due to its director and other characters), it reveals some of the difficulties of performing hospitality and artistic integrity simultaneously.

To demonstrate Collins's accessibility and authenticity, the film emphasizes the commonalities Collins has with many non-poet Americans, attempting to show him as an average guy even while celebrating his achievements. By making Collins's life very recognizable and un-mysterious, the film attempts to decrease any distance between the poet and his audience. In the first scene, Collins drives a neutral-colored, unassuming sedan; he says he fears coming off like “a pompous ass” in the finished film. Much of the film takes place in Collins's home, as opposed to his office in the Library of Congress, which is only shown for a few seconds. An American flag hangs from the front porch of his white nineteenth-century farmhouse. It's surely a valuable property, but Collins explains to the viewers that he did not become a homeowner until around the age of fifty, hinting that he and his wife had to struggle to achieve the American dream. The film does not mention Collins as a Ph.D. or a professor until its halfway point, when he reminisces about the partying he did in graduate school and the “pothead” poetry he wrote for

*Rolling Stone* in the seventies. One of the last scenes in the film shows him playing with his dog in his yard. An outtake interspersed with the credits consists of his wife teasing him about talking too much and expressing surprise that his interviewers haven't gotten bored and left. Collins's life does not seem particularly special or strange in any way; his life as an artist appears to be similar to the life of many non-artists. Somers-Willett describes stereotypes of blackness enacted by black poets to confirm the difference and exoticness of the black identity and thus make the black poet appear authentic to white audiences; in this film, Collins is associated with stereotypes about a typical American middle-class life in order to confirm his un-exoticness—to make audiences feel that Collins has a life they can relate to.

In contrast, the film uses the testimony of experts to show that Collins's poetry is *not* ordinary. Collins's editor at Random House, *The Paris Review* poetry editor Richard Howard, and poet-critic Edward Hirsch all discuss the greatness of Collins's work. Hirsch also praises Collins's role in growing the audience for poetry: "When I began in poetry . . . you couldn't find an audience except in other poets . . . and I think a lot of things have been working to break that down, and I think, you know, Billy Collins was one of our adventurers in this regard."

Hirsch also claims that "all poetry, even the darkest poetry, has an element of playfulness," claiming that Collins's poems are both serious works of art and humorous. Yet Hirsch is ultimately conflicted about whether humor and literariness can co-exist: he says that "people get in the habit of laughing at [Collins's] poetry" at readings, and miss the "mortal panic" in the poems. By suggesting that the audience shouldn't laugh at Collins's work as much as they do (because they are missing more serious elements of the poems), Hirsch implies that Collins's poetry is both more serious and more complex than it is given credit for. Next, Hirsch praises Collins for having "no sense of shtick" in

his poetry readings, implying that an over-the-top humorous performance would indeed cheapen his poetry. Hirsch's comments resonate with William Logan's review, even though they have opposing opinions of Collins's poetry, because Hirsch is uncomfortable with how easy and enjoyable Collins's audience finds his work. Hirsch assures the film audience that Collins does not cater to his poetry reading audiences with a slick, gimmicky performance, affirming the division between entertainment and art.

Hirsch traces Collins's literary heritage to Whitman and Coleridge, two canonical poets, when offering his justification for choosing Collins's book for the National Poetry Series:

I think there's a kind of misconception about his reputation—I've always thought he was literary. And when I chose him I thought he was literary. I mean I knew he was funny, and extremely witty, but I really thought these poems were for *me*—I didn't think they were for—in particular for—the widest possible populace.

Hirsch implies that Collins's ability to appeal to poets like him bespeaks his value more than his ability to appeal to a wide audience. He praises Collins's accessibility and at the same time suggests that his work is more nuanced than it appears, therefore justifying Hirsch's own opinions as a poet-critic. Hirsch chose to publish Collins's poetry based on its appeal to critics and poets, not based on its appeal to popular audiences. Although one of the film's main themes is the reconciliation of entertainment and art, ultimately director Woodard and poetry expert Hirsch draw attention to the dichotomy and keep it alive. In fact, Hirsch chose Collins for the National Poetry Series in 1990, long before he became a best-selling poet; his comment that he did not think the poem were "in particular for—the widest possible audience" hints at the possibility that he would be less likely to give an award to a poet who did seem to court popularity.

## The Hospitality of “Litany” and its Public Performance

In order to better understand the critical reception of Collins’s work and his performance of hospitality, one of his poems will be examined on the page and in public performance. The poem is called “Litany,” and it appeared in Collins’s 2002 poetry collection *Nine Horses*.<sup>6</sup> “Litany” takes its first lines from an epigraph by Jacques Crikillon: “You are the bread and the knife, / The crystal goblet and the wine.” The poem then extends the metaphors in these lines, linking the beloved to several other objects:

You are the dew on the morning grass  
and the burning wheel of the sun.  
You are the white apron of the baker,  
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

If the reader is taking these lines seriously, the second and third stanzas make Collins’s satiric aims plain, telling the beloved what he or she *cannot* be compared to: “There is just no way that you are the pine scented air.” In the fifth stanza, the poem makes another turn: the speaker seems to lose interest in the beloved and begins to metaphorize himself instead:

And a quick look in the mirror will show  
that you are neither the boots in the corner  
nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.

It might interest you to know,  
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,  
that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star,  
the evening paper blowing down an alley,  
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

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<sup>6</sup>The poem can be found online at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=30605>.

“Litany” makes Monroe C. Beardsley’s characterization of metaphor as a “misuse of language” seem apt, but not because, as Beardsley says, the metaphors have “a peculiarly valuable and interesting character, so that this sort of misuse is . . . a supreme use of language” (134). To the contrary, these metaphors misuse language in the sense that they *don’t* make the reader see the beloved in a new way, and don’t give any insight into the similarities or differences between the beloved and the crystal goblet. The poem is a parody, not just of Jacques Crikillon (a Belgian poet who is not particularly well-known), but of all overly sentimental, hyperbolized, or just plain bad comparisons made by poets through the ages.

Metrically speaking, the poem is not particularly tightly constructed. It is in free verse, made up of seven stanzas ranging from three to six lines. The lines contain between two and six stresses, and alternate between iambs and anapests in no discernable pattern. Only five lines are enjambed, and there is only one caesura.

Collins achieves poetic coherence through the anaphora of the word “you” and, in the last stanza, the epistrophe of three lines ending with “knife.” But the poem is built on the rhetorical device of polysyndeton, or the use of many conjunctions. In “Litany” that conjunction is most often *and*, helping to achieve the comic effect of the poem by adding—always adding—more comparisons. “Litany” also echoes a technique from Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” Instead of merely comparing the beloved to beautiful things, both poems derive energy from hedging, excepting, and backtracking their compliments. The speaker tells the beloved what he or she isn’t, and what he or she *might* be: “It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge, / maybe even the pigeon on the general’s head.”

Being able to compare “Litany” to canonical poetry is not necessary for finding humor in it; however, some readers will pick up on the fact that Collins is poking fun of



metaphor itself. Collins does not find the essential elements of poetry too sacred to make light of, which could be considered hospitable behavior; the poem potentially can put someone over-awed by poetry at ease. Indeed, in a Favorite Poem Project radio reading on NPR's *The Connection*, caller Jennifer picked "Litany" as an example of Collins "giving poetry to every reader" and stated that she appreciated how the poem invited audiences to have fun with poetic language (Pinsky and Gordon). Logan's fears about Collins's audience can be neither proved nor disproved by Jennifer, who does not discuss whether or not she appreciates more difficult or more canonical poetry. Nor can art's power to uplift or brutalize humans be discovered by reading the poem—it's hard to imagine a critic using "Litany" as either an example of transcendent poetry or of the kind of popular art that harms society.

Though there is plenty of humor in "Litany," that humor is understated and deadpan. There are no exclamation points or italics. The poem's pace is slow, with many pauses, and the effect is wittier than if Collins had begun the poem in a straightforward, combative way. The speaker is not overtly aggressive toward poets, including Crikillon, who have praised their beloved in uninspired ways. However, as the poem goes on Crikillon's lines gradually seem more absurd, and the speaker of "Litany" appears more clever by comparison.

When Collins began a poetry reading at Boston College on April 28, 2005, he read three poems about "the coordinates of the poetry exchange"—the reader, the poet, and the poem (Collins, "Billy Collins"). These poems were self-referential in nature; they discussed the relationship between poets and readers precisely because Collins was beginning a relationship with his live audience. There was no "fourth wall" in this performance—Collins talked to the particular crowd of people in attendance. He mentioned his earlier activities at Boston College that day, and referred jokingly to Yeats

as a “buzz kill,” attempting to connect with beer-drinking college students. As the reading progressed, Collins continued to keep his specific audience of students and faculty at a Catholic college in mind, reading “Questions about Angels,” (a poem he rarely performs) because it mentions medieval theology, “something that used to have to be studied in Catholic schools.” Though Collins reads many of the same poems from reading to reading, he also considered his particular audience when making his set list, and his sensitivity to the unique audience at Boston College was hospitable.

After reading a poem called “The Trouble with Poetry,” which refers to poets as thieves, he transitioned into introducing “Litany:”

Thank you. So that was petty theft, and I confessed to that. And then, there are other—I mean, throughout all of these poems there are crimes being committed that I will not admit to. But . . . this next poem begins and got going with a more flagrant act of stealing. And that is, the history of—the little brief history of the poem is that I found in a magazine a love poem by a poet I had never heard of before and I hope never to hear from in the future. [Audience laughs.] I read in the back the contributor’s note, after I’d written this poem—just to check a little bit up on this guy, and it just said he lived in Belgium. So I thought, “whew, that’s good, okay. [Audience laughs; Collins smiles.] That’s far enough away.”

Well, his poem is a love poem, and it’s addressed to the beloved. And what he does in the poem from beginning to end is what poets have been doing for centuries in Western love poetry. He compares his beloved to all kinds of things, in nature and not, but basically begins and ends just by comparing her to things he can think of. And, apparently he thought that—you know Freud asks that kind of demeaning question, “What do women want?” And this—and other poets—I believe think that what women want are similes. [The audience laughs; Collins smiles.] That’s enough just to keep them happy. So anyway he—I took the first couple of lines of his poem and I just rewrote the poem for him. Thank you very much. So he says—he begins by addressing the beloved, presumably gazing into her peerless eyes, and saying to her: “You are the bread and the knife, / the crystal goblet and the wine.” And I call this poem “Litany.”

Collins's introduction to "Litany" is a striking example of literary hospitality. By giving his audience a detailed and self-deprecating account of his composition process, he establishes a rapport with them. He never uses the vocabulary of "allusion" or "epigraph," nor does he quote Eliot about great poets stealing. He uses "simile" as a more general term for the metaphors in Crikillon's poem; this usage is not incorrect, but it is indicative of the imprecise nature of Collins's comments. He also doesn't risk the audience feeling ignorant because they've never heard of Crikillon—he promptly tells them the little he knows about the poet. He does not drop the name of the magazine he read the poem in, and therefore does not make fun of the publication or anyone who might appreciate or respect the poems found in it. The bits of history in his introduction involve the rather vague "centuries of Western love poetry" and a short, easily digestible quote—even a cliché—by Freud. By the end of his introduction, Collins has more than thoroughly equipped his audience to understand his poem and its context. In fact, a person familiar with poetry might find this introduction much too long and become bored by the way Collins informs her about elements of the poem she could pick up on for herself.

Collins takes no chance that his audience could be confused by something in "Litany"—he makes sure everyone is on equal footing before he begins to read the poem. It is easy to understand how someone not experienced with poetry could be charmed by Collins's lengthy, humorous, and uncomplicated introduction. He performs hospitality by welcoming the entire audience to the poem in a relaxed, generous way. Collins's performance of authorship is implicitly aligned with Jensen's views in *Is Art Good for Us?*; neither Jensen nor Collins automatically distrust art that gains a broad audience, nor do they assume that "easy" entertainment is not worthwhile. Indeed, one of Collins's first remarks to the audience at Boston College is "You're a nice big audience; I like to see

that,” openly indicating that he likes to be popular. Collins never suggests that the people at the reading have a special intelligence or status because they are listening to poetry, and does not attempt to separate his art from mass media the way that Pinsky does. Literary experts, poetry critics, and canonical authors are of little importance in Collins’s performance of authorship at Boston College; their expertise is not invoked.

### **COLLINS AS A ROMANTIC POET**

The other thing going on in the introduction to “Litany” at Boston College is the implied story of composition. Collins read a poem in a magazine, wrote his own poem in response, and only then looked up more information about the author of the original poem. In other words, no research was required to write it. He says, “I took the first couple of lines of his poem, and I just rewrote the poem for him.” The word *just* is a key to Collins’s performance of authorship. Though he doesn’t say how long it took him to write the poem or how much time he spent revising it, he implies that he had an idea, spontaneously wrote the poem, and it came out well. Introducing “Litany” on “Prairie Home Companion,” Collins used the word *just* again, saying “I just didn’t think it developed very well, so I just took those two lines and I restarted [Crikillon’s] poem” (Collins, “April 20”). His story of composition reflects the Romantic notion that good poets write spontaneously. Regardless of the actual practice of either poet, Coleridge’s description of writing “Kubla Khan” is not that different from Collins’s description of writing “Litany;” both performances of authorship present the poet as spontaneous and gifted (though Collins does not refer to any mystical or spiritual forces at work in his writing process).

Pease’s essay on the history of authorship explains the attraction of writers to performing the role of genius. Pease defines *author* as “an anonymous agent turn[ing]

into an individual” (105). Many contemporary literary critics understand the individual as a product of material and social forces, but, as stated earlier, *genius* implies the “ability to transcend the entire cultural milieu” (108). Romantic notions of genius coincided with the Industrial Revolution because, at a time when most workers were becoming alienated from their labor, a creative genius could do cultural work that was a product of his own mind (109). Although an artistic genius did not necessarily own the means to produce a large amount of goods or a large amount of capital, he did control his own labor, and that set him apart from the majority of workers.

According to Pease, as a result of this separation between creative labor and other kinds of labor, the cultural world became increasingly distinct and then distant from the worlds of economics and politics:

During the political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the cultural realm could not be fully distinguished from the economic and political realms. But in the twentieth century the author’s genius was invoked to explain the irrelevance of economic and political issues to questions of strictly cultural interest. The genius’s putative freedom from material constraints authorized this separation of the cultural from the economic realm (110).

The separation of culture from politics and economics eventually helped shape New Criticism, which considered art in the absence of context. According to Pease, the cultural world eventually produced its own division of labor, with the critic as the genius. The critic could understand work better than the author, and decide what was literary and what was not (111). More recently, however, Pease explain, the tables have turned again:

Instead of distinguishing the critic’s work from the author, those critics using historicist, Marxist, Frankfurt school, and feminist frameworks have restored the critical dimension to the author’s work, thereby linking the author and critic in a shared project . . . In restoring the historical context to the author’s works, these critics have rescinded the New Critics’ claim that the genius’s texts transcend historical concerns (111-2).

Pease's essay illuminates what is at stake for poets in performing authorship as genius. A performance of genius makes both the economic facts of the artist's life and the critical reception of the artist less relevant to an audience. A genius is not influenced by audiences or critics or sales; he owns his authentic imaginative labor. Pinsky welcomes the power of the critic and does a lot of critical work himself, partially because critics affect canonicity. Not coincidentally, he is well-received by most critics. Alternatively, an author who positions himself as part of the political and economic world (such as Beau Sia, who is discussed in the next chapter) more readily acknowledges the importance of popularity for his political and economic success. Collins admits neither the importance of critics nor the importance of popular audiences, performing the role of an authentic artist who is not influenced by anything except his own imagination.

Contrasted with Pinsky's discussions of his canonical ambitions, and his meditations on history and grammar, Collins seems to have given very little thought to the implications of his work. Even though he talks about stealing in the performance of "Litany," he does not theorize it or discuss the poetic strategy that may have been involved with that technique. The performed ease and spontaneity of Collins's compositional process gives him another, different kind of authority—not the authority of an expert, but the authority of a writer for whom writing comes easily. Though Collins never uses the word *genius* to refer to himself or anyone else, his way of talking about his work suggests that it is a product of talent rather than education. The documentary supports this idea; it shows him telling students at Misericordia College in Pennsylvania that "one of the biggest pleasures of writing . . . is simply the curiosity about where the poem is going to end up." Collins speaks about writing poetry as a spontaneous, imaginative journey, harkening back to Shelley's definition of poetry as an "expression of imagination" (753). Though the filmmakers show Collins's poetry notebooks, which

contain scribbled-out lines, arrows, and insertions over the texts of the poems, Collins does not discuss the revision process on camera.

In other interviews, however, Collins does give opinions about revision, and these are mostly negative: “The drudgery of revision is threatening to replace any kind of compositional spontaneity that young poets might trust in. Then again, it takes a while just to figure out a way to do it; it takes a lot of this drudge work to get there” (Collins, Interview by Weich). While not dismissing the idea that it takes practice to become a poet, Collins believes that focusing on collaborative revision in workshops is not helpful to young writers. (Pinsky also de-emphasizes the importance of workshop collaboration, though he advocates other kinds of study.) According to Collins, writers should avoid becoming bogged down by the culture of criticism in workshops; their authenticity is threatened because they listen to and try to please their colleagues and teachers. This belief suggests the futility of a poet going to school for creative writing, even though Collins teaches some creative writing classes. In a talk at St. Johns Preparatory School in Minnesota, he joked, “If I had a bumper sticker it would say *Revision is for sissies!*” (Borgert). Collins’s position on revision supports his own role as creative genius; he does not need other people to help him with his work. It also reflects his notion of poetry as a solitary activity, and emphasizes his commitment to the lyric mode. The collaboration of a workshop interferes with the composing poet and his imagined audience of one.

Some poets advise writing down and saving stray ideas or lines, in the hopes that they could eventually be incorporated into poems, but Collins believes in throwing away incomplete drafts:

I throw drafts away all the time and I wish more people did . . . The poem should have a bolt of energy running through it (the Chinese call it *chi*) and if I cannot feel it, the draft is burned—crumpled into a ball and rolled on the carpet with the others. If you have a kitten, they love playing with

rolled up balls of paper, and that may be all a failed draft is good for. Why make a reader unhappy when you can make a kitten happy? They tell you in workshops to save everything. You could use it later. Rubbish. Pitch it. If you use it later it will seem attached to the poem by duct tape. If you burn the rice, you throw it out and start again. I would say throw the pot out too. What the hell? (Collins, Interview by Saunder).

Collins offers no advice on how to write an energetic poem, and his only suggestion for those who have written a poor first draft is to throw it away. When asked about his work habits, Collins claims, “I have no work habits whatsoever” (Collins, Interview by Saunder). Defying the mantra of many writers and writing gurus to “write every day,” Collins implies that he does not need to employ any particular strategies to write good poems.

Taken together, these facets of Collins’s performance of authorship—his lack of writing routine, his habit of throwing away any writing that is not immediately successful, his belief that revision is over-emphasized—suggest that one cannot become a poet through effort or study (as Pinsky claims he has done). Collins’s advice gives no aid to an aspiring writer who has written a mediocre poem. He relies on his own innate talent, spontaneity, and imagination to write poems, and these qualities cannot be taught. Just as Romantic poets worked to distinguish themselves from makers of popular art, Collins’s adoption of a Romantic persona makes a distinction between himself and other writers he deems unsuccessful. Those less successful writers may be both less talented (they are not geniuses) and less authentic (their writing is influenced by other people’s expectations).

One way that Collins differs from Romantic poets is that he does not have a very passionate persona. Wordsworth said poetry illustrates “the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (597). In contrast, the documentary shows Collins in front of an audience at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in New Jersey, saying, “poetry doesn’t demand that you be emotional when you write . . . it just



demands that you concentrate. For me the best time to write is when I have nothing to say.” In an interview for *60 Minutes II*, Collins said, “I think boredom is like the mother of creativity,” a notion he has repeated in several other interviews (Leung). Collins’s claim that he writes best out of boredom adds a bit of cynicism to the persona of a Romantic poet; he does not seem to have any important ideas or emotional insights to communicate through his poetry.

Collins wrote his dissertation on Wordsworth and Coleridge, and he adapts some aspects of their literary personas in order to perform his own artistic integrity. Collins’s performance as an authentic genius works to justify his popularity—if one believes that he is not influenced by poetic culture or audience expectations, then one will not question his integrity no matter how popular he becomes.

#### **“BEST ON THE PAGE:” PERFORMING NON-PERFORMANCE**

For Collins, being a poet means being a *writer*. Of course, a lot of poets would describe themselves as writers. But Collins, unlike Pinsky, considers the poem’s native technology to be the page, even though he has published two audio recordings of his poetry. Again, *native technology* does not imply that Collins considers poems as writing and only writing. He does not deny the oral or performative aspects of poetry, but he considers the page the primary home for the poem. In an essay about poetry’s audience in *Poetry* magazine, Collins writes:

Every active poet these days has two audiences to contend with, the one he has in mind when he writes—some kind of imagined ideal listener—and the one that actually shows up at readings. That the latter should outnumber the former is a condition universally wished for. The imagined reader is perhaps nothing more than a ghostly companion who serves to alleviate some of the isolation of writing . . . But when I am composing, I am too busy concentrating on the poem to think of anyone, either real or imagined . . . I have never written a poem with the idea of standing at a lectern and reading it out loud . . .

Collins goes on to discuss the pleasure of *reading* in isolation, with only the imagined author and other imagined readers for company (Collins “The Club” 68-9). Though Collins says that he wants a large audience at public readings, (and insists that all poets want the same) he calls the solitariness of the poet (or reader) essential to poetry. Within this quote one can see the author-as-audience conundrum that Gracia describes—an author who, though he insists he writes without thinking of anyone, at the same time describes the ghostly presence of his imagined reader.

One way to understand the link between Collins’s Romantic performance of himself as a genius and his concept of poetry as written is to think about the differences between “works” and “texts.” In the essay “Writing,” Barbara Johnson lays out the implications of the two terms:

Barthes lays out a theory of literature based on a split between the classic notion of a *work (oeuvre)*—considered as a closed, finished, reliable representational *object*—and the modern notion of a *text*—(considered as an open, infinite *process* that is both meaning-generating and meaning-subverting . . . While Literature is seen as a series of discrete and highly meaningful Great Works, textuality is the manifestation of an open-ended, heterogeneous, disruptive force of signification and erasure that transgresses all closure (40).

Understanding a poem as a text or performance involves similar ideas of the poem as a process that is never finished, one that is shaped by context. The idea of a work, however, is more suited to the writing of a genius because it implies that the poem is complete, and that it transcends context. Pinsky’s effort to become part of the canon also reflects his goal to write works relevant to many different contexts. Both poets therefore reject the idea of poems as primarily performative—Pinsky because he wants his work to endure, and Collins because he wants his work to seem authentic.

The relationship between literature and performance studies outlined by Jackson in the previous chapter explains why Collins may not want to prioritize the performance of poetry in his role as an author. Jackson quotes an influential theater critic, Robert Brustein, who accused dramatists of being “too anxious to please,” having a “tainted imagination,” and maintaining an “unsavory . . . alliance with the marketplace” (84). The notion that those who write with performance as a goal are susceptible to selling out is a persistent one. As mentioned in the Introduction, in the early twentieth century associations of acting with “immoral behaviors” was one reason Chautauqua platform readers avoided the trappings of theater (Canning 310-312). More recently, as Somers-Willett points out, authenticity has become a highly valued quality in the performative arena of the poetry slam; even overtly performative poets are judged based on authenticity, a quality that is not closely associated with traditional theater or film acting. By insisting in writing’s primacy over performance, Collins may seem more authentic and less likely to “taint” his imagination by catering excessively to audiences.

In the opening quotes of this section and of this chapter, Collins describes himself as leading a double life. On one hand, he needs to be the “smiling public figure” so that his private work will find an audience. On the other hand, the public part of his job is definitely inferior to the private part; if the public self begins to dominate, it threatens the quality of the poetry composition. Collins’s statement relates to what Charles Dickens’s friend Forster said when Dickens first decided to do public readings: “It was a substitution of lower for higher aims; a change to commonplace from more elevated pursuits; and it had so much the character of a public exhibition for money as to raise, in the question of respect for his calling as a writer, a question also of himself as a gentleman” (qtd. in Andrews 33). Though Collins performs very frequently and seems to have no qualms about public exhibitions for money—in “The Club” he refers to the

largest public reading he ever gave, to 2,400 people in Wisconsin—he nevertheless buys into the idea that poetry *writing* is a more elevated pursuit (and a more refined pleasure) than poetry performance.

Unlike Pinsky, Collins does call his public poetry readings *performances*. However, he insists that his writing identity is more important than his performing one. Considering the popularity of his public readings, this may seem an odd choice in his performance of authorship. Collins's and Pinsky's performances of authorship both reflect the long-held anti-theatrical prejudices in the literary world; they both distance themselves from the performing arts. Collins has several times quoted Effie Gray, the wife of John Ruskin, who, when asked what her husband was like, said, "he was best on the page" (Riggott). Collins's own claim to be best on the page asserts his artistic authenticity in spite of the popularity of his performed personality on stage.

When Collins reads "Litany" at Boston College, his voice is pleasant, with a languid or lethargic tone. He sounds as if he really does compose in a state of boredom, reading at a calm, relatively slow pace. The neutral khaki suit he wears does not draw attention to the way he moves his body during the performance. He gives few words any special emphasis until the very end of the poem, when he just barely stresses "*you* are still the bread and the knife / you will *always* be the bread and knife" to play up the joke slightly. He slows his pace during the last few lines to further draw out the humor, concluding "not to mention—the crystal goblet—and—somehow—the wine." The last two dashes are in the written text of the poem, but the first two are inserted during the performance to emphasize the way the poem is circling back to its beginning, which has a humorous effect.

Collins's relaxed reading style hardly seems like a recipe for a wildly popular performer. Yet many journalists and critics give Collins credit for his talent on stage,

attributing his best-selling poetry books to his ability to impress live audiences. And live audiences are invariably pleased with him. Their laughter is present in any live recording of Collins; their applause (generally after each poem instead of withheld to the end of the reading) is enthusiastic. Collins's style of performing poetry works extremely well with the poems themselves. The suitability of his performance style to his poems is evident when contrasting champion slam poet Taylor Mali's recitation of Collins's poem "Forgetfulness." Mali emphasizes the humor in the poem by varying his pitch, volume, and tone, and the poem does not seem as funny as when Collins reads it in his flat, lethargic way (Collins and Mali). As with the comedic straight man, the funny things Collins says stand out more against an expressionless face. He only smiles once, briefly, while reading "Litany," though he does smile more broadly during the applause that follows. When the audience is surprised or delighted, it doesn't feel as if Collins has been trying too hard to make them feel that way. The audience never has to fake a laugh in order to prevent awkwardness—as they might do at a bad stand-up comedy show. When Collins reads his poems, he outperforms many overtly dramatic poets without seeming to perform at all.

Collins instructs teachers and students on reading poetry in front of an audience as part of his Poetry 180 program on the Library of Congress website. He gives four basic tips: read slowly, pause at punctuation marks but not line breaks, look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary, and do not give the poems "a dramatic reading as if done from a stage" (Collins, "How to"). In the "long tradition of readers negotiating acting and colorless reading," Collins has a uniquely effective style: he writes poems that are maximally appealing when read in a colorless way (Andrews 75). Then he suggests that all readers read *all* poems in the style best suited to *his* work. In doing so, Collins discourages poets and audiences from taking a creative approach to poetry performance.

His performance of authorship begins to look a bit competitive or self-serving: other humorous poetry may seem less funny in comparison to his if readers follow this advice.

#### **COLLINS AS EDITOR: ATTITUDES TOWARD READERS AND WRITERS**

The tension between Collins's performance of hospitality and his performance of authenticity is most evident in his editorial projects, *Poetry 180* and *The Best American Poetry 2006*. The *Poetry 180* books perform hospitality in every aspect; *The Best American Poetry* collection affirms Collins's poetic genius and authentic talent, which put him in a different class than his audience. His performance of authorship reflects Rubin's description of middlebrow forms of art, which often "oscillate between the association of literature with privilege and with accessibility, featuring experts who project both superiority and kinship to the average reader (*Making* 268). In *Poetry 180*, Collins performs kinship, and in *Best American Poetry*, he performs superiority. He negotiates popularity and artistic integrity by separating poetry's audience into very distinct groups: those who are poets and those who are not. Those who are not poets are treated with courtesy and respect and hospitality, and given every enticement to continue reading. But those who *write* poetry are treated with skepticism and strongly encouraged to desist. Collins and Pinsky both insist that being part of poetry's audience requires no special skills or talent, but that poets are an elite group; in terms of attitudes toward readers, Collins's performance of hospitality and authenticity is remarkably similar to Pinsky's performance of authority.

#### **Hospitality in *Poetry 180***

Collins's largest public project as laureate, *Poetry 180*, attempted to increase poetry's audience by exposing high school students to a variety of short, enjoyable, and un-canonical poems. Collins constructed a website hosted by the Library of Congress that

contained the text of 180 poems, one for each day of the school year. The way Collins envisioned the program, there would be “no discussion, no explication, no quiz, no midterm, no seven-page paper” (Collins *Poetry 180* xv). Collins wanted students to feel more connected to poetry; he did not attempt to hone their interpretative skills. He also created the print anthologies *Poetry 180* and *180 More*.

Collins’s way of choosing reader-friendly poems was to showcase mostly living poets—at least 93% of the poems in the *Poetry 180* anthologies and websites were written by a poet still alive at the time of publication. Even the dead poets represented were mostly born in Collins’s generation. Collins does value enduring, canonical poetry by well-known authors, but his primary object when making the anthologies was to choose poems he considered hospitable; part of his hospitality involved choosing poems not associated with textbooks.

Collins’s anthologies do not claim to be definitive. He presents poems as the idiosyncratic choices of someone whose main qualification for choosing them is that he has read a lot of poetry (not that he is a literature professor). Collins’s introductions tactfully allow the audience their own responses to the work presented. The gesture of reducing his choices to opinion, rather than present them as knowledge of what is best, is a hospitable move: as Rubin says in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, readers may not feel qualified to share their judgments of art, but they do feel capable of forming opinions. Thinking about art as a matter of opinion allows neophytes to approach poetry without feeling intimidated (236).

Collins suggests that if someone reads ten poems in *180 More*, and finds none of them interesting, he or she ought to go skateboarding, because “maybe it’s just not time for poetry in your life” (Collins, Interview by *BookPage*). He does not consider audiences mentally or aesthetically deficient if they decide not to continue reading. He implies that

poetry is not the only or the most valuable way to spend one's time; it is not suited for all moods and occasions. By promoting poetry but *not* suggesting that there is something wrong with the reader who doesn't like it, Collins makes the endeavor of reading less intimidating for his audience. The lack of pressure on the reader to come up with a particular response is one key to Collins's poetic hospitality. Rubin describes Book-of-the-Month club advertisements in the first half of the twentieth century, which appealed to audiences' sense of guilt for not having time to read great literature: its marketers tried to appeal to an audience "who sets out to choose books but instead commits a series of self-betrayals" (Rubin, *Making* 99). Guilting people into buying works of literature did make for a successful book-selling campaign, but Collins attempts to appeal to audiences by reducing any guilt they may feel about not reading great poems. His introduction works as a modesty trope: by claiming that the poetry is not that important and may not appeal to everyone, he sets up readers to be pleasantly surprised when they find the poems accessible and enjoyable. Collins's attitude in *Poetry 180* implies that he does not fear democracy the way Jensen suggests many art critics do; he encourages readers of the anthology to believe they know what is best for themselves. Because Collins writes poems that are very popular, the idea that *anyone* can be a poetry critic is not troubling to him.

Unlike Pinsky, Collins does not try to govern the tastes of Americans based on a performance of expertise. As laureate, he promoted a variety of styles of poetry. Collins wrote praise for canonical poets such as Walt Whitman and Dylan Thomas that he taught in his literature classes—but also poets who did not write in English, like Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska and the poets of the Spanish Renaissance. He wrote an introduction and contributed a poem for the anthology *Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop, and*



*the Poetry of a New Generation*. He also introduced a book of high school student writers in his hometown—a book that promoted cross-cultural dialogue and youth literacy.

Most notably, Collins wrote an introduction to a recent edition of *The Stuffed Owl*, a collection of proclaimed “bad poetry.” As Collins points out, some of the bad verses are written by great poets like Wordsworth, while others are written by poets who are now obscure. Much as a film buff might describe a “good bad” movie—so bad, one enjoys it precisely because of its badness—Collins describes “good bad” poems.

“truly bad poetry, or Good Bad Poetry, goes beyond the insipid or the dull and manages to delight us by attaining new depths of dreadfulness. Poetry that is below average disappoints and leaves us numb, but Good Bad Poetry produces an undeniable reaction by making us laugh or at least infusing us with a feeling of superiority” (Introduction ii).

The *Stuffed Owl* is not celebrated for passing down wisdom through the ages. Rather, Collins encourages readers to enjoy their petty sense of superiority over the poets presented. Far from having a lofty view of poetry, Collins encourages readers to enjoy it for any silly reason.

Collins does not insist that the only poetry worth reading is enduring, serious, or moral; he embraces a wide variety of poetic activity. In this way, he is hospitable to people who do not have much experience with poetry because he does not imply that there are any standards of greatness they need to be aware of, or that their appreciation for any particular poem is indicative of their good or bad taste (unless the reader finds the “bad” poems in *The Stuffed Owl* or the lines of Jacques Crikillon worthy of respect). Consciously or not, Collins affiliates himself with the culture of the poetry slam, whose “emphasis on the audience as critic stands apart from traditional readings that celebrate or revere authors already deemed worthy by literary authorities” (Somers-Willett 5).

## Superiority in *The Best American Poetry*

Collins is much kinder to the inexperienced reader than the inexperienced writer. In his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2006*, “Seventy-five Needles in a Haystack of Poetry,” he wrote:

It is possible that there are some not-so-mute but still inglorious Miltons out there whose work never found its way to me, but my wide reading indicated rather a preponderance of poems written by non-Miltons who might want to consider muteness as an alternative to poetry writing (xvi).

Collins reveals several assumptions about poetry in this statement. First, bad writing is worse than no writing. He discounts the value of self expression, which he calls “the folly of ‘self expression’” later in his introduction (xx). “Self expression” has often been associated with the identity politics of feminist and multicultural writers (Jackson 179-80). As a white male, Collins speaks from a privileged position; poems considered to be universally appealing have traditionally been written from a white male’s point of view.

Furthermore, many psychologists claim that self expression is a healthy process that should not be restricted to professional artists. Authoring poems has been shown to be particularly effective in a therapeutic environment: becoming authors allows victims of trauma to “move beyond the victim-victimizer role” and “express themselves in a meaningful way but also control the amount expressed . . . At the same time, the author might be able to communicate more because the unexpected happens during creation” when inhibitions are lowered (Maddalena 10). Sharing poetry with others aids the therapeutic process as well: “This feeling of agency and belief in the ability to enact change is in stark contrast to the feelings of helplessness associated with past trauma” (80). That’s not to suggest that Collins should have published more self-expressive poems in *Best American Poetry*. It’s the sarcastic injunction for self-expressing poets to “consider muteness” that compromises Collins’s hospitality and firmly separates him as a

poet from poetry's audience. He suggests that only he, and innately talented people like him, should be writing poems. In an interview, Collins said, "I am most pleased when I hear that someone who doesn't generally read poetry (and definitely doesn't write it) enjoys reading my poems" (Collins, Interview by Kamp). Collins is hospitable to poetry audiences, but tries to protect his status by insinuating that they should not write poems themselves. He believes that the state of contemporary poetry is quite bad, saying, "It's enough to make you wish the NEA would award grants to poets for not writing, like the one farmers get for not growing crops" (Collins, *Best* xv). He assigns an arbitrary percentage to the number of contemporary poems "not worth reading"—83%. Though he's too popular to fear mass consumption of art, he does worry about how mass production of poems affects the art.

Collins tries to get readers interested in poetry through accessible, short, contemporary poems—poems that are broadly in the same category as the poems he writes. Unlike Pinsky, who introduces audiences to canonical authors as an attempt to associate his work with enduring poetry, Collins associates himself with contemporary writers who are, for the most part, less established and less famous than he.

Collins-the-man's motives are not known. But the reason the pseudo-historical author Collins comes across as self-serving is because he discourages other people from becoming authors. He suggests that if people cannot write publishable work, they should not be writing. "Litany," with its mockery of bad metaphors, is written toward the same end. Collins has a different strategy from Pinsky to gain authorial authority: rather than focus on the expertise he has taken pains to develop, he implies that his innate talent makes him worthy of reading. He does write introductions for high school poetry and for different poetic sub-genres, and is interested in getting a broad audience for a variety of

poems. At the same time, he promotes himself an authentic, integral poet by highlighting the superiority of his artistic ability.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Collins's integrity as a poet has been hotly debated. Yet, his attempts to become a respected and yet popular poet have largely been successful. He's certainly one of the wealthiest American poets—he received a book deal in 2001 that was rumored to be as high as one million dollars. He's capable of drawing a few thousand people to see him perform his poems publicly. He served as the nation's poet laureate and is included in many anthologies of American literature. In many ways, Americans interested in poetry *have* overcome the prejudices outlined by Jackson, Jensen, Harrington, and Bourdieu.

Yet, if Collins's performance of authorship is successful, it is not consistent. When considering his performance of authorship in light of his stated goal of literary hospitality, he has three major accomplishments: he makes his poems seem easy to understand through his performances at readings (even if, one might argue, they are easy to understand regardless of his introductions), he does not remind the audience of his own poetic expertise, and he does not judge the audience on the quality of their tastes. However, by indicating that writing is very easy for him, he argues for his own genius or talent. Further, he discourages those without talent from sharing their work. He insists that he does not write to court a large audience, and that writing is a more important part of his career than performing. These performances of authenticity, designed to attain literary respect, make Collins less hospitable by suggesting a nearly un-crossable line between poets and non-poets. Though not performing expertise in the same way that Pinsky does, Collins does perform his superiority to non-poets. His conflicted

performance of authorship is indicative of the tension between popular and high culture that remains palpable in twenty-first century America.

Collins takes pains to avoid the appearance of selling out, describing composition as a solitary, written process, avoiding the appearance of acting in public readings, and hinting at his own artistic genius. Yet his popularity still makes his integrity questionable to Logan and others. After hearing a description of this chapter, a young man working for a startup technology firm said, “I’ve heard of [Collins], so he must not be any good.” It’s relatively easy to understand what critics and poets like Pinsky have to gain by convincing audiences they are needed to distinguish true works of art from mass-produced junk. But it’s also important to realize that many members of poetry’s audience also discount their own judgments—they actively look for authorities to guide their poetry consumption, questioning the populace’s ability to choose the best art.

One difference between Pinsky and Collins is that Pinsky has a stronger sense of the poet as a civic figure. Collins rarely discusses the place of the poet in society. During Collins’s laureateship, Americans sought out poetry after the events of September 11, 2001. Reporters asked Collins—not only the nation’s laureate but also a native New Yorker—to explain the importance of poetry during crises, to recommend poems that would help make sense of the tragedy, and to write a poem about the events. Collins denied that his post made him more qualified to speak about tragedy: “Maybe some people can say things better or differently than others, but there are no experts here. My reactions are not aesthetic or poetic or professional. They are simply human” (Martin). When asked, “Do you imagine that President Bush reads much poetry?” Collins de-emphasized the value of the arts when answering:

I don't know what he reads. I hope he's not reading too much of it—he should be busy doing other things, like running the country and maybe

even keeping us out of war. I remember that when I read before Congress, someone commented that Dick Cheney on the CNN feed didn't appear to be paying a great deal of attention to my poem. I said: "Well, I really wouldn't want him to. I would rather he concentrated on the affairs of state" (Good).

Pinsky's cultural authority comes with a certain degree of civic duty, and the following chapter discusses Beau Sia, who performs authorship as political engagement. These two poets, whose styles of performing poetry in public could not be more different, nevertheless have something in common: they understand poetry as a force in society. In many ways, Sia resolves Collins's conflicted attitude toward poetic hospitality and entertainment by making his popularity into a political tool. This philosophy eases the tension between popular and integral art—Sia can admit to doing *anything* to make his poetry more appealing, including perform in an outrageous manner, because he claims to have a message of value to communicate. Because Collins denies that poets have special knowledge or a place in discussing matters of civic concern, he makes his own entertaining poetry more difficult to defend in a contemporary American society that believes mass culture to be inferior to high culture.

The increase in the number of public readings, and their dissemination through digital media, directly impacts Collins's performance of authorship. When the audience can see the body of the author, they are more likely to evaluate the poem in the context of the poet's perceived identity. Though Collins has nothing to gain by emphasizing the realness of his whiteness or his maleness, he nevertheless performs authenticity as a poet in order to make his work more appealing to audiences, both popular and critical. If audiences believe that his poems reflect some "deeply true internal substance," then Collins can perform poetic hospitality to attract larger and larger audiences while his artistic authenticity remains unquestioned.

## Beau Sia Performs Author as Ally

### THE HISTORY OF LYRIC

James William Johnson begins his definition of *lyric* in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* with the lyre. As previously discussed, lyric's association with music began to fade in the Renaissance, when poems were shaped through a new means of presentation—the printed page (714). Pinsky, taking a long view of literary history, identifies his own poetry and the poetry of the canon with the oldest definition of lyric; he stresses poetry's sonic qualities.

However, since the Renaissance, the definition of *lyric* has become messier. Johnson elaborates:

Critical attempts to define lyric poetry by reference to its secondary (i.e. nonmusical) qualities have suffered by being descriptive of various historical groupings of lyrics rather than definitive of the category as a whole. Among the best known and most often cited proscriptions regarding the lyric are that it must (1) be brief (Poe); (2) “be one, the parts of which mutually support and explain each other, all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influence of metrical arrangement” (Coleridge); (3) be “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth); (4) be an intensely subjective and personal expression (Hegel); (5) be an “inverted action of mind upon will” (Schopenhauer); or (6) be “the utterance that is overheard” (Mill) (714).

Collins's poetry picks up on some of these well-known definition of lyricism, most of which were developed during the Romantic period. His poems are brief and subjective, and they function as overheard utterances, since he claims to compose with a single imaginary listener in mind. Virginia Jackson critiques this style of poetry, the “short, nonnarrative poem depicting the subjective experience of a speaker,” in the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*'s special section on “The New Lyric Studies” (183). Jackson claims that “the more ideally lyric poems and poetry culture have become, the fewer actual poetic genres address readers in specific ways” (183). In other words, as more and more poems

become lyric, poetry is less and less capable of engaging a particular audience. Collins, while on the one hand addressing readers hospitably both in his poems and his performance of authorship, also insists that he does not specifically address anyone. When asked, after September 11, 2001, why poetry appealed to a nation in shock, Collins replied, “my poems and lots of people's poems are unintentional responses to terrorism, in that they honor life” (Collins, Interview by Secor). Collins posits only the vaguest relationship between political and poetic life; he claims no specific knowledge of any worldly issue. Jackson could also include Pinsky in her critique, since his ambition to write enduring, universal poems overshadows any attempt to connect to specific readers.

Sociologist Wendy Griswold points out that genre is “an inherently social relationship,” “neither obvious nor unchanging” (18). The introduction of this dissertation explains that the contexts of poetry are changing in the twenty-first century due to the growth of digital media and the rising numbers of authorial poetry readings. The careers of Pinsky and Collins have benefited from use of digital media and live readings to disseminate their own and other people’s poems. Yet, as outlined by the previous chapters, both poets have resisted and denied the influence of performance on their art. This chapter asks, what does a wholehearted embrace of current changes to poetic contexts look like, and how does it affect the performance of authorship? Though many contemporary American poets could be useful examples of embracing performance and new media, Beau Sia is the poet discussed in this chapter.

Sia, whose Chinese parents immigrated to the United States from the Philippines, was raised in a suburb of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He discovered poetry on MTV while in high school during the mid-nineties. It wasn’t Yeats or Coleridge, it was a humorous poet named Maggie Estep who caught the young Sia’s attention (Aptowicz 134-135). Estep’s signature poem, “I’m an Emotional Idiot,” is not featured in any



*Norton* anthology thus far. At the time she appeared on MTV, she hadn't published a book. In fact, of the six books Estep has published as of 2010, none of them are marketed as poetry—and three are mystery novels involving horse racing.

It is not surprising that Pinsky's career, which began with an interest in the dictionary, is so different from Sia's. Of the poets discussed in this dissertation, Sia is the youngest, and it's possible to argue that stigmas against performance are less palpable to him than to members of older generations. He attended New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and majored in screenwriting; that he advanced his writing career through studying film, as opposed to getting a degree in literature or creative writing, offers another explanation for his comfort with poetic performance. Sia writes many poems about the entertainment industry; his interest in film and celebrity culture is likely another reason that he embraces theatricality.

While in New York, Sia followed Estep's path and began performing at the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe, which at the time was the home of New York City's only poetry slam and of Bob Holman, a tireless poetry organizer and promoter. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz's *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* divides New York slam history into three time periods, and Sia was a prominent poet during two of those waves. During the Second Wave (1996-2001), slam poetry success was marked by attending (and winning) the National Poetry Slam. Sia attended the National Poetry Slam five times during that period, twice winning the team competition. He was also prominently featured in the documentary *SlamNation*, which countless poetry slammers avidly studied. During the Third Wave (2001-2007), success was marked by appearing on the HBO television show *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. Sia performed poetry on all six seasons of the show and in the Broadway spin-off *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, including its national and international

tours. The Broadway show earned him and his cast-mates a Tony for Special Performance in 2003.

In slam and *Def Poetry* venues, Sia uses his whole body in dynamic, forceful performances that can include hip hop, impersonation, break-dancing, costumes, and stage sets. He performs regularly on college campuses across the nation—not as an edified, distinguished poet, but as an entertainer. Student activities offices, not English departments, pay him thousands of dollars to share his work. These events are promoted to undergraduates and not faculty. After performing, Sia sells his wares: his parody of pop music star Jewel’s poetry volume, *A Night Without Armor II: The Revenge*, and his CD *Attack! Attack! Go!*

If not brought to campuses by student activities offices, Sia is part of Asian-American studies programming. This chapter focuses on some of Sia’s racially-themed poetry—poetry that disrupts Romantic notions of lyricism most thoroughly. Johnson suggests that “the popularity of lyric poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has increased with its employment in the cause of self-expression, feminism, and racial and social equality” (726). He does not go into detail about how those types of poetry promote lyricism, but Perloff indirectly supports this statement with an observation of her own, complaining that the domination of Romantic lyric theory persists even as “literature departments turn increasingly to cultural studies and postcolonialism” (750). Perloff’s definition of *lyric* as “the mode of subjectivity—of self-reflexiveness,” suggests that poetry about race has been interpreted as self-reflexive by literary scholars, rather than being understood to “engage and intervene in public life” (Harrington 11). Cultural studies and post-colonial studies connote the involvement of literature with the economic and political realms; calling a poem *lyric* suggests its apolitical address to an unspecified audience.

Rather than being self-reflexive, some of Sia's poems address specific audiences to specific ends—exactly what Jackson calls for in her essay. Further, they invite audience participation in ways that Pinsky and Collins, for all their interest in growing poetry's audience, don't employ. Sia's poetry is often politically motivated, *political* defined broadly as "all that can be changed by social consensus or external authority" (Hallberg 961). (Most of Sia's political poems have more to do with social consensus than with changing laws or government policies.)

As Robert von Hallberg's article, "Politics and Poetry," suggests, "the supposed strain between politics and poetry is actually more a strain between politics and the evaluative criteria of criticism. Didactic poems are esteemed according to a universality or generality criterion, whereby a poem succeeds insofar as it speaks to the conditions of life in different historical contexts" (961). In other words, critics' expectations, rather than the inherent qualities of poetry, make politically specific poems seem inferior to more universal ones. In a recent issue of *Poetry* magazine, David Orr elaborates on this idea, saying, "the [Romantic] lyric, because it's meditative and not supposed to be addressed to a large audience, puts poetry in an awkward position, politically speaking" (413). Poems about public life that aren't addressed to a public seem oxymoronic.

Orr critiques a poem by Robert Hass called "Bush's War" that ultimately fails to address that large audience:

Hass's feelings are praiseworthy and his despair at American policy is justifiable, but the poem never addresses its political subject in terms that are actually political. It puts forward no argument, makes no revelatory comparison, confronts no new audience, engages no misconception in language likely to be understood by the deceived, and so on and so on. Having dared, to his credit, a truly political poem, Hass is unable to muster an engaging political voice, and instead retreats into the conventions of the contemporary meditative lyric (416).

As we shall see, Sia's poems do put forward an argument and do confront new audiences; they also attempt to raise the consciousness of an implicitly "deceived" American public. Yet one of the problems with politically motivated, specific poems is that they "exist at the mercy of time, history, and other people" (418). This observation of Orr's is crucial to understanding why politics don't interest Pinsky and Collins as poets: Pinsky does not want his poems to be at the mercy of time, and Collins, as a genius, wants to be outside the cultural milieu. Sia's goal is to publish and perform his poems out of existence; if he succeeds in gaining the attention of his intended audience and in persuading them of his position, the relevance of his work will immediately fade.

Stanley Fish explains some drawbacks to writing rhetorical poems—poems that have a specific message for a specific audience. Like performed poems, they are traditionally seen as impure or inauthentic. In teasing apart a speech in *Paradise Lost* made by Belial, Fish identifies a number of dichotomies between, in this case, Milton's ultimate truth of religion versus the biased opinion of the (devil) rhetorician: "inner/outer, deep/surface, essential/peripheral, unmediated/mediated, clear/colored, necessary/contingent, straightforward/angled, abiding/fleeting, reason/passion, things/words, realities/illusions, fact/opinion, neutral/partisan" (205). And Milton was far from the only poet to understand his work as oppositional to rhetoric. According to Harrington, American "poetic theorists as diverse as William Cullen Bryant in the 1820s, Arthur Davison Ficke and Allen Tate in the early twentieth century, and New Critics in the latter half of the twentieth century attempted to configure poetry as . . . the domain of a private universal subject" as opposed to rhetorically-motivated (11).

Rhetoric's stock has risen since Fish wrote his essay in 1990: in the twenty-first century, Milton's faith in one true religion has given way to the idea that all truths are partial. College students learn in writing classes that literally *everything* can be construed

as an argument. To that end, scholars study the rhetoric of canonical literature. Meanwhile, the kind of oratorical event of Belial's speech is once again part of poetic culture—both academic authorial readings and slam poems often deliver a deliberate message to a specific audience. These poems may not literally ask audiences to take up arms, but many do suggest ways to think, act, and vote. This dissertation cannot tease out the cause-and-effect relationships involved in rhetoric's rising prestige in the academy, the increase in the number of authorial public readings, the growing interest in contexts of presentation of poems by literary scholars, and the advancement of the flashily oratorical and blatantly persuasive slam poems. However, all of these trends contribute to the changing of the lyric genre in the twenty-first century and the development of Sia's performance of authorship.

Somers-Willett affirms this change in the American poetic landscape in the conclusion of *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, describing “poets who are redefining the American lyric through a fusion of media, politics, and aesthetics” (135). Another essay in “The New Lyric Studies,” by Rei Terada, suggests that scholars are changing their conception of the lyric, though on slightly different grounds than Somers-Willett mentions. Citing conference papers at the 2006 MLA convention, Terada points out that literary scholars now ask questions about rap, hypertext poems, avant-garde work, and non-Western poetry's influence on American poetry.

It comes as a relief that after years, probably centuries, during which “lyric” is used as an intensifier, reflecting the assumption that lyrics more than other media are concentrates of culture or consciousness, the current conversation about lyric isn't especially heightened. The lyric zone of electrification is dissipating along with belief in the autonomy of the lyric object and in the specialness of the lyric mode (196).

By Terada's criteria, Sia is moving away from the lyric mode due to his affiliations with hip hop and digital media. He adds performative layers to his poem that have no corollary

in song or print: sets, costumes, dance moves, facial expressions, and hairstyles are all inextricably linked with Sia's poems on the page. As Terada suggests, scholars are investigating these new lyrics: performance studies scholar Jill Dolan and Somers-Willett both devote attention to *Def Poetry* television shows and Broadway productions.

In some ways, Sia's "new lyricism" is actually very *old* lyricism: lyricism that depends on music and public performance instead of print. But Sia breaks the molds of lyric poetry in other ways, as well. He writes poems collaboratively, which certainly presents a very different approach to authorship than Collins's performance of genius or Pinsky's performance of authority. Collaboration is an idea foreign to Romantic conceptions of lyric poets as solitary and self-reflexive. Though in oral cultures, songs and poems are repeated (and changed slightly) during each performance, resulting in more than one person influencing the piece, direct collaboration from the moment of a poem's creation is not a known part of oral poetic traditions. Though one might consider Sia's poems un-lyrical if judging by Romantic definitions of the term, if viewed in light of the oldest definitions his poems can be seen as continuing (and stretching the boundaries of) lyricism. This chapter examines three aspects of Sia's new (old) lyricism—his collaborative poems, his political messages, and his style of performing poetry in public—to understand his performance of authorship as an alliance with an audience.

### **THE POET-AUDIENCE ALLIANCE**

Sia's poetry career began at the poetry slam. Damon describes the criteria for a good slam piece as "a skilled congruence of content, performance, and performer" ("Was That 'Different'" 328). Because in slams the performer of the poem is always the author, authenticity becomes important to audiences; they use the author's body to understand

the content of the poem. Though many slam poems are written in the first person, in a persona closely related to the poet's persona offstage, authenticity is not actually a requirement for participation in slams. Authority, although also frequently performed in slams, is likewise not necessary for successful participation. This chapter argues that one of the most important components of the poetry slam, in terms of performance of authorship, is the relationship between the author and the audience, described as an alliance. The alliance between author and audience at poetry slams has carried over into Sia's post-slam performances of authorship.

The definition of *alliance* can encompass a broad range of relationships and activities. It's appropriate to Sia's relationships with audiences outlined in this chapter because allies, though they may not agree, consider each other's concerns and points of view. An alliance may indicate perfect agreement, close collaboration, and equal participation by all members. However, if one considers the various kinds of alliances made by, for example, the government of the United States, it becomes clear that allies may disagree on many issues, may not have equal power, and may not equally participate in all operations. Further, at times, collaboration is not required—or is in name only. Unlike *hospitality*, which indicates a fairly stable balance of power and a fixed relationship between host and guest, *alliance* encompasses many different kinds of affiliations.

At a poetry slam, the audience participates in several different ways. First, anyone present is encouraged to voice their agreement or disagreement with the content of a poem and how the judges evaluate it. Second, a select number of audience members are judges who rank each poem and ultimately determine the slam's winner. The judges are picked randomly by the host, and have no qualifications—they can in theory be illiterate. Finally, the audience is partially made up of poets. At local slams, anyone can compete. It

is not uncommon for a poet to write something in response to or in imitation of another poem at a slam. The democratic nature of the slam means that everyone is given an equal chance to present their work to the audience. Not all poets will get the same amount of respect—and the judges do not score consistently or fairly—but the slam community places a great deal of value on creating dialogue between a variety of competitors. Slammers take pride in the fact that no one is silenced (though a poet presenting unpopular views might be discouraged from returning by boos or low scores). Ultimately, there is no essential difference between a poet and a non-poet at slam events. And Sia does not perform his difference from his audience, unlike Pinsky and Collins.

Dialogue between poets at slams is encouraged, but at National Poetry Slams, collaboration between poets is also allowed. Though official rules state that everyone performing in a group piece must have contributed to the writing and scripting of it, some group pieces primarily highlight one poet's writing. Others attempt to split the speaking and writing of the poem equally; for example, many duets are written 50% by each poet, with each poet speaking about half the lines in the performance. In two of the most-viewed group pieces of Sia's—one in the poetry slam documentary *SlamNation*, and one on Poetry Slam Incorporated's website, Sia does not have a leading role. The poems highlight the words and performance skills of another writer on the team—Saul Williams and Celena Glenn respectively.

Somers-Willett described seeing a group piece Sia performed with New York's Urbana team, entitled "Running a Race," to Aptowicz in an interview.<sup>7</sup>

Urbana set one of Celena Glenn's pieces to music [at the 2000 Providence National Poetry Slam]. Beau Sia was beat-boxing, Taylor Mali and Noel

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<sup>7</sup>This performance can be found on-line at:  
[http://www.poetryslam.com/index.php?page=shop.product\\_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product\\_id=388&category\\_id=55&option=com\\_virtuemart&Itemid=29](http://www.poetryslam.com/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=388&category_id=55&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=29).



Jones were singing and Celena Glenn was up front performing her piece. And when I heard that piece, it blew my mind and I think it blew everyone's mind in the auditorium that night at Finals in Providence because it opened the door for what slam poetry could do (Aptowicz 338).

Sia's role as beat-boxer was to provide rhythm for the piece; Glenn's poem was the center of attention. He danced a little bit in the background, but he moved in a less exaggerated way than he does during performances of his own poems. Though nothing prevents poets submitting to journals from collaborating with each other, in the poetry slam, collaboration is part of the culture; it is expected of its participants.

Collaboration gives the performance of the poem a richer texture. Music in poetry slams can only be made with "one's own body"—musical instruments are not allowed. Therefore, group pieces offer ways to achieve complex musical effects. More people on stage does not necessarily equal more dramatic thrill, but combining voices, adding music, and staging multiple bodies adds to the potential messages and emotions of a poem and infuses the poem with vibrancy, perhaps because traditionally poems are written and performed in isolation.

Sia's collaborations with poets he has slammed against are also collaborations with poets who have been part of his audience. For Pinsky, there is a distinction between expert poets and inexpert readers; to Collins, only writers with a great deal of ability should present their work in public. Sia performs as an author not to be admired from afar, but to be engaged with and responded to. In contrast, Pinsky only admits to his writing process "verging" on collaboration with his expert poet friends, in part because of the unorthodoxy of co-authorship in canonical literature. Collins, as a genius, claims to

not collaborate or even share drafts of poems with anyone; the implication is that he doesn't need other people's help to succeed. By embracing poetic collaboration, Sia upsets the conflation of poem and lyric, fusing the art of poetry with one that has traditionally been more collaborative: theater.

One can also see Sia's alliance with his audience through his involvement with social media. He has a MySpace account, a YouTube account, a Facebook page, and a Facebook fan page. Sia uses these sites to share poems and performances with friends and admirers. He also communicates things that are not poems—performance schedules, ideas he is mulling over, and updates on daily activities (such as the name of a movie he watched recently). Unlike Pinsky and Collins, his e-mail address is publicly available, and he said in a recent interview that he tries to answer most e-mails sent to him: “Even if it's not to bring me to your college, or university, or conference or something like that, if it's in regards to just needing to reach out there into the world—this technology should be more—for more than getting me shows.” (Sia, Interview by Yoshimura). Sia's comment reveals that these technologies are effective for keeping in contact with his fans; MySpace and Facebook allow him to announce upcoming appearances and market new projects. However, one reason these sites are appealing is that they allow fans to directly interact with the person they admire; if someone can respond to Sia's status update that he is “super pooped” or e-mail him directly to talk about poetry, they are less likely to see a Facebook announcement of an upcoming show as intrusive or obnoxious self-promotion.

Sia has a blog on his MySpace page that he posts on infrequently. These posts do not create an image of the poet as expert or genius. They are written very informally—all the letters are lower case, and some words are misspelled. The posts are not organized into paragraphs; they have a rambling, off-the-cuff feel to them. Sia mentions his personal reactions to politics and films as well as the difficulty he has completing certain projects. He further promotes this intimacy with his audience by posting an acoustic song called “Summer’s Gone,” that he plays and sings with a friend, about summer being over and wanting to smoke pot. The simple, repetitive lyrics and slow tempo make the song seem as though it has been improvised and played in his living room. Another item currently on his MySpace page is a rap entitled “G.I. Joe Freestyle.” The fact that he includes an improvisational piece may give Sia a certain amount of credibility in the hip hop scene. On the other hand, neither the freestyle nor “Summer’s Gone” represent Sia’s crowning artistic achievements. Not everything he shows to the public has been carefully polished, and any member of his audience is encouraged to share their comments on these pieces directly with him. Whether he takes audiences’ comments seriously or not, Sia fosters the sense that, unlike Collins, he *does* want feedback on his work.

Encouraging audience participation is a key component of Sia’s performance of authorship. Bourdieu explains in *Distinction* that

The most radical difference between popular entertainments—from Punch and Judy shows, wrestling or circuses, or even the old neighbourhood cinema, to soccer matches—and bourgeois entertainment is found in audience participation. In one case it is constant, manifest (boos, whistles) . . . in the other it is intermittent, distant, highly ritualized, with obligatory applause (487-8).

By embracing the new media of the twenty-first century, encouraging his audience to participate in his work, and collaborating on writing and performing with other poets, Sia performs authorship as an alliance with his audience. As one can imagine after reading the Collins chapter, this could present problems for how others perceive Sia's artistic integrity. Even Mark Smith, the creator of the poetry slam, worried about the "fine line between pleasing and pandering" (22). Yet Sia does not claim, as Collins does, that he is outside the cultural milieu. Rather, for years he participated in slams where random members of the audience publicly evaluated his work, and he continues to experiment with posting poems on sites like Facebook. Sia openly courts an audience, and openly seeks to make money from his art. However, the value he places on dialogue and communication gives him an avenue to artistic integrity.

#### **THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF POLITICAL POETRY**

As Jensen describes it in *Is Art Good for Us?*, there are two main ways of viewing the arts: the first, the instrumental view, says that "cultural forms do something to us" (1). The second, which Jensen calls the expressive perspective, claims that "the stuff we find distasteful or upsetting will not necessarily harm us or harm anyone else, and (alas) the stuff we find delightful and uplifting will not necessarily improve us or improve anyone else" (3). Pinsky takes an instrumental view, claiming that reading great poetry of the past helps us understand ourselves and our society. We receive wisdom from previous cultures by reading enduring poems. The instrumentalist views art as having power within the culture; as Belfiore and Bennett explain in *The Social Impact of the Arts*, "assuming that the arts have the power of transforming people also entails the possibility that they might corrupt" (68). Collins and Jensen take the expressive perspective, claiming no ability of the arts to engage with or change society. Discussions of political

poetry in America tend to align with the instrumental view—by writing political poetry, authors attempt to have an impact on public life. Critics evaluate political poetry by examining how (not if) these poems influence audiences.

Aldon Lynne Neilson takes an instrumental view of art when he says in his book, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, “There must be something said about the other which somehow differentiates him from yourself if you are to enslave him, or after emancipation, if his condition is to be kept different from your own” (4). Whether these differentiators seem positive (Asians are good at math) or negative (Asians are passive), stereotypes allow an un-marginalized race to maintain their privileged status. Sia’s political poems, revolving around Asian-American identities, subscribe to the view that “art, by letting us sympathize with other people and getting in their shoes, makes us better people” (Belfiore and Bennett 140).

One of the most troubling views of political poems’ effect on their audiences is found in Mary Strine’s essay, “Protocols of Power: Performance, Pleasure, and the Textual Economy,” which points out that public poetry readings “are conventionally appreciated as a distinctive aspect of expressive culture, necessarily set apart from direct political action for the more contemplative gratifications of enlightenment, emotional engagement and edification” (61). Strine quotes Carolyn Forché saying she fears that politically-themed poetry readings disempower the audience. Forché complains about “the illusion that if one, say, goes to an auditorium on a Thursday evening and hears someone speak about conditions in one country or another . . . one has done their part” (62). Strine’s essay expresses the difficulty of turning the audience’s “enlightenment” into a discernible change in the political sphere.

Somers-Willett expresses similar concerns when discussing the National Poetry Slam. National slams traditionally include open mike readings based on marginalized

identities: the Jewish reading, the women's reading, the African-American reading. Sia hosted the 2006 Asian-American reading at the National Poetry Slam in Austin. Somers-Willett's concern is that "the readings provide an opportunity for the celebration of these identities while, on the other hand, confirming (and perhaps even advocating) their marginality from dominant culture. Such featured readings mark these voices as fetishes, "deemed to be outside of dominant culture while also being valorized as ideal" (72). Nielson suggests that romanticizing the abilities and lifestyle of the other as "ideal" allows the dominant race to maintain their dominance.

The celebration of marginal identities at racially-themed readings specifically, and in poetry slams more generally, does not indicate that slam audiences are racially enlightened. Rather, the audiences themselves are performing their own "positions as liberal, rebellious, hip, and against the status quo" (Somers-Willett 79). Further, "Rewarding such writing and performance can benefit white liberal audiences: reward displaces them from being the target" of the minority poet's protests (84). As audience members pat themselves on the back for being non-racist, they are simultaneously and unconsciously affirming the poets' differences from themselves and contributing to that minority poet's oppressive environment in American culture. However, Somers-Willett does suggest that there are ways for authors to circumvent the fetishization and marginalization cycle: she cites Sia as an author who can, by "exaggeratedly embodying stereotypes of racial identity," make the audience "question their assumptions about and consumption of performances of racial identity" (90).

Dolan discusses Sia as an example of performing utopia. Her book "argues that live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (2). Sia's poetry performances, as part of the larger

*Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* show, “address audiences as citizens of the world and model political critique and engagement” (2). According to Dolan, this utopia does not merely evoke pleasant feelings and then fade, leaving the audience with a sense of accomplishment they do not deserve. Rather, these utopic performances actually rehearse “new ideas for social relationships” (92). By letting the audience feel the power of these ideals (the respect for and dignity of marginalized people), the show brings utopia into being. Though the utopia only lasts during the performance, Dolan argues that its effects linger. However, as Dolan points out, many of the critics of *Def Jam on Broadway* found its ethnic diversity and message contrived, angry, and even threatening. As Hallberg points out, political poetry “is commonly (and too narrowly) understood to be oppositional by definition” (962). What Dolan understood as a utopic moment of intercultural dialogue was viewed by many other critics as un-justifiably angry and aggressive complaining.

### **A Poem to Change Minds? “An Open Letter to All the Rosie O’Donnells”**

Looking at an example of a political poem and the audience response to it will further illuminate the potential upsides and downsides of political poems. In February of 2007, Sia created a YouTube account and posted his first video, “An Open Letter to All the Rosie O’Donnells.”<sup>8</sup> His audience was both extremely specific and extremely broad; he was speaking to talk show host and comedian Rosie O’Donnell—one woman—but extending the piece to address an imagined audience of “people being open to learn from one another.”

Late in 2006, Rosie O’Donnell said on an episode of *The View*: “The fact is that it’s news all over the world. You know, you can imagine in China it’s like ‘Ching chong

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<sup>8</sup> The poem can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJCKHu3trKc>.

ching chong Danny Devito ching chong chong chong chong, drunk, *The View*.”<sup>9</sup> Sia’s video responds not precisely to this event, but to her defensive reaction when told why her comments were offensive. The video opens showing Sia standing alone in front of a blackboard with smudged words written on it. “Beau Sia / Poet” briefly flashes in white at the bottom of the screen. His appearance contradicts the professional teacher image the setting portrays: his hair is styled into a Mohawk, and he wears a bright yellow printed t-shirt and a dark hooded sweatshirt with pink lining.

Sia briefly describes O’Donnell’s comment and her defensive reaction to the criticism it drew. He then says, “in response to that, an open letter to *all* the Rosie O’Donnells” and the camera briefly pans away to reveal rows of empty seats in the classroom. Sia proceeds to explain to the camera why O’Donnell was not comically imitating an accent, but making a “racist interpretation of a language.” His anger is contained (he doesn’t shout or scream) but not disguised: “You do lots of impressions of languages. Well in that case, ‘ching chong ching chong’ is a terrible impression. I thought you were famous because you were good at what you do.”<sup>10</sup>

Midway through the poem, Sia puts O’Donnell in the positions of the Asian and Asian-American people who tried to explain to her why they were upset by her words, comparing her ignorance of Asian accents to ignorance about the queer community O’Donnell belongs to: “You see, Rosie, I would never make fun of who you are, and then make you feel wrong for just trying to inform me of why I shouldn’t say—whatever it is I’m going to say—about plus-sized lesbians.” At another point, he suggests that it’s

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<sup>9</sup> The clip of O’Donnell’s remark can be found here:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6WWpcmRtRQ&feature=related>.

<sup>10</sup> There are no line breaks in these quotations because they are transcribed from the video. The main indication that the piece is a poem is that Sia is introduced as a poet at the beginning of it.



necessary for O'Donnell to confront her mistake because the world's population is predominantly Asian. The world "looks like this," he says, pointing to his face.

Sia's demeanor gets less stern towards the end of the piece, in which he sits down in one of the classroom seats, symbolically taking his place among "all the Rosie O'Donnells,"—those of us who speak ignorantly. "So listen to me, because I don't think you're evil; I don't care if you're mean . . . Now is the time, Rosie. We all make mistakes. There is always room for forgiveness." The video ends focused on Sia's somber profile.

The video has been viewed over 650,000 times and sparked over 6,500 comments, as well as five video responses. The comments themselves reveal an inherent problem with trying to change minds through rhetoric: not all of the members of the audience correctly interpret the message of the poem. Sia's poem asks O'Donnell to apologize for her remarks, but it also states that "ignorance is not a crime." It suggests that while no one can eliminate their own ignorance, they can learn to accept correction from other people. When looking at a sample of comments on the video, it becomes clear that many viewers misunderstood Sia's message, or perhaps chose to ignore it in favor of advancing their own agenda. Five out of the first fifty comments (10%) said they liked the video and then insulted O'Donnell for being fat or homosexual. For example, user *tysongeisler* wrote, "He's right. Rosie O'Donnell is a fat, ignorant bitch." Sia's point that "we are all ignorant" was lost on this user, as well as the fact that he was not insulting O'Donnell when he said "plus-sized lesbian." Some of the comments agreed with Sia that "ching chong" is offensive, or agreed that O'Donnell should apologize, but none explicitly agreed that "we are all ignorant."

It's possible that, along the lines of Somers-Willett's and Strine's critiques, some viewers were patting themselves on the back for their own non-racism. However, others

seemed to identify only with Sia's point that "ching chong" is racist, while maintaining sexist, size-ist, racist, or homophobic attitudes. A user named VivaLaChina wrote "I'm an Asian, and I don't like Ching Chong, but Chinese Mandarin sounds retarded, no offense." Not only is Sia's power to change minds called into question by this comment, one doubts that *any* poet has the ability to cause VivaLaChina to confront his or her own racist views. On the other hand, perhaps "Open Letter" does not so much immediately prompt changes of heart as work along with other arguments or artworks to eventually affect the views of the audience.

Among those who liked the video, none of the responses gave Sia credit for changing their minds about any issue, except Rosie O'Donnell herself. Apparently, though others did not get through to her, Sia's performance changed her mind and prompted her to apologize for her remarks on her blog. O'Donnell calls Sia's video informative and creative and says:

i apologize  
for any and all pain  
caused to any and all  
by my comments  
ignorance  
lack of compassion - empathy  
understanding (qtd. in "Beau Sia Schools")

To what extent can one understand Sia's political poem as successful? On one hand, Rosie O'Donnell, a major component of Sia's audience, at least claimed to become more enlightened on why "ching chong" is considered a racist slur. If one subscribes to the instrumental view of art, this is important because as an international celebrity who appears constantly in television shows, magazine articles, and tabloids, O'Donnell's enlightenment could go on to positively affect her many viewers and make them more sensitive and culturally aware. At the very least, if O'Donnell refrains from making

remarks like “ching chong” in the future, there would be one less source of racist comments to negatively affect American audiences. The poem can also be said to be successful because O’Donnell’s response was not simply to the poem, but also to the 650,000 people who watched it and the 8,000 ratings that averaged 4.5 out of 5 stars. Sia’s audience collaborated with him in the sense that by watching, rating, and commenting on the video, they helped it attract the notice of O’Donnell’s staff—without so many viewers, it’s unlikely that she would have seen the video; with less positive ratings, it would have been easier for her to ignore.

Yet, the number of people who liked the video and yet didn’t seem to understand its main point could indicate a failure on Sia’s part to affect his audience in a meaningful way. For a political poet, being liked may not be enough validation that one’s work is successful. Sia tries to recoup the value of his poem through a response to the comments that simultaneously re-emphasizes his own views while taking a respectful tone toward his audience. His response to the comments on his poems again reveals his performance of authorship as an ally to the audience: his goal as an author is to promote dialogue between people who take separate positions on issues of importance. He says: “regardless how y’all felt about the video, i truly appreciate all of you taking the time to provide your honest opinions of it. i believe this can . . . improve everyone communicating with one another.” He goes on to address some of the more radical misreading of his performance, saying that he does not hate O’Donnell, he did not mean to offend by using the terms *plus-sized* or *lesbian*, and that he is not “threatening that asians will punish all the non-asians in the future.”

The poem is intended to persuade. However, even in cases where Sia cannot persuade his audience, he attempts to keep communications channels open. Unlike Collins, who wants all inexperienced or inept poets to keep their work to themselves, Sia

values everyone having a voice, even if they are ignorant about poetry or about the issues he wants to discuss.

One can't empirically measure the effect that Sia's video had on its audience or on American culture. Even determining whether those first fifty respondents changed their minds as a result of the poem is difficult because most do not respond to the poem's main message. It's hard to tell if this poem was instrumentally "good" for those who watched it. Still, whether we believe O'Donnell's apology to reflect a new understanding that she should not be so defensive when told she has offended someone, a new understanding of the fact that her comment was racist, or a new understanding of how many people disliked her remark, her apology does signify a change of mind. For others, perhaps the video is part of a slower process of change, containing pieces of information that, combined with others, will eventually affect individuals and the greater culture.

### **Honest Dialogue and Self-Expression**

As discussed in the previous chapter, giving popular audiences power to evaluate works of art threatens a cultural authority like Pinsky or William Logan in their ability to consecrate art. Reading tysongeisler's comment, one might be tempted to seek cultural authorities instead of the populace for interpretations of poems. However, as a member of an Asian-American culture that has not particularly benefited from the sanctioning of American cultural authorities, Sia has more to gain by respecting the opinions of a wider audience. As a racially marginalized author, he may not be susceptible to the "ambivalence about democracy, technology, and commerce" that Jensen says many cultural critics experience. For Sia, democracy is a more unequivocal good than it is for Collins or Pinsky. Self-expression, to him, is a right, rather than a privilege of the educated or innately talented. As he says in "Open Letter," "I speak on behalf of those

who don't have the opportunity to address you. For those who know what 'ching chong ching chong' feels like combined with a swinging bat." Sia shows more sensitivity than Pinsky or Collins to how it feels for any member of an audience to be silenced. Indeed, Sia would probably find Collins's injunction for the less talented writer to "consider muteness" reprehensible.

Sia takes the attitude that everyone has something to say, and those expressions should be validated and appreciated as long as they are honest. He contributed to an eclectic book entitled *Slam* which was edited by Cecily von Ziegesar and featured poetry by unknown teens and famous poets, as well as quotes, song lyrics, photographs, drawings. When asked "How do you win a slam?" Sia answered,

That's easy. Be yourself. Once you get your raw self on stage, start to shape, mold, and perfect it. 95% of the people who win slams are their poems to the core. And remember: it really isn't about the scores. It's about your voice and your poetry and having a stage to speak from (7).

Sia speaks to a group of presumably young, untutored writers and tells them their voices deserve to be heard from a stage—and that as long as they are honest, they will succeed. In 2003, Sia talked about the pros and cons of young people writing poetry for public consumption:

Plenty of these kids doing spoken word now are treated like rock stars. They are missing the point of poetry as self-expression . . . But it has also brought a lot of kids together around the things affecting their world, who might not have even spoken to each other (Simmons 110).

Sia does not claim that young people need talent to make poetry a worthwhile pursuit. Rather, he tells them to honestly communicate. Slams and readings are worthwhile activities if the participants share the goal of dialogue. For Sia, honest communication is political, because getting into someone else's shoes is a way to have better relationships with people who have different backgrounds and experiences. He doesn't explicitly claim

that he is himself honest or authentic, but by emphasizing the value of honesty and expressing “deep truth,” he performs his own authenticity.

This is not to say that Sia believes all honest self-expression deserves equal praise. Sia’s parody of pop star Jewel’s best-selling book of poems, *A Night Without Armor II: The Revenge*, illustrates his belief that not all poems deserve publication. Speaking of Jewel’s book, Sia says:

I’m not trying to knock her writing, but I’ve spent many hours a day writing for the last six years. Maybe she’s been writing longer, but it doesn’t seem so. It’s hard for me to say whether someone’s awful or not having come from such an awful state myself. She just needs to forge her craft. She reads like a beginner, not a seasoned pro deserving of a big publishing deal (Interview by Amorosi).

Sia resents Jewel’s ability to publish a book when her talent was so undeveloped. He claims he wrote his entire, book-length parody in four hours. The parody illustrates Sia’s point about young poets being treated like rock stars above—it’s not that Sia wants to silence any voices, but that he believes certain institutions (the publishing industry, the television industry) should promote the best work as opposed to the work of celebrities. However, in another interview Sia suggests an upside to Jewel undeservedly getting a publishing deal. He says, “I’m kind of pleased that there have got to be millions of kids getting into poetry now, because of Jewel. Maybe on their own they’ll develop interest in Frank O’Hara, William Carlos Williams, or me” (“Hear and Now”). Even though Sia wasn’t impressed by Jewel’s book, he still saw young people becoming interested in her poetry as a good thing. Jewel’s writing, though unimpressive, might inspire others to try self-expression. Though Sia does expect publishers to refrain from disseminating “awful” poetry, he doesn’t see writing awful poems or even sharing awful poems as a problem, especially if those awful poems are honest.

When Sia collaboratively wrote and performed in a show for the 2004 *Declare Yourself* campaign, honest communication was again the theme. Television writer and producer Norman Lear sent his newly-purchased (8.1 million dollar) 1776 Dunlap broadside of the Declaration of Independence around the country, encouraging young people to vote. The *Declare Yourself* campaign self-consciously worked with celebrity and popular culture to reach as many young people as possible. The campaign partnered with Yahoo! and *US Weekly* magazine, promoted events featuring actors Drew Barrymore, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Reese Witherspoon, and broadcasted public service announcements. The *Declare Yourself* website features videos of actors reciting The Declaration and explaining its history. Over 1.2 million people in 2004 and 2006 registered to vote through the *Declare Yourself* website.

Lear also arranged a spoken word and music show that toured eighteen college campuses in the fall of 2004. The poets chosen to go on the tour, including Sia, “lived in L.A. for months, crafting a show that they hoped would ignite political consciousness and inspire civic action, while also being sure to stay moderate in their content” (Aptowicz 322). The program had a target audience and worked at inspiring that audience in general terms (“toward civic action”) and also specifically to vote in the 2004 election. As in “An Open Letter to All the Rosie O’Donnells,” Sia made a point to encourage his audience to honestly express themselves, this time through their vote. Because the message was encouraging participation, there was no conflict between having artistic integrity and achieving popularity. Popularity was crucial for the success of the campaign; Lear spent a great deal of money and partnered with big-name sponsors in order to ensure its media exposure.

*Declare Yourself* was self-consciously racially diverse. On November 3, 2004, an NBC political news show, *Hardball*, aired a segment featuring a performance by Latina

poet Mayda Del Valle, black poet Sekou the Misfit, and Sia. The poem Sia read on the show sympathizes with young people who may feel that they are silenced within the culture, and encourages them to speak via voting. Sia patriotically states that “My parents left their homeland, left language, culture, and family so that my home could be here, so I declare myself because I will not let their sacrifices be in vain.” Yet he also criticizes the racism in our country:

We laid the tracks that sent us to our own internment and still I am a spy. I am next year’s Arab. I am other. I am a threat, and I am an American. And in case you hadn’t been listening, I am speaking English. So let a brother live, because I will not wear my birth certificate on my face (Sia, *Hardball*).<sup>11</sup>

Most recently, Sia performed at the Presidential Town Hall hosted by Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote, which the 2008 presidential candidates attended via teleconference. In Sia’s performance, which he later posted on YouTube, he spoke directly to the presidential candidates, asking them to “talk about us [Asian-Americans] more” (Sia, “Beau Sia”). Again, because the message of these poems is considered crucial, appealing to large audiences does not present a conflict for Sia’s performance of authorship. Unlike Pinsky, who, when summoned to the White House as poet laureate, read canonical poetry, Sia recited a brand-new poem specifically addressed to the 2008 candidates.

Achieving respectful dialogue with peers, audiences, and political leaders is the goal of Sia’s performance of authorship. As such, he is not criticized for his popularity by journalists or academic critics—though he is likely not even defined as a poet by many of them. With its specific audiences, his poems are probably less likely to endure. The new

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<sup>11</sup> These lines are transcribed from Sia’s performance, and do not reflect the line breaks he may have written.



media that he works in do not yet appear in the *Norton Anthology of Literature*. And Sia has yet to publish a book of his own poetry besides *A Night Without Armor II*.

### **PERFORMANCE AS POETRY'S NATIVE TECHNOLOGY**

The dynamics of sound, as explained by Walter Ong, reveal why a rhetorical, political poet would also embrace performance. As Ong describes it, oral language has a lot in common with rhetorical language: both tend to emphasize a particular situation rather than a universal or abstract idea (49). Ong also explains the orally expressive world as a world of “good and evil;” he calls orality argumentative and “combative”—which calls to mind common rhetorical and political techniques of persuasion (43). Oral speech-makers “live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance;” Ong contrasts this practice with that of dictionaries (Pinsky’s writing companions), which “advertise semantic discrepancies,” and give meanings which are now obsolete (46). Most importantly, to understand poetry as performance and sound turns poetry into an event instead of a written object: “Sound resists reduction to an ‘object’ or an ‘icon’—it is an on-going event . . . the divorce between poem and context would be difficult to imagine in an oral culture, where the originality of the poetic work consists in the way this singer or narrator relates to this audience at this time” (157-8). This idea reflects Barbara Johnson’s discussion of the difference between a work and a text, with performance more closely aligned with the concept of text: “textuality is the manifestation of an open-ended, heterogeneous, disruptive force of signification and erasure that transgresses all closure” (40).

Henry Sayre, in an essay entitled “Performance,” claims performance is defined by its status as the single occurrence of a repeatable and preexistent text or score . . . Such a ‘commonsense’ definition of performance contains

within it one particularly important assumption, namely, that the work itself is not only distinct from its actual or possible realizations but in fact *transcends* them. That is, it anticipates, even *authorizes*, its many occurrences and somehow *contains* their variety (91).

The idea that there is an essential artistic work that contains all performances of that work helps explain why “Traditionally, the work of art itself possesses a priori status in relation to its manifestations, and performance is itself an event of the second rank” (91).

When comparing the videotaped performance of Sia’s “The Asians are Coming, The Asians are Coming” to its printed version, one can see Sia has flipped the traditional understanding of print and performance: performance is the favored technology.<sup>12</sup> As Gracia explains, “Written texts are frequently intended as visual signs of oral texts . . . [and] oral texts are often intended as signs of written texts” (22). Gracia would call the performed version and the printed version of the same words “counterparts;” though they do have an essential sameness, they are not identical. They are also not necessarily equal in quality. Sia does not claim that all poems are best on the page or stage. However, his performance is more polished than his writing, at least in the case of “The Asians are Coming, The Asians are Coming.” (In the case of “Open Letter,” there is no published print counterpart.)

Sia’s message can be derived from one of the poem’s last lines: “you’re not shutting me up until / the egg roll is recognized as an American food.” If egg rolls are not American food, by extension, Asian-Americans are not recognized as American people. Movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, whose Oscar for Best Picture inspired the poem, focus on exotic, ancient traditions in Asia, and Sia feels angry that more Oscar-winning movies do not depict contemporary American people of Asian descent. Sia has several immediate goals: to challenge the stereotyping of Asians by non-Asians, to

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<sup>12</sup> The performance can be found on-line here:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diNLPGHZbGM&feature=related>.

empower Asian-Americans, and to influence art makers not to use stereotyped or demeaning images of Asians or Asian-Americans. One place Sia performed this poem was at a special Congressional meeting of the Black, Hispanic, and Asian Pacific Caucuses in 2002, an event that attempted to “create an atmosphere of understanding among groups that have often felt pitted against one another for resources and recognition” (Clemetson). In “The Asians are Coming, the Asians are Coming,” Sia wants his audience to look at American society and see injustices; he also speaks more specifically to the creators of film and television media, challenging them to change their characterizations.

The poem begins:

Look asshole, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*  
was not our one shot at love  
it's the pre cursor of what's to come  
Oh yeah, now it's cool to like these Asian people  
as long as they're being Asian on the big screen  
and you set it in Asia, and it's a long time ago  
and they're speaking in Asian (Thank God for subtitles)  
who cares if they're kissing?  
as long as they're only kissing other Asians  
you have nothing to worry about right? (Simmons 99).

On the page, the poem has nine stanzas, varying in length from one to ten lines. The lines range from two to fourteen syllables with between one and six stresses in each line. The shape of the poem alone does not demonstrate that Sia privileges performance over print. There are many free verse poems with similar ranges of stanza and line lengths. Words are inconsistently capitalized: proper nouns are capitalized, but the first word after a punctuation mark is capitalized four times and not capitalized one time. In addition, two words are capitalized that seem to be part of a new sentence, but do not follow a period. A handful of commas are used, but not in every place one would use a comma when

writing grammatical sentences. The only punctuation mark used consistently and correctly is the question mark. Again, lack of capitalization or punctuation does not in itself indicate a lack of care—Sia may have been making deliberate aesthetic choices—but the lack of consistency or pattern to the punctuation, line breaks, capitalization, and rhythm suggests that this poem’s home is not the page. Further, the poem does not function as a script. The punctuation or lack thereof does not correspond to the way Sia performs the poem.

Sia works very deliberately with the performed text, but even when the printed poem is published, he does not seem to take much care with it, at least by comparison. As Sia himself said, "The way the eye reads the page and the ear hears the words is such a different thing . . . [*Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* is] not about the line breaks, it's about being coherent and being understood" (Pareles).

The care taken in performance is best indicated by the lines:

you asked for a global economy  
well so sorry  
if it blows up in your face and goes beyond  
getting a billion Chinese on AOL

eating KFC in their Gap khakis (Simmons 100).

In reading the words “so sorry,” one can sense a certain degree of sarcasm, which is also present in the *Def Jam* performance. But on the page, “eating KFC in their Gap khakis” is the most vivid line because it is the least clichéd and contains a specific image. In the performance, however, Sia elongates the syllables of “so sorry” and speaks them in a hyperbolized accent—something like “soooooo saaaaww-wwyy”—and then follows those words by speaking in a perfectly crisp Midwestern American accent (Sia, *Def*). The Asian accent is unnerving in its familiarity—the number of blockbuster films containing a slightly hysterical Asian with a heavy accent is disturbingly high. (Is it the Pink

Panther's butler? Short Round from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*? Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles*?)

One reason that Sia uses a wider range of performative behaviors than Pinsky or Collins is that he has a rhetorical, political message he wants to be understood. By performing as an author for whom the message is the most important aspect of the poem, Sia can theatricalize the poem without throwing its poem-ness into question. Unlike Edward Hirsch, who praises Collins for having no sense of shtick, Sia uses some gimmicky performance tricks—sudden shifts in volume, heavily emphasized curses, and hyperbole of various kinds. Through his performance, it's clear that he is, like Pinsky's character on *The Simpsons*, using sensationalism to attract attention. However, unlike Pinsky's character, Sia's performance of authorship also indicates a belief in his project and a passion for his cause.

Sia's performance is anything but subtle. Wearing a hot pink angora turtleneck sweater with a blue striped wristband, he sweats profusely under the studio lights. His hair is slicked back. Regardless of what other messages his clothes and hair might send, they at least announce that Sia wants his appearance to attract attention. He is everything that critics of slam poetry say slam poets are: angry, ranting, emotional, vulgar, humorous, melodramatic. These qualities are not generally valued or rewarded by grants from national arts foundations or described in poetry textbook anthologies. But if Sia performed the way Pinsky and Collins do or the way they say poets should, the message of his poem would not be as clear.

If Sia went on stage dressed professionally like Pinsky or in khaki pants like Collins, he would not look very different from the stereotypical Asian-American engineer. If he came off as an authority, his exclusionary persona would conflict with his message that everyone should be heard in our society. If he emphasized his authenticity,

he would be contradicting the message that Asian-American people perform a vast number of different identities. Furthermore, if Sia read from a page, behind a lectern, in a calm, collected way, he wouldn't show the range of emotions that defies stereotypes of Asian-American people as passive. If he didn't caricature a Hollywood-style Asian-American accent so vividly, the difference between Hollywood depictions and Sia's own articulate voice would not stand in such stark contrast. But as it is, the humor and outlandishness in Sia's dress, manner, and vocalization—which all surprise the audience in their extreme nature—undercut his audience's assumptions about what an Asian American person looks like and how they behave. Crucial aspects of the text are inextricably linked with Sia's body.

Another reason Sia may be more comfortable with performance than Pinsky or Collins is that he has some training as an actor and experience with theater and film. Sia played small roles in blockbuster films *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) and *Hitch* (2005). He also acted in the independent films *Slam* (1998) and *Rachel Getting Married* (2008). Sia's body is compact and athletic; he can break-dance, and has an unusual amount of mobility on the stage. He can fall to his knees, do martial arts-style kicks, or imitate a Backstreet Boys dance and incorporate its moves seamlessly with the voicing of his poems.

Sia's CD, *Attack! Attack! Go!*, unlike many other poetry CDs, involved an active team of producers at Mouth Almighty records. Rather than make a CD that captures his live energy, Sia's album is layered with sound effects, samples, and beats. He speaks his poems in a much different way than he does during live performances—he sounds much more artificial and rehearsed because he speaks to the cadence of the instrumental beat. The resulting album is more risky than a straightforward live CD because the album is obviously rehearsed and produced. There is no veneer of spontaneity that Collins, for

example, tries to preserve in his recordings of live performances. That Sia is willing to perform in these conditions and sell his live audiences the CD shows that he is unembarrassed by the fact that he rehearses and hones his performance skills.

## CONCLUSION

Sia's performance of authorship as ally to the audience, with its emphasis on the present-moment connections between people, leaves him vulnerable to quickly changing trends. As he states in an interview, "I am getting a lot of work now but next year there could be the new young Asian poet, the new young whatever, and I could be out of a job" (Sia, Interview by Glazner 119). If one is not striving, as Pinsky and Collins do, to create universal art, then they are susceptible to being displaced by the next trendy artist. There's pressure on Sia to continually innovate on his poems in order to stay relevant to audiences. As he mentions in another, more recent, interview, "The Asians are Coming," is one of his best-know poems, and it is not as relevant in 2010 as it was in 2000, the year it was written (Sia, Interview by Yoshimura). Indeed, in 2010 the movie *Up* was nominated for best picture—a movie that does not emphasize the Asian-American boy's Asian-ness at all, but shows him as a very typical, contemporary American child: his parents are divorced, he's a Boy Scout, he's overweight, he likes chocolate and animals. The characters and settings of *Up* could hardly be more different than *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Though Sia doesn't say so, it's possible that his poem, which appeared on HBO and Broadway, and has over 92,000 views on YouTube, contributed to the change in mainstream films' depictions of Asians and Asian-Americans.

In that interview, Sia affirms again that "it's just very important at this point in history for *everyone* to share their story honestly. Because you never know what value it will have and it's the only way to get a realistic account of where the entire world is, and

what to do about it” (Sia, Interview by Yoshimura). Honest dialogue can never really go out of style or become irrelevant, so Sia’s performance as ally in some ways allows him to continue to assert his status as author. His performance relates back to Rubin’s characterization of the poet as a seer (*Songs* 20). Sia does not make a claim to have more extraordinary vision than anyone else, but by honestly sharing his unique, marginalized position with an American audience he can help others to gain knowledge. In performing the role of seer, though not necessarily one with unusual gifts of sight, Sia argues for his own authenticity in spite of his blatant attempts to succeed in the marketplace. If honest dialogue is the mission, popularity is a good thing because it broadens the dialogue. One must trust in Sia’s honesty to believe that he is not a sell-out, though Sia’s claim to promote honest dialogue is perhaps less difficult to believe than Collins’s performance of a genius who is unaffected by his audience.

Sia’s rhetorical, political, contextual, performative poems accomplish what Pinsky sets out to avoid in his performance of authorship: they muddy the definition of poetry. Indeed, New York City’s Bob Holman, one of Sia’s first mentors, defines poetry as “anything that wants to call itself poetry” (Aptowicz 30). The blurring of poetry with hip hop and theater makes poetry less of an isolated discipline, and therefore the authorial persona of expert or authority is more difficult to achieve. Because the distinction between author and audience is not as clear in Sia’s performance of authorship as it is in Pinsky’s and Collins’s, and because of his emphasis on present-tense dialogues, it’s perhaps less likely that his works will endure for centuries.

Sia manages to resolve the difficulties of Collins’s performance of authenticity (in the sense of artistic integrity) by focusing on the content of his poems (as honest and as containing important perspectives on important issues). By openly courting popularity but maintaining the value of honesty, Sia performs artistic integrity. His performance of



authorships suggests that poetry can have a more immediate social function than is possible for Pinsky. But Sia and Pinsky have similar authorial personas in that they have an instrumentalist understanding of how poetry fits into a broader culture.

Like Sia, Patricia Smith emphasizes the importance of author-audience communication and intimacy in her performance of authorship. Smith affirms not only the importance of poetry for a community, but the importance of poetry for self-definition and self-healing. Her performance of authorship reflects an attempt to honestly communicate with one's audience, but more importantly, an attempt to honestly communicate with oneself. Smith, like Collins, alternately affirms her difference from non-authors and her closeness with her audience. Yet she also attempts to attain a Pinsky-like authority, thus bringing this portrait of contemporary authorship in America full circle.

## **Authorship as Survival: Patricia Smith**

In the May 2008 issue of *PMLA*, the Editor's column featured a roundtable discussion of professors who also work in prisons teaching visual, literary, and performative arts. Claiming that educational arts programs reduce recidivism and allow "long-term inmates the resources to invent more meaningful lives," the column praised the work of the professors who continue to teach in prisons in spite of decreasing amounts of government funding for such programs ("Editor's" 545).

That literature and writing classes could prevent inmates from returning to prison, or help hardened criminals find their humanity, is a rather large claim; however, each of the participants in the roundtable affirmed the transformative power of literature. Bell Gale Chivigny said the writers she worked with testified "that the act of writing helped them escape, survive, resist, protest, vent rage, face pain, feel love and remorse, and undertake reform" (556). Stephen John Hartnett called his workshops "laboratories for agency" (560). Buzz Alexander quotes a letter sent to him from former prisoner Lessie Brown: "I just don't know how to describe how all this has made me feel. I guess if you consider a woman who felt like she was nothing, who felt she had no potential for anything, and would never be anything, then maybe you can understand just a little, what this has done for me" (565).

This chapter focuses on Patricia Smith, who, like these scholars, has taught creative writing in prisons, and who testifies to the importance of writing in every life. The chapter investigates the implications of performing authorship as a means of survival. The term *survival* encompasses many benefits of authorship discussed by Smith and the scholars in the roundtable: a strong conception of self, a high self-esteem, emotional well-being, physical well-being, and literal survival (escape from death).

Smith, one of the most successful slam poets ever to compete, who primarily slammed in the late eighties and nineties, describes the slam this way:

The slam started my life, and saved it at the same time. It was a huge, unwieldy, heartbreaking thing that found a little colored girl from Chicago and blessed her with a second throat and a new language to flow from it. The competition taught me root and defiance, and helped me discover a confidence I was sure I didn't possess. The people around me—those first friends at the party—are still closer to me than much of my family, even when years have passed, even when we're hundreds of miles apart. Even today, I can catch the eye of one of them from across a room, and something passes between us (“Slam On”).

Here Smith describes poetry writing, poetry performance, and a community of poets that did not necessarily save her from suicide or self-destruction, but helped her to thrive. Yet, at other points, Smith credits poetry for saving her life more literally. After losing her job at *The Boston Globe*, Smith wrote a large group of poems that she called “her salvation;” some of the poems in that group were about suicidal impulses (Interview by Quinn).<sup>13</sup> Smith performs authorship as a vital, crucial part of her existence; its importance in her own life prompts her to encourage other people to write creatively. Though Smith no longer competes in slams, she has pursued authorship as survival in many different genres and mediums.

In many ways, Smith has the exact opposite problem of Pinsky: Pinsky performs his own poetic authority primarily, but encourages a large audience to feel empowered to develop their own poetic tastes. Smith conceives of the poet’s primary job as “show[ing] everyone that poetry is something that we all own,” meaning that everyone can write it (Interview by Glazner 165). Yet she is also highly competitive and motivated to receive the kind of professional accolades and recognition Pinsky has achieved. Smith’s

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<sup>13</sup> In June of 1998, after being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in journalism, Smith was fired from her job at *The Boston Globe* for fabricating some of the people she wrote about in her Metro / Region column in six different articles.

performance of authorship also resonates with Collins's because both poets attempt to be accessible and hospitable to their audiences, but also to earn the respect of critics and literary gatekeepers.

Smith's performance of authorship also shares a problem with Sia's: how does one simultaneously value every voice and also stand out as an elite writer and performer? One danger of Smith's performance of authorship is that her audience will value her ability to teach and share the experience of writing but not her poetry specifically. Like Pinsky, Smith blurs the role of poet and teacher together, but without Pinsky's hierarchy of experts and non-experts, Smith's skills as a teacher do not necessarily translate into skills as a poet. Smith says that poetry slam taught her confidence; indeed, one needs confidence to be able to perform equality with one's audience. Smith's insistence that "poetry is something we can all own" can function as a modesty trope—while suggesting that anyone could do what she is doing, she perhaps implicitly invites her audience to disagree and find her work superior to that of others.

The potential disenfranchisement of Smith because of her race and gender may factor into her performance of authorship as survival, and may have factored into her enormous successes in slam poetry (since white audiences tend to reward black poets deemed authentic). Like Sia, Smith does not wish to silence amateur poetic voices, and encourages self-expression. Unlike Sia, Smith also often writes persona poems that are from the point of view of someone who in race, profession, age, and gender does not resemble Smith herself. Sia's persona poems tend to be written from the point of view of someone who resembles him physically. In any case, both poets are comfortable acting during poetry readings in spite of their emphasis on authentic self-expression. Sometimes the contrast between Smith's body and the poem's persona has a powerful affect in performance (see Somers-Willett's description of Smith's poem "Skinhead" in *The*

*Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*), but in other performances, such as of the poem “34,” the similarities or contrasts between Smith’s body and those of her characters are not particularly emphasized. Her focus is on helping *everyone* own poetry.

This chapter does focus on the potential benefits and problems of performing authorship as survival. It questions the claims of arts therapists and education scholars on the relationship of creative work to physical and emotional health. Smith’s poem “Building Nicole’s Mama” will be discussed in the context of this discussion, along with the background information Smith provides about the poem in interviews and blog posts. The relationship of Smith’s performance of authorship as survival to her openly competitive persona will be examined as well. Next, the chapter will show how Smith’s performance of authorship as survival connects to her notion of the plural existence of poems; she favors no one technology in the creation of poems and believes all genres of writing and contexts of presentation help assure survival. An analysis of “34” will show how Smith creates texts that are crafted both for the page and stage. Finally, the chapter will discuss Smith’s performance of intimacy with her audiences at live performances as a strategy for helping those audiences realize that they, too, can own poetry and use it to promote their well-being.

## **POETRY THERAPY**

Smith’s performance of authorship as survival is evident in her poem, “Building Nicole’s Mama,” which is dedicated to the sixth grade class of Lillie C. Evans School in Liberty City, Miami. The dedication itself suggests that the poem exists because of the classroom in which Smith taught Nicole, and reminds the audience that the characters in the poem actually exist. Smith often mentions in performance that the students made her promise to say the name of their school every time she reads the poem, emphasizing both

its authenticity and the impact it had on the children in the class. Though written much earlier, this poem is the first in Smith's 2006 poetry collection *Teahouse of the Almighty*; Smith often performs it at the beginning of her poetry readings. It starts with a description of writing students who want to discuss death because they have experienced it in various circumstances.

*Can poetry hurt us?* they ask me before  
snuggling inside my words to sleep.  
*I love you*, Nicole says, Nicole wearing my face,  
pimples peppering her nose, and she is as black  
as angels are. Nicole's braids clipped, their ends  
kissed with match flame to seal them,  
and *can you teach me to write a poem about my mother?*  
*I mean, you write about your daddy and he dead,*  
*can you teach me to remember my mama?* (1-2).

Here, the speaker (who is very closely tied to Smith the author) is credited with soothing troubled children, implying that they have few other places let their guard down. Nicole's seemingly benign question "can you teach me to write a poem about my mother?" twists into "can you teach me to remember my mama?" The poem suggests that Nicole needs poetry in order not only to remember her mother, but to understand herself through that remembering. Nicole can both soothe herself and exercise agency through the writing of the poem; therefore, the ability to write a poem is considered crucial in her life.

When Smith recounts the Miami residency in interviews, she expands the narrative of the poem by explaining that Nicole's mother had died the week before, and she was back in school, having seen no psychologist: "She kept hearing all these bad things about her mother—that she was a drug dealer and all this—'but I had really special moments with my mama and I want to remember those'" (Interview by Quinn). Smith explains, "I put this poem first in the book and I also do it first, almost every reading that

I do, because it reminds me of how powerful poetry is, that it can take you from one place in your head to a safer place.” In the interview Smith adds, “She’s in college now, by the way, that’s how old I am”—not-so-subtly suggesting that Nicole’s college education is due in some part to Smith and the introduction of poetry to Nicole’s life. Smith extends this principle to all people: “You just need outlets, we’re like little pressure cookers walking around most of the time.”

In a post written on the Poetry Foundation blog, Smith further elaborates on the story of Nicole:

I let Nicole hold my hand, clutch my clothing, try on my footsteps, share my lunch. But I also showed her ways to fill the void that she was trying to fill with me. *What was her name, Nicole, what was her name?* We talked about her mother and slowly the adjectives came, and then more adjectives, and then whole memories, sweet and a little startling. *No honey, it doesn’t matter if the words are spelled right.* Before the week was over, Nicole found her throat, and her mother sprang from it (“What We’re Really”).

Smith’s performance of authorship includes many such stories—of desperate people she encounters who find a “second throat” from which to expel the pressure building inside them, thus becoming emotionally safer.

Smith considers the poem to be a *text*, rather than a *work*. She claims that the process of writing and performing is primary, not the enduring work preserved in anthologies. The difference between her approach and Pinsky’s is perhaps best highlighted by examining his introduction to a volume he edited called *The Handbook of Heartbreak: 101 Poems of Lost Love and Sorrow*:

To say the words of a poem is a physical and emotional comfort, as well as a genetically reinforced thrill; it is a little like being actually, physically touched or embraced. If the words say what I lack or miss or long for, then the comfort and the thrill are perhaps that much more penetrating because they remind me of how the physical act of speech can connect me to other people (xiv).

Pinsky describes how reading sorrowful poems can comfort the reader—partly because of empathizing with the poem or feeling the poem empathizes with us, partly because of the relationship of orality to human connection. Rubin describes how anthologies of poetry can be used in a different way to promote emotional well-being: *Home Book of Verse*, *Household Book of Poetry*, and *A Library of Poetry and Song* were used to suggest comfort and stability, ultimately promoting values one associated with one’s family and religion (*Songs* 246; 253). However, Smith describes the poems that she has written not so much as a source of comfort to her audience, but as a model for the behavior of writing poetry. Demonstrating how she re-creates past trauma in order to promote emotional well-being, she encourages young people to experiment with that process of poetry. Implicitly agreeing with Frost that “a poem begins as a lump in the throat,” Smith attempts to help students create a poem that will dissolve the lump. Unlike Pinsky, who suggests with his “handbook” that the best poets are the best soothers of grief, Smith suggests that the process of writing is more beneficial than the act of reading.

When asked to give young writers advice, Smith suggests listening to amateur poets, revealing a respect for ordinary, ungifted writers that directly opposes Collins’s view:

Skip the star-studded reading of the author du jour and check out an open mike instead. Hear folks in the process of discovering their voices; ordinary people are extraordinary teachers . . . Amble to the stage every once in a while. Don’t ever be just a spectator, and don’t ever be in unquestioned awe of anyone (“Why We Write” 66)

Like Sia, Smith understands the relationship between writer and audience to be reciprocal and the boundary between them blurry. Smith performs her role in Nicole’s life as crucial, but an untutored writer like Nicole also inspired Smith to write one of her signature poems.



In *Poetry and the Public*, Harrington investigates open mikes and writing groups, interviewing practitioners and discovering that a “spirit of self-sufficiency and of personal and community empowerment appeared to be the most salient aspect of poets’ evaluation of their own poetry practices” (179). The San Francisco Bay Area poets that Harrington interviewed cited poetry’s “transformative power” in their lives (182). His interviewees also revealed an appreciation for the catharsis of writing, sharing, and listening to other people’s poems: “in one workshop after the 1991 bombing of Iraq had begun, every poet brought a poem on that topic—not, as one member put it, ‘because we’re going to try to change the world with our poetry,’ but rather, ‘because we’re feeling something deeply’” (179). In this case, the emotional release of writing and sharing feelings about war seemed more important to the poets than sharing a specific message or trying to teach others about their point of view, which is Sia’s major concern. Harrington’s interviews reveal similar sentiments about sharing poems to Smith’s; his subjects affirm the importance of both emotional release and building a community through sharing poetry.

On the Poetry Foundation blog, Smith describes a writing workshop she ran for foster children. One child was “raped so brutally that her vaginal wall was torn” (“Have You Said?”).

In this space, we’ve been talking about the good and awful things about poetry readings, whether or not they’re worth our time. Kenneth [Goldsmith] says no. Kwame [Dawes] says yes. I say *hell yes*.

I start with that image of a pudgy, freckle-faced child stuttering out the words “vaginal wall.” She can’t think of a more lyrical way to say what she’s saying . . . I guess I don’t think about the words as much as I do the courage it takes to stand and say them.

This post agrees with Harrington’s point in *Poetry and the Public* that “poetry is not reducible to poems” (5). Harrington describes writing workshop as places to explore deep

feelings in the company of a community. Similarly, Smith says “I don’t think about the words as much as I do the courage it takes to stand and say them,” indicating that the poem itself is unimportant compared to the emotional release of sharing a traumatic experience and the support of the community one shares it with. Smith describes in her post the way two of the girl’s friends got up and stood next to her as she read, “movi[ing] their shoulders close so she could cry into them.”

Pinsky’s and Collins’s dismissals of self-expression and amateur poetry readings seem quite callous in the face of this description of a young girl trying to come to terms with the crimes committed against her. However, Pinsky and Collins do not disapprove of arts therapies—they just don’t discuss them. Though neither explicitly says so, it seems likely they would consider the workshop with foster children rather unrelated to their own poetry careers (as more therapy than art). Indeed, using art as an adjective for therapy indicates that the art is secondary—implying that it may not be very aesthetically interesting. However, many audiences find therapeutic or confessional art quite compelling, and also find it difficult to critique. In *Songs of Ourselves*, Rubin describes a debate about poetry as therapy that took place in 1957:

Well aware of [Amy Morrow] Lindbergh’s status as the wife of flier Charles Lindbergh and the mother of their kidnapped baby, Ciardi nevertheless declared, “I am compelled to believe that Mrs. Lindbergh has written an offensively bad book—inept, jingling, slovenly, illiterate even,” a book exemplifying “aesthetic and human failure” (*Song* 92).

Ciardi’s review was much harsher even than Collins’s injunction for bad poets to consider muteness. To Ciardi, and presumably to others, a bad poem is a bad poem, and should not be shared with others. However, there was a huge backlash against Ciardi’s review, including one letter instructing him not to “dissect [the book] for technique.”

Smith advocates a position between the two extremes; she does not necessarily suggest publishing the poems written by the foster children, but she also does not insist that a poem must uphold a certain aesthetic standard to be worthwhile. Neither does Smith insist that we should equally respect all poets, poems, or poetry readings even though she values self-expression:

Sometimes when we're talking about readings, we're talking about the superstars, their pockets stuffed with accolades and grant money, mechanically reheating their "greatest hits"; sometimes we're talking dull, self-centered droners who couldn't talk a cockroach away from a bright light; sometimes we're talking about testosterone-fueled braggarts bellowing odes to their omnipotent genitalia, minorities pissed off about being minorities and bombastic babblers who never understand why people use one word when fifty will work just as well ("Have You Said?").

What makes a good poem in Smith's terms is partly based on authenticity. If someone is sincerely, bravely putting to words an experience that is haunting them in one way or another, that poet should be respected, applauded, and supported. If a poet is seizing an opportunity for an audience but has nothing terribly interesting or important to say, that poet is not so deserving of appreciation. Smith also hints that "superstars" rich in "grant money" have more of a responsibility to put on a good reading than foster kids—though she doesn't specify whether that is because the superstars have a larger audience, are being paid to perform, or are used to reading in public and therefore not being particularly brave by doing so.

Smith's stance in some ways does present difficulty for critics and audiences. How should a critic like Ciardi best respond to authentic, but un-aesthetic works of art? If poetry is something that we all own, how can we dismiss the "bombastic babblers" and "testosterone-fueled braggarts?" Judging poetry (or poetry performance) based on authenticity is problematic because authenticity as determined by audiences is based on

appearances—it's not a stable quality. It's both difficult to assess and difficult to quantify.

For example, Ft. Worth poet Michael Guinn slams several poems about the sexual and physical abuse of women and girls. In these poems, the narrator describes acts of violence he has witnessed or that have happened to someone close to him. Often poetry slam judges enthusiastically applaud these poems, viewing them as authentic, if disturbing, and perhaps even considering Guinn “brave” for describing traumatic experiences. Many members of the slam community, however, after hearing multiple poems about violence toward women from Guinn, develop the opposite perception: that he exploits the theme as a way to arouse the audience's sympathy and earn high scores from judges. Even if one knew Guinn's personal history with violence (his website says his career as a social worker inspired his poems), one could not definitively say whether he authentically feels the pain of the experiences he describes, or calculatingly writes poems on themes that he knows the audience finds compelling (or both). The value of Guinn's work can be judged on its aesthetics, and can be evaluated according to whether it condemns violence or revels in it, but it's a nearly impossible task to determine if Guinn writes out of genuine pain or concern.

Smith's performance of authorship depends on her authenticity; only by writing a poem that is, in an emotional sense, “deeply true” (even if fictional) can Smith's poems help ensure the survival of herself and her audience. “Building Nicole's Mama” might be dismissable as melodramatic or overly sentimental; yet if we understand the poem to truly reflect a group of sixth graders who all “know somebody dead” (and therefore also reflect the experiences of many other real children in the same situation), its argument for the importance of poetry becomes much stronger. The poem's attempt to draw a strong emotional response from its audience can be appreciated best if one believes Smith's

experience, and the children's trauma-filled and fragile lives, to be real. (Even her persona poems are often based on true stories.)

Though it may be difficult to assess the sincerity of any claim to authenticity, Smith performs an authorship that helps both her and her audience survive, or at least stay sane. This is accomplished by writing or performing poetry that may thematically relate to issues in her audiences' lives, but also by modeling the behavior of writing to survive. In a way this is the most dramatic claim of importance that an author can make, certainly rivaling Pinsky's ambition to write works that will endure, Collins's desire to be known as a genius unaffected by the public, and Sia's attempt to foster productive dialogue with his audience about matters of mutual concern. But is authorship as survival a plausible concept?

Psychologist Cheryl Jean Maddalena's *The Resolution of Internal Conflict Through Performing Poetry* investigates the emotional effects of specifically the performance of one's own poetry. Maddalena points out that "Most therapists consider the expression of feelings to be crucial to the therapeutic process" (8). Not only writing feelings down, but sharing feelings, is important: Maddalena quotes a study by Langosch explaining that "children are often relieved to discover that others share similar thoughts and fantasies" (9). Those who study arts therapy generally subscribe to the idea that artistic catharsis allows a middle ground between holding in one's feelings and acting on them in harmful ways (11). Some psychologists understand arts therapies to result in "a greater acceptance of the known self" (17).

The problem with arts therapy research, as Maddalena states it, is that

The majority of research on creative arts therapies appears to use a single group for study with no control group. These studies sometimes use specific instruments in evaluating the benefits of creative arts therapies,

though sometimes they appear to use the evaluator's general assessment of progress rather than a specific measure (21).

Maddalena's own research into the psychological benefits of performing poetry has similar weaknesses to the arts therapy studies she critiques. She interviews local performing poets about why they write and what good they get from it. She takes them at their word, and the study does not consider how those who do not perform poetry deal with inner conflict.

However, what's interesting about Maddalena's research is that it focuses not on troubled youth or adults with known pathologies, but on people who are not in a clinical setting. These socially-functioning, presumably relatively sane people consistently claim that performing poetry helps them resolve internal conflict. Maddalena uses the word *resolved* to mean "worked out, analyzed, soothed, or reassured" (48). Her research suggests that many performing poets share Smith's sense of being "pressure-cookers" who need the release of both writing and sharing in order to maintain a sense of calm and lead functional lives. Maddalena explains how performing poetry helps poets with self-acceptance: "re-experiencing painful emotion does not seem to be referenced in the creative arts therapy literature, while every one of this study's participants mentioned it . . . there is an overall sense of poets honoring their own emotion by performing certain works" (78).

Maddalena also stresses the difference between a therapeutic environment and an open mike or slam: the audience in the latter event is not captive, and the fact that the audience chooses to be there is very affirming for poets. One does not necessarily try to entertain one's support group, but many poets feel empowered by their ability to affect an audience: "For at least three minutes, poets move from the place of past vulnerability and into a position of power" (80). This idea of gaining power through performing poetry

relates back to Smith's claim that the poetry slam gave her confidence, which translated into other aspects of her life. To write a poem about a traumatic event does not only offer emotional relief—it also allows a person to exert control over their experiences, crafting and shaping them. If the resulting work of art is interesting or pleasing to an audience, the writer can experience the audience's admiration, thus transforming unpleasant events into a source of confidence.

Smith stresses not only emotional release, but the transformation affected by crafting and honing one's experiences into words. In a blog post, she wrote about an idea of Frost's that enthusiasm in poetry should be "taken through the prism of the intellect" ("What Robert"). She criticized poems that are "ohs and ahs and no more."

Unfortunately, overwrought enthusiasm—complete with grimaces, raised fists, clenched teeth and curled toes—is quite often mistaken for passion and, regrettably, talent. The poem itself is all but forgotten in the anger, the intensity, the vaguely choreographed histrionics.

While Smith encourages self-expression, she also teaches techniques of writing and performance. She attempts to show her students how to reveal ideas and intellect in their writing as well as emotion. Though she would encourage students to write about any experience, she presses them to craft those experiences into an aesthetic text that will give its author a sense of her own power and skill.

Several teachers of impoverished urban youth also testify to the importance of creating and sharing poetry for the emotional well-being, and even the physical survival, of the writers, among them Susan Weinstein, education scholar and author of *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth*. In *Words in Your Face*, Aptowicz interviews Jen Weiss, the founder of a non-profit organization in New York City called Urban Word that hosts youth slams and runs writing workshops for teenagers. Weiss

cannot conceal her impatience when Aptowicz asks her if she thinks slam poets will make it into the canon:

ultimately we don't care whether this poet ends up in the canon because we're trying to basically keep kids out of jail, so whether or not spoken work or slam poetry ends up in the canon is just so far removed from the day-to-day job of Urban Word . . . It's not so much that these kids will go on to be performers, or writers, or published writers—it's that we hope that they will continue to write (315).

Weiss does not explain why writing is so important, but it is plain that, like Harrington's workshop writers, she believes writing poetry is transformative for disenfranchised youth. Ed Garcia, who has taught for Urban Word, explains its benefits more specifically: "poetry and slam . . . reaches them, in the sense that nothing else can. It becomes their language, it becomes their culture. They see it so much more as something that they can do, something that reflects their community, their feelings or emotions, their sense of style and sense of self" (Aptowicz 211). A sense of self is what Smith claims the slam gave her, and also what she helped Nicole gain through writing about her mother.

Jensen critiques these arguments. Citing the Campaign to Triple California State Funding to the Arts, Jensen shows how some arts supporters credit art with boosting the economy and creating jobs as well as supporting "self-expression, healing, wisdom, and personal growth. To support the arts is also to support civic growth, safer neighborhoods, drug rehabilitation, and higher property values" (146). Jensen's concern is that by blaming bad art (or lack of art) for society's ills and crediting good art with its successes, one does not address community problems directly and effectively: "to sift, to critique, to explore, to question . . . This isn't something *art* does, this is something *we* do . . . It is absurd, and simplistic, to presume that art will make [crime, urban renewal, homelessness, etc.] better" (205).



Indeed, the epilogue of Weinstein's book, which tells what the young writers she has worked with are doing a few years after her initial study took place, shows that the students' conceptions of themselves as writers did not necessarily keep them from getting pregnant at a young age, going to jail, or working an unfulfilling and low-wage job. As Jensen suggests, looking to writing workshops to reduce recidivism is not practical as public policy. Yet the idea that writing poetry makes one emotionally safer is an extremely powerful one even if there is no outward change in the author's life: consider the letter Brown wrote to Buzz Alexander, which claimed that because of writing classes, she no longer felt like "nothing." Even if Brown goes back to prison or is unable to support herself through writing as she planned to do when she got out of jail, feeling like "someone" would still be a huge improvement in her circumstances.

Though most have only their own experiences and anecdotal reports to go on, these experiences are powerful enough to convince many education, psychology, and literature scholars that writing poetry (along with other kinds of art consumption and creation) is necessary for survival. The National Endowment of the Arts 2008 survey on public participation in the arts belies this, as it demonstrates that only about 7% of American adults practice creative writing; the figure is similar in the 2002 and 1997 surveys (49). Presumably, many of the 93% of Americans who don't write creatively are still leading functional and happy lives. The study implicitly backs Jensen's argument that the arts are not instrumental for health or well-being. Yet for the incarcerated or impoverished, writing can perhaps have a bigger impact on survival; the testimonies of those who have participated in arts therapy suggest that writing workshops are a good vehicle for creating emotional outlets and promoting confidence, as well as facilitating communication with one's teachers and peers. The processes of releasing emotions,

crafting those emotions, and sharing the resulting work is one effective way for hardened criminals or troubled youths to gain emotional intelligence.

### **THE PLURAL EXISTENCE OF POEMS**

Smith first gained recognition as a poet through her poetry performances, most notably becoming the four-time individual National Poetry Slam champion (a record set in the early nineties that still stands). Though initially somewhat antagonistic to the established poetry scene in academia and poetry journals, in recent years Smith has turned her attention to achieving accolades in those areas as well. Her performance of authorship as survival helps her cross between performance poetry and print poetry circles. If poems are vital to emotional and physical well-being, then the question of whether the poem belongs in a book or on the stage becomes trivial by comparison. Smith's performance of authorship as survival suggests that any way to put poetry in the hands of the disenfranchised—whether by helping them write or perform or both—is beneficial. Like Sia, whose message is so important that any way of getting attention is considered acceptable, Smith's performance of authorship suggests that poetry is too important to limit its forms of expression. Both their understanding of poems as texts and their goals to interact with their audiences help Smith and Sia ignore anti-theatrical prejudice and wholly embrace performance as part of their poetic careers.

Smith, like Sia, communicates ideas about poetry and poets on a blog—both her own personal blog and in a series of posts on the Poetry Foundation website in 2006 and 2007. Sia, however, writes in his blog only very sporadically, and he does not write very often about art itself. The wealth of blog posts written by Smith is one way that she performs intimacy with her audience (to be discussed in more detail later in this chapter) and her commitment to helping everyone discover poetry in their lives. Blogs are

potentially more accessible than poetry books. Unlike books, they can be found on any computer, and they exist indefinitely on the internet, accessible at any time. When writing for the Poetry Foundation, Smith often wrote more than one post per week, giving her audience a frequent and ever-expanding source of her ideas and her reflections on her experiences as an author. Sharing her ideas in public, freely-available forums where the audience is encouraged to comment complements Smith's commitment to making poetry part of every life.

If successful, Smith's performance of authorship may appear to be quite selfless, but she is equally vocal about her own intensely competitive drive. She has openly stated that she wants to become poet laureate: "You heard right. I've got my eyes on the prize. I want to follow proudly in the footsteps of the 12 white men, 2 white women and one black dove who've been undisputed sultans of the stanza" ("I Am Certainly"). In a blog post entitled "Oh, HELL yeah . . . ." Smith describes her favorite review of her poetry collection *Teahouse of the Almighty*: "in one of those reviews that makes me wanna—as the Godfather of Soul James Brown might say—jump back and kiss m'self, I was called . . . wait for it . . . here it comes . . . 'a speech pathologist's wet dream.'" That Smith would write a post about a good review already suggests she is eager to let fellow poets know of her success, but her open excitement does not suggest any degree of modesty. On the same blog, she also brags about being accepted into the Warren Wilson M.F.A. program and evaluates herself based on Auden's criteria for a major poet to "see how major I am:"

Since, I certainly aspire to be "major" (the alternative would be—uh, what?), I thought I'd see how I measure up, just how far I have to go before students of the genre are poring over my musings for "clues" or whispering my name in hushed, shivery reverence. Maybe then I can ease up on the shameless marketing of me, myself, and I, crossing the country hawking my books with the unleashed fervor of a Jehovah's Witness ("M.F.A.", "I Want").

Smith ultimately decides in the post that she does meet most of Auden's criteria for being "major," although she also questions the quality of his criteria. In the post, Smith reveals her ambition to be enduring, canonical, and revered while at the same time admitting (and exaggerating) the ways she markets herself. As discussed in the Collins chapter, marketing implies a business savvy that is not generally associated with high, canonical art. To some critics, those like Collins, who are suspected of having too much business acumen, are automatically suspected of being inauthentic; those critics would likely be equally suspicious of Smith's "shameless" self-promotion.

Unlike Collins, who claims that his audience does not influence his composition process, Smith states that she wants to write poems that are immediately influential to those for whom poetry could be necessary for survival. And yet she also openly desires to win major awards. Though her competitive drive is serious, she discusses it in a humorous way. Her performance of authorship has something in common with Pinsky's—both openly aspire to gain enduring authority as poets, and both treat their desire for literary fame with humor. (Remember Pinsky's appearance on *The Simpsons* and his jokingly demure "no, I couldn't possibly!" to Thorburn at MIT.)

Desire to be the best and most famous contemporary American poet does not necessarily mean that Smith cannot carry out her mission to help her audiences realize that "poetry is something we all own." But by humorously admitting she cares what others think of her work, she makes caring what others think less damning. This is the opposite approach of Collins, and it's one that ultimately seems less conflicted and more convincing than his insistence that he does not consider his audience when writing. Collins performs hospitality to audiences while performing but claims to be indifferent to them in the moment of composition; Smith performs hospitality in addition to ambition in

both the composition and performing aspects of her career; she tries to move her audiences emotionally and also to gain their respect.

The origin story Smith tells about her most recent book, *Blood Dazzler*, provides a good example of her understanding of the poem's ontology and the role her audience plays in her authorial life. While working on her M.F.A. at Stonecoast in 2006 (though Smith's poetry career began in the late 1980s, she did not get a creative writing degree until she was in her fifties), she wrote a poem, entitled "34," in the voices of thirty-four people who died at St. Rita's Nursing Home in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Smith performed the poem several places, including the Palm Beach Poetry Festival in the winter of 2007. During that reading, she noticed that the crowd was restless. Afterwards, she approached one of the people who had seemed uncomfortable during her reading, and the woman said, "Well . . . uh . . . they just had Mardi Gras, didn't they? Things are better now. I mean, I saw some pictures on CNN" (Interview by Medaris).

This response influenced Smith's decision to write an entire book in different voices relating to the hurricane:

Since New Orleans and surrounding devastated regions were seldom in the news anymore, people who felt that way were no longer forced to look closely at what had happened, at what was still happening. They refused to hear poor people, tossed out of cramped trailers, begging their country to notice. They no longer chose to notice anything outside of the sad, manufactured gaiety of the French Quarter. They didn't want to be reminded of our country's gross ineptitude, or listen again to the mumbled apologies of a clueless leader. There were those who refused to acknowledge a stark reality—an era, indeed an entire culture, had been sacrificed to the water. That's when I decided to keep writing (Interview by Medaris).

Smith, like Sia, has a political aim in the writing of her book; to her, it's important for people to get inside the shoes of those affected by Katrina so that they continue to both acknowledge and cope with the catastrophe. Smith wrote and performed poems in the

voices of other hurricanes, dogs left behind, the dead and dying, politicians, and government employees. She crafted them into dozens of different forms. *Blood Dazzler* was a finalist for a National Book Award in 2008. (Incidentally, one of the judges for the award was Pinsky.) Smith is also collaborating with a dance group called Urban Bush Women:

“The first time I heard ‘34,’ I was just so struck by the rich telling of these stories,” [Paloma McGregor of Urban Bush Women] wrote in an email. “As a choreographer, I am committed to storytelling. Amplifying voices, particularly of those who are ordinarily denied a platform, is a key part of why I make art. So when I heard ‘34,’ I felt the power of a kindred artistic spirit” (Interview by Medaris).

Smith and McGregor are (as of March 2010) working on a full production, including dancers and actors. *Blood Dazzler* is a work of art created by an individual, and one that is gaining a new dimension through collaboration. The book, which may never have existed without Smith’s performance of her poetry, has the potential to show up on literature syllabi for years to come.

“34” is written in free verse, in thirty-four numbered sections. Most sections are one stanza long, but some have two or three short stanzas. The stanzas range from one line to nine lines; about 70% of the lines have between two and four stressed syllables. Because the poem is written from the point of view of thirty-four different people, not all lines and not all stanzas look the same. However, there are certain repetitions throughout the poem that tie it together. Repeated words from stanza to stanza show that many of the residents have similar things on their minds—a few different sections quote the “Our Father” prayer; some mention children, miracles, faith, and dying. As the poem progresses, the words “leave” and “left” appear more frequently. In section 15, different images of water bind the lines together:

15.

The walls are slithering with Bayou spit,  
tears,  
the badness that muddies rivers.  
We flail in that sin,  
alive and bended beneath a wretched Southern rain.  
We sip our breath from that filthy ocean.  
Only some things float.

Here, the words slithering, spit, tears, rivers, rain, and ocean set up the section's final image: "Only some things float," indicating that the residents of the nursing home are not going to float when the water reaches them. The water in the poem refers to flood water but also metaphorically to despair, folly, and tragedy—all of which may be as difficult to conquer as the rising flood.

Looking at the poem on the page, certain lines and stanzas appear to be crafted for print specifically. For example:

In all the places I fall,  
it is dry (6).<sup>14</sup>

To save us, they will rub our gums with hard bread.  
They will offer us  
water (8).

In both of these cases, the impact of one resident imagining dryness, and one imagining clean drinking water in contrast to the flood waters rising around her, is emphasized by the line breaks. These line breaks stand out because they are enjambments and because they end their respective stanzas and sections. In other cases, Smith uses the visual repetition of anaphora such as "I want" in section 20 or "They left" in section 31. Further, section 18 contains no lines, only blank space; the reader experiences the emptiness, or perhaps wordless despair, through the visual information of blank space.

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<sup>14</sup> Citations to this poem reference the numbered section in which the line appears.

Yet the sounds of the poem are attended to on the page as well; the page can function as a script. Words are italicized that direct the reader toward certain pronunciations of certain lines: “God is in *all* houses” and “Hollow be *our* names” (16, 22). Certain aspects of the regional accent are represented in print: *gon’* is used for *going to* in several places, *wanna* instead of *want to*. Though the punctuation and capitalization is standardized, the grammar is at times unconventional: “My name Earline / and I’m gon’ say you my life—” (19). It is hard to say the line out loud without adopting a hint of a Southern accent.

A video of Smith reading “34” at the June Jordan’s Poetry for the People event in March of 2009 suggests that certain parts of the poem were composed with performance in mind.<sup>15</sup> Smith reads the poem from a book positioned on a music stand slightly to her side, and she looks up at the audience frequently. She reads the poem’s opening prose paragraph, which is in the format of a newspaper article, in a calm, low voice. She uses that same emotionless tone to read the number of each section, turning the section numbers into a narration that runs through the poem and contrasts with the louder, more emotional voices of the thirty-four characters in the nursing home.

Smith does not use a different vocal style for each of the thirty-four sections, but she switches back and forth between several different tones to emphasize that each section represents a different person. Some sections are read with a more pronounced Southern accent, some sound assertive, others sound defeated. When Smith quotes the “Our Father,” she makes it seem as if she is crying as she prays the words. Each time she says “*Leave them*” she whispers the words very slowly, with a long pause between words. “*Leave them*,” is italicized in the poem, so a reader knows the words are said with

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<sup>15</sup> A video of “34” can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3lqIeE-Qys&feature=related>.



special emphasis, but Smith's particular rendering of those words in performance cannot be suggested in print. She stutters during the first half of section 17 in a way that makes clear that the character is stuttering (Smith the author is not having difficult reading). After reading the number 18, which is the empty stanza, Smith pauses for six seconds, sparking an audible reaction from her audience. Then, she smiles for Earline's section—which is the only time in the poem that she reads in a happy, light-hearted tone: "*Half dead, I used to say, / I used to tell 'em Hell, I'm already half dead*" (19). Toward the end of the poem, Smith quickens her tempo for a last, desperate prayer "God, we need your glitter, you know, / those miracles / you do for no reason at all?"<sup>16</sup> Then she slows the tempo down for the last three stanzas, symbolizing the ebbing away of the lives of the residents.

Smith is unique among the authors in this dissertation in that she speaks of "34" as having both a performed and written dimension; her book and her performance both suggest a great deal of effort and attention went into crafting the final written version and into crafting the performance. In his introduction to *Close Listening*, Charles Bernstein explains the ontology of the poem in a way that reflects Smith's performance of authorship:

A poem understood as a performative event and not merely as a textual entity refuses the originality of the written document in favor of "the plural event" of the work, to use a phrase of Andrew Benjamin's. That is, the work is not identical to any one graphical or performative realization of it, nor can it be equated with a totalized unity of these versions or manifestations. The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence (9).

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<sup>16</sup> Smith omits the word "wacky" (as in "wacky miracles") from the *Blood Dazzler* version of the poem in this performance.

As we have seen, “34” has a plural existence, one its author clearly embraces. Not only the poem itself, but also the poem’s origins and the poem’s dissemination are plural. For Smith, the poem does not necessarily have a “native” or best technology, but can work equally well in different mediums. His performance of authorship agrees with Gracia that the visual and performed texts are counterparts; they have something fundamental in common, but are not identical (19). Smith’s career also reflects Middleton’s suggestion that “it is a mistake to think of silent reading and performance as exclusive alternatives” (*Close* 286).

Smith’s conception of the art of the poem, perhaps surprisingly, reflects trends in current literary scholarship much more than the ideas of professors Pinsky and Collins. Pinsky, in particular, sees poetry as a defined discipline with its own set of criteria for evaluation. Giving different stanzas different vocal effects is not poetry to him, and adapting poetry to a variety of mediums may blur the art so much as to make it meaningless. Further, for a poet like Pinsky or Smith who is intensely competitive, it may be difficult to evaluate and rank different artworks. After all, Smith has been directed in the performance of her poetry by Derek Walcott in a one-act play, and she has performed poetry with the musical accompaniment of three different jazz bands. She has performed her persona poem “Undertaker” in a film that won an award at Sundance. She can be evaluated as an actor and a writer and a jazz musician. Smith’s success in such a variety of artforms does not serve as a precise, mimicable model for inexperienced poets.

Bourdieu says that an artwork “has meaning only for someone with cultural competence,” suggesting that mixing genres as an author, in particular, requires more skills than are needed to create an artwork located squarely in one discipline (*Distinction* 2). If an artwork belongs equally to more than one discipline, it potentially becomes difficult for that artwork to be recognized as part of any artistic tradition. Smith

complains that when she first got the attention of traditional poets, her reputation as a slam poet made her work seem alien to them: “When the poetry status quo finally recognized me, it was as trained monkey, poem on demand, an easy way to perk up a dull panel or interminable academic dronefest” (Smith “More Elephant”).

### **THE POET AS INTIMATE**

One set of poets’ dichotomous roles examined by Rubin in *Songs of Ourselves* is alien and intimate. As described above, Smith’s unusual success in a variety of genres may make her seem alien to her audience, perhaps partly because her audience may not have expertise in all the genres Smith engages. When Rubin describes the alien/intimate dichotomy, she refers to modernist poets who made some audiences uneasy by writing esoteric poems that contrasted with the popular, accessible poems of the day. Rubin primarily focuses on the intimacy the audience feels (or doesn’t feel) with the poem. This section focuses on the way that Smith performs intimacy between herself as a poet and her audiences in order to act as a mentor. Her performance of intimacy is complementary to her performance of authorship as survival: by gaining emotional closeness with her audience in performing, Smith can more effectively model the practice of relieving emotional stress through writing. By sharing intimate details of her life, she encourages the audiences to see her as a friend. Empathizing with Smith helps her audiences understand her as their equal, and perhaps more readily believe that poetry could positively influence their own lives.

In the two poetry readings described in this section, Smith was introduced by fellow poets in ways that indicated they saw her as being quite different from themselves. Mike Henry, who runs the Austin Poetry Slam, introduced Smith on March 8, 2009 as “the one poet who we all aspire to be” (Smith, *The Independent*). The next night, Susan

Somers-Willett introduced Smith to a group of college students and faculty members at the University of Texas: “If there’s one thing Patricia Smith knows, it’s how to convince you that everything she says is gospel” (Smith, Joynes). For a poet be revered as multi-talented and successful in both performance poetry and academic poetry circles suggests an unusual degree of talent and charisma.

Smith may seem dazzlingly other to many members of her audience, and, as mentioned, she aspires to be considered uniquely talented and successful. Smith’s performance of intimacy with the audience does not contradict her introductions, but it does make her seem less intimidating. Smith’s performance of intimacy is markedly different from the other poets in this dissertation. Though Collins is hospitable to the audience, he does not discuss his personal life in any great detail between poems. Though Sia responds to his audience’s feedback, his polite, respectful tone towards them suggests a certain amount of distance.

When giving the readings in Austin, Smith did not seem to be overly prepared. She asked someone from the audience at the Joynes Reading Room to pick a number, and then read the poem on that page from her first book. The poem was called “Boy Sneezes, Head Explodes” and Smith laughingly mocked her early work, but still read the poem. Because she knew there were many young writing students in the audience, she suggested that an example of her early work would be useful for them to hear. Also during that reading, Smith forgot some lines of “Skinhead,” which she attempted to recite by memory. She laughed that off, not seeming particularly embarrassed, and said “I’m so comfortable with you.” She’d used those exact same words the night before at The Independent bar in front a poetry slam crowd, this time to explain why she was taking her time shuffling through a sheaf of poems. About halfway through the university reading, Smith announced “I will just keep reading, ‘cause this is fun.” She casually stated that

she doesn't know the meaning of the phrase "Blood Dazzler," the title of her book. A little later, she mentioned she was having a hot flash, saying, "I gotta fan . . . when I feel comfortable with the audience I start doing all kinds of domestic things."

Smith also shared intimate details of her life. At The Independent reading, she read a poem called "Blood Sonnets" about her granddaughter's first period. Smith introduced the poem in a way that made it clear it was about her and her granddaughter, thereby indicating that the sex scenes in the poem were drawn from Smith's life as well. When asked in an interview about the problems of performing such intimate work, Smith answered:

There are people who might look at me and say, "Oh, she's got all these great things happening, and I wish my life could be that great." My life is not great. My son was in jail, and I had a big custody battle for my granddaughter, and a failed marriage, a mother I don't completely understand, and my father was murdered at a real critical time in my life and . . . those are things that you can look at the veneer of a person and not see. I think it's important to use the throat we have to make others realize they have it too. To say, well, yeah, this is what I went through with my son. My son understands. He would say, "When I was locked up, there were people who never got visitors. Or people who talked about their parents being too ashamed of them to come" (Interview by Floyd-Miller).

In order to fulfill her mission to help others realize that poetry writing is an option for them, Smith says "There are people who need to not only know what you can do creatively, but a little bit of what you're going through as a person, and how important it's been to you to use that other throat" (Interview by Floyd-Miller). Rather than tell the audience that writing is an outlet for her and it could be for them, Smith tries to demonstrate the power of poetry by showing how it helps her through traumatic experiences.

At the end of the slam reading in Austin, Smith thanked Henry and another Austin poet, Wammo, for sending her a postcard after she lost her job at *The Boston Globe*.

Smith was depressed and intended to skip the National Slam that year, but she got a “funny little card” from the Austin poets, adding that “the first time [she] smiled” after getting fired was when she received the card. At another reading in Austin, during the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference of 2006, Smith announced, “Austin, you saved my life” (Smith “Grassroots”). Rather than (or in addition to) personally discussing the event with the people directly involved, Smith publicly credits them from the stage whenever they are in her audience, making the entire crowd feel as if they know intimate details about her life and emotional state.

Smith is quite conscious of the intimacy that she projects. In interviews, she has explained that, despite advice from directors and collaborators, she insists on talking directly to her audience, rather than “emoting to the back row but looking over the audience’s heads to some weird spot on the back wall” (Interview by Floyd-Miller). That advice, given to her by a director when she did a theater version of her poems, was untenable to Smith:

I think I did one show before I said, you know, the audience is right here. Part of what I like to do even during readings is kind of like break that wall, so it’s not like *I am poet, you are audience and we shall never meet*, but kind of coming out to the audience sometimes, or even something as simple as leaving the microphone. I said, “I can’t do this like this. If there is an audience right here at my feet, then I have to talk to them.”

One reason that Smith performs this intimacy is to evoke the feeling in her audiences that they are capable of writing poems as well. By implying that the poet and the audience can meet, she suggests a certain degree of equality between them, rather than emphasizing her special status of performer.

Smith is just as intimate with her audience when writing on her blogs. She begins a post in March of 2007, “I have fallen absolutely, irrevocably, unflinchingly in love with

W.H. Auden,” which is an appropriate sentiment to express under the auspices of the Poetry Foundation. Then she adds:

I’m ashamed to say that I created a few new expletives when his 897-page collected works popped up on my MFA reading list. I planned to quickly scan the monstrous volume for cool stuff (mentions of lust, free coupons, whatever) and pen a heartfelt, though somewhat cursory, analysis, using words like “sweeping,” “intricate,” “concise” and maybe even “hullabaloo” (“W.H.”)

Several of Smith’s friends and colleagues were horrified that she admitted not knowing Auden’s poetry so publicly. They were concerned she had made herself look foolish in the eyes of the Poetry Foundation and her professors. Smith wrote a follow-up post to answer their concerns: “We all know a pretender, the snoot who fakes his way through the canon, deathly afraid of not catching a name as soon as it’s dropped” (“Ignorance”). In Smith’s performance of poet-ness on the blog, she decides not to play the role of literary expert or taste-maker, instead choosing to highlight her failings as a student, and therefore achieve a sense intimacy with her audience. Further, her love of Auden seems more authentic because she admits her initial reluctance to read his works.

Smith’s post about how to perform poetry, “Don’t Be Boring, Please,” gives advice quite different from Pinsky and Collins. Smith tells poetry performers: “don’t be afraid of drama.” Indeed, her post evokes a director advising beginning actors. Her style of performance involves trying to feel the poem’s emotions as intensely as she did when she wrote it: “I like to say that we seek to re-create the spark that made us write the poem in the first place. When you’re performing and you see that spark in someone’s eyes, you’ve hit it. But we’re not doing anything that anyone else can’t do.” She tells performers to believe what they are saying, because their confidence will affect the performance. Smith not only blurs the distinction between the poem as written and the poem as performed, but also the distinction between performance and acting. She writes and

performs many poems in a different persona than her own, but even when she is reading in the voice of Patricia Smith, she is trying to inhabit herself at the moment of the poem's conception, and thus engaged in a type of method acting. Sayre's essay on performance claims that "Performance artists distinguish themselves from actors and actresses; for instance, because the latter 'pretend' to be someone else in a time different from the real time of the event . . . performers maintain their own identities" (96). Smith conflates acting and performing.

She also encourages poets to take their time, saying, "There are breaths and nuances and pauses. There is tension and release, hills and valleys, just as there is in everyday speech." She admonishes poets not to fidget or gesture without purpose. Yet, in spite of the acting approach Smith takes, she fundamentally agrees with Pinsky that the poem is more important than the performer:

If you're not willing to speak clearly, acknowledge your audience and present that poem in the best possible light, ask yourself why you're reading in public at all. Of course, we're all seeking acceptance. But you're not asking an audience to accept YOU—you're asking them to listen and accept a series of meaningful lines you have written.

Unlike Pinsky, Smith tries to explain how performance can show the poem in the best possible light. She argues that as long as the performer remembers the importance of the "meaningful lines" he or she has written, performance techniques will not distract the crowd from the poem.

Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project encouraged readers to explain their emotional connections to poems. As mentioned in Chapter 2, about 28% of the responses published in *Poems to Read* explained that the audience felt an intimate connection with the poem because of experiencing something similar to what it described. Rubin, who examined Pinsky's database of favorite poems, remarked that while few respondents actually used



the word “friend” to describe a poet, many entries reflected a sense of intimacy, suggesting that the respondents shared an “outlook” with the poet (*Songs* 391-2). The notable difference between Pinsky and Smith in their attitude toward readers is that Pinsky encourages and develops the audiences’ relationships with canonical poems, while Smith exerts effort to make her audiences feel intimate with her.

Connecting with that “initial spark” allows Smith to perform in ways that seem authentic to the audience. Again, this strategy renders the process of reading and writing less intimidating, in some ways: a member of the audience, who can see how well others are responding to Smith, may understand the audience to be connecting to her emotion more than her talent with words or talent performing. For some, imagining others responding positively to their own shared emotions could inspire them to try to write and share their work. (On the other hand, some may be more intimidated by the process of publicly sharing private emotions than by writing and performing a less personal work.) However, similar to authenticity, intimacy can be easily felt or sensed but not so easily proved. The audience may seem emotionally connected to Smith, but that connection may only last as long as the reading, it may not actually reflect relationships outside of the performance. On the other hand, Smith counts the poets who slammed in her community when she first started writing poetry as some of her closest friends, so lasting relationships can sometimes develop out of the intimacy created between poets and audience. Also similar to performing authenticity, performing intimacy gives the critic little room to maneuver. Rubin describes the construction of poet as friend as “a form of mediation . . . that eliminate[s] the critic as middleman” (285). Though striving for recognition by critics, Smith nevertheless attempts to create a direct connection with her audience that does not depend on any explication or scholarly interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

Unlike Sia, Collins, and Pinsky, Smith maintains an up-to-date, professional website.<sup>17</sup> Sia's MySpace page is not frequently updated, and his website has been "under construction" for years. Pinsky and Collins do not have a personal webpage of any sort (no blogs, websites, or social networking profiles). As a journalist whose mistakes have been made public—and stayed public because the endurance of searchable digital media—Smith uses her website to create a professional image that's in line with her own performance of authorship. Her competitive drive leads her to take control of her web presence. Further, Smith's website reflects her commitment to writing in a variety of artforms and her ability to connect to a variety of audiences through a variety of media.

The home pages of Smith's website claims authority—mentioning Smith's awards for print and performance poetry. Yet the site also claims Smith's authority as a teacher:

A sought-after speaker, inspiring teacher and experienced leader of workshops and residencies, Patricia crafts innovative classes in writing and performance for squirming 1st-graders, seasoned slammers, soccer moms, prisoners, surly preteens and college students. ***She now offers intensive individualized instruction featuring manuscript construction, revision and review*** ("The Poetic").<sup>18</sup>

The final words on the home page are, "Find out what words can do. Let her change your life." Smith's website emphasizes that she has experience with nearly any poetic situation imaginable, and that she can teach or perform for any group of people. The bolded statement that Smith takes individual students augments her performance of intimacy—she is reachable to anyone. Smith teaches in the creative writing programs at Stonecoast and CUNY-Staten Island; the calendar on her website reveals a busy schedule of

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.wordwoman.ws/>

<sup>18</sup> Italics and bolding in the original.

performance and teaching gigs. Smith does not appear to *need* to take individual students to attain authority or survive financially, creating an impression that she values intimacy among her audiences extremely. That she is referred to as “Patricia” instead of by her last name augments that impression.

To emphasize the point that Smith can change “your” life, the first words on the “contact” page in the upper right hand corner are “call me / really!” Smith takes pains on her website to seem approachable and easy to contact. Sia also invites public conversation on his Facebook and MySpace sites, and even suggests he will e-mail anyone who writes him, but Smith promotes intimacy with her audience even more extremely by asking them to have an individualized, vocal, private conversation with her.

Smith’s professional accomplishments establish her literary authority, and court the respect of audiences and critics. Yet her casual, intimate attitude when writing website copy or blog posts, when being interviewed, and when publicly performing encourages members of her audience to try writing poetry. Smith insists that poetry’s audience should include everyone, and that poems are keys to self-understanding and self-healing. Her performance of authorship does not cast the poet as a seer or a sage or a genius, but a mentor. To project the image of a trustworthy guide and friend, she has to project a sense of authenticity and honesty.

Although Smith has complained at times about not getting the respect she deserves as a poet because of her slam background, her recent induction into the International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent and the *Oxford Anthology of African-American Literature* suggest that in the twenty-first century, poets working in multiple mediums and genres still are capable of creating canonical work. Though how long Smith’s poetry will endure is not known, her achievements at least put her work in

the running to be on literature syllabi in the distant future. Her insistence that everyone should find their “second throat” has not appeared to damage her authorial authority.

One interesting point of comparison between Smith, Sia, Collins, and Pinsky is that they all de-emphasize the role of the critic in helping the audience appreciate good poetry. Though Pinsky’s performance of authorship implicitly depends on critics to help shape the canon and promote the best and most enduring work, he still invites readers to judge for themselves whether a poem “sounds terrific” when read aloud. Collins encourages readers to choose among a variety of poems to find something they like, and Sia and Smith encourage direct engagement with poets and writing. Though Smith performs the greatest degree of intimacy with readers among the four poets, all of them attempt to show audiences how to engage directly with poems rather than rely on textbooks or scholarship. That strategy not only aims at growing poetry’s audience, but at allowing poets to take a more active part in shaping their own roles within American culture.

## Conclusion

In the spring of 2007, I asked the students in my poetry literature class how their friends reacted to the fact that they were taking a poetry course. The class agreed that there were two frequent responses: either their friends were impressed that they were taking on such a difficult artform or they assumed that the class was extremely easy. The four poets in this dissertation all agree that poetry should not be esoteric, though there are plenty of twenty-first century poets and scholars who would claim that a poetry class should be difficult. Yet the opposite idea—that poetry is easy—is a possible response to the increasing numbers of performative contexts for poetry. Students have seen poets on YouTube, watched their peers compete in poetry contests like the NEA's Poetry Out Loud or teen poetry slams, and witnessed poetry performers opening for rock bands.

Adding to the notion that poetry is easy is the fact that anyone can be a published poet in 2010; it takes almost no effort or money to create an on-line poetry journal or to post poems via social networking websites. Smith's blog on the Poetry Foundation site reflected her professional authorial status, but long before that, she published her thoughts on poetry (and her thoughts on the Patriots football team) in her personal livejournal blog; livejournals are free for anyone to set up and maintain. Similarly, Sia's latest work-in-progress, published in video format to his Facebook fan page on December 27, 2009, is nowhere near as polished as his *Def Poetry* performances. Further, in order for Sia's audience to find out about his new works, they also sign on to receive status updates like, "Beau Sia has difficulty with so much, but is working to change that reality" or "Beau Sia is not a cyclon." Smith, Sia, and other web-savvy poets can publish carefully crafted poems that reflect their accomplished careers, toss off a clichéd or half-formed idea, or publish thoughts about a subject in which they have no expertise. When

authorship is so easy—when it’s possible to publish just about anything—credibility and visibility become more difficult to achieve. One published poem, even in a print literary journal, does not establish someone as an author worthy of attention; even dozens of print-published, digitally-published, or publicly performed poems may not be enough to achieve any recognition from critics or peers. In an editorial written for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, poet David Alpaugh calculated, “If journals merely continue to grow at the current rate, there will be more than 35,000 of them by 2100, and approximately 86 million poems will be published in the 21st century!”

Of the four poets, Smith and Sia are the most comfortable with the idea that anyone can be an author. They encourage their audiences to talk back to them, insisting that writing poetry is something everyone can try. Yet both still attempt to achieve recognition of their talent as authors, partly by extending their repertoire beyond poetry. Smith and Sia both appear on HBO, in theatrical productions, in films, and in slams; they earn credibility through their mastery of multiple, overlapping artforms. Pinsky and Collins, in contrast, perform a more impermeable divide between poet and audience, emphasizing their unique ability to craft poems (due to education in Pinsky’s case and innate talent in Collins’s). Pinsky and Collins, in the face of the changes to poetry contexts in the twenty-first century, attempt to specialize—to define poetry in a relatively narrow way and excel within its boundaries. Yet both men still appear in on-line videos, on audio CDs, on television, and in newspapers; both create anthologies, teach writing classes, and give public readings.

In the introduction, Rubin was quoted describing the different roles of the American poet she had discovered: “these figures should be thought of as actors who, once they take the stage, stay there—sometimes in shadow, sometimes brought forward for a reprise—while a shifting spotlight shines on other members of the troupe” (11). The

roles of the poet outlined by Rubin—seer, sage, sophisticate, innocent, alien, intimate—have indeed stuck around in the twenty-first century. The lyric poem has not disappeared, nor has print culture. Poets just do more. They don't only write lyrics, they also write dramatic monologues and collaborative theater pieces and songs. They don't only give public readings, they participate in communities created through public projects like The Favorite Poem Project, Poetry 180, poetry slams, youth writing workshops, workshops in prisons, creative writing programs, and social networking websites. Poets spend more and more time in public, which requires them to spend more and more effort on finessing and controlling their public personas.

For the poets in this dissertation, John Galassi's statement that authors' "real talent is writing" is not the whole truth. The most successful poets in the twenty-first century have more than one "real" talent. To use another example, Mary Oliver, one of the few poets who has sold more books than Collins in the twenty-first century, is not easily found in on-line videos or recordings of poetry readings, yet, like all the poets in this dissertation, she has an agent who arranges public readings and events. Oliver is 75 years old and very well-established in her career—in order to achieve credibility as a *young* poet, and gain recognition in a world where anyone can self-publish, authors in 2010 sell themselves and their work using multiple mediums.

For most who make poems, or indeed, create any kind of art, the roles played by these four authors are familiar. On creating a good poem, one at different times may be tempted to credit one's education and experience, one's innate inclination or facility, one's intense desire to communicate an important idea, or one's need to hold on to sanity or one's identity. Indeed, these factors have probably always influenced the creative process. What's newly prevalent in the early twenty-first century—authorial performances, video cameras on cell phones, easy self-publishing programs—hasn't so

much affected the kinds of roles played by authors as the way they enact those roles. Poetry performance has been, in different ways, a thorny issue for each of the authors presented here as they try to come to terms with and perform an authorial identity. Public performance does not inherently conflict with notions of authority, authenticity, dialogue, or healing self-expression. Yet as these writers have become professional performers, their flexibility as authors has been challenged; they have had to adapt their performances of authorship.

Critics can always choose to focus on different contexts of a poem; they can look at the poem on the page in a contextual vacuum, consider the poet's biography, examine the relationship of the poets to other poets in literary history, use an ethnic or gendered lens, or study reception. When examining contemporary poetry, focusing on the role of the poet and his or her performance of authorship makes sense as a response to the increasing number of poetry performances that are local and contextual, that are engaging cultural norms and audience expectations.

Pinsky's poem "Shirt," if written by Sia or Smith, would have different contexts of presentation and therefore different possible interpretations. If Sia had written "Shirt," it could be understood as an indictment of slavery and imperialism. If Collins had written it, one might perceive the strategy of examining the shirt from many angles as more gimmicky or clever. Smith's version of "Shirt" might have encouraged audiences to empathize with the people who died in the factory, prompting a feeling of catharsis. In Pinsky's hands, "Shirt" is not politically motivated or personally therapeutic, but a collection of sounds that attempts to capture human history, seemingly without judgment. At John Carroll University, when Pinsky speaks of every person being the descendent of rape, and every person the descendent of both slaves and royalty, he speaks without rancor. The breadth of human history is beautiful and interesting to him—he does not



encourage his audience to emotionally connect to those victims of violence. Smith's poems "34" is in the opposite position of "Shirt." Her performance of authorship leads us to understand the poem as a way to process and cope with national and personal tragedy—not merely as a vehicle to chronicle history or imaginatively explore the situation of impending death.

Evaluations of "Litany" differ dramatically depending on if one understands it to be the product of education and research, like Pinsky's poetry, or a work that has been quickly composed. When watching *Saturday Night Live*, one understands the sketches have been planned in a small number of hours, and admires the comedians for their ability to quickly and cleverly respond to current events. We judge those same comedians by different standards when they appear in feature films that take months or years to complete. We expect the jokes to be more carefully crafted, and are less forgiving when a line falls flat. To understand Collins as cleverly and quickly composing poems (and performing them with minimum rehearsal) could allow the audience to appreciate his cleverness without expecting to find the same amount of joy in reading the poem year after year. "Litany" perceived as the careful work of Pinsky would seem much less impressive. And if the audience understands "Litany" as being in a Sia-style dialogue with Jacques Crikillon, whose lines are featured in the epigraph, it becomes embarrassingly cruel.

To read "The Asians are Coming, The Asians are Coming" in a book would likely lead one to conclude that it wasn't a poem at all, or that it was a first draft. It might be understandable as a quickly-dashed off, clever work like Collins's. But, as discussed, without Sia's body to inhabit the opposite of the Asian-American male stereotype, the poem reads more as a complaint than a challenge to the audience's assumptions. The poem on the page does not invite the audience into the shoes of a man who has been

dismissed as sexually weak and objectified as exotic in spite of the globalization that is assimilating his culture.

The poems themselves are not the only entities affected by the performance of authorship. The way each of these poets constructs poetry's audience is very different as well. Pinsky construes the audience as students, as listeners to rhythmical sounds, who engage with a shared history of enduring poetry; Sia understands the audience as collaborators and fellow poets, who each have their own area of expertise, and who engage in dialogue about the present. Smith insists that everyone is an artist, and Collins understands a great divide between those can make good poems and those who can't. Whether an audience member wants to learn from a poet, admire one, engage with one, or become one makes a difference in the kind of poetry they choose to consume and the poets they admire. It's possible that scholars and critics are less influenced by these perceptions of poets as authors than less-educated poetry audiences, but the performance of authorship *does* influence who is taught in which classrooms, who makes it into which anthologies, and who receives which awards.

In the twenty-first century, when poets are interviewed so often, blogged about so frequently, and looked up on Wikipedia so easily, the performance of authorship is also important for the role of the poet in the poet-poem-audience relationship. One might see Pinsky as a committed scholar or merely a snob, see Collins as a sleazy salesman or a talented, improvisational artist, see Sia as a "minority pissed off about being a minority" or a man pursuing engaged dialogue with his audience, see Smith as a mentor or a self-absorbed confessional poet.

Neither Smith, Sia, Collins, or Pinsky stands out as the most convincing in their performance of authorship, and none of the roles they fashion are more significant than others in terms of the future of American poetry. That individual poets are friends, allies,

experts, or geniuses may not be believable to audiences at all times; none of these poets achieve completely consistent performances. However, that American poets can successfully perform all of these roles in relation to their audiences *is* convincing. Putting the four performances of authorship together, one can see the richness and variety of ways that people come to know poetry in American life.

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## **Vita**

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