

## Ethnopoetic Transcription and Multimodal Archives: Toward a More Comprehensive Approach to Slam Poetry Scholarship

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Slam is a relatively young genre of poetry, created in 1985 by a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith, who sought to challenge ivory tower ideas about creating and evaluating poetry (Woods 2008:18). Extant slam poetry scholarship is neither as prolific nor as comprehensive as that on some of its performance poetry siblings,<sup>1</sup> raising the question of why this may be the case. While the relative “newness” of the genre may account for some scholarly gaps, it is also worth noting that the complexities that define slam poetry can be difficult to analyze. One crucial area of slam poetry that has been scholastically marginalized is its bimodality,<sup>2</sup> particularly as pertaining to composition (and recomposition). While not every slam poem develops bimodally, bimodality does apply to a large body of work within this genre of poetry. In cases where bimodality applies, the slam poem is usually textually composed but intended for performance. This formal duality presents the opportunity to study how text and performance inform each other in composition and recomposition as part of the creative process.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, however, that the extant body of slam poetry scholarship includes crucial and insightful works. *Voicing American Poetry* by Lesley Wheeler (2008) and *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (2009) provide detailed analyses of slam poetry as a form and institution, including attention to the multifaceted nature of slam poetry performance. Works by poet-scholars, such as *Words in Your Face* by Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz (2007) and *Killing Poetry* by Javon Johnson (2017), offer important insider perspectives on slam poetry while also illuminating historical contexts, social significance, and cultural politics. Despite the richness of slam poetry scholarship, many other types of performance-based poetry have received more comprehensive scholarly attention. The griot tradition, the improvisatore tradition, and countless examples of ancient and otherwise historically-situated performance genres are widely addressed in ways that integrate them within broader theories of poetry performance. Key examples include “Coleridge’s ‘The Improvisatore’: Poetry, Performance, and Remediation” by Angela Esterhammer (2011), “Neon *Griot*: The Functional Role of Poetry Readings in the Black Arts Movement” by Lorenzo Thomas (1998), and dozens of works addressing epic poetry (including, but not limited to, Gregory Nagy’s (1996) *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*). Furthermore some extant scholarship on performance poetry has failed to provide slam poetry with a “seat at the table” during discussions in which slam poetry might be invoked as a relevant example. Both Thomas’s “Neon *Griot*” and Daniel Banks’s (2010) “From Homer to Hip Hop: Orature and Griots, Ancient and Present” invoke rap and hip hop, but not slam poetry, as contemporary links to the griot tradition, despite the presence of scholarship that addresses the relevance of slam poetry to Black culture and experience (with Somers-Willett’s aforementioned text serving as one example of this). The reasons for these potential imbalances and exclusions extend beyond the purview of this article but may be worthwhile to consider in relation to integrating slam poetry more fully within the larger context of performance poetry.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term bimodality to acknowledge the textual and performative formats of any given slam poem to which this approach to composition, recomposition, and dissemination applies.

It must be acknowledged that the relevance of the text to the study of slam poetry is not universally accepted. There are, however, also those scholars, editors, and practitioners who have made room for text in their understanding of slam poetry. In his introduction to the anthology *Bum Rush the Page*, Tony Medina writes: “This book exists in a paradox. While it will be closely related to what some are calling the spoken word—that which lives in performance—the poetry gathered here, for the most part, maintains the integrity of the page, of the written word” (Medina and Reyes Rivera 2001:xx). Medina’s commentary illustrates the complexities created by the proximity of page and performance but does not deny the significance of text in cases where performance poetry is published on the page. I argue that, in the case of bimodal slam poems, acknowledging both text and performance versions should play a crucial role in analysis centered around creative evolution and the situation of slam poetry in relation to other types of oral or oral-adjacent poetry. To fail to recognize multimodality in slam poetry (in cases where it exists) can lead to misunderstandings about how slam poetry fits within the larger genre of performance-based poetry. Scholarship that unpacks the compositional complexities of bimodal slam poetry provides a foundation for acknowledging and analyzing diverse modalities within the slam poetry genre to understand corresponding diversity within the creative process of slam poems.

The fact that the slam poetry genre includes a bimodal branch creates a variety of scholarship opportunities to explore how such bimodality impacts the creative process. Of particular importance, from my perspective, are insights into how a bimodal slam poem may be composed and recomposed across modes, as opposed to within a single mode. However, as any slam poetry scholar can confirm, slam poetry records have not been particularly widely archived, posing challenges to bimodal analysis. Such archives as do exist, such as video publisher Button Poetry’s Youtube channel, often only document one format of a given poem, as opposed to both text and performance. Finding both text and performance versions of a slam poem often entails descending into a Google rabbit hole of personal websites and YouTube channels, and even this process is often fruitless. This lack of representation hinders interested scholars’ understanding and analysis of the roles played by both text and performance within the creative process of bimodal slam poems. This article suggests that the creation of multimodal slam poetry archives may enable more productive scholarship within this area of the genre and outlines the potential directions such scholarship might take. An author-created archive of a single slam community is used to illustrate the concepts and value of the approaches discussed.

### **Bimodality, Plurality, and Change**

A starting point for understanding bimodality within slam poetry lies in John Miles Foley’s classification of the genre as a voiced text. According to this classification, slam poetry can be understood as textually composed, orally disseminated, and aurally received (Foley 2002:39). It is necessary to understand how these different modes relate to each other in order to understand why bimodality is a significant and foundational feature of slam poetry. This line of reasoning also resonates with Jerome McGann’s ideas about scholarly editing: “The scholarly editor’s task is to clarify as much as one can the artistic process of creative activity, for it is that

process which *is* the literary work, whether we look at the work as a carrier of meaning (informational) or as a creative event (aesthetic)” (1991:71). Analyzing a slam poem’s existence across multiple modes is a way of understanding the creative process that McGann declares to be intrinsic to a work of literature. While slam poetry scholarship is not necessarily editorial work, it is work that shapes how other scholars, as well as members of the general public, understand the genre. More fully addressing bimodality, and interactions between modes, in scholarship enables a more complete representation of the genre by acknowledging this creative process as a feature of the poetry itself. This approach opens the door to various scholarly possibilities, including more comprehensive and accurate comparative analyses between the creative processes of slam poetry and those of other types of oral and oral-adjacent poetry.<sup>3</sup>

### Intermodal and Intramodal Change

Before discussing how multimedia archiving could enable more productive analyses of bimodal slam poetry across modes, I must first clarify how these modes can, and do, interact as part of the creative process to which McGann refers. Foley’s model of the voiced text suggests a very linear kind of movement from text to performance. While this representation is accurate, the ways in which text and performance relate to each other in slam poetry also extend beyond this. For example, although the primary mode of slam poetry delivery is often performance, slam poems are also published in print. It is also worth considering that slam poetry texts often inform performance in various ways, and these texts are sometimes revised based on performative recompositions. A slam poem may evolve from text to performance, as Foley’s model suggests, but it may also evolve from text to text, performance to performance, or performance to text.<sup>4</sup> In short, text and performance interact in ways that are both linear and recursive in the case of bimodal slam poems.<sup>5</sup> The examples in this article will primarily analyze text-to-performance movement but will address other types concerning their potential for future scholarship.

### Plurality and Versioning

To understand a bimodal slam poem as a literary work that evolves inter-modally and intra-modally is to understand it as a plural entity that exists across multiple versions of text and/or performance. Peter Middleton writes (2005:xi):

... poems are not like light, a wave or a particle depending on which way you look at them, they

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<sup>3</sup> More precise examples of such scholarship will be addressed later.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term “inter-modal” to refer to changes that occur between versions of different format types and the term “intra-modal” to refer to changes that occur between versions of the same format type.

<sup>5</sup> This linear and recursive evolution raises questions about whether a bimodal slam poem can be viewed as complete if the author intends to continue performing it or whether the poem’s final version is attained only when the author permanently discontinues its performance (and, complementarily, subsequent textual revisions). These questions may serve as genesis points for future scholarship.

have several aspects. Poems can be manifested as heterogeneous material objects; they can be events in performance; their multiple versions, published copies, and performances cannot be located in any single point of space and time . . . .

A bimodal slam poem almost always exists in more than one text version and more than one performance version. Exploring the relationships between modes necessitates the acknowledgment of this multiformity, ultimately reinforcing the idea that a single performance or publication does not comprehensively define the poem.<sup>6</sup>

Embracing the plurality of slam poetry also entails an understanding of its potential for variation, especially how this potential is realized. Gregory Nagy's analysis of the Homeric epithet suggests that repetition may enable variation (1996:52):

The multiple repetition of the same, each repetition being different, is an idea encapsulated in the very identity of *Poludeukes* as a twin, one of the Divine Twins. The very idea of a twin conveys both sameness and difference. Here we may consider in general the semantic epithet: each time the epithet is repeated, it is both the same and different in meaning. With each of its countless returns, the epithet refers to the same thing, but to a new instance of the same thing.

Nagy's explanation highlights how repetition within a new context creates change. Because performance is a primary mode of slam poetry transmission, the same poem may be performed multiple times in various venues. A new venue may impact how a poem is performed, ultimately resulting in a new version. Consequently, repetition and recontextualization are vehicles of variance in the slam poetry genre.

The changes that occur as a result of such repetition and recontextualization may be understood as instances of *mouvance*, a term coined by Paul Zumthor and explored by Nagy. Nagy proposes that *mouvance* can be interpreted as "the process of recomposition-in-performance as actually recognized by a living oral tradition, where the recognition implies the paradox of immediate change without ultimate change" (1996:25). This concept also relates to what M. H. Abrams refers to as the fourth dimension of a poem. Abrams suggests (2012:2):

. . . poets, whether deliberately or unconsciously, exploit the physical aspect of language. It is this component—the act of its utterance—that I call the fourth dimension of a poem. . . . the fourth dimension—one that is almost totally neglected in discussions of poetry—is the activity of enunciating the great variety of speech sounds that constitute the words of the poem.

The fourth dimension of poetry to which Abrams refers is often a part of recomposition through performance, since vocalization of text often results in its extension or evolution. However, because slam poetry is not strictly a living oral tradition,<sup>7</sup> applying the concept of *mouvance* to

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth acknowledging that slam poets' perspectives on their work may be worthy topics of analysis regarding this framing. While these perspectives extend beyond the purview of this article, they may prove to be a fruitful foundation for future scholarship, particularly in cases relevant to multimodal archival work.

<sup>7</sup> That is, not orally composed or preserved.

the genre requires a bit of adaptation. The fact that bimodal slam poetry exists in both text and performance means that performative recompositions may be reflected not only in future versions of the poem in performance but also in future versions of the poem's text.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, it is possible for readers who are familiar with the performance of a slam poem to hear traces of the performance in the textual recomposition, almost as though the text were a sort of cross-modal palimpsest.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, such recompositions are intermodal by nature. What I find most salient is how *mouvance* calls attention to performative recomposition, because this complicates the voiced text model of slam poetry proposed by Foley. The voiced text model poses text as slam poetry's sole mode of composition and performance as its sole mode of transmission. This interpretation precludes, however, the possibility of performative recomposition and textual versioning, which can, and do, happen within the genre. Of course, this type of versioning can be difficult to study, because, as previously mentioned, most extant slam poetry collections don't feature multiple versions of a given poem. My recognition of this lack led me to create a prototype for a multi-version, multi-format slam poetry archive. One function of this archive, which focuses on Slam Free or Die in Manchester, New Hampshire, is to illustrate how the composition and recomposition of slam poems extend beyond the linear and singular trajectory suggested by the voiced text categorization. I argue that bimodal slam poetry recomposition occurs between and within the modes of text and performance in a manner that is not always linear. One way to define this phenomenon would be as a bimodal and multi-directional form of *mouvance*, as conceptualized by Zumthor and analyzed by Nagy, that extends the concept of recomposition to address the complexities of the relationship between text and performance in slam poetry.

Thus far, I have established that a bimodal slam poem is neither a singular nor a static piece of literature. Slam poetry is, in part, defined by variation, evolution, and bimodality. However, extant public slam poetry records are not currently organized in a manner that facilitates scholarly analysis of these genre features. My conviction that these features of slam poetry are significant, and deserve more scholarly attention, was the primary motivation for the creation of the archive I will discuss in this article. In applying the archive to bimodal slam poetry analysis, I draw upon techniques that are heavily rooted in ethnopoetics. In Dennis Tedlock's aptly titled essay "Ethnopoetics," he describes the subject in question as the "study of the verbal arts in a worldwide range of languages and cultures" and notes that "The aim is to not only analyze and interpret auditory performances, but also to make them directly accessible through transcriptions and translations that display their qualities as works of art" (1992:81). My applications of ethnopoetics incorporate artifacts from the aforementioned archive and are

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<sup>8</sup> Slam poetry's bimodality complicates the idea of "immediate change without ultimate change" to which Nagy refers. In the context of the bimodal, multi-versional branch of the genre, a more apt explanation might be that immediate change does not supersede the previous version, but instead creates a new version, allowing for the coexistence of both the initial version and the recomposed version.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of performative voice echoed in a textual recomposition resonates with Zumthor's recognition of voice as a feature of text within his conceptualization of *mouvance*. This point is also relevant to the works of scholars who have analyzed the role of vocality in text, such as Jennifer Esmail's "'Perchance My Hand May Touch the Lyre': Orality and Textuality in Nineteenth-Century Deaf Poetry," in which the author asserts that "nineteenth-century deaf poets ambivalently maintained an idea of 'vocality' in their poetry while underscoring how that imagined 'voice' was a silent construct of print" (2011:510).

designed to illustrate how a multi-format comparative analysis of a bimodal slam poem can provide insights into composition and creative evolution. To speak to Tedlock's point, I believe that this is a necessary step toward being able to more fully "display their qualities as works of art" (1992:81). This work can serve as a foundation for further slam poetry scholarship, which may include comparative analyses of the creative processes of bimodal slam poems and other oral and oral-adjacent genres of poetry.

### Introducing the Archive

It has been a struggle to find multi-format records of slam poetry for use in my research on bimodality within the genre. In some cases, I had to abandon analytically promising poems because I simply couldn't find the requisite versions. I would find text versions but no performance records, or vice versa. Even when I could find the records I needed, it entailed a tedious process of combing random personal websites, blogs, and, of course, YouTube. I often wished for an accessible and, above all, an organized repository that would represent slam poems in a multi-versional and, when appropriate, bimodal manner, but such a thing did not exist. Of course, many conventional literary publications frequently publish slam poems in text, and projects such as Button Poetry are dedicated to compiling videos of slam poetry performances. It is not as though slam poetry is an undocumented genre. However, as established, text or performance alone comprises only part of what defines the genesis and evolution of a bimodal slam poem as a piece of literature.

I contend that the lack of organization and accessibility of slam poetry records has played a role in the limited extant scholarship on the genre's bimodality and versioning. In response, I created the Slam Free or Die multimedia archive, featuring slam poems by poets from the Slam Free or Die open mic and slam in Manchester, New Hampshire. While its current scope is admittedly limited, the archive is designed to bring both modes of bimodal slam poetry together to present individual poems as bimodal and poly-versional.

In conceptualizing this archive, I was influenced by other archives that feature performance elements, particularly the PennSound website. Not only does PennSound spotlight performances and readings as significant modes of literature, but it also attends to versioning by providing multiple records of some featured pieces. Both features are relevant to the motivation behind the Slam Free or Die archive. However, my goal is not solely to showcase the aurality of slam poetry but, rather, to emphasize the relationship between its text and performance elements. Towards this end, I gathered a variety of records, including text, audio, and video media. I solicited these records, as well as permission to use them, from individual poets.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, every poem featured in the archive is documented by at least one text-based record and at least one performance record (audio or video). All text-based versions of poems appear as written by the authors. Some poems are documented by multiple text or performance records, allowing for an analysis of *mouvance* both between and within modes.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that some poets granted permission for their work to be featured but then failed to provide the records of their poems. This lack of follow-through has been a persistent challenge in compiling the archive, and I hope to troubleshoot this more in the future as I continue to consider potential expansions.

To house the archive, I used the web-publishing platform Omeka, which is particularly suited to archival work (<https://sfod.omeka.net>). Once I created the site for the archive, I used two different features to index content: tags and collections. As I uploaded each artifact into the archive, I tagged it with the following classifications: author name, poem title, format (audio, video, or text), and year of publication/creation. The labeling enables users to target specific authors, poems, formats, or dates when searching for content. Additionally, if a user is browsing the entire catalog of artifacts, they can click on tag links at any time to create a narrowed list of content. I chose tag titles based on their relevance to the type of analytical work enabled by the archive. I also categorized content by format by creating collections for each format type. The archive currently houses three collections: audio, video, and text. Users who wish to study multiple poems within a particular format may use the links of the collections to generate lists of all artifacts within a specific format category. Of course, users may also use the tags to narrow their focus within any given collection further. At this point, the archive is relatively modest in size. However, as it grows, the tagging system and collections library will evolve to accommodate both content and user needs.

### **Applying the Slam Free or Die Archive to Analysis**

Ideally, the representation of multiple versions and formats within the archive will both enable and encourage scholars to further study bimodality and versioning as features of slam poetry. One approach to this type of scholarship involves ethnopoetic transcription. Many scholars, including Dennis Tedlock, Jerome Rothenberg, and John Miles Foley, have used ethnopoetic transcription as a means of representing performative and paralinguistic features of poetry, a practice that bears relevance to the task of analyzing bimodal relationships in slam poetry.

I provide Jerome Rothenberg's description of ethnopoetics to build upon and extend Tedlock's aforementioned definition of the same and provide a foundation for applying ethnopoetic transcription to slam poetry scholarship. Rothenberg (n.d., "Introduction") describes ethnopoetics as:

- (1) A comparative approach to poetry and related arts, with a characteristic but not exclusive emphasis on stateless, low-technology cultures and on oral and nonliterate [nonliteral] forms of verbal expression.
- (2) The poetry and ideas about poetry in the cultures so observed or studied.
- (3) A movement or tendency in contemporary poetry, literature, and social science (anthropology in particular) devoted to such interests.

Rothenberg's first definition is particularly relevant to the study of slam poetry because it highlights the ethnopoetic focus on oral expression. Although slam poetry is not oral poetry by conventional definitions, it is what one might call an oral-adjacent or oral-influenced genre. As previously mentioned, Foley uses the term "voiced text" to contextualize slam poetry within the larger framework of oral poetry.

Rothenberg, Foley, and Tedlock have applied ethnopoetics to the study of performative

and/or oral literature to illustrate the limitations of text-only representations of such works. This methodology aligns closely with the aim of making oral performances more broadly accessible, as outlined in Tedlock's definition of ethnopoetics. In some cases, such applications have taken the form of ethnopoetic transcription. Rothenberg describes such transcription in the following discussion of ethnopoetics (n.d., "Translation"):

Translation is carry-over. It is a means of delivery & of bringing to life. It begins with a forced change of language, but a change too that opens up the possibility of greater understanding. Everything in these song-poems is finally translatable: words, sounds, voice, melody, gesture, event, etc., in the reconstitution of a unity that would be shattered by approaching each element in isolation. A full & total experience begins it, which only a total translation can fully bring across.

Rothenberg's analysis suggests that an ethnopoetic transcription of performed and/or oral literature represents both words and features such as physical elements of performance, performative contexts, and nonlinguistic sounds. Ethnopoetics maintains that a performed/oral poem cannot be fully experienced or understood through text alone. Foley applies this line of reasoning directly to slam poetry in *How to Read an Oral Poem* by creating an ethnopoetic transcription of Lynn Procope's slam poem "elemental woman," using a system of formatting, symbols, and paratext to communicate features of performance, such as vocal dynamics, pacing, and emphasis. Essentially, he transcribes elements of performance over the plain text version of the poem. He suggests that "ethnopoetics can open up dimensions of oral poetry that conventional printed media institutionally ignore or obscure . . ." (2002:97), and that "ethnopoetic transcription does offer a way to partially recover what the conventional printed page deletes: the living, present dimensions that constitute a performance" (101). Foley's primary goal in applying ethnopoetic transcription seems to be, at least in part, to acknowledge and define the limitations of conventional text in representing oral poetry while also illustrating how adapted uses of text can account more fully for the nontextual features of an oral poem. Ethnopoetic transcription enables a type of analysis that encompasses both text and performance in cases of bimodal poetry. I assert that this type of analysis is necessary for any scholarship that addresses the creative and evolutionary processes of bimodal slam poems.

My suggested applications of ethnopoetic transcription to slam poetry differ slightly in purpose from those of Foley and Rothenberg in that I suggest that ethnopoetic transcription can be used to simultaneously represent multiple versions of a bimodal slam poem, across modes, in ways that illustrate the compositional and/or evolutionary relationships between such modes. A primary product of such analysis is a concrete and clear illustration of moments of change between versions, demonstrating how inter-modal and intra-modal *mouvance* produce multiple versions of a given slam poem.

My approach to ethnopoetic translation is rooted in the application of formatting styles and the addition of text-based cues as means of representing auditory and physical features of a bimodal slam poem. These formatting features are applied to a text version of the same poem with the intention of illustrating how the text is compositionally and creatively fundamental to



the performance and how the performance, in turn, extends the text.<sup>11</sup> The translation key below (which also appears in Appendix 1) outlines how these features are applied to indicate pauses, volume and speed variations, nonverbal elements of performance, and vocable and tonal variances and features.

Translation Key:

- pause: \* (longer pauses = more asterisks)
- nonverbal physical performance and audience response: (described in parentheses directly under the relevant words)
- rising or falling volume: < + italicized words or > + italicized words
- increasing or decreasing speed: < + bold words or > + bold words
- tonal shifts/emphasis: all caps
- vocable additions to the text: underlined words
- vocable subtractions from the text: strikethrough words
- vocable paraperformatives: bold font
- physical paraperformatives: italic font directly beneath relevant lines

While my application of ethnopoetic transcription is largely informed by Foley's aforementioned transcription of "elemental woman," my methods and presentation do differ from Foley's in some fundamental ways. First, it should be noted that I do not provide a side-by-side comparison of text and transcription as Foley does in *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Instead, I include both the text and the transcription in the appendices. Regarding his application of ethnopoetic transcription in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, Foley also notes that "To make sense of the transcription, you as reader and reperformer must do two things: first, consult the digest of symbols that precedes it to learn your cues; and second, perform it aloud yourself. This exercise, like ethnopoetics itself, is participatory" (2002:98). My approach to ethnopoetic transcription, at least in this article, is designed to promote a more analytical, as opposed to participatory, engagement with slam poetry across modes. While the ethnopoetic transcription presented in this article does not preclude reader reperformance, this application is beyond the purview of this article. My use of ethnopoetic transcription relies on textual versioning as a means of representing compositional *mouvance* across modes.

To illustrate my theories through practice, I will analyze an ethnopoetic transcription of "Thoughts of Craving" by Tim Hopkins,<sup>12</sup> a poem currently featured in the Slam Free or Die archive. I created this transcription using one text version and one video version of the poem, both dating from 2013. I used Foley's ethnopoetic transcription of "elemental woman" as a guide for creating the included translation "key," which designates how formatting is used to represent performance. Ultimately, I superimpose the performance version of the poem over the text version by using symbols and formatting conventions to document significant performative features in relation to the text. The primary goal of the following analysis is to illustrate how the

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<sup>11</sup> The text version of a bimodal slam poem is almost always composed prior to the poem's performance.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1.

ethnopoetic transcription identifies and illustrates moments of *mouvance* and enables discussions about their interpretive significance.

### Recomposing Diction, Syntax, and Other Linguistic Features

This ethnopoetic transcription illustrates several types of *mouvance*, but the first I will discuss is change created by the addition, subtraction, or reordering of the poem's linguistic elements. For example, the text version of some lines toward the end of the poem reads as follows: "I am begging for you to leave your drinks where / they lie / I'll pick them up and give myself one more / Blackout night." In performance, however, these lines become, "All I'm doing is begging for this party to stop ~~I am begging for you to~~ leave your drinks where / they lie / I'll pick them up and give myself one more >*silent* / (brings hands in to rest on abdomen) / (right arm outstretched, pointed finger) / *Blackout night*."<sup>13</sup> Consistent with the transcription key, linguistic additions are denoted by underlining, whereas linguistic eliminations are denoted by strikethrough text. Through this formatting, the ethnopoetic transcription identifies such instances of *mouvance*, and the adjusted phrasing in the performance version of these lines creates a sense of tension that is less noticeable in the text version.

First, I will address the impact of linguistic additions. The phrase "begging for this party to stop" can be interpreted in two ways within the context of the poem. The phrase could suggest that the speaker wants the party to stop so that they will be left alone to succumb to the desire to drink. This line, however, could also indicate the speaker's desire to escape the temptation the party offers, even as the following phrases imply that this resistance is ultimately futile. Both interpretations reinforce the depth and gravity of the disease with which the speaker is grappling.

While the previous examples illustrate instances of performative *mouvance* consisting of linguistic additions, some recompositions take the form of line or phrase eliminations. In the last paragraph, the lines discussed also incorporate just such an elimination-based recomposition. The following lines from the ethnopoetic transcription identify the cut phrase through the use of strikethrough text: "All I'm doing is begging for this party to stop ~~I am begging for you to~~ leave your drinks where (arms outstretched) / they lie." The resulting syntax, "leave your drinks where they lie," creates a more imperative impression than "I am begging for you to leave your drinks where they lie." This moment of recomposition is not just syntactical, but also tonal, in nature. It changes the line from request to demand. It is important to note that the impact of such elimination-based recomposition is just as significant as recomposition that adds or restructures content. Recomposition is a sort of revision of something already complete, and it is generally known that such a process entails not only the crafting of new content but also the cutting of content that no longer serves the piece of writing. As the above example illustrates, recompositional eliminations can impact core features of the poem, such as its tone.

Other linguistic recompositions illustrated by the transcription include changes in diction. These occur when a word or phrase is replaced, as opposed to simply eliminated. In some cases,

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that types of *mouvance* other than linguistic additions and eliminations are represented in the lines of transcription presented above. The discussion that directly follows will, however, only focus on these additions and subtractions.

the recomposed diction subtly impacts the interpretive potential of the poem, as is illustrated by the following line from the transcription: “fake smiles get ~~you~~ me further than honest scowls.” In performance, Hopkins substitutes “me” for “you,” a seemingly slight change that is easy to miss. However, this recomposition takes the line from general to specific, ultimately suggesting a sharper sense of ownership on the part of the speaker. The word “you” distances the content from the speaker, whereas the word “me” personalizes it. This is more consistent with the overall content of the poem, which, while tapping into the common shared experience of alcoholism, is deeply personal in nature.

The linguistic features of this poem play a significant role in creating its voice, and, in turn, the voice plays a significant role in what the poem ultimately says about the experience of alcoholism. Because bimodal slam poems are, by nature, created for performance, one way of viewing the modes would be to consider text as a generative foundation and performance as a sort of apotheosis.<sup>14</sup> The above discussion illustrates how linguistic additions, eliminations, and even slight changes in diction can, through recomposition, impact voice and, consequently, features like tension and tone. In the example of addition-based recomposition, the transition from figurative to literal voice between modes impacts the messaging by emphasizing desperation. Similarly, the absence of the cut phrase in the elimination-based example of recomposition results in a more commanding tone, which may also relate, more subtly, to the intensely demanding needs of the addiction. Even changes in pronouns, as illustrated above, are not always insignificant.

While the examples discussed are not exhaustive, it is my hope that they illustrate the ways in which using ethnopoetic transcription as a tool of bimodal, multi-versional analysis identifies moments of bimodal *mouvance* and ultimately helps to illustrate why such moments are worthy of analysis. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that linguistic features are not the only features of slam poetry subject to *mouvance*. Because performance incorporates many physical facets and non-linguistic vocables, it is also prudent to consider the ways in which non-linguistic performative elements of slam poetry may function as recompositions, a topic which will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

### Vocal Dynamics and Physical Performance

A genuine acceptance of slam poetry as a partially bimodal genre also entails the acknowledgment that paralinguistic features of performance are no less significant to the study of slam poetry than syntax and stanza breaks. I want to clarify that my goal here is not to debate the problematics of creating hierarchical relationships between text and performance, nor is it to “defend” performance as a valid mode of literature. My argument is based upon an egalitarian approach to text and performance within the slam poetry genre. I wish to propose that non-linguistic elements of bimodal slam poetry performance can be viewed as instances of recomposition when they extend the text or change from performance to performance. The

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this apotheosis is perhaps a temporary one, as this article asserts that bimodal slam poems continue to evolve after their initial performances.

following examples will illustrate how ethnopoetic transcription can be used to identify these moments of *mouvance* and understand their significance within the larger context of the poem as a plural piece of literature.

### Voice

Vocal dynamics are slam poetry elements that depend on embodiment, making them strictly performative features within the genre. In “Thoughts of Craving,” Hopkins’ uses of vocal dynamics can be viewed as performative recompositions, or instances of *mouvance*, because they extend the interpretive potential of the poem beyond the text. One example of this is the manner in which Hopkins manipulates volume to emphasize certain lines within the poem. Many instances of such recomposition seem to highlight moments of existential reflection. Consider the following line from the transcription as an example: “< ***I mean I don’t think I’m I am whoever you think I am.***” The transcription uses italicization combined with a greater-than angle bracket to denote that Hopkins raises his voice at this point in the poem, which can be interpreted as a means of drawing attention to this claim about the speaker’s sense of self. This emphasis is compounded by a cooccurring increase in tempo, transcribed using the greater-than angle bracket combined with bold font. At some points, decreases in volume are equally impactful in drawing the audience’s attention. Hopkins emphasizes the line, “>*Well everyone but me\**,” by lowering the volume of his voice.<sup>15</sup> The stanza preceding this line focuses on describing a raucous drinking party, and the aforementioned line interpolates the speaker of the poem within this context. Because the speaker of the poem is a recovering alcoholic, it is significant that he feels othered by the party, making Hopkins’ use of vocal dynamics as an emphatic technique all the more apt and interpretively significant.

When shifts in pace and volume are used simultaneously, as noted in the first example above, these twofold moments of recomposition not only draw attention to the lines in which they occur, but also often create tonal shifts. Hopkins decreases both the speed and volume of his speech when he performs the following line: “>***I never wanted to be known by verbs or adjectives.***” This line of the poem is an analytically pregnant one, and it makes sense that Hopkins’ performance would draw attention to it by manipulating two separate features of vocality. If the audience pays close attention to a line, it is likely that they will spend more time unpacking its meaning than if nothing had drawn their attention to the line in the first place. In the case of this particular example, audience members might ponder which adjectives and verbs are implied, particularly within the context of the poem as a whole.

In simplest terms, instances of vocal *mouvance* tied to pacing and volume ultimately draw attention to the moments of a slam poem in which these recompositions take place. Additionally, analyzing such examples fosters an understanding of how these performative features are informed by the text, even as they incorporate mode-specific techniques to extend said text. Ethnopoetic transcriptions, such as the one I have created of Hopkins’ poem, allow analysts to identify these moments precisely. Doing so enables discussions about why the poem

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<sup>15</sup> Denoted in transcription by combining italics with a less-than angle bracket.

was recomposed in these ways and how these recompositions impact the poem's interpretive potential.

## Body

The embodiment of a slam poem that occurs through performance is the locus of much *mouvance*, be it auditory or visual. The vocal dynamics previously discussed exemplify one category of such *mouvance*. There are, however, many features of embodied performance that are visual, as opposed to auditory, and the following section attends to the ways in which some of them may function as recompositions.

The first example of physical recomposition, as illustrated by the transcription, occurs before Hopkins utters a single syllable: "*Stands on stage silently for 8 seconds / Walks up to the mic slowly.*" It should be noted that the performance video used to create the ethnopoetic transcription of "Thoughts of Craving" documents a performance within the larger context of a poetry slam. Poetry slams are generally raucous events, and the time between performances is filled with scoring, audience response, and host banter. Hopkins' deliberate pause serves as an opportunity for the audience to "settle" and a means of securing as much audience attention as possible. One interpretation of this pause as recomposition poses it as an illustration of the ways in which performance and text differ as modes of slam poetry dissemination. Not only would it be conventionally impossible to compose this pause as part of a text version of the poem, but it would also be unnecessary. However, there are other interpretive possibilities, as well. Even when setting aside the poetry slam event as a contextual feature, the transcription identifies the pause as a feature present in the performance version, but absent in the text version. A simple understanding of this would be as a performative addition to the poem. This view parallels the earlier discussion of performative vocables as *mouvance*. Consequently, it stands to reason that this example would raise similar questions, such as how this moment of physically performed *mouvance* changes the audience's experience of the poem.

In addition to creating audible paratext, slam poetry embodiment also creates visual paratext through the manipulation of the performing body. The performing poet's use of gesture, movement, and facial expression often extends or alters the meaning and/or impact of a given poem's text. Consequently, the physicality of performance often entails moments of recomposition, and these (generally) inaudible features are no less significant to an understanding of slam poetry versioning and creative evolution than the audible counterparts so far discussed.

The simplest type of physical recomposition demonstrated by the ethnopoetic transcription of Hopkins' poem is the use of gesture for the purpose of emphasis. This technique parallels the previously discussed use of vocal dynamics for emphatic purposes. Of course, this method comprises a visual, as opposed to auditory, appeal to the audience. As is the case with audible emphatic performance techniques, physical emphasis may be used to draw attention to lines that are interpretively dense, as illustrated by the following excerpt from the transcription:

>**I wonder how sincere I am, \* if \* I'm ever sincere**

(hands gesture low and outward) (arms drop to sides)

<**I mean I don't think I'm I am whoever you think I am**

(hands on center of chest) (arms pointed outward)<sup>16</sup>

Consider the gestures described in the parentheses. It is worth noting that they are relatively abstract, as opposed to being pantomime or symbolically recognizable gestures. Consequently, the independent meaning of these gestures is interpretively limited, suggesting that their primary purpose may be to emphasize the words they accompany. This draws the audience's attention to these lines, which may encourage them to more deeply consider both the meaning of the lines and their significance within the larger context of the poem. Because these lines suggest a moment of fraught self-reflection, this functionality makes sense. It is also of note that the lines themselves lend deeper meaning to the relatively simple gestures. For example, Hopkins drops his arms to his side at a moment when the speaker is questioning a feature of their identity. In this context, the gesture seems to suggest a sense of resignation or discouragement. Additionally, the use of inward and outward gestures in conjunction with the line that follows highlights the distinction between the speaker's "self" and the "you" of the poem, reinforcing the sense of discord between self-perception and public perception suggested by the text of the line itself. While the simplicity of these gestures allows them to function as a sort of performative beacon primarily, they achieve greater interpretive potential when analyzed in conjunction with their linguistic counterparts.

In some cases, physical and vocal emphasis techniques are used simultaneously, resulting in a multisensory appeal to audience attention. As footnoted, the excerpt discussed in the previous paragraph was also used, in part, to illustrate how Hopkins' manipulations of pacing and volume can be interpreted as moments of performative recomposition. While vocable and physical instances of performative recomposition do not always occur in tandem, they do so in the example discussed above. Through the simultaneous employment of physical and vocable recomposition techniques, Hopkins achieves a greater degree of emphasis than would likely be accomplished by either physical or vocable recompositions alone.

Physical recompositions may, and often do, extend beyond emphatic use of gesture or movement. Slam poets also frequently use gestures to physically perform features of their poems in ways that make said features more accessible and defined. Consider the following example:

>*and we're doing everything it tells us to like*

"Hold up! DRANK"

<"**Shots shots shots shots . .**"

(pantomimes taking shots 4x)

At this point in the poem, the speaker remarks on how the actions of the partygoers mimic the lyrics of the songs to which they are listening. When Hopkins performs the action of taking shots, he illustrates this moment of the poem in a manner that extends beyond simply

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<sup>16</sup> Part of this excerpt has been used in an earlier example, and this overlap will be addressed later on.

incorporating the lyrics into the text. In the context of the poem's general topic, alcoholism, the physicality of taking shots is also high-impact. This act of physical performance interpolates the reality of the poem within the shared performance space created by the performer and audience, a feat that would be virtually impossible to accomplish through text alone.

Another type of physical recomposition occurs when Hopkins uses gesture to evoke the landscape of the poem through performance, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

<*Some dude is pissing in a closet*

(points with right hand)

Two more are fighting in the ~~parking lot~~ driveway

(points with left hand)

The gestures associated with these lines situate the events described in the text in spatial relation to each other, creating a loose, fictional "setting" for the poem. While the basic details are clearly established in the text, the use of gestures to indicate these spatial relationships brings the setting into a slightly sharper focus. Additionally, Hopkins' use of the real-world performance space as an analog of his poem's actual setting serves as a partial bridge between the performance act and the world of the poem. Both the pantomime and landscape-sketching examples are intended to illustrate that physical performance can extend the text in ways that impact the audience's experience of a given poem. This suggests the significance of bimodality and how an analysis of individual examples of physical recomposition can serve a deeper understanding of the relationships between modes and the impact of bimodal evolution.

As in the case of linguistic-based instances of *mouvance*, recompositions rooted in non-linguistic vocalizations and physical performance yield important insights into the creative, evolutionary nature not only of this poem but of bimodal slam poems in general. Non-linguistic vocable features and physicality are features unique to performance. While standard linguistic recompositions can be represented through standard text, the features discussed in this section cannot. Recognizing these performance-centered features as part of the recomposition of the poem underscores the importance of performance in the creative process. As illustrated in the examples analyzed above, what we might call performance-specific *mouvance* enhances the speaker's emotional presentation and internal conflicts in the case of Hopkins' poem. Furthermore, it is worth noting that performance-specific *mouvance* can be viewed as generative, as opposed to revisionary. While linguistic recompositions can be understood as conventional revisions of existing text, performance-specific recompositions add a dimension of content that is absent in the text. The impact of performance-specific content on future iterations of text versions of a bimodal slam poem, as well as the evolutionary nature of this content from performance to performance, is an avenue of scholarship that may merit further exploration.

### **Understanding *Mouvance* through Ethnopoetic Transcriptions**

The examples so far discussed provide specific illustrations of how ethnopoetic transcription enables the identification of specific instances and types of *mouvance* between

modes of bimodal slam poetry. The analyses that accompany these identifications are designed to illustrate how recomposition may impact interpretation, reinforcing the idea that any given slam poem is best understood as a plural piece of literature. Additionally, it should be noted that my discussion of “Thoughts of Craving” represents only a fraction of bimodal *mouvance* within the slam poetry genre. While my analysis addresses a text-to-performance comparison, it is also possible, as mentioned earlier in the article, to explore how a slam poem is recomposed from text to text, performance to performance, and even performance to text. Nonetheless, the examples of *mouvance* and/or decomposition within this article also illustrate the ways in which ethnopoetic transcription enables a more defined and precise understanding of how a bimodal slam poem may creatively evolve across modes.

The other types of intermodal and intramodal *mouvance* mentioned above can be viewed as opportunities to apply ethnopoetic transcription comparatively to further explore the changes that take place as a bimodal slam poem is recomposed. Another potentially fruitful angle of approach might entail longitudinal studies that consider multiple text and performance versions of individual, bimodal slam poems over extended periods of time.<sup>17</sup> While such projects are beyond the scope of this article, they are likely to provide some relevant and salient insights. First, these types of projects would allow for the consideration of recursive models of recomposition. While the linear text-to-performance model of recomposition, which is the core focus of the examples in this article, is likely to be primary in most cases, a bimodal slam poem is often recomposed, either textually or performatively, after the initial performance. Determining the role and directionality of recomposition in the ongoing evolution of a bimodal slam poem can offer insights into the author’s creative process.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, a body of such analyses might elucidate some trends and commonalities that apply to the creative process in a more general sense. In these ways, such work fosters a deeper understanding of the relationship between bimodal slam poetry and the broader category of oral-adjacent poetry.

## Conclusion

The relationships between text and performance in bimodal slam poetry are nuanced, complex, and interpretively significant. The inclusion of these features in future slam poetry scholarship would contribute to a more comprehensive and accurate body of knowledge of the creative processes at play within the genre, helping to mitigate reductive understandings of slam poetry and ideally encouraging and enabling additional research. However, a lack of easily accessible bimodal representations of slam poetry continues to be a significant barrier to this type of academic work. My application of the Slam Free or Die archive has illustrated not only how

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<sup>17</sup> This raises the questions of when a bimodal slam poem is “done” and which versions should be prioritized. These are difficult to address in a general sense, and the answers are likely to vary from poem to poem and from purpose to purpose.

<sup>18</sup> This illustrates the need for multimedia slam poetry archives, which can preserve not only the artifacts themselves but also their contexts, such as dates of production. Scholars must have access to this information in order to fully unpack recursive and linear *mouvance*.



such bimodal archives may play a role in surmounting this accessibility barrier but also the type of scholarship to which these archives may contribute.

Slam poetry has always been a scholastically marginalized genre compared to most other performance-based literature. This may be partly due to the fact that it is difficult to analyze the full scope of its features. While bimodality is only one such feature, I hope that the preceding analyses have illustrated that it is, indeed, a significant one. My work here is intended not only to expand the scope of slam poetry scholarship to include a more multi-dimensional approach to modality but also to illustrate the ways in which reimagining documentation and archival processes can encourage and enable more rigorous, accurate, and complex work on the genre. While my focus here has been bimodal poetry, it is certainly feasible that similar attention could be given to other compositional modalities of slam poetry. For instance, improvised slam poems may be analyzed across versions with an aim toward understanding the role played by oral recomposition within the genre. Additionally, scholarly acknowledgment and exploration of how diverse creative processes within the genre are tied to different modalities, and combinations of modalities, would provide opportunities to comparatively analyze compositional diversity relating to slam poetry. It is my belief that such work can contribute to the existing, and hopefully growing, body of slam poetry scholarship in ways that will help to ensure that slam poetry is represented in a manner that is accurate, multifaceted, and relevant to the larger tradition of performance poetry.

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### Appendix 1: An Ethnopoetic Transcription of “Thoughts of Craving” by Tim Hopkins

Text Source: 2013

Video Source: 2013

Translation Key:

- pause: \* (longer pauses = more asterisks)
- nonverbal physical performance and audience response: (described in parentheses directly under the relevant words)
- rising or falling volume: < + italicized words or > + italicized words
- increasing or decreasing speed: < + bold words or > + bold words
- tonal shifts/emphasis: all caps
- vocable additions to the text: underlined words
- vocable subtractions from the text: strikethrough words
- vocable paraperformatives: bold font
- physical paraperformatives: italic font directly beneath relevant lines

*Stands on stage silently for 8 seconds*

*Walks up to the mic slowly*

This party is on fire tonight!

(arms spread, points up)

(turns palms out)

I mean roaring thunder loud

(right arm outstretches, finger points toward the audience)

We have that mainstream stereo bumping in the background

(left arm outstretches alongside right) (drops arms, pushes palms back behind him rhythmically)

*>and we're doing everything it tells us to like*

“Hold up! DRANK”

<“**Shots shots shots shots . .**”

(pantomimes taking shots 4x)

<***Some dude is pissing in a closet***

(points with right hand)

Two more are fighting in the ~~parking lot~~ driveway

(points with left hand)

<*And ~~everyone~~ everybody is >**fucked up on something** \*\**

(arms open wide, looks up)

*>Well everyone but me \**

(lowers eyes, right hand out at waist level)

and I don't always enjoy the role that I play

In fact it's nights like thisese \*

that I'll find myself staring

(gesture outward, left hand)

I see at my friends drinking

And I'll ask them to share \*

(gesture outward, right hand)

< **with a smart ass smile**

(gestures across mouth with finger on right hand)

and a half assed chuckle

> **I wonder how sincere I am, \* if \* I'm ever sincere**

(hands gesture low and outward) (arms drop to sides)

< **I mean I don't think ~~I'm~~ I am whoever you think I am**

(hands on center of chest) (arms pointed outward)

Or maybe I've become something we've never met \*

(back and forth pointing between self and audience)

~~Maybe he's better than I am~~

I think that you're better off with me "this" way

(point outward) (point inward to center of body)

> **And Whatever ~~it is~~ you want to call it \***

(emphatic gesture, left hand)

> **I can't escape the question**

Is reality what you've been forcing in my ears?

(arms begin to spread out) (raise hands, point index fingers toward temples)

I mean labels are slapped on everything

So quick

(snap with left hand)

Labels are slapped on everyone

So quick

(snap with left hand)

So many people \* misdiagnosed \*\*

Building lives of rubble that look like homes > **but never feel** > **like anything more than dirt**

(hands gesture upward, gaze upward)

> ***I never wanted to be known by verbs or adjectives***

(left hand out, palm up) (right hand out, palm up)

I've always thought of myself as noun

(hands in against abdomen)

When I looked in the mirror

(arms out, fingers in frame gesture)

I never thought Recovering or Damaged when I all I saw was human

(arms down at sides)

> ***And here, \* you call me, \* alcoholic\****

>A problem \* is only a problem when it is deemed so

<and A good feeling is only a “good” feeling when you’ve decided that it is so

(emphatic gesture, right hand)

<Maybe I was taught happiness wrong

(spreading gesture with hands)

Learned escaping to a world on mute

(raises hands near head)

Was better than suffering the volume

(presses palms to sides of head)

<I miss the old times \* the silence ~~of~~ in a blackout night

(emphatic gesture, right hand)

I’m told I’m not supposed to

(emphatic gesture, left hand)

< Don’t tell the war stories

<One day at a time

(counting on right hand, one finger)

One hour at a time

(counting on right hand, two fingers)

One minute, One moment, at a time

(counting on right hand, four fingers)

(right hand down)

<A craving can last one moment, one minute

(counting on left hand, one finger, two fingers)

<One hour

(counting on left hand, three fingers)

<one day

(counting on left hand, four fingers)

And I Can’t say that I’m comfortable

<But after enough time

(emphatic gesture, right hand)

Dirt ~~begins to~~ feels like home

fake smiles get you me further than honest scowls

And all I’m trying to do is <scream above ~~the~~ your noise

(puts right hand on abdomen)

So when I see my friends drinking

I ask them to share

with a smart ass smile

a half assed chuckle

All I’m doing is begging for this party to stop ~~I am begging for you to~~ leave your drinks where

(arms outstretched)

they lie

I'll pick them up and give myself one more >*silent*

(brings hands in to rest on abdomen)

(right arm outstretched, pointed finger)

*Blackout night*

**Appendix 2: Text Version of “Thoughts of Craving” by Tim Hopkins**

## Thoughts of Craving

This party is on fire tonight!  
I mean roaring thunder loud  
We have that mainstream stereo bumping in the background  
doing everything it tells us to like  
“Hold up! DRANK”  
“Shots shots shots . . .”  
Some dude is pissing in a closet  
Two more are fighting in the parking lot  
And everyone is fucked up on something  
Well everyone but me  
I don’t always enjoy the role that I play  
In fact nights like this  
I see my friends drinking  
And I’ll ask them to share  
with a smart ass smile  
a half assed chuckle  
I wonder how sincere I am, if ever  
I don’t think I’m whoever you think I am  
Or maybe I’ve become something we’ve never met  
Maybe he’s better than I am  
I think you’re better off with me “this” way  
Whatever it is you want to call it  
I can’t escape the question  
Is reality what you’ve been forcing in my ears?  
I mean labels are slapped on everything  
So quick  
Labels are slapped on everyone  
So quick  
So many misdiagnosed  
Building lives of rubble that look like homes but never feel more than dirt  
I never wanted to be known by verbs or adjectives  
I’ve always thought of myself as noun  
When I looked in the mirror  
I never thought Recovering or Damaged when I all I saw was human  
And here, you call me, alcoholic  
A problem is only a problem when it is deemed so  
A good feeling is only a “good” feeling when you’ve decided it is so  
Maybe I was taught happiness wrong  
Learned escaping to a world on mute

Was better than suffering the volume  
I miss the silence of a blackout night  
I'm told I'm not supposed to  
Don't tell the war stories  
One day at a time  
One hour at a time  
One minute, One moment, at a time  
A craving can last one moment, one minute  
One hour  
one day  
Can't say I'm comfortable  
But after enough time  
Dirt begins to feel like home  
fake smiles get you further than honest scowls  
And all I'm trying to do is scream above the noise  
So when I see my friends drinking  
I ask them to share  
with a smart ass smile  
a half assed chuckle  
I am begging for you to leave your drinks where they lie  
I'll pick them up and give myself one more silent  
Blackout night

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