

Killing Poetry: An Interview with Javon L. Johnson

by

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Javon L. Johnson (javon.johnson@unlv.edu) is an Assistant Professor of African American Studies; Director of African American and African Diaspora Studies via the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has a M.A. and B.A. in Communications Studies from California State University, Los Angeles, and after earning his Ph.D. in Performance Studies from Northwestern University, he served as a

Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Southern California in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity, as well as the program manager of History at California African American Museum in Los Angeles. In addition to *Killing Poetry: Performing Blackness, Poetry Slams and the Making of Spoken Word Communities* (Rutgers University Press); he is the co-editor of forthcoming *The End of Chiraq: A Literary Mixtape* (Northwestern University Press). Additionally, he writes for *The Huffington Post*, *The Root*, and *Our Weekly*, and serves on the editorial board for *Text & Performance Quarterly*. Additionally, Johnson is a highly awarded spoken word poet. Merging race and gender theory with comedy and lyricism, he began writing seriously in 2001. Shortly thereafter he won poetry slam nationals in 2003 (team Los Angeles), in 2004 (team Hollywood), and placed 3rd in 2005, making him one of a handful of poets to make finals three years in a row. Returning to slam after a brief hiatus, he placed 5th in 2011, 4th in 2012, and 2nd in 2013 (team Hollywood). Johnson appeared on HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, BET's *Lyric Café*, TVOne's *Verses & Flow*, The Arsenio Hall Show, The Steve Harvey Show, and co-wrote a documentary titled *Crossover*, which aired on Showtime, in collaboration with the NBA and Nike. Professor Johnson recently finished a national tour with *Fiveology*, a collective of spoken word poets, and currently serves on the board of Say Word, an organization that mentors teenagers and promotes creative self-expression through spoken word poetry in Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Times* said, "From subject matter, to wordplay to delivery, he is working it out! It's hard not to have good times while watching him have a good time on stage."

IMZ: Thank you for this interview.

JLJ: Thank you for reaching out.

IMZ: What are some of the complicated issues that comprise performance poetry spaces?

JLJ: There are many. Indeed, *Killing Poetry* looks at race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the sexual assault in our communities, the politics of viral videos, and there are so many I did not explore. I try to inform the reader that, although we are a series of progressive spaces, progressive is not an achievement or a stable identity and that we often replicate the same issues many poets speak against.

IMZ: When I think of spoken word poetry, I think of The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron and others, would they be considered pioneers in the genre?

JLJ: One of the earliest things I try to do in the book is inform folks that there is no genre called poetry slam. Slam is a competition in which a range of modes and genres exist. However, folks like TLP, GSH, and the Watts Prophets loom large in the consciousness of many (black) spoken word poets who slam. In fact, Abiodun Oyewole of TLP opens his house on Sundays to invited artists to eat, watch sports, talk politics, culture, vibe, and share work. It is a beautiful space that I was fortunate to experience when I lived in New York for a short stint.

IMZ: What effect do you think Russell Simmons' Def Poetry (aired on HBO between 2002 and 2007) had on the slam poetry movement?

JLJ: As with anything, there was some good and some bad. While the show (along with the film *Slam* and the documentary *Slam Nation*) certainly popularized contemporary spoken word by bringing it to the masses through HBO, thereby giving exposure to poets, it also gave the world a false understanding of the poetry coming out of the communities. Indeed, 30 minute segments are incredibly limited in what they can show, couple that with the producers' and directors' tastes and advertisers desires you get a show that produces an image of mostly progressive black poetry communities, which is not entirely true.

IMZ: In short, what is slam or slam poetry, and what are some of the promises and problems within slam and spoken word?

JLJ: Slam poetry is the competitive art of spoken word poetry in which a mode of genres, styles, and forms may exist. One of the things I love most about these spaces is the ways in which they open up, or make accessible, entire worlds for people who may not have access otherwise. Whether literary, activist, or even academic, recognizing all of those terms are not static identity markers but loaded modes of being, slam has opened doors for many to become poet, professor, or political agitator.

One of the biggest issues that I see is how they replicate many of the same oppressive structures they claim to fight against – how, even in a progressive space, they replicate and reproduce racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, etc.

IMZ: Why is it important to contextualize contemporary Black poets in a larger Black literary tradition to kill the notion that poetry slams are inherently radically democratic and operate within utopia-centered cultural environments?

JLJ: I don't think it's important in order to "kill the notion that poetry slams are inherently radically democratic," as situating us in the larger black literary milieu wouldn't be able to accomplish that task. Rather, I think it is important because it illustrates that there are long standing traditions of black poets protesting, pushing back, and imagining new possibilities that have existed long before those of who slam have decided to take up that work. In this way, we might see that there is something particular about the black aesthetic tradition, though widely complicate and varied, that works toward building and imaging new worlds and new world possibilities.

IMZ: You have written on the question of gender, race and sexuality within slam and spoken word communities in Los Angeles, California (e.g., masculine posturing) specifically, what are the issues involved in such an exploration, especially in contrast to what is being done in other parts of the U.S. (e.g., Chicago)?

JLJ: I don't know if comparison is useful here, as each city is pressed with their own unique obstacles and I know Chicago has had to grapple with their own patriarchal practices, as did a lot of other communities.

IMZ: The blurb about your book mentions sexual assault, what is that about, and how did that become a part of the slam and spoken word community?

JLJ: It is too long to flesh out here but sexual assault is a part of our community and some of what I am dealing with in the project is how do we wrestle with and, if possible, work towards ending that. I don't have the answers but I have an incredible amount of questions and, taking the lead of the women who have spearheaded the necessary conversation around sexual assault, continue to dialogue about it.

IMZ: In your book you argue that the truly radical potential in slam and spoken word communities lies not just in proving literary worth, speaking back to power, or even in altering power structures, but instead in imagining and working towards altogether different social relationships. What 'imagining and working towards altogether different social relationships' are you suggesting?

JLJ: In short, what I am referring to is how slam and spoken word poets have not always desired to prove their literary merit by established or traditional modes but instead opted to build their own presses (or not publish books at all), schools of writing, and aesthetic communities (almost) in opposition to traditional institutions, and how that might serve as a model for a constant search for other/more possibilities.

IMZ: How has social media replicated some of the white supremacist, patriarchal, and mainstream logics many spoken word poets seem to be working against, and why do you think this has happened?

JLJ: I discuss this in the book, but part of the issue lies in the ways in which we consume people and their art, and how that is uniquely tied to how white people in particular, because how colonialism made it so, has the power to eat. I am uniquely speaking about Button Poetry, its audience, its YouTube platform, and how they all serve one another. While I think Button is actively working on diversifying their channel, the consumption power is troubling. However, I do want to make space for how black artists have used social media platforms to carve out radical spaces for ourselves, our colleagues, and our audiences.

IMZ: I have read that you have competed in national slam poetry competitions and won, how was that, and how do you answer the critics of the competitive nature of slam poetry?

JLJ: In short: It was great and I made lots of really close friends and I don't answer the critics at all. I do not care to, as that answering work often reifies the critics (usually experts) as the gate keepers of poetic output. I think competition has its place. Additionally, submitting poems, applying for grants, and even reading in an open mic (with their norms and immediate audience response) are inherently competitive. More still, if anyone does not like the numeric value placed on a poem, and I understand why many folks do not, you can and should choose another format to share your work. At the end of the day, slam, a competition with Olympic style scoring, is a trick, a device used to get people to care about art more. And, if you look at the crowds that slams draw, it is safe to say its working.

IMZ: You wrote your doctoral dissertation on slam poetry, was it difficult finding faculty (or a university) willing to consider your initial proposal?

JLJ: Not at all. I went to Northwestern University and studied Performance Studies. Not only did I immediately form a wonderful committee, they were all black (E. Patrick Johnson as chair, D. Soyini Madison, Harvey Young, and Dwight McBride as my cognate advisor), and they all encouraged radical creativity, intellectual rigor, and an investment in the politics of the work. I was and am incredibly fortunate.

IMZ: Some or perhaps most in the slam and spoken word community hope to create radical spaces for the art to thrive, but what has been the reality?

JLJ: The reality has been that, while we are working to create spaces in/of difference, we often replicate many of the same oppressive mechanisms we are claiming to be pushing against. Slam, progressive, inclusive, and radical at times, is fraught with racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, etc. Indeed, this should stand as a reminder that radicality is not a static destination but a commitment to ongoing efforts to fight for and work towards a better world.

IMZ: What do you see as the future of slam and spoken word poetry, particularly in the African American community?

I am not sure but I can say that I don't see *a* future, rather I see *multiple* futures. I see aesthetic spaces and communities where black artists and the communities built around us and our art are more accepting and open, which takes continued efforts to ensure they are as complex as black folks are.

JLJ:

IMZ: Thank you for this discussion, I am sure our readers will gain new insight on the particulars of slam and spoken word poetry. And last, should you have some parting words or knowledge you would like to share, please do.

JLJ: I don't, however, I want to thank you all for reaching out. I am honored.