“Ragan Fox is a Gay Slam Poet”: An Autobiographical Exploration of Performance Poetry’s Performative Implications

Ragan Fox

This essay reflects on and features poems representative of my decade-long involvement in performance poetry, which includes a third place finish in the individual competition at the 2005 National Poetry Slam, two published collections of performance poetry, and hundreds of featured performances, in venues ranging from the Nuyorican Poets Café to Air America radio. The artistic statement is an autobiographical consideration of the performative and poetic dynamics of specific performance poetry and academic contexts.

Keywords: Slam Poetry; Performance Poetry; Gay Identity

The six poems I include in this collection chronicle my decade-long involvement in and contributions to performance poetry, both inside and outside the context of poetry slam competitions. The pieces have been split into three thematic categories that each foreground the implicative dynamics of performance poetry and my identity as a gay man. The three poetic encounters I describe in this narrative contextualization have performatively shaped my identity as a “gay slam poet.”

Poetic and Performative Encounter #1: Naming My Gay Body

Pale skin absorbs blazing sun as I make my way through the beautiful, rolling Ozark Mountains, where I am scheduled to perform poetry at the University of Arkansas’ student union. Heat and anxiety cause cold sweat to soak the armpit areas of my button-up shirt. This is my first trip to Arkansas, and I have no idea what reactions to expect from the local audience. How will the men and women at the University of

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Arkansas respond to the gay themes that dominate my poetry? How will they react to my flamboyant gestures? To the high pitch of my voice and lilting cadence?

Fear takes a stranglehold of my heart when I notice the following words written on cement outside the Arkansas Union’s entrance: “RAGAN FOX IS QUEER!" The large, multicolor, block letters paralyze me. My right foot sticks to the sidewalk, anchoring my body and forgoing any movement that might push me forward, into the Union, into the unknown, into the past.

I am immediately taken back to 1988 and the halls of Labay Junior High. My frail, gender-ambiguous body walks down a long corridor that leads to the school’s gymnasium. A hulky boy named Adrian cuts across the hall’s busy traffic, punches my chest, calls me “faggot,” laughs like a hyena, and walks away. The sting of his fist radiates through my torso. I shake my head from side to side, catch my breath, and am suddenly shoved from behind. Another boy screams “Queer!” and disappears into the hustle and bustle of students rushing to their next class. Later that afternoon and after several more bouts of “hit-and-run,” I discover that, earlier in the day, one of my peers posted a sign that announced, “[i]t’s punch a fag day. Everyone hit Ragan. Ragan Fox is queer!” I close my eyes, click my heels, and wish myself into the future.

“RAGAN FOX IS QUEER!” beckons the cement leading to the building where I am scheduled to perform. I remain frozen for a full minute before reading smaller words scribbled under my name: “Poetry slam tonight with special feature, gay poet Ragan Fox. 8 p.m.” Are the chalky letters in front of me a warning, welcoming, or both?

I later learn that the host of the Arkansas event thought “RAGAN FOX IS QUEER!” would be a provocative way to draw a crowd for my performance. I wonder if a heterosexual slam poet has ever walked into an event only to find his or her sexual identity used as a form of promotion, like “SAUL WILLIAMS IS STRAIGHT!” or “PATRICIA SMITH IS A BREEDER!”

The Arkansas poetry slam functions as a performative encounter, where my inclination to sleep with men is expressed, highlighted, categorized, debated, and radically contextualized in my performing body. For the past ten years, people have identified me as a “gay slam poet,” meaning I regularly compete in poetry slam competitions, or “slams,” and explore gay subject matter in my work. Gay themes in my poetry include renderings of gay history, reflections of my coming out experiences, and vivid descriptions of past sexual encounters.

These topics are not the exclusive purview of gay performance poets. Other modes of poetic expression feature topoi that (re)create, shape, and reiterate gay identity. All modes of poetry are performative in some sense; but slam and other forms of performance poetry are unique in how they display and call upon performers’ bodies to provide the proof of the truth of what is spoken. Verbal texts and the body coconstitute and point at one another. When I stand in front of an audience and recite my poems, the selections “accrue power in performance because they intensify audience attention to the speaking body” (Wheeler 151). My tendency to elongate “S” sounds, for instance, substantiates verbal references to “my pronounced lisp” (see “Faggot”). Audiences may also use the high pitch of my voice to aurally confirm lines like, “I know the blows thrown at face when voices creep two octaves too high” (see
“Be Mine”). When I perform, I put my gay body on a stage, where my mannerisms and styles of speech are willfully paraded and often celebrated. Unlike my days at Labay Jr. High, I enjoy playing the role of gay boy and frequently become more flamboyant when I perform gay-themed work. Why then does my stomach sink to my knees when I read “RAGAN FOX IS QUEER!” on Arkansas asphalt? Do the performative dynamics of naming my gay body change when, without consulting me, slam organizers and audience members point at and label me?

The sidewalk chalk message outside the union functions as a gay intervention, because it queers the Arkansas Union. People who attend the event are implicated by my explicit sexuality, which is performatively rendered on the cement, textualized by my body, and showcased in my performance poetry. But “RAGAN FOX IS QUEER!” also bolsters the presumed heterosexuality of the space, because the message perpetuates fallacious beliefs that people, texts, and contexts are “straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer” (Doty 3).

The rainbow words follow me into the Arkansas Union. At 7:55 p.m., I sit in a room loaded with 200 audience members, glance down at my set list, and sigh as I realize that almost every poem I plan to perform involves gay themes. Am I pandering? Am I complicit in my own marginalization? The narrated and narrative events co-constitute one another. I am “Ragan Fox, a gay poet”; I cannot escape the gravitational force of settings that demand me to be alternately and simultaneously “homosexual,” “gay,” “queer,” and “faggot,” regardless of connotation or philosophical consideration.

The first two poems that follow this artistic statement interrogate labels used to constrain and enable gay identity. In “Faggot,” I, via first person account, draw a connection between hate speech and hate acts, all the while arguing that hate speech is a performative enactment of violence. The second poem, “Be Mine,” is a poetic monument to Lawrence “Larry” King, a fifteen-year-old gay Californian who was recently shot to death by one of his classmates in an antigay hate crime.

Slam provides an opportunity to simultaneously archive and dramatize gay-related hate crimes that tend to go under-reported and in far too many cases unreported in the United States. Other modes of poetic expression, all performative in their own right, may record and commemorate varied concerns of gay men; but performance poetry is unique insofar as “the author’s physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body” (Somers-Willett 69–70). Audience members may, in turn rely on a perceived ethos of embodied authenticity to evaluate a poem and its performance. Slam competitor and English scholar Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett argues that:

Performance, as one might expect in a judged, hybrid genre such as slam, is the instrument that makes a poem ring true or false with any given audience. Although authenticity itself is a fallacy—the result of constructed, culturally sanctioned performances over time—it still has very tangible results in everyday practice, especially in slam competition, where audience members are charged with the task of evaluating lyrical performances of identity onstage. (70)
Many slam poems are, thus, “performative” in two senses of the term. First, poems like “Faggot” and “Be Mine” rely on and construct discourses about gay people to help constitute, enable, and constrain gay identity. Second, I utilize theatrical conventions, like dramatic nonverbal communication, a stage, and applause from the audience, to situate gay identity as both a theatrical and everyday life performance of self. “Faggot” and “Be Mine” partially explain why I am commonly referred to as “Ragan Fox, a gay performance poet.”

Poetic and Performative Encounter #2: Reading My Gay Body

Today is May 9, 2002. I chain-smoke Marlboro Lights with such fierce dedication that I sometimes speak in smoke signals. Carcinogens make my body perform in strange and uncomfortable ways. Each morning, I eat poison from ashtrays, an act that kills my appetite for food. I weigh a gaunt 118 pounds. I also have a sinus infection I cannot shake. I have spent the last couple of weeks coughing up phlegm in every possible shade of neon and enduring my least favorite sick feeling, fatigue. Despite my illness, I continue to stick Marlboro Lights between my lips and inhale destruction. Smoking exacerbates symptoms of my illness. The deadly habit also calms my nerves when I compete in slam competitions.

This week, I am scheduled to participate in two city “slam-off” events, contests that will determine the eight poets who will represent Austin and Houston at the 2002 National Poetry Slam. Houston’s team-deciding event comes first on my itinerary. I drive my forest green Ford Mustang through the Hill Country, and make my way south, to the bleak, hot cement of downtown Houston.

When I arrive at the venue, I immediately light up a cigarette, hoping that the mechanics of smoking and supply of nicotine will relax me. My associations between smoking and slam poetry are strong. At particularly competitive slams, I spend most of my time outside the venue, chain smoking and trying to ignore the loud echoes of performing poets. Many slam competitors smartly remain in the room throughout the competition, which extends a courtesy to the other contestants and provides an opportunity to see what themes and styles the judges favor. The folly of smoking!

“Just one cigarette before the competition. I won’t make it past the first round if I don’t calm these haywire neurons,” I tell myself. My front teeth bite down on the cigarette’s filter; I inhale and let out a cigarette-stained exhale of billowy white smoke. My strategy backfires. I lose my balance and begin coughing. I spend the next fifteen minutes gathering a collection of items that will give me the momentary strength required to perform through lingering illness. I ingest a week’s supply of hot tea, honey, lemon, cough drops, and Emergen-C.

As I choke down my tenth Cherry Robitussin, a man and woman approach me and ask, “Are you Ree-gan?”

“Close,” I reply. “My name is pronounced ‘Ragan,’ like a ‘ray gun’ that shoots down homophobia.”

The handsome couple kindly giggles at my stupid joke. “My husband and I saw you perform last year in Austin—”
I interrupt the woman with a fit of coughing and wheezing. I hold out my right index finger, indicating that I will need a minute before I continue with the conversation. My productive cough forces me to hunch over and spit thick, sticky, multicolored fluids into a tattered tissue. I feel like one of those chubby, green cartoon germs personified in cold medicine commercials.

“Sorry, you were saying?”

“We really enjoy your work and are rooting for you tonight.”

“Thank you! I need all the support I can get.”

As the young couple walks away from me, I watch the woman lean her head toward her husband’s neck and whisper, “I had no idea he was sick. I wonder how long he’s been sick.”

Each pause before “sick” indicates to me that “sick” references more than my sinus infection. She drags out the “S” sound in “sick,” unaware that I am within earshot. Her husband grimaces, shrugs his shoulders, and leads her to two foldout chairs in the audience.

Less than a decade after the American Psychiatric Association removed “homo-sexuality” from its list of mental disorders, the AIDS pandemic provided a new reason for doctors and the general public to medicalize gay male bodies. Medical discourses incite people to associate “gay and any individual symptom of HIV with positivity” (Fox 9). Each lay reading of my skinny, gay body is its own poetic and performative encounter. Long pauses inserted before the word “sick” communicate a perception of my HIV serostatus.

Given the exchange with the couple, I am tempted to perform a piece about HIV, AIDS, and gay male subjectivity. I unfortunately do not have any poems in my “arsenal” that will allow me to respond to the seemingly kind couple who had no idea I was (pause two beats and whisper) “ssssick.”

Any slam competitor worth his or her weight in rhyme understands that listening to the room is the key to consistent victory. Overheard comments before an event begins, reactions to specific themes and styles, and the immediate context of the venue provide important cues for strategizing.

I consider performing an extemporaneous piece addressing how the couple in the audience possibly misread my body. Right before I convince myself to improvise a poem about gay men and HIV, I think, “[w]hat if she wasn’t implying that I was HIV-positive? And what if she was? My reaction to her whispered statement says a lot more about me than her.”

I shift around in my seat and begin writing the “skeleton” of a poem in my head. Themes emerge: AIDS, sex, my fear of testing for HIV, gay bodies, ambiguity, and audience expectations. The poetics of slam events function in a generative manner. A seed works its way to my brain, where, years later, it will grow and blossom into poetry. Emotion recall and long gestation periods are certainly not unique to poetry slam. Slam events do, however, set a distinctive, immediate, and emergent stage for a poet and audience members to engage in face-to-face dialogues about taboo social issues. At slams, human bodies and bodies of work are literally and voluntarily put on display; event hosts then call for audience reaction, both expected and unexpected,
quantitative (e.g., scores) and qualitative (e.g., “He is sick!”), and flattering and unflattering.

Slam is a highly democratic form of poetic expression. Anyone can judge a slam event. Slam competitors do not need special credentials or academic training to participate and succeed. Slam competitions also frame and incite face-to-face political conversations and in situ political events, where participants share space and interact. People regularly make comments about my thin body; but something profound happens when these remarks are made at a slam, a place where the politics of marginalized people is often celebrated. At the Houston slam finals, I politicize body commentary in a way that I have not in more mundane contexts. Because many audience members attend slams to hear the politics of marginalization (Somers-Willet), I feel compelled and invited to directly and theatrically respond to lay and incorrect readings of my body. Slam invites this sort of impromptu dialogue.

The second pair of poems that come after this narrative contextualization depict how the HIV pandemic relates to my gay body. The first poem about HIV, “Headstone,” was featured in the individual semifinals of the 2005 National Poetry Slam, which was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Each time I disclose/perform my HIV serostatus in “Headstone,” I place a ten-second pause between the words “HIV” and “negative.” It was not until I began writing initial drafts of this statement that I realized the ten-second pause references and re-imagined the silence between “I had no idea he was” and “sick,” as stated by my aforementioned supporter at the 2002 Houston slam finals. The uncomfortable silence sometimes but does not always move audience members to be self-reflexive in assumptions they may make about my flesh. The first time I performed “Headstone” at the Mesa Poetry Slam, my friend Doyle informed me that she overheard a man say that he was not surprised that I contracted HIV. My lower lip dropped to my chin when she told me about his comment. Did he simply ignore the disclosure of my HIV serostatus? How did the ten-second silence fail to punctuate the moment? The man’s reaction to my poem indicates just how powerfully my gay body and stereotypes about gay men signify in specific poetic contexts.

The second piece about HIV is an excerpt from a poem titled “Getting Away with Murder: Sexual (R)evolution in Three Acts.” The featured passage is a theatrical rendering of how HIV and AIDS have impacted many gay men. I rely on allusions from Greek tragedies to call attention to how gay men have been mistreated in the AIDS era. I also reference tropes from Greek plays to show how the mating rituals of some gay men contribute to raising HIV seroconversion rates.

Poetic and Performative Encounter #3: Structuring My Gay Body

A few years ago, I decided to “retire” from slam. When my friends inquired about my departure, I replied, “I want to explore new poetic frontiers,” a self-important statement that made me sound like the self-anointed Captain Kirk of performance poetry. I suppose I was too ashamed to admit that I was experiencing burnout.
My participation in slam began to wane when I entered the doctoral program at Arizona State University. I competed in just enough contests to qualify for the city’s team competition. This angered many of the local poets, who regularly called for more consistent participation to help draw in larger audiences. Having bodies share space is a key component of performance poetry. Because my body was relatively absent from most weekly slams and slam-related events, a number of poets from Mesa, Phoenix, and Tempe questioned my dedication to the local community. After the Mesa slam organizer announced that members of the 2005 Mesa team would have to sign a contract that required weekly participation in local slam competitions, I withdrew from the team-selection contest. I had a dissertation to write, papers to grade, and job applications to submit. Presence became an even more salient problem after I landed my first job as a PhD. The demands of a new tenure-track position, course preparation, teaching, service responsibilities, and scholarly writing now fill my agenda, leaving little time to write poetry, much less memorize poems and perform them in public.

My departure from the activity made me realize how much slam has influenced my writing. Slam poetry tends to reflect a specific set of poetics. One need only open one of the many published slam anthologies to see that most slam poems are relatively the same length. Forty-eight of the fifty poems featured in *Freedom to Speak*, the 2002 National Poetry Slam anthology, are between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half pages. Similarities in poem length emerge because poetry slams are time-structured events. When I competed, individuals were typically provided three minutes to perform a single poem. The three-minute time constraint forced me to edit long narratives down to their most essential characteristics and story hooks. When writing about my relationship with my father, I chronicled experiences that better captured the spirit of our relationship in three minutes than accurately (whatever “accurately” may mean) depicted the complex dynamics of any of our arguments. Many of my slam poems are also written in the first person and deal with issues of identity, a common practice in slam given that most local competitions feature and reward the work of individual artists who interrogate identity-related marginalization.

I spent a decade using slam poetry events as writing workshops. When audience members did not laugh at critical parts of a comedic poem, I ran home, wrote fresh jokes and discovered new ways to play with language. While editing a poem about my perpetual state of unemployment, for example, I changed “break room” to “give-me-a-fucking-break room.” The change in the piece came about because the performative dynamics (e.g., laugh and silence) of poetic events provided a specific and compelling editing impetus. When dramatic poems failed to score well, friends at the slam offered editing suggestions and recommended blocking and delivery strategies. I asked a number of friends for feedback when preparing to compete in the individual finals of the 2005 National Poetry Slam. I pulled fellow slam poets Phil West, Mike Henry, Buddy Wakefield, Danny Solis, and Jason Carney into hotel broom closets and begged them for suggestions. “Why not drag out the ‘S’ sound when you reference your lisp in the ‘Faggot’ poem,” one of them recommended. In
what other context would I be fortunate enough to have some of the best spoken-
word poets in the country help coach my writing and performance?

I recapitulate the structures and characteristics of slam, because my retirement
from this community has significantly altered how I craft and revise my work. Many
of my newer poems, when spoken, exceed three minutes. I also no longer feel
compelled to be the first-person hero in all my poems. All this opportunity is coupled
by constraint. Structure, after all, provides guidance and form. If my turbulent
childhood taught me anything, it is that I thrive in structured environments.

In an effort to battle writer’s block, I search for poetry in the structure of items
haphazardly placed on my desk. My calloused hands grab a worn and highlighted
copy of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Themes explored in the book’s
index read like a biography. I imagine that the page numbers to the right of each key
word represent the age of a person when they participated in the indicated theme/
activity: adultery, 38, 41; children, 27–30, 37; debauchery, 38, 39; erotic literature,
21–23; homosexuality, 38, 43; mental illness, 30, 36, 38; perversion, 36–49; sodomy,
43; venereal disease, 54.

Outside the immediate poetics of a slam poetry event, I find poetry in structure,
just like Foucault knew I would! Fingers crash against keyboard and, via index,
document the most significant, embarrassing, and wonderful moments of my life.
The penultimate poem I include in my collection is the poetic index I concocted after
thumbing through Foucault’s theories of sexuality.

While reading and revising my poetic and biographical index, I realized the extent
to which scholarly commitments have crippled my love life. I have only had one
boyfriend since starting my doctoral education and moving on to a tenure-track job.
I have also stopped having sex, an act that many may perceive as the foundation of
“Ragan Fox is queer!” What is a gay man without sex?

Nowhere does this paradox present itself with more ferocity than in academia. Despite my lackluster love life, I, modifying Jacqueline Taylor, am frequently called
upon to be an “exemplary gay,” who is expected to teach colleagues and students
about gay history, queer theory, and gay experiences. Most people favorably review
my gay-themed lectures, but I have, on a few occasions, come across student
evaluations that castigate me for pushing my “gay agenda” on the class. “Too much
gay agenda,” one evaluation reads. A student who, over the course of an entire
semester, was exposed to a single one-hour lecture on lesbian, gay, bisexual,
transgendered, and queer/questioning theories authored the comment. I cannot
help but feel the presence of my gay body queered every lecture for this disgruntled
student.

I turn to poetry to make sense of these scholarly and pedagogical conundrums. My
recent work queers the structures of academic life and explores the poetic potential of
academic environments. I conclude with a poem that exemplifies how academic
structures have influenced my recent work. Specifically, my pre-PhD love life takes
the form of an academic résumé. The piece playfully merges two primary, often-
competing tracks in my life: sex and scholarship.
When organizers feature me at events, I am usually described as a “gay” or “queer” performance poet. More often than not, event hosts do not discern between these labels. Because “gay” and its various denotative variations regularly precede my name or the term “poet” (i.e., “gay poet”) when it is placed before my name, I should clarify what I mean when I reference my sexual identity.

“Homosexual,” “gay,” “queer,” and “fag” are terms between which I frequently distinguish. For the purposes of clarity, I offer what I consider to be rough but helpful definitions of each term. My understanding of “homosexuality” is largely shaped by Michel Foucault’s depiction of the “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” (105). “Homosexual” is a psychiatrically deployed label that implies an illness. “Gay,” for me, is an affirming “umbrella” word that I use to describe gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. For some, “gay” references only gay men and is used as a male-generic term to obfuscate the specific concerns of non-White gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and some transgendered people. Others critique what they perceive to be “gay’s” essentializing tendencies. “Gay,” for fans of poststructural thought, is one of many false identity-related dualisms. “Queer” challenges the gay-straight binary, questions the stableness of identity, and emphasizes nonnormative sexuality as a way of doing and constructing knowledge, rather than a way of being. “Fag,” in my world, holds little philosophical currency.

Over the last three decades, I have struggled with these complicated, loaded terms. My identification with this cluster has proven to be particularly complicated in the last ten years. I began my graduate education in the 1990s, a time when, in the worlds of performance and cultural studies, queer theory emerged as a sexy shift away from the status quo. Throughout my graduate studies, I, for the reasons outlined above, primarily identified as “queer.” Over the last five years, I have slowly moved away from “queer” and back to “gay.” This strategic maneuvering is a personal decision I made after completing several ethnographic projects in various gay male communities.

I currently identify as “gay” for three reasons. First, my ethnographic studies of intergenerational communication divides between older and younger gay men convince me that the term “queer” inhibits conversation between the two groups. Second, my poetry and scholarship (not that the two are mutually exclusive) interprets and creatively renders specific communication habits that emerge among the gay men I study. Because I rarely focus on lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, or those who simply opt for any non-normative expression of sexual identity, using “queer” to describe the themes of my scholarship would be insincere. Finally, I am not convinced that “queer” lives up to its theoretical goals. The word has been co-opted by popular culture (e.g., Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and Queer as Folk) and ultimately perpetuates the same binaries it aims to deconstruct.

In this essay, I use the labels “gay” and “queer” interchangeably. I realize I may frustrate several of my readers by engaging in this practice. I perhaps haphazardly use the terms synonymously because I identify with both and see utility in the terms running alongside one another.

Poetry slams are competitive events where poets orally present self-written poems. Randomly selected judges at typical poetry slam events score individual and group performances on a scale of “0” for what they perceive to be a bad poem performed poorly to “10” for what they consider to be an excellent poem performed perfectly (Glazner 14).

“Slam poetry” describes texts performed at a poetry slam and spoken word performances written and/or performed in slam’s style, which is influenced by two key competitive rules and conventions. First, most slam competitions are governed by a “3-minute rule” (Dillard 21) that mandates point deductions for poets who exceed the three-minute time limit. “The three-minute rule,” according to slam aficionado Bob Holman and Miguel Algarin, “is an
arbitrary time limit set to (1) emulate a pop song and (2) get the show over in time” (17). Second, poets are expected to perform their own work at most poetry slams, which may explain why a vast majority of slam poems are written in the first person point of view and focus on issues of identity.

Bauman distinguishes between narrative and narrated events (54). A narrated event describes an “event recounted” (Langellier 131), or a past event reperformed. A narrative event specifies the immediate context, in which a narrative is performed. At the University of Arkansas, for example, I performed a piece that chronicles the several times I have disclosed my sexual identity to my father. In this context, my previous “coming out” experiences are narrated events and the Arkansas Union, my performance, the audience, and other situational factors (e.g., signs advertising my performance) comprise the narrative event.

References


