



# Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities

By Javon Johnson

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In recent decades, poetry slams and the spoken word artists who compete in them have sparked a resurgent fascination with the world of poetry. However, there is little critical dialogue that fully engages with the cultural complexities present in slam and spoken word poetry communities, as well as their ramifications.

In *Killing Poetry*, renowned slam poet, Javon Johnson unpacks some of the complicated issues that comprise performance poetry spaces. He argues that the truly radical potential in slam and spoken word communities lies not just in proving literary worth, speaking back to power, or even in altering power structures, but instead in imagining and working towards altogether different social relationships. His illuminating ethnography provides a critical history of the slam, contextualizes contemporary black poets in larger black literary traditions, and does away with the notion that poetry slams are inherently radically democratic and utopic.

*Killing Poetry*—at times autobiographical, poetic, and journalistic—analyzes the masculine posturing in the Southern California community in particular, the sexual assault in the national community, and the ways in which related social media inadvertently replicate many of the same white supremacist, patriarchal, and mainstream logics so many spoken word poets seem to be working against. Throughout, Johnson examines the promises and problems within slam and spoken word, while illustrating how community is made and remade in hopes of eventually creating the radical spaces so many of these poets strive to achieve.

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**Bibliography**

- Rank: #338886 in Books
- Brand: Ingramcontent
- Published on: 2017-07-17
- Released on: 2017-07-15
- Original language: English
- Dimensions: 8.29" h x .51" w x 5.53" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 170 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Javon Johnson provides an eloquent argument on a very important subject. *Killing Poetry* will make a significant contribution to black performance history."

(Omi Osun Joni L. Jones *author of Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Àse, and the Power of the Present Moment*)

"With thick description and deeply personal and political prose, Johnson's *Killing Poetry* provides a rich opportunity for us to explore a world of competitive art-making hidden to most. *Killing Poetry*'s dynamic attention to the specific racial, gendered, sexual, and geographic valences in the spoken word community, means that it is unrelenting in its practice of 'deep listening' and complex thinking. Javon Johnson transfers his truly gifted eye as a spoken word and creative artist, to the critical work of studying performance and its other attendants."

(Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr. *author of Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*)

#### About the Author

JAVON JOHNSON is an assistant professor of African American Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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**Robert Delaney:**

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