

A Slam Papi and Three Griots

In this essay I discuss *Ground Zero*, a book of poems by Marc Kelly Smith and discuss Smith's conception, the Poetry Slam, in terms of Chicago's literary history. Through profiles of Gwendolyn Brooks, Patricia Smith, and Inka Alasade, I consider how the slam became a vehicle for Black thought and Black voice.

This consideration is intellectual and personal. A founding member of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, a troupe of poets formed by Marc from the regulars at the Get Me High Lounge in the Bucktown neighborhood, I was participant and witness to the pre- and early days of the slam.

I think of the writers discussed in this essay as being organized by graph theory, which is composed of nodes and edges. An edge is a line of relation, a node is where edges meet. I include graphs of these relations in the essay. First, I consider Marc Smith at *Ground Zero* of the slam.

Slam Papi

Smith is a literary descendant of prairie populists like Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg. Before Smith began the slam, he was a worker and writer. Literary, not academic, his concern is with "cornered people" found in diners, clubs, pancake houses, and cafes, or outside on streets struggling, or moving toward whatever "it" moves people to move.

Ground Zero stages a carnival of speech—street cries and sermons, sweet singers and sadsacks, wise guys in recovery, and callow youth in their narrow world. Smith's approach is *novelistic*. There is plenty of sonic play in the poetry, but the subjects are *characters* in narratives.

To explore this novelistic approach I'm going to dress Smith's collection in an overcoat tailored by the early 20th century Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In *The Dialogic Imagination*

Bakhtin names the multiple voices in a novel *heteroglossia*. He notes that poetry assumes a single speaker, whereas the novel is a collage of voices:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, natural and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects; there developed the literature of the fabliaux and Schwenke of streetsongs, folksayings, anecdote, where there was no language center at all . . . (273)

We recognize the lyrical “I” as a “political centralization of the verbal-ideological world.” The heteroglossia of the clown mocks that “I.” The clown is not a figure of derision, but figure who derides. Before the slam started, the Chicago Poetry Ensemble produced a performance called “Circus Chatter” at the Deja Vu Lounge. As the show began, Marc sat at a dressing table, putting on greasepaint. In the finale, he delivered a showstopper in full clown makeup.

We will return to *schwenke* later; for now, we can inventory diverse elements of speech in *Ground Zero*. “Ballpark Poem” is paced by the vendor’s cry, “*Peanuts!*” and “Got tickets?” (23-6). So is “The Rush Street Shuffle”: “Free Shots! . . . Free Shots!”; “How about a headwash honey?” (47). There’s a “folksaying” in “Uptown Monologue”:

When you’re down and out
raise your head high and shout,
OH SHIT! (3)

“Cockren” is composed of anecdotes of the eponymous character.

Furthermore, we hear the lively talk of bar flies in “Nobody’s Here,” an asshole on his cell phone shouting in “Asshole on His Cellphone Shouting,” cops, preachers, and suburbanites looking for parking in “Rush Street Shuffle,” loosely held-together diner patrons in “Winter

Cafe.” “Small Talk” is composed entirely of overheard conversation.

When Bakhtin discusses the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev he explains the idea of character zones, where characters’ speech interrupts authorial narration:

But this heteroglossia, as we have said, is also diffused throughout the authorial speech that surrounds the characters, creating highly particularized character zones. These zones are formed from the fragments of character speech, from the various forms for the hidden transmission of someone else’s words, from scattered words and sayings belonging to someone else’s speech . . . Such a character zone is a field of action for a character’s voice, encroaching in one way or another upon the author’s voice. (316)

Indeed, in “Asshole on Cellphone Shouting,” “Ballpark Poem,” and “Impudence,” interrupting the narrator generates the poem’s central tension.

Another example of the character zone is the way Smith modifies nouns with speech, whether those nouns are animate or inanimate, for example, “Gotta get away people” (3). The noun “people” is modified by what those people say, “gotta get away.” Later in “Uptown Monologue” he uses this technique to describe poets, “the you-read-it-I’m-scared poets . . . The I’m alone will anyone talk to me poets” (4). Modifiers don’t speak *to* what the noun is; they speak *as* the noun, “*I want you conversation*” (8).

When Smith does employ a singular “I,” the voice is direct and thoughtful. “My Father’s Coat” is an example. The poem begins:

I’m wearing my father’s coat.
He has died. I didn’t like him,
But I wear the coat. (38)

“I wear the coat” is refrain as the narrator rehearses his grievance, “There was more of everything he should have done. / More of what he should have tried to understand.” What does

one do with this troubled legacy? Smith says, “Wear it.”

The coat fit him well.
It fits me now.
I didn’t love him.
But I wear the coat.

The narrator globalizes the refrain at the end—we “break in” our inheritance so that it suits us:

And it seems to me
That this is the way most of us
Make each other’s acquaintance
In coats we have taken
To be our own. (39)

This poem demonstrates Smith’s skill. The narrator describes the relationship, contemplates his own critical judgment, and reconciles himself to his father and the people who prepare a face to meet the faces they meet. The poem does not recap, but discovers its conclusion, so that the reader shares in the poem’s discovery.

When Bakhtin discusses the spectacle, he uses the German word *schwenke* to describe streetsongs. *Schwenke* means “swing.” If multiple voices is one hallmark of Smith’s poetry, jazz voicing is another—his poetry *swings*. For example, the titular poem, “Ground Zero,” is an extended apocalyptic riff:

Beep beepin’ and zoom zoomin’
Scrabblin’ the midair early alerts
Bustin’ through the sandbag barricades
Topplin’ the do not enters
Zigzaggin’ the checkpoint Charlie zebras—
A crazy-legged jack fool with a twenty megaton shadow
Beep beepin’ as he crisscrosses sprinkler swishin’ lawns (10-11)

The onomatopoetic words function as character zones—things talk—and like eighth or sixteenth notes, quicken vocalization. So does action—reading pace accelerates as the narrator sprints.

Dropping the “ng” at the end of the participles enhances this speedup. The sound is rich as well, “midair early alerts” accumulates short vowels paired with “r.”

Ground Zero contains many such voicings, explicit in poems like “Arnold the Jazz Prophet,” and “Conga Beat.” “Ballpark Poem,” and “Rush Street Shuffle,” are essentially jazz scores for multiple voices. The lines are stretched, rushed, varied, shouted, chanted, and sung.

According to the poet Kenneth Rexroth, founder of the San Francisco Renaissance, and “godfather” of the Beat poets, the first time poetry was recited over jazz was in the 1920s in Chicago. In *An Autobiographical Novel* (hard to tell whether to air quote “Autobiographical” or “Novel”), Rexroth claims that it happened at an underground club called the Green Mask Tearoom on 10 E. Grand Avenue. Members of the Austin High School Gang provided the musical accompaniment (167).

The Austin High School Gang was a group of white students who attended Austin High School on the West Side. The New Orleans jazz they listened to on a local jukebox inspired them to take that music as their vocation. Their members would later play for Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman’s Thundering Herd.

In their oral history of the Great Migration, *Anyplace but Here*, Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy offer 1908 or 1910 as the possible years that jazz arrived in Chicago, so it’s hard to believe that Rexroth and friends were the first ones to speak poetry over jazz. It is enough to say that Smith playing poetry like jazz has a long history in Chicago.

In *Ground Zero*’s last poem, “Something,” jazz provides a key to the cosmic energy that binds us to each other and the world:

And whatever that something is
Contained in the wind, in the music, in the loneliness,
It strains against its boundaries
To be found, to be free,
To be resolute in the storm bent bending of stems
 In the beating rapture of rain,
 In the vibration of strings set to motion
 By fingers commanding allegiance

From each of the keys as they are played
By that something of something around us
Between us Within (78)

There's an echo of Coleridge's "Aeolian Harp":

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

Smith sees people as harps diversely framed; *Ground Zero* is a "real book" for poems composed of Chicago voices.

The Poetry Slam is an extension of the practice found in *Ground Zero*. The slam is a live anthology of voices. Anyone can appear in that anthology. Smith knew from the start that the slam was a resistance discourse to what Charles Bernstein calls "Official Verse Culture," particularly in how it relates to whose voices are heard.

Rexroth describes the soapboxes at Washington Park on the South Side and Bughouse Square on the north. Anyone could climb onto the soapboxes and speak. The audience gave tips. Proletarian poetry did not generate Rexroth much coin, but he could live on the tips from his recitation of Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" (142):

I watch the green field growing
For reaping folk and sowing,
For harvest-time and mowing,
A sleepy world of streams.

In Rexroth's time, these public spaces, as well as the stage at the Green Mask, were essentially open mics, fostering a democratization of poetry.

Open access to poetry is generally opposed by two kinds of litterateurs: gatekeepers and poet-dealers. Gatekeepers are self-appointed arbiters of what counts as poetry. In an interview with David Meltzer in 1969, Rexroth shows Robert Lowell to be a gatekeeper. Rexroth recalls

that he and Lowell had been discussing early 20th century poetry and Lowell recited a list of names. He skipped the Prairie Populists. “What about them?” Rexroth asked. “Oh, those aren’t poets,” Lowell scoffed.

While gatekeepers guard poetic orthodoxy, poet-dealers are brokers of culture. Access to publication, readings, appointments, and grants are chits to be traded. Poetry is a patronage system. If not like Pound’s Medicis, then patronage you’d find in Chicago politics. Poet-dealers abide by a phrase found in an oral history of the Daley years, *We Don’t Want Nobody Nobody Sent*. Nobody has to send you to an open mic; you just show up.

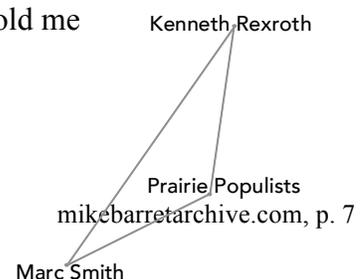
The open mic was central to Get Me High scene, as well as the slam at the Green Mill. Indeed, it is one of the slam’s enduring legacies. Write poetry? Abracadabra, you’re a poet. There’s a place to read it to an audience—no gate, no deal. The 37 years since the slam began, thousands of poets globally have stepped up to a mic to read their poetry because that space was open to them.

Excitable Speech

I hadn’t seen Marc in a number of years when we met early fall in a small river town in Illinois where he lives; I was camping nearby. We had a warm reunion. As we climbed the steep incline to his house, I was reminded of Ryokan, the Japanese Zen monk who wrote poetry in a hermitage on the side of a mountain.

Mark Eleveld notes in his preface to *Ground Zero* (indirectly quoting Tony Fitzpatrick) that Marc is a contrarian poet. I know that Marc lives by the Blakean proverb, “Always be ready to speak your mind and the base man will avoid you.”

While we reminisced about the early days of the slam, Marc told me



about the controversy at the College Union Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) in Chicago in 2017. I had not heard about the contretemps. So what happened at CUPSI 2017? I will present a very short answer.

The answer is like a Buddhist koan:

At the 2017 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational Marc Smith said, “I am Marc Smith and I started the poetry slam.” Then college union slammers shouted, “SO WHAT!”

Gwendolyn Brooks

Introducing *Ground Zero*, Patricia Smith describes the 10th anniversary National Slam Championship in 1999 at the Chicago Theater. She contrasts Marc Smith, at the energetic center of everything, to a slight figure in the background, “somewhere in the back of the theater, my muse smiled and slipped out the back door. She was wearing coke-bottle specs and stockings pulled to a roll just above her knees” (xix).

By including Gwendolyn Brooks in her introduction to *Ground Zero*, Patricia Smith contextualizes the slam in terms of Chicago literary history and Chicago’s Black history. Most Chicago poets between 1940-2000 had some relation to Gwendolyn Brooks—multiple lines of relation meet in her person.

In an interview on the Poetry Foundation website poet Michael Anania recalls Brooks and the poetry scene in Chicago during the late 1960s and early 70s. The Newberry Library holds the correspondence between Jack Conroy and Brooks; the library at UC-Berkeley has her correspondence with Ted Berrigan, who spent time in Chicago with Alice Notley. In addition, Brooks arranged for the Illinois Arts Council to present a monetary award to Nelson Algren when he needed the money. And this is only a start at drawing her connections to other Chicago writers.

Brooks, famously, had a political awakening at a Fisk University writing conference in 1967. But Rexroth in an essay “Black Writers—Black or White Readers,” describes an earlier conference in 1964 in Monterey, CA:

Brooks’s encores were a revelation to the whites in the audience. People obviously knew her work by heart and called again and again for one favorite poem or another . . . more remarkable, any attempt to create literary antagonism or schism between Miss Brooks and Mr. Jones [Amiri Baraka] was fiercely resisted by ordinary people in the audience. (23)

This scene shows the affection the audience had for Brooks and her poetry; meanwhile, the figure of Amiri Baraka foreshadows her conversion three years later.

Brooks’s stature extended beyond Chicago. In 1950 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her second collection *Annie Allen*. Major Jackson, in “Pulitzer Jury Report 1950,” analyzes the letter announcing the Pulitzer and her reception by white poets and critics. The Pulitzer Committee’s letter notes:

No other Negro poet has written such poetry of her own race, of her own experiences, subjective and objective, and with no grievance or racial criticism as the purpose of her poetry. It is highly skillful and strong poetry, come out of the heart, but rich with racial experience. (178)

The letter echoes what Louis Simpson said when reviewing Brooks’s *Selected Poems*:

I am not sure it is possible for a Negro writer to write without making us aware he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important. (181)¹

¹ In 1987 Third World Press published *Blacks*, which is a “collected old/selected new” volume. *Blacks* is a 528 page rejoinder to Louis Simpson’s claim that if “blackness” was the only subject of poetry,

If the letter exposes the racism of the committee, it explains why she was held in high regard—her poetry is diction-rich metrical verse applied to Black subjects. It is “skillful and strong poetry” in the Post-Eliot modernist esthetic. But, according to Untermeyer and Simpson, no grievance, racial criticism, or ontological blackness allowed.

Jackson’s essay is included in *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscience and Change Agent* (2017) edited by Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff. Quraysh Ali Lansana was a member of the group Brothers in Verse, two founding members of which were regulars at the Get Me High Lounge.

The name of the radical, independent publisher of *The Whiskey of Our Discontent*, Haymarket Books, reminds us of the history of progressivism in Chicago. Rexroth, Sandburg, and Conroy were part of that history. Progressivism was such a force locally that reactionaries convinced the federal government to build Fort Sheridan outside city limits to garrison troops in case the class war began in Chicago.

The Whiskey of Our Discontent is an overview of Brooks and her work, with a range of texts from scholarship like Jackson’s, to personal accounts of Brooks. One of those personal accounts is by Cin Salach.

Cin Salach, in her twenties then, was an important figure during the formation of the slam. A collaborator with Patricia Smith, Salach founded the Loofah Method with musicians, and a revolving cast of artists from different genres. In Salach’s essay, “The Necessary Truth,” she shares her admiration for the ethos of Gwendolyn Brooks:

Ms. Brooks’s life was a long, extended, in-and-out breath of teaching-learning, writing-publishing, mothering-partnering, witnessing-participating, loving-fighting that kept her poems always alive. Her poems had big lungs AND a big heart.

it was not important.

I believe Ms. Brooks is one of the finest political poets of our generation. (138)

Patricia Smith

Patricia Smith was a second-generation slammer. I was in graduate school on my way out of the slam scene while she was on the way in. When the slam went national, so did she. Between 1990 and 1995 Patricia Smith won four individual slam national championships and one second place.

Patricia Smith was one of the first slam poets to publish a book. Luis Rodriguez's Tia Chucha press brought out *Life According to Motown* in 1991. In 2017, the year of the College Union Poetry Slam Invitational in Chicago, TriQuarterly Press published her 7th volume of poetry *Incendiary Art*. *Incendiary Art* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.²

Incendiary Art is a searing take on the personal and historical delivered with passion, unflinching honesty, and the skill of a masterful poet. There is a variety of poetic technique on display—a villanelle, intricately woven internal rhyme, prose, documentary, and autobiographical poems. *Incendiary Art* is a difficult, painful read, a stumbling block to the complacency the reader might enjoy. The book's telos is laid out in the opening poem "That Chile Emmett in that Casket":

Sometimes the page was tacked, flush against plaster with a pearl hatpin,
or jammed into a dime-store frame with a glowing Jesus. In some kingly

frontrooms, its place was in the shadowbox, propped on one ripped edge,
or laid curly-cornered on the coffee table, smudged and eaten sheer

with the pass-around. (5)

Jet Magazine on Sep 15, 1955 published photos of Emmett Till in his open coffin. The

² Slam poetry shares a similar arc with Language Writing—off-the-grid resistance discourse is eventually absorbed into Mainstream Verse Culture.

picture was cautionary, “*See what happen when you don’t be careful?*” and commemorative. The poem ends with the narrator’s conflict with both the cautionary and commemorative:

. . . *Look!* she screeched. You did. But then you remembered

there weren’t any pictures of *you* in the house, pinned high on the wall,
folded up tight against the Lord, toted like a talisman in wallet or purse.

You’d searched, woe climbing like river in your chest. But there were
no pictures of you anywhere. You sparked no moral. You were alive.

Patricia Smith was born in 1955, the year of Till’s murder. This is a sociological observation—Emmett Till occupied a central place in Chicago homes. Underneath the ambivalence of the narrator, a mixture of survivor’s guilt and envy, is the trauma of Till’s fate at the hands of white supremacists.

There are five “Emmett Till: Choose Your Own Adventure” poems in the collection. They imagine alternative histories, without escaping the menace of actual history.

Look magazine in January 1956 published a confession by J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, the torturers and murderers of Emmett Till. If they are to be believed, as they confess in the interview, Milam and Bryant only meant to scare him. But Till refused to admit that he was inferior to whites, “I’m good as you,” he said. That’s why they murdered him, “We were never able to scare him,” stated J.W. Milam. “Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights” (Hule). Till’s picture was paired with Christ’s in Black homes because he was a martyr—Till refused to assent to white supremacy.

“Incendiary Art” is a group of poems about white terrorism, police violence, and urban riots. For example, “Incendiary Art: Chicago 1968,” describes a scene during the Martin Luther King riots. As the Goldblatt’s Department Store on West Madison burns, a boy is seen “careening down Madison Street, rabidly clutching / a coveted pair of what he was convinced

were / Converse All-Stars” (17). The shoes were different sizes, colors, and on fire. But he wears them anyway, “amid the reeking ruins, he limped with conjured / pride, careful to hide his raw and swollen hands,” his pride and pain the riot’s consequence.

Other “Incendiary Art” poems include Birmingham 1963, Philadelphia Move 1985, Los Angeles 1992, Tulsa 1921, and Ferguson 2014. After considering these historical conflagrations and the plight of black men in this country, the narrator wonders why there isn’t more burning:

. . . A city, strapped for art,
delights in torching them—at first for kicks,

or waltz to whirling sparks, but soon those hearts
thud, thinner, whittled by the chomp of heat.
Outlined in chalk, men blacken, curl apart.

Their blindly rising fume is bittersweet,
although reversals in the air could fool
us into thinking they weren’t meant as meat.

Our sons don’t burn cities as a rule,
born, as they are, up to their necks in fuel. (9-10)

The fire last time and the fire next time.

Incendiary Art ends with “Incendiary Art: The Body” and returns to Till:

. . . You left us not much path, even
after your body was that brief beauteous
torch. They seem to remember you
fondly. And there are unstruck matches
everywhere. (129)

Walter Mosley in his blurb praises Patricia Smith for her truth-telling while:

(1) she conceives history in way that deftly removes the chaff of lies; (2) [sees] this
history we know, or at least have the possibility of knowing, who and what we are; and (3)
by taking us beyond America’s ahistorical tendencies . . .

Mosley has located the book’s power—*Incendiary Art* compels the reader to face American

history. In other words, live with an image of Emmett Till.

Adeyinka Alasade

In the April 2012 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Patricia Smith tells the story of how she met Gwendolyn Brooks. Coincidentally, it is a moment when the three griots of this essay intersect in space and time:

When I approached her, I wasn't sure what I wanted. On a break between poets, I moved close and began, "Miss Brooks, I—" But a dreadlocked young woman—whose musical name, Inka Alasade, I remember to this day—had stepped to the mic and was about to begin her poem. Miss Brooks smiled and turned away from me to face the stage and listen.

When Inka Alasade first started competing in the slam she was know as Teri Davis. During her last slam championship, she declared she was no longer to be called Teri Davis but *Inka Alasade*, Yoruba for "vision that has arrived" (Preston).

The information on Alasade is sparse, gathered here from memory and newspaper accounts. According to the press, Alasade was widely traveled, studied at the Sorbonne, and, later, ran sessions of dub poetry.

She wore short dreadlocks and loose clothing, her eyes behind glasses, often dark. She traveled with a coterie who shared a booth close to the stage when she performed. She was a three-time undefeated slam champ, but that does not begin to tell the power of Inka Alasade's sway.

She reminded me of Fred Hampton, the charismatic Black Panther leader who was assassinated by police in 1969. I was afraid *of* and *for* her. Edward Hanrahan, who orchestrated the raid to murder Hampton, was still around running for various offices, though he never won

another election. I share an alma mater with Hanrahan—we're Fighting Irish.

Alasade owned the stage starting late in 1986 through 1988. She was wicked funny—she could coo out a line that, when it landed, punched you in the gut. She was brilliant and courageous. There was no shortage of whites tripping over the stumbling blocks of Black thought and Black voice in the early days of the slam. Alasade was a master mason of stumbling blocks.

In a venue keen for political poems—no one was more political. I argued with Marc that the slam was anti-intellectual—first heard/best heard is not a form for complexity. But no one was more intellectual than Alasade. In addition to the wit on display, her poems had lines in multiple languages. And without question, she was the most accomplished performer: changing tone, volume, *swinging* the lines. Her poetry was not just the music of language; it was the music of critical thought.

When the press mentions Alasade, there's often harping in the background. When she beat Vince Kueter in a semi-final match, the *Chicago Reader* reported that a poet complained that Kueter's loss was unjust (Obejas). Kueter was a good, folksy poet, but not better than Alasade. Tony Fitzpatrick and I were battling in the other semi-final bracket. When asked about our competition, Tony quipped, "We're competing to see who's going to lose to Teri Davis."

In a *Tribune* article an anonymous poet grouched that her poetry was too "destructive" without offering any "generation" (Preston). Yes, her poetry destroyed complacency—by being engaged in race, power, language, and gender. Could it be that some were uncomfortable with grievance, racial critique, or blackness itself?

Her power was in her attitude as well—she didn't seem to give a shit if you liked her poetry. Your discomfort was your problem. Her confidence was righteous—if she competed with

another poet and three random audience members judged, she would win—because she *was* the better poet.

Indisputable—the poetry and persona of Inka Alasade provided lift that helped the slam get off the ground.

Chicago Intersections

Gwendolyn Brooks had a road to Damascus revelation in 1967 at a writing conference at Fisk University. She realized that a black person:

. . . is understood by *no* white. Not the wise white; not the Schooled white; not the Kind white. Your *least* prerequisite toward an understanding of the new black is an exceptional Doctorate which can be conferred only upon those with the proper properties of bitter birth and intrinsic sorrow. (85)

In the titular poem from the 1980 chapbook *Primer for Blacks* Brooks writes:

The huge, the pungent object of our prime out-ride
is to Comprehend,
to salute and to Love the fact that we are Black,
which *is* our “ultimate Reality,”
which is our lone ground . . . (10)

Brooks’s poetry had always portrayed Black experience, now she explicitly names blackness as ontological, the ultimate Reality for her people.

Brooks dropped Harper and Row in order to publish with black presses—first with Detroit’s Broadside Press, then with Third World Press, Haki Madhubuti’s press on Chicago’s south side. The Black Arts Movement, and a Chicago counterpart, the Chicago Organization for Black American Culture, emphasized the need to develop Black artists, Black critics, Black modes of critique, and Black institutions. The means of production for Brooks’s work was now located in a Black neighborhood. Chicago had a Black cultural infrastructure Brooks could draw

energy from.

Chicago had a Black cultural infrastructure since its founding by a black man. In 1905 that infrastructure included the *Chicago Defender*. The “Exodus Train” chapter of *Anyplace but Here* describes how the *Defender* directed the Great Migration to Chicago. Patricia Smith’s mother came from Alabama and her father from Arkansas, settling on the West Side. Till’s biological father came from the Bootheel of Missouri and his mother, of course, from Mississippi, before settling on the South Side.

As Black population increased in Chicago “redlines” were enforced to keep neighborhoods segregated, but those boundaries were always under pressure. As Blacks migrated *within* Chicago, whites fled away: Black migration/white flight.

“Rootsville,” Inka Alasade’s name for the West Side, is a textbook example of white flight—my family’s story. I spent my first five years in the ground floor apartment of a duplex co-op on Pulaski and Ida B. Wells Drive (then Congress Parkway). We moved in the summer of 1967 to the far northwest side.

Less than one year later, Pulaski and Ida B. Wells was within the riot zone after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Goldblatt’s in Patricia Smith’s poem was just a mile north. My family was safely ensconced 30 blocks west and 70 blocks north.

A few days after we moved out, my father had to collect some remaining boxes. He told me that when he arrived on the West Side that morning, there was a line over a block long to put in an application to rent the apartment. Decent, affordable housing has always been concentrated on the white side of redlines, though that duplex on Ida B. Wells still looks good.

In spite of racial and ethnic gerrymandering in Chicago, there are intersections among Blacks, whites, and other “others” in space and time. I call these sites of convergence, “Chicago

Intersections.”

During Rexroth’s time The Green Mask was a Chicago Intersection. He recalls:
By far our most successful evenings were the Thursdays given to poetry. We got everybody to read, even Chicago’s most seclusive and asocial poets Edgar Lee Masters. There was a succession of negro poets, of whom the best was Fenton Johnson, locally, and Langston Hughes from New York; also Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, as well as others of the New Negro who started out in life writing verse and later became sociologists, anthropologists, politicians, trade-union leaders. (167)

Twenty years later, in his introduction to *Anyplace But Here*, Arna Bontemps describes how the WPA writers’ room was a Chicago Intersection:

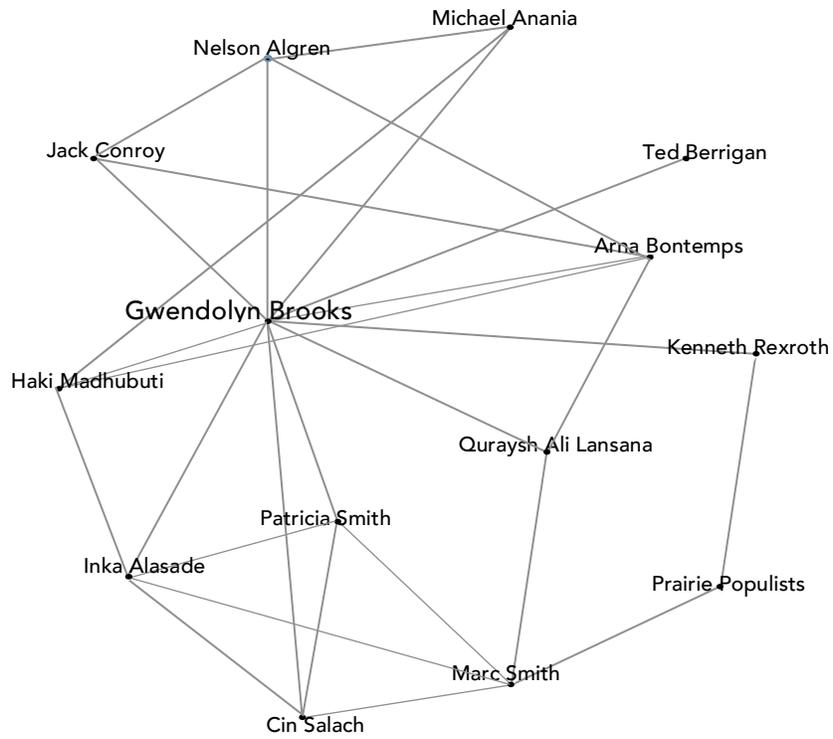
at a similar desk was a serious young supervisor who never wasted much time but who I thought I saw making eyes at the slender young typist in the secretarial pool. He was Nelson Algren. Across the big room in an area assigned to the radio unit, one occasionally saw the energetic and personable figures of Studs Terkel and Lou Gilbert, both clearly marked for bigger roles in television and the movies, respectively. Katherine Dunham, Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Stuart Engstrand, and George V. Martin had worked at these same desks just weeks or months earlier . . . (v)

The 1988 event where Patricia Smith introduces herself to Gwendolyn Brooks was a Chicago Intersection. The event took place in a Blues club on the north side, fundraising for Guild Books, a progressive bookstore. Its title, Neutral Turf, was a nod to Chicago’s sectarian nature (though the name strikes differently for 7 at the golden shovel). In addition to Smith, Brooks, and Alasade, about every poet in Chicago was there. Neutral Turf captured the *zeitgeist* of Chicago poetry during that time.

From its inception, the Poetry Slam was a Chicago Intersection. The Poetry Slam also shows how people connect at these intersections. That is why Gwendolyn Brooks is a key figure—she made connections everywhere. Patricia Smith is insightful in pairing Brooks and Marc Smith for two important reasons. First, she is associating the slam with Black literary history in Chicago. Second, like Brooks, Marc Smith has made numerous connections in the years he has been on the Chicago scene.

I followed Marc from the Get Me High to the Green Mill and because I did, I got to hear Inka Alasade and Patricia Smith. Thousands of people have had similar experiences at the Poetry Slam. Wherever the slam has been exported it functions in the same way—becoming a local intersection for diverse poets and audiences to connect.

Patricia Smith writes that only Marc Kelly Smith could have begun the slam. His creativity and energy made it happen. The Black thought and Black voice of Inka Alasade helped the slam take off. The Black thought and Black voice of Patricia Smith helped the slam go national. And it could have only have happened at a Chicago Intersection in the vicinity of Gwendolyn Brooks.



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