

# crossroads connections

connecting research across communities

● volume 4, issue 2

## Listen, Mi'jito

### Youth Slam Poetry & Social Change

#### What is Slam?

Slam poetry is a performance art that takes place as a competition and is open to anyone willing to compete. The performance aspect of slam poetry is far more important than adherence to traditional poetry structures. Since it is a competition with judges chosen randomly from the audience, slam poetry relies on audience participation and engagement. A typical slam poem is three minutes or less, with poets cut in subsequent rounds until a winner is chosen. Slam poems are often characterized by explicitly political or social-justice oriented messages. In *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, Miguel Algarín depicts slam as fiercely political, its purpose “to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless” (p. 9). Susan

Somers-Willett, in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, argues that poetry slams are “places where the possibilities of identity are explored... Instead of being windows on culture, poetry slams are culture; they are places where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured” (p. 9).

#### About this research

This research brief highlights slam poetry, an art form that involves performing poetry out loud for an audience and often focuses on social critique. It discusses how youth slam poets may identify as poets and/or activists through slam performance and how slam poetry can be a venue for youth to engage with policies and practices that impact their well-being. It suggests that youth slam poets make use of strategies such as **disidentification** to create alternative narratives about themselves. Such strategies also generate youth coalitional consciousness, or youths’ understanding that they can work together to effect social change. ●

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz defines “disidentification” as a performance through which someone who is subject to a cultural label can reclaim or reject it, and claim a new label. Disidentification involves the performance of multiple, even colliding, perspectives through which racialized and gendered identities arrive at representation.



# Rethinking Identifications

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## The Tucson Youth Poetry Slam

The Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (TYPS) is a monthly competition and set of community events and workshops for youth aged 19 and under. TYPS supports the development of critical literacies and provides a space for youth voice. Research in literacy studies (e.g. Jocson 2008; Fishman and Lunsford 2005) has demonstrated the significance of slam poetry communities in developing critical thinking among youth. Slam poetry events can become spaces for public argument and the emergence of coalitional activities among youth. Supportive youth slam spaces such as TYPS often motivate the exploration and naming of identifications through performance, which can lead to coalitional activities. In the following poem from TYPS, Sammy Dominguez demonstrates one of the strategies youth slam poets use when confronting social injustices. ●

**Sammy slams Mijito:**  
[youtu.be/DG8VW3rV020](https://youtu.be/DG8VW3rV020)

**Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (AZ) homepage:**  
[www.tucsonyouthpoetryslam.org](http://www.tucsonyouthpoetryslam.org)

**Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (AZ) 2014 Championship Performances:**  
[www.youtube.com/user/TucsonYouthSlam](http://www.youtube.com/user/TucsonYouthSlam)

## In “Mi’jito,”



Dominguez re-claims a potentially painful term, “mi’jito,” (“my little son”). While mi’jito is generally intended as an affectionate term, it also represents gender boundary reinforcement for Dominguez when the lunch lady uses the male form of the term (ending in -o). Dominguez’s poem thus captures the challenges presented by normative gender and sex roles and simultaneously presents the encounter with the lunch lady as an opportunity to affirm gender identity as un-fixed and fluid. The poem acknowledges the power of words to resist, negotiate, and reconfigure expected and imposed identities.

Dominguez makes use of disidentification to rethink gender. Disidentification can be a survival strategy for queer youth. Dominguez’s poem acknowledges an existence within a restrictive system that imposes gender boundaries on individuals. At the same time, Dominguez is able to embrace the affectionate, caring aspects of the term “mi’jito.” Youth slam poets such as Dominguez suggest alternative ways of perceiving and understanding through poetry, performance, and community action.

Young people are rarely consulted about the policies and practices that directly affect them, and these policies to a large extent restrict the lives and opportunities of marginalized youth in particular. The Tucson Youth Poetry Slam and other slam poetry sites offer potential for queer youth disidentification and individual and coalitional transformation. Slam poetry captures an outcry from these youth poets for acknowledgment, respect, and the capacity to enact and trouble complicated choices with critical awareness. ●

# Mijito

Sammy Dominguez

I confess.

When the lunchlady called me  
'mijito,'

my heart sang.

You see, I don't feel like a woman,  
and I don't really feel like a man,  
so you can just call me Sam.

It's all I was ever meant to be,  
just good old me.

Yet most days I can't see.

Who's that in my mirror?

Once, I bound my chest and called  
myself Jack.

Yesterday I put on lipstick and a  
dress.

It feels like there's too much of me  
to fit in my mirror.

I think it's why I dream in first  
person and can't ever see myself  
clear.

My mind's eye doesn't know how  
to see me, how to perceive me  
and sometimes that makes me a  
little scared

I threw out the rules, blurred the  
lines, and broke the barriers.

I am breaking my mirror now.

Who I am defines itself.

But I will always remember that  
year I spent looking in the mirror  
screaming,

'You are not a faggot.'

The year my lover's lips were  
laced with fear

every kiss felt like a sin

pieces of me died every time their  
parental eyes burned 'sinner' into  
my flesh.

I didn't match their heterosexual  
Christian values

I am not what they would have  
chosen,

and I am sorry.

Some days I'm sorry.

I never liked to shop and wear  
pretty things

and I was always mixing my  
stripes and my spots.

I always despised my long hair,  
pulled back into braids,  
and today I am still pulling on my  
chains

my heart desperately trying to  
beat its way out of this cage.

But if I can't be free

I will plaster my prison with poetry  
sing syllables like skylines and  
breathe words like freedom

to take me away from here, to  
somewhere where I can be me.

No matter what he she is.

Mijito.

Her voice snaps my spine back in  
line

where I am standing on a broken  
reflection

burnt flesh free from chains

What do you want, mijito?

What do you want?

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## Crossroads Connections 4.2

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**The Crossroads Collaborative**, funded by the Ford Foundation, brings stories and numbers together through action-oriented research with academics, youth-serving organizations, and youth from the community to develop knowledge, increase understanding, amplify youth voice, and share what we learn with the broader community.

<http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads>