Creating a Cultural Brand in France: Slam Poetry as Poésie Démocratisée



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For Truly,
forever Truly Original

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Abstract

French slam poetry, or *le slam*, has developed into a uniquely French interpretation that privileges the original motivations behind the American poetry slam competition rather than the competitive format itself. Its practitioners take pride in slam's capacity to represent any genre or style of oral poetic expression and orient their practice not around aesthetics, artistic conventions, or competition, but around slam's ethos. Research on French slam has focused primarily on studying slam in social and educational contexts rather than on slam's ontology. This thesis addresses this gap by identifying the core principles that constitute French slam through the use of a grounded theory based analysis of twenty years' worth of public discourse around slam. Furthermore, to better understand how this ethos structures and organises *le slam* I argue that it is best understood as a brand, not genre, of oral poetry. This branding framework elaborates the aspects of slam that make it recognisable despite its inherent ambiguity and positions it within 21st century French cultural production. By employing a grounded theory approach I have been able to asses slam on its own terms in accordance with a cultural studies tradition to identify what is at the heart of slam as popular oral poetry. French slam is oriented around the concept of democratising poetry. However, at its core it is not just poetry as an aesthetic experience, but also the social experience of creating, sharing, and consuming poetry together. French slam is simultaneously social and creative, this duality informs all aspects of its practice. Slam is thus a meeting, or *rencontre,* of poetry and of people that manifests as a brand of democratised poetic expression. This thesis brings to cultural studies a new perspective on emergent popular art whilst elaborating the specificity of French slam poetry.

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Extended Abstract

What is *le slam?* This is the question I have attempted to answer in this thesis. However, French slam poetry is inherently ambiguous: it is derived from the American tradition of poetry slams –spoken word poetry competitions—but it has taken on a distinctly French hybridity that embraces both competition and open mic poetry under the name 'slam'. To a casual observer this makes slam effectively no different from any other poetry reading or spoken word poetry event. However, as I argue in this thesis, slam is different from 'generic' spoken word in that it is 'slam'. Slam is not just a name, it has meaning and signals to a potential audience or participant that slam is distinct from spoken word, even if the technical and practical characteristics of the two practices are effectively indistinguishable (several poets who are able to freely sign up to read or perform their poetry in front of a live audience over the course of a few hours). To further complicate this ambiguity, in 2006 a *slameur* Grand Corps Malade released an album of his slam *textes* with minimal musical accompaniment which quickly rose through the charts to becoming a platinum record. This initiated a 'vague du slam' and brought to the fore debates over what slam was and whether it was music or poetry, hip hop or chanson. A simple answer to these debates was not provided by slam's practitioners, instead the slam scene itself has experienced internal dissent over slam's definition and practice, and practitioners prefer to highlight their own idiosyncratic definitions of slam that reflect their personal values and experience over a cohesive definition of slam whilst adamantly resisting any attempt at characterising slam as a genre of poetry. The resistance to slam being a genre stems from a widely held desire by slam practitioners to

maintain slam as inherently diverse and accessible to all styles, genres, influences, and manifestations of poetry: a poetry that is democratised both in form and in terms of who the poets are.

The particularities of French slam—anti-genre, mainstream, commercially successful representatives, and a broader remit than the American and international poetry slam tradition that includes open mic poetry performance, music and other orality-based expression—make slam particularly ambiguous as a creative and cultural phenomenon and challenging to analyse using standard concepts of artistic production. Nonetheless, much of the research on slam has focused not on slam as a creative phenomenon but on its applicability in education and social contexts—in other words, not on what slam *is,* but on what slam *does*. This thesis takes a different approach and aims to show what slam *is*. I have attempted to identify and elucidate the ontology of slam—despite its inherent ambiguity and internal contradictions. I have done this by identifying ten identity traits I argue constitute the basis of slam's ethos and identity. Additionally, I argue that to best understand slam it ought to be seen as a brand of oral poetry, rather than a genre, style, or movement. This framework of a brand allows for a rich exploration of the nuances and specificities of slam that make it slam and enables us to account for its ambiguity and inherent flexibility whilst maintaining its distinctiveness that makes it recognisable and attractive as a cultural artefact. Furthermore I have attempted to do this under the auspice of cultural studies which allows for the study of cultural artefacts on their own terms rather than through the guise of high culture. This is necessary for slam which touts itself as poésie démocratisée.

Accordingly, I decided to look at how people talked about slam, what sort of image and representations they put forth about slam in order to identify spaces of overlap that might indicate the beginnings of a coherent definition of slam that would accommodate as much of the inherent diversity within slam as possible. To do so I employed a grounded theory approach with content analysis of public discourse around slam. I selected to focus on this public speech based on the assumption that such public discourse—namely, the press and

social media—is intended, even subconsciously, to construct a narrative of slam for the collective unconscious.

Grounded theory is an emergent methodological approach that is ideal for poorly researched or novel phenomena as it lends itself towards theory building rather than the testing of existing theories. Importantly, it is grounded in data meaning that data is able to speak for itself rather than be filtered through a specific theoretical approach or worse, made to fit a hypothesis. This makes it especially appropriate for cultural studies as it allows for all the ambiguities and contradictions that are inherent in slam to emerge in the process of analysis and avoids the complication of trying to fit slam to a particular genre, style, movement or other existing but inadequate construct. This grounded theory approach allowed the data from a corpus I compiled of public discourse documents spanning twenty years to thus 'speak' for itself rather than being filtered through a particular theoretical angle or personal bias, and also enabled certain characteristics of slam to emerge that could have been overlooked had I focused too much on what I, or what other researchers, wanted to see in slam. Indeed, given slam's ambiguity and diversity it is all too easy to project onto slam a given perspective and to cherry pick certain artists or slam textes that represent a particular concern.

By using this approach, I was able to use content analysis to discover patterns of 'describing' slam that I could then group and refine into ten identity traits. These traits are values that underlie slam's ethos as well as characteristics of slam: rencontre, démocratique, accessibilité, immédiateté, partage, s'exprimer, diversité, métissage, and 'colludique' (collaborative and ludic simultaneously). I argue that these identity traits are foundational to slam and underlie its manifestation as a consistent set of features that despite slam's inherent diversity and ambiguity allow it to be recognised consistently in the collective unconscious as 'slam'.

Indeed, as I soon discovered the coherence in slam comes not from the work produced but from the ethos behind the work: its *dispositif*. Accordingly, this attitude that informs slam production is sensed and understood by those who consume slam. How to characterise that attitude that infuses slam eluded me for some time until I came upon the concept of branding

and I realised that slam was like a brand. It was a name that signalled to audiences its personality and values without being too restrictive, it focused not on specific traits but on a felt spirit and ineffable attitude. It also was a name that signified a certain level of 'coolness' and made it attractive on the basis of that which distinguished it. Slam is essentially an open mic oral poetry scene that organises itself around open mic nights, competitions in various formats, and workshops. Yet, *le slam* is more than that. A poster advertising a slam event is *different* from a spoken word event. That felt difference that makes slam appealing to certain audiences is the slam brand. A brand is at its base a name that has the power to distinguish similar products, entities, or other artefacts from one another in a way that is meaningful for its consumers or audience. However, a brand also provides organisation to the 'product' at hand, enabling it to remain consistent and coherent enough to be recognisable whilst also flexible in its particularities.

The shared tacit recognition that something is slam, rather than a capella rap for example, is slam's brand equity. Importantly, as a brand, slam is specifically a 'cult brand'. Cult brands address a cultural moment and as a cult brand slam addresses a cultural zeitgeist of the democratisation of culture writ large. This democratisation has been most noticeable with platforms like Wikipedia and Twitter, but it can also be traced back to the very birth of cultural studies which sought to study and thus legitimise popular culture on par with esteemed high culture. In this thesis I have applied the model of a brand to slam to elaborate how the identity traits I discovered shape slam. Specifically, I applied the concepts of brand identity, brand DNA, brand positioning, brand image, and brand organisation to slam to argue that slam is best understood through this model as a brand. Each chapter addresses one of these aspects of slam's brand, beginning first with its identity. They build together to demonstrate not only slam's ontology but also how slam is best understood through the brand model.

What I have sought to do is provide an ontology of slam, to finally answer: what is slam? In doing so I came upon the insight that by understanding slam as a brand—rather than a genre, art movement, or even an 'art world' (Becker 2009)—would allow for a richer and

more specific understanding of French slam in all of its ambiguity and cultural specificity. For it is the 'brand' of slam—found most strongly in its image but also in its organisation, identity, and position—that makes it appealing and distinguishes it from other oral poetry: how it is perceived and situated discursively and symbolically in culture.

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Abbreviations and Guide for the Reader

Abbreviations

AAM: Abd Al Malik

FFDSP: Fédération Française de Slam Poésie

GdB: Guay de Bellissen

GCM: Grand Corps Malade

GSN: Grand Slam National

GT: Grounded Theory

LSF: Ligue Slam de France

PAW: Poetry Art World

PLH: Pilote Le Hot

Guide for the reader

As part of this research, I have identified certain core characteristics or traits of slam. These traits occur throughout this thesis and are integral to slam français; consequently, I have used the French term rather than English translation. However, I have opted to break with convention: they will not be italicised as they are *not* treated as foreign terms, but rather are considered native to this thesis. This distinguishes between these terms, as slam's identity traits and integral to this thesis, and their use in a general sense.

Additionally, I do not italicise terms I consider to be part of slam's technolect: e.g. scène ouverte, blase, slameur. This also allows for these terms to be used in both senses: particular to slam and in a general sense. They are marked with an asterisk the first time they occur and a glossary is included in the appendix. Accordingly, when foreign terms are italicised, they should be read in a general and non-slam specific sense as per convention.

In particular, to avoid ambiguity, I use ‘slam’, as is standard, to refer to the French variant of slam poetry, and when speaking of non-French slam poetry, I use the full English-language name, ‘slam poetry’. If both are referenced simultaneously, it will be slam (poetry).

Finally, in order to respect the creative vision of slameurs, I use their pseudonyms (or blases) rather than their legal names, retaining the original orthography. Accordingly, as sources their names are treated as single unit, e.g. ‘Dame Gabrielle’, not ‘Gabrielle, Dame.

Introduction

Le Slam: not just slam poetry by another name, nor simply spoken word.

Slam, or *le slam*, is a cultural phenomenon whose name comes from the American 'slam poetry' movement. Despite coming from that movement, French slam is distinct in its cultural specificity, its organisation, its position in the sphere of cultural production and how it is understood in the public discourse. This thesis attempts to uncover the ontology of slam, whilst taking these particularities into account, from the perspective of slam's self- and public images, rather than through the lens of superficially similar, yet fundamentally different, creative forms.

Although this thesis is not a comparative study per se, a brief note on the American tradition of 'slam poetry' is first necessary to understand the cultural specificity of French slam. 'Slam poetry' is poetry for, or coming from, a 'poetry slam' and a metonym for the poetry slam movement. The 'poetry slam' format was created by Marc Kelly Smith in 1984 at a working-class bar in Chicago, IL, USA. Smith is a proudly blue-collar, poetry aficionado who was frustrated with the culture of poetry readings at the time, which he believed to be threatening poetry's sustainability outside of academia. The 'poetry slam' format he created is differentiated from both a poetry reading and spoken word* generally by its competitive element and rule-bound format: no props, costumes, or other accompaniment; three-minute time limit per poem; one person/poem at a time; the poem must be written by the person on stage; a jury chosen from the audience awards each poem a score from 1.0-10.0; and a winner is selected from each round who then competes against the other finalists in later rounds.[1]

'Slam' however, is neither slam poetry *en français,* nor is it merely a synonym for

[1] In official, regulation competition the rules are more comprehensive: there are rules on audience interaction, time limit transgressions, sampling, each poem only once per tournament, use of alternates, in the event of a tie, scoring systems and penalties, etc. (cf. Somers-Willet 2009: 141-148 for the American National Poetry Slam competition rules).

'spoken word' poetry. Rather, slam is inherently and deliberately ambiguous: it is both the practice of poetry slams as well as live open-mic oral poetry performances imbued with a fundamentally democratic ethos that informs and distinguishes it. Accordingly, its definition is fundamentally idiosyncratic with each participant having their own meaning ascribed to it.

This ambiguity ultimately comes from a multitude of historical, cultural, social, and economic factors that comprise slam's cultural specificity. Unlike elsewhere in the world where slam originates directly from the American slam poetry movement, in France it was initially distanced from this tradition. Instead, folk practices and inspirations from an American film, *Slam,* turned into uniquely French ad hoc manifestations of 'slam'. These were nurtured initially by pioneers of French slam such as Pilote le Hot, Nada, the collective 129H, and others. But disagreements over its idiosyncratic definition(s) and ideology led to a schism in the French scene over whether 'slam' should indeed mean a poetry competition based on rules as developed in the USA for regulation competition, or if 'slam' was open-mic poetry performances with a few, flexible guidelines in place to promote an equitable platform and fun atmosphere (i.e. the 'scène ouverte').*

Then in 2006, a slameur,* Grand Corps Malade, released an album of slam textes* laid over a breakbeat that quickly rose through the charts, making him a star and catapulting slam to national attention. This led to a 'vague du slam' that resulted in new heights of mediatisation and popularity that fundamentally changed the dynamic of slam and its public perception in France. Importantly, the expanded awareness of slam, mediated through his work, resulted in slam having an image that is broader than the practice itself, yet nonetheless defines it.

Furthermore, slam entered a field of pre-existing French cultural production, wherein proximate forms to slam—namely, rap, *chanson française,* and poetry—already had their own status and criteria for authenticity and legitimacy as well as histories of previous inter-reactions. These similar cultural products and their inter-dynamics together create a proximate cultural landscape against which slam was positioned. Each proximate form acts as a precedent for slam, thereby creating a filter through which slam's own integration into this landscape passes. This filter, and the cultural frame of reference it is contained within, shape

the engagement with and understanding of slam for audiences and thus also the public discourse. Thus, the mediatisation that slam was subject to meant that its image became a shaping force in its own right, resulting in the practice of slam entering a reflexive dynamic with the expanded image of slam, resulting in profound, and profoundly unpredictable and emergent, formative effects on the phenomenon.

Accordingly, slam is inherently understood and approached through the lenses of the aesthetics and cultural positioning of these proximate forms—independently and in concert. Importantly, it is through the filter of the precedents set by these proximate forms and shaped in public discourse that slam comes to exist as *French* slam: as a genre-resistant practice that somehow encapsulates and reflects back onto all of these forms, whilst being perfectly comparable to none of them.

It is my aim to present a framework through which we can view slam that accounts for both the social and the creative elements of slam as mutually reinforcing, and which neither reduces slam to a genre nor to subcultural expression or practice, but allows it to be open, ambiguous, and diverse—as its ethos aspires for it to be. Accordingly, the primary objective of this thesis is the ontology of slam.

Le Slam and French Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is a diverse field that is influenced by a range of social science and humanities disciplines. At its origin, cultural studies was founded on the belief that popular and ordinary everyday culture merit academic attention as much as the more traditional 'high culture'. Due to this perspective cultural studies has also challenged what we understand by the notoriously difficult to define term 'culture', including important issues of power and representation while shining a light on thorny questions such as who has the authority to ‘make culture’ and make pronouncements on it. Finally, cultural studies has also challenged notions of judgement and critique, and how they relate to subjects such as social class, gender, identity, race, sexuality and so on (Hesmondhalgh 2013:50-54). Cultural studies can thus be

thought of as an interdisciplinary exploration of the interrelation of subjectivity, identity, and culture (both in the anthropological and in the creative sense).

While there are differences in the methods and area of focus of French cultural studies, British cultural studies and even the American tradition, at its simplest and of concern here, French cultural studies concerns the triangulation of these aspects specific to the idea of France (Forbes and Kelly 1995). The remit of French cultural studies is broad addressing virtually anything that is affected by '[t]he noticeable prominence of Frenchness [which] is perhaps one of the distinguishing features of French culture, just as conversely an attachment to culture is a distinctive signal of Frenchness.'(2).

It is this concern with Frenchness that this thesis addresses with regards to slam; however, not just because it is French slam but because it happens that *le slam français* is particular to France, distinct even from other iterations around the world. Slam's specificity and ambiguity stem from culmination of its initial distancing from the American origin; local interpretations; internal divisions within the emergent scene; unparalleled and heavily mediatised success of one of its activistes;* and the particular cultural environment, geography, and historical period in which it has developed. However, unlike *chanson française*, slam cannot claim to be natively French; it is American, but made French and made unique through cultural hybridisation.

Cultural studies often overlaps and works with other disciplines such as history, critical thought, sociology, anthropology, art history, gender and sexuality, media studies, communications, et cetera. However, there has been a bias, in francophone and anglophone French cultural studies, to focus on the literary and the canonical; whereas research that is more social in nature has resided within its own disciplinary quarters of sociology or history rather than an interdisciplinary approach as is possible and warranted with cultural studies (Looseley and Holmes 2013:4; Barker 2000:5). Otherwise, there is a tendency in French cultural studies—related to the primacy of literature and the printed word in French culture—to either study music (i.e. chanson française) taking into account its aurality or to study literary

objects on the page (LeBrun 2016:3; Teillet 2003:173). There is not a developed tradition of studying contemporary orality that is neither music nor film.[2]

Furthermore, while Anglophone cultural studies tends to be biased towards English-speaking culture (looking to France only for its theory) in both French and Anglo-Saxon traditions there is—compared with sociology—little cross-cultural work (Looseley and Holmes 2013:3). Although this project is not a comparative study per se, it nonetheless preliminarily addresses some of the intercultural and cross-cultural dynamics of globalised pop culture between the United States and France including the mediated influence of US pop culture on local understandings of French/hybrid pop culture. Slam is not only culturally hybrid—inspired by an American movement, but made French—it is also defined by its manifestation as a 'space', its ethos its and image, rather than a coherent set of identifiable literary or artistic conventions and characteristics.

Accordingly, this work seeks to study a cultural form that could be assessed as a literary object—as poetry, normally associated with 'high culture'—but instead studies it as a globalised yet uniquely French cultural artefact: pop culture *oral* poetry, *le slam*: *poésie démocratisée*.

As for methods and methodology, given the breadth of cultural studies, a deductive and exploratory approach is common (Stokes 2013:222); however, a more inductive approach can also be valuable. Most social science research uses both styles of reasoning to some extent, and noted sociologist Howard Becker (1998) cautions against dogmatic approaches and insists that it is sometimes necessary to allow the data to guide the researcher in their methodological and theoretical choices, thereby 'following the data'—whatever your data should be. In the case of this thesis, these data are the discourses around slam that, given its ambiguous nature, define its image—how and what slam is understood as both by outsiders and insiders to it—with the assumption that the reality of slam is somewhere in between how it understood by those who make it and how it is perceived by those who consume it.

[2] See bibliography.

In this vein, to address slam's ontology whilst accounting for its inherent ambiguity, Frenchness, and social significance without resorting to a potentially reductive comparative analysis nor relying on a literary analysis that would not do the phenomenon justice given the diversity of its products, I employed a grounded theory approach: a largely inductive methodology that provides for emergent theory building grounded in data.

Grounded theory is especially useful for its ability to provide answers to questions like 'what's new?, so what?' and 'why so?' that are significant for theoretical contribution (Whetten 1989 in Gligor et al 2016:98). A benefit of grounded theory is that it lets the data guide the researcher towards a theory, rather than a researcher guiding data to a theory (Ahmed and Haag 2016). Accordingly it allows for 'substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge first, on their own' from the data, and thus 'enables the analyst to ascertain which, if any, existing formal theory may help him generate his substantive theories' (Glaser and Strauss 2017:33).

After first building a substantive theory of slam that accounts for its ontology, I arrived at the beginnings of a formal theory that provides a framework through which to better understand slam and similar cultural phenomena. Slam is not merely a format, cohesive movement, or a genre; rather, it is a disposition towards poetic expression that combines a concern for both the social and the creative aspects of poetry. Conceptually, this greater umbrella of slam—its image, practices, identity, and ethos— is similar to that of a brand.

This novel approach of analysing a cultural and creative phenomenon as a brand allows for the appreciation of an increased influence of public discourse on the shaping, positioning, and meaning of cultural/creative work—especially that which does not conform to established institutions, art worlds,[3] or traditions nor which can be considered either a subculture or developing art world. Cultural studies generally has been concerned with ordinary culture; however, French cultural studies has lagged behind comparatively with regards to popular forms (Looseley and Holmes 2013). Slam is, I argue, built upon folk practices of open-mic oral

[3] See Becker (2009). I discuss this further below. Briefly, art worlds are a sociological concept put forth by Becker that are highly organized cooperative worlds whence works of art come. This concept has been valuable in disproving the myth of the solitary genius artist.

poetry performance, re-branded as 'slam' to connote a certain attitude, ethos, and association with young, 'edgy', and 'cool' cultures. As I will address in Chapter Four, despite attempts to bring French slam strictly in line with international competition regulation, this open interpretation of slam has persisted and in the public image become dominant. Accordingly, slam is recognised qua slam, and distinguished from other forms of oral poetry, like spoken word or poésie sonore, by what the name connotes.[4] This is what a brand is: a name that distinguishes something from similar things available and which influences decisions of audiences/consumers/clients to 'consume' that 'product' over another. Brands also offer a means to identity building. We consume brands and associate with certain phenomena to signal our identity, values, preferences, and status (Holt 2004). Brands are not mere consumerism, but are about identity and cultural communication through the symbolic repertoire they can represent. This language of branding has come to become a part of daily life. We think of our own self-image in terms of brand and whether what we share with the world is 'on-brand'. We criticise businesses for their brand message and apply branding concepts to non-commercial entities in order to classify and talk about them. In this culture of branding, phenomena are no longer beholden to traditional forms of organisation but can be identified by the symbolism and message they wish to convey—just as traditional commercial brands are. This allows for cultural phenomena that do not fit neatly into existing rubrics and which are discursively constructed through their image, symbolism, messages, and how people engage with them relative to their own identity formation. Accordingly, analysing slam

[4] A brief note on terminology: Spoken word, according to Somers-Willet, was initially conceived of as non-musical verbal expression—not necessarily poetry—with a commercial intent, tracing back to the heyday of radio entertainment (2009:100). Spoken word includes speeches, oratory, book readings, poetry and other forms except theatre. In this thesis however, unless otherwise stated I use 'spoken word' in lieu of 'spoken word poetry' since I am not dealing with other verbal forms. Oral poetry is sometimes understood to be that of pre-literate (or pre-Gutenberg) culture; accordingly, spoken word poetry—regardless of commerciality and mode of transmission—is sometimes understood as oral poetry for literate cultures. I find this distinction uninformative and restrictive. However, in recognition of this latent understanding, I use oral poetry in the broad sense, meaning poetry that is *intended* for orality, but irrespective of the culture, era, or commerciality. Whereas spoken word (poetry) is all 20th and 21st century poetry; that may or may not be intended for orality, but is performed with the voice aloud (i.e. a poem intended for the page); live or recorded; commercial or not; and which is neither a specific sub-genre (i.e. sound poetry) nor slam. As I argue, slam is not a sub-genre of spoken word, but a brand of oral poetry given its oral intent and ability, like generic spoken word, to accommodate any genre; but unlike generic spoken word, when we look beyond the formal features it has a distinct disposition informing it, audience expectations, and ethos with which it is made that unite it and make it recognisable regardless of its mode of transmission, format (oral or textual), or other characteristics.

as a brand provides a framework through which to approach cultural phenomena that do not neatly accord with existing categories and which are subject to public discourse that shapes their image to an extent that the image is greater than reality, thus becoming reality.

By analysing slam as a brand, we can avoid the strictures of genre (to which slam itself insists it cannot conform) as well as the baggage of the French canon to instead be able to see slam on its own terms: as popular poetry. This is especially relevant for French cultural studies given the historical importance accorded to poetry and literature in French culture. Unlike many art forms, slam's essence is not in the works themselves but in the space of slam: the interactive, experiential, exchange of poetic verse: *une rencontre*. To assess slam by looking for criteria of quality based in other forms, whether poetry or rap, is to miss the point of slam. The weight of poetry and literature's history bears upon slam indirectly, mostly in its positioning and public understanding, but to analyse slam within that tradition is to neglect its popular, folk, culturally and creatively hybrid nature. The concept of a brand is fluid enough and honed over years study of markets and marketing to the 'masses', therefore making it appropriate for cultural phenomena that are both 'popular culture' and cultural in the social sense. Furthermore, with the increased influence of social media (as hyper-connected public discourse) the opinions and ideas of 'customers' have greater influence than before. It is not just critics who have a public voice and opinion shaping the understandings of cultural products but potentially anybody. This applies equally to brands as it does to public figures, politics, cultural discourse and so on. This co-construction applies in particular to brands, like slam, which are sui generis (ad hoc, grassroots, decentralised and disseminated) and whose image is the product of multiple overlapping discourses rather than directed marketing campaigns as with traditional brands.

How to Study Slam: Particularities of Slam that Inform the Research

I approached the study of French slam initially in an exploratory and inductive fashion, starting first with my incidental, personal discovery of slam during the 'vague du slam'. It

quickly became apparent in preliminary research that slam was an under-explored topic and it was not as straight-forward a creative and expressive cultural phenomenon as I had thought.

Early analysis initially showed that French slam was unique in two important ways that shaped subsequent research: the substantial influence of mediatised celebrity on the phenomenon and the lack of a consensus over its definition by its adherents. Another related feature specific to French slam that quickly emerged was that it and its participants were averse to slam being understood as a genre. These specificities guided my methodological choices for this thesis towards a primarily inductive approach, led by the data obtained in public discourse, to *forming* theory rather than the pre-set use of an extant theoretical framework applied to slam in the first instance.

Three particularities of French slam inform this research project and confirm the utility in a grounded theory based approach. First, early on I discovered that there was a lack of a consensus as to slam's definition. Not only did it differ from the American phenomenon, but even people doing slam did not seem to agree on its definition. Furthermore, there was little scholarly research on slam that provided an answer to whether it was poetry and if so what genre of poetry, if it was music, or if it was performance. This led me to begin focusing the research on the ontology of slam. The other two specificities also appeared early in the data collection process and both narrowed the scope of research. The first of these is that slam is not a genre and thus is not amenable to being studied as such. The second is the role of mediatisation as a unique feature of French slam.

French slam is not a genre of poetry. This maxim espoused by activistes in the scene was one of the first prominent themes to appear in early data collection. French slam does not conform solely to the competitive format of the American slam poetry tradition nor can we easily define slam as a genre of poetry based on its formal, stylistic, thematic, canonical or traditional characteristics. Indeed, practitioners of slam argue that slam is not a genre because it accepts all genres of poetry. The extreme diversity of slam textes is characteristic of its radical inclusivity and makes it difficult to meaningfully categorise slam as a genre.

Instead, a more useful approach is one similar to that which was described to Howard Becker by his mentor in defining ethnic groups. His mentor showed how for a researcher to define what constitutes an ethnic group it is tempting to look at features like common language, religion, skin colour, ancestry et cetera—whatever traits make that group *different* from another group in question. However, as his mentor Hughes explains, 'An ethnic group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups; it is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the ins and the outs talk, feel, and act as if it were a separate group. (Hughes 1984: 153–54)' (Becker 1998:2). In other words, to define an ethnic group you cannot study it in isolation looking for such traits; rather, you must 'trace its "ethnicity" to the network of relations with other groups in which it arises.' (ibid.) This relational approach is similar to definition by exclusion (e.g. slam is not music, slam is not theatre); however, studying how slam situates in relation to similar forms does provide rich data by allowing us to identify what does indeed distinguish slam from other creative practices without resorting to mere genre distinctions comprised of a list of formal traits or implying canonical position based simply on historical antecedents. Again, as slam is not a genre it also as such resists fitting into any canonical tradition and instead comprises a poetic space and community of practice that allows for any genre—even those not yet defined. The relational approach to delineation described above by Becker and Hughes is appropriate for a cultural phenomenon like slam which not only resists a genre classification but which also is defined through its internal relations, relation to other creative practices, and by its place in culture. This concern for defining slam relationally informs my approach and requires a comprehensive analysis of not only slam but similar creative forms for comparison and the cultural context in which slam has developed, not in a futile search for genre but to better understand slam on slam's own terms and in its full richness as a cultural phenomenon.

Finally, the last particularity of French slam comes from the historical turning point in 2006 when Grand Corps Malade (GCM) released his debut album and rose quickly to the top of the charts. This garnered unprecedented media attention (i.e. 'la vague du slam') on both

him as a star and on the hitherto relatively underground slam phenomenon. Indeed, due to his success and fame, for some audiences he *is* slam. Therefore, although media is not the only source of knowledge and representations, it is nonetheless impossible to understand French slam without also considering the role of mediatisation and GCM's celebrity as they are defining, structuring forces that are also specific to the development of French slam.

As part of the mediatisation of slam, every concerned journalist, critic, and fan offered their definition and interpretation of slam, yet these opinions and representations were sometimes in conflict with those held by participants in the scene. This public discourse[5] between the various interested parties in turn helps to create a public image of slam attenuated by its mediatisation. This public image is co-constructive with, and thus of, slam itself. Thus, in order to properly address this specificity of French slam and to understand the impact of mediatisation, I focus on the media discourses of slam to analyse its representations and image since:

> Images are clearer, more impressive than the reality they claim to represent, but they are also fragmented, contradictory and exhibit a vast variety that questions the unity of the world of experience. Images are made and read in relation to other images and the real is read as an image (Fiske 2011: 117).

Accordingly, rather than the poetry produced within slam in isolation or case studies of the people within the scene, the primary object of analysis is the c0-constructed images, representations, and cultural myths of slam: that is, the discourse around slam. The complex public co-construction over time would make it a mistake to focus either on a single period or point in time, or a small group of individuals (which surveys and interviews would produce) or to focus too much on individual texts as even a comparative analysis of slam texts risks construing an arbitrary selection as a representative sample. The grounded theory approach

[5] I use discourse in its broad sense meaning, 'the patterned ideological and cultural themes that symbolic forms, stories, and genres represent and reproduce. A discourse is the way objects or ideas are talked about publicly that gives rise to widespread perceptions and understandings. Discourses help to organise ideology and culture.' (Lull 2000:173). With the caveat that although discourses have structuring tendencies, nobody/nothing has absolute control over how messages are received (encoded and decoded), therefore they do not ipso facto determine audience responses (Carah and Louw 2015:28; Lull 2000:173). For this reason, Derrida's (1993) work is important and it is better to think of messages as being disseminated rather than circulated or communicated as these both risk implying that there is no change to the message from its origin to its destination.

applied to public texts allows for an emergent substantive theory of slam based in the data to address the question of ontology of slam.

The development of a substantive theory is sufficient; however, grounded theory also enables researchers to formulate 'formal theories' which are abstracted from the specific data that gave rise to a substantive theory and also able to be applied to a range of phenomena. Alternatively, in the course of building theory, a grounded theory researcher may find that the data begins to 'fit' an existing theory. Accordingly, grounded theory benefits from knowledge from other disciplines to refine and elevate analysis of the subject at hand. Therefore, whilst researching slam I also explored various theoretical approaches from media studies, psychology, sociology, economics, history, anthropology, literary theory, socio-linguistics, and cultural studies. I used this research to further refine and elaborate my understanding of slam holistically and through continued comparative analysis. From this auxiliary research, I came upon what Glaser and Strauss call an 'insight' and discovered a theoretical approach that not only fit my data on slam but also helped to further explain it in a way that my substantive theory building was unable to: branding.

There is a certain 'sense' or felt subjectivity that goes beyond mere aesthetics and function that distinguishes slam from other forms of oral performance poetry whilst giving slam a particular character and set of expectations. It is the ambiguity, felt subjectivity, and its ethos that define slam, rather than its creative products (the textes), as the products of slam are infinitely varied, sharing no common criteria except orality and a shared sense of belonging to the slam brand. Furthermore, slam developed ad hoc and grassroots. It is an emergent, yet culturally specific, creative phenomenon. Although I analyse slam as a brand, the development and structure of slam makes it fundamentally distinct from what traditional brands in that the latter are created and managed by a usually hierarchically situated entity (e.g. a team of marketers, an owner or CMO, or others that are tasked with creating a brand specifically). Whereas slam's brand is emergent: it is not explicitly designed or managed as a brand per se, yet arises from the discourses, their dialogic, and the images of slam. Accordingly, slam is not simply a brand, but a novel concept: a sui generis brand.

The development of its own brand identity serves to inform potential audiences of certain expectations and associations that characterize slam. These potential audiences will in turn use these to relate slam to their own self-image construction but, importantly, also to fashion a sense of how brand slam distinguishes itself from other art forms. Importantly however, a brand is also more than just that 'sense' or 'idea' of a thing in some isolated sense, it is not mere image, it also structures the production under its purview. What defines a texte as slam is its affiliation with the slam scene and whether the slameur created the texte with the spirit of slam, its ethos and brand identity. To understand slam production then, one must understand what I argue is slam's brand that serves as the intangible sense and spirit of the phenomenon at large.

It is this essence of slam, this idea of slam as it is held and felt—while transcending any tangible expression from it—together with the dialogic and creative process necessary for seeking an understanding of this essence, that is the focus of this thesis. In other words, this thesis asks an ontological question: what makes slam, *le slam?*—What provides the recognisability and felt essence of slam that creates the sense of coherency amongst otherwise highly diverse and independent iterations of slam production? What is it that makes slam more than simply oral poetry but not a formalised criteria driven genre either? Furthermore, given that recognisability is tied-up with image, how has slam been co-constructed in the public discourse?

As I argue that one cannot fully understand the slam phenomenon without properly accounting for this mediatisation and how it interrelates with the practice of slam, this data is derived from the public discourses around slam that have shaped its brand image and affected the development of its brand identity. Indeed, I suggest that inherent to being a sui generis brand—malleable, autopoietic, and emergent due to its lack of management—and its fundamental ambiguity, slam has been shaped and thus made recognisable by these discourses. Its brand has been publicly co-constructed by its audiences, critics, and practitioners.

Chapter Organisation

This thesis uses a grounded theory methodology within a cultural studies approach to address the ontology of slam. Furthermore, in addition to providing a substantive theory of French slam by identifying its identity and ethos, it also provides preliminary groundwork for an inchoate formal theory of sui generis brands. This may serve to be an insightful perspective for studying cultural phenomena, in particular those which are subject to multiple and contested concurrent avenues of mediatisation in their co-construction.

While this thesis aims to show what makes slam, *slam,* it is not through one aspect alone, but by capturing its gestalt[6] that its ontology becomes clear. I argue that it is helpful in doing so to understand slam as a brand. Accordingly, by using a model of brands, broken down into different aspects, I will analyse slam through multiple aspects independently in order to arrive at its cumulative ontology. These aspects include its identity and ethos, position relative to other cultural production and cultural context, history, institutions, and importantly, image. Accordingly, the chapters are organised both by the substantive theory findings (e.g. the identity of slam) and by their parallel branding theory constructs: brand identity, positioning, DNA (or roots), organisation, and brand image.

I start in Chapter Two with the inner most aspect, slam's identity, which I have arrived at through a grounded theory analysis. Then, in Chapter Three, I will look at the most external aspect, the atmosphere in which slam resides: the cultural context and proximate cultural production relative to which slam is positioned. Following that, I will go to the middle aspect: the lived experience of slam, which comprises three areas of significance. I begin first with the history of slam in Chapter Four followed by a study of the mediatisation of slam that traces

[6] Gestalt is the concept that a whole is not merely the sum of its constituent parts but something independent, phenomenologically and meaningfully different, from that sum of parts. It is important to the understanding of how the brain deals with visual information (Hamilton and Carlston 2013). Many optical illusions, especially those that rely on whitespace, are the result of the brain constructing a 'gestalt' or a holistic image from individual parts that do not actually align in such a way to create that image yet the brain derives that information and constructs the 'gestalt' from it nonetheless. As a simplified example, as it pertains to discourse and symbolism, we can deconstruct a myth, a story, or an image into constitutent parts; however, putting those 'parts' back together, like tropes and motifs in a fairy tale, is not guaranteed to result in a powerful myth even if all the parts are there. That is because in such an example, the myth is a gestalt. In other words, the parts combine in such a way as to create something holistic and wholly new, something apart from just the sum of those parts. In this respect, I use the term 'gestalt' expressly to communicate that although I have identified key traits of slam, that slam is not merely those traits but something apart from just the coming-together of those traits.

the co-construction of its image in Chapter Five. And finally, Chapter Six looks at the organisation of slam: its institutions that distinguish it and embody its identity whilst simultaneously situating it within a pre-existing cultural landscape. All five of these aspects come together, greater than the sum of their parts, as a fully-fleshed out ontology and understanding of slam.

Chapter 1: Methodology and Literature Review

This chapter first presents a brief overview of a grounded theory approach. Following this, is a targeted literature review that summarises other scholarly work on slam to situate this research. Finally, this chapter also presents the branding theory constructs used in this thesis to elaborate the argument that slam is a brand of oral poetry.

Chapter 2: A Substantive Theory of Slam: The Identity of Slam

This chapter presents the results of a grounded theory analysis of the public discourses around slam. I have identified ten key polysemic terms, core tenets of slam, that function as the fundamental identity traits for slam. The gestalt of these traits informs slam's ethos and provide the ideological underpinnings of slam's organisation (as detailed in Chapter Six). The tacit or explicit recognition of some or all of these traits is what identifies an act, performance, or product as slam. These traits in conjunction distinguish slam from other forms of creative expression.

Chapter 3: The Cultural Context of Slam: Brand Positioning

This chapter addresses the cultural context into which slam entered. It addresses the French cultural production sphere: the effects of cultural policy, ideology, history and heritage. It looks specifically at three key precedents for slam: French rap, chanson française and traditional poetry. These three proximate forms are understood through the framework of Howard Becker's (2009) *Art Worlds*: they are highly-organised, cooperative entities that provide the resources, cooperative behaviour, and divisions of labour necessary to produce works of art. This chapter thus provides a background of the cultural salience and structure

of these art worlds in order to understand how slam is positioned relative to all three of them simultaneously, yet is distinct from all of them. This defines slam within the greater field of culture production and allows it to exist without being subsumed into any of these art worlds. Unlike these art worlds however, I argue that slam is a brand-driven organisation which is inherently more open and outwardly focused in comparison to an art world. Furthermore, although similar yet sufficiently distinct, slam is not in direct competition with any of these proximate forms; but rather, it is complementary to all of them. Its ambiguity and identity which makes it fundamentally open allow it to be a platform for more than just performance poetry, but rather writing-based creative expression with an oral destination that can seamlessly be developed into song, theatre, literature, poetry or other verbal arts. Nonetheless, it is essential to understand these three proximate forms as they provide a filter through which French slam is understood. Accordingly, I return to them in Chapter Five discussing the image construction of slam by way of its mediatisation.

Chapter 4: A History of French Slam: Brand DNA

Chapter Four is a comprehensive history of French slam spanning approximately twenty years: beginning from the symbolic origin point of 1998 with the premiere of *Slam* at Cannes Film festival to the mid-twenty-teens. Rather than rely on popular historical accounts, some of which privilege certain figures in the scene and histories over others, I have tried to construct a history from multiple angles which also shows how the scene developed and evolved over time. Crucially, this history is also an examination of the Brand DNA of slam: its characters, symbols, names, creators' visions, products, and so on. Brand DNA is a framework for understanding and demarcating identity, and this chapter shows how the history, individuals, and events in slam's development have created and/or reinforced crucial aspects of its identity, image, position, and organisation.

Chapter 5: The Mediatisation of Slam: Brand Image

Chapter Five deals with the mediatisation of slam, starting from the initial media discourse about the film *Slam* that shaped early interpretations of the practice, to the herd

mentality during the 'vague du slam'. This chapter is organised in phases: phase I, before the 'vague' and phase II during/immediately after the vague. Within these phases I have further organised this chapter around key players in the discursive construction of slam: the rap-slam conflation and the rap scenes reaction to its role in slam's image construction; the reaction to slam's popularity from outsiders, including the PAW; and the slam scene's response to the mediatisation and its perceived effects. Finally, included in this chapter are two 'portraits' or case studies that examine how two brand characters are mediatised according to powerful narratives that construct them as embodying particularly French values.

Chapter 6: The ABCs (Ateliers, Blases, and Collectifs) of Slam: Brand Organisation.

The final chapter, examines three institutions of slam: ateliers*, blases*, and collectifs*—or, the ABCs of slam. These institutions are not unique to slam per se, however the ideological reasoning behind them is based in slam's identity and ethos. Accordingly, I argue that as a brand, these institutions are derivative of the brand identity and an example of how a brand's identity structures the organisation itself. I examine each institution through the angle of the French cultural context, the angle of state intervention, and finally through the relevant identity traits that inform their existence as characteristic institutions.

Chapter One

Methodology, Theoretical Approach, and Literature Review

In this chapter I will first briefly cover grounded theory and its methodology. Then, I will present a summary of key theoretical concepts from branding that I have adopted *after* developing an initial substantive theory of slam in order to better elaborate its ontology and explain slam as a French cultural product. When I began this study, there was very little academic research on French slam; therefore, a pre-research literature review was effectively impossible. Accordingly, it was quite easy to avoid potential limitations and biases. The academic literature which has been published during my research I have firstly, treated as additional data against which to check my own initial conclusions and insights, and secondly, treated as primary data, that is, as examples of discourse around slam. Accordingly, I have organised this chapter such that a literature review is included herein as I treat it as data and for comparative analysis. Following that, I will explain how I obtained, organised, and analysed the data used in this study.

1.1 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) is a means to theory building: it produces abstractions rather than mere descriptions to generate theory that 'accounts for a pattern of behaviour that is both relevant and problematic' for those involved in it (Glaser 2007; Glaser 1978:93 in Goulding 2002:loc1220). It is an inductive approach that allows for the discovery of theory from data that is systematically obtained and analysed in an iterative process which includes both sustained data collection and constant comparative analysis. Theory can be substantive or formal. Substantive theory is particular to the topic and not generalisable whereas formal theory is abstracted further from the research and able to be 'tested' against different contexts and data.

As an emergent research design, GT is especially useful when there is no suitable extant theory for studying a social phenomenon, or where extant theory would be inappropriate in forcing the data to the theory and thus neglecting relevant aspects of the topic at hand. Indeed, this is a significant difference between GT and similar qualitative methods; such as critical discourse analysis which is rooted in critical social theory and proceeds from a theoretical frame (Fairclough 2003; Jaworksi and Coupland 2010). Whereas some qualitative methods are more concerned with describing meaning, conceptualisation is a core process in GT thereby making it theory-generating: 'concepts are generated from empirical data rather than from existing literature' (Schreier 2012:3; Hallberg 2010). A method like qualitative content analysis can be used within GT, but a crucial difference is that GT also seeks to explain the relationships between categories extracted from the data (Cho and Lee 2014:5).

There are five 'core tenets' of grounded theory—theoretical sampling, constant comparison, theoretical coding, theoretical saturation, and theoretical sensitivity—however, the two most important features for this study are constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Gligor et al 2016:98). Constant comparison is the process of comparing the data continually, meaning that data gathering is done in conjunction and as a continual iterative process that is neither linear nor sequential. The data gathering continues via theoretical sampling whereby, as concepts begin to 'emerge' from the data, the researcher will follow these trails and gather more data to further elaborate what appears to be relevant. For instance, for my research, as it became apparent that slam was frequently compared with rap, I began to broaden my sources to also include discourse from rap and hip hop artists to find their perspective on this comparison. I then compared these sources, including from experts on rap, with discourse coming from slameurs themselves and from journalists and poetry experts. This led to a further trail of analysing the difference between music and poetry, which brought me to the unique status of chanson within French culture and the debates over whether it is poetry or music.

Constant comparison and theoretical sampling are an iterative process that can take place throughout the duration of a research project until the researcher reaches what is known as theoretical saturation, or where there is enough data that a substantive theory can emerge. Theoretical sensitivity refers to entering the analysis process with as few pre-conceived ideas about the data as possible, or at least the self-control and reflexivity to challenge oneself on them, remaining 'sensitive' to the data itself without filtering it through a hypothesis or other models and theories. Importantly, by employing open-coding as opposed to using codes for the data drawn from elsewhere, theoretical sensitivity is enabled. Theoretical coding comes out of this open coding process and is where codes will emerge from the data analysis resulting in a relational model that links together the substantive codes into what is called a core category, so that 'substantive codes conceptualize the empirical substance of the area of research. Theoretical codes conceptualise how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory.' (Glaser 1978:55). These codes and the data analysis are assisted by a process of memoing throughout the research, at every step of data collection and analysis. These memos can be as simple as a keyword or long journal entries by the researcher as they work with the data. This also assists in theoretical sensitivity helping the researcher to challenge any biases or assumptions and re-analyse data where necessary.

The strength of GT is that it allows the researcher to 'follow the data' first and then begin to identify and work with either original or extant theory—or a combination or both—that helps to explain and elaborate the data and phenomenon at hand (Glaser and Strauss 2017:33-34). As such, it is also usually advised that a researcher not conduct a comprehensive literature review prior to the data gathering process. This is to mitigate the risk that theory may impose itself or that research results may lead the researcher to narrow the data collection and analysis—potentially ignoring significant data—at which point any results are no longer *grounded*, but may have been unintentionally selected for to fit a preconceived theory or approach. Relatedly, premature literature review can also mitigate what Glaser and Strauss call 'insights', which are valuable in the building of theory. These insights can come from the data itself or from the researchers own background and other experiences. Importantly, they

can be aided by a timely review of the literature, not just in the domain in question but across different fields. Accordingly, GT suggests that a focused reading of similar research and literature review take place *after* a substantive theory has begun to emerge once the literature can be used as further data for comparative analysis.

1.1.1 Analytical process and the emergent understanding of slam's ontology

By following the data trails and performing continual analysis, followed by further theoretical sampling, particular themes and concepts emerge in the course of the research. The emerging results from GT can be presented as hypothesis, a model, or an abstract conceptual theory built up around a core category and its associated categories (Hallberg 2010). Namely, as I discuss in Chapter Two, the core concept and category of 'rencontre' became a theoretical code that links together the other identity traits of slam, also discussed in that chapter. The other core concept that emerged from the analysis is that of 'poésie démocratisée'. This is a phrase that appeared early in my research and early in the development of slam. At one point, I nearly discarded it and it was only upon further (re-) examination and careful analysis that its meaning became apparent. Slam is not just art, slam is fundamentally and inherently social. The social aspect of slam is as important to it as the creative and aesthetic ones. Slam is poetry that is an act and process of rencontre. The tenets of slam, or identity traits of slam's brand which I detail in Chapter Two, work together to facilitate this social and creative rencontre and they, along with the organisational features of slam, maintain it as poésie démocratisée. A theoretical code taken from sociology that describes this is autopoiesis.[7] Autopoeisis explains system formation and existence: An

[7] Autopoiesis is a concept that originates in biology to describe how living systems, like cells, maintain themselves It was elaborated by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2013) in the 1970s who applied it to social theory, in particular systems theory. Systems theory sees systems as precarious, they need to be sustained; however it is possible for them to be self-sustaining but it is not guaranteed. An important component of the concept of autopoiesis is that the different elements or parts of a system will interact in such a way as to both produce and re-produce the system itself. This auto-reproduction does not require external stimuli. It is not that the system can clone itself, but rather that the constituent parts are reproductive of their whole. Luhman took the concept and adapted it to sociology by including the premise that society is based on communication, rather than on actors or actions as was the prevailing thought in sociology at the time. A modification he made to the understanding of communication was, in addition to the information and the utterance, the crucial component of 'understanding'. Something is not communicated unless it is 'understood'. Therefore for Luhmann the heart of communication is in 'understanding', not in the transmission of a message. Accordingly for communication to happen it requires understanding in the first instance and furthermore, 'acceptance'. For Luhman this

autopoietic system is one that is self-enclosed and self-reproducing, capable of maintaining itself. Its internal communication decides what is valuable and sustains its distinct identity. If the fundamental elements change, the system ceases to exist. Such a system is self-enclosed, but this does not mean completely shut off from the environment. External effects can affect the system, but they do not fundamentally change its elements. For slam, these elements are its identity traits. They are emergent and self-sustaining. They reinforce and propagate one another. The ideal of a poésie démocratisée provides an energy to sustain them and the linking category of rencontre at the core brings them together functionally. The discovery of these identity traits constitutes one of the two turning points in the analytical process of understanding slam undertaken in this thesis. It is the result of close readings and constant comparative analysis and coding of the data I obtained starting from my first encounter with slam until the emergence of a substantive theory from the data.

A later possible step in GT is the development of formal theory. Formal theory is still grounded in the data, but has been further abstracted such that unlike substantive theory, a formal theory can be applied to any topic. Developing formal theory is not required, indeed it is quite rare. A GT researcher does not formulate a hypothesis in advance; however, a hypothesis may be generated from the research and later tested (Glaser 2009). Furthermore, after concepts are generated from data, it is possible to engage in a review of literature and discover something that may be helpful in further analysis and theory construction (Dunne 2011). In doing so, extant theory can be elaborated or the beginnings of a formal theory prepared.

The second turning point came during a hiatus which allowed me to step away from the data and gain perspective. A seemingly unrelated concept became another crucial insight and which led to a late-stage literature review: that slam can be best understood as a brand of poetry. The insight that slam could be conceptualised as a brand was quickly mitigated by a fundamental aspect of brands which is that they are owned and managed by a central authority

communication based model explained society rather than actions or the will of actors. Accordingly, society is autopoietic based in communication.

whereas slam is decentralised, rhizomatic,[8] grassroots, and ad hoc tenuously held together ideologically by its identity traits that I identified initially and more concretely by its discursively-constructed public image. Accordingly, while I have adopted brand theory and applied it to my research and analysis on slam, I have not done so as some kind of simple and ready-made explanation for slam, but as a framework for elaborating a theory of slam specifically as a *sui generis* brand. I propose that a sui generis brand is emergent, coming not from someone's agentic, conscious decision to brand the thing in question, but out of itself by way of its historical development, socio-cultural context, and importantly, via the image it attains (and which precedes it) which in turn, reifies its brandedness. Accordingly, a sui generis brand is contrasted with traditional brands, which are actively managed as a brand. Slam—ad hoc, rhizomatic and emergent—is a sui generis brand of poetry. Despite this lack of coherency, it is nonetheless recognised in the collective mind with a distinct subjectivity. Its identity traits appear as a form of autopoiesis that underlies the phenomenon and sustains its identity despite its inherently fluid, open, and contested definition. Thus slam is a sui generis brand of poetry, specifically oral poetry; and any oral poetry can only be *slam* when it emerges from and represents the specific socio-creative slam space. 'Space' here, is in Certeau's sense of a 'practiced place', it is not the physical space, but rather a space in which the intersections of human activity and experience makes it meaningful (1984:117). The slam space from which slam, qua slam, comes is a space that is constituted by slam's identity and ethos in a self-sustaining recursion, which is even further reified, made tacitly recognisable, and disseminated via its image.

Therefore, through the application of core concepts in branding theory this project also addresses: how is slam a *sui generis* brand? In what ways is slam a brand? How does slam and

[8] Non-hierarchical, able to be horizontal and multidirectional, multiple and subject to multiplicity— following on from Deleuze and Guattari's introduction of the concept in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004 [1987]) [*Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille plateaux* (2013 [1980])]. What is useful in employing the rhizomatic is that any one element can attach itself to anything and still exist, that it does not need to follow set pathways—yet there is still order. It (that which is rhizomatic) does not follow 'roots' or pre-destined pathways, it can combine and interact laterally, diagonally, in any direction rather than just linearly. As an example, grassroots movements tend to be rhizomatic in that they are not centralized and can appear in a seemingly random way and interact in surprising combinations yet together form a coherent functioning.

the concepts derived from the analysis map onto the currently accepted brand constructs? How does applying brand theory to slam help to explain it? Indeed, this last question is explored and developed throughout the organisation of this thesis. Each substantive chapter addresses a different element of branding theory and presents slam though that lens. These chapters have two titles, one which refers to their substantive concept and one which refers to the relevant brand theory concept.

This thesis aims to explain what slam is and how it is a sui generis brand. It presents a substantive theory specific to slam that addresses slam's ontology. Building upon that initial substantive theory, I have applied fundamental branding concepts to slam, elaborating it as a brand to further explain slam as a cultural phenomenon. Although this research does not seek to explain how a sui generis brand emerges generally, it nonetheless identifies some concepts particular to slam that may be generalisable, thus providing the groundwork for a formal theory of sui generis brand emergence. This theoretical sui generis brand may: be decentralised and/or rhizomatic; have a lack of ownership/explicit management and thus is emergent; be subject to the presence of multiple, divergent yet overlapping visions for the phenomenon held by influential individuals directly active in it; be under a spotlight (i.e. mediatisation) that filters and disseminates images and myths, while also bestowing the power of celebrity; and be amenable to the seduction of hype-cycles. Importantly, these traits will exist within a context of a hyper-connected, authority and meta-narrative averse, rapidly attention-shifting world that has become complacent to brands in everyday life and thus accepts and applies the concept of a brand almost anywhere, including to individuals (i.e. a personal brand), in recognition of the symbolic and communicative power of branding—a culture of branding.

Finally, it should be noted that because of slam's inherent anti-genre nature, I have not done a content or literary analysis on individual slam textes, as to do so would not be to analyse slam, but rather that particular slameur. Instead, by applying the above methods and comparison with, for instance, slam's most similar product, rap—both as a cultural artefact and its textes— and through a sort of reverse-engineering, I identified some tendencies in slam

textes that, while not indicative of a genre, distinguish it on the basis of its identity traits. For instance, while rap often uses cryptic language that is understandable to its own community as a subcultural marker and signal of craftsmanship, slam encourages writing that is easily understood in order to generate the slam 'claque' or moment of *rencontre* (see Chapter Two). Textes that require contemplation, multiple listens, or knowledge for intertextual deciphering do not accord equally with all the values of slam, only some (e.g. diversité), and therefore are likely to be less common.

I will now address briefly brands and brand theory. The following is the result of study on brands that I conducted following a key insight in the last stages of research to elaborate upon what had emerged from my analysis. Following this brief review of branding, I also include a short review of slam specific literature. I include this to inform the reader about other research and to highlight how I have used it as data and for comparative analysis in building theory.

1.2 Branding Theory

As mentioned above, I employ the use of brand primarily as a theoretical framework of analysis rather than suggesting that it is something constructed in a direct sense by agentic and brand-intending actors in and around the slam scene. This distinction is methodologically essential, because although the concept of brand is used in this thesis as an analytical tool rather than a direct ontological argument, the analysis of slam as a brand *does* provide valuable insight into and analytical pathways to elaborate theoretically the internal constitutive dynamics of its essence, organisation, ethos, and cultural positioning and specificity despite its ad hoc, decentralised and diffuse, rhizomatic nature. Branding theory in this thesis is not used to try to coerce the complex process of slam's identity formation through dissemination and reflexive contestation of images and representations into some form of rigid framework. Rather, it is used to make the basic framework of analysis for the image-discourse itself— the brand—and from this position elaborate an understanding of slam. While I conclude that slam can and should be understood as a brand of poetry—specifically as a sui

generis, emergent brand—this is an a posteriori interpretation rather than an a priori proposition, born out of a key insight developed after having developed substantive theory as to slam's ontology.

Regarding brands, there are two important premises that must be laid out. First, that the contemporary era is marked by a culture of branding, therefore any new cultural phenomena are potentially subject to a branding paradigm and accordingly it can be argued that French slam has developed within, and as, brand culture. Secondly, that a brand is more than just a name and logo attached to a product in order to drive sales or increase profit margins for good or service. Rather, brands are *cultural artefacts*—with or without a commercial intent—that distinguish and identify a business, a product, a service, an institution, or even an individual through a set of symbols and stories. Brands have and create greater value than even identical non-branded products in that they convey meaning and offer a unique promise to customers/audiences in the aim that they will engage with that brand (Lerman et al. 2018:1-6).

1.2.1 Brand Culture

> *The material presence of brands in everyday life is a significant part not only of the symbolic world but also of the communicative and ideological presence of brands--how branding becomes the way we tell stories to ourselves about ourselves and our identities —Banet-Weiser 2012:166.*

This brief subsection expands the argument that brands in contemporary society have come to occupy a general role as vehicles for meaning making and identity creation. Given brand culture, it is possible for a brand to emerge *sui generis,* forming in convergence with new and emergent cultural phenomena and without intentional agentic origination or causal management. For cultural phenomena such as slam, brand culture provides an insightful framework for understanding the societal atmosphere of brand familiarity that allows for such organic emergence. This co-formation is an important assumption that underlies this thesis, thus 'brand culture' warrants a brief discussion.

Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that brand cultures are an important cultural aspect of advanced capitalism: ‘Branding in our era has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations.’ (2012:4). The brand culture of society writ large can be traced in part to the emphasis on 'creative economies' starting in the late 1990s, wherein governments implemented policies designed to encourage the growth of entrepreneurialism and creative industry as part of a wider economic and social agenda. The advent of the 'creative economy' changed how we view those working in the arts and culture by bringing the logic of capitalism to fields that were previously envisioned to be outside of its markets and pressures. For Banet-Weiser, brand cultures are both the overarching culture of branding present in advanced capitalist societies and individual brand cultures like those of 'green' branding associated with environmental movements and products sold with this ethical stance in mind. She builds upon the materialist theories of Raymond Williams (2002) and argues that brands are what Williams 'called a structure of feeling, an ethos of intangible qualities that resonate in different ways with varied communities.' (Banet-Weiser 2012:9). However, she departs from Williams’s view that culture and capitalism are related, but not determined by each other: he 'opposed the idea that relations of production could somehow direct culture because culture is made "by living".'(ibid.). Banet-Weiser contends that in advanced capitalism this separation is not so clear, and it is 'often impossible' to separate the making, selling, and using of things from the ways that we make our own lives (ibid.). According to her, brand strategies and logics are not only the backdrop but also the tools for 'living' in culture (ibid.). The ubiquity of brands is also noted by researchers like Martin Kornberger who bluntly claims, ‘branding as cultural form is our *zeitgeist*’ (2010:22). Brands are interfaces that transform the way we organise production and the way we consume. They put in touch these two spheres and act ‘as an institutionalised window between them’ (ibid.). They are both pervasive and ubiquitous; and as Kornberger suggests, brands are becoming one of the most powerful phenomena transforming how we organise our lives. Such a culture in which brand strategies and logics have become taken-for-

granted tacit knowledge and tools for living provides the environment for a practice like slam to emerge, sui generis, as a brand of poetry.

1.2.2 What is a brand?

In an everyday capacity, we tend to think of a brand as a 'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers.' (AMA 2017). This definition, seemingly straightforward at first glance, is deceptively deep. Including 'any other feature' to serve as differentiator allows the concept of a brand to encompass things such as the brand's culture, personality, emotional relationship between consumer and brand, perceptions, opinions, values, messages, mission, stories, memories, expectations, and many other things that allow us to conceive of a brand, and thus relate to it, as a rich and three-dimensional system of symbolic representation engaging in cultural mediation. The holism of these things is the brand, a totality of symbolic meanings with its agentic power indirectly expressed through the brand owners, the media, the public observers, and the consumers and stakeholders[9] that interact with it.

Accordingly, it is unsurprising that brands are also formed for entities including: NGOS and universities, cities and countries, political parties, and individuals as their 'personal brand'. Theoretically and practically for the purposes of this thesis, there are product brands, personal brands, and corporate brands. Personal brands are, in brand culture, another way of saying 'public image' for both public and non-public figures relevant to what they produce or provide for others. Whereas, a corporate brand is the brand for an entity—such as the above examples—as opposed to for a specific product.[10] Importantly however, there are significant differences in branding an enterprise and branding a product. The significance of the brand

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[9] Stakeholders include: owners, employees, customers, investors, suppliers, partners, regulators, special interests and local communities (Hatch and Schultz 2001:1042). Stakeholders are, effectively, anyone who has a 'stake' in the success (or failure!) of the corporation and/or brand. For slam this includes slam activistes, venue owners and managers, audiences, journalists and other commentators (including academics) with a focus on slam or adjacent phenomena, educational and cultural organisations, poets, rappers, singers, authors, and other creatives.

[10] A corporate brand is sometimes confused for a product brand. For instance, Nike Inc. is a corporate brand and the iconic 'swoosh' is its logo. Under the brand, 'Nike' there are various product brands such as the Air Jordan, as well as other brands that it has acquired (e.g. Converse). Whereas for Nike's Air Jordans, the Air Jordan has its own product brand that will differ from that of, say, Nike's golf shoes. The Nike brand is consistent for both of these shoes, but their respective product brands are tailored to the product.

can run deeper and have greater institutional effects. The brand has meaning both internal to the corporation or institution and externally (Urde 2013). The scope, brand architecture, origins of identity, responsibility, lifespan, and target audience all differ (Hatch and Schultz 2008:7-9). Accordingly, slam should be thought of as a corporate brand rather than a product brand and it is through this rubric that I approach slam. Hereafter, unless specified otherwise, 'brand' refers to a 'corporate brand' conceptually.

Brands are systems of symbolic representation and as such, are used to enable and enact myth making and storytelling in culture. Banet-Weiser elaborates this, 'brands are meant to invoke the experience associated with a company or product; far from the cynical view of academics or beleaguered parents, brands are actually a story told to the consumer.' (2012:4). The 'cynical view' she refers to is one that sees brands as malevolent tools to manipulate people psychologically, 'tricking' them into buying things they do not need or want and making them spiritually poorer in the process. Such a view is reductive and assumes a lack of agency on behalf of the 'consumer' while neglecting both the rich cultural experiences and identity building processes that are an inherent part of humanity to which brands contribute.

An additional way to define a brand which I find useful is to think of a brand as 'a name with the power to influence' (Kapferer 2015: passim). This definition is useful and insightful because it gets to the heart of the *pre-experiential* schematic effect on the individual prior to direct engagement with the brand and its products. Other informative and useful ways to think of a brand is to see them as a form of communication or speech, as an interface, as a frame of action (Goffman 1974), or even as a sign (in the structuralist and post-structuralist senses). The ability to distinguish, qualitatively and often symbolically, is at the heart of what a brand does, which is give meaning. What these ways of seeing all have in common is seeing brands as complex, dynamic, spaces in which various actors negotiate meaning. For instance, Martin Kornberger (2010) argues: 'The brand is the institutionalized yet contested space in which producing and consuming takes shape. As such, branding describes a field rather than a single phenomenon or object.' (48).

These definitional conceptions better explain how brands function in society when compared to its most rudimentary form as a mark that gives identity to consumer products. They allow us to think about brands *in toto,* and certainly as more than crude devices of commerce. Importantly for my purposes here, they also allow us to conceive of brands in and of themselves, independent of their commercial origin and therefore understand them as producers of culture.

Importantly for this study, among brands there are certain brands which stand out in culture for their ability to harness and address cultural myths. These brands—like Oprah, Harley-Davidson, Linux, and Lush cosmetics—are 'iconic' or 'cult brands'. A crucial difference between a cult brand and a non-cult brand is the extent to which it can act as an icon for what become loyal, dedicated customers who engage with the brand as part of their life-story and thanks to whom the brand gains a cult status which sustains it even if it never becomes a dominant player in the general public. Brands become cult brands 'when they perform identity myths: simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives' (Holt 2004: 8, passim). Douglas Holt (2004) offers the following axioms of cultural branding, or what makes brands 'iconic': they 'address acute contradictions in society', 'perform identity myths that address these desires and anxieties [related to those contradictions]', 'perform as activists, leading culture', 'rely on breakthrough performances, rather than consistent communications', 'enjoy a cultural halo effect', and the identity myths they perform 'reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action' and, finally, these 'are set in populist worlds'—which are separate from daily life and from the 'realms of commerce and elite control' (6-10). Any brand can be a cult brand, whether a corporate, service, personal, or product brand. What matters is the extent to which a brand engages with cultural myths, providing identity value for its customers: what kind of stories they tell and the symbols they create. Not only is the model of a brand useful for conceptualising slam, but, based on the identity traits I have identified and the application of a branding framework to slam, I argue that slam is indeed a cult brand.

There are two final, but crucial points: First that brands and brand theory, although traditionally focused on commercial enterprise, are not exclusively so and do not require the existence of a profit motive. Secondly, brands are vehicles for cultural myths, individual identity construction and other socio-cultural phenomena. They are not merely identifying marks for a business or seller of goods or services. Brands have meaning and make meaning. A brand exists (has meaning) primarily in an individual's perception and understanding, but brands become symbolically and culturally powerful when the collective understandings 'have become conventional and so are continually reinforced because they are treated as truths in everyday interactions.' (Holt 2004:3).

Importantly however, while the story metaphor used by Banet-Weiser (2012, *supra*) is informative, brands are becoming less a one-sided story told to passive consumers and audiences, and instead are increasingly an interactive dialogic that involves both the brand and its audiences as its storyteller. This process may also be magnified by the presence of social media which allows a direct link between audiences and brands and importantly provides individuals with a large platform of potentially great influence. This creates a space for co-creation and emergence of new brand images and meanings, and even the possibility for new cultural myths. The brand serves as the general sense that is felt and agentically acted upon (serving as a platform of sense from which to act through) and in slam, through these factors, the shared sense of other agents, and in the totality of their discursive dialogic co-constructing the phenomenon at large.

This space of identity co-creation of meaning and image as mediated by this brand sense is where the heart of my methodology lies. I argue that slam, from its arrival in France and through its development as a culturally situated French phenomenon has emerged as a sui generis brand of oral poetry via the co-constructive dialogic and thus branding it underwent and produced in the public discourse concerning its definition, cultural relevance, social position, and aesthetic orientations.

1.3 Brand theory concepts

As discussed above, a GT approach builds substantive theory, that is theory specific to a social phenomenon; however, it can also lead to formal theory, although this is less common. Formal theory is abstract and applicable to a range of phenomena. As I was working with my research, and in particular struggling over what made a slam session* different from an open-mic spoken word event, it occurred to me that perhaps French slam is a brand. The difference between these two events is the brand: the identity, the values, the image, the ethos, what people expect, what kind of people one expects, the styles and ranges of poetry you might expect. Of course, a defining feature of slam is that it is open to all kinds of poetry and people, but its image can bias a newcomer to certain expectations. Slam's image precedes it: there is a 'felt' difference between a generic open mic spoken word poetry event and a slam session, to such an extent that someone may choose to advertise an event one way or the other or choose to attend one event over the other on this basis.

As I reviewed the branding literature and sought out advice from experts in the field, I decided to adopt the applicable core concepts of branding theory, that I introduce below, to slam in order to elaborate the theory of slam as a sui generis brand of poetry. This thesis is structured such that each of these concepts is dealt with in turn, allowing for 'thick description' (Geertz 2017) of slam within that rubric, and builds upon each chapter into an eventual synthesis of slam's brand.

Accordingly, in the following section, I will introduce each of the core theoretical concepts from branding theory used to understand the *brand* identity of slam, and thus slam as a brand of poetry. Given this goal, I will begin first with brand identity before moving on to discuss the other concepts: brand image (which is particularly relevant to slam given its mediatisation) followed by brand DNA, brand positioning, and brand organisation. These concepts act as analytical pathways to examine the ontology of French slam, pathways to arrive at an understanding of what makes slam, *slam*. By applying these concepts individually and showing how they work together—based in the data from the discourse around slam—I seek to develop this theory of a sui generis brand.

1.3.1 Brand Identity

> *More than just the object itself, a brand is the perception—the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings and sense of authenticity conjured by the product itself. The brand is the essence of what will be experienced; the brand is a promise as much as a practicality—Banet-Weiser 2012:4.*

For our purposes, brand identity is the core values, or ethos, that are unchanging and which underlie the rest of the brand's manifestations, such as its aesthetic, ethics, promise, message, and organisation. Brand identity, therefore, is structuring. Brand identity is crucial to another, and in some ways near-identical concept, brand personality. We tend to anthropomorphise brands and see in them a certain personality: some brands are seductive, others are playful, some may be elegant, or even rebellious. That personality however may be based on the brand identity or be a part of the identity and often must remain consistent throughout a brand's history or else the brand loses what makes it identifiable and relatable, akin to how a complete change in personality would make someone seem like another person entirely, even if their biography and other identifying characteristics remained the same. Much like with people, moderate personality or superficial marker changes are tolerated, whereas identity is too foundational to be changed significantly without cascade effects. Therefore, brand identity should be thought of as that which is essential and foundational to a brand.

Finally, in traditional brands, brand identity is explicitly or tacitly designed and built by the brand owners[11] as part of a deliberate brand strategy. The identity in traditional brands, while not always explicit, can allow for change in individual elements which results in re-branding; there may be the same 'name' but the *brand* is different as the brand identity and possibly other properties (such as key offering or product) have changed significantly. It is not self-sustaining and it is subject to external forces and to brand's stakeholders. Importantly,

[11] 'Brand owner' is here a convenient umbrella term that includes marketing/PR teams and brand managers, as well as any entities that have a stake in a brand such as a CEO, shareholders, a founder, and others. It can also, depending on the brand strategy, include core customers who drive brand engagement— possibly by acting as brand advocates and brand champions.

it is not based on an autopoietic system. This is a crucial distinction in what I call a sui generis brand and traditional brands.

1.3.2 Brand Image

Brand identity is often conceived of in relation to another important concept: brand image. If we follow a basic communications model of sender/receiver, the brand identity resides in the message sent whereas the image is constructed in the message received. The brand image may not be exactly what the sender intended but nonetheless is the message to the receiver and is therefore what is effectively 'real'. More specifically, brand image concerns specifically how audiences view the brand relative to its message it puts out on the world based on its brand identity, positioning, target audiences et cetera. Brand image is not entirely controlled by the brand itself but resides in the minds and perceptions of outsiders. Branding theory also posits that the brand and those communicating about it must negotiate the image, or the discursive perceptions at play, and communicate accordingly. Thus the construction of a brand is not one-sided but comes out of the interactions between audiences and producers. The brand image may be at odds with what the brand wants to communicate and how the brand (its owners) sees itself (its brand identity) and sometimes this incongruence leads to changes in the brand and communication strategy. The symbolic development of a brand in culture is a result of this reflexive process between the brand and its brand image. However, even though the brand image can be changeable and reactive, the identity *core* usually remains relatively consistent.

Brand image is especially crucial to slam given its mediatisation and the presence of celebrity in its public discourse. Indeed, this mediatisation and the pre-eminence of GCM, arguably creates the conditions where slam's image precedes it. Accordingly, its image is also structuring and when its public image does not accord with its identity or ethos, a dialogic ensues; which I argue has contributed to the co-construction of slam's brand over time.

Brand image research alone can be an unproductive method for assessing a brand's identity; accordingly Kapferer suggests to begin by inferring it from things like Brand DNA

(2015:164). By combining this approach with the other concepts (organisation and positioning) I have been able to more confidently theorise the interaction of the identity traits with the manifestation of the brand itself. I will now address these final concepts below.

1.3.3 Brand DNA

Brand DNA is a framework introduced by Jean-Noël Kapferer (2015). It can be used to infer brand identity from the marks left by the brand i.e. the products it has chosen to endorse and the symbols by which it is represented through time' (2015:164). Brand DNA provides a map to identity, to 'semiologically analyse the sending process by trying to discover the original plan underlying the brand's objectives, products and symbols.' (ibid.). Specifically, Brand DNA includes: the brand's most typical products, brand name, brand characters, visual symbols and logotypes, geographical and historical roots, the brand creator's early visions, and advertising (content and form) (2015:165-170).

I apply this construct to the history of French slam that I detail in Chapter Four. By applying this to the events in slam's development it provides insight into the brand identity as (perhaps subconsciously) envisaged by the slam scene's activistes.

1.3.4 Brand Positioning

Positioning is an essential concept in branding, without it the concept of a brand is meaningless. Brands are signs and therefore only have meaning—only exist—in relation to other signs. Positioning in branding logic, refers to how a 'product' fits within a given market and respective to potential competitors.

Even in branding strategies for traditional brands, cultural context is a part of positioning; but positioning is more specific than just how an object fits within a context and rather focuses on how it fits relative to other similar objects or concepts (brands/products). This concept of positioning better accommodates the arguments I will outline regarding slam vis-à-vis rap, 'traditional' poetry and even chanson.

Indeed, there is an inherent paradox in branding which is that of a paradox of similarity and differentiation. Whatever you are branding whether it should be a beverage or a politician,

must be similar enough to its 'competitors' so that the audience recognises what it is (e.g. a liberal or conservative politician). However, to be a successful brand there must be sufficient differentiation. Again, signs are only coherent in relation to other signs, and brands are a type of sign. Also, as Deleuze (2011) reminds us, a philosophy of difference is based on intensity, therefore brands create differences and by extension intensities. It is the right intensity of differentiation that balances the recognisability of what is being branded within a certain category that makes for a good brand.

Slam is exemplary of this similarity/differentiation paradox, as well as some others. For instance, it is often amateur poets, but it is also professional poets. Slam can be competitive, or not. Slam is positioned between rap and traditional poetry. It is distinguished from rap by its more poetic focus and by not being a part of hip hop subculture. It is positioned as to appeal to a broader audience than the one to whom rap appeals for instance. Slam as a brand derives its meaning from how it is *not* rap, how it is *not* traditional poetry—its meaning comes from where it is positioned in the market for cultural production of poetic and musical texts. Without comparing slam to similar products it is only possible to describe what slam is functionally, but not what it is symbolically and its symbolic meaning is what gives it value and cultural significance. Again, without the slam brand, slam is just open mic oral poetry that is sometimes competitive. By calling it slam, and relating to it through the brand image we construct, we give it meaning, but that meaning is always also relative to other cultural practices. That relativity—brand positioning—and where it is positioned is often informed by cultural myths which are part of the interpretative framework through which phenomena are viewed. Just as these cultural myths underscore the discourse around slam and ultimately end up shaping it and its place in culture as does its brand position.

By analysing slam's position, the images and representations, and its history (as Brand DNA) we are able to tease out some of the cultural myths which affect slam's representations and image construction. These cultural myths, in conjunction with the counter-narrative constructions—in particular by slam insiders—as well as other key concepts and themes that hold sufficient impact and signification, allow for a fuller conceptualisation of slam's brand.

However, there is one final concept that is useful to fully theorising slam as a brand: its brand organisation.

1.3.5 Brand Organisation

Martin Kornberger argues that traditional organisations—as opposed to brand-driven organisations—are hierarchical, have strict boundaries that protect them from the outside, and store knowledge internally. A brand-driven organisation however maximises its surface level to provide maximum interaction with the environment, it is more open in that sense, 'Through this brand surface, external ripples are translated directly into internal impulses, and internal rumblings are amplified and made sensible to the outside.' (2010:21). Organisational knowledge can be outsourced, things can be produced by anyone not just those in the organisation. Everything is on the market except the brand itself, 'The brand becomes the face that gives production character and consumption something to fall in love with and remember.' (ibid.).

This theoretical contrast between traditional organisations and brand-driven organisations is interesting to consider vis-à-vis Howard Becker's (2009) concept of an art world: the people and institutions interacting to produce works of art in a particular genre or field. They are highly organised. They exhibit a division of labour. They have boundaries that are not impermeable per se as they can be fluid, but they are also guarded by gatekeepers. They have internal logics and aesthetics that define and legitimise the conventions of the art form. They are able to say what is and what is not art on the basis of these and exclude a great deal of art and artists on the basis of their internal knowledge, metrics, conventions, aesthetics and philosophy. In this sense, they resemble greatly the traditional organisation described by Kornberger above. This was Becker's notable contribution to sociology and to the study of art: to identify and recognise that art is not the product of original genius but of highly structured, highly organised complex art worlds and that art worlds are organisations. Traditional poetry, exists within the poetry art world. Rap, exists within a hip hop art world and hip hop subculture—the latter which provides the philosophical and ideological underpinnings for

definitional and categorical boundaries that comprise the art world. With significant qualification, slam is an emergent, inchoate art world. Indeed, slam is better understood like the brand-driven organisation: it is the brand that gives sense to the production within it, rather than institutional and internal knowledge, permeable but thick boundaries, hierarchies, gatekeepers, and complex divisions of labour.

With this concern for the brand and its influence on the actual tangible and physical organisation of the brand itself, Kornberger (2010) has theorised that in a corporate brand specifically, the brand identity will structure the organisation of the entity itself. Hatch and Schultz show that corporate brands differ in the source of their identity from product brands: the former derive their identity from the heritage, and values and beliefs stakeholders hold in common, whereas the latter derives its identity from the imagination of marketers based on market research (2008:9).

This focus on organisation within branding theory takes into account the brand's multiple stakeholders and is less concerned with marketing externally than it is on institutionally reifying and ensuring alignment with identity, core values, strategic vision and the creation of a shared conception of the brand. For a brand to function organisationally with any sense of coherency, the brand's identity needs to be understood and recognised across the organisation, as gaps in the perspectives held by the various stakeholders potentially constituting a threat to the brand (Roper and Davies 2007). Importantly, a good corporate brand will also, given the identity origins and their influence, shape and structure the organisation itself. It will give shape to the organisational culture, and even to the structure of the organisation: hierarchies, alliances, collaborations, authority, knowledge transfer, divisions of labour, and so on.

For slam, I have identified three specific features, or institutions, of its organisational presence (ateliers, collectifs, and blases) that I argue are, as a corporate brand, manifestations of its brand identity. Importantly, although I had identified these institutions as cultural specific to slam prior to applying a branding theory, the corporate brand model highlights how they are integral structuring features to slam's existence. Their continued, unquestioned,

existence implies there is a tacit consensus regarding their value and significance to slam, indicating that not only reflect and reinforce its identity but also structure slam as to demonstrate and reify its ethos. I explore this in Chapter Six.

1.4 Slam Literature

In conformation with the GT maxim, 'all is data' I have used other research on slam primarily as comparative data to check my own analysis against as well as raw data (i.e. discourse from primary voices). Below, I include a short literature review on the academic and—given the paucity of research on slam as a cultural phenomenon— pop-academic work on French slam. First, I will cover a foundational text on American slam poetry that is used widely in other research on slam. This will then be followed by brief summaries and usage of the academic literature on slam as well as the pop-academic literature. Finally, I give an in-depth synopsis of the most substantial research on French slam to date in the form of two doctoral theses and how they are used as comparative data.

1.4.1 Non-Francophone Slam Literature

The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America—Susan Somers-Willet, 2009

In the United States, Susan Somers-Willet's PhD on American slam poetry was later published as a book in in 2009. Somers-Willet's work remains one of the most comprehensive and foundational studies on the subject[12] and is cited widely—including in France, where it has informed the work of others regarding French slam (e.g. Vorger 2012; Fagerlid 2012). It is important to note that although Somers-Willet's research falls within a cultural studies approach, it could equally be considered critical race studies. The dynamics, history, and context concerning race in the United States is culturally specific and thus not directly comparable to France. However, given French slam's divergence from a fundamentally

[12] See bibliography for other research.

competitive format, her work is nonetheless foundational to the subject and is useful for identifying divergences via careful, valid, comparative analysis.

Somers-Willet uses a cultural studies approach and analyses the entanglement of identity politics—especially those concerning race—with the performance[13] of authenticity in American slam poetry. In her study, 'slam poetry' refers almost exclusively to the poetry (performances) at, or from, official competitive poetry slams— namely, the National Poetry Slam.[14] Accordingly, she problematises the official poetry slam rules[15] and related norms—in particular, the rule that the competitor must be the sole author of the poem and the role of the audience-as-critic.

Somers-Willet argues that audiences reward performances which accord with what the audience perceives as being 'authentic'—that is, which accord with the audience's perception of the author's self (or presentation of self). The audience's assessment of this particular understanding of 'authenticity' relies on a model of cultural norms against which the performance/poem can be judged rather than the assumption of an 'original or essential self' which exists beyond or without external constraints (2009:73, 76). With this 'authenticity' established as an essential—if not necessary—criterion for a successful slam poem, authorship becomes the performance /writing of self and identity (8). Consequently, since the audience thus also authenticates and legitimises performances of identity at poetry slams, it therefore follows that 'poetry slams generate the very identities that poets and audiences expect to hear.' (76).

This construction of 'authenticity' and identity at poetry slams is not apolitical. While slam poetry is open to anybody, its populist image combined with the lack of formal criteria guiding aesthetic choices enable poetry slams to be places where marginalized identities are celebrated, expressed, performed and authenticated (7). In particular, she argues that African-

[13] Performance here refers not only to the actual physical act of poetry performance, but also 'performance' in the sense of both Erving Goffman (1990) –a performance of self—as well sometimes even in the sense of J.L. Austin (1975) in terms of performativity and performative utterances (symbolic or otherwise).
[14] The exception being when she discusses 'slam poetry'—either written or oral, which has invariably come from the poetry slam circuit and is disseminated on television, in anthologies or in other productions.
[15] cf. Somers-Willet (2009): Appendix, The Official Rules of the National Poetry Slam Competition.

American cultural/racial identity is especially subject to such 'authenticity' testing and furthermore she finds that it is 'consistently more rewarded by audiences' (8). She further substantiates citing that at the time of her writing, the majority of the winners of the National Poetry Slam were African-American (ibid.). These observations, alongside a careful study of the performances of African-American identity in slam poetry allow her to argue that slam poetry aesthetics 'correspond to performing marginalized identity in order to engage (and at times exploit) a slam audience's shared value of difference' (10).

While Somers-Willet's research is exclusively on the American slam poetry circuit, it provides a valuable contextualisation and analysis of the effects of culture and cultural politics on creative and social phenomena. This contextualisation helps illuminate the cultural specificity of French and American slam (poetry). Given that, as I discovered in data collection, there is a persistent assumption in France that slam originates from hip hop culture, Somers-Willet's analysis of the post-hoc association of slam poetry and hip hop culture in the United States is particularly informative in helping to contextualise and sift through the assumptions and discourses. Her study also provides insight into some of the potential ramifications of codification and regulation which has been particularly informative for conceptualising the debates and discussions that have occurred in the French slam scenes regarding the institutionalisation of slam (see Chapter Four).

1.4.2 Francophone Slam literature

In addition to the two doctoral theses directly dealing with French slam, there are a few studies that either mention French slam or study it from a pedagogical perspective.

From Quebec, Paul Fraisse's 2013 doctoral thesis is on oral/performance poetry scenes in Quebec. Only one chapter addresses Quebecois slam, for which, 'il aura fallu attendre que le slam se développe en France pour que les Québécois commencent à s'intéresser à cette pratique pourtant initialement résolument nord-américaine.' (342). Although he discusses the history of slam in France, he only accounts for the history relevant to PLH and the competitive tournoi*, neglecting the influence of GCM in the francophonie. It appears that

Fraisse is also a slameur (alias, Polo) who has competed with PLH in competition. If so, it is not surprising that he would focus only on that experience of the phenomenon (see Chapter Four). Additionally, Jeukens (2011) is a master's *mémoire* also about slam poetry in Quebec. As I am only interested in slam in metropolitan France, sources like this offer background knowledge for better conceptualisation.

From France, Camille Dubois's (2012) *Master 2 professionnel mémoire*, specialised in French as a foreign language, is applied research using slam in an education setting in France. This study is similar to and informed by Vorger's (2008) master's *mémoire*.

Another master's *mémoire* by Adrienne Ferré (2007) is not about Francophone slam or poetry *per se*, but instead is a detailed study of the work and philosophy of a German slam poet, Bas Böttcher. Nevertheless, I include this mémoire because it provides valuable insight into the initial arrival of slam (poetry) in Europe, and addresses significant differences between the French and German slam (poetry) scenes despite a fair amount of cultural diffusion across the border.

Finally, there is a Belgian 2006 '*article*', submitted alongside a 'mémoire médiatique', by Frédéric Bourgeois. This *article* pre-dates the rise of Grand Corps Malade (GCM); therefore, American oral and performance poetry history, including hip hop, feature strongly alongside a discussion of the market for oral and performance-based poetic expression in Europe. Again, this is useful for comparison as data and for theory development as the slam scene and discourse around it had since further developed.

In addition to the above academic research, there are a handful of publications addressing French slam (see bibliography for details). The majority tend to instrumentalise slam and focus on its utility for language acquisition and/or mastery—sometimes with an added focus on disadvantaged and/or immigrant youth. Otherwise, a few take a literary approach; albeit, focusing almost exclusively on GCM and/or AAM. Finally, a few look at slam as a cultural phenomenon, but are largely descriptive overviews of the practice or focused on a particular slameur.

The pop-academic work on slam is also limited, but provides substantial data and material. This includes several documentary films and a book by a music journalist, Héloïse Guay de Bellissen, who—ignorant of slam—was assigned to write a book on the phenomenon coming out of the 'vague du slam'. Her reflexive ethnography is based on open-ended interviews primarily with slameurs. Her approach comes from an outsider perspective without any particular research agenda, thus providing a well-balanced look at the state of slam at the time.

While all these publications offer insight into French slam, they are not without problems. Many of these publications feature almost exclusively the work of GCM and/or Abd Al Malik—a rapper that is mediatised as a slameur during the 'vague du slam'—as the primary source for their discussion of slam. This is problematic because, firstly, GCM is over-represented in the research on slam at the expense of other slameurs and styles creating the illusion that his work is representative or typical of slam. Secondly, Abd Al Malik's inclusion as a slameur is controversial amongst slameurs, rappers, fans and rejected even by the artist himself. As I discuss in Chapters Four and Five, he is erroneously held up as a slameur by outsiders on the basis of the rap-slam conflation and due to a demand for more artists like GCM to illustrate and represent the phenomenon. Arguably, the inability for current rubrics like 'genre' and 'style' to accommodate something like slam explains his misattribution as a slameur.

Secondly, those which attempt to analyse slam either linguistically or as a literary object not only rely primarily on GCM, they also make the mistake of trying to study orality on the page. It is well-argued that words and music cannot be separated for instance when studying chanson; however, this becomes less apparent with slam which is, ideally, a capella. Even GCM adds music to his slam textes post hoc, the texte is not written to the music and the music is there for ambiance, rather than melody or harmony. Nevertheless, the same concern applies: the words on a page are not representative of the slam texte. There are matters of intonation, prosody, tone, body language, volume, rhythm, speed and non-verbal utterances that cannot be assessed on the page alone but which are integral to the poeticity of slam.

Accordingly, those studies which purport to analyse slam textes not only misconstrue slam as a genre based on GCM's idiosyncratic style, they also do a disservice to slam, ignoring the oral/aural aspect inherent to orality, by neglecting to analyse it in situ.

Additionally, some of these publications contain factual errors or contestable assertions about slam.[16] As I came across this literature both in theoretical sampling and later in the process, these issues became apparent and indicated that there has been a rush to publish on slam especially around the 'vague du slam',[17] as well as a haphazard approach to the topic which lacks in-depth research and knowledge on the topic and associated phenomena like hip hop and American slam poetry and a lack of caution with pre-conceived notions and biases that lead to the presentation of opinions and assumptions as facts. Interestingly, although these issues are also apparent in the journalism on slam, as is traditional in journalism there is often more reliance on the direct speech of those from the slam scene which can indicate a higher level of reliability. Accordingly, I rely on these and similar sources for the socio-historical information and anecdotal perspectives they provide, I treat them as primary and secondary sources for data—not as critical analyses. All of the literature mentioned and included in the bibliography I have treated as data in my analysis rather than as research upon or against which to build my study. It is through the range of discourses on slam and their public construction of social representations of slam that I analyse the ontology of slam.

1.4.2.1 Substantive Academic Literature on French Slam

Camille Vorger at the University of Grenoble completed the first doctorate on French slam in 2012. It is a linguistic study of slam with a particular focus on the application of slam in language education settings. In Norway, Cicilie Fagerlid's 2012 doctorate in anthropology

[16] Some of the more notable examples include: a claim that rap 'étymologiquement, est un rétro-acronyme des expressions «Rythm and Poetry» et «Rock Against Police» [*sic*]' while slam, 'emprunte au hip-hop le rythme, le tempo, la mélodie du phrasé.' and was originally called '«Spoke and word»' (Tyszler 2009:16-17); or the characterisation of slam by Espitallier (2006), 'Il s'agit de lectures publiques (le plus souvent improvisées) de textes évoquant la vie en milieu urbain, la violence économique, sociale, policière, raciale, etc., ou jouant sur des considérations plus intimes où se raconte le mal de vivre et la révolte.' (105).
[17] See Chapter Five.

utilises Parisian slam as a site to study post-colonial identity negotiation. Both of these studies differ from this thesis in scope, research interests, and approach which I will briefly summarise below with the caveat that in my research I have used these theses as data, as both secondary sources in their own right reflective of the discourse and for direct quotations from relevant individuals as insider voices within a secondary source.

1.4.2.1.1 The Stage is all the World, and the Players are mere Men and Women: Performance Poetry in Postcolonial Paris—Cicilie Fagerlid, 2012

Fagerlid is an anthropologist based at the University of Oslo. Her primary research interest is postcolonial cosmopolitanism and her thesis is based on her fieldwork in Paris between the autumn of 2005 to the summer of 2007.

Although slam is ostensibly the topic of her doctoral thesis, the focus on slam is arguably instrumental. Fagerlid sought a fieldwork site where 'the belonging -community connection could be studied through the lens of the emotions and issues of the two recent outbreaks of social unrest' (59). Accordingly, after being brought to a slam session in the *banlieue* by a friend, where she was forced to confront her own prejudices,[18] she decided that slam suited her research agenda as issues 'concerning belonging, vivre ensemble and republicanism as well as rage and revolt, came together and united in the most imaginable perfect field site.' (2012: 36). In particular, from this initial encounter she 'sensed and started to claim [...] [that slam] is more republican than the republic itself; it is more true to the republican ideals.' (18). To substantiate this hypothesis of hers she undertook an ethnographic study of a select sample of the Parisian slam scene as well as provided a few life-stories of select slameurs and select textes that accord with this claim.

There are a few concerns with her study that need to be addressed as they pertain to how I use her work as data. Importantly, although her thesis concerns French slam, it is *not about* French slam. Rather slam is merely a convenient site for her original research agenda concerning cosmopolitanism, post-colonialism, and republicanism. It is in a select sample of

[18] Namely, she was anxious around what she refers to as hooded 'banlieue youth'—who she later saw inside, thus not a threat, and consequently became aware of her latently held stereotypes and prejudices (41).

the Parisian non-competitive scene[19] where she was able to select certain individuals through whom she can explore the concept of a cosmopolitan 'vivre ensemble' and argue that slam is thus a type of post-colonial therapy.

The narrowness of her subjects is problematic because throughout her thesis she makes hasty generalisations about the *entirety* of French slam—or more reservedly, the entirety of Parisian slam—and even on the basis of this non-competitive sample, compares French slam to the *inherently competitive* American slam poetry as one of her key conclusions pertaining to the cultural specificity of slam in France. Furthermore, her own self-imposed limitations result in confusion as to her conclusions. She claims to be familiar enough with what she calls 'the milieu' of Parisian[20] slam (which includes all variants and derivatives of slam) that she is 'certain' she would have found similar dynamics and values in other networks (61-62). However, she also states that she believes the dynamics of slam change with competition and therefore, had she studied competitive slam, her 'results would have been different' (ibid.). In other words, she states that her results and subsequent claims can be generalised to all Parisian slam, but had she studied more than just non-competitive slam, she would have had different results.

Finally, there are also a few instances that appear to be confirmation bias. For instance in addition to identifying Korean, Cameroonian, and Antillean slameurs, she presents a Belgian-French slameur with a Spanish surname (of unknown heritage) and another blonde, white man born and raised in Lille to Polish parents as sufficiently foreign to be representative of cosmopolitanism (48-49). Or, she concludes (erroneously) that French slameurs are not as educated or interested in literature or writing as American slam poets. She arrives at this through her claims that, 1) university education is less common in France,[21] 2) that she sees

[19] Her justification for not including any informants in the competitive scene is because it did not 'capture [her] to the same extent' (62).

[20] She only conducted field work in Eastern and North Eastern Paris, which is arguably sufficient. However, she also explains that she did not go to other areas, like the Left Bank, as she was confident there was no slam activity there due to its reputation as being too 'posh'(61-62). This assumption indicates that she was choosing to view slam as inherently working-class, and rather than questioning these biases and pre-conceived conclusions she incorporates them into her arguments—thus foregone conclusions.

[21] She uses statistical data from the 2002 and 2010 OECD reports on education, but only uses the figures for the percentage of the population as a whole (ages 25-64) holding a university degree: 16.4% France versus 31.5% for

no evidence of literary opposition or interest (absence of evidence fallacy) and, 3) because none of the slameurs she met had university degrees in 'creative writing, literature or French' (314).[22] This is both incorrect inductive reasoning and is based in a false premise since before 2012 there were no university-level degrees or courses in creative writing in France.[23]

Accordingly, her research is not only limited in its representativeness due to its narrow sample, but also limited in its reliability and relevance for slam more generally. Therefore, while I use her thesis as data, I do so critically and cautiously; for example by analysing direct quotations from activistes, or anecdotes qua anecdotes, and her thesis *in toto* as data for the discourses around slam and pertaining to the representations and images of slam.

1.4.2.1.2 Poétique du slam : de la scène à l'école: Néologie, néostyles et créativité lexicale—Camille Vorger, 2012

Camille Vorger's 2012 doctoral thesis was realised under the specialisation of 'sciences du langage, didactique et linguistique'. As a necessity of being the first PhD thesis in France on slam, there are several chapters dedicated to defining and describing slam. Unsurprisingly, given her research domain, this examination of slam appears to be intended primarily to establish slam as a linguistic object in order to study it as a site of possible lexical creativity and as a potential didactic tool in language education.

Her thesis is divided in three parts. First, she studies slam as 'un potentiel néopoétique', looking at the history of slam and briefly considering it in comparison with rap. In the second part, she looks more closely at slam texts posited as having 'un potentiel néologique'. She analyses not only the word 'slam' itself, but also a diverse corpus of paratexts[24] (e.g. event flyers) looking for instances and patterns of word formation, with a

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the USA. She claims slam is a youth phenomenon and its population is predominantly under 40 years of age; however, the same data shows that for those between 25-34 years of age, 41% have a bachelor's degree or higher in France versus 42% in the USA. It is the upper age-range which dramatically skews the data resulting in a substantial discrepancy between the two countries (17% of 55-64 year olds in France versus 40% in the USA). She neither acknowledges the differences depending on age bracket nor questions what it might mean for her claim regarding the educational attainment and social class of slameurs/slam poets (OECD 2010:36, table A1.3a).

[22] They did however have degrees in, 'Fine Arts (Arts plastiques), from Sciences Po (Sciences Politiques), and Marketing and similar studies, in addition to a number of people from various more or less experimental kinds of theatre schools' (314).

[23] The Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès was the first to establish such a program in 2013. Others have followed since, either offering a master's degree or short courses.

[24] cf. Genette (1987).

special focus on neologisms. From this she studies a corpus of slam textes from: Bastien Mots Paumés, Souleymane Diamanka, and Grand Corps Malade. Whilst acknowledging there is no 'slam style, she establishes each of their singular, individual styles as 'néostyles' and whose writing she qualifies as *l'écriture* 'composite', 'palimpsestuelle', and 'métissée' respectively. Finally, in the third part, she explores slam as 'un potentiel didactique' by running experimental slam ateliers for both *français langue étrangère* (FLE) and *français langue maternelle* (FLM) students. Her motivation for this comes from the increasing usage of slam in curricula; therefore she examines it in situ, in order to reflect upon the didactic application of slam. In particular, she is interested in how slam ateliers hosted by slameurs can be spaces that support and engender lexical creativity. She concludes that the slameur-*animateurs* facilitate in establishing such a space, and furthermore that slam ateliers in education can enhance language development and acquisition with respect to practical fluency and to paralinguistic communication and style skills as part of language mastery.

In Vorger, there is relatively little concern for cultural hybridity or convergence in slam. Instead, it appears that she approaches slam as a necessarily stable and homogenous phenomenon—both internationally and within France—in order to study it experimentally in an educational context. Accordingly, she also uses survey and interview material from slam artists from outside of France (viz. Spain, Germany, Canada, and the USA) to help her define slam. Relying upon a Spanish or American definitions of slam poetry for French slam is problematic given French slam's exceptionalism; however her inclusion of these viewpoints offers useful comparative data for my research.

Vorger's study provides a wealth of valuable insights and testimonies from those active in the scene as well as a detailed and useful linguistic analysis of both slam textes and paratexts. Given her prolific publication[25] on the topic and extended engagement with slameurs, her work has been a significant contribution to the public discourse, even receiving mention in mainstream press articles. Furthermore, Vorger's work when taken alongside

[25] See bibliography.

Fagerlid provides two distinct studies of French slam from different disciplinary perspectives and motivations, but which share some informants and textual material. The two studies do not overlap chronologically and thus, in conjunction, help to provide an indication of the changes in the slam scene as perceived by outsiders with an academic interest.

1.5 Primary data sources and methods

1.5.1 Public Texts

As I have outlined, I focus in particular on the public discourse around slam as a shaping force of its image and as complicit in its brand co-construction. As I began my research the influence of mediatisation and unique role of celebrity in French slam became apparent and thus I narrowed my scope to the cultural myths, images and representations of slam. Accordingly, for source material I rely upon what I call 'public texts': these texts are similar to those that would be used in a star study in media studies and include all nature of media from mass media press articles, documentary films, academic articles, personal blogs, social media, television interviews, ephemera and so on. This corpus is by no means totalizing or 'complete', and it could not be simply on account of the high degree of ephemerality of many events, the lack of perfect archiving, and not to mention my own ignorance of slam (American or French) prior to 2008. I have nonetheless attempted to gather as much material as possible that is archived or otherwise available from the preceding decade, even using internet caches to access dead blogs, websites, and social media that would have been publicly available. By limiting my material gathering to what is 'publicly available' this necessarily excludes a one-off flyer or other ephemera printed for an event most copies of which have presumably been destroyed, and a majority of live slam performances. My concern is with the discourses around slam and the representations and image of slam in particular and therefore the materials need to be what is accessible publicly without requiring time travel or access to private archives. Changes in media practices over the past decades have resulted in what Nick Couldry calls

showings, presencing[26] and archiving (2012:47-49). Notably, there is a drive to archive whereby individuals attempt to manage and maintain their presence by producing plethora of content, archiving their lives and identities, over time. This provides an abundance of material for non-obtrusive content analysis and research on social—fundamentally communicative—phenomena. Furthermore, this choice of sources avoids demand effects: that is, the problem of informants answering for the researcher by either qualifying and changing their responses to what they believe is wanted of them or in response to who is asking. A longitudinal public text corpus serves as an ideal vehicle for accessing in situ debates and discursive constructions as directly occurring between those shaping the phenomenon, while avoiding the pitfalls associated with the intermediation of formalized information extraction.

The texts I have obtained via a process of theoretical sampling date from the period beginning in 1998 until early 2018,[27] with the bulk of them appearing during the 'vague du slam' between 2006 and 2009 roughly. In addition to databases like Lexis, I gathered this material from the individual archives from different newspapers, magazines, radio and television programmes and so forth. I also found caches of press material from the websites of individual slam activistes.[28] Finally , I conducted frequent ad hoc theoretical sampling internet searches of keywords (e.g. 'slam', 'slam+poésie', 'slam+rap'), using both anonymous browsing and allowing the algorithm to direct me based on previous searches, with both France-only and global parameters applied, and with both French language-only and any language applied. This corpus comprises approximately 370 documents which come from the mainstream press,

[26] Showings are a broad and loose category of media acts that are made public and many of which were not possible or accessible in the pre-digital age. Presencing is individual's and group's managing through media of continued presence to others, across space and is done via the process of archiving.
[27] Although I had reached what Glaser calls 'theoretical saturation', when you have enough data that a theory begins to emerge much earlier, given the ease of access to data in my methods I was able to continue to cross-compare new data as it appeared. None of the newer data contradicted the earlier conclusions and therefore only further validate the substantive theory and contribute to the analysis of slam's brand.
[28] Glaser warns against relying only on such caches as they can sometimes lead a researcher down an overly narrow and specific path. However, with the case of someone as prominent in Slam's history as Pilote le Hot the cache his websites provides is relevant and representative. Furthermore, not only do such caches provided by prominent activistes serve a particular purpose by providing a central resource for the rest of the scene, they can also sometimes indicate their particular stance or bias. Accordingly, I have used material found in such caches, both as individual documents and *in toto*, for further descriptive elaboration and as material for comparison with the rest of the data as advised in GT. I found six of these caches, however, combining all the material together with the rest, while noting its origin, reduces the risks of overrepresentation of one individual or collectif's perspective.

both national and regional (e.g. *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*); from the specialist press (e.g. a music magazine, poetry magazines); books and articles from academics, critics and journalists both popular and academic; as well as public texts from blogs, web forums (pre-contemporary social media), social media, zines, ephemera, creative products, and websites published by those in the scene. In addition to open- and substantive- coding and re-coding, I have also organised all the public texts used as data[29] with two different but overlapping methods described below: one which is typical for cultural studies and one which I have created specifically to address the insider-outsider dialogic of slam.

1.5.2 Intertextualities and data organisation

One of the prominent researchers in popular culture texts, John Fiske (2011) has proposed a system to organise the multitude of texts that concern a product, or 'text' (i.e. a film, book, celebrity, concept or brand. Essentially something which contains codes that can be 'read', a sign).

He calls this vertical intertextuality and distinguishes it from 'horizontal intertextuality'. Horizontal intertextuality is a more traditional approach and includes looking at a product or 'text' through its genre or a particular character that appears in multiple productions: 'Horizontal relations are those between primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character or content.' (109). A shortcoming of this sort of intertextuality is it does little to 'open the text up to the reader: similarly, it does little to advance our understanding of the inevitability of intertextuality, of the intertextual as the prime site of culture.' (116). Vertical intertextuality however better addresses the whole of culture and the text whilst also mitigating any pushing of polysemy to an extreme whereby there can be no final meanings as per certain postmodern thought. Vertical intertextuality allows us to focus on specific moments that are socially and culturally situated and their relation to the primary text, it provides evidence of how a given meaning is activated over another (118-119). As Fiske defines it:

[29] This includes both the above public texts and any (pop-)academic literature on slam used as data.

> Vertical intertextuality consists of a primary text's relations with other texts which refer specifically to it. These secondary texts, such as criticism or publicity, work to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text. The tertiary texts are the final, crucial stage of this circulation, for they occur at the level of the viewer and his/her social relations. Studying them gives us access to the meanings that are in circulation at any one time (ibid.).

Vertical textuality is particularly useful for drawing out the various meanings of a text, and importantly as Fiske explains, 'The plurality of these meanings and articulations is not, of course, a structureless pluralism, but is tightly organised around textual and social power.' (127). Accordingly, this method is helpful for understanding the dynamics at play in the co-construction of slam and its image. Specific examples of what he considers secondary and tertiary texts include 'studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism, or tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves in the form of letters to the press or, more importantly, of gossip and conversation.' (109). The secondary texts are influential in which meanings are activated, they have the potential to prime certain meanings and frame interpretations. Tertiary texts give insight into how the primary and secondary texts are read within the culture, and they can help show how effective the meaning activation of secondary texts has been and the extent to which there is textual polysemy. Fiske's delineation of primary text is in this work employed to, firstly, the slam phenomenon and, secondly, to its creative products (i.e. poetry performances). This choice of primary text is guided by the interest of this thesis, firstly in slam's mediatisation and public co-construction of its ontology and secondly, in the image and branding of slam. A brand (viz. its image and/or reputation) can precede the direct experience of the product, and that is where its power lies: to influence the consumer or audience beforehand and thus shaping their experience of the product. The mediatisation of slam functions much like marketing to prime audiences to a certain expectation of slam. The actual product (the poetry performance and the experience of it) contribute to further conceptualisations of slam; however, they may be already framed by the brand expectations produced in part by media influence as well as social influence, other cultural schema, and relevant prior experiences. I consider slam—as a brand—a sort of sign, much in the same way that Fiske contends that Madonna is 'a web of intertextual meanings crossing media

boundaries, “she” is a sign formed by television, film, records, the press, and the publicity industry.' (Fiske 2011:110). Slam is more than its poetry, but like Madonna's music, the poetry contributes to the image.

Accordingly, using a vertical intertextuality model, I have divided the public texts I have gathered and sorted them into primary (slam poems and performances), secondary and tertiary texts. However, this method while highly informative does not fully elaborate the co-construction of slam and the dynamic between those within the slam scene (activistes) and those outside of it. Specifically, the vertical intertextuality model distinguishes between the social sphere (tertiary texts) and the paratextual production sphere (secondary texts); whereas, with slam, the social and paratextual production spheres are often intermingled and there is not as clear a division of labour and production—especially when it comes to slam's image/brand construction which is co-mediated by both those on the 'production' and 'social' sides.

I have therefore also devised my own organisation, which separates the texts into insider and outsider divisions. This means a blog post written by a slam activiste is categorised as '*insider*' whereas the text by a journalist or academic is an '*outsider*' text. Within a secondary source there are both *outsider* texts—or voices—and *insider* ones, i.e. direct quotes. However, such direct quotes, and more so, paraphrases must be read as selected by the *outsider* voice and careful consideration is taken to try and ascertain and contextualise if the choice of quote or its placement in the article belies the intent of the *insider* voice when it was uttered and what other motivation may reside behind its inclusion. I have adopted this second method in order to better differentiate between the narratives and counter-narratives of this dialogic as it highlights the minor but significant differences in slam's image for different groups and brings to the forefront the narrative/counter-narrative. The combination of both organisational methods also allows for a better identification of the cultural myths at play as they are employed contingent on the assumed audience and authorial stance of these texts. The charts below show how specific texts fit into these two schemas.

Vertical Intertextuality

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
– Poems/Performances, the slam brand sign-object. – Slameurs and collectifs. – Public images and representations (e.g. personal websites, visual content, imagery).	– Journalist, academic, public official, other (including from slam activistes) publications (e.g. criticism, reviews, essays, et cetera). – Promotional material, ephemera. Press releases and publicity from organisations within slam scene.	– Fan discourse and internal communications between slam activistes intended to be public but not explicitly publicity per se.

Insider/Outsider

Insider	*Outsider*
– Poems/performances; – ephemera and publicity made by slam activistes; – activiste (includes dedicated[30] fans) discourse on social media; – select direct quotes found within secondary and tertiary sources; – outsider paraphrasing or reporting of an insider voice or test *only* when the same message appears in multiple, different secondary sources; – articles and publications written by slam activistes.	– Journalist, academic, casual observer and other 'outsider' voices, publications and discourse.

In addition to sorting the texts both in terms of their vertical intertextuality as well as in terms of insider/outsider, I have arranged them within these classifications chronologically to provide a historical overview of patterns and developments. I have also categorised them according to whether they were found in a cache taking into consideration the selection process that would have taken place in creating such a cache. Finally, I have also organised them with respect as to whether they are from a mainstream national source (e.g. *Le Monde, France Inter, Les Inrocks*), a regional source (e.g. *Le Parisien*), a commercial entity or promotional material for a commercial product (e.g. a record label's website), a governmental,

[30] NB casual fan discourse is distinguished by the authority of the statement, a statement made with confidence will appear more legitimate to an outsider and therefore convey authority and as such should be considered as having influence but not as 'insider' per se.

academic, or non-profit source, or an independent/niche/alternative media source (e.g. a zine, a minor literary magazine, a speciality rap magazine).

Following an inductive approach, engaging in a process of qualitative content analysis and close readings subject to the rigor of a grounded theory methodology, I have coded, re-coded and (re-)organised/categorised these texts and the codes in an iterative and comparative fashion. This was done initially without any specific question in mind, and as data and concepts emerged, I pursued specific questions and themes sometimes shifting to a more deductive approach when necessary. This was done by, first, reading and noting the dominant themes; or, open coding. This was followed by a second instance of re-reading with the intent to identify certain key themes, concepts, and manifest meanings that I had identified as relevant from the first readings (including myths and discourses). As a third step, I repeated this by reading with particular attention to the authorial intent and intended audience, the source and its organisational category (viz. mainstream, alternative) and both latent and manifest meanings, messages and representations. This was done with each text, compared with others texts, and when I obtained new texts, they were compared again and substantive codes were applied or modified with new data. Finally, by re-reading again, taking the gestalt of these texts in mind and the relevant cultural myths that had emerged in the prior readings an overall image of slam and the shapes of its discourse emerged. Throughout these readings I identified and coded key terms and concepts and kept note of them, wrote memos, and when applicable, used visual content analysis to assess the relevance—if any— of images, layout, colour schemes and so on. As these readings progressed within and in between these stages, I compared codes, reviewed memos, cross-checked, compared, and sought further data. As I identified substantive codes (i.e. liberté) I re-read with intent to ensure this code was correctly applied or if it had been missed. I also repeatedly condensed codes into larger categories, discovering the relationships between initial individual codes and establishing their family of resemblance and significance. Through such analysis, I was able to narrow down substantive codes into core categories and develop models to explore and explain their relationships. Finally what emerged was a core set of tenets that I argue are slam's brand identity.

Chapter Two

Slam as a Brand of Poetry: Brand Identity decoded

Le slam est un phénomène artistique [...] mais c'est aussi un phénomène social, ça va de pair—Rouda quoted in GDB 2009:195.

Brand identity, in the broad sense, is much like human identity as it is not simply a list of traits, but a gestalt of experience, characteristics, attitudes, presentation, beliefs, et cetera. However, when we talk about brand identity we are distilling it down it to the determinative characteristics that are taken in conjunction with other aspects (e.g. DNA, positioning) as I will present in this thesis for slam in arguing that branding is a useful theoretical tool for understanding French slam.

Branding theorists and experts have developed different ways of assessing brand identity. For instance, Jean-Noël Kapferer suggests that brand identity can be inferred is 'from the marks left by the brand, i.e. the products it has chosen to endorse and the symbols by which it is represented through time.' (2015:164). One way of doing this is by analysing the Brand DNA over time. Another way is to 'semiologically analyse the sending process' to try and discover an unarticulated plan underlying the brand's products, objectives, and symbols (ibid.). Chapter Four focuses on the DNA facets of slam's identity; but first, Chapter Three looks at the positioning of slam in its cultural context and vis-à-vis similar cultural products, and finally Chapter Five explores the image construction of slam via its mediatisation. Thus, this thesis as a whole addresses slam's brand identity semiologically via the language, images, and myths used in constructing slam's brand image in the public discourse whilst taking into account the DNA and positioning/cultural context of slam in order to elaborate its core brand identity. However, this chapter in particular addresses what unites all of these and is at the core of slam: its identity traits and how they co-exist and reinforce one another. Through

careful reading and grounded theory-based analysis as detailed in the methodology chapter, I have identified what I argue to be slam's brand identity encapsulated in ten characteristics or traits: liberté, rencontre, s'exprimer, diversité, métissage, partage, démocratique, colludique, accessibilité and immédiateté.

Kapferer's brand identity prism model is one of the common models used in identifying the facets of a brand's identity. As slam is not a traditional brand, but sui generis, these models are imperfect. Nonetheless, I find his brand identity prism useful for organising how these facets come together and how the characteristics I have identified as slam's identity characteristics interrelate with one another and with other traits that make slam identifiable as a brand. His prism is divided between six prisms and is cut along a vertical and horizontal axis. The leftmost facets (physique, relationship, and reflection) are external, they are what is identifiable from the outside of the brand. The rightmost are internal, they speak to the internal direction and ambitions of the brand. This distinction between internal/external is most crucial in understanding the distinction between 'Reflection' and 'Self-Image'. Reflection is how the ideal consumer of a brand is imagined. It is aspirational and how people might describe what they imagine to be the typical consumer of that brand. Self-image however is how those who consume the brand or engage with it see themselves; it is their identification and values that they feel are represented or augmented by their engagement with the brand. As for a non-traditional brand like slam, it is also how the brand sees itself since the brand is also its customers being sui generis and its market is anybody. Culture reflects the ethos that drive the culture of the brand. Personality are the traits one would ascribe the brand if it were a person, it is how people describe it. Relationship describes the relationship dynamic embodied in the brand, as all brands are communication and communication establishes a relationship. Lastly, physique is both the physical manifestation of the brand but also the tangible assets: its attributes and benefits. Finally, on the horizontal axis he differentiates between the picture of the sender and the picture of the receiver, this flow back and forth is whence the image development of the brand is built over time. This dynamic he incorporates in the prism is representative of communicative basis of brands. Therefore, the uppermost

facets are how we see the sender (slam) and the bottom facets, how an imagined or real potential consumer of slam is perceived. Together they form a contiguous, dynamic-whole that is the brand.

In figure 1 below I have mapped out the ten characteristics of slam's brand that I have identified through my analysis of slam. As slam is not a traditional brand, this prism is limited in its explanatory power; however, it is nonetheless useful here as a visual aid in how various traits of slam come together to form its brand identity. Alongside these identity characteristics I have also added other traits of slam's brand (in white). These traits are not the primary focus of the research here and are of secondary importance to slam's brand as they are not essential to its core or spirit, nor are they indicative of its ethos per se. However, they also support my extended argument that not only is slam a brand, but a cult brand specifically.

Cult brands attract a particular following and a community will develop around them. Cult brands, more so than non-cult brands, have a strongly defined culture and importantly, their ideological underpinnings become an answer to a social crisis felt by a certain group (Kapferer 2015:160). Douglas Holt (2004) in his study of cult brands (or iconic brands as he calls them) shows that they respond appropriately and with savvy to shifts in societal dynamics and to cultural movements. These brands resonate with groups who find solace in certain cultural myths (cf. Barthes 1970,1977) that are embodied in or espoused by the brand, and which help them to adjust and find their sense of identity relative to those cultural and societal dynamics. Accordingly, it is the primary ten characteristics of slam that resonate and are the basis of the ethos, the core of the brand identity.

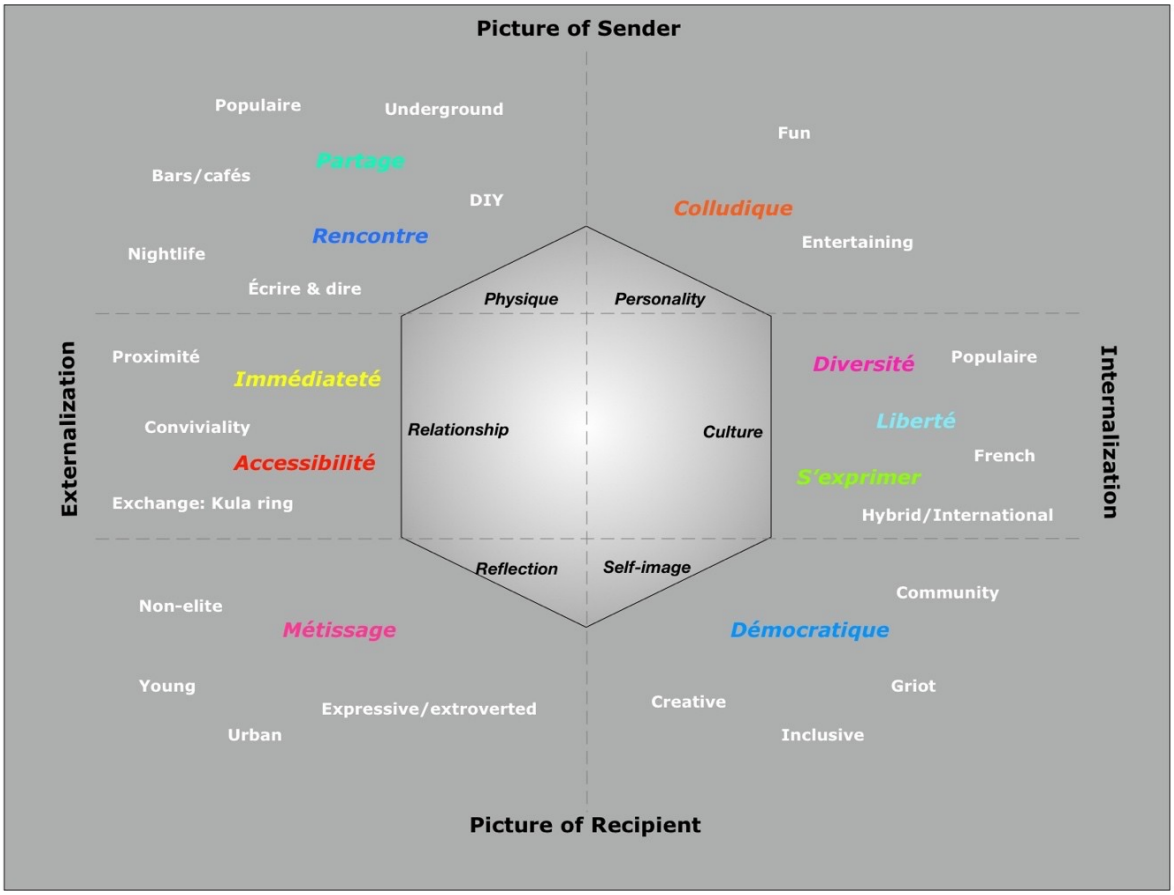


Figure 1. Brand Identity Prism

In this chapter, I will detail and discuss what I suggest are the characteristics/traits or themes of slam's brand identity. None of these traits exist in isolation, they are all interconnected and recursive or reflexive with other traits. With that in mind I will attempt to both detail these characteristics in isolation and how they relate to the other traits. To augment the discussion of these traits I include select quotations from slam activistes that further illustrate the signification of the trait to slam's identity.

Slam as a cultural phenomenon is intrinsically both social and creative. Accordingly, these traits also have both creative and social interpretations. Furthermore, they are always intrinsically interrelated and have a recursive effect on one another. Additionally, although I have selected one word to describe these traits as a metonym, the chosen word is also polysemic: it has more than one meaning and furthermore may have more than one reading or act as a code. In other words, in addition to its denotation there are sometimes several

connotations.[31] I have additionally identified meanings, readings, or interpretations from these metonyms which are not proper synonyms per se, but which nevertheless can be understood as falling under the same general semantic umbrella of meaning and signification. I will when necessary include within parentheses the trait that is being referred to if its metonym is not appropriate and when the use of the metonym is not appropriate grammatically.

I have divided the characteristics of slam's identity into two groups. This is primarily for analytical convenience; however, the core traits I begin with are slightly more central and obvious, even when slam is viewed superficially. Therefore, even though they are not necessarily more important than the others, they are stronger in terms of their image-making potential and thus more central as *brand* identity traits.

2.1 S'exprimer

S'exprimer, to express oneself, additionally, self-expression is the first core characteristic. Both of these meanings 'express oneself', and 'self-expression' are encapsulated in the identity trait 's'exprimer' albeit with subtle nuance in their distinction. I will refer to s'exprimer throughout this thesis, but there are times when the distinction between to express oneself in a general sense of expressing an idea or sentiment and self-expression meaning creative, artistic expression is warranted. Accordingly, I use self-expression with the hyphen to mean the latter, '*self* expression' without a hyphen and italicised for the former and *self/*expression if it is both in one. Otherwise, as with all these traits I will indicate if they are being invoked by including them in the text or within parentheses.

Firstly, to express oneself (*self* expression) is the primary activity of slam: to speak, *déclamer*. The very act of voicing a sentiment or a thought that is guaranteed to be heard by a willing audience can be empowering. The guarantee of an audience and the opportunity to declaim something to this audience is not readily available to everyone: 'Malheureusement en

[31] All of these traits would in terms of meaning and usage more properly fall under the third order of signification according to Barthes, the mythological or ideological. However, for the distinction of how I use the metonym and the various significations of it the denotated/connotated is useful (1970, 1977).

France, les prises de paroles sont extrêmement limitées, le slam c'est la possibilité de parler sur une scène.' (Rouda quoted in GdB 2009:194). Even posting online or on social media does not guarantee an audience, nor acknowledgment of being heard. Slam, accordingly, provides an open (libre/liberté) platform that makes expressing oneself accessible (accessibilité) and where that expression is guaranteed a minimum of reception. This expression and reception, the space for the 'partage' of *self* expression that is received in the same moment (immédiateté) can also be termed a 'rencontre' (which I will discuss below).

The second meaning of 's'exprimer' is the more creative oriented one of self-expression (with a hyphen). The concept of self-expression is often the core of creative endeavour writ large; however, it takes a special importance for slam when considered in conjunction with the other traits such as démocratique, liberté, and partage in particular. Indeed, as the activiste Yo recalls his time at one of the earliest slam venues, Les Lucioles in Belleville: 'Alors que le bar, c'est par principe une exception culturelle européenne et particulièrement française, qui est le lieu de convivialité, le forum démocratique. Alors les gens avaient besoin de parler, et ce besoin de parole, on l'a assouvi aux Lucioles.' (Maaroufi 2012). Thus, while it is a truism to state that self-expression is at the core of creative production; it is nonetheless characteristic of slam's identity vis-à-vis the gestalt of its identity characteristics. Given that s'exprimer is so central and is the essence of slam, I will refer to it throughout and it can be assumed to be present and relative to all aspects of slam as a poetic—creative and social—phenomenon.

2.2 Rencontre

Rencontre, or meeting, is the second core identity trait and core category. Importantly, it overlaps significantly with all the other traits. Indeed, many activistes define slam as a rencontre[32]—*une rencontre où quelqu'un a le droit de s'exprimer en toute liberté.*

[32] E.g. Tsunami MC, 'le slam est un spectacle sous forme de rencontres de poésies' (Midi Libre 2004); LSF, 'Le slam est une rencontre soudaine entre des publics différents […]' (2009:8); and GCM, '[…] le slam, ce sont des moments de rencontre où la scène est partagée par tous ceux qui le veulent' (Dicale 2008) among others.

This reading is the primary reading of rencontre, and is an abstract, even metaphorical, interpretation rather than a literal one. It also encompasses other identity traits: Intrinsic to rencontre is the concept of partage and immédiateté (see below). Rencontre also can be understood as the space or the event itself in which *le partage de poésie se déroule* and that slam is the moment in which this occurs. This rencontre is enacted in the immédiateté, the moment, of the exchange of self-expression and then manifested through a texte and the receipt of it by a public. The partage and the rencontre happen in real time, it is synchronous communication and exchange. However, the entry into partage happens first, and once the expression is received by the listeners *and* facilitated by accessibilité, immédiateté, and a colludique[33] atmosphere, there is a rencontre.[34] The immediacy of communication and the physical immediacy, or proximity, between the performer and the audience are characteristic of the liveness of slam and intrinsic to its values— which I discuss further under immédiateté below. This primary meaning of rencontre is both social and creative. However, there are two other readings of rencontre which address each aspect individually.

The first secondary reading is the literal reading of rencontre, that is the meeting of individuals. A value and identity trait that underlines this is that of métissage, specifically, the diversity/mix of people, cultures, languages et cetera present at a scène slam. This ideal of rencontre is also closely connected with not only démocratique as the result of this rencontre, but also colludique and accessibilité in that the accessibilité and colludique atmosphere of slam can facilitate this rencontre. This is part of the social aspect rather than the creative one; however, there is the belief that the social rencontre facilitates and enhances the creative experience and vice-versa.

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[33] Briefly, as I discuss this in more detail below, colludique is a term I have borrowed from Camille Vorger who uses it to refer to 'la connivence par le sourire'.

[34] Put differently, écouter + dire = partage, s'exprimer + immédiateté = rencontre. Rencontre implies a more profound poetic and humanistic experience than partage, rencontre is not merely an exchange but a meeting. However, partage is a prerequisite for rencontre, the space of partage must be initiated first for rencontre to be possible. Partage is the establishment of a shared space whereas rencontre is the fullness of the experiencing of that shared space together. Furthermore, partage is a liberating effect of s'exprimer. Without the free ability to express oneself, true partage is not possible. Partage that leads to rencontre requires some level of authenticity, which may come by way of vulnerability, but at minimum is based in that immediacy and shared experiential moment.

The second, creative, reading of rencontre is exactly that: the creative analogue to the social meaning (people coming together in a meeting): different styles and works coming together in meeting (i.e. the scène itself). This reading of rencontre is also based on creative liberté and diversité as well as the secondary, creative sub-reading of métissage: mélange or mixture. I will discuss this further below; however, a quote from GCM neatly describes a result of this creative imperative, '[le slam est] une rencontre entre la tradition et la modernité' (Libération 2004).

Rencontre is a core trait of slam's brand identity. It is not only a way to describe the actual event itself but also the space in which slam occurs. Furthermore, it describes the social interaction and participatory energy that characterises a slam scène and additionally encapsulates the creative mixture found in the diversity of textes performed during a session and the meeting of styles, influences, cultures, languages, and ideas shared in the slam moment—itself understood as a rencontre between the performer and the public via the partage of self-expression in the form of oral, live, poetry.

2.3 Liberté

Liberté is the third core characteristic. This is a complex and polysemic trait that I have chosen to identify by the single lemma, 'liberté'. Liberté refers to the idea of free-speech, a concept deeply rooted in the ideals of democracy and modern liberal society. It also refers to the freedom to express oneself in a space that is intended expressly for self-expression. An important assumption in slam is not only that anything is permissible—expression is open and free—but also that everyone is welcome. This assumption underlies another trait 'démocratique'; which is further supported by the characteristic of 'accessibilité'. This ideal of a truly egalitarian (démocratique) forum of free speech may not always work in practice but nonetheless constantly informs slam.

With particular regards to slam and its creative aspect, liberté also refers to the *openness* that slam maintains with regard to style, genre, references, et cetera. Liberté in this sense means free from canon, free from genre constraints, free from expectations or

assumptions about your self-expression. In slam's beginnings, PLH described it as 'La liberté d'expression, c'est à dire de forme et de fond, est totale. Créations originales, horoscopes, Victor Hugo et autres recettes de cuisine: tout est permis, sauf la censure!' (Bernal 2001). This tradition of liberté continued despite his turn towards competition in the scène ouverte tradition of slam. For instance, as a journalist attending an atelier hosted by Selecta Seb at a *collège* describes the textes, 'Derrière le micro, la grande liberté du slam dans le style comme dans les thèmes évoqués a donné toute sa voix. De la passion du Nutella ou des jeux vidéo à la déclaration d'amour à sa mère en passant par l'éloge de la vie ou de l'amitié, les slams ont su conquérir le public.' (Genévrier 2012).

Slam can be contrasted with traditional poetry and rap in that those are both genres which have specific codes, a canon, conventions, and expectations held by the audience. Slam frees itself from any such confines, the only limits being that it is oral (ideally, live) and around three-minutes in length. Rap is tied by the rhythm of the breakbeat, slam is a capella so the performer can adopt whatever rhythm they feel is best, 'Avec le slam, on a trouvé une liberté qui n'existait pas dans le rap. Dans le slam, il n'y a pas de code rythmique. Ton rythme, c'est ta pulsion du moment. On n'est pas emprisonné dans une mesure.' (Souleymane Diamanka quoted in Libération 2004). Rap is a genre that is deeply tied to its subcultural expression and accordingly there are certain tropes and motifs (e.g. the ego-trip, intertextual references to other rap songs and rappers) that occur in rap and which are expected by the audience and the market, 'Le rap est trop souvent prisonnier de l'agressivité de ses clichés et des impératifs commerciaux.' (AAM quoted in Davet 2006). A rap song of course can opt not to incorporate these tropes and motifs but it is still nonetheless restricted by the lyrical integration with the breakbeat and importantly, that it ought to have some tie to its subcultural expression (see below, and Chapters Three, Six).[35]

[35] This restriction is emphasised by the rapper Kery James when asked in a joint-interview with GCM about the differences between rap and slam regarding love songs and their themes and sentiment ('une jolie déclaration d'amour' for slam versus one that is 'compliquée, voire impossible' in the song 'Thug Love'): 'Au-delà du rap et du slam, c'est avant tout une question de personnalité. A chacun sa nature, sa capacité à exprimer des sentiments. Si j'avais eu l'envie et l'inspiration de Grand Corps malade [*sic*] pour écrire cette chanson, je n'aurais pas hésité. Je ne me l'interdis pas en tout cas. Mais c'est vrai que le rap s'enferme dans certains codes, et en sortir signifie s'exclure aux yeux de certains.' (Binet 2008).

Traditional poetry, even prose poetry, is poetry that is written from within the canon. It is not naïve or outsider art, it is written with knowledge and often reference or influence from the poetry canon. Even prose poetry or free verse are still defined by the distinction from lyrical poetry. Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter Three on positioning, many people in the general public may not recognise free-verse as poetry and instead associate poetry for instance with the alexandrine structure they were taught at school—which is ipso facto constrained in and by its form. Slam allows rap, slam allows alexandrines, but as mentioned above, it also allows the performance of a recipe for penne carbonara. The aspiration that is always present in slam is to enable free expression, self-expression without limits to the form or style or system of reference whence the expression comes—and without social censure. It is an open (*accessible*, démocratique, and *libre*) space for both free speech (social) and free expression (creative). The result of this openness is the marked and characteristic diversité of both creative expression and of participants, slam 'c'est une pratique poétique oratoire. Tout le monde est invité à dire de la poésie, dans différents lieux: théâtre, bar, librairie…Il suffit de s'inscrire puis la scène est ouverte. Toute forme de poésie est acceptée, vers ou prose, dans tous les styles. Ce peut être de l'improvisation; de l'écriture automatique…La manière de la dire est tout aussi libre. On peut crier, hurler son texte, le rapper, le murmurer, dire les mots à l'envers…' (Tsunami MC quoted in S.N. 2004).

There is an additional brand image aspect of slam's liberté identity trait that ought to be mentioned and which is also related to the broad concept of democracy via liberal western thought. Liberté in this instance is that of political freedom and of human dignity and rights. This is not a primary meaning of liberté but nonetheless plays into its brand image via the representations of certain activistes. Furthermore, this meaning of liberté can be identified in some of the social action taken by activistes in the slam scene. There are two activistes in particular whose media representation embodies this that are worth mentioning briefly. The first, Tata Milouda is a slameuse who has received a great deal of media attention (see Chapter

Five). Her prominence is partly due to her harrowing yet powerful personal story of liberation from domestic abuse, oppression, and illiteracy facilitated through her experience with slam. Her story is both exemplary of liberté but also another trait, accessibilité (see below). The second is the activiste Dgiz who has been involved in slam since its early days. While incarcerated he first began to write, to 'crier mes envies de liberté' (Davet 2006). Indeed, his personal story mirrors that of Ray, the protagonist in *Slam*.[36] Ray's story and the film too have been influential on this reading of liberté and its association with slam, and this meaning of liberté has been furthered by the public social actions of slam activistes hosting ateliers not only in retirement homes and schools, but prisons as well. Access to culture as right and as a guarantor of democracy (thus, equality) is an underlying assumption in such action. There is also the myth of slam that self-expression and expressing oneself via the partage of your texte in the slam rencontre brings to the fore shared human experience and interpersonal connection (colludique) amongst diverse but equal participants via this 'poésie de proximité' and is thus also liberating—if only metaphorically or symbolically.

Finally, there is however one reading of liberté that should not be mistaken as applicable to slam: freestyle.* There is a misconception that slam textes are, by convention, improvised, not extemporaneous. The vast majority are not and activistes are quick to emphasise the amount of writing and work that goes on ahead[37] of the slam session: 'Le slam oscille entre oralité et écriture. C'est un leurre de croire qu'il ne s'agit que d'improvisation, même si cela arrive dans un pour cent des cas. Le slam demeure très écrit, et jouit d'une préparation à la virgule près. Pourtant, j"'écris" [*sic*] pour "dire". Dès que je couche deux vers sur le papier, je les déclame à l'oral. Je veille scrupuleusement au rythme des mots et à leur sonorité.' (GCM quoted in Lemancel 2008). Thus, although not only can a slam texte be free verse poetry, it *can* also be freestyle since there are no rules or conventions against it thanks to the liberté inherent in slam; a slam texte is, however, unlikely to be freestyle and not only because of the difficulty inherent to such a feat. Accordingly, 'liberté' or its derived readings

[36] See Chapter Four.
[37] See 'atelier' in Chapter Six.

like 'libre' should not be mistaken to suggest that slam is predominantly freestyle or that freestyling is especially valued.

2.4 Partage

Partage is the first trait I will discuss that falls under the what I consider to be the second tier of identity characteristics. These are less determinative and obvious than the core, but are nonetheless essential and highly influential on slam's brand. Alongside partage, I include immédiateté, démocratique, accessibilité, colludique, diversité and métissage in this tier. Although I have chosen not to further tier these characteristics, some like partage are more central than others (like métissage or accessibilité) which are more supporting traits or results of the others. However, they are all important and in different instances they carry different weight so any ranking would be imprecise and more confusing than informative. However, I will start with partage in particular since it is closely tied with a core characteristic, rencontre, and furthermore informs the rest of the characteristics as it is a foundational activity of slam.

Partage is simply to share. However, its reading is far more profound than that. The sharing of poetry is the direct manifestation of slam, whereas the sharing of one's self-expression is a value that informs slam. Furthermore, this second sense of sharing as a value in the rencontre of slam, is linked with another characteristic, colludique. Colludique includes the concepts of conviviality and collaboration but also with a ludic aspect that is foundational to slam. To share is not just to put your work out there but also to grow as a creative alongside others. The slam session creates a space for shared creative and personal development.

As for the social/creative aspect and dynamic of partage, like the other traits partage is both. In terms of the social, partage is the experience and opportunity for (sometimes literally) 'L'idéal, c'est de partager la scène et le micro' (GCM quoted in Hache 2006). This experience of sharing the scène (throughout the duration of the slam session but occasionally simultaneously) comprising a multitude of poetry and of slameurs/-euses helps to ensure the diversité and the ludique (entertaining) atmosphere which characterise slam and which are

central to its broad appeal. Furthermore, this social aspect of partage is also tied to the expression of one's self. It is a space for sharing textes that are not just creative but also personal or political (see below under 'démocratique' and 'diversité): 'qu'est-ce que le slam? Partager des idées, des sensations.' (Lynx K quoted in Normal 2005:9).

The ideal for this type of partage is reinforced by the ideal for diversité, both social and creative:

> C'est aussi un enjeu social: se questionner, ensemble. Cette communauté du slam, elle est magnifique parce qu'il y a des jeunes, des vieux, des hommes et des femmes, tout le monde! Et artistiquement, c'est pareil: on ne regarde pas la qualité spécialement. Tant mieux s'il y a de la qualité, mais on soutient ce [*sic*] qui bégayent, qui sont timides, qui tremblotent de la feuille... (Dgiz quoted in Maaroufi 2013).

To share the stage and to share the event with others also helps to create that sense of conviviality whilst also reducing pressure on any one individual allowing for greater social and creative liberté. This last point leads into the creative aspect of partage; that by sharing space creative collaboration is possible and furthermore (mutual) inspiration. Partage is also the sharing of creative expression that can engender further creative expression. This sharing, and the openness (liberté) of slam that allows it, can create a rencontre, or event, in which creative métissage *is* the work of art, 'Le rap a capella peut être du slam, mais le slam, ce n'est pas que du rap a capella, c'est beaucoup plus ouvert. C'est de la poésie urbaine, une rencontre entre la tradition et la modernité. C'est aussi un esprit, celui de partager un texte avec le public.' (GCM quoted in Libération 2004). The sum of all the performances is a métissage, it is a collage of self-expression. The diversité that creates this métissage is enabled by the creative and social partage. Importantly, partage in the slam sense is built upon the immediacy of the liveness and orality that define slam.

2.5 Immédiateté

Immédiateté, or immediacy, is the next characteristic of slam's brand identity I will address. In addition to meaning immediacy, the reading of this term is also instant/instantaneous, interactivity, a moment/an instant, and is manifested through orality (an essential convention of slam). Immédiateté is a necessary characteristic due to the oral

and live nature of slam. Oral poetry, especially when live and in a dynamic and colludique atmosphere, demands quick comprehension in contrast to other forms of poetry where the audience can take their time with the text. Furthermore, unlike most rap and chanson, slam does not expect a chorus in which the audience is reminded of the thesis of the texte. Comprehension is important to the experience of partage and essential to have a rencontre with the public. That rencontre is also an experiential moment and thus immediate reception is crucial. One could argue that without comprehension on the part of the receiver the goal of expressing oneself (feeling heard) has not fully been realised even if self-expression in the creative sense has. An artist can share their self-expression but if nobody 'gets it' they have not really communicated fully with their audience. Accordingly, some slameurs prefer to write their textes in a way that is *accessible* –or easy to understand in their use of vocabulary, themes, and structure (see below). This sense of immédiateté is a creative one and it also distinguishes the slam texte as essentially ephemeral and thus accordingly slam is experiential, 'L'essence du slam, c'est l'instantané. Le texte existe dans l'instant et il disparaît. Quand je suis dans le public et qu'un texte me plaît, j'écoute comme un fou: cette phrase est géniale, mais il faut que je capte la suivante; si je n'attrape pas le texte, il n'existe nulle part.' (GCM quoted in Dicale 2008).

There is also another reading of the creative aspect of immédiateté which is the emphasis, if not insistence, on liveness and orality. Slam is oral: slameurs/-euses *écrivent à l'oral* (borrowing GCM's idiom). Thus, while anthologies of slam have been published, these texts ought to be considered the equivalent of the script for a play that is meant to be watched rather than read. Indeed, slam on the page is easily regarded as poor in quality because of this. However, the orality and (ideally) liveness[38] of slam is essential and definitional of it as a creative form and to judge it on the basis of written poetry is misguided: '*l'écriture slam* [est] différente de celle de l'écrivain. Notre travail commun c'est d'écrire. Le slam c'est condenser

[38] I note that 'liveness' is an ideal because while purists argue that slam is only live and in person (possibly a live-stream), others accept recordings of slam, and others may also accept printed textes. However, in this last instance they may not call it slam but instead, traditional poetry. Likewise, a recording of slam may be deemed 'spoken word' or 'issu du slam'. As always, there are individual exceptions and interpretations. The liberté of slam justifies pushing the boundaries of conventions, including slam's relative few.

l'intensité, le livre c'est disperser l'intensité. L'écriture d'un livre c'est une relecture incessante. Un truc à devenir fou. Le slam ça va vivre sur une scène, ça change tout.' (Dgiz quoted in GdB 2009:144-145). The concern for immédiateté is always present in the writing of slam and I will now address the social aspect of immédiateté.

A second reading of immédiateté is the moment, the moment of the partage and thus of the rencontre. This is the *claque* of slam. It is something that is valued as a slameur/-euse because it allows for immediate feedback from and interactivity with the audience. This interactivity is also a large part of the conviviality, the colludique atmosphere which brings (diverse) people together (in a métissage) for a rencontre and partage of poetic self-expression. This interactivity is characteristic of slam and the colludique atmosphere is emblematic. This is in contrast to the archetypal poetry reading which may be staider and more traditional in its audience-performer dynamic in that it maintains the fourth-wall and respect is shown only after the performance is finished. This is also in contrast to rap, where although the audience is not held to the same expectation of quiet reception, there is little opportunity for interaction with the audience due to the music: '[dans le slam] Il y a aussi plus d'interactivité avec le public. Avec le rap, on ne s'arrête pas de rapper parce que le public réagit. D'ailleurs, on l'entend moins à cause de la musique. Avec le slam, quand tu dis ton texte, tu captes les réactions, le ton de ta voix varie en fonction d'elles.' (John Banzaï quoted in Libération 2004). Slam's value placed on immédiateté, communicative accessibilité, and its colludique atmosphere create a space for partage and thus rencontre *in the moment*.

Finally, to circle back to the first reading of immédiateté, or what we could characterise as near-instant comprehension, there is also a social aspect to it. Slam can be described as 'une poésie de proximité' (cf. Dgiz quoted in Davet 2006; GCM quoted in Painset 2015). The ease of communication creates a closeness with the public through creative expression that is based in a shared mode of language or expression and the shared moment. Obtuse, esoteric, or otherwise difficult to *capter* textes—given the ideal for diversité, human diversité in particular, at a session—mitigate this proximity. By valuing immédiateté over leisurely contemplation (or laboured contemplation even!), this risk is minimised and in turn, creates a more convivial

and democratic atmosphere. Such an atmosphere is also conducive to the experience of partage, thus leading to rencontre and thus allowing for both self-expression and the chance to express oneself in such a way that its *claque* is felt.

2.6 Accessibilité

Accessibilité is the idea of accessibility but also openness,[39] and is closely related to that of démocratique—which I discuss immediately below. As I discuss in Chapter Three regarding traditional poetry, that art world can appear inaccessible to those who are not already close to it. The mythology of slam tells of its origins in a bar in Pigalle, frequented by drug-addicts, prostitutes, and street punks. This image is in contrast to that of a traditional poetry reading. The reality of accessibility is not what matters here, but the presumption, image, or myth of it. A characteristic of slam's identity is thus that it not only appears accessible in contrast to other creative forms—like traditional poetry and rap— which may have the appearance of being inaccessible, but that slam also strives to be effectually accessible. In addition to free inscription to a scène, one of the hallmarks of the scène ouverte tradition has been the 'rule' of *un vers dit, une verre offert*. This is the basic, social aspect of accessibilité. However, accessibilité is more than making sure that anyone can participate in a scène, it is also about creating an environment and *dispositif* that makes it such that poetry itself, the consumption *and* production of, is accessible to—and thus able to be enjoyed by—anyone.

Like the other characteristics, accessibilité has effects on both the social and creative aspects of slam. I have already addressed the obvious social aspect of accessibilité, one that aims to ensure diversité, and I will now address the creative aspect and the less overt social aspects.

As I mentioned above regarding 'immédiateté', the value of accessibilité can have the effect of modifying the language or style in which one writes their texte. This is the case for

[39] Whereas liberté is also openness, and liberté and accessibilité overlap, the openness that is liberté is in the sense of open and free to interpretation and expression. Here openness is to mean ideally welcoming and not hermetic, no gatekeepers: open access.

GCM who explains, ‘Ce que [*sic*] me caractérise, c'est une spontanéité, une accessibilité dans l'écriture. J'aime raconter des histoires alors que d'autres slameurs sont peut-être plus abstraits.’ (Hache 2006). As he says, others are more abstract, or prefer to challenge the audience rather than assume a lowest common denominator. They might see elderly or children as part of their public but choose not to modify their work to those who may be too immature or too hard of hearing to grasp it fully. This choice is part of the liberté of slam. Accessibilité is not a strict rule, but rather, in addition to being an identity trait, it is a core value and thus arguably one of the mores of slam. However, as a value and a trait of slam’s brand it still has a presence even for those who strive for a more sophisticated poetic expression, for instance Tô explains, '[...] quelqu’un qui m'a dit que ce que je faisais était trop bien et que le public n'était pas prêt. Bien sûr que j'ai une langue complexe mais j'ai l'expérience. C'est une idée qu'ont les gens, les intellos comme quoi le public est bête. Moi, j'ai les outils pour emmener le public à la poésie.' (Tô quoted in Dame Gabrielle 2012b). Among those tools I would suggest is the spirit of accessibility. Though he admits he does not use everyday language, his goal is still to *rendre la poésie accessible au plus grand nombre*. This maxim is a value that is repeated frequently, and is linked with the descriptor tagline often seen when referring to slam in the public discourse: ‘l*a poésie démocratisée*’. This idea of making poetry accessible, to democratise it is the subtle social aspect whereas the motivation to write in such a way that is accessible is an optional creative aspect. However, the creative aspect of accessibilité can go further, 'La force du Slam réside vraiment dans le fait de faire de la poésie sans s'en rendre compte.' (Hocine Ben 2011:115). With this statement, activiste Hocine Ben is expressing that slam’s ludic aspect and its openness, its liberté from genre, canon, and form, allows the experience of poetry without the stigma of poetry, per Dame Gabrielle, ‘L'idée de départ et qui demeure est de se réapproprier la poésie devenue académique, élitiste, bref chiante.' (Dame Gabrielle 2013a).

The stereotype of poetry being elitist and boring, whereas slam is not only socially but aesthetically an antidote to this, pervades the idea of accessibilité and of démocratique, ‘La poésie s'est sclérosée à force d'élitisme. Aujourd'hui, elle renaît, plus pétillante que jamais. Elle

descend de sa tour d'ivoire Grâce [*sic*] au Slam qui accueille tout ce qui bouge. L'essential du Slam, c'est de s'exprimer, de crier haut et fort ce que les poètes académiques taisent, de parler de la vie réelle. (Les Polysémiques quoted in Le Progrès 2003). In other words, the creative effect of accessibilité is to allow that liberté of expression such that new forms, new styles, new interpretations of old works et cetera are able to be heard and experienced, for poetry to be a part of life rather than a hobby for a select few, 'Je viens de la poésie traditionnelle, trop souvent snob et mortifère. Le slam, au contraire, c'est le rythme, la vie.' (George quoted in Davet 2006).

Accordingly, orality—thanks to its instantaneous nature— is the ideal medium for such expression and this reinforces the accessibilité of slam. A fantastic example of this is Tata Milouda (see Chapter Five). She was illiterate, yet she was able to participate in slam thanks to its orality and the value of accessibility. In less extreme cases, the accessibilité of slam allows people who might not have much exposure to poetry or literature to engage with the art form without feeling inadequate or unprepared. Additionally, it provides a platform to those who might not have a traditional trajectory and thus access to an audience for their talent and self-expression, 'toute le monde ne vient pas forcément des grandes écoles. Les talents parfois sont très bien cachés et nous sommes contents de les découvrir lors de ces événements. Ici, il n'y a pas de règle précise. Chacun fait ce qu'il souhaite, comme il le souhaite [...] L'écriture a plusieurs langages, il s'agit de prendre conscience de ses lignes fortes, de trouver ou retrouver ses propres gestes.' (Robert Dextre quoted in Pelotier 2011).

Finally, in addition to providing access to poetry and *self* expression to those who might not easily have it otherwise or in as colludique a setting, slam has also affected the dominant audience-performer dynamic physically, emotionally, and culturally. As Dame Gabrielle explains in her incisive essay 'Le slam, petites précisions sur le sujet' on her prominent blog dedicated to oral expression *Cris & Poésie,* 'Le slam a aussi le vertu de réconcilier l'artiste et le public en réaction au star-système qui crée la distance jusqu'à éloigner les étoiles montantes de la population et de leurs réalités.'(2013a). Firstly, there is a proximity in terms of the style, content, and themes expressed as poetry. GCM's body of work is

emblematic of this *poésie de proximité*, 'J'aime bien utiliser les mots de tous les jours, je ne m'interdis pas d'utiliser le verlan, l'argot, des gros mots, ce n'est pas incompatible avec la poésie.' (GCM quoted in Painset 2015). He furthermore states that he tells stories about what he can see from his window; about his city, about love, about pain and the past—all themes that are more familiar to a diverse audience's reality and experience of the *quotidien* (Hache 2006). The accessibility of such themes for a diverse audience comprised of '[m]inots dionysiens, bobos parisiens, jeunes et vieux franciliens' additionally enables a better rencontre, the audience can relate to the themes and to the performer (Bureau 2006). Finally, this erasure of the audience-performer barrier is also physical. The stage may be little more than an area of the room cleared of furniture with a microphone rather than an elevated platform that distances the audience, raising the performer (literally and arguably metaphorically) above the public.[40] This not only reminds the audience that they are equal with the slameur/-euse but also reinforces the possibility of becoming a slameur/-euse themselves. As I mentioned above, there is a certain liberté and immédiateté in the possibility for direct reactive participation with the audience for the slameur/-euse as well as for the audience who can feel more connected to the creative expression by being able to immediately engage with it via their own *self* expression. Furthermore, in conjunction with the value of immédiateté embodied as physical proximité, and thus also quick access, we see specific manifestations of slam like *slam sauvage*: slam performances on the street, in the metro, or wherever. The orality, accessible nature, and goal of an immediate impression upon the audience means that even if only in passing before the metro doors slam shut, there is still that moment of partage de la poésie: *The slam rencontre*.

Accessibilité reinforces the démocratique and furthermore propagates the prevalence of métissage and diversité within slam: all people, all poetic expression; anyone and any

[40] Interestingly, both chanson and slam exemplify this aesthetic and convention. In chanson, the proximity of the singer adds to the authenticity and the DIY aesthetic that is characteristic of chanson. In slam, this has a similar effect in addition to also erasing the line between artist/audience and reinforcing the notion that anyone can go on stage and be a slameur/-euse, 'Ce qui nous a passionné, c'est cette espèce de réduction de la frontière entre le public et la personne qui est sur scène. T'es slameur que dans l'instant où tu montes sur l'estrade.' (Rouda quoted in *Slam ce qui nous brûle* 2008).

poetry. Slam is a space for making both the consumption and the production of poetry accessible in a new way and for many activistes this is also a place to overcome poetry's reputation. Slam activiste Narcisse explains that in his ateliers he asks who likes poetry and none of the participants raise their hand. He then performs one of his textes and upon receiving a positive reception he explains to the participants that it was slam, or poetry. This ambition of making poetry accessible and sharing it to as many as possible (démocratique) is slam's guiding ethos: 'le slam, c'est ça. Une forme de soirée qui a été créée pour rendre la poésie accessible, vivante, intéressante. Le slam n'a pas révolutionné la manière d'écrire la poésie, mais il a complètement transformé la manière de la dire et la manière de l'écouter.' (Narcisse quoted in Glévarec 2014).

2.7 Démocratique

> *Sous sa forme résolument novatrice, le slam fait de la poésie un spectacle vivant, interactif et démocratisé. […] Le slam est un mouvement artistique, culturel et social, marqué par la volonté de rendre la création et l'expression de la poésie accessibles au plus grand nombre. Les scènes slam donnent la parole à tous les amateurs de lecture et d'écriture, qui expriment le désir de participer à l'événement—L'Hérault du jour 2004.*

Démocratique is perhaps the most straight-forward of the identity traits, and indeed slam is characterised by the phrase 'poésie démocratisée'. On the one hand, as I discussed above, slam is democratised in contrast to the *perception* and *image* of traditional poetry and other similar poetry scenes as this excerpt from an early article about slam shows, 'Démocratique. Les amoureux de [la] langue française exclus des lectures de poésie traditionnelles y trouvaient un lieu démocratique pour « dire, déclamer, hululer, chuchoter, scander, aboyer»' (PLH quoted in Binet 2000).

However, slam is also démocratique in and of itself, without comparison with other poetic phenomena. Within the reading of démocratique is the concept of egalitarianism; or more aptly of equality, fraternity, and liberty: 'La définition la moins compliquée du slam, *à la française*, serait *liberté, gratuité, égalité*, puisqu'on prend le même temps chacun quand on s'exprime, et puis *fraternité*, parce qu'on boit un coup, en toute convivialité.' (Dgiz quoted in

Maaroufi 2013). However, linking in with accessibilité this idea of equality and egalitarianism is reinforced: 'Ce qui est attirant c'est cette absence de barrière, ce pied d'égalité sur lequel on est.' (Madatao quoted in Maaroufi 2012). Here, Madatao is referring literally to the stage but also metaphorically to slam itself; in particular, a slam session. Not only, like Dgiz explains, is the scène and session kept equal by limiting the time for each slameur/-euse to 3 minutes, but there is an assumption of equality in that there is no right or wrong style, genre, or form for the poetry declaimed *sur scène*. This is in contrast to what Craig and Dubois (2010) (see Chapter Three) observed at contemporary poetry art world readings where there was an 'objective' standard of quality—or a right and wrong way to do poetry—that was accepted amongst the gatekeepers of that art world and by which an outsider poet would be excluded or, less likely for those drawn to slam, included.

This lack of prescribed style, themes, genre, or content is indicative of the liberté of slam and by virtue of it, slam is kept more démocratique in its accessibilité, 'Pour moi, le secret de la vitalité du slam se cache dans sa recette. Le slam n'est qu'un mode d'emploi: quelques minutes à égalité partagées par tous sur une scène. J'ai depuis participé à près de mille événements. La recette est bonne: je n'ai pas encore d'extinction de voix.' (Normal quoted in GdB 2009 :159). Limiting what can be considered appropriate for slam could exclude would be slameurs/-euses either by not accommodating their tastes or by making the session appear more restrictive and intimidating. The colludique (see below) atmosphere facilitates making anyone feel welcome and reduces the pressure someone might feel in participating by making the session play-like. Ateliers (see Chapter Six) also ensure that slam is démocratisée by assisting new slameurs/-euses in crafting their textes ahead of time: put another way, educating the people so that they can fully participate in their rightful and free *self*/expression. Additionally, as I discuss, this also has the effect of helping to increase the diversity of the textes shared as well as the diversity of the participants themselves, 'Le slam est au carrefour de tous les arts, ça représente toute la France, notre grand gueule, notre démocratie. Tant que la parole reste au peuple, tout va bien.' (Dgiz quoted in Binet 2006b).

This diverse mix of people and textes are assumed to be *sur un pied d'égalité* and this equality, access, freedom, and collaborative action that sustains the slam scene is part of its démocratique essence, 'Pour moi le slam c'est un mouvement qui a pour but de démocratiser la poésie, c'est un moment qui permet aux personnes qui ont le goût de l'écriture de se rencontrer. Chacun est invité à déclamer des textes sur un pied d'égalité.' (Nada quoted in GdB 2009:101).

By engaging with the idea of poetry being democratised—brought to people who previously had poor access— and enacting this ideal through slam's conventions, institutions, and identity characteristics, slam has also changed the relationship people have with poetry and artistic production generally. It is not just poetry that it aspires to democratise but the opportunity for creative self-expression as well as *self* expression, or *la prise de la parole*:

> Dans ce phénomène du slam, il y a quelque chose très positif [*sic*], parce que tout le monde a quelque chose à dire. Après, passer le cap de l'écrire, de l'exprimer, de le partager [*sic*], avec cette ouverture, cette possibilité de prendre la parole, que n'importe qui puisse accéder à une expression oral [*sic*], c'est épatant! A un moment donné, il y a une saturation du fait qu'il n'y ait que certaines personnes, des professionnels du langage, des comédiens, des chanteurs, ou dans un autre sens les professionnels de la politique, qui aient le droit de l'ouvrir, qui aient la spécialité, la virtuosité, et donc l'exclusivité de l'expression orale. Là ça se manifeste au travers du slam, mais de toute façon ce n'est pas d'aujourd'hui. (Denis Lavant quoted in Maaroufi 2013).

This necessity to speak, to express oneself, and the ability to do so is inherently democratic but as some activistes in the slam scene will also point out, the scène itself can facilitate the sort of discourse and free speech that is crucial in a democracy. Katel, a student from Cameroon explains that, 'Le slam est pour moi une façon citoyenne d'aborder la vie et des thèmes dont ne parlent pas les journaux' (Davet 2006). Similarly, Madatao explains that slam is more than just poetry, but also a chance to engage with his *concitoyens* :

> [le slam] c'est aussi un espace de démocratie. A l'heure où on ne sait plus trop pour qui on veut voter, si on est représenté par quelqu'un ou pas, c'est une façon quelque part d'échanger et de voir un petit peu où en est la société. Mon investissement là-dedans, il n'est pas que artistique, il est aussi politique, dans le sens de se rendre compte de qui dit quoi, qui habite où, et si on arrive en fait à vivre ensemble.' (Madatao quoted in Maaroufi 2012).

Another slameur, Yo interjects in this interview, 'L'étymologie de politique, *vie de la cité…'* to

which Madatao responds, 'Oui, je pense qu'on a un rôle à jouer en créant des choses qui permettent au peuple de se rassembler, de partager, et d'échanger. On ne nous écoute plus, donc à nous de créer nos instants de parole.' I have quoted extensively from this exchange between the two activistes because this sort of activism that creates democratic spaces of the partage and rencontre of *self*-/expression is emblematic of slam's ethos to spread poetry *au plus grand nombre* and even arguably to 'créer sans cesse de nouvelles scènes pour amorcer la démocratie' (Sania 2005).

2.8 Colludique (Collaborative and Ludic)

Vorger in her study developed the concept of 'colludique' which I have chosen to adopt here as an identity trait for slam because it is not only informative but also provides a nuanced and slam specific term for this identity trait. Colludique is an expansion of Jakobson's 'phatic function' of language, or language for the sake of interaction. Vorger notes that many linguists have suggested adding a ludic function to Jakobson's six functions of language. Expanding on that, as her thesis takes a particular interest in the development of neologisms in slam, Vorger argues that the *fonction ludique* furthermore 'peut être liée au phénomène de la néologie' as suggested by Pruvost and Sablayrolles (2003) (Vorger 2012: 187). From this she arrives at the concept of 'colludique' which she defines as 'cette nécessaire connivence visant à faire fonctionner le potentiel ludique de la langue' (ibid). In addition to this concern with neologisms, interactivity—or active participation by the audience-- with the slameur/-euese is intrinsic to her development of colludique, 's'agissant de «jouer ensemble» avec les mots' (188).

My adoption of this term 'colludique' as a trait of slam's identity builds upon her development of colludique. Her work is primarily concerned with the linguistic content of the slam textes, whereas my focus is on the phenomenon of slam as a social, cultural and creative phenomenon and therefore is prior to and greater than the textes and their particular linguistic traits. Thus, as Vorger identified, the ludic is inherent in some slameur's linguistic expressions (word play and neologisms). However, I suggest additionally that all slam activity exists within

a ludic context—prior to and independent from any consideration of competition. Danto (1964) argued regarding the *artworld* that its production exists within an atmosphere of art theory. Similarly, I suggest slam occurs within an atmosphere of the ludic—accordingly, given its simultaneous creative and social impetus, it is colludique.

Accordingly, I have modified and built upon her definition and therefore define colludique as: Cette nécessaire connivence visant à faire fonctionner le potentiel ludique *de faire partager la poésie au plus grand nombre*. In other words, colludique is collaboration, working and coming together, cooperation, community, conviviality, and interaction/active participation.[41] This activity presumes a ludic context. Although, colludique in some ways resembles 'rencontre' in terms of the social and/or creative meeting of two entities, colludique implies a different temporal dimension. Rencontre happens in the *claque* of slam, the moment. Colludique covers the long-term, enduring cooperation on a creative level and the social interaction necessary for slam to exist.

What about the ludic element that is the competitive slam format? The American poetry slam was inspired in part by professional wrestling—a low-brow form of entertainment that had mass appeal. The competition format specifically was both to make poetry entertaining and to minimise the narcissistic, anti-social behaviour affecting poetry readings (Aptowicz 2008:36-37; Smith and Kraynak 2009:21). Although French slam initially was not based in the competition format, it eventually became a part of the French slam scene. Some competitions are more experimental and playful whereas others are based in the official Chicago rules for international competition. Regardless, any instance of competition, given the history of slam poetry, makes it ideally colludique rather than merely ludique. The competition inherent in slam is not like competing for a Nobel prize, it was and remains intended to be more like a sport, 'Les gens montent sur scène pour présenter un texte de trois

[41] A minor nuance that should be noted for clarity: Collaboration does not imply cooperation or collegiality. It is entirely possible to collaborate without being cooperative or having a sense of conviviality. Rather, all of the above terms and concepts fall under colludique and may or may not co-exist in varying combinations. Ideally, this atmosphere of the colludique, with its ludic aspect, arguably makes collaboration with conviviality more likely. Nothing is guaranteed nor is conviviality and collegial cooperation required for creative production; however, it remains a value and ideal for slam.

minutes maximum et la salle leur met une note, comme au patinage artistique. Le slam est un sport de poésie.' (PLH quoted in Czerwinski 2014). However, given the diversité of the French slam scene, one must remember that while slam competition is like a sport, it ranges from a friendly game of pick-up basketball to the World Cup in its seriousness and consequence.

Although I suggest that slam exists in an atmosphere of the ludic, this is independent of the competitive format of the poetry slam (tournoi). As I have detailed, when slam first began developing in France the competition aspect was overlooked or unknown to many of the pionniers. Instead slam began within the scène ouverte tradition. However, inherent in the scène ouverte was a sense of the ludic; if only to contrast it from what was perceived as overly serious, inaccessible, intimidating, and stiff poetry readings from the traditional poetry art world. Accordingly, there was emphasis on the original rule of slam, *un vers dit, un verre offert,* in its early development to signify that a slam session was entertaining, low-pressure, social but friendly, 'cool', and fun. The minimum rules that exist in slam, such as a time limit, help to provide an entertaining evening as they can prevent only one style or one performer from dominating the stage for too long and thus help keep the audience engaged. Even though it is not necessarily explicit, the atmosphere of a slam session is assumed to be lively and energetic, convivial, participatory, and striving to be fun—ultimately colludique. This may be modelled after the poetry slam scene in *Slam,* inspired by rap battles, in rejection of the perception of traditional poetry events, or inspired by the tradition of cabaret and popular theatre, et cetera. Representations of slam help to reinforce this atmosphere and make it an expectation of the slam session and aesthetic of slam generally. And since seriousness is not ipso facto mutually exclusive with play, or the ludic, even if some tournoi—or textes that are political or confessional and not seen as typically ludic—take themselves more seriously there is still the atmosphere of the ludic around the slam concept.

There are two conventions or institutions of slam that are representative of the colludique characteristic of slam's identity: collectifs and blases. I address them both in greater detail in Chapter Six; however, they warrant brief mention here. As I have noted, because French slam initially grew without direct influence from the American competitive circuit,

group performances were not ipso facto excluded as a possibility under the rubric of slam in the first instance. Collectifs have taken advantage of this liberté and by virtue of their both collective and collaborative nature are representative of the colludique spirit. Secondly, the use of blases—or pseudonyms—is a convention in French slam. In addition to supporting other identity traits (like accessibilité), blases are inherently ludic as their use provides a clear signal of when the slameur/-euse is *sur la scène* or in the slam space. This creates a symbolic barrier between a colludique slam space and everywhere else. This symbolic barrier is what the philosopher Johan Huizinga (2014) called the 'magic circle': an imaginary, but very real, in its being felt demarcation between the play state and non-play state.

Finally, although I have opted to use Vorger's portmanteau 'colludique' the traits of collaborative and ludique independent of one another are also present. However, as I have argued, given slam's simultaneous social-creative dynamic, it is only in rare instances where something can be understood only as ludic and not also collaborative/collective/or conducive to conviviality—and vice-versa. Slam is inherently social, not solitary in contrast to poetry read on the page. Slam's orality and the ideal of liveness in slam, demands immédiateté for this rencontre. In an interview about Spoke Orkestra's album, D' explains slam and its partage/rencontre thus, 'Le slam c'est un texte, plus quelqu'un qui le dit, plus quelqu'un qui l'écoute' (Lajoinie and Chapon 2004). Note that D' says 'écoute' not 'quelqu'un qui le lit', this reminds us that even in recording, when the ideal and convention of liveness cannot be realised, the act of listening, rather than reading, is more immediate and social. With orality, the tone, intonation, rhythm and emotion present in the performer's voice helps guide the interpretation, whereas written poetry which does not offer such immediate emotional clues could be argued to be more 'writerly' in comparison to slam performances where such orality is also further imbued with immédiateté.[42] Orality is in this sense inherently more social than

[42] By 'writerly' I am referring to Barthes's (1974, 1976) distinction between readerly and writerly texts—*des textes lisibles et scriptibles*. This distinction is imperfect for comparing slam and traditional poetry since slam textes, like traditional poetry, can be either 'readerly' or 'writerly' in their style—nor are all slam textes necessarily narrative in form. Nonetheless, this distinction is sufficient here to elucidate the experiential difference of orality and written poetry in terms of emotional and paralinguistic expression on the part of the slameur/-euse to guide the audience in their reception.

reading since it brings in this emotional intelligence via paralinguistic communication. Accordingly, the ludic is difficult to detach from the social in slam. However, the social—specifically, the collaborative/collective/ cooperative—can be detached from the ludic in particular circumstances. Slam is fundamentally premised on a convivial and entertaining, lively, fun, atmosphere which is best understood as the ludic foundation; therefore, it is only in specific instances, often detached from the slam session—from the practice of slam in its manifestation—and away from the slam rencontre where collaboration/community/ collective/ cooperation is not ostensibly tinted with the ludic. Finally, it should be noted that this colludique atmosphere, especially where conviviality and friendliness are valued, supports the diversité and related métissage that is emblematic of slam and its image as well as interacting with other characteristics like immédiateté, partage, accessibilité, rencontre and even démocratique to create slam's brand identity.

2.9 Diversité and Métissage

> *Le slam c'est justement une tribune libre où tu peux te rendre compte qu'on vit dans une société riche, pluri-artistique, pluri-communautaire, où tout le monde peut vivre ensemble. Personne n'a envie de s'exploser la gueule !—Dgiz quoted in Maaroufi 2013.*

Diversité and the final identity, métissage, may appear to be similar enough that I could combine them into the same metonym as a characteristic of slam's identity. However, I have chosen not to because there is a subtle distinction between the parts within slam and the sum of its parts, which can be identified in the distinction between diversité and métissage. More importantly, there is also the cultural and human nuance to métissage compared with the relative neutrality of the term diversité which is not to be overlooked. Nevertheless, since they are similar and interrelate with one another I will discuss them both in this section bearing in mind that they are not synonyms nor merely complements but different perspectives: individual phenomena versus the greater sum, the collective image made of those individual parts.

Métissage, from *métis*, refers to the mixture of different human cultures, races, languages, and ethnicities—in other words, hybridity. Slam is a fundamentally culturally hybrid phenomenon. It is an American cultural product that spread to and developed in France distanced from its origins and in a unique, culturally specific way. It is not merely an American product that has been imported to France but a true métissage of the two cultures production. Secondly, métissage of course refers to *La France métissée* and this is where diversité and métissage begin to overlap in terms of the social aspect of slam.

One of the hallmarks of slam is that it is diverse in terms of the people involved, there is no typical activiste:

> C'est le principe de base et c'est aussi l'intérêt qu'on y trouve en allant dans des cafés, sur des scènes ouvertes. Au-delà de la dimension artistique, il y a aussi ce truc que tu ne vois nulle part ailleurs, des personnes de 7 à 77 ans, toutes origines sociales, réunies dans un même endroit, parce qu'il y a ce fil rouge qui lie tout le monde: écrire et venir dire un texte. (Félix J. quoted in Chabassuer 2007).

This characteristic of slam is often presented as being in contrast to other poetry scenes:

> Rares sont les endroits qui comme les soirées slam [...] rassemblent autant de tranches de âge, d'origines ethniques et sociales. Au café culturel [...] Tchatcheurs bobos ou tribuns des quartiers chauds, gamines intimidées ou vieux renards des mots, tous sont animés par leur envie d'écouter et de dire—ou plutôt de slamer, de déclamer en public, a cappella et plus ou moins en rythme, leurs textes et poèmes. (Davet 2006).

As I have said above, for some, slam's self-image is defined by its openness (viz. liberté, accessibilité, démocratique, colludique) relative to the perception and stereotypes of traditional poetry. This diversity, of all ages, genders, ethnicities, religions, and social classes is held up as a virtue in and of itself but also in contrast to other cultural production—not only traditional poetry, but one could argue also rap, which is less likely to be accommodating of an elderly person or a child and which operates within its own subcultural context.

It is important to note that slam is not a subculture. Crucially, slam is fundamentally open (liberté), accessible (accessibilité) and démocratique—therefore, slam is inherently, even radically, inclusive. Whereas a subculture, by definition, cannot be inclusive of everyone as it must exclude those of a dominant culture to some extent in order to be a *sub*culture.

While those involved in slam can arguably said to constitute a community—whether a brand community or at minimum an imagined community–it is not analytically useful nor

informative to expand the definition of a subculture to include slam/its community because in doing so, the concept of a subculture loses its substantive and analytically useful meaning. All subcultures need an *other* to define themselves against, and although slam touts itself as poésie démocratisée, in doing so it is not saying that other poetry is inherently un-democratic, nor that those who maintain other poetry as the dominant poetry culture are unwelcome. Although individual activistes may lament the organisation, economy, norms, and culture of the poetry art world;[43] slam is not a rejection of traditional poetry. Indeed, slam, in its radical inclusivity, welcomes even those from the dominant poetry culture (i.e. traditional poetry) as well as rappers, rockers, theatre-geeks, punks, musicians, philosophers, the elderly, the young, and so on. For slam to present itself as *poésie démocratisée* is not in opposition to a real or imagined un-democratic poetry. Rather, it is to highlight its brand promise[44] in the same way that calling a grocery store 'The family-friendly shop' is not to imply that other stores are hostile or un-friendly to families, but that this particular store puts an emphasis on attracting this particular market and builds its identity around this rather than another quality like being low-cost.

Importantly, because slam is not a subculture it is able to retain its openness and diversité that results in its characteristic métissage: the slam scene is mixed, not just comprised of diverse people but in its whole, it is a mix, un métissage of people. It is a métissage not only in terms of national or ethnic identity/culture, but also in terms of being able to accommodate a mix of postmodern and subcultural identities as well. This diversité and the resultant métissage is of course tied in with the value placed on slam being démocratique (including equal), open, and accessible. Furthermore, the social aspect of partage I have discussed is to also create a rencontre between people who might not otherwise have such an interaction thanks to this diversité and métissage: 'le slam est le seul art qui offre

[43] See Chapter Three.
[44] Brand promise is the promise to deliver certain experiences, features, or benefits consistently to the customer (Kotler et al. 2017:246)

la possibilité de découvrir des gens que l'on ne fréquenterait pas autrement.' (Tsunami MC quoted in Davet 2006).[45]

However, like the other traits there is also a creative aspect in conjunction with the social one. When considering the creative aspect of diversité and métissage, métissage is a container term, like a metonym, for the more object-focused but also less politically-charged, *mélange*. The *mélange* is holistic of the diversité of the production within slam. If slam were to be defined solely by the creative production that comes from within it, that production would be a mix of different genres, styles, influences et cetera that have in common orality and the above traits as their underlying ethos that shapes their production. As Ami Karim adds to his discussion of the diversity of the scene in terms of its activistes and the diversity of its products (i.e. the scène ouverte, tournoi, et cetera), 'Le slam n'est pas un courant littéraire tenu par des règles d'écriture; il est la convergence des genres qui acceptent d'exister en dehors de leurs carcans respectifs. Le slam n'est pas un style musical, il est un style d'oralité, qui s'allie parfois à certaines mélodies, pour se transcender, évoluer, changer, devenir autre chose.' (2009:13). As activistes remind the general public, slam is not a genre, but is characterised by its diversité and the sum of slam is a mixture of genres and styles—but all of which are *à l'oral*.

The creative diversité that is possible in slam is related to liberté. Without codes, canon, genres, and other specifications, all manner of expression is able to be slam. This liberté allows a different relation between the audience and the performer. As the actor and sometimes slameur, Denis Lavant, observes:

> Dans la bouche d'un slameur, la liberté du texte, de l'interprétation: y a pas de règles. Pas de dogme. Au théâtre, plein de formes, mais le cadre reste: personnages, dialogues…C'est défini, répété, fourni quand c'est prêt. Il faudrait pouvoir proposer quelque chose lié à une émotion, à un contexte. Comment laisser quelqu'un de la salle monter sur scène pour jouer dans la pièce? Le slam le peut. (Maaroufi 2011).

[45] Interestingly, one typical feature of most subcultures is a distinct way or dress or self-presentation that signals to others your identification with a given subculture. GdB (who is familiar with subcultural signalling given her own identification as a 'enfant de rock' and who dresses and produces work in a goth-rocker style) observed in her exploration of slam the distinct lack of any kind of public, external, superficial group-marker for slameurs like one might note for those in the hip hop or punk scenes: 'On ne peut pas reconnaître un slameur dans la rue. Comme on reconnaîtrait un gothique, un rappeur, un rockeur, une religieuse. Un slameur, une slameuse c'est tout le monde et personne à la fois.' (2009:92)

He and his work are indicative of the human diversity of slam (he is a professional actor) but also the creative possibilities and diverse results of the slam ethos and value system of aesthetics that comprise part of its identity: diversité, immédiateté, and liberté.

The diversité in the form, format, medium, style et cetera of production creates a métissage of creative production that all can be considered *issus du slam*. Hence why although GCM's albums are not technically slam albums, [46] and are more correctly spoken word, I argue they are still representative of slam in the broader sense. Likewise, the theatre productions by the collectif Uppercut, the albums from Spoke Orkestra and Luciole and other experimental creative production based in the slam concept and ethos. The sum of slam's diversité in terms of its cultural production is a creative mélange and underlying that creative diversité is the cultural, human métissage of the people who engage *colludiquement à la recherche d'un moment, d'une rencontre, de une poésie en toute liberté, dans l'esprit de partager un texte pour rendre l'expression orale et poétique accessible au plus grand nombre: voilà le slam, la poésie démocratisée*.

Conclusion

To further illustrate how I see these characteristics interrelating and forming an autopoeitic gestalt, I have diagrammed the flows and connections of how the characteristics of slam's identity co-exist (figure 2). This diagram is both part of the process in developing as well as the result of a grounded substantive theory. The diagram illustrates how the various identity characteristics of slam interrelate and are reflexive with one another. This diagram is imperfect, it cannot fully render all the flows between all of these aspects; therefore, it is the more salient flows that I have indicated. All characteristics are integrated and interrelated as a gestalt of slam's brand identity. The core theoretical concept that explains the relationship between these is autopoiesis: they all reinforce one another and thus both *are* and *sustain* the identity of slam. All of these characteristics comprise its ethos, its core, that gives dynamism

[46] Similarly, as Félix Jousserand explains regarding the 'album' they produced from Bouchazoreill', 'ce n'est pas un album de slam, c'est un compte rendu, une photo, des fortes têtes qu'on a vu évoluer dans le cadre des soirées Bouchazoreill', des moments de pur slam. On en a fait un disque avec de la musique.' (Chabasseur 2007).

and coherency to its brand and makes it identifiable as such on a deeper level than just by superficial characteristics like orality, being in a bar or café, et cetera. These identity traits are the essence of slam that, even as superficial and *non-essential* elements change (e.g. typical venue), remain as the core identity of the brand.

On the vertical axis are the two sides, which are always connected, of the social and the creative aspects of slam. The social is coded in blue and the creative in yellow. It should be noted that 's'exprimer' and 'dire' are effectively the same; however, I have arranged them as such to highlight the social/creative duality. However, the two aspects are never separate therefore as the diagram indicates certain characteristics are primarily creative but that creative is overlaid with the social and vice versa. Think of it as an infinite layering. Horizontally, it is divided between the action or the moment that takes place within the context/atmosphere. For example, rencontre occurs within a democratic and colludique space. The tree flows in both directions, there is no one starting point.

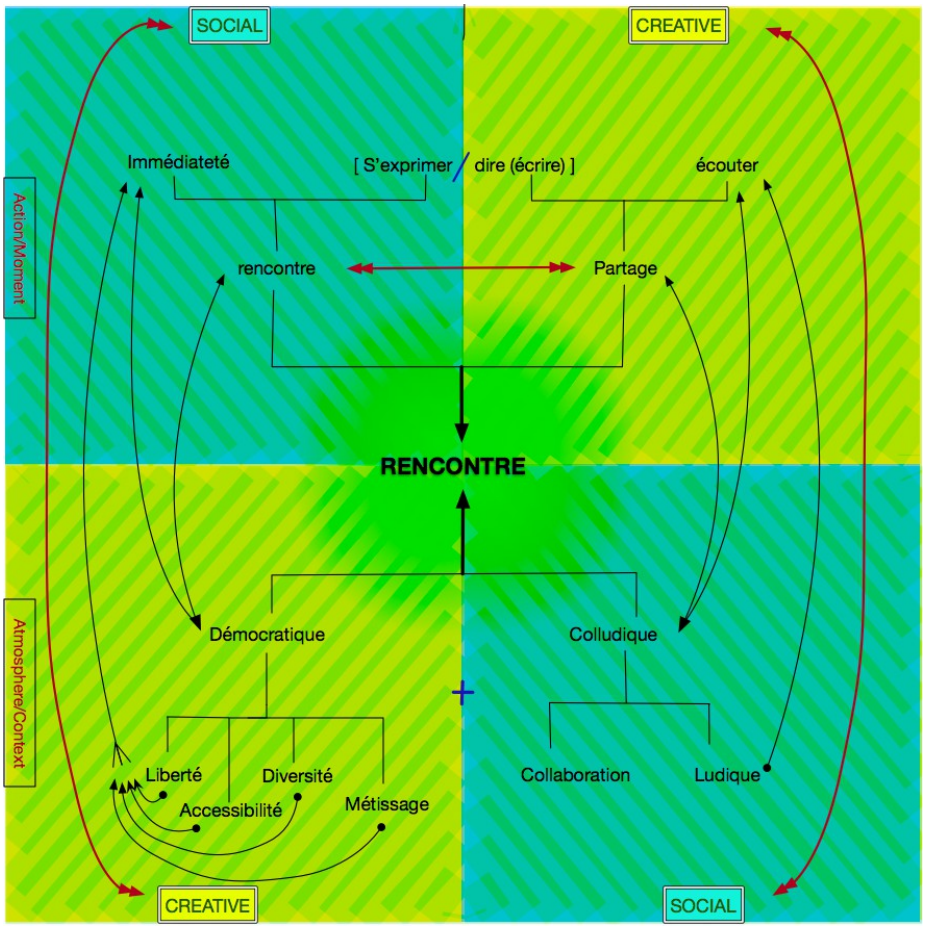


Figure 2. Slam Identity Relationship Diagram.

All the branches (identity characteristics) result in 'RENCONTRE' at the centre. This RENCONTRE is different from the identity characteristic and therefore, it is in uppercase to distinguish it. It is the core category that unites all the others. In addition to being an integral identity characteristic, I suggest that slam—as a brand and cultural phenomenon—is itself also rencontre: a rencontre of people, creativity, poetry, self-expression, culture, social class, et cetera. This RENCONTRE is identified in green, indicating a full mixture of both the social and creative aspects in that experiential space. The arrows indicate paths of reinforcement and support; however, all traits are interrelated therefore the arrows emphasise especially pertinent relationships. Démocratique *and* colludique support RENCONTRE; rencontre *reinforces* partage *reflexively* and this dynamic allows for RENCONTRE. Slam as this RENCONTRE is a manifestation of the diversity of humanity brought together via the sharing and exchange of human experience—or, poésie démocratisée. This is slam's rallying cry. Poésie démocratisée is also a second core category: implicit and emergent from the holism of this autopoiesis. It is the epithet that distinguishes slam from spoken word on an ideological level, and thanks to which, helps slam to be akin to a cult brand.

Cult or iconic brands tap into cultural myths that resonate societally and find momentum through addressing the anxieties felt by various groups in a society (Holt 2004). Slam does this: its cultural myth of poésie démocratisée responds to the felt exclusivity and inaccessibility of traditional poetry—especially in French culture where poetry holds a special, if not sacred status. Slam's convention of orality positions it as a more accessible, fun, entertaining, quotidian variant to difficult, time-consuming, and potentially alienating writing. Arguably, orality brings it back to something seen as primal and universal to humans, something pre-historical allowing people to identify with others over space and time. It better integrates non-Western traditions and thus Slam's cultural myth, of which diversité and métissage are indicators, also reflect a post-colonial France and a globalised interconnected multicultural world. Slam itself is thus also a cultural myth. But, it is also a format for

competition and an accessible, popular platform for poetic expression. Accordingly, slam acts as a cultural myth as well as being a cult brand of oral poetry.

Chapter Three

Landscape of cultural infrastructure and context: Brand Positioning

In this chapter I will address the most similar cultural products that exist within this context in order to situate slam's positioning both relative to these forms but also to provide a sense of its positioning vis-à-vis the overall cultural and ideological landscape of French cultural production that these proximate forms also navigate. Since the specifics of how slam itself relates to these forms is better explored elsewhere, this chapter instead focuses on these forms as conceptual and cultural precedents to provide a frame of reference for the rest of this thesis and to show how and why slam stands on its own, as a brand of oral poetry, rather than becoming subsumed into these proximate forms and their respective art worlds. It will also touch on the unique ability of slam to be able to create works/artists that can cross-over into all three of these proximate art forms—despite substantial differences in aesthetics, conventions, resources, audiences, and traditions. Slam's identity and nature as a brand, rather than a defined genre, allow it to be flexible and open enough to accommodate the conventions and aesthetics that define these forms, and thus contribute to the work produced within their art worlds without losing its own unique affect or significantly changing those forms.

Slam is poetry, but also fundamentally oral. It is therefore both poetic and audible. Given its intention as orality, textes may sometimes tend towards certain oral conventions like rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, et cetera that helps provide melodic-like structure to the writing when spoken. It thus lies in a liminal space between poetry and music. Understanding slam and identifying its position requires recognising that the above mentioned proximate art forms

do not exist in a cultural vacuum nor do they exist wholly independent of one another. On the music side, there is rap and chanson with which slam shares certain commonalities and is understood through their respective filters. On the poetry side, there is the dominant image of poetry as page-based, and the weight and prestige of the French literary tradition and canon. However, *chanson française*—as poetic music—also exists in the liminal state between music and poetry, whilst being the epitome of 'Frenchness'.

There are, in other words, continuums along which these art forms exist and which position them relative to each other, thus situating them. On a scale of poetry-music, chanson falls in the middle. On a scale of Frenchness, chanson is the most quintessentially French with both rap and poetry acknowledged as global, albeit with specifically French variants. And finally, on a scale of prestige, on a scale of its worth as art, and on a scale of literariness, poetry is high above at the top, with rap down at the bottom. Slam, comes into the landscape of these pre-existing forms, and by doing so highlights these hierarchies and relationships, proposes new dynamics, and re-orders the status quo—but does so only as it stands in *relation* to the others. However, slam does not necessarily directly impact these forms, their art worlds, or even the dynamics between them and these continuums as such. It does not, for instance, elevate the prestige of rap per se. Nor does it open up traditional poetry to oral and live, popular performance. Instead, slam is distinct enough to co-exist with and even be complementary to all of these forms. It is both marginal and popular enough to fill its own niche.

Indeed, the entry of slam into this field of cultural production highlights what may have been seen as lacking in the other art forms—unfulfilled or frustrated spaces of cultural production in the French landscape that the positioning and development of slam came to provide for. Slam fills a lacuna. It furthermore provides an indirect platform for preparing for entry into these proximate art worlds and the practice of their forms. However, it is not solely a platform for other art forms, as evidenced by artists like GCM. It has, within this context, created its own niche.

Brand positioning aims to do exactly this: create a unique conceptual space within the mind of an audience vis-à-vis the pre-existing array and via which the audience gains the impression of the brand, that it is sufficiently distinct from the rest of the market to be worthy of their attention (Kapferer 2015:152). Brand positioning lets the audience know how a product differs from what is already on the market, but also how it is similar to those pre-existing products such that the audiences will feel confident and familiar enough to engage with it. There are four analytical axes through which brand positioning is developed: for whom (target audience), against what other products (competitors), what makes it distinct (brand promise or benefit), and how/why it achieves this (reason to believe). Slam is radically inclusive and seeks to target as broad an audience as possible (viz. its identity traits: démocratique, diversité, and accessibilité). Like identity, brand positioning is essential to a brand but in isolation, if just looking at positioning, it will 'not reveal all of the richness of meaning nor reflect all of [the brand's] potential' (Kapferer 2015:154). I address these axes and the 'richness of meaning' elsewhere in this thesis, namely in terms of its organisation, DNA and identity. Accordingly, in this chapter I will address only the second axis of positioning: competitors. Slam's position relative to rap, chanson, and traditional poetry informs audiences of what slam is not, thus allowing them to better understand what it *is* and how what it offers is distinct and is thus valuable and merits their attention. Thus is it through slam's engagement with, distinction from, and understanding through these proximate forms that it is positioned as a brand of oral performance poetry. By understanding them and some of their salient features that distinguish them from slam and/or inform slam's cultural situatedness, slam's relative position in the cultural landscape is made clearer.

First, I will address a few pertinent aspects of the cultural context before addressing rap and how it became such a prominent art form in France—such that its presence is unavoidable when discussing slam. Rap is the most contemporaneous, as well as equally foreign, form that shares notable superficial similarities with slam. Although rap can be argued

to be oral poetry,[47] it is almost invariably seen as music. Slam is not music; nevertheless, rap is a convenient and interesting lens through which to view slam, therefore it becomes a dominant counter-point in public discourses.

I will then address chanson, its Frenchness, and its relationship with rap and poetry—that is, its mythic status that influences all proximate cultural production. Slam is a capella oral poetry, thus similar to chanson without the music; but artists like GCM (who dominate the popular perception of slam) produce work that combines music with text thus invoking within a French context the *chanson à texte* in particular.

Finally, I will provide a detailed look at traditional, typically page-based poetry—an exalted, high art form that precedes all else—and the organisation of its art world to illustrate how slam, despite being poetry, is distinct from even other oral poetry; and why, due to its ethos and identity, it is unlikely and unwilling to assimilate into the contemporary poetry art world (PAW).

3.1 Cultural Production and the State

State intervention in cultural production is well-established in France. Importantly, as David Looseley stresses, since its establishment in 1959, 'the powerful, centralised Ministry of Culture' has become 'the most powerful agency of legitimation' especially for new or marginal forms of cultural production that are otherwise neglected by the education system or other similarly established institutions. Although there is 'a different kind of consecration' available as the result of commercial success, especially for pop stars and the like, he contends that 'even in twenty-first century, neo-liberal France, the market does not offer the kind of solemn national consecration the state confers.' (2003: 204). That the state can provide that sort of legitimacy for cultural products is related to the cultural history of France and the history and

[47] Some French scholars have argued that French rap could be considered not just music, but *chanson française* (Rubin 2004). Compared with their American counterparts, some of whom uncritically accept rap as poetry (cf. Wood 1999; Hoffman 2013:230), they later to and less likely to argue that rap is poetry full-stop (Martinez 2008). Julien Barret (2008) is a notable exception. This is arguably due to a difference a cultural understanding of poetry; accordingly, rap is qualified as 'poésie musicale' or as music 'poétique' (cf. Carinos and Hammou 2017; Pecqueux 2007; Béthune 2004).

underlying ideology that informs its cultural policy. Although the details of this are far too vast to address here it should be noted that some of the more crucial aspects of France's cultural policy and ideological underpinnings include an unwavering belief in the right of its citizens to access to culture, urban planning, music policy, language policies, and education policy (e.g. *éducation populaire)*. An interest in these is justified through the logic of republicanism, a crucial element in which is the idea of national culture: shared and revered by all, it is necessary not only for national identity, but for national unity. Accordingly, this has led the French state to involve itself in the cultural affairs of its citizens, including with regards to language and even aesthetics (Lebovics quoted in Looseley 2003:205).

One of the more significant periods for cultural policy began with the appointment of Jack Lang as culture minister in 1981: his 'two five-year periods as Minister of Culture are mainly remembered for two things: a doubled budget for 1982, and the pursuit of cultural democracy in the form of support for creative forms hitherto unrecognised.' (Looseley 2003:131). Importantly, Lang held a belief that culture 'was not the preserve of the subsidised arts and that the state should be ready to work with the private sector' and for him this was critical in order to reach four key objectives: democratising access, encouraging creativity, reconciling creativity with the market, and preserving national identity. Prior, funding for culture had been primarily focused on preserving 'minority arts': those arts that without state intervention would suffer immensely due to lack of funds and public support. However, Lang's ambitions instigated a shift from this conservationist perspective to also seeing arts as 'an investment which fosters growth', albeit only possible if 'mass culture and the creative industries were welcomed under the umbrella of culture' (ibid.).

This was a profound ideological shift, and unsurprisingly engendered a range of debates not just on cultural production but on the value, role and place of culture as well as on 'Frenchness' and national identity. Given the timeliness of these debates, the content and nature of them, and the rhetoric about and from them, the resulting policies unsurprisingly addressed relatively more contentious forms of cultural production such as rap music.

3.1.1 Logocentrism and Cultural Policy

French cultural policy has long privileged written and verbal expression as it best accords with the idealised cultural and national identity of 'Frenchness' as opposed to, for instance, music. Looseley explains:

> French cultural policy has always been concerned, in one form or another, with Frenchness (albeit recently in a multicultural guise) and with language. Hence, in part, the low priority originally conferred on music by the Ministry in comparison to theatre and the Maisons de la Culture. Hence too the continuing commitment of the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs to preserving and promoting the French language abroad (2003:198).

Language is a point of both pride and power; it is seen as integral to the ideal of French national identity. Within a context of logocentrism, language is revered and sacralised via the written word. And for France especially this occurs via literary culture—which commands particularly high esteem both internally and externally. Indeed, France sees itself as having an exceptional literary culture: few other nations place such importance on literature as a defining part of its national identity as France (Coward 2004:466). Importantly however, this emphasis on the literary in national identity furthermore also privileges the written over oral language: 'La France, du fait de son histoire ancienne et de ses traditions littéraires et institutionnelles, accorde à l'écrit une importance dominante et presque exclusive dans le monde des lettres.' (Fraisse 2013:8). Thus, not only was there a distinction between the official speech and colloquial variants but in particular a distinction between speech and writing—with the latter being most closely aligned with the 'official' French.

The privileged position of the written word in such a context has ramifications for not only musical production, but also for oral poetry. For instance, the medievalist, Paul Zumthor (1983, 1990) identifies this logocentric tendency in Western culture and critiques its reliance on criteria intended written work to judge oral works. According to Zumthor, the difficulty we have in analysing and even apprehending oral poetry stems from this cultural bias since our (Western) culture is based in the written word (1983, 1990). Additionally, he argues there is a long standing aesthetic prejudice that all artistic language is identified with writing; therefore, we struggle to recognise the artistic validity of non-written work (1990:4).

The importance accorded to the French language as the vector of identity and esteemed representation of the written word has ramifications for cultural policy. Although—especially starting with Lang's tenure—there has been increased legitimacy and stature of musical and other audio-visual production, the crucial importance attached to protectionism of the French language and its prominence has not diminished. Not only has cultural policy maintained its interest in literary production (see below), but foreign and economic policy has reacted to technological and cultural changes—especially as they concern perceived threats to the French language as a vector for 'Frenchness'. For instance, France has repeatedly successfully negotiated (e.g. at the GATT trade talks in 1993 and more recently starting in 2013 with regards to TTIP) for what is referred to as the 'l'exception française' and 'l'exception culturelle' which has the effect of limiting the importation of cultural production products from abroad—however, the true 'enemy' is understood as English-language production. This exception is effectuated through generous subsidies as well as zero-sum promotion of French language products. France has managed remarkably to uphold this exception citing the threat that would presumably otherwise exist to its domestic cultural production—and thus to its unique culture—as justification (Hare 2003; Looseley 1997, 2003).

Legitimacy, that is, cultural legitimacy is rarely independent of state intervention given the French state's substantial interest in culture, therefore cultural policy and the cultural ideologies that inform it must be taken into account. These underlying ideologies and logics are more complex and ranging than can be addressed here, but among the more relevant ones is that of logocentrism: comprising the dual sacralisation of language and literary culture—the latter of which alongside the particular history of France results in privileging of the written word above other media. Thus, while cultural legitimacy is, in part, contingent upon 'Frenchness', legitimacy may also be contingent upon a requisite degree of logocentric reflection as this logic informs the ideal of 'Frenchness' and is integral to national identity. Accordingly, when analysing the brand position of slam, the cultural context must first be taken into account and then an examination of similar 'products' that exist within that context and which are affected by forces of legitimation and cultural relevancy.

3.2 Proximate musical forms

Below I will first discuss French rap/hip hop to establish its cultural position followed briefly by chanson. I begin with this cultural product, or artefact, because it is the one considered the closest to slam in its technical form, its cultural history, its foreignness, and its cultural status. Rap and slam in particular are sometimes conflated and the collaboration between, and cross-over of, artists from both scenes further complicates this. I contend that although slam is not directly derived from hip hop, and should not be considered a part of hip hop, that it has however been influenced by hip hop culture and has developed in the wake of the establishment of a hip hop art world in France. The positioning of slam relative to rap/hip hop will also be further addressed in Chapter Five on slam's image with respect to the mediatisation of slam and the image construction as influenced via rap. But first here it is useful to discuss the history of rap in France to better understand how representations, myths, and discourses surrounding hip hop and rap emerge in the first place and come to affect slam's image and cultural salience.

French hip hop, like American hip hop, is dominated by the most commercialised and recognised of its practices: rap. Hip hop is not merely a musical genre, nor is it simply a style. It is a multi-faceted sub-cultural assemblage of creative expressions rooted in the black American experience that is now a globalised phenomenon thanks in part to its highly organised, hierarchical art world that comprises both a commercial mainstream element and various underground ones.

Hip hop began[48] in the Bronx in New York in the mid- to late- 1970s, whence it spread to France. Its arrival in France was relatively early, beginning in 1979 with the release of the now legendary single 'Rappers Delight' from The Sugarhill Gang before gaining momentum and inspiring local production in the early 1980s. This was encouraged by early cross-cultural

[48] It is of course impossible to unequivocally state when hip hop began, as it is an assemblage of cultural practices that evolved from various other ones. As Rose (1994) explains the notion that early hip hop began solely for pleasure and not profit is misguided as it rests on the assumption that the two are incompatible. She explains that the earliest hip hop creators were not choosing not to produce for profit but rather they were unaware they could; once they realised it was possible they began to market themselves (40). With that, hip hop as we now recognise and refer to it was born.

trans-Atlantic interactions by pioneering figures in hip hop[49] and local cultural variables—the latter of which in particular helped hip hop quickly become a preeminent force in contemporary popular French culture (Barret 2008:13; Hammou 2012:19; Prévos 2002). Indeed, France quickly became the world's second greatest hip hop/rap market after the United States, in part due to the radio quotas implemented under Miterrand (Cannon 2003:191; Barret 2008:11).

Hip hop comprises rap, DJing, graffiti, and dance; and can be considered both an ensemble of cultural, creative expressions as well as a culture in and of itself. These four practices, also represent the four elements, or pillars of hip hop: oral (MCing 'emceeing'/rapping), aural (DJing/turntabling), visual (graffiti) and corporeal (dance). These four pillars are the foundation of hip hop and help maintain its cultural and ontological coherence whilst enabling it to be adaptable to local contexts as it has spread globally (Barret 2008:14; Chang 2011: loc. 45, 1600).

Rap is the most widely recognised, culturally successful, and prominent expression of hip hop but it cannot be dissociated from hip hop, the integrity of which is essential to rap's identity and positioning. Nevertheless, rap overshadows the rest of the tapestry of hip hop due to its commercial viability and has become the primary vector of hip hop culture in the mainstream. Furthermore, other practices that are not part of the traditional 'four pillars' can also be considered valid as hip hop cultural expressions (e.g. beatboxing) or are so integral to subcultural expression they are nonetheless distinct (e.g. fashion). Hip hop culture also

[49] For example, Fab Five Freddy, one of the early influential figures in both graffiti and music, released his historical single 'Change the Beat' in 1982 which featured him rapping in both French and English. On the B-side was a woman who rapped entirely in French. 'Change the Beat' has been recognised as one of the most sampled tracks of all time in hip hop. Following this he released four other records in France first and embarked on what has been said to be the first hip hop tour in Europe which included the legendary DJ, Afrika Bambaataa and helped establish the long-standing cross cultural bond between the two nations via hip hop (Hammou 2012:64).

sometimes forms a base or core for a broader 'urban culture'[50] classification which can include practices, in a localised hip hop culture, like parkour.[51]

France has maintained a consistent connection with American hip hop and periodically looked across the Atlantic for inspiration and guidance. However, French hip hop is not merely the simplistic appropriation or direct importation of American hip hop (nor, as this thesis argues, is French slam of American slam poetry). Rather, French hip hop has balanced this affinity and affiliation for American hip hop with critical distance and respect for both its own and the American cultural context. [52] Accordingly, French hip hop, rap in particular, has developed its own cultural repertoire and specificity that not only reflects its origins and evolution in both cultures but now in turn also participates in fruitful cross-fertilisation with American hip hop as its peer. Differences persist, and are related to the cultural and socio-economic context of each country as well as hip hop's cultural history in each. Importantly, although perhaps obvious, it must be stated that in the United States, hip hop (culture) is intrinsically tied to black/African-American[53] culture, not least because hip

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[50] The designation 'urban'/'urbain(e)' is laden with euphemistic meaning; however, it is sufficient to say here that its usage is often in the United States euphemistic to refer to black underclass culture (viz. 'ghetto' 'ratchet') and a generalised black and minority (inner-) city culture. The usage of 'urban' or '*urbain(e)*' in France is often similarly euphemistic, but as in both cultures the context of the usage of the term 'urban/*urbain(e)*' is essential to determine whether something is called 'urban' referring directly to the non-rural context or if there is an element of euphemism at play.

[51] Parkour began in France and was developed under its current form in the 1990s by David Belle and Sébastien Foucan (Atkinson 2009). 'Parkour' is derived from *parcours* and *parcours de combattant* (ibid.172). The contemporary parkour is a specifically (sub-)urban variant of an obstacle course, developed with respect to the everyday spatiality of the French *banlieues* (hence it is called 'suburban' in some English language literature). It engages with the built environment in novel ways, to 'perform a great variety of movements and tricks such as swinging, jumping, balancing, running and vaulting to pass over, under or through all kinds of obstacles'—for instance, a bike rack or a waste collection receptacle (Aggerholm and Larsen 2016:69). As it has grown in popularity, it has become subsumed and associated with 'street' culture, including skateboarding (which also uses the built environment in a similar fashion, performing 'ollies' off of bike racks for instance) and in urban agglomerations, with hip hop culture. Arguably, skateboarding is to the suburban built environment of the United States, particularly the West Coast what parkour is to the European (sub-)urban, and especially the French *banlieue*'s space. They both use the environment as a canvas for bodily expression in an anti-authoritarian activity that takes back free expression from the development of places which stifle the freedom of space and creative exploration. Accordingly, the inclusion of parkour in urban culture and hip hop culture in Europe, like the association of skate culture and surf culture with rock music in the USA in the 1970s, is especially interesting regarding how the respective national cultures and subcultures have converged in certain aspects and the extent to which French hip hop culture is localised/hybridised with US urban/hip hop culture.

[52] In particular rap has been easily established as 'French' in part because it arrived as part of hip hop culture—including dress, graffiti, slang, etc.—and accordingly it was 'easy to establish organic links' with other arts in France like dance and mural art thus allowing a sense of Frenchness and authenticity despite hip hop culture's American origins (Looseley 2003:56).

[53] A quick qualification: the terms 'black' and 'African-American' are sometimes interchangeable; however, for the purposes of this thesis, 'black' will be used. As an identity qualifier, 'black' is defined in its opposition to whiteness, and therefore includes a broader range of ethnicities and identities than 'African-American' can. Accordingly, it also better encapsulates the societal dynamic of opposition and negotiation between a dominant

hop was born out of both Afro-Caribbean and Latinx culture in NYC. While hip hop's practice is not exclusive to black Americans, hip hop cannot be considered independently of its own cultural history nor that of black Americans. Indeed, the cultural history is a significant part of hip hop's global appeal, in particular for marginalised and disenfranchised groups, as it speaks to a universal struggle against discrimination and inequality. This is certainly true for France; however, there are local factors which have contributed to the development of hip hop in France, and which also contribute to slam's position relative to rap's positionality.

Hip hop affects slam's positioning due its prominence, aesthetic similarities, provenance, and association and myth making with the *banlieue* and minority cultures. Rap especially is superficially similar enough to slam that it becomes a point of comparison for understanding slam. The familiarity with, cultural prominence, and 'Frenchness' of French hip hop can all be traced back to cultural policy affecting its development in France in the 1980s.

As Karim Hammou (2012) explains in his detailed sociological study of the history, French hip hop benefitted initially from the structural and institutional changes as well as cultural precedents that came about in the 1980s and early 1990s. Among the changes he lists are the legalisation of *radios libres*, the development of youth-oriented programming on radio and television, the changing structures of record labels and cultural producers, and the increased accessibility of affordable and portable technology for DIY music production. [54] Looseley (1997, 2003) also attributes institutional and structural changes driven by government ideologies and motivations to the success of popular music like rap in France.

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culture and a minority position allowing for a better for understanding of the social, cultural, and political roots of hip hop and similar cultural expressions. (cf. Perry 2006).

[54] Following the legalisation of *radio libres* in 1981, community-based stations, like Radio Beur in Paris, which played 'world music' and Raï, offered a platform for different tastes and hybrid styles—of which rap would profit and build upon. (Looseley 1997:200; Looseley 2003:50-51). Notably, a previously 'pirate' station, Radio Nova (1981-2007) in Paris played a significant role in establishing a hip hop scene in Paris. And in 1984, the *animateur*, Sidney, who began playing rap music on the free radio station Radio 7 (1980-1987), became the host for the first television show dedicated to hip hop, H.I.P. H.O.P., which played an instrumental role in the growth of hip hop culture in France. (Hammou 2012:26-30; 60-69). This profound change in French audio-visual culture occurred right as hip hop was maturing into a bona fide art world and establishing itself commercially in the United States enabling a direct and concurrent development of the two scenes.

For example, in line with the concern for national culture and identity in these debates, measures were put in place to ensure the continued prominence of French language music in the face of the growing dominance and taste for English language pop music. One of these was the introduction of audio-visual/radio quotas requiring a minimum amount of French language content (Looseley 1997:77; 2003:141). A beneficiary of this was French rap. Starting in 1996 the quota was increased to 40% for radio stations and many used French rap to make up this target (Looseley 2003:56,158).[55] Initially aspiring rappers and hip hop artists in France produced music highly derivative of American hip hop, even preferring to rap and sing mostly in English. However, given the quotas intrepid aspiring rappers knew that if they produced music in French they would be more likely to get radio play given the limited amount of French language music in pop genres at the time. Accordingly, entire radio stations began to feature French rap significantly and thus helped to inculcate a taste for hip hop music whilst being an important route of distribution and publicity for the then-emergent art world. Not only this, but coming out of the debates and rhetoric concerning national identity, rap was espoused by Lang and others as an ideal vehicle—more appropriate than Anglo-Saxon style rock music—for the beauty of the French language. Indeed, given his enthusiasm and support of rap's potential to become a bona fide French popular form, Lang was sometimes affectionately called 'Jack le rappeur' in the press (Looseley 1997:178; Hammou 2012:126).

That said, some of the assumptions that played a role in Lang's support of rap are coming from a culture of logocentrism— that while pervasive throughout the western world, is especially pertinent in France where the interwoven aspects of language, written-culture, history, modern nationhood, identity, and cultural policy inform and reinforce one another. For instance, for those like Lang, rap was privileged at this time over French approximations of Anglo-Saxon pop music because of its focus on the verbal as opposed to melodic. However, this does not mean that it was accepted and legitimated wholesale. Indeed, rap despite its

[55] These quotas were modified under Trautmann, Lang's successor. For instance, radio stations could opt for 50% quota of French language music *or* 'musical forms contributing to musical diversity'—35% of which are song, and 25% of which are new talents (Looseley 2003:163-164).

ability to become 'French' came via a subcultural sensibility, hip hop, that is inherently counter-cultural and as such is prone to subversion and thus controversy.

3.2.1 Hip hop as social protest

Rap is technically a form of vocal delivery for rhyming verse. The formal and stylistic aesthetics of rap comprise content, flow, and delivery.[56] The term for this vocal technique, rap, has become a sort of synecdoche referring to music which predominantly utilises this technique. Importantly, however, this music, for it to be considered rap, must come from or represent hip hop culture. This crucially distinguishes rap from other variants of rhythmic and/or rhymed speaking over music.[57] Furthermore, per Rose (1994) the stylistic features of rap—flow, layering, and rupture—create stylistic continuity with the four pillars of hip hop, making what defines rap is its hip hop sensibility (38).

Incidentally, where rap has been subject to controversy has not be regarding its technical characteristics —although they are invoked as a straw man argument to deride the artistic merit of rap—but rather, has been concerning it as a part of hip hop culture, and its attractiveness as a protest music. The general aesthetic of hip hop is inherently countercultural—unsurprisingly, given that the history of hip hop is deeply tied to social protest and the cultural experience of black Americans. Rap especially, is embraced by marginalised groups globally, with recognition of its simultaneously black American cultural roots and universal aesthetic and relatability, thanks to this countercultural aesthetic along with the ideologies and politics that shaped hip hop in 1970s New York City (Rose 1994; Perry 2006). Unsurprisingly, hip hop aesthetics are often intentionally subversive. However, even

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[56] Content is self-evident. Both flow and delivery are markers of skill. Flow refers to the rhythm and the rhyme of the lyrics/verse, how well their rhythm is maintained, and how well the rhyme or prosody supports and accentuates this rhythm. Delivery also refers to the elegance of the cadence and prosody, but in terms of the rapper's vocal control as it meets the rhythm of the verse/lyrics: it is the efficiency and elegance of how the content is 'delivered' regarding enunciation, presence and importantly, breath control. A skilled rapper will be adept in both flow and delivery. Whether rap is lyrically 'interesting' is determined by the stylistic or semantic intent of the language therein, by the relationship between the content and the flow, and even by how the content accentuates the delivery. Sophisticated meaning is sometimes secondary to these aesthetics and virtuoso displays.

[57] For example, neither Serge Gainsbourg's 1971 'Melody', nor the 1979 'Aux Armes et caetera' should be considered (anachronistically) rap—even though they are not sung per se, but rather the rhyming lyrics are delivered in a rhythmic speech pattern that oscillates between chanting and feeble singing. This is still valid despite the inclusion of reggae in 'Aux Armes et caetera'–an important, albeit indirect precursor to hip hop. These songs share some of the technical characteristics of rap, but none of the cultural context or aesthetics of hip hop.

when they are not intentional, they may be mistakenly interpreted as such by those most distant from its cultural repertoire and history. Accordingly, hip hop, but especially rap— given its mainstream presence, commercial viability and inherent explicit communicative capacity— is prone to controversy within the mainstream and the dominant culture. French rap is no exception to this.

The protest and social revolt roots of hip hop persist globally, localised for each context. Accordingly, in France, although hip hop can be associated with race and ethnicity as it is in the United States, it is to a significantly lesser degree; and social marginality is the primary operative category rather than race specifically.[58] Unsurprisingly, hip hop flourished in cities with significant immigrant populations and socio-economic inequality, in particular Paris and Marseille.[59] Although some of the most influential rap groups and artists of the early 1990s during rap's mainstream embrace were based in both Paris and Marseille,[60] it is the impoverished and marginalised Parisian *banlieues* in particular that are linked to hip hop in the public imagination and in pop culture. This is arguably related to a general bias towards Paris as the economic, political and cultural 'centre' of France; culturally significant artefacts, like the 1995 film, *La Haine;* and mediatised controversies like the 1996 indictment of NTM for their lyrics which allegedly incited violence against the police.

Similarly, rap also came to be implicated in the long-simmering social problems that reached an apex in the early-mid 2000s: The so-called *crise de banlieues*. As Hammou (2012) recounts, rappers who were at the time experiencing success with their art, were drawn into the mediatisation as the *porte-parole* for the *banlieue* 'en crise'. Journalists and presenters were aware of the public's fascination with the 'crise' and the ensuing moral panic and were

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[58] Exceptionally, there have been commentators who have made specific comparisons between black Americans and specific racial/ethnic groups in France. For instance, the musician and producer Bernard Guéguan noted in the early 1980s that the experience of young Arabs in France could be comparable to that of black Americans. (Hammou 2012:65).

[59] Notably, Paris and Marseille became anchors for rivalries and even regionalisation in terms of style and sound in French hip hop especially during the 1990s. Similar (sometimes contrived) rivalries also exist today also but within smaller metropolitan regions, such as between Seine-Saint-Denis (93) and Val-de-Marne (94) within the île-de-France region (Silverstein 2002:55).

[60] Among the most prominent of the era: Suprême NTM is from Seine-Saint-Denis; IAM is from Marseille; MC Solaar (born in Senegal) grew up in Seine-Saint-Denis and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Paris; and Assassin is from Paris.

therefore eager to access the inner world of the *banlieues*. However, access to those involved in the riots or simply witness to them was difficult; therefore, the media approached rappers who hailed from the areas affected or similar disadvantaged areas— ostensibly to discuss their music. But it was often a bait-and-switch as journalists steered the interview towards the *banlieues,* strong-arming these artists into being reluctant spokespeople for those living the complex reality behind the 'crise' that fascinated and even induced anxiety in those following the events from afar.

This period, just prior to slam's explosion in pop culture, arguably set a precedent for understanding it vis-à-vis rap's relationship with social and economic marginalisation—the frustration over which sometimes erupts into violent rather than verbal protest. However, the history of hip hop and social protest has also been subject to mediatisation and misunderstandings due to the inherent challenge it poses to the status quo. This parallel history to that of social protest I call the rap spectacle. The rap spectacle is especially relevant to slam as it provides a framework against which to judge slam in the public discourse that, as I explore in Chapter Five, leads to mischaracterisations of slam on the basis of erroneous assumptions about rap.

3.2.1.1 Rap Spectacle

The mediatisation and public discourse on rap is often what can be considered spectacle: it is the more shocking, scandalous, or stereotypical examples from rap that get the most attention, often at the expense of other production. Indeed, the rap spectacle becomes a counter-example upon which to judge slam in public discourse.

That some of the more subversive rap lyrics are an expression of the carnivalesque can be lost on some cultural critics who misunderstand—wilfully or otherwise—rap's aesthetics, and consequently publicly demonise rap as a scapegoat for other social or cultural concerns. Consequently, the rap spectacle feeds on itself as biases held by voices of influence reinforce prejudices and reduce rap to its to its more anti-social, radical, counter-cultural, and often (metaphorically) violent expressions—or, as I refer to it, spectacle rap.

Rap is not a single genre, despite what the rap spectacle implies. The idea that spectacle rap *is* rap was reinforced in the mainstream just prior to slam's mainstream moment thanks to both the 'crise' and thanks to the surge in popularity of 'hardcore' / 'gangsta' rap which became a mainstream, top of the charts entity especially around 2004 with rappers like Booba, La Fouine, and Rohff releasing multiple albums, singles, music videos and otherwise maintaining a steady presence in the mass media.[61] 'Hardcore/gangsta'[62] rap lyrics are cryptic, relying extensively on intertextuality, argot, verlan, and phrases from English and Arabic. Violence is a recurring motif as well as ostentatious wealth and ego-trips, with things like Kalashnikovs and Bugattis referenced. This differs from other sub-genres; for example, those which—whilst still employing intertextuality and cryptic language—focus more on the quality and ingenuity of the lyrics and the delivery. In addition to the globalised American pop culture media that disseminates hip hop sub-genres like gangsta rap, Dirty South, and trap music as well as hip hop-related controversies, the mainstream presence of French rappers working in similar genres of hip hop/rap have helped to exacerbate and sustain the stereotype of rap as a violent, misogynistic, criminality glorifying, anti-social, and sociopathic genre of music.

I will address the effects of the rap spectacle on slam's image in Chapter Five. The same precedents and mythology of the *banlieue* and hip hop culture that have shaped the discourses around rap have played into the representations of slam: either through its presumed derivation from rap or thanks to the prominence of slameurs with affiliations to the *banlieue*. In terms of slam's position relative to rap, it must be said that slam is always in the shadow of rap. The very real connections between slam and the French hip hop scene further validate this association. However, slam is distinct from rap in important ways. It is neither music (or even a genre), nor is it a subculture: it is far more free in its expression and is radically inclusive socially. Nonetheless, because of the prominence of rap and these points of commonality and

[61] See bibliography for details.
[62] While there are differences between 'hardcore' and 'gangsta' rap, in the popular imagination there is not an appreciation for such subtlety. Since the concern here is how rap is perceived I have grouped these together and will henceforth use the more provocative term, gangsta rap—even if not accurate—to reflect this generalised perception.

affinity, slam is always understood and thus positioned through, via, against, and/or next to rap.

3.2.2 Chanson and Slam

The second cultural product I will discuss that is relevant to slam is *chanson française*. Chanson is an inescapable part of the atmosphere of aural creative production in France, and it colours the reception, production, expectation and understandings of slam. The way in which slam (by way of GCM)[63] has been able to affect chanson is notable and indicative of its full integration into the cultural field. However, it is important to emphasise that despite the impact made by GCM on chanson, this does not indicate a desire to disrupt or augment chanson as an impetus towards slam for activistes at large.

Although slam is ostensibly poetry, like rap it also—in addition to its aural/oral nature—shares certain other commonalities with chanson. Not only are they considered 'popular' art, but slam and chanson in particular also share the uncomfortable position of being poetic(-like) language that does not conform to an everyday conception of poetry—that is, as something you read. Rap relies heavily on rhyming—a common sense-making heuristic marker for poetry—but its low cultural prestige, aesthetics, conventions that are both cryptic yet ostensibly vulgar, and its position as low-brow, highly-commoditised entertainment (thus the furthest distance from high art possible), mitigate in conceiving of rap as poetry.

Unsurprisingly, with some slam production now sharing the space of chanson (and rap), some slameurs have been compared with chanson artists who preceded them both in the media and in popular discourse (see Chapter Five). Although in my research I have come across this substantially less frequently than comparisons or associations with rap, it does occur. More importantly chanson is directly and practically implicated in French slam's mainstream popularisation given Charles Aznavour's involvement. Accordingly, slam is inherently positioned relative to chanson even if differences between the two creative products

[63] Notably, GCM's role in Renaud returning to songwriting and performing in 2015/16. See Chapter Five.

are arguably greater than those between rap and slam on a technical, formal, and culture-of-origin level.

Sara Poole (2007) cautions that a study of the influences on slam 'cannot ignore the tradition of chanson—and specifically of the *chanson à texte*—that many slameurs acknowledge' (348). While I agree, the relevance of chanson to slam is not as explicitly or directly acknowledged artistic influence on the whole. Rather, it is the legacy of chanson that permeates the cultural sphere in France to such an extent that slam is *ipso facto* understood either in relation to, or through a filter, of chanson. Furthermore, there are underlying assumptions about chanson as a cultural product that in turn affect slam, just as the underlying assumptions about hip hop have affected slam. A link between all of them is that of logocentrism and the inherent assumed literariness of chanson. That chanson can be regarded as literary, whereas other music cannot, is integral to its status and mythical power.

Importantly, chanson is specifically French; whereas slam and rap are both foreign creative products that have been made French through their hybridisation and localisation. Furthermore, not only is chanson culturally French, but it is held up as emblematic of Frenchness. Accordingly, comparisons of slam to chanson can be interpreted as attempts at not only understanding slam as a creative product but also specifically as attempts at situating it culturally. Attempts to associate slam with chanson may also be on some level attempts to identify or even establish slam as particularly *French* rather than as something imported or foreign.

3.2.2.1 Chanson and Frenchness

While chanson can be seen as a form of oral poetry, it is more often positioned as distinct and, technically separated out from poetry on the account of it being 'song'. As slam was brought to mainstream media attention via albums and concerts which feature slam performances accompanied by music, this same ambiguity regarding chanson similarly affected the position of slam.

There is an assumed division between poetry and music, that relates back to a culture of logocentrism, and has effects on creative production and cultural legitimacy via state intervention. As Looseley explains:

> French cultural policy has always been concerned, in one form or another, with Frenchness (albeit recently in a multicultural guise) and with language. Hence, in part, the low priority originally conferred on music by the Ministry in comparison to theatre and the Maisons de la Culture. (Looseley 2003: 198)

The division between music and poetry appears to be long-standing and stems from the aforementioned logocentrism that pervades Western and in particular French culture; but also is reinforced by the assumptions and everyday definitions of poetry. In discussing poetry and chanson, Bernard Ascal argues that following the establishment of the Académie de poésie et de musique in the 16th century, 'La poésie est renvoyée dans le champ protégé de l'imprimé et la chanson dans la rue.' (2008: 193). Thus there was a rupture between music and poetry that had two effects. The first being that authors began to write poetry as poetry specifically and for which, 'le livre est son espace privilégié.' and the second being that 'l'auteur écrit en fonction d'une mise en musique. Le texte ne doit être appréhendé qu'avec elle.' (ibid. 191). In other words, poetic text was either intended from the outset for music or for textual consumption, not a mixture of the two or the possibility of either. It was only one or the other. Thus, he goes on to quote Gainsbourg for instance who said 'sans la moindre ambiguïté que la poésie est "aussi dissociée de la chanson qu'Alban Berg ou Stravinsky sont dissociés de la comédie musicale."' (ibid.). Likewise, although Brassens received the grand prix de poésie in 1967 from the Académie Française, he claimed that, 'je ne sais pas si je suis poète, il est possible que je le sois un petit peu, mais peu importe. Je mélange des paroles et de la musique, et puis je les chante.' (ibid.).

It appears to have become taken for granted that poetry is mutually incompatible with music/song. So it follows that, while chanson is poetic, it is not poetry. Accordingly, there are implications for the position and acceptance of a product like slam, which shares characteristics with rap and chanson that disqualify it as poetry in the strict sense, in much the same way that chanson can be problematically accepted as only poetry-like.

There is a rupture in the perception of poetry and music between the general public and experts. Although Brassens denied that his work was poetry, it is commonly held by the general public that Léo Ferré especially, and the other *chanteurs à texte*, were poets in the loose sense. Chanson française is seen as emblematically French by foreigners in part because of its poeticity, and poetry is mentally linked with the literary success of France. Despite a common-sense, instinctual acceptance of chanson as poetry (or at least poetry-like) this is not enough to eradicate the centuries long assumed distinction between poetry and song. Accordingly, some experts attempt to justify an essential difference between chanson and poetry, as the sociologist Sébastien Dubois argues 'On aurait tort de penser que la poésie se confond avec la chanson, leurs moyens ne sont pas les mêmes.' (2008a:40). This focus on the process is indeed more meaningful and less contingent upon arbitrary distinctions that find their justification weak when properly questioned. However, as he continues to explain, poetry is not alone and exists amongst other arts; therefore, even when music and poetry combine they remain distinct but able to work together and one should not reduce poetry to music. The focus on process is helpful, but assumes that the process and the means of producing a song versus a poem are inherently different for all artists. For example, artists like GCM are more like Brel in that they write slam textes intended to be a capella and later add music, rather than writing to a beat. However, where this can be reconciled is looking at the context from whence the work is produced. Intent and context matter. Furthermore, when considering chanson compared with other forms of song and its relation to poetry, Ascal makes a strong case that despite the historic and symbolic separation, there is a link between chanson and poetry, and that chanson 'devient alors la forme privilégiée où se développent des propositions musicales prenant toujours en compte le sens du texte et sa structure.' (2008:194). If we accept this as valid, chanson and poetry are on a continuum. Such a continuum also allows for other forms, such as rap.

Indeed, it can also be said of rap, that it privileges the sense of the text and its structure above concerns for melody. However, whether rap is poetry or is even 'music' (given this exact privileging of lyrics over music) continues to be controversial and contested. The controversy

that surrounds rap (most notably pertaining to its artistic merit and its content) is well-documented and therefore there is not a need to discuss it here. However, when considering the position of a similar product like slam, and the context in which both rap and chanson also exist, there is also the issue of provenance that affects the acceptance and recognition of different forms.

Any invocations of chanson when discussing slam (or rap) implicate slam's inherent foreignness as well as its potential to be authentically French. Adeline Cordier (2008) in her study of chanson française explains that it is, 'probably the most particular feature of the French popular music tradition' and that scholars rarely bother to translate the term to English which in turn reinforces the idea that 'la chanson is a typically French phenomenon' (2008:9). Whether it is chanson itself that is particularly French, its image as French, or as her thesis contends, that key figures associated with chanson come to embody and manifest a powerful 'myth' of Frenchness, there is little dispute to the strong connection between chanson and French culture.

Cordier's doctoral thesis makes interesting arguments that pertain to slam, both as it is associated with chanson and with regards to how slam is culturally situated independent of any chanson connection. Her main thesis is that the trio of Brel-Brassens-Ferré is a myth (in the Barthesian sense) whose power lies in how it embodies 'Frenchness' and thus functions as a cultural arbitrary by which to assess what 'French' means. She places the epicentre of this myth in a much circulated photograph of the three singers during an interview, incidentally the only known instance where all three were in the same place together at the same time. Despite the lack of interaction as an actual trio between the three men they are nonetheless imagined as a triumvirate of Frenchness—as this emblematic trio, as a myth. The mythic power of this one image is a testament to the power of the media and public perception to shape a phenomenon and give it meaning which transcends the image itself. Thus, the power of the mythic trio is not the trio itself, but rather the 'extraordinary prosperity' of their association found in the significance the public, via the media, 'saw in it and gained from seeing in it' (2008:2-3). This is not unlike the various images of slam that have circulated

during its development and which have shaped it into its contemporary form. I will return to the mythic power of chanson in Chapter Five where I discuss the image construction of slam. However, for now her argument regarding chanson's emblematic and mythic power to convey Frenchness is relevant in terms of positioning.

The verbal quality of rap over its musical quality can bring it in line with a distinctly French cultural artefact—chanson française—and thus it is able to be legitimated and attached to France's venerated literary (and logocentric) heritage. Such re-framing of music production as literary (or at least as somehow more literary than musical) allows for continued (re-)affirmation of France's literary and linguistic prowess whilst maintaining the assumed separation between musical and verbal art. This was the reasoning that Lang and others applied in their initial support of rap and, indeed, this logic was also applied to chanson in order to elevate chanson to art that was above mere entertainment. With such a frame of art in place, it was also possible to sacralise those works which were of particular cultural value, which has meant that 'Critics, journalists, or even the general public have used terms like 'chanson littéraire', 'chanson à texte', or 'chanson poétique' to distinguish between what are often perceived as quality songs and less prestigious variety songs.' (Cordier 2008:68). Accordingly, chanson which is particularly 'literary' is thus also more exemplary as 'French' since it presumably draws more on verbal than musical talent and skill.

Chanson has not been a specific concern or interest of cultural policy in the same way that rap or techno music has. In the first instance this is because, unlike rap and techno, it is not imported but natively French, representative of 'Frenchness' (Loosely 2003). Accordingly, it has served as the touchstone upon which to judge and orient other musical cultural production being not only aggressively *French* but also legitimated as cultural production deserving particular reverence. This legitimacy is due in part to its 'literariness', putting the lyric ahead of the sound, which makes it congruent with a logocentric cultural logic and furthermore due to its capacity to mythologise 'Frenchness'.[64]

[64] This latter point is the central argument of Adeline Cordier's 2008 doctoral thesis, 'The mediating of chanson: French identity and the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré'.

Any attempt to associate slam with chanson thus provides legitimacy: it not only helps to establish slam as 'authentically' French but also anchors slam to a popular art form that is less controversial than hip hop and revered despite its middlebrow status. Chanson not only lends a poetic legitimacy to slam, it also adds a French legitimacy to it—especially in contrast to rap. While French hip hop has matured to the point that it is fully hybrid and recognised for its particularly French flair, it is still a foreign import to France. Furthermore, although there was initial support for hip hop (namely, rap) eventually this waned given various events and controversy in the 1990s. Indeed, as I discuss later, an initial draw for slam was that it was able to get public funding whereas any rap affiliated venture could not as easily.

3.2.3 Slam and music: Distinction exemplified

When it comes to slam, whether a listener hears traces of Aznavour, Gainsbourg, and Brassens; or whether they hear Orelsan, MC Solaar, and Alonzo depends on their cultural repertoire and schema. However, it is also affected by how slam has been represented to them, shaping their preconception of it (via the media, peer influence, marketing, its brand image and so on). This all comes into concert with social and cultural dynamics of distinction, like those studied by Bourdieu (2010),[65] swinging the scale of reference towards rap or towards chanson, depending on the audience and their taste cultures.

Given the significant growth and mainstream success of French hip hop throughout the 1990s and which has only increased since, it is also unsurprising that many audiences would immediately associate and interpret slam through a hip hop bias. However, given the pervasiveness of chanson in France, its inescapability, it is also unsurprising that associations

[65] In *Distinction* (2010, 1985 [1979]), Bourdieu synthesised some of his other work to demonstrate that 'taste' and preferences for cultural consumption were significantly dictated by social class and peer groups: that 'good' taste was not a natural endowment nor an objective measurement but wholly socially situated and determined. Importantly, he also augmented the concept of social class with the variable of cultural capital to that of economic capital. Furthermore, he refined the concept of habitus: habits, or ways of interpreting and interacting with the world, that are determined by the amounts and types of capital accumulated by individuals. Accordingly, social power he argued was affected too by cultural capital and accordingly those born into the 'wrong' families lacked the required cultural capital to demonstrate 'good' taste thus excluding them from certain social networks and from pathways to power and prestige. This dismantling of the belief that certain cultural forms are inherently 'good' as opposed to socially determined is crucial to understanding the dynamics of social class and power even as it pertains to subjects such as cultural production and consumption. It draws into question any assertion that a given work of art, such as an opera, is inherently 'good' and that another, such a rap or graffiti is inherently 'bad'.

between chanson and work like that of GCM would be made. Indeed, I suggest that the prevalence of chanson, its image and iconic role in French culture predispose French slam to being affiliated with chanson—even if there is never any intention to do so on the part of slameurs. By virtue of being French, chanson becomes influential—either in the reception of slam, or in the implicit influence it makes during the creative process, or, more likely, both. However, the influence of chanson on slam is arguably less direct than that of hip hop. Slam went from a marginal activity limited to a few venues to a rapidly growing cultural phenomenon in a cultural centre for French hip hop: Saint Denis. The geography was influential on slam's unique development into a culturally specific form and furthermore that hip hop culture has profoundly shaped some of the aesthetics, values, norms, and conventions of French slam—despite the fundamental, cultural, formal and artistic distinctions between rap and slam.

Thus slam is simultaneously positioned as derivative or strongly associated with hip hop (depending) but also more strongly French and legitimated as such given the lack of a strong cultural basis for its practice (i.e. hip hop for rap) and the recognition of chanson-like elements in some French slam products like the albums of GCM. This position, between chanson and rap on a poetic-like music continuum, is one of the positions for slam. However, as mentioned above, whether slam is understood relative to hip hop/rap or to chanson will vary greatly depending on its audience. As a mainstream product it sits in between both. But it also—both as in the mainstream and underground— tries to mitigate that tension between rap and chanson by insisting on its fundamental difference from both of these genres: that slam is *poetry,* not music. Given this final important position characteristic, I will now address the contemporary French poetry art world in order to understand how slam exists in relation to—and outside of—it.

3.3 Poetry Art World

The final product most similar to slam is 'traditional' poetry; that is, contemporary poetry and 'classic' French poetry.[66] 'Traditional' poetry exists in and comes from the poetry art world (PAW). By 'art world' I am referring to Howard Becker's (2008) concept of an art world: a highly-organised complex system of coordination between actors who together, through a structured division of labour, collaborate to produce works of art. Becker's theory of art worlds was part of a paradigm shift in the understanding of the production of art because it made explicit that art is not the product of an individual artist-genius's talent, but rather the result of highly-coordinated group action. Even what is considered to be 'art' is the product of such coordinated action within an art world. As I mentioned in the methodology, compared to brand-oriented organisations, these art worlds are similar to what Kornberger (2010) refers to as traditional organisations in terms of hierarchy, internal knowledge transfer, et cetera.

An examination of the PAW serves to outline how French slam exists alongside it, tease out why the branding of slam as 'poésie démocratisée' is attractive, and explain slam's positionality given that some slameurs acknowledge their 'outsiderdom' to the contemporary PAW or feel that they are unable to access it. Importantly, while the alternative space that is slam (poetry) exists in both cultures, in the United States slam poetry is something that poets from that poetry art world participate fully in: poetry slams are fixtures on university campuses and included in creative writing courses. There is a pipeline between the poetry slam circuit and academia and the poetry art world. In France, the structure of the PAW and the centrality of publication creates barriers for entry for non-textual poets. The structure and economy of the PAW[67] is the focus of Sébastien Dubois, whose research provides tangible information that can then be contrasted with slam.

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[66] I use the qualifier 'classic' here to refer primarily to renowned canonical poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, et cetera. Some earlier poets (e.g. Racine) would also fall under this category from the classical age of French poetry (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), as could medieval and renaissance poets (e.g. Christine de Pisan). To remind the reader, I use 'traditional' in opposition to slam, meaning the ordinary understanding of poetry that is primarily page-based, and associated with fine art and literature.

[67] Specifically, the poetry art world belonging within the pure art pole and not the commercial art pole. What is generally revered as poetry. Furthermore, in all of his and his collaborators' research they focus on contemporary poetry, not what is deemed the 'classics'. The need for such an analytical separation has been demonstrated by

3.3.1 Contemporary French Poetry: an art world within 'the artworld'

For France, it appears that the idea of a live poetry space in the first place and secondly that it was accessible to those not traditionally a part of the PAW was a primary point of attraction rather than competition. Félix J., slameur and activiste, explains the situation thus:

> Ça faisait soixante ans grosso modo qu'en France on n'avait pas rempli des salles uniquement pour écouter du texte. C'est quelque chose qui avait toujours existé, avec un impact dans la vie de tous les jours. Ces soixante années sont un accident de l'histoire. La faute à Heidsieck, aux lectures à Beaubourg sur le mode de l'avant-garde. Aujourd'hui, on remplit à nouveau les salles parce que la poésie est connectée à des problématiques de notre temps. Cette poésie est populaire parce que [elle s'est] rattachée à une époque et soucieuse de se rendre communicable auprès de tous (Jousserand and Peillon 2009:183).

Some of the more prominent slameurs do not publicly appear to be aware[68] of earlier instances of oral poetry in France (although there are references to the American Beat Generation poets); however, Félix J. is not only acutely aware of it, but he openly criticises this history and its effects on poetry. His criticism of the French PAW, and in particular of its lack of attention to oral poetry, figures into his motivation for slam and is a theme echoed by others in the slam scene.[69] Other slameurs do not specifically lament the status of oral poetry in particular, nor express knowledge of *poésie sonore* and other movements, but rather appear to be more familiar with chanson française and rap as poetic oral expression. They do however

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Moulin (1986) on the basis of the different market mechanisms (rarity, uncertainty, etc.) for grand classification (classical/contemporary) that affect the value and cultural importance of works.

[68] Whether he or other slameurs are familiar with poets like Heidsieck or the history of *poésie sonore* is unknown, but mention of avant-garde and experimental poetry rarely appears in the slam discourse. Rather, when asked about poetry, GCM—for example— refers to only to Apollinaire and similar classics (Dufay 2006).

[69] Similarily, Frédéric Nevchehirlian explains that what he appreciates about 'notre génération' is the renewal of oral poetry and the 'dimension spectaculaire'. The performance should be 'extra-ordinaire' and although this was done by *poètes sonores* like Julien Blaine or Serge Pey, in the slam scene, '[…] au lieu de se réfugier dans des centres d'Art, nous, on allait dans des lieux populaires et sans qu'on soit tous des hommes de lettre. C'est pour ça que j'ai animé ces soirées parce que pour moi c'était une utopie.' Interestingly, given the development of slam and broader poetic expression he explains that he, 'A l'inverse de Prévert qui refusait ce titre pour ne pas appartenir à une caste, je le revendique. Je le revendique comme un minot qui se prend pour Zidane en portant le maillot de foot. Sauf que là on ne dit pas de lui qu'il est prétentieux.' (Dame Gabrielle 2012a). So while he uses the label he also recognises that it still carries a negative connotation, which he hopes changes thanks to slam. Likewise, Yo explains that in the 1990s 'c'était très ringard de se dire poète' but that this changes thanks to 'le forum démocratique' that one finds in bars, in the slam scene (Maaroufi 2012). Or, Denis Lavant, (well-versed in theatre and traditional poetry) who is influenced by his discovery of rap and slam and describes himself as nostalgic for Villon in his assessment of slam (and rap) as poetry that addresses the needs of today, whereas 'Dans la poésie moderne il n'y a pas de rythme…[…] Les poètes contemporains officiels, ça ne touche plus terre, y a plus un propos concret, qui parle de la rue, du quotidien.' (Maaroufi 2011).

criticise the PAW, whether for its sexism, elitism, or simply for its irrelevance to their life and experiences.

For instance, Cat Mat, of the collectif Slam Ô Féminin, explains that she was attracted to slam because 'je me suis ennuyée prodigieusement dans certaines scènes très élitistes, assez paternalistes, du milieu officiel de la poésie…' (H.M. 2013:58). For her, 'le milieu officiel de la poésie' is not only sexist ('peu de femmes citées par ailleurs.') [70] but also, despite valorising poets who in their own time were highly criticised, it treats poets today (often youth) who do not conform to the standards and expectations of the artworld with condescension (ibid.). 'The artworld' here does not refer to an all-encompassing art world in Becker's (2008) sense that covers all creative activity, but rather to a specific cultural myth of '*the* artworld'. Colloquially, this is a proxy for the creative activity and economy most closely associated with high culture institutions like museums and galleries, fine art dealers and shows, criticism and market speculation, and higher education. However, theorists like Arthur Danto (1964) further specify '*the artworld*' by its embeddedness in 'an atmosphere of artistic theory' (580).[71]

Cat Mat also criticises what she sees as hypocrisy in the *artworld* PAW, '[…] ils défendent souvent une poésie très éthérée, en dehors du monde, de la réalité. Et ces hommes-là évoquaient tous ces poètes qui, eux, avaient été très engagés politiquement, qui avaient brassé le réel.' (H.M. 2013). Her statement is similar to Félix J.'s critique of the state of oral poetry in France prior to slam and similar sentiments are presumably relatively common and may underline the motivation towards slam for many involved. Slam (regardless of the

[70] More substantially she states that although there are women, and symbolic representation, 'elles ont été mises dans un coin' rather it has always been men who have been acknowledged in history. Importantly she argues that 'Les muses sont au féminin, les poètes au masculin…La poésie, ça n'est pas féminin, c'est l'inspiratrice qui est féminine […] C'est souvent le regard d'hommes sur la femme en tant qu'image, en tant qu'objet, et en tant que muse, qui est reconnu.' (H.M. 2013:58). Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, the idea slam can be more egalitarian as it is without a biased history, certainly warrants an in-depth analysis where it can be given more substantial attention.

[71] These institutions, under the auspice of art theory, and the ideology that holds them together form what Arthur Danto calls 'the artworld'. Accordingly, for clarity, I will use Danto's word '*artworld*' in italics for ease of reading to refer to this particular mythic construct in order to avoid any confusion with the theoretical concept deployed by Becker—who shows there is not one art world (written with a space) but many different art worlds. More concretely, '*the artworld*' includes classical art, fine art, conceptual art, avant-garde art, modern art, pop art, et cetera but does not include outsider art, most street art, folk art, amateur art et cetera.

competition structure) appears to have responded to a desire for poetry by people not a part of the contemporary French PAW, or *the artworld* in general.[72]

3.3.2 Poetry Art World as a Restricted Field of Production

Until recently, French poetry was arguably still strongly influenced by a tradition of highly intellectual, rarefied and esoteric poetry and emphasised a dichotomy between poetic and prose language. Despite the artistic successes from such works, this tradition also 'contributed to the alienation of generations of French readers for whom these were too abstract and inaccessible.' (Wourm 2007:101). Prior to the mid 19th century the rift between poetry and the general audience was not as pronounced; unsurprisingly, the 'intellectualisation' of poetry has alienated the general public. To such readers, poetry appeared to have mostly abandoned what they most strongly associated with poetry—lyricism and more traditional forms—and by 'adopting "difficult" techniques [poetry] opted for non-referential experience which set the reader at a distance.' (Coward 2004:353).

With its appeal directed toward a specialist audience, poetry was free to focus inwardly at poetry itself, 'Shielded against commercialism, poetry has maintained the momentum of the avant-garde more effectively than any other genre. It has kept faith with Art and is now the purest aesthetic laboratory on the French literary scene.' (Coward 2004: 353). With such shielding and avant-garde focus, it is perhaps unsurprising that, with the exception of classics, poetry books are not bestsellers when competing with middlebrow alternatives.

The PAW, contemporary poetry especially, is what Bourdieu (1983, 1991, 1993) calls a 'restricted field of cultural production' whereby the audience is largely the producers themselves and is working from a logic of art for art's sake. He describes this as the economic world reversed and accordingly has a very limited audience and little influence on/from popular and mass culture. Thus, as Dubois (2005) also contends, poetry reduces its demand to that which it can create itself. Accordingly, poetry's public is 'other poets, publishers,

[72] An exception might be PLH who seemed from the beginning to use slam as a way to ingratiate himself to the poetry art world, especially through his involvement in Printemps de poètes at its inception.

reviewers, members of institutions active in poetry; poetry's public is limited to the world of poetry.' (5).

However, although the market for poetry is limited, as with many of the fine arts, the general public does not wish to see it disappear despite not consuming it greatly. Like other art forms such as opera, poetry retains a privileged position in culture and indeed has long been generally considered among the most sacred and revered of the fine arts. Given the sacralisation of language in France—imperative to national identity and reinforced by logocentrism—poetry almost demands that it therefore receive special consideration as a focus of state intervention, not only as art, but as patrimony. Importantly, this government support also enables the contemporary PAW to maintain its autonomy without concern for market forces and therefore there is less immediate pressure on it to broaden its audience beyond itself to sustain its production.

Thus the French poetry economy is paradoxal: simultaneously a marginal form of cultural production and a thriving economy (Craig and Dubois 2010). It may be surprising then—given rhetoric that poetry is in danger of becoming irrelevant—that the contemporary French poetry market is relatively healthy, 'nor has its literary recognition vanished into thin air' (Dubois 2006:23). Dubois argues that the socio-economic characteristics of contemporary French poetry help explain how it can be both marginal and vital at the same time (24). Through generous public support via effectual[73] state intervention, the autonomy of the PAW and the centrality of publishing to its economy maintain their presence, while also being provided with the stability required for its social and organisational logics. As part of the autonomy that is thereby created, the contemporary French PAW also has its own dedicated and exclusive institutions—publishers, venues, journals, et cetera—which are run by poets themselves rather than external actors (Dubois 2006).[74]

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[73] For example, Dubois's findings show that in the early 1980s there were approximately 200 poetry editors at the CNL, whereas as of 2009, there were 400 which he attributes to cultural policy measures that promote poetry (2009:17).

[74] For instance, a significant majority of poetry editors are themselves also poets (61% as reported by Dubois 2006), as are the publishers, critics, academics, and others in gatekeeper and support functions (Dubois 2006:28).

The publishing industry is central to the PAW, much of its activity is directly centred around it—necessarily so, as this is how the PAW manages to remain both marginal and vital at once. Indeed, the strategies employed by publishers have pervasive effects on the organisation of the PAW and even on the conception of poetry. This includes impactful effects such as the dominance of print in its economy leaving little room in the market for oral poetry, thus making it seem all but non-existent. With regards to the publishing of new material, and in addition to public funds, publishers also play a crucial role in supporting such publication through sales of 'bestselling "consecrated" poets'—the books of poetry one might find for sale at a train station (Craig and Dubois 2010:444). The recursive relationship between the PAW and the centrality of publishing interrelates with the above mentioned hermeticism and has profound effects on the state of contemporary poetry in France.

Specifically, these effects affect the styles and genres of poetry most valued in the PAW's economy, and thus are in publication. In turn, this affects the perception of poetry in the public consciousness and what is understood as 'good' poetry by both specialists and laypeople alike. It follows that this also affects how similar cultural products like slam interact and are positioned relative to the PAW.

3.3.3 Poetry Art World Structuring: Hierarchies and Recognition

Dubois relies upon what he calls an 'unrefined and imprecise' theoretical construct that divides the contemporary PAW in 'two parishes': lyrical poetries and experimental poetries (Dubois 2010a:30; Dubois 2011:92). This idiosyncrasy of French poetry is a product of theoretical attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to problematise the extreme diversity of styles and movements that have appeared during the 20th century following the two paths opened by Mallarmé and Rimbaud of 'poésie orphique (ou poésie du sens), et poésie de la lettre' (Dubois 2008b:119). Dubois admits that despite being reductive, many in the poetry world use this distinction, with this orientation being one of the two axes along which the PAW is hierarchically ordered, the other being 'literary quality' (Dubois 2011:92).

In contrast to everyday definitions of poetry that use traditional verse poetry as a frame of reference, French (art) poetry ceased being defined by its opposition to prose long ago. However, lyrical poetry, although not by default in verse, retains some of that tradition and can be understood as 'the expression of a relationship with the world in a literary form, with the question of the subject and its place' (Dubois 2010a:36). In contrast, experimental poetry, the other pole of Dubois's 'parishes' and heavily influenced by 20th century art movements, breaks more radically with the standard conventions of poetry. For example, given that a standard (if not taken-for-granted) convention of poetry is that it is written for the page, poetry which does not conform to this convention is ipso facto 'experimental' (Craig and Dubois 2010:456). Experimental poetry can furthermore be characterised by its concern with language itself, with formalism. Consequently, 'experimental' poetry is typically considered more difficult due to this as well as to its nonconformity with standard conventions. Therefore, *poésie sonore/action* and its poets like Heidsieck are considered experimental alongside poets who write for the page but nevertheless break other conventions sufficiently. Importantly, poets whose style may be more consistent with the conventions of lyrical poetry, but who write for the stage—that is, orality—are also considered experimental by not writing for the page. Such departures from convention can make experimental poetry challenging for non-experts to appreciate (Dubois 2010a:36). But it also adds further difficulty due to its minor status meaning that it lacks integration into literary history, which then reinforces its esotericism due to the loss of subsequent exposure to a broad audience (Dubois 2011:110). Unsurprisingly, despite some overlap in conventions (performance and orality), this means experimental poets are not generally common influences in the slam scene. Finally, although it is entirely outside of the PAW, we can assume that were it to be, slam's departures from convention would situate it in the experimental 'parish'.

The poetry economy determines what poetry makes it to mainstream recognition, and then renown. Dubois shows that work which would be considered 'experimental' is at a distinct disadvantage. Not only are there fewer publishing outfits for experimental poetry, those which do exist do not provide a pathway to renown. In addition to being published in the right

journals and by certain prestigious publishers, interest from academia is crucial for renown: it is when a poet reaches this world of academia that new, unestablished audiences appear, and it is the academic world that has the most influence on the constitution of the canon (Dubois 2010b:43). But as Craig and Dubois (2010) explain, 'It is usually only once a poet's work is published in a pocket collection that the French academic field becomes interested in a poet's work and further contributes to a poet's legitimacy and influence' (444). [75] Accordingly, so-called experimental poets remain within their own niche in the PAW; whereas lyrical poets who play the game right, can achieve eventual renown.

3.3.4 Gatekeepers and Mode of Entry into the Poetry Art World: Poetry Readings

The relative hermeticism of the French PAW means that its key gatekeepers (publishers, editors, et cetera) are themselves almost invariably also poets who once gained entry, and then status, through strategic connections (Dubois 2011:94). Publishers wield significant influence from the centre of the PAW economy; but rather than finding new talent themselves, for instance at poetry readings, they delegate this to the poetry reviews which thus serve as a barrier for entry (Dubois 2011:98).

As Craig and Dubois (2010) explain, the ostensible role of poetry readings in France is first as a means of publicising a new publication by a poet of sufficient status, usually well-established. However, there is a second, not-so-explicit, purpose of the reading: a space in which poets engage in a strategic 'gift exchange' in order to establish the social connections that are necessary for a career. Unestablished poets attend these readings to pay respect to more established poets and to play the social game correctly in order to make the connections and cultivate the affinities that might assist them in gaining entry into the art world. Thus, as Craig and Dubois (2010) show, while poetry readings offer opportunities for social capital accumulation, this opportunity is only realized when conduct is in accordance with the un-spoken social rules, norms, and aesthetic tastes of the poetry reading.

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[75] Craig and Dubois identify how in the US, career progression is less contingent upon publication and often begins at university.

Thus, while the PAW may claim it is inclusive and open, in reality it is a restricted space with limited and highly controlled resources: 'the audience at readings is dominated by poets and other actors in the PAW—editors, publishers, professors of poetry, critics as well as those friends and family of the featured poet(s) who provide important support.' (ibid. 448). As their research shows, exclusion often happens due to a novice poet's inability to navigate the relational space of the poetry reading and its unspoken social norms successfully.[76] However, it also shows that exclusion is likely to be *openly* justified on the basis of the *perceived* quality of a poet's work.

On the surface, disregarding a novice poet on the quality of his work seems routine and justified. In fact, Craig and Dubois (2010) do not examine this further and instead focus on the social dynamics. However, implicit in excluding a poet on the basis of the quality of their work is an assumption that there is a shared consensus as to what makes a poem 'good'. Indeed, there is; however, it is entirely subjective, contingent on the current aesthetic system. Unsurprisingly, what the general public enjoys as poetry is often radically different from what is considered 'good poetry' within the art world. For example, while the public generally enjoys chanson as poetry[77] and many consider it highly poetic, it is not poetry for the PAW.[78] This may at first seem to be based in the crass distinction that chanson is commercial, whereas poetry is adverse to such concerns; but the distinction between chanson, *qua* music, and poetry is, as Dubois reminds us, symbolically powerful and more about the special status of poetry. Furthermore, it hints to what those outside of the PAW are interested in as poetry. According to Dubois, Brassens is often considered the most poetic of chanson artists by the general public, and he concludes this is because his songs use traditional classic poetry

[76] The details of this are not relevant here, having to do with the symbolic 'gift exchange' they have observed at readings based on a logic of offering and on the hierarchy of the art world (cf. Craig and Dubois 2010: 448-449). Interestingly however, one of the taboo behaviours they cite is 'shameless self-promotion' which is a trope in hip hop and not looked down upon in its culture per se. Accordingly this could disadvantage a slameur influenced by this aspect of hip hop culture.

[77] Dubois cites a figure from a survey taken in conjunction with the inaugural Printemps de Poètes in 1999 that shows a full 85% of visitors considered Brassens to be a poet (2006:32).

[78] This reason and that chanson artists and poets are competing in separate, unrelated markets (audio recordings vs. print respectively) is why Dubois has not included any chanson artists in any of his research—despite public opinion (Dubois 2009, 2011).

components—'precisely those that poets no longer use'. He concludes that 'the discrepancy between contemporary poetry and "general" audience conventions is obviously what explains why so few people read poetry.' (2011:90). This statement is somewhat oversimplified, there are certainly more factors to consider, but it is safe to assume that his conclusion forms a significant part of poetry's relative marginality.

Importantly, amateurs—who according to Dubois tend to write regular verse—are excluded from the art world on the basis of quality; since quality actually means in accordance with what is currently considered 'good' within the PAW's aesthetic. (Dubois 2009, 2011). Thus amateurs in this sense does not merely mean those who write/consume poetry as a hobby, but also those sufficiently distanced from the aesthetic logic of the PAW regardless of their level of dedication to the form. This has ramifications for slam as it not only embraces amateurs, it also allows even the most traditional and clichéd of poetry components without prejudice.

3.3.5 Slam vis-à-vis the Poetry Art World

Slam did not create spaces for live, oral poetry in the first instance; but rather branded such spaces anew for anybody interested without *artworld* pretensions and politics or the entanglements of the PAW's economy. However, slam is not a direct reaction to the PAW from within and therefore should not be considered avant-garde nor revolutionary— it has never been a part of the PAW. Slam has its own logic, organisation, institutions, and aesthetics. Accordingly, on the one hand it can be considered an emergent art world in its own right; but, it is also a brand—and it is this brand that provides the foundation for its emergent art world.

Autonomy and self-sufficiency are features that the contemporary PAW shares with slam. Both have their own institutions for publishing, production, distribution, et cetera and both benefit from state intervention in cultural production. The resources they use, the justifications behind the public support they receive, their means of production and strategies all differ however. There are only a few spaces of overlap or interaction between the contemporary PAW and slam. Importantly, it is more likely to be the renowned poets from the

PAW who are the poets of reference with the general public. Since slam, being *poésie démocratisée*, is not inherently tied to the canon and is open to a broad conception of poetry, what counts as poetry for the general public is the baseline for slam. Therefore, it tends to be these consecrated poets alongside other creatives—*chansonniers*, hip hop artists, poets from other cultures, and storytellers—who are more likely to be references for slam than 'artworld' poetry. Indeed, lack of awareness of movements like *poésie sonore* and other performance poetry by other slameurs and activistes is indicative of the elitist nature of the PAW—that is, despite proclamations of poetry's accessibility, a typical person on the street may not be familiar with Henri Chopin, nor with more contemporary poets like Julien Blaine. This knowledge divide is essential to understanding slam's position. Slam is presented as accessible democratic poetry; one need not have familiarity with even Baudelaire or Prévert to get started. The barrier to entry is only your self-confidence to get on stage. Even that barrier is mitigate to some extent by the ateliers prior to the session (see Chapter Six). However, despite seeming as if they belong to entirely different fields of cultural production, poetry and slam are both parts of contemporary French creative culture and both consider themselves 'poetry' in the broadest sense of the term. Nonetheless, their audiences are as different as their aesthetic systems.

The distinction between the two can be reduced to the truism that contemporary poetry is part of the *artworld*; whereas slam is not. However, if we were to analyse slam as a 'field', it also does not fit neatly into the dichotomy proposed by Bourdieu: that the literary field is divided into two poles, 'pure art' and 'commercial art' (1991, 1996, 2015; Sapiro 2003). The logics of these two poles are opposites: in the former, artistic logic takes precedence over economic logic, whereas in the latter, artistic ideals are subordinated to commercial success (Van Rees and Dorleijn 2001 in Dubois and François 2013:502). On an individual slameur level, there are some who aspire to aesthetic concerns and others who seek commercial success; however, slam broadly is not dominated by one or the other of these logics, nor indeed by some amalgam level constituting a mixture of this same scale. Rather, slam is dominated by the logics produced by its ethos: poésie démocratisée. Slam's primary logic is largely social,

rather than positioned somewhere between artistic or economic, while of course still containing within it both artistic and economic concerns.

The way in which it is economic is in its testament to letting the audience decide what is 'good', similar to an open marketplace. Economic value is thus not directly tied to an established aesthetic but is rather determined by the audience. The perceived quality of a poet's work can indeed be subject to significant aesthetic fluidity. Importantly, reputation is not based on artistic capital nor economic capital per se but rather on ones engagement with the scene. Indicatively, when asked about GCM and his commercial success, several prominent slameurs state that they do not take issue with his mainstream and commercial success because he has remained active and committed to the scene. Slam is an inherently social and participatory creative phenomenon, and this is what is stressed by activistes to engage participants/audiences.

Nevertheless, slam should not understood as 'amateur art': not only do some slameurs make a career out of their poetry or in the organisational aspects of the slam art world, but slam also has an emergent organised art world with its own festivals, distribution networks, critics, aesthetic system, et cetera. In fact, any attempts to position slam within existing classifications like 'amateur' or 'commercial'/'professional' requires significant and awkward qualification. For instance, as Dubois (2005) discusses, amateurs (which he contrasts with 'serious' poets) use media like the internet as a new means of broadcasting and which provides them a platform otherwise not possible given their distance from the PAW. However, he identifies that 'serious' poets use the internet strategically, either by using the technology as a medium itself (e.g. Jérôme Game's digital poetry) or as a means to establish a virtual community. Amateurs he contends are differentiated from 'serious' poets on the basis of both literary and economic terms, accordingly their use of the internet is presumably not to achieve the same aims as 'serious' poets (such as collaboration, analysis, critique). Research by Aude Mouaci (2001) supports this contention and demonstrates that amateurs use technology like the internet not as a means of personal branding, publishing, and professional networking, but more in the spirit of personal blogs and social media. Their intent is not necessarily to

promote their poetic work or to establish a network of peers as 'serious' poets do. In this respect, slameurs fall into both camps; it is not possible to argue that in general slameurs are more similar to 'serious' poets, nor can we argue they are more similar to 'amateur' poets. There are both within slam, yet their work is not divided along those lines, nor is their status within the scene either. Slam, is not de facto amateur poetry simply because it is outside of the contemporary PAW. Rather it is a poetic space organised by activistes within the scene that allows entry for amateurs and others alike, *poésie démocratisée*.

Rather than suggest building upon Bourdieu's construct of a pure and commercial pole in art, as this does not adequately encapsulate slam, I suggest to instead conceptualise slam as a brand. The brand reputation of slam stems from its identity and image, with activistes for the slam brand gaining internal reputation through their engagement with it, thus further reinforcing the open sociality of the phenomenon. Influential slameurs with respect in the scene as well as significant artistic and commercial capital, GCM being the shining example, act as brand ambassadors, spreading the ethos of slam and informing new audiences about the unique 'brand offering' that slam provides. Other activistes do the same, albeit at a lesser level, through their individual and collective efforts. Slam, with this operation of its sociality-driven logic and scene ethos, is a brand of oral poetry that provides social space and a freely accessible creative platform. This social space, its ethos, and the openness of the creative platform, are more important concerns for the slam community than what is individually attempted to be achieved with this platform, which can of course be artistic or commercial success, but can also be just about anything else.

Conclusion

I have outlined these proximate forms—the most similar cultural products to slam—to provide a brief overview of the landscape; that is, the cultural context into which slam entered. I have not outlined them in full, but rather focused on the aspects of them most salient for understanding slam: how they are distinct from but relevant to slam's position and understanding in the cultural production landscape.

Slam by virtue of its ethos defies simple classification that would allow it to assimilate with any of the pre-existing art worlds discussed in this chapter. Indeed, slam does not neatly fit into any one pre-conceived category or genre—by its very nature it resists such categorisation. Accordingly, individually and as an assemblage of cultural production references, the proximate forms discussed in this chapter—rap, chanson, poetry—provide way-points for situating slam in the French landscape of cultural production: triangulation through these proximate forms creating a frame through which slam can be assessed. When audiences look through this frame, slam can be judged on the basis of any of the criteria relevant for these forms and indeed this is exactly how slam has been approached in the public discourse. This framing of slam—vis-à-vis rap, poetry, chanson, or any combination thereof—is never wholly neutral, it is always to assess the extent to which slam is distinct from but also similar to a given form in order to position it within the landscape and thus understand for whom, how, and why it exists. Another way to describe such an analytical approach is brand positioning.

At its simplest, brand positioning identifies the target audience for the brand, competitors to the brand on the market, and what the brand offers—or can promise—that those competitors cannot (i.e. how it is distinct and is able to deliver on that promise when others cannot). In the previous chapter I identified slam's identity traits that all constitute an offering that is distinct from the proximate art forms discussed in this chapter. These competitors—to use branding language—to slam are rap, chanson, and traditional poetry.

The core of the practice of slam is oral poetry and as such its closest competitor amongst proximate French cultural products is traditional poetry. However, as this chapter illustrates, the picture is far more nuanced than that. Slam's liberté and diversité allow for derivatives from the cultural production of 'proper slam' (scene ouverte or tournoi, slam's most typical products) such as albums of slam or anthologies. Such products 'issus du slam' can be potential competitors for other cultural products such as rap or chanson; indeed the most common mainstream conception of slam (e.g. GCM) posits slam—mistaken for a music genre—as a competitor for rap, while in its pure state as live performance and, specifically,

carried out in its scene ouverte form, slam is actually closest to the ideal of *chanson française*: performed live, staged for intimacy, and with minimal support and separation between the audience and performer. Thus, slam is also a possible competitor for these particular experiences. The point made is that due to its inherent liberté slam is able to effectively compete with all of these proximate forms depending on the lens through which one views the practice of slam. However, as a cultural competitor to many things, it is also always an imperfect competitor to any one of them since its possible manifestations are *inherently* pluralistic. Thus, it becomes essential to differentiate between what slam is and how it is used by its highly diverse practitioners. Some slameurs are naïve artists, and some are not. Some activistes are amateurs and others aspire to build a professional career as a slameur/*animateur*. Some slameurs aim for only live orality, others use the live, oral, performance platform as a tool to refine their writing. Some slameurs eschew music, others use their slam textes to develop songs and break into the music industry as part of the *nouvelle scène* (e.g. Luciole). Some slameurs prefer experimental, avant-garde inspired work, others find their muse in 90s hip hop—and others still are satisfied reading the classified ads from a vintage newspaper as their slam texte. Indeed, slam is not just inclusive, it is radically inclusive: its audience/participants is everyone and anyone. This is in contrast to both rap and traditional poetry and, unlike all three proximate forms including chanson, it offers freedom from canonical expectations and art world conventions. It aspires to be more accessible and open as a platform for poetic *self*/expression. As this platform, however, it is comparable but ultimately complementary to all three of these proximate French art forms. Despite this, slam is none the less assessed for its cultural value, and for its Frenchness, relative to them. These discourses and processes of comparative evaluation are far from trivial, serving as they do to shape the construction of identity by way of the image for slam as a nascent phenomenon, as discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four
A History of French Slam: Brand DNA

A prominent slam organisation, the Ligue Slam Français (LSF) opts not to define slam based in characteristics or features, but rather 'par son histoire' (2009:6-7). However, the history of slam, as a sequence of events, is not enough to give character to this phenomenon. Instead I intend to show the nuances of French slam through an exploration of its history as these nuances help to illustrate the cultural specificity of slam. Furthermore, as I argue it is informative to understand slam as a brand, I will apply the concept of Brand DNA to the history of French slam. By applying this theoretical concept to the events in slam's development it provides a key component of insight into the brand identity that is the focus of this thesis. Specifically, it can be used to infer brand identity from the marks left by the brand, for example the products it has chosen to endorse and the symbols by which it is represented through time. Brand DNA provides a map to identity in this way as it allows for the study of a historical trail of sorts, whereby one can analyse not just the forward event dynamism and its markers as such, but also the lived and contextualized historicity of the unfolding of these events as they shaped and continue to shape the phenomenon of slam. To briefly recap, Brand DNA comprises: a brand's most typical products, names, characters, visual symbols and logotypes, geographical and historical roots, the brand creator's early visions, and advertising (content and form) (165-170). These will be discussed throughout this chronological history of slam as they appear and in the form of brief digressions that clearly highlight and identify key features of the Brand DNA.[79]

Thus, this chapter has the following aims: first to try and provide an unbiased history of slam's development in order to illustrate how these factors have driven the specificity of the

[79] It should be noted that there are two facets of slam which are not instrumental to the historical development per se: visual symbols and logotypes and advertising. I address these at the end of this chapter without the same regard to sequence and temporality.

phenomenon and its practices; and secondly, to illustrate slam's brand DNA through this history.

4.1 The Rise of Slam: From Saul Williams in Slam to PLH and Slam Productions

The history of slam in France has already in its barely twenty-year history become mythologised. A convenient origin story often invoked by journalists, academics and others[80] dates the birth of slam in France to the screening of the film *Slam* at the Cannes film festival in 1998—where it won the Camera d'Or and received significant media coverage.[81] While many slameurs cite this film as an inspiration or what introduced them to the concept,[82] to deem it *the* origin of slam in France neglects the existence of folk poetry practices which—aside from the name—were comparable to early French slam: open mic poetry performance. That sort of poetic expression is folk art: existing across human cultures and history without a specific creator or origin. That said, the film was the predominant source of the name 'slam' and inspired many slam activistes. Accordingly, slam can be seen as an evolution of folk practices framed by the filmic mediation of the *Slam*; therefore, I treat 1998 as the beginning.

4.1.1 Slam, the Film: A Source of DNA

In terms of Brand DNA, the film *Slam* is the predominant source of the name, 'le slam'. The knowledge of the American tradition the pioneers of the French slam scene had is integral to understanding slam's identity and image in France. It was arguably the film, rather than diffusion from the poetry slam circuits in the United States or Europe,[83] that helped spur its

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[80] Bara 1999; Davet 2006; Dubois C. 2012; Espitallier 2006:105; Guay de Bellissen (GdB) 2009:52; *Livre/échange* 2003; Martinez 2002:12, 2007:11; Mereu-Boulch 2001; Morice 2000; Nouvel Observateur 2001; Peillon 2007:177; Perreau 2001b; Rach'2002a; Thibaudat 2002; and many others.

[81] Most who attempt to place an origin for slam cite the film but not necessarily the screening at the festival per se. To the extent that the film did help to popularise the concept and the term it can arguably also be attributed to the press coverage of Cannes, the screening of the film at theatres and at cultural festivals (e.g. at Printemps des poètes in 2006, 2008, 2009 and presumably others; at the 93 Hip Hop festival in Paris 2001; and the airing of the film on Arte and Canal+, both that and subsequent years (Morice 2000).

[82] E.g. Lynx K (GdB 2009:100), Nada (ibid. 66), Hocine Ben (Hocine Ben 2011:113), Nevchehirlian (Dame Gabrielle 2012a), Tô (Fagerlid 2012:254-265), and Thomas and Yann F from 129H (Thibaudat 2002).

[83] The European poetry slam scene had already been in development for several years outside of France. The International Organization of Performance Poets (IOPP) was founded in 1993, after the Stockholm-based poet, Erkki Lappalainen discovered slam poetry at the 1992 National Poetry Slam in Chicago and promised Marc Kelly Smith he would bring it to Sweden. The IOPP hosted a Swedish national poetry slam in Stockholm in 1997 and an international variant in 1998 (Brummer-Pind 2007:1-2; Schmid 2000:8). Entirely unrelated, a group of American

usage in France. It was arguably the symbolism, story, and the portrayal of slam in the film that contributed to the ethos and early development (including also the brand creators' visions) of French slam. Finally, the geographic origin of the film—coming from the New York City[84] slam poetry scene rather than the Chicago one—plays a small but significant role in the geographical roots of slam's brand DNA given the affinity for hip hop in the New York scene.

4.1.2 The Filmic Portrayal of Slam Poetry

Shot in a drama vérité style, the film combined a loose script with improvised lines and acting by both actors and real-life subjects. The story line is fictional, but the location, some of the actors, and the poetry by Saul Williams, along with its message regarding race and identity in the United States are not. This style and the director's prior work in documentary film making gives *Slam* an air of realism—as if it were a documentary film. Finally, the narrative of the film, the content of Williams's poetry, and the overall imagery evoke that of struggle, resistance, redemption, overcoming challenges, popular revolt, reappropriation of voice, and the power of creative self-expression:

> Le film, comme ses acteurs et personnages, se doit d'inventer une nouvelle forme de parole au détour de chaque plan pour donner vie à ses convictions, terrasser un ordre mortifère et enrayer la terreur fratricide. C'est, mine de rien, un retour aux bases communautaires du rap, voire du blues: la résistance par la prise de parole. (Péron and Rigoulet 1998).

Indeed, the dominant theme of the film, irrespective of cultural perspective, is liberation—liberation from the chains of inequality, of racism and prejudice, of societal expectations, from the self and internal doubt, and less metaphorically, liberation from prison and a life of struggle— via the medium of poetic self-expression. 'Slam est un film sur l'énergie libératrice et libertaire de la parole' writes a French journalist reviewing the film after its premiere at

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poets in Berlin began hosting poetry slams and thanks to the assistance of a German poet, Wolf Hogekamp, this led to the first German national poetry slam in 1997 (Vorger 2012: 47; Ferré 2007:48).

[84] Specifically, the Nuyorican Poets Café based in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The influence of New York hip hop was palpable on the poetry at the Nuyorican, which was notable for its multicultural orientation. Nuyorican is a portmanteau of Puerto Rican and New York, reflective of its owner and clientele. The final scene in the film is at the Nuyorican café and both of the protagonists in the film are real-life Nuyorican slam poets. Accordingly, the film reflects Nuyorican (thus New York style) slam poetry as opposed to Chicago-affiliated slam poetry (Aptowicz 2008; Hoffman 2013; Kane 2003).

Cannes (Rigoulet 1998). This framing, or re-framing of slam, arguably helped to establish the idea that slam was a liberatory type of free expression, a *poésie démocratisée*. This interpretation of the film and its meanings gave justification to calling the open mic poetry events, 'slam'.

However, there is only one representation of a poetry slam in the final climatic ending scene of the film. It features Williams's slam poem 'Sha-Clack-Clack', which is especially representative of the film's themes and motifs: delivered in the first person, it is a declaration of self-actualisation and condemnation of historical and contemporary, overt and institutional racism. Importantly, Ray appears transformed by his experience on stage and his performance is inspiring to both the character, the audience *in* the film, and the audience watching the film. It is this belief in the power of free expression, represented in a relatable but powerful way in the film, which underscores the developmental influence on French slam from the film.

That it was the film—which told a powerful story of personal triumph through self-expression—rather than competitive poetry slams that brought the term 'slam' to France may partly explain why French slam was initially without the competitive aspects that characterise American slam poetry. Notably, this 'poetry slam' scene leaves out details indicating that American slam poetry is oriented around a specific competition format. Rather, the poetry slam (filmed at the Nuyorican café) is presented as a vibrant, interactive and participatory event where anybody is welcome to get up on stage and share their writing to a diverse, lively, encouraging audience. The format is secondary, overshadowed by Ray's experience sharing his poetry as redemptive, confidence-boosting, cathartic, community and solidarity building, and above all, liberating.

Indeed, the film is less about slam poetry than 'representing the realities of the black 'urban' male experience through spoken word poetry, in particular through the main character's poetic representation (and ambivalence toward) gangsta-style crime and imprisonment' (Somers-Willet 2009:106). The portrayal of slam poetry in the film is primarily that of 'urban' oral poetry. The poetry—and freestyle rap—featured in the film stands out as it is neither 'highbrow' or erudite nor is it reminiscent of lyrics from 'gangsta' rap or even the

more moderate rap music featured on the soundtrack. The poetry (and freestyle rap) in the film fall between two extremes —gangsta rap and rarefied, esoteric poetry—and is immediately understandable by a wide range of audiences. The inclusion of hip hop both in the film and in its marketing helped to communicate this second framing that touches upon both the moral realism of the represented demographic but also the way it negotiates criminal and poetic identities. This dialectic of the criminal and the poet is a central thread for hip hop music, and in the film *Slam*, it threads another loop, tying itself to slam poetry as well.

This motif of a latent or tacit link between the criminal and the poet and between slam poetry, spoken word, and rap is not lost in translation. However, to problematise this requires a certain cultural knowledge that is not expected nor even arguably fully accessible to foreign audiences in the same way. Accordingly, what can be drawn out of this pairing of hip hop with slam poetry in the film is that they are related as they come from the same cultural expression and production. In reality, the relationship between hip hop and slam poetry is post facto their relative geneses. At best, this relationship suffices to be a Wittgensteinian 'family of resemblance' rather than of a shared ancestor with direct lineage as purported in some of the French discourse. Indeed, it would arguably be better to describe them as step-siblings, rather than cousins.

They are nonetheless portrayed as cousins—not cousins thrice removed, but direct immediate cousins—in the French media and subsequent discourse, which I term the rap-slam conflation. This is unsurprising given how the slam poetry in the film is portrayed: not as competitive poetry, but *urban* inflected poetry alongside its other motifs.

For instance, the film alludes to a connection between hip hop culture and slam poetry—via an ethnically diverse cast, hip hop dominated musical score and accompanying soundtrack, and other imagery—and makes a case for the transformative power of live poetry. The relation to hip hop is also indicated through references to it in the marketing material and its predominance on the film's soundtrack. The lack of explicit reference to slam poetry is palpable in the film for anyone looking for it. Instead, arguably due to the filmmaker's desire not to represent slam per se, but rather, a particular emotional story of moral realism, rap and

slam are united into one expression in the film. The American DVDs describe the character as an aspiring rapper whose 'poetic rap' helps him to survive prison (figure 3). Nowhere does it mention slam poetry. Whereas the French DVD reads, 'il pratique le slam, mélange de poésie et du rap' (figure 4). Ray is described as both a 'poète et rappeur' on the French DVD. The only mention of either 'poetry' or 'slam' on the American DVD is in the chapter listing, '25. Poetry Slam'. So while an American audience, ignorant of slam poetry, can watch the film and assume a wholly hip hop context; a French audience is told that his hip hop infused lyric is actually 'slam' a mix of poetry and rap. Slam is literally re-defined from a competitive format for oral poetry to a mix of poetry and rap on the DVD cover, the marketing, and in the press.

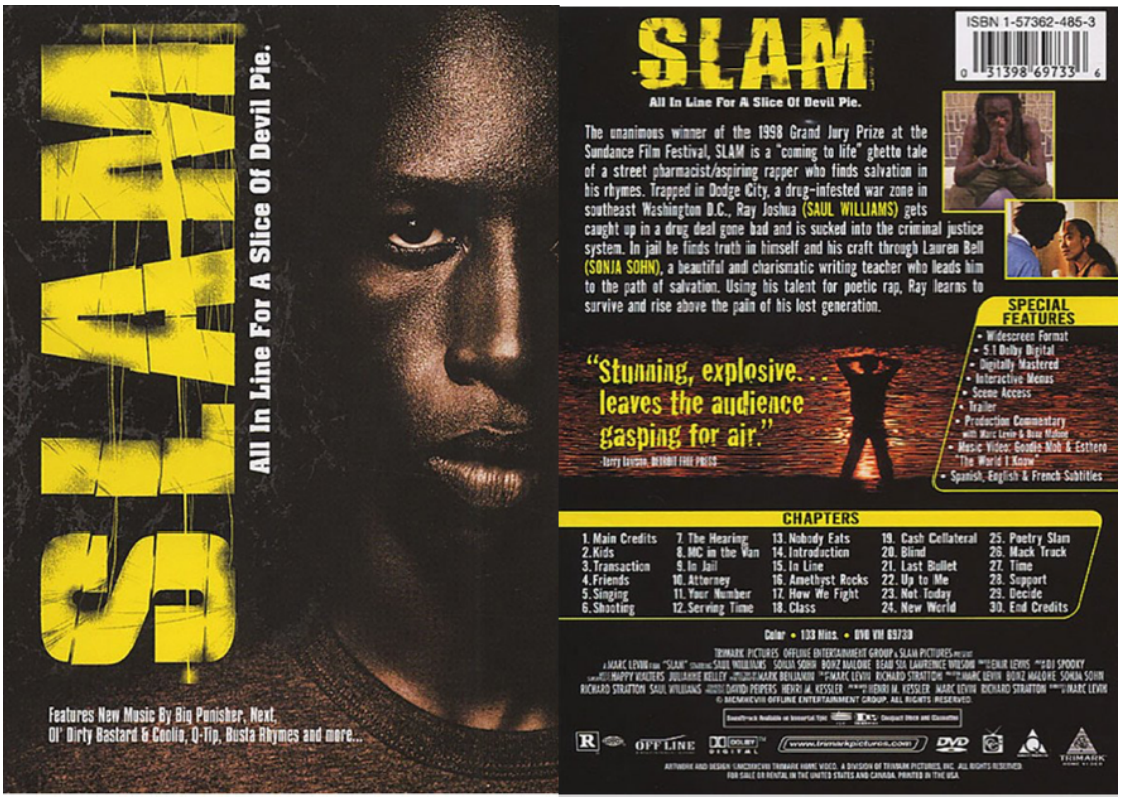


Figure 3. USA Slam DVD cover (Front and back)

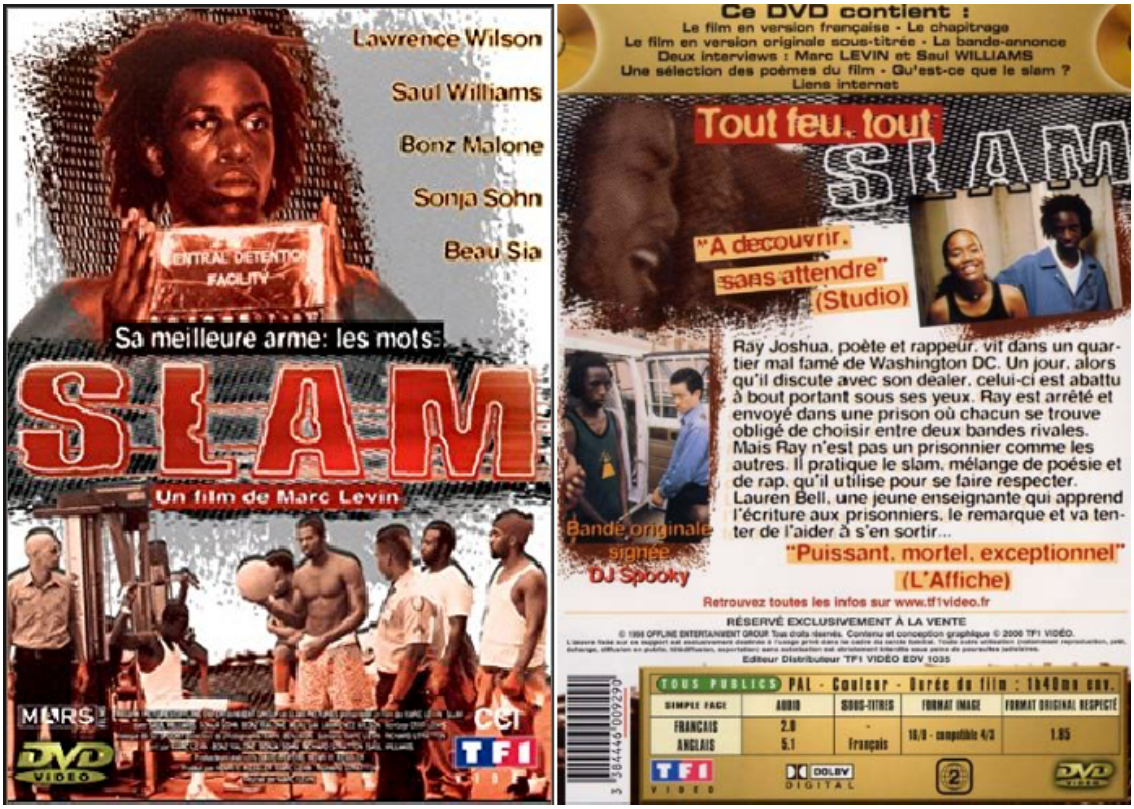


Figure 4. France Slam DVD cover (Front and Back)

Given the portrayal of slam poetry in the film, it is unsurprising that many of the adherents to what became known as slam in France indicate this film as one of the influential sources for their practice.[85] Given also the pseudo-documentary feel, the blurred boundaries between reality and fiction with Williams as the protagonist, and the lack of details regarding slam poetry, it would also not be unreasonable for a viewer to assume that the poetry scenes are accurate representations of slam poetry. Finally, given the influence of the film—or at least representations of the film—on the development of French slam (poetry), it is then not surprising that the competitive format of the poetry slam was initially neglected in France and that a connection between hip hop and slam poetry was taken for granted. Thus, the initial filmic mediation of slam poetry and the subsequent mediatisation of *Slam,* were both important influences on the development of slam *français*.

[85] It should also be noted that it was not only the film itself, but also the public discourse around the film which was a possible source of influence. In particular, Nada had not seen the film but had seen an article on it in *Libération*, and it was based upon what he had read in this article that he feigned familiarity with slam—the film and the poetry—during his 1998 interview with *Nova Magazine* .

In summary, the name 'slam' was *not* borrowed directly from the poetry slam competition format in the United States— 'conformément aux traditions nationales, le slam français jette volontiers la pierre aux "Ricans" pour leur obsession compétitive [...]' (Hahn 2002). Rather it was via a film influenced by the hip hop friendly New York poetry slams; therefore, the influence of *Slam* must not be neglected. By giving a name to the hitherto folk practices of oral poetry the practice and its products changed from a loosely held broad genre to a specific practice with associated values, images, and reputations. In other words, by giving oral performance poetry a name, 'le slam', it branded the practice and gave it an identity marker thus forever distinguishing it from the folk practice as well as from other similar practices and products such as 'spoken word', 'a capella rap', and 'poésie sonore'. Indeed, the name 'slam' is so integral to the phenomenon and crucial to its identity that ownership over this name and what the name represents soon became important wedge issues within the emerging slam scene.

4.2 First Generation Slameurs (1999-2003)

In addition to the name being a relevant component of Brand DNA, the early visions of the brand creator(s) can be considered integral to the brand—even if the brand should at some point defer away from them. I suggest that one of the brand creators for slam is the aforementioned Pilote le Hot (hereafter PLH). He endeavoured to establish slam in the capital, bring slam to the PAW, and pursued his particular vision for French slam—albeit to the chagrin of other activistes and brand creators. Although PLH was not alone in his activities, he was successful in establishing himself as a figurehead for early slam. This set in motion the emergence and early phase of French slam, as well as its growing pains, marking the beginning of the first generation of slameurs.

4.2.1 Club Club and the Early Convergence of the Film with Folk Practice

The historical accounts which go beyond attributing the arrival of slam in France to the film *Slam* trace its origins to such folk practices, in particular its geographical roots can be traced to those folk practices at a bar in Pigalle, Paris in 1998. At this bar, Le Club Club, a

weekly cabaret was held which included poetry performances. It was organised by a group which included Nada and Pilote le Hot—both of whom have become mythologised as two important *pionniers* of French slam.

It was at Le Club Club, that the name 'slam' was first used. A journalist from *Nova Magazine* interviewed Nada at the bar and as a result of her November 1998 article, he became the first person in France to be publicly called a 'slameur'.[86] The journalist applied the name 'slam' to the 'folk' practices at Club Club based both upon her experience in New York and on the relevance and association with the film *Slam*—which had been in the French media due to its premier at Cannes earlier that year. This gave what had been an informal practice both a *name* and powerful imagery attached to it thanks to the eponymous film.

Nada claims that this article helped to promote Club Club, resulting in more customers as well clientele from broader socio-economic demographic (2002b:20; GdB 2009). Despite this, Club Club closed in December 1998 and while the initial group went their separate ways, the name 'slam' stuck. Thanks to a fair amount of media coverage of *Slam*—and to a lesser degree the American slam poetry scene—the name 'slam' was afforded increased recognition and cachet whilst providing an element of novelty and the unknown. They continued to use the name 'slam', both in view of the personal and ideological similarities they identified in the film as well as for strategic reasons. It also avoided associations, good or bad, that potential audiences and participants might have had with '*poésie*', '*lecture*' or '*spoken word*'.

This marks the beginning of a defining period in the early development of French slam in Paris as it saw this group of pioneers not only going their separate ways physically—to different bars—but also ideologically with regards to their creative activity with this new concept, 'slam'.

[86] Importantly, Nada claims that while he was familiar with slam, in part due to the media coverage of it, he was not explicitly presenting himself as a slameur: 'Je lui interprétais quelques textes, répondais aux questions qu'elle me posa durant l'interview, elle prit des notes, quelques photos et l'article parût dans Nova Mag de novembre 1998, je me retrouvais sans l'avoir cherché promu slameur par un mensuel à tendance underground.' (Nada 2002a).

4.2.2 PLH and Slam Productions

After Club Club closed, PLH started hosting his own slam soirées* at other venues in the east of Paris. In May 1999 he founded Slam Productions as *une association loi de 1901*[87] dedicated to the 'production, promotion d'évènements artistiques et toutes activités paracommerciales pouvant servir à ce but' (Journal Officiel n.d.(a)). PLH was enterprising and leveraged the interest in slam and growing attention in the media to further promote slam as an educational and social initiative, thus securing government subsidies for Slam Productions. He was able to present slam starting in 2000 alongside the freshly inaugurated Printemps des Poètes and at various literary initiatives and festivals. He also established the website *slameur.com* and a publishing company, Slam Éditions, through which he published two collections of his poetry (PLH 1999, 2000) and an anthology of other slameurs (PLH (ed.) 2000).[88] Due to his initiatives he was a frequent figure in the media where he was able to further promote himself and Slam Productions, as well as his interpretation and vision for the emergent slam movement.[89]

Though the formation of Slam Productions ought to have been unproblematic; there are multiple claims[90] that in doing so, PLH also trademarked the term 'slam' under his name.[91] Some in the scene perceived this as hypocritical—especially given PLH's claims that he and Slam Productions sought to democratise poetry through the promotion of slam (129h 2006:21). This move, along with the media exposure of Slam Productions, created a sort of hegemony whereby Slam Productions became the arbiter of slam's definition and practice. Indeed, as the account by Xavier Lauretta published in the 129H guide describes: 'Sur Paris et jusqu'en 2000, la visibilité du mouvement slam est réduite à celle de Slam Productions, qui impose un monopole institutionnel et médiatique, tout en occultant les énergies parallèles'

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[87] Under the principle of freedom of association, and strictly not for profit, 'l'association est la convention par laquelle deux ou plusieurs personnes mettent en commun, d'une façon permanente, leurs connaissances ou leur activité dans un but autre que de partager des bénéfices…' (loi du 1er juillet 1901, 1ere article). Henceforth, I will use the French *'association'* to refer specifically to avoid any confusion with the English 'association'.
[88] See bibliography for more detail.
[89] See Chapter Five.
[90] cf. 129H 2006:21; and the identical but unattributed passage reproduced in Campana 2008:20; and as cited by Vorger 2011: 243; GdB 2009: 52-53. Dame Gabrielle cited in GdB 2009: 222-223.
[91] He also registered 'Slam Productions' and allegedly, 'slameur' (E.R. 2002).

(129H 2006: 22). Thus, although slam—qua '*slam*'—was only a nascent movement, the seeds of a slam schism had been planted.

4.2.3 Early Tensions: Diktat Démocratique

The establishment of Slam Productions marked the beginning of what has been characterised as 'l'ère du diktat de Pilot[e]' (GdB 2009:70). Yet, despite the alleged monopoly—or as PLH claimed, *thanks to* it[92]—slam was presented as 'poésie de la rue' with negligible barriers to participation and open to everybody, that is, poésie démocratisée: 'Les scènes des slam sont en fait des "scènes de poésie démocratisée" selon les termes de Pilote le Hot […]' (Dauphiné Libéré 2000). Here, 'démocratisé(e)' refers both to the classic inclusive conception meaning as accessible to everyone in addition to signalling a counter-cultural, *culture populaire*.

The predominant conception of 'démocratique' necessarily includes this specific interpretation of what it is to democratise poetry by virtue of its emphasis on both accessibility and on liberty—as in free expression without constraint as to style, topic, or the language used therein. However, while the latter conception of slam as 'poésie démocratisée' is arguably more enduring and definitional, when invoked by PLH or intended to be representative of Slam Production's ethos, it is also one that is perhaps both controversial and questionable. As Vorger (2012) observes, this claim that slam is 'poésie démocratisée' appeared to others in the emergent slam movement as being at odds with PLH's decision to trademark 'slam' and the perceived monopoly by Slam Productions (243). Indeed, this rhetoric is curious given that these acts would, if not *de jure*, at least *de facto*, prevent true equal access to slam: the very principle upon which slam—as poésie démocratisée—was based.

Not only was 'slam' allegedly restricted to Slam Productions, but PLH additionally held a position as the predominant, almost sole-spokesperson for slam. He was adept at courting media attention and the almost myopic focus on him and Slam Productions by the mainstream

[92] More specifically, that because Slam Productions existed, slam scènes were able to exist in adherence to democratic principles whilst preventing another (imaginary) entity from organising 'slam' events but which may have been less 'democratic' or less welcoming of 'poésie de la rue'.

media reinforced the perception of a monopoly in the scene—despite PLH's public declarations that slam was 'poésie démocratisée'. Thus, slam under the stewardship of PLH acquired the image of inaccessibility relative to the earlier iterations prior to his strategic moves.

Although PLH is one of the brand creators, through his stewardship he also acted as a character for slam's brand—one of the components of Brand DNA. He did this by positioning himself in the media as the face, quite literally, of early slam français such that slam became associated with him. Effectively all the press coverage on French slam in Paris features him (and photos of him)—occasionally along with other *pionniers* such as Tsunami MC and Nada. How he is represented, especially in relation to other activistes, I address in the following chapter but for now it is important to acknowledge how he became a character representing slam in its early development.

4.4 The Years 2001-2003: Growing Diversification of the Scene

In 2001 other slam activistes began to establish themselves and challenged PLH's position as the 'figure de proue du slam français' (Launet 2004); whilst also diffusing the concentration of slam activities in the capital—especially in the *banlieue*. The spread of slam to the *banlieue* becomes an important part of the geographical roots of slam in that it allows slam to become associated with hip hop (given its *banlieue* association) and portrayed as 'poésie urbaine' as well as being the initial expansion outside of, and thus disrupting, the Parisian centre of gravity—both physically in that there is a very real geographic barrier between Paris and its periphery, but also symbolically. For example, Nada had begun 'animating' scènes at Café Culturel—the longest running slam venue in Paris—starting in 2001 (Uback Concept 2001a). These scènes were run by the Saint-Denis based *association,* Uback Concept,[93] who hosted the first documented slam session in greater Paris on February 16, 2001

[93] Uback Concept began in Saint Denis as a hip hop collective in 1996, shifted to slam in 2000 due to its absence in the *banlieue*, and incorporated as an *association* in 2004 (Journal Officiel n.d.(b)). Not forgetting their hip hop lineage, on November 28, 2001 at the Hip Hop 93 festival they screened the film *Slam,* and hosted a slam session further entrenching the shared symbolism (Uback Concept 2001b).

(ibid.). Furthermore, the first slam collectif, 129H, was formed in 2000 and comprised the slameurs Rouda, Neobled, Lyor and Ninanonyme. 129H later became *une association* in September 2001 with the purpose of organising ateliers, scènes ouvertes, *spectacles*, and other community events with a particular focus on the *banlieue* (Journal Officiel n.d. (c)). As slam grew, other collectifs, *associations*, venues, and individuals also began to appear in the greater Parisian scene: such as, the first woman-only collectif, Slam Ô Féminin (in 2003), and other newcomers like the slameurs Marco DSL and Bastien Mots Paumés who were both notably 'anti-tournoi' (Annuaire des Associations n.d.; Dame Gabrielle 2013b).

Other new cultural production appeared that challenged the pre-eminence of PLH's Slam Productions. For example, two slameurs began publishing fanzines: *SlamZine* from Normal and *Politbüro* from Chantal Carbon of Slam Ô Féminin. Similarly, in 2003 Tsunami MC distanced himself from Slam Productions and established the website, *Planète slam* which became an important resource as 'le site le plus généraliste sur le *slam* français' and an alternative to *slameur.com (*the website of Slam Productions). In addition to animating the slam sessions at Café Culturel alongside Uback Concept, Nada and his collectif, Spoke Orkestra (c. 2004) founded the independent publishing company for slam, Spoke Éditions and starting recording the first slam album *Interdit aux mineurs* in 2003 (Boulate 2010). Slam was also growing in *province,* for example: the collectif Les Polysémiques in Vienne, Section Lyonnaise des Amasseurs de Mots (S.L.A.M.) in Lyon, and the slameur Frédéric Nevchehirlian in Marseille.

However, as slam grew and evolved so too did the opinions regarding the 'correct' interpretation of slam as a practice and in terms of its identity and image. Divergences over the correct usage of 'slam' became more salient starting around 2001 as PLH started to move away from the interpretation of slam as 'poésie démocratisée' coming from the streets of France and with little reference to the American original, towards a more rule-bound, 'discipline' definition of slam. For example, prior to this, those affiliated with Slam Productions had defined slam as, 'la poésie telle qu'elle existe dans la rue, sous forme d'art oratoire [...] Entre la harangue et l'expression corporelle.' whose characteristic rule was 'un

vers dit, une verre offert' (Perreau 2001b; Mereu-Boulch 2001). While others in the scene continued with similar 'poésie démocratisée' definitions, the idea of slam as a discipline became dominant at Slam Productions, which continued to maintain their dominant position in the media. As a result, public explanations of slam shifted and almost invariably[94] began to reference three rules of slam: 'un texte à la fois, un passage limité à cinq minutes maximum, aucune musique ni mise en scène' (Pizoird 2002). Slam Productions insisted upon these rules, arguing that it ensured the continued democratic atmosphere of slam. However, these rules—in particular the prohibition against music—were also potentially conflicting with some of the other 'folk' practices that had become common and representative of French slam. For example, to ordain that slam had a limit of 5 minutes, meant that Nada's *spectacle*, *One Man Slam,* or the performances by Spoke Orkestra—as a trio, sometimes with chairs on stage—could not be labelled as 'slam' due to time-limit, number of slameurs, and prop violations; despite having been conceived as slam and within the slam scene.

4.4.1 Conceptual Experiments with Competition

French slam adopted most aspects of American slam poetry *except* the centrality of competition,[95] coalescing instead around an open and experimental nature more unconstrained by the specific rules that the competition format requires. With such openness however, it is perhaps not surprising that the *idea* of competition generally began to inspire new activities in addition to the classic scènes ouvertes typical of early French slam. These included variations on the tournoi: *concours/tremplins de poésie*, and *joutes oratoires/verbales*.

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[94] If Slam Productions or its affiliates were involved, these rules and slam as a discipline were almost always referenced. However, when other activistes intervened slam was defined as, for example, 'une écoute mutuelle', 'un échange de paroles, une tribune de tolérance' etc. (Thibaudat 2002). Whereas in *Hip Hop Flow's* feature on slam, the lack of formal rules in lieu of rules supporting these definitions is emphasised: 'Les seules règles sont l'ouverture d'esprit de la part de tous et l'envie de découvrir de nouveaux écrits.' (Rach' 2002a). This is not to say that there is a clear distinction between Slam Productions and everybody else, but rather to illustrate the changing definition of slam, how it was mediatised, and how the changes in definition indicate the emergent divergences of the scene.

[95] The editorial in *Cassandre* summarises this particularity, 'Outre atlantique le Slam est essentiellement axé sur la compétition, en France il s'est surtout implanté par le biais des scènes ouvertes, au point que l'on se demande si le mot Slam n'est pas l'unique similitude reliant les deux courants.' (2002:20).

These new activities underline that what was arguably appealing about slam for its emergence in France was not the specific format so much as what it represented symbolically, in particular the openness that allowed it to act more like a cultural myth that gave emphasis and space to its French specificity. Accordingly, the competitive element that was so fundamental to and characteristic of American slam poetry was minimised in early French slam.

According to the *associations* Uback Concept and 129H, the first ever slam de poésie* in France was held in the *banlieue*, at Café Culturel Arts et Rencontres in Saint-Denis on March 8 and 16, 2002 (129H 2006; Uback Concept 2002). It was co-organised by Uback Concept, Nada, Café Culturel and other activistes—apparently in association with Printemps des Poètes as part of the event 'À la rencontre du slam' (figure 5).



Figure 5. Flyer for a slam de poésie, 2002.

Interestingly, Slam Productions was uninvolved with this tournoi despite hosting a *concours de poésie* at Printemps des Poètes since 2000.[96] Furthermore, there were two other early tournoi interpretations in 2002. The first, in June, featured a name-draw to determine the challengers, whose affront the audience decided. The second, anticipated that autumn, required each slameur to present three textes, 'un slam-rap, un slam-chanson réaliste et un slam-poésie en alexandrins ou en forme de sonnet classique' (Cassandre 2002:20).

Another notable competitive event was the *spectacle*-cum-soirée, Bouchazoreill' (active from 2004-2007). This soirée organised by D' de Kabal and animated by Yo was an open mic event 'autour du slam et des slameurs' that took place one Sunday each month at a club in Paris (Chadbasseur 2007). It was open-mic, but differed both from the classical scène ouverte slam session and from tournois. Firstly, like the tournoi there were rounds, but unlike the (points based) *slam de poésie* tournoi, two slameurs faced off with one another at the centre of the audience while an applaudimeter judged the winner. Secondly, there was music and the projection of images in the background. Thirdly, there were themes the slameurs had to address—either in the first round as an elimination device or if no theme in the first round the last two would have increasingly esoteric themes (Libération 2004). Finally, given the synchronic nature of the event, the textes were sometimes partly improvised or even entirely freestyle. Then in 2007, a more *spectaculaire*-like version of Bouchazoreill'—which included a regulation boxing ring—was featured at Le Printemps de Bourges[97] on April 21, and later at the Zénith in Paris on June 3 (Printemps de Bourges 2007a; Davet 2007). The latter also included ateliers and a concert showcasing the performances of the slameurs and musicians who had earlier that year recorded the compilation CD, *Bouchazoreill': Slam Expérience*.

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[96] There is little documentation on this event, Grand Slam de Printemps. Aside from an event listing on an archived version of *slameur.com* it only appears in the online event history for Printemps des Poètes where it is described as 'Concours de slam avec remise de prix à 22h.' (Printemps des Poètes 2000). It appears that the names for the events were controversial for the different activistes, with PLH later insisting on terms that reflected the competitive American origins and avoiding Gallicisms like 'chelem' (Dame Gabrielle 2006). The first mention of a 'tournoi de slam poésie' at Printemps des Poètes is in 2003, at the bar La Coupole (Printemps des Poètes 2003).

[97] The Printemps de Bourges programme describes the event nicely: 'Sur les créations vidéo du Kolektif Alambik, chaque spectateur pourra librement éprouver son flow et ses lyrics dans la classique session à « micro-ouvert ». Un tournoi en équipe, réunissant les pointures de la scène slam pour des joutes verbales consacrées par le public à l'applaudimètre, clôturera la session… sur un ring de boxe électrisé par un présentateur MC survolté' (Printemps de Bourges 2007b).

Despite being competitive, these initiatives when viewed in contrast to the strict rule-bound American style tournoi, are examples of one of slam's most typical products, the scène ouverte. They epitomised the open and innovative spirit of poésie démocratisée since they allowed for different rules, constraints, and formats to be explored rather than limiting slam to only one competitive format and set of rules. It is important to underline that the concept of the scène ouverte was not opposed to competition per se, but rather that competition was a part of the broader French tradition rather than the sole possible iteration of *le* slam. However, while the scène ouverte part of the French slam scene embraced such innovative and experimental initiatives, the 'discipline' oriented strand of French slam had already began observing the three rules[98]—all of which were violated by Bouchazoreill'— and was further aligning itself with a more fundamentalist interpretation of slam and its identity.

At this point in the history of slam, with regards to Brand DNA, we can identify slam's two most typical products. The first is the scène ouverte, essentially an open mic event which is seen as characteristically French *poésie démocratisée*; and can be open to a myriad of creative, but always oral, expressions. The second is the tournoi, the competition based at first loosely, and eventually strictly, on the American official competition rules. The disagreement within the scene as to which of these products was the true representative of slam's brand brought about a schism which soon became exacerbated by further ideological and interpersonal differences, as I discuss below.

During this period Slam Productions maintained its media dominance. However, as it moved towards a more restrictive interpretation of slam, it appears that the same mediatisation which had benefitted slam's initial growth and the purposive implementation of it under PLH's Slam Productions also contributed to an atmosphere of jealousy, distrust, and outright hostility. The belief that slam was poésie démocratisée also implied that there was no leader and that slam was able to accommodate diversity, not only in regards to the style, themes, and influences of the textes and of its activistes, but also in regards to the

[98] 5-minute maximum, no music or mise en scène, one texte at a time.

interpretations of the practice and concept itself. Yet, not only was the voice of Slam Productions effectively silencing that of others, it also restricted the representation of divergent opinions on slam.

4.5 The Year 2003: Further Ideological Tensions and Schism

It appears that whatever tensions existed during the apogee of Slam Productions under the leadership of PLH did not entirely disappear as a result of the organic growth and diversification of the scene starting in 2001. The grievances which started initially with PLH's decision to trademark slam alluded to the ideological differences as to slam's identity that would divide the scene. As the scene grew in size and popularity these tensions were becoming reified as a—superficially interpersonal, but fundamentally ideological—schism in French slam.

Furthermore, internal dissent appeared. PLH and Slam Production had published anthologies of slam textes, some of which their respective authors later published on the website, *Planète Slam,* which was managed by a former colleague of PLH, Tsunami MC. PLH ordered them removed claiming that he owned the copyright to those textes. This instigated a complex legal dispute between PLH and Nada, who tried to break his contract with Slam Productions; and another between PLH and Tsunami MC. In a blog post (23.01.2004) on *Planète Slam*, Tsunami MC wrote a summary of these events and also describes the other legal action[99] in which Slam Productions was involved before arguing that this litigiousness was not only isolating Slam Productions but dividing the scene irreparably. Notably, Tsunami MC also questioned, publicly on his blog, whether these lawsuits were the best use of the government subsidies Slam Productions received, and if it was not counter to the stated mission of promoting poetry and its access of Slam Productions.

The reactions to this dispute indicate an ideological difference regarding the best way to attain what they believed to be the shared goal of slam: promoting poetry in all its forms

[99] This includes an employment dispute concerning a former employee and slameuse for which Slam Productions was ordered to pay damages, an on-going lawsuit Slam Productions brought against a local theatre, and a defamation case against Tsunami MC.

and for the greatest number of people possible. Those on the side of *Planète Slam*, supporting the scène ouverte tradition, adhered to a vision of slam based in diversity, authenticity, openness, sharing, equality and freedom. However, for this ideal to function it required a strong, trusting, and united community who shared those values. Slam Productions also valued democracy, accessibility, and general promotion of poetry; however, it did not assume such a community of trust and sought instead to achieve its aims through established societal and institutional norms and systems (like IP law). This schism is defining in French slam as it has affected and shaped the values of slam and thus its identity.

4.5.1 Slam (Re-)Aligns with the American Tradition: Defence of Orthodoxy and the FFDSP

A definitive rupture between each interpretation, open versus orthodox, appears to have come in late 2003 following the establishment of the *association* La Fédération Française de Slam Poésie (FFDSP) by PLH. This was a result of his sojourn in the United States where he and his colleague, Catherine Duval (aka K'Trin-D), had participated in some auxiliary events at the National Poetry Slam in Chicago, where they met Marc Kelly Smith (Jepsen 2003). Following this, they committed to bringing the US-style poetry slam competition format—and the definition of slam (poetry) as strictly derived from it—back to France. This motivation to directly import from the United States an orthodox application of format thus also contributes to the geographical roots of slam. As the reader will recall, initially it was the New York style of slam poetry (hip hop influenced) that influenced French slam via the film *Slam*; however, with this action taken by Slam Productions, the Chicago style—its rules, culture, and history—is more explicitly integrated into slam's construction.

PLH, as one of the brand creators, now shifts his vision to closer align slam français with the American tradition. However, in order to do so the definition and understanding of slam would require the cessation of one of slam's typical products: the scène ouverte. Rather than trying to control others' interpretations of slam, PLH using his expertise and taking advantage of the French governmental support for such initiatives, established a new organisation (FFDSP) to represent French slam—albeit in accordance with his particular

vision that was directly ascribed to the American competition format rather than the indigenous French scène ouverte tradition.

4.5.2 FFDSP, Grand Slam National, and Slam Family

As a *federation,* the FFDSP was established with the intent of uniting the various associations, collectifs and others in the French slam scene; however, somewhat ironically, due to both its orthodoxy and affiliations, it arguably further divided the scene and instead reified the schism. Until this point, PLH and his colleagues had insisted upon the adherence to three basic rules of slam; however, this was not as part of a competition structure but, as they claimed, was in order to maintain the *démocratique* essence of slam. Nevertheless, with the establishment of the FFDSP not only did they modify the rules in accordance with the American standard (for instance, changing the time limit from five minutes to three), PLH also insisted upon the competitive structure—le slam de poésie—as fundamentally integral and intrinsic to the 'correct' significance of 'slam'. As he stated, 'le slam est devenu une discipline à part entière, avec des règles bien précises. Ce n'est pas un simple style, contrairement à ce que certaines groupes veulent faire croire' (Etre and Salles 2004).

With the FFDSP, slam was brought in line with a more 'orthodox' interpretation, necessarily derived from the slam de poésie and in accordance with the American official poetry slam regulations (2011a). Following its establishment, the FFDSP hosted the first internationally recognised 'official' national tournoi, the Grand Slam National (GSN) in Nantes, 26-27 June, 2004 (Binet 2004).[100]

[100] The GSN is modelled after American and international regulation slam poetry competitions. As mentioned above, PLH was directly inspired by the National Poetry Slam in the United States. The GSN is organised by Slam Productions/FFDSP, Entry is via a venue that has paid membership fees to the FFDSP and meets certain minimum qualifications (i.e. organises a minimum of six scènes per year). Each venue enters as a 'team' but ultimately it is the indivudal slameurs who are the competitors. There are initially qualifying rounds some time in advance, followed by several rounds, semi-finals and finals during the event itself which proceed according to the 'Chicago Rules' as a minimum reference. In addition to a national poetry slam, beginning in 2007, the FFDSP hosted its first international poetry slam, La Coupe du Monde in Bobigny (Binet 2007).

4.5.3 Schism Between Openness and Orthodoxy

The FFDSP's fundamentalist re-interpretation of slam as *only* comprising *le slam de poésie* threatened to attenuate what was for many a defining aspect of slam: openness (liberté). I suggest this threat was possible in three key ways. Firstly, as Fagerlid presumes and Somers-Willet shows, insisting upon slam as a competitive slam de poésie has the potential effect of limiting its accessibility—and thus its openness—to some individuals who may be intimidated or otherwise deterred by the idea of competition tout court; specifically, public competition; and/or judgement by non-professionals without clear criteria.

Secondly, as Somers-Willet described in her research on American slam poetry, this emphasis on the competition risks the possibility of restricting the themes and styles of the slam texts and performances to whatever is perceived as popular, audience-pleasing, and likely to win—which may be at the expense of those which are experimental, potentially subversive, and even personal.[101] As competitive slam was developing in France, this risk would have been palpable to those accustomed to the more 'anything goes' atmosphere of the French scène ouverte. Unsurprisingly, in a press article announcing the first GSN, an American slam poet, Shä Key cautioned against the effects of competition she had witnessed: 'Pour gagner ces tournois les poètes ont recours à des phrases ou à des sujets chocs' (Binet 2004).

Even if the competition does not have a noticeable effect on the themes in such a way, there is also the concern that overly strict adherence to rules can not only prohibit participation from the outset but also stymie creativity in other ways through an overly regimented atmosphere which may in turn also mitigate in the sharing and experiencing of poetry. In fact, Marc Kelly Smith even criticised the overly strict adherence to the rules he witnessed at the 2007 inaugural Coupe du Monde tournoi, hosted by the FFDSP, where the slameur from France, Victor Zarca, was eliminated after his first poem went over the allotted

[101] However, it should be noted that the latter is arguably less likely to occur at the slam tournoi—where the stakes are low, there is little incentive to win beyond winning itself, and the record is re-set each time—than it is at the official, regulation competitions.

time by fourteen seconds. Smith explained that he thought such unyielding regulation was excessive and not what he had intended by implementing such rules. According to Smith, the three-minute rule, 'permettait d'éviter que des gens très mauvais squattent la scène pendant un quart d'heure. Car le slam, c'est aussi de très bons poètes et parfois de très mauvais.' hence, the rule was there to raise the level of the poetry, not to prevent good poetry from being heard (Binet 2007).[102]

Finally, and importantly for French slam specifically, this 'fundamentalist' interpretation undermined the more flexible, and until this point, commonly accepted interpretation of slam as a democratised, free and open, space of poetic expression with sociality at its core. This interpretation of 'poésie démocratisée' is also specifically and uniquely French, and moving away from it threatened to erase this local innovation and tradition.

Although the more fundamentalist definition of slam stipulated by the FFDSP was at odds with some of the slam scene, since the FFDSP was centred on the organisation of a poetry slam tournoi like the Grand Slam National, it *could* have co-existed with the 'open' practice of slam as another slam space and innovation like Bouchazoreill'. Indeed, in addition to the earlier less formalised slams de poésie starting in 2001, other tournois similar to the Grand Slam National had also begun to appear, such as Slam United[103] in Paris (2004-2008), [104] and later the Grand Slam de Paname (2008-2011) and Slam So What (2008-2016) among others (Universlam 2017; Ass.2.plumes 2016). However, this co-existence did not appear, due in part to the FFDSP's imposition of a narrow definition of slam and arguably due in part to its affiliations.

[102] He also describes an adaptation he witnessed in Germany where the audience gives a rose to a slam poet if they liked their poem, and the one with the largest bouquet is considered the winner.
[103] The slameur, Sylvainkimouss (2005) notes on his blog that the prize for winning the 'vrai-faux tournoi de poésie' was a Twix, indicative of the ludic—rather than competitive for prestige—emphasis.
[104] Slam United I (Oct 2004), Slam United II (January 2005), III (December 2005), IV (2007) and V (January 2008). There may have been a Slam United VI, however the only mention of it I have found is in association with the Grand Slam de Paname 2009 wherein the pre-qualification rounds counted for both Slam United and Grand Slam Paname (universlam 1 2009).

Importantly, although the FFDSP was not officially connected to Slam Productions[105] the exact nature of the relationship between the two *associations* was unimportant relative to their *perceived* relationship—which sullied the reputation of FFDSP as an apologist for the fundamentalist interpretation.[106] An indicative example is the short paragraph in the widely referenced 2006 Guide Méthodologique published by 129H, which illustrates the distaste for Slam Productions/FFDSP and the nature of the suspicions held by some within the 'open' faction of slam towards the FFDSP due to PLH's reputation:

> 2004, la création de la FFDSP […], issue de Slam Productions et directement reliée au mouvement slam internationale, lui même contrôlé par Marc Smith. La Fédération, qui encarte les *slameurs,* reprend les règles des compétitions américaines et le premier «*Slam National»* en 2004 envoie aux Etats-Unis la première équipe de *slam* français, emmené par…Pilote le Hot… (2006:24).

The authors of the 129H guide remarked upon the rapid growth of slam in France as indicative of 'la joyeuse impossibilité pour ce mouvement croissant d'être représenté par une seule personne ou un seul collectif' (2006:23); however, the authors also claimed that the FFDSP was a direct response to said 'rapide et multidirectionnel' growth. Indeed, as the FFDSP website explained:

> C'est aussi pour cette raison, avec l'expansion de la Slam Poésie comme forme d'art, que la FFDSP a émergé non seulement comme un corps administratif pour maintenir les règles qui gouvernent la Slam Poésie, mais comme une organisation qui cherche à agrandir le public et à protéger les intérêts de cette pratique (2011a).

The FFDSP furthermore states that it offers the opportunity to 'se sentir légitimes et reconnus comme membres actifs de cette famille [européenne et mondiale]' by joining the federation

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[105] They do however list two instrumental Slam Productions figures: Catherine Duval (K'Trin-D) and PLH as 'Présidente/Affaires éducatives' and 'Consultant' respectively as of 2011 on their website www.ffdsp.com. Furthermore, the address listed on the 1901 *association* declaration for FFDSP, 6 rue Fréderic-Lemaître, was that of Slam Productions until 2009.

[106] In between the original submission of this thesis and its final form, the website for the FFDSP has been deleted. This appears to have happened sometime between mid-August and late September 2018. However, the website, slameur.com—belonging to Slam Productions and associated with the 'cabaret populaire', Culture Rapide, to which PLH is affiliated—is still functioning, yet (dead)links to the FFDSP. The Facebook page for the Grand Poetry Slam (the new branding of the GSN as of 2018, to include both the Coupe du monde and the Slam national) provides an email and phone number for Slam Productions and a (dead)link to the FFDSP; however, those seeking more information on the upcoming GSN/Grand Poetry Slam (presumably in May 2019) which is organised and managed by the FFDSP, are without this central resource. The deletion of the website *may* be related to a controversy that occurred this summer regarding the Coupe du monde hosted and organised by the FFDSP/Slam Productions. Please see post scriptum.

(ibid.). The implication of this is that slam which does not conform to those standards the FFDSP upholds (i.e. those pertaining to official competition) cannot be considered legitimate—nor should they be called 'slam' according to PLH (E.R. 2002; Dame Gabrielle 2012b).

This delegitimisation of those activistes who disagreed with this vision for slam's identity unsurprisingly alienated them, despite these activists not finding the practice of competitive slam de poésie problematic per se. Consequently, the extent to which it federalises slam is restricted to those who accept this interpretation and/or those who wish to participate in the Grand Slam National— because in order to do so one must support and join the FFDSP in order to obtain valid 'licence'[107] to compete (FFDSP 2011b).

At this juncture in the development of slam there are traces of what may be called the two 'factions' of slam. On the one hand there are those who adhere to the 'fundamentalist' interpretation of slam based on the American poetry slam model (FFDSP/Slam Productions, etc.). On the other hand, there are those who support the autochthonous French slam interpretation: a 'democratic' oral poetry practice with a significant focus on the social aspects, reified by the norms and culture of the movement based on the identity traits of slam. It is important to note, however, that even as the schism grew deeper between these factions they should not be misunderstood by being strictly defined but as having significant overlap and flow between the two, something that continues to be the case to this day.

To summarise slam's brand DNA thus far, PLH has acted as both a brand creator and a character representing slam. His visions for slam being at first 'démocratisée' and later a strict derivative of the American tradition first helped to coalesce the phenomenon into an emergent scene but later divided this scene into two different factions who privileged one of the two most typical products of slam over the other: either tournoi or the scène ouverte. The name for slam came from a film that portrayed poetry as a liberating force and touched upon several pertinent social and cultural issues for those who in France felt outside of the dominant

[107] The licence costs €10. That there is a fee could be argued to be anti-democratic and non-inclusive as it puts in place a financial barrier to entry.

culture in some way. Additionally, slam gained the slogan/branding 'poésie démocratisée' due to the belief that it embodied principles of democracy and made poetry accessible to all, bringing it down from the proverbial ivory towers. But in addition to being represented as poésie démocratisée, slam was additionally characterised as '*poésie urbaine*'— especially by the media. The *urbain(e)* association was furthered by the influence of the film, *Slam,* which depicted an urban experience in the United States that resonated with audiences. The descriptors *urbaine* and démocratisée emphasised that slam, although poetry, was not the same poetry one might hear at a bookstore or a poetry reading by an established art world poet. However, whilst 'démocratisée' was seen as benign, the attribution of 'urbaine' aligned slam further with hip hop—an association that was not universally welcome by those in the scene, in particular PLH (see Chapter Five). Finally, by giving what was previously a folk open-mic poetry practice the name of *le slam*, it gave identity and personality to the phenomenon and forever distinguished it as something specific—a brand of poetry. The name itself is important as it became a divisive point, first when PLH tried to trademark it and then diffusedly throughout the early history as activistes in the scene began to differ on its definitional content. As mentioned, PLH and his associates preferred the American original whereas others supported the indigenous French definition that privileged the scène ouverte format and the associated 'open' ideology.

4.6 The Year 2004: Identity Crisis and Debate: Slam Family

Despite the varied definitions over the years, slam has perhaps best been characterised and even defined by its own identity crisis. Slam's identity crisis partly began with, and has been exacerbated by, its mediatisation. This mediatisation has helped to progressively shape and even re-shape the image of slam in the public imagination, and thus affect how slam is understood. I analyse this in greater detail in Chapter Five but it is important to note the influence here because of this mediatisation's structuring effects on the brand DNA of slam.

As early as 2002, the activiste Normal had started discussions as to slam's definition (GdB 2009:159). However, given the effects of mediatisation, coupled with the growing schism

internal to slam, French slam was now becoming encumbered by its own identity crisis. Thus, by late 2004 with the identity crisis worsening, three slameurs[108] explicitly formed the collectif *Slam Family* to act as an intermediary and facilitator for these debates:

> Il est temps de se rencontrer, de se connaître… Il est surtout temps de réunir les différents clans, dont les slameurs et le public sont les victimes sans le savoir. Il est temps d'échanger nos points de vue sur le slam… Il est surtout temps de choisir ensemble le(s) futur(s) du slam en France, en prenant en compte les intérêts du plus grand nombre (2004a).

Slam Family thus launched the operation 'Parlons Slam en France' encouraging further debate and meetings alongside slam sessions or independently with the intent of clarifying slam in France: 'une recherche de sens, de cadre et de définitions' (129H 2006: 24). In support of this, in October 2004 *SlamZine*[109] released a special issue 'SlamZine hors-série 1: Le Slam C'est Quoi? Faut-Il Arrêter le Bordel?'[110] featuring contributions from 44 different slameurs, activistes, and audience members—and offered seven different conceptions of slam (Uback concept 2005).

The 'Parlons Slam en France' programme continued throughout 2005 and 2006,[111] with debate occurring in person as well as on forums, blogs, and websites of various activistes. The Slam Family and its supporters discussed the future of slam and how to best deal with issues affecting the slam scene including: lack of consensus as to slam's definition, media misrepresentation of slam (and arguable over-representation of PLH), insufficient contact and communication between different groups within and across regions due to Parisian dominance, and the lack of trust in the FFDSP (and for some, PLH specifically). One debate following a slam session in March 2005 centred on the question, 'Le slam en France, doit-il

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[108] Specifically, Lynx K, Normal, and Lo—all of whom were highly active in slam during its early development, and while not hostile, not friendly towards PLH and Slam Productions either. Lynx K was one of the founders of the slam sessions at Café Culturel (GdB 2009:99). Normal was the publisher and editor-in-chief of the short-lived fanzine, *SlamZine* (ibid. 159).

[109] *SlamZine* was the first specialised media for the slam scene published as a zine from 2001 to 2005. As it was a print zine, and thus ephemera, the specifics of it are difficult to confirm.

[110] A blurb for the issue on the Slam Family blog reads; 'un panorama du slam en France dans tous ses états: état des lieux, état de l'art, états d'âme. Il contient révélations tranchantes, analyses saignantes, repères historiques décongelés et en bonus un appel à l'insurrection! Il permet d'acquérir une vision globale du sujet, propre à dynamiser les échanges lors des forums. Très documenté, il a ainsi dégagé sept conceptions différentes du slam. *Slam Family vous invite à le lire. Et Slamzine espère que vous le diffuserez largement autour de vous!*' (2004b).

[111] A blog post from Slam Family from February 12, 2005, lists 67 individual slameurs and collectifs/associations who have pledged their support for the initiative (2004c).

être coordonné?' and addressed these concerns and others[112], as well as downsides of coordination such as it mitigating the organic, authentic, grassroots nature and spirit of slam by institutionalising it and a lack of democratic representation—like that of the FFDSP (Sania 2005). The results of the debate were published on a blog, and showed a majority in favour of coordinating (ibid.). However, blog comments included anecdotes and concerns about the FFDSP—the supposed federalising force for slam. For instance, Zaz, the former secretary of the FFDSP, suggested that 'l'entrisme' was possible but that the FFDSP lacked goodwill and members and, moreover, that the roots of the divergences in the scene stemmed from either jealousy on the part of those who were in competition with PLH or from his ill-mannered conflict resolution. Such anecdotes and others are indicative of the then-growing sentiment that although the FFDSP ought to have had the potential to federalise slam, it was unable to do so because it was unrepresentative of the scene's diversity and was tainted by PLH's reputation as the un-elected, de facto spokesperson of slam and as somebody with a poor history of leadership.[113]

The desire to coordinate slam, both in order to support slameurs outside of the capital and to mitigate the media's misrepresentation of slam, combined with what appears to be a desire to compensate for the FFDSP's perceived shortcomings. In this identity crisis, the core values of slam are called upon and defended in the face of a perceived threat to them (FFDSP). Identity is made stronger in the face of opposition. I suggest that, with hindsight, we can see that Slam Family and others debated the future of slam to address these specific concerns because these identity traits, although not explicitly defined as such, were threatened—thus threatening the existence of French slam as it was understood, experienced, and valued. However, what they could not anticipate was the threat to their vision for slam which was on

[112] To quote an activiste, Popof, without coordination, 'le talent des slameurs pourra être récupéré et exploité à moindre prix par des gens à la morale bancale, comme cela a déjà été le cas dans l'édition'. This appears to be a reference to the anthology published by Slam Éditions, which had led to litigation over intellectual property rights. It is also, more generally, a reference to the poetry art world (cf. Chapter Three).
[113] There are various other anecdotes from slameurs citing such personality differences. For example, Tô explains elsewhere why he calls his work 'Pulse Poésie' and not slam, in part due to the lawsuits and schism, but also, 'Moi-même, plus je collaborais avec Pilote, plus je m'embrouillais avec lui. Ça devenait compliqué de faire du 'Slam', de se présenter comme 'Slameur'…' (Dame Gabrielle 2012b).

the precipice: 'la vague du slam', an intense period of mediatisation brought about by the mainstream, commercial success of Grand Corps Malade.

4.7 'La Vague du Slam': Grand Corps Malade and the 'Mainstreaming' of Slam

The celebrity status of Grand Corps Malade as a *slameur* is unparalleled[114] and even casual observers of French slam recognise that the state of slam in France is unique because of his fame and influence. GCM was already recognised in the slam scene before the release of his 2006 album—which rapidly spread this recognition outside of slam circles and into everyday public discourse. I suggest that this ushered in the second determinative phase of slam: 'La Vague du Slam' (*grâce à* Grand Corps Malade) which saw a significant increase in both the quantity and the quality of mediatisation (Chapter Five). Slam became subject to its own 'buzz' and this threatened the already fragile, fractured scene and importantly, irreversibly changed the image of French slam in the public sphere.

4.7.1 GCM

In terms of Brand DNA, GCM has become one of, if not the most, prominent brand characters. At the peak of the *vague* his name became practically synonymous with slam. It was as if he were both the sole spokesperson and symbol for this phenomenon. Accordingly, his image and slam's image became conflated at times. However, due in part to the significant mediatisation, he also became one of the brand creators as he was permitted, as a representative of slam's brand, to push for his vision of slam and how he defined the practice. He attempted to explain and define slam according to the open tradition but also to clarify that his album was not a 'slam album' but rather that it was 'issu du slam'. Despite this, his work—in particular his 'music' albums— became conflated with slam and defining of its image. PLH, who had previously been the primary figure in the Parisian slam scene, was no longer the media darling and therefore his definition of slam did not receive the same credence that it

[114] The closest example is Saul Williams. However, unlike GCM, his albums have not been represented as *slam poetry* albums. Furthermore, in part due to the larger and more competitive market of the US, he has not reached the same level of fame and celebrity as GCM has in France.

had previously. GCM's own brand image eclipsed that of slam's image up to that point and the two became effectively symbiotic for a short while. Finally, his open identification as a native of Saint Denis contributes to the image of slam as poésie urbaine, as a poetic practice associated primarily with the *banlieue*. This furthers the influence of the *banlieue*—and its own image, associations, and reputation—on slam's geographic roots. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to briefly explore his biography as his celebrity became a defining part of slam's DNA.

GCM's biography can easily be read with cynicism as the result of luck, circumstance, a marketable story of personal tragedy, and serendipitous industry connections. It can also be read as a romantic tale of such personal tragedy leading to the discovery of an immense talent and deserved success. The reality is more likely somewhere in between and despite his over-mediatisation and the effects this has had on the movement, he appears to be considered 'authentic' and welcomed by those in the scene (see Chapter Five).

As the most mediatised slameur, GCM's story has become a part of the mythology of slam and its image. Although I discuss this mediatisation in the following chapter, I will briefly summarise key facts of his biography here. GCM was born Fabien Marsaud, in the Parisian *banlieue*, Seine-Saint-Denis, in 1977. As a teen he was a promising athlete and thanks to his height (1.94m) considered playing basketball professionally. However, in 1997 a tragic diving accident left him paralysed. After a long recovery, he regained mobility, but requires the use of a cane for support. With his athletic career ruined he instead completed his DESS in international sports management (GbB 2009:290; Joby 2008).

Fabien soon discovered slam after passing by Café Culturel which was near where he lived in Saint Denis. He later accompanied his childhood friend and now slameur, John Pucc' Chocolat, to Café Theranga in Clichy where he was persuaded to perform his now legendary texte, 'Cassiopée'.[115] While continuing to work at the Stade de France he became more and

[115] This texte is legendary in part because it does not appear on any of his albums. GCM, in trying to prevent his commercial career from cannibalising the original essence of slam, has on various occasions refused to publish the texte—because slam is meant to be heard first and foremost, not read. Similarly, he has argued that slam is defined by its moment of partage and rencontre, and is thus ephemeral; therefore, that Cassiopée has not been published is likely his attempt to draw people to live slam sessions and appreciate slam in situ. According to GdB,

more active in the slam scene, above all at Café Culturel. He won multiple non-FFDSP tournois, animated sessions at Café Culturel (i.e. Slam'aleikoum), and supported the more liberal, open interpretation of slam. While he was known in the scene for his talent, outsiders also took notice of his striking and sombre voice as well as his height, made less imposing by his dependency on a cane—which was the inspiration behind his blase.

In 2005[116] he met the producer, Jean Rachid—the brother of the Raï singer, Faudel, and the son-in-law of Charles Aznavour (Lepoittevin 2003; Binet 2008). Aznavour's independent publishing company, éditions Raoul Breton, decided to work with GCM (Mortaige 2007; Mandel 2007; France-Soir 2008). Thus, after signing to AZ/Universal and receiving support from the various backers, GCM recorded his ground-breaking album with the musical accompaniment of his friend S Petit Nico:

> Au printemps 2006, l'album Midi 20 prend tout le monde à contre-pied: le public qui découvre les mots sobrement déclamés d'un jeune homme qui ne cache pas sa banlieue, et les professionnels qui n'auraient jamais imaginé qu'un slameur pourrait décrocher le disque d'or des 100 000 exemplaires vendus en à peine trois semaines (Dicale 2008).

His soon to be double-platinum album quickly reached no. 3 in the charts and eventually sold over 700,000 copies that year (Fernandez 2013). Following a 20-day tour across France, Quebec, and even parts of Africa, on March 10, 2007 he also won two Victoires de Musique[117] (GdB 2009:33). Accordingly, the media maelstrom further grew around him with newspaper articles, television performances and interviews, radio spots, and so on. GCM was recognised as a slameur, already having some media exposure as such, and the attention on him heightened slam's profile in the mainstream.

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both the public and his friends say 'Cassiopée' is one of his most beautiful textes and 'les gens crient 'casssiooppéé' pendent ses concerts pour qu'il la fasse' and should he, they often join in (2009:27).

[116] In addition to his prominence within the slam scene, in 2005 GCM opened for various entertainers including Eric et Ramzy, Cheb Mami, and Hakim & Mouss (Levaillant 2006). Such performances helped gain him recognition outside of slam. He also had solo performances at the Réservoir in Paris in September 2005 (Binet 2006a). These performances but also the latter in particular helped him to get signed to AZ—an affiliate of Universal—according to Valéry Zeitoun, then director of AZ (Zeitoun 2006).

[117] He was nominated for three and won both the category 'Album révélation de l'année' and 'Révélation scène' (GdB 2009:33).

Although his albums were not technically slam—as they were not live, conducive to rencontre—they nonetheless became associated with, thus representative of, slam's brand. I suggest that rather than seeing them as typical products that comprise the Brand DNA that gives rise to identity, they instead be viewed as formative for the brand image. His albums were the first experience for many of slam. They brought new audiences to the slam events around the country and in the Francophonie writ large. His albums were merely derivative of slam; however, despite his and others attempts to provide this nuance, it was lost on some audiences who instead given their familiarity with rap, assumed them to share parentage. This conflation, which had already been developing for several years, was exacerbated by the media's appetite for more GCM-like characters that could be readily mediatised for eager audiences. This led them to a rapper, Abd Al Malik (AAM), whose style superficially resembled that of GCM's delivery and whose image was ideal for the emerging narratives of slam (see Chapter Five). Although the mainstream media began going to more slam sessions, the ephemerality of the slam session and the lack of a tangible product attached to it made those slameurs less amenable to the mass media format. AAM, however, had just released *Gibraltar* (2006) and—despite coming from hip hop—due to its softer sound and superficial similarity with GCM, the public assumed it was slam. I suggest therefore that AAM is also a character for slam's brand DNA: His commercial success, mediatisation, and relationship to slam fed into slam's image and eventual identity crystallization—despite him being neither a slameur nor part of the slam scene and community.

As slam became the new *tendance* represented by these two performers, conflations with rap, debates over its poetic merit, inaccurate depictions, and misinformation spread. This helped fuel further—often futile—attempts by slam activistes to clarify that slam was neither a new genre of poetry nor a style of music—despite its most widely recognised product being a poetic music album. These attempts were further complicated by the absence of a consensual formal definition in the slam scene, due in part to the schism and organic development of French slam. This also allowed interested outsiders drawn to slam thanks to the media attention on GCM to push for their own definitions and interpretations of slam as they

attempted to capitalise on its popularity. Accordingly, such interpretations also contributed to its mediatised image(s) while factoring into the public discourses surrounding slam and adding complexity to the phenomenon. I argue that this period of increased mediatisation around GCM affected slam both externally and internally, each of which I address in the following chapter.

4.7.2 Mediatisation Impact and Community Reassessment

The reactions to GCM's mediatisation varied from opportunistic to critical, and incited action on the part of educators, civil employees, culture industries, rappers, social commentators, poets and slam activistes—all of whom contributed to further mediatisation of slam. Slam's pre-existing lack of a consensual formal definition together with its lack of internal coherence as a movement further complicated attempts to control the narrative and mitigate media pressures by those within the scene. Concurrent with and arguably partly attributable to the *vague du slam*, there was an increase in the activity and cultural production related to slam. Record labels descended upon slam scènes looking for the next GCM, as did aspiring rappers and artists emulating him. Where prior to the *vague* activistes would often try to get media coverage to little avail, once the *vague* began they found themselves in high demand for interviews and performances. This increase in activity and media attention (the latter fuelling the former at times) was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it brought new participants to slam, created new audiences, and brought greater financial and creative opportunities to slam activistes. On the other hand, it put a strain on activistes who were put in a position of having to construct counter-narratives to those of the media and interested outsiders, while also trying to maintain their own projects and hold the community together. Since much of this is a result of the mediatisation and is part of the co-construction of slam's image, I will address it in detail in Chapter Five.

However, it is worth noting here for the history of slam that although GCM has remained an influential artist and pop culture celebrity (viz. the birth of his second child was announced in the celebrity tabloid, *Closer*), the same cannot be said for others who—at least

initially—benefitted from the *vague du slam* (Riou 2013).[118] This is not to say that slam was merely a trend that quickly evaporated. Rather, following the explosive rise in interest and attention a natural decline followed as outsiders and the media moved on to the next big thing. It was during this decline that slam began to regroup in recognition of the effects of the mediatisation and the rapid growth that had occurred (especially in *province*). This in turn lead to the beginning of a renewed drive for genuine federalisation. In 2009, the efforts of six activistes culminated in the Ligue Slam de France 'sous l'impulsion de différents associations françaises qui souhaitent resserrer les liens entre tous les acteurs du slam français', as well as address the above issues affecting slam (LSF 2009:7). Thus, the establishment of the LSF marks the beginning of what I am suggesting as the third phase of slam: Federationist hybridity (2009-), within which begins the third generation of slameurs (2011-).

4.8 LSF and the Maturation of *le Slam Français*

The LSF was founded by six slameurs (Yopo, Mr Zurg, Laurent Etienne.com, Selecta Seb, Msieur Dam, and Onizuka). Notably, GCM supported the LFS and agreed to lend both his name generally as well as to appear at major LSF events.[119] The LSF emphasises their equal support and recognition of both tournoi-based slam and the 'scènes ouvertes sans note', as well as other interpretations (LSF 2009:5).

The successful establishment of the LSF marks a formalisation of the schism in French slam. Indeed, the founding values and mission statement of the LSF closely echo some of the salient recurring desires expressed in Parlons Slam en France (see above). In particular, the LSF defends the equitable representation of slam scenes outside of Paris and the fully equal recognition of the different interpretations and practices of French slam. Both of these address

[118] For example, Luciole, a slameuse who was initially considered the female GCM, was signed to a major for her first (slam-heavy) album in 2009; but has since lost that representation and instead self-published her second album in 2012, and a third in 2015 that moved entirely away from slam to chanson (Culturebox 2009; Luciolesenvole.com 2015).

[119] Specifically, he is listed in press releases as supporting the LSF and in an LSF annual report he—as in the institution built around him—is listed as an honorary member under the category of support partner, alongside other organisations like Marc Kelly Smith's non-profit organisation, Chicago Slam Works (LSF 2013).

the primary demands and concerns of those who were critical of or simply underwhelmed by the FFDSP and its precursors.

4.8.1 Ligue Slam de France: Réseau National et Francophone

The objectives of the LSF are to 'soutenir les collectifs locaux, favoriser les échanges et proposer à tous les amateurs de poésie, slameurs ou non, structures culturelles ou éducatives, une véritable plate-forme d'information en ligne pour que chacun ait droit à la parole.' (2009:3). Representing slam both in Paris and *province* without allowing the historical and demographic weight of the capital to eclipse the rest, they aim to 'donner la parole à tous' via slam, bring together 'des collectifs locaux à une coordination nationale' and provide 'une plate-forme en ligne et des événements' (ibid.).

In addition to aiming to bring together activistes (slam, poetry, and music) from across the nation, the LSF also seeks to unite through its core values and its position as defender of *all* the interpretations of slam—with both tournoi and scènes ouvertes considered equally legitimate. The founding values to which members must adhere are: *égalité, ouverture, accessibilité, respect, partage, interactivité, liberté d'expression, liberté d'opinion* (2009:5). Additionally, their charter makes clear that 'La LSF défend la pratique originelle du slam avec tournoi et reconnait les scènes slam sans tournoi comme faisant partie intégrante du mouvement slam français du moment qu'elles en respectent les valeurs'. And in contrast to the FFDSP, 'La LSF n'entend pas régir les règles du tournoi/ encourageant ainsi l'inventivité et l'originalité de chacun' (LSF 2009:5). As for a definition of slam, the LSF also remains—in accordance with its values—purposefully open. The league does not explicitly define slam, but rather defends the principle of slam as an open (libre) discipline and proposes instead a 'definition' of slam through a condensed overview of its history as well as including the idiosyncratic definitions of its founding members. For example, for Mr. Zurg, the president of the LSF, 'Le slam c'est de la Poésie Orale Populaire' and for Yopo, 'Le slam, c'est un JEU de société, un mic mac de mots, le tic tac du chrono, la tactique du + performant, le clic clac des

plaquettes du jury, le trac des poètes et puis…les clap clap du public lui aussi s'exprimant' (LSF 2009:10-11).[120]

In this respect, given their stewardship and vision for the open orientation of French slam, the LSF can be considered among the brand creators and its concern for slam outside of Paris contributes to the geographical roots of slam's DNA. Their early visions for slam include the aforementioned objectives as well as an inclusive annual competition based festival, the Coupe de La Ligue Slam France. This *coupe*, I suggest should, although it is not necessarily widely known in the general public, be recognised amongst the products pertinent to slam's DNA as it has helped to shape the forward vision and development of French slam. Importantly, it has united French slam with the American tradition whilst remaining faithful to the French specificity of slam that stems from the original scène ouverte concept.

In 2011 the LSF hosted its first *coupe*: 'Le festival de *tous* les Slams de France' [emphasis mine] (LSF 2011). This was held in Tours, Joué lès Tours, and featured a variety of events including tournoi, scènes ouvertes, *concerts de spoken word* and music, lectures and other events to 'rassembler tous les acteurs du slam, et tous les slam' (LSF 2011; Soulard 2011). In addition to GCM (who performed in concert there) the festival welcomed other *invités d'honneur* such as Marc Kelly Smith.

The specific goals of the festival were representative of the aims of the LSF and, furthermore, served as responses to some criticisms made against the FFDSP. In particular, the festival featured a myriad of opportunities for members of the public to participate in scènes ouvertes, to learn more about slam and poetry generally, and to get involved elsewhere both prior to and following the festival. Furthermore, the festival also emphasised its tournoi as 'une véritable compétition nationale égalitaire aux meilleurs poètes de France' with diverse

[120] The other four founding members define slam as follows. 1) Sélecta Seb: 'Le Slam c'est pas un genre de poésie, c'est pas une marque de basket bio à la mode, c'est pas un genre musical, le slam c'est un moment de partage et d'écoute, quelques minutes pour briller et se faire entendre!'. 2) Laurent Etienne.com: 'Le slam est pour moi un moment de liberté d'expression, quelque soit votre âge, votre culture, votre religion, votre couleur de peau. Il regroupe tous ces individus autour d'un même plaisir: l'amour des mots !'. 3) M'sieur Dam': 'Le slam c'est l'occasion pour l'auditeur d'en prendre pleins les oreilles et d'en redemander, c'est l'occasion pour l'auditeur de prendre la parole, devenir acteur, et recommencer… Prenez garde, c'est une fièvre hautement contagieuse…'. 4) Onizuka: 'Le slam c'est se retrouver et se tourner vers les autres, et puis des mots.' (LSF 2009:11).

regional representation. Finally, the festival also featured 'le 1er tournoi national organisé en dehors du cadre scolaire pour les moins de 18 ans en France' as an alternative to the FFDSP's GSN Interscolaire (LSF 2011). Whereas the GSN Interscolaire (since 2005) required entry via pre-selection at a participating school and followed the same rules of the GSN (jury, numerical scores, classifications), La Coupe Junior followed the official international poetry slam regulations; but it did not require entry via a participating institution and instead allowed participants to register for the tournoi at the door, right up to the start of the event and thus is arguably more 'open' and accessible. The specificities of the tournoi (i.e. not requiring entry via pre-selected venues licenced by the FFDSP) and other events at the Coupe de la LSF are indicative of the different philosophies and ideology underlying the FFDSP and the LSF. Similarly, beginning in 2014 the Coupe moved from Tours to other cities around France (Rennes, Strasbourg and Bordeaux), continuing to establish slam's presence outside of Paris (LSF 2016).

At the 2012 Coupe (also in Joué lès Tours) Marc Kelly Smith inaugurated a new cross-cultural initiative, the 'French Slam Connection' which seeks to create and strengthen ties between European and American poets as well as explore new direction for the art, such as 'performance interpretation/translation' (BWW 2012). The 'French Slam Connection' has since continued its annual poet-in-residence programme at the Green Mill tavern—the birthplace of American slam poetry.[121] And on 21 November, 2017, continuing to codify cross-cultural and trans-atlantic links between French slam and American slam poetry, the LSF announced their official partnership with the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City—the legendary café and whose poets were part of the inspiration for the film, *Slam*. (LSF 2017a).

[121] In association with this partnership, the initiative One Poetic Voice also hosts events with French slameurs in the Chicago region such as workshops at local schools for spoken word poetry, slam poetry, and French cultural appreciation—in both French and English—directed by Marc Kelly Smith (One Poetic Voice 2017). This year featured the collectif Uppercut (comprising Antoine Faure (aka Tô), Damien Noury, and Yas) (Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States 2017).



Figure 6. Facebook post LSF (2018). Pictured (left to right): GCM, Mr ZURG, Yopo, and Marc Kelly Smith. May 30, 2018 at 15:26 UTC.

As the creator of slam poetry, Marc Kelly Smith is also the original brand creator, but for the global brand, from which French slam stands apart in its cultural and historical specificity. Accordingly, Marc Kelly Smith's support for the LSF is notable. Not only did slam initially develop in the 'open' fashion, semi-ignorant and independent of American slam poetry, but the 'open' faction of slam also contends for a leaderless existence with a multitude of interpretations co-existing. Despite this however, Smith's approval appears to carry a certain authority which legitimates the LSF project and its motivations. Importantly, despite being the founder of the competitive format, Smith is now not a committed advocate for the poetry slam-as-competition emphasis. For example, Vorger quotes her email interview with Smith on his opinion of French slam:

> As I've said before, the slams in France are more akin to the early years of slam in Chicago than many of the American slams. They are freer, more playful, more imaginative, and possess a healthy dose of anarchy.' and furthermore that, 'The biggest thing that bugs me about the reporting over the years is that everybody equates poetry slam with competitive poetry, that ain't it! That's the narrow-minded view of it (Vorger 2012:43).

Likewise, in an interview for *Arte.tv*, Smith emphasises the importance of community to his philosophy of slam, 'Don't be in your little corner and that's what the slam is, less competitive poetry and more a family of poets, an international family of poets. People now are connected all over. The slam is open to anybody who walks in the door.' (Arte.tv (2008) quoted in Vorger 2012:34). Thus, given his opinions regarding competition and affinity for *le slam français*, Smith's support of the LSF lends legitimacy to the 'open' interpretation of slam; much as his opinions had done earlier when Tsunami MC had expressly published a translation of Smith's reservations concerning strict regulation and competition in an article 'Slam, la philosophie' on his website *Planète Slam*:

> Bien que le "Uptown Poetry Slam" ait toujours mis l'accent sur les performances oratoires des poètes, c'est la compétition, par son rituel dramatique, qui a suscité l'intérêt des médias et son engouement populaire. Est-ce une bonne chose? Parfois, je pense que non (Smith 2003 quoted in Vorger 2012:33).[122]

The LSF thus had both the approval of Marc Kelly Smith and GCM: two men who are both integral figures to slam. As brand creators (and in the case of GCM also a brand character) their support for initiatives like the LSF arguably helps to solidify this more open vision for slam as *the* vision for slam français that is open to more than just one format for competition and thus sustains the French scène ouverte tradition that characterised the initial emergence of French slam.

4.8.2 Third Generation Slameurs

Although it is difficult, if not unnecessary, to put an exact date on when a new generation begins, I suggest that 2009 is the early boundary for marking a third generation of slam. According to Dgiz, the second generation of slameurs emerged around 2004, just after

[122] This short article also cites several edicts that are counter to the 'fundamentalist' interpretation of slam that activistes like those affiliated with *Planète Slam*, Slam Family and the LSF rallied against in defending the 'open' interpretation of slam: 'Le slam doit être **ouvert** à toutes et à tous ainsi qu'à toutes les **formes** de poésie.' and Chaque **organisateur** de slam doit être **libre** d'attache de toute structure extérieure et n'a de compte à rendre à aucune autorité si ce n'est à la communauté des poètes et au public.' and finally, 'Certaines théories peuvent impressionner le néophyte. L'esprit communautaire du slam est en conflit permanent avec les **ambitions individuelles** et les **appétits égoïstes**. Ce **combat** pourrait détruire la cohésion et la créativité du mouvement. Vous l'aurez deviné, je suis du côté de **l'idéalisme** et de **l'espoir.**' (Bolded in original).

the scene began to diversity and before GCM's debut and the associated massification of slam (Maaroufi 2013). Given the subsequent turmoil and influence of the 'vague du slam' on slam itself, I suggest instead that the third generation started to appear on the horizon as the vague began to dissipate in 2009—coincidentally also when the LSF was founded. Initiatives like the LSF and slam-produced media like *Cris & Poésie* (see Chapter Five) both legitimised and made public the concept of slam *français* as based on open, liberal, *démocratique* principles—rather than understood exclusively as a tournoi de poésie or misinterpreted as a genre of music/poetry—by representing and even questioning the diverse interpretations and practices of slam. Thus, the potential confusion as to slam's ontology was attenuated. This arguably liberated slam from its identity crisis by facilitating debate whilst respecting the diversity of interpretations. Furthermore, unlike during the second generation when slam audiences were privy not only to those internal debates, but also to the conflicting, confusing definitions of slam and thus alienated by them, newcomers today have increasingly had access to a bevy of resources many of which also welcome the diversity of the scene both regionally and creatively. Indeed, the roots of the schism are now becoming something of legend, especially given GCM's prominence and the resultant greater external stressors. Perhaps indicative of amnesia regarding the schism, the activiste, Dame Gabrielle, wrote on her website, *Cris & Poésie,* about the low attendance at the LSF's annual Assemblée Générale to remind her readers of its historical relevance: 'Le/La slameur-se s'organise. Tout-e seul-e, en collectif, en asso et en ligue. La Ligue Slam de France née d'un rejet sur les méthodes non fédératrices d'une fédération de slam poésie portant mal son nom, a eu son AG le week-end dernier.' (Dame Gabrielle 2014). Thus, while there are obvious personal histories, and the FFDSP still exclusively recognises the orthodox interpretation of slam, the schism had begun to transmogrify into the main support branches of slam's family tree.

The legitimisation of the diverse interpretations of slam via initiatives like the LSF has been crucial in enabling French slam to develop its own proper identity. Of particular significance is the process by which pre-existing communities became involved in these initiatives and through them both granted and were granted such legitimacy and thus

recognition. This drive towards federalisation and coalescing of the community served as a key juncture in the evolution of slam as a coherent and thriving de-centralised network spurred by the shared ambition of promoting poetry through democratic social spaces of sharing and encounter as embodied by *le slam*.

4.9 Slam DNA: An Overview

Slam has never had a clear coherent identity shared universally by all who use its name. Rather, where there is agreement, there is a *sense* of what slam is: a knowing, a recognition of it based in certain core values like the ideal of a poésie démocratisée. The slameur, Souleymane Diamanka defines slam as '*un dispositif*' and I agree that this better describes slam than other categories such as genre, movement, style, and so on (Diamanka and Barret 2012:30). However, given the public discursive shaping of slam's image and the importance of this image to slam's identity, I suggest it is informative to understand slam as a brand of poetry. The brand 'slam' encapsulates this *dispositif* and communicates the underlying values and motivations that inform the practice and enjoyment of slam. Throughout this chapter I have indicated key historical events that are a part of slam's brand DNA as per the model laid out by Kapferer (2015).

Firstly, I discussed how the name 'slam' came from an independent film of the same name which did not depict the American tradition of slam poetry competitions but rather presented slam poetry as a liberating force with a hip hop influence and 'urban' appeal. I also discussed how contention within the slam scene emerged over the correct usage of the name 'slam', with different groups within slam arguing for different application of this brand name. I discussed how two typical products of slam's brand emerged: the tournoi de poésie and the scène ouverte.

With regards to the brand creator's original vision, I have selected three individuals in particular who I argue are brand creators of slam's brand: Pilote le Hot, Marc Kelly Smith, and Grand Corps Malade. Marc Kelly Smith created slam poetry in the United States and is affectionately called 'Slam Papi' for this reason. He is not the brand creator of French slam but

as the originator of American slam poetry, his visions and opinions have been influential on the development of French slam—with various activistes citing him in order to justify their vision for slam. Additionally, his continued work with the French Slam Connection/One Poetic Voice in the United States is helping to export *le slam français* to slam poetry's country of origin and further cross-cultural exchange and hybridity between the two nations. Although Pilote le Hot did not import the American practice, he did initially capitalise on the name to establish the then-loosely defined open mic poetry scene. He even acted consciously as a brand manager, trademarking the name 'slam' as well as 'slameur' and his production company, 'slam productions'. He spent the early 2000s building a brand of slam poetry with his vision at the centre. However, by excluding the other visions of slam—held by those like 129H, Nada, Tsunami MC, Félix Jousserand and others—PLH's vision lost dominance due to this inconsistency and the resultant tension. There was a grassroots drive for the quintessentially French scène ouverte tradition to remain characteristic of slam's brand which PLH appeared to be generally accepting of, albeit not under the 'slam' name. The difference in visions led to a schism within the scene and eventually, with the emergence of the third brand creator Grand Corps Malade (GCM), this divergence of opinion and resultant identity crisis ironically became characteristic of slam's brand. GCM is a brand creator in that he became so famous and mediatised that anything he said regarding slam was treated as gospel by the media and thus the public.

GCM, in addition to being an unintentional, reluctant brand creator, is an important character for slam's brand. His unparalleled fame following his 2006 album debut made him the representative of slam and whatever he did affected its image. His face, name, and voice became synonymous with slam for the general public. He became a veritable slam icon. Incidentally, in 2006 another recording artist, a rapper, Abd Al Malik (AAM) also became a character for slam's brand. Just as GCM never sought to be a brand creator, AAM did not seek to be a character for slam. However, the media frenzy around GCM (the vague du slam) needed more representatives of slam to satisfy their hunger for this new '*tendance*'. Furthermore, as I detail in Chapter Five, AAM fit the media constructed and idealised image of a slameur better

than that of the established 'rap spectacle' rapper image and therefore, his name became representative of slam despite having no 'legitimate' relations to the slam scene.

I have identified specific historical entities and events that are foundational to slam's construction: folk oral poetry performance, a film, a bona fide traditional brand (Slam Productions) and schism, a federation, a superstar, and finally a league. Additionally, I have highlighted briefly how the influence of the localised cultural geographies of each has played a role in the construction of slam, both its brand and its image: namely, New York and later Chicago, USA; Paris; the Parisian *banlieue*; and finally, *province*. There are however a few characteristics of brand DNA that have not been covered: visual symbols and logotypes and advertising which I will address now briefly.

4.9.1 Visual Symbols and Logotypes: Final Element of DNA

Slam's brand is by nature an organic, rhizomatic one, a brand that embodies its internal diversity. Accordingly, the flyers and posters and other ephemera range in style from clearly hip hop influenced to sophisticated and referencing handwriting with calligraphic print. The logos for Slam Productions/ FFDSP and the LSF do not share any dominant feature (figures 7, 8). The logo for the FFDSP is inconsistently applied, sometimes their logo is a variant of the theme for that years GSN poster, elsewhere it is an image of a crowd (pictured on a t-shirt for sale on the website, figure 11). The FFDSP uses a lot of revolutionary imagery: the colour red, raised fists, soviet and communist imagery et cetera. The LSF uses the colours of the French flag and is otherwise neutral without any strong revolutionary nor conformist imagery. The posters for their respective annual tournoi for 2017 are also pictured below (figures 9, 10). They both feature either a pen and/or a microphone. These two symbols (pen and microphone) are frequently found on slam related ephemera and logos to indicate the centrality of writing and orality to the brand. In the appendix I have included more images from various slam organisations and ephemera with a range of styles. What is relatively consistent appears to be: an influence from street art and graffiti in the choice of fonts, reflecting either the hand-written nature of it and/or referencing an *urbain(e)* aesthetic and

context; and the presence of a microphone, a person, or some other symbol indicating orality, sometimes alongside a pen or other writing instrument (See appendix for examples).

Finally, given his influence as a character and brand creator, and given that he himself is also a brand, Grand Corps Malade's visual style and advertising should be considered. Although the entirety of his work is relevant, I suggest that *Midi20* (2006) and *Enfant de la Ville* (2008) are the most shaping of his personal brand as they are the first two products that established him as a star. Consequently, they are also the most influential on slam's brand since these two albums were released during the formative *vague du slam* period and have thus left an indelible mark on slam français.

Both of his first two album covers are representative of the range of his visual style. On both his name appears in large letters, with him standing nearby. However, whereas on *Midi20* (figure 12) his cane is clearly pictured, on *Enfant de la Ville* (figure 13) he is pictured from the waist up, but clearly standing under an underpass in the city. In both he is notably wearing a tracksuit which evokes an *urbain(e)* sentiment and association. Otherwise, the image is relatively sparse with little detail and symbolism.

On the cover of his third album *3eme Temps* (figure 14), his corporeal representation is reduced to a close-up of his expressionless but stern face. Similar imagery of just his face, up close and without clear expression, appears on the cover of his 2012 autobiographical novel, *Patients* (figures 15, 16). His fourth album, *Funambule* (figures 17,18) returns to the full-body shot, with both his cane, tracksuit, and Adidas trainers clearly visible. The visual style is painfully non-descript yet reflective of *urbain(e)* aesthetics. The colours are dull, sometimes black and white. Only the cover for *Enfant de la Ville* features an actual scene in the background, the rest are a solid colour: white, beige, or black.

From these two albums, several tracks were made into music videos: notably, 'Les Voyages en Train', 'Saint Denis' (both on *Midi20*) and 'Je viens de Là' (*Enfant de la ville).* These videos all feature scenes where he is walking from the distance down a road or path towards the camera, often staring straight ahead with a deadpan expression—as well as various scenes depicting the city life around him and which he references in these textes. All

three music videos are filmic and documentary-like, with an uncharacteristic fly-on-the-wall perspective for music videos yet feature choreography, dancing, costumes and stage craft. Although the production values are respectable, there is a lo-fi, grainy réalisme.

Again, although this is representative of *his* brand, given his position as the figure for slam, his visual style affects slam's brand image. The simple imagery, an emphasis on urban/*urbain(e)* life, life happening on the street, and his direct, deadpan delivery and body language create an overall sense of quotidian contemplation. In all three videos both the visuals and the textes themselves touch on themes of the small meetings in everyday life, diversity and the recognition of it, an openness to the experience of the immediacy and wonder of the mundane, all with GCM as your citizen-poet, *griot-urbain* guide to the street and everyday life as it is, beautiful and deep despite its banality. Importantly, several of the key characteristics that I argue comprise slam's brand identity are present: rencontre, métissage, diversité, immédiateté, and liberté (in the form of openness). These themes re-occur throughout his brand, slam textes, and slam derived creative production. They additionally sometimes can be detected to varying degrees along with some of the other themes I argue to be essential to slam's identity: partage, s'exprimer, accessibilité, démocratique, and finally, colludique. Slam's brand is greater than GCM. However, his influence is not to be minimised. Indeed, this creative production, while being derivative of 'pure' slam, has influenced slam's image greatly and therefore, while it is possible to study and analyse slam just as a poetic practice, I find it more informative to look at it as a brand. Slam's brand, when understood in such a way, can and does encompass the work of GCM and others from the slam scene to an understanding beyond individual production, serving as a key to the above mentioned *dispositif* and 'sense', the values and traits integral to its image that defines and organises slam. Slam, understood as a brand, thus unlocks the nuanced yet comprehensive understanding necessary to conceptualise the ontology of French Slam.



Figure 7. Logo



Figure 8. Logo



Figure 9. GSN 2017



Figure 10. LSF Coupe 2017



Figure 11. FFDSP Logo



Figure 12. Midi20 (2006)



Figure 13. Enfant de la Ville (2006)



Figure 14. 3eme Temps (2010)

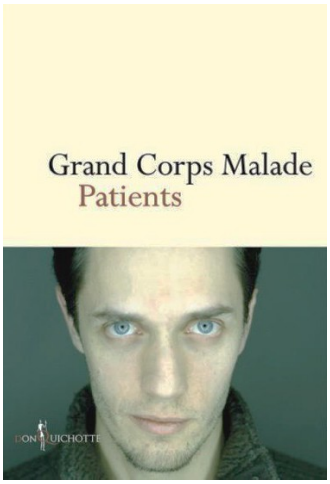


Figure 15. Patients (2012)

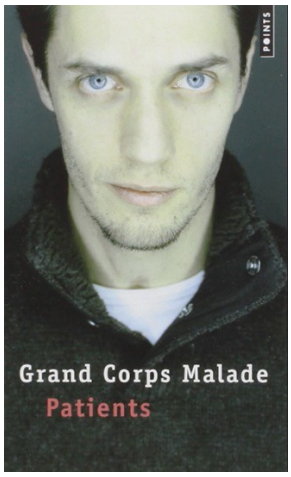


Figure 16. Patients (2012)



Figure 17. Funambule (2013)



Figure 18. Funambule Bonus ed. (2013)

VOLUME II

Chapter Five

Mediatisation: Brand Image of Slam

[Grand Corps Malade] a amené à la fois la surmédiatisation et la mort du projet pour que ça ne devienne qu'un phénomène Grand Corps Malade / Abd El Malik [sic]. Mais ce n'est pas que de leur faite [sic], les médias ont largement contribué à éteindre la diversité du mouvement—Nevchehirlian quoted in Dame Gabrielle 2012.

Possibly a self-aware act, the 2006 article 'Vague à slam derrière Grand Corps' in *Libération* addresses the effects of GCM's mediatisation—both positive and negative—on the slam scene. It covered attention from the culture industries and new audiences, increased likelihood of viable opportunities for producing albums and other projects, the condensation of slam into one figurehead, and the conflation of slam with rap and music (Binet 2006b).

However, it could not fully address the diversité within slam nor how the hegemonic public discourse, fuelled by the mediatisation, minimizes it. For instance, some slam activistes reject commercialization. Others reject the idea of recording slam and believe it should be live. And others reject the use of music: either in competition or in any and all instances. Accordingly, for the media and public discourse in France to latch onto slam as a term to represent the commercial, music-adjacent and musically-augmented products made by GCM (and AAM) was contrary to the diversité of slam.

Nevertheless, following *Midi20,* GCM rapidly became synonymous with slam. His albums became understood as *slam* albums— rather than as 'issus du slam'.[123] In countries like Germany or the United States, slam poets with some level of popular commercial success have been billed as spoken word poets, musicians, singers, or rappers**;** whereas in France, '*slameur'* became treated in the public discourse as a quasi-professional category unto itself.

[123] GCM and others have insisted that his album is not a slam album, and is rather 'issu du slam', but this clarification sometimes falls on deaf ears. Ivy, a slameur from Quebec, explained in the Canadian press, 'Quand je l'ai rencontré l'automne dernier, […]Fabien lui-même disait que bien qu'il soit issu du slam, son disque n'était pas slam à proprement parler, que c'était une œuvre hybride. Je suis moi-même en train d'enregistrer un disque hybride du même type. L'ennui, c'est qu'on ne peut pas contrôler la réception des gens…' (Péan 2007).

This collapsing of GCM and other slameurs' albums with slam—live, a capella performance and/or competition—is arguably due in part to slam's mediatisation which has helped to reify this association in the public's mind. Normally, we should be cautious when speaking of such media effects as they are difficult to prove (Couldry 2012:36). However, with regards to French slam, given the mediatisation and continued commercial success of GCM, it is safe to assume that the media and public discourses created and/or solidified the concept of a 'slam album' (as well other 'myths' that affect slam's image).

Brand image is mediated through private and public discourses; however, in lieu of and in addition to marketing, media[124] discourse and representations can be especially influential in shaping brand image. Along with identity, positioning, and reputation, brand image is a crucial part of the overall brand conception. And in the case of a sui generis brand like slam, image is arguably one of the more powerful and influential aspects that fosters relating to it as a brand. Accordingly, this chapter addresses slam's brand image and in particular, the mediatisation that arguably contributed to slam's image development.

First, I will briefly introduce the mediatisation of similar forms that have already been explored in Chapter Three as historical precedents that are important to keep in mind as they affect slam and in order to provide the context for this chapter's exploration and analysis of the brand image and its development. Following this, I have organized this chapter chronologically, in three parts. Each part addresses a different phase of slam's mediatisation: phase 0, 1, and 2. Phase 0 represents the initial mediatisation of the film, *Slam*, which I discussed in the previous chapter. However, since it sets in place precedents and assumptions for later interpretations and representations of slam, it nonetheless merits a brief discussion.

Phase I spans roughly 1999-2004 and is the period of dominance of PLH and Slam Productions. Phase II spans 2006-2009 and is the 'vague du slam'. These phases are not perfect demarcations, and there is overlap. Phase II, the 'vague du slam', is a crucial period in

[124] This includes both traditional media (i.e. top-down media like broadcast media and print press) and new media (i.e. dispersed media, social media).

the image construction of slam. For organisational purposes, I have divided it by three sets of *intervenants*: rap, PAW/critics, and the slam scene.

I have structured the discussion in Phases I and II around what I call 'constitutive showings'. 'Showings' is a concept I borrow from Nick Couldry (2012) that refers to mass-media acts that make something publicly available—which may not have been *as* public historically. These constitutive showings are critical incidents where media coverage is significant in terms of the storytelling, myth making, and image construction of slam. They are not necessarily large or broadly consumed incidents, shown on the front page of national papers and/or watched by millions, but I suggest they are significant in the meanings—manifest and latent— that can be extracted from them. It is in this sense that they are constitutive: as mediatisation they contain significant meanings that are constitutive of slam's image and development as a brand. Finally, I offer two 'portraits', or case-studies, that analyse specifically two 'brand characters' for slam—AAM and Tata Milouda—to illustrate the brand image in action.

5.1 Precedents for Mediatisation: The Rap Spectacle & Chanson's Frenchness

5.1.1 Rap

As discussed in Chapter Three, just prior to the 'vague du slam' the mediatisation of the so-called *crise des banlieues,* along with concurrent and overlapping mediatisation of rap, and an increase in the visibility of rap that conforms to the assumptions of the rap spectacle arguably further contributed to the assumption that rap is vulgar, low-quality, sociopathic, and/or promotes violence.

Accordingly, rap is stigmatised. The overall mainstream image of rap tends to be more negative than positive, and it is arguably seen as restricted to/appropriate for *banlieue* culture—not deserving of outside attention or consideration of its artistic merit on par with other art forms like traditional poetry. Importantly, in slam's mediatisation, rap enters into a

duality—but not a dichotomy—with slam of the sacred and profane,[125] yin and yang, banal expression and mere profanity. This can be read as a neutral attempt to situate slam and understand it relative to something more familiar. However, given the overarching image of spectacle rap dominating the public perception, propositions of such a duality are not benign. Accordingly, as I will analyse regarding slam in this chapter, anything seen as comparable with rap risks possible negative bias attribution; or, conversely a positive bias by virtue of being *not* rap.

5.1.2 Chanson

In the mediatisation of slam, associations with hip hop are more common than references to Villon, *goguettes,* or Léo Ferré; however, there are also attempts to situate slam vis-à-vis *chanson française* and to a lesser extent, traditional poetry.

Mainstream media caters to a mass audience, therefore one can assume that references to Heidsieck are not as salient or meaningful for audiences as references to Brel or NTM. Furthermore, Charles Aznavour's quiet, but not-so-secret, role as a publisher, mentor, and *parrain* for GCM bolsters the affiliation between slam and chanson. His role in slam's development is crucial because without his support, GCM may not have become a celebrity and the face of slam despite the cultural myth that 'il brille simplement parce qu'il est brillant.' (Da Gobleen quoted in GdB 2009:114).

However, this tendency is arguably also related to the media focus on slam as commercial audio recordings—especially during the 'vague du slam'—rather than a capella performance. The inclusion of music on these albums invokes a philosophical argument as to where the boundary between music and poetry lies. Thus, given the literary tradition and emphasis on writing (logocentrism) in France, it can be argued that the mere fact of orality pushes slam towards the music end of the spectrum, away from poetry.

Importantly, in terms of identity, attempts in the public discourse to associate slam with *chanson française* are arguably attempts to legitimise slam as authentically French.

[125] cf. Durkheim (1995, 2013).

While associations of slam to popular poetry can be read as romanticising French working-class history and culture, associations of slam to artworld poetry, like *poésie sonore,* are (arguably less successful) attempts at legitimising slam within the French poetry canon. All of these associative constructions—even rap to an extent—can be read as an attempt to claim Frenchness over slam, overwriting its American historical origins.

I argue that the mediatisation of slam co-constructed its image, and that in turn, its image is influential on its identity—thus constitutive of its brand. However, many of the dynamics, tensions, controversies, and discourses elevated and disseminated by media also exist independently of this mediatisation. It is useful to consider Durkheim's view that celebrities stand in for 'ways of acting that have been worked out in common' (1995:209). GCM's celebrity and mediatisation disseminates, amplifies, and—given that images and myths are sometimes more real than reality—even reifies that which is already a tacit consensus; that is, the brand.

Thus, the mediatisation engenders a situation where the image of slam precedes it and accordingly it takes greater precedence in an audience's initial relationship to slam/its brand than its identity. Indeed, its identity may be something only properly acknowledged by those in the slam scene—only sensed, but not fully felt, by outsiders. Nonetheless, while the image precedes it, both the image and the identity of slam are integral to its ontology. As I show, they work in unison, in a complementary fashion, to generate the brand. Whether one is a casual observer or part of the scene, the difference is a level of familiarity and intensity rather than a dichotomy of mere image and reality in terms of the brand.

5.2 Phase 0: Slam, The Film

Phase 0 represents when the term 'slam' first entered the lexicon in part via the eponymous film and its mediatisation that started a discourse about the film: what it represents, blackness, American culture, poetry and rap, and ultimately, slam and its power for redemption via self-expression.

Slam's mediatisation repeated some of the various tropes associated with hip hop culture and rap music whilst valorising the moral salvation brought about by poetic expression depicted in the film. In particular, *Slam* arguably helped to contribute to one of the discursive conceptualisations of slam and thus slam's image: that slam is related to, part of, or derived from hip hop culture, thus from black American culture. Importantly however, unlike in the United States where the association with black, underclass politics was emphasised, as well as 'gangsta' rap as the film's oppositional 'other', in France, the revolutionary potential of speech was emphasised.

Accordingly, the representations of the film and its narrative plant the seed for what I call the rap-slam conflation. Although there is a connection between the two forms, it is nuanced and complex. In media and public discourse, these nuances, complexities, timelines, and subtleties are generally lost and instead, the two forms are reduced to a duality that does neither justice. In phase I this conflation becomes a public point of contention; however, in phase II it returns with a vengeance with the 'vague du slam'.

5.3 Phase I: PLH

Phase I marks a transition from the mediatisation of slam as something foreign and imported to something that is Gallicised and made local. The central focus of Phase I is Pilote le Hot and his *association* Slam Productions/FFDSP. It is important to recall that during this period, the slam scene was experiencing internal tensions over slam's 'democratic' nature, resulting in an ideological schism: slam *à la française* versus a strict interpretation of the American tradition. These pre-existing tensions were exacerbated by the mediatisation during Phase I.

5.3.1 PLH: prophète-propriétaire de la poésie populaire

In the early days of slam, not only was slam (and the practice of it under the name '*slam*') allegedly restricted to Slam Productions, but PLH additionally held a position as the predominant, almost sole-spokesperson for slam. His over-representation and accreditation—including in the media—even Jean-Michel Espitallier has remarked upon: 'On se souvient de

la starification du très surévalué Pilote le Hot dans les années quatre-vingt-dix' (2006:107). Indeed, the media coverage occasionally veered towards the sycophantic, where PLH is given exclusive and arguably excessive credit as 'l'inventeur du slam' (Métro 2002), 'le grand slameur devant l'éternel' (Bertucci 2002), the 'énergétique figure emblématique des 400 slameurs français' (Dubois 2002) and less ostentatiously, as '[le] chef de file de slameurs en France' (Saint Saveur 2001) who 'réussit à faire descendre la poésie sur le chaud bitume populaire et citoyen' (Nouvel Observateur 2001). This apparent erasure of the other individuals who were active at Club Club, as well as other early proto-slameurs, likely reinforced the perception of a Slam Production monopoly over slam despite PLH's public declarations that slam was 'poésie démocratisée'. In addition to the identity building use of this phrase, his use of 'poésie démocratisée' was also, if not primarily, to invoke working-class romanticism and the glory of the Revolution as something quintessentially French, thus situating slam within that *tradition populaire*. In describing slam as such he tried to connect it first to popular/populist tradition as well as to position it as non-elite. PLH's regular invocation of slam as 'poésie démocratisée' was arguably also an exercise in branding slam per his vision. Indeed, by pursing intellectual property rights, it would appear that his was an explicit, conscious attempt at such. However, such attempts through legal and official documentation under his name alone also imply ownership or the desire thereof, which was anathema to the concept of slam qua poésie démocratisée held by others in the scene. This ideological discord was arguably exacerbated by his prominence in the media that disseminated and legitimated his agenda and vision for slam which did not, however, accord with other activistes.

As the scene itself and interest in slam grew, encouraging coverage of it, the schism in slam also became apparent to the media—and thus to the general public as well. For instance, a *Métro* (2002) article on PLH titled, 'L'inventeur du slam parisien' starts with the disclaimer: 'Ses collègues n'aiment pas qu'on le dise, mais c'est bien lui le chef de file et créateur du mouvement slam à Paris.' before highlighting his entrepreneurial activity and success from slam. More directly, a 2002 article in *L'Express* summarises a recent poetry revival and

explains that amongst the various criticisms of slam—regarding the quality of poetry or its originality—there are those who 'diront que Pilote le Hot tire la couverture à lui' (Dupont 2002). While the mediatisation of slam was initially largely Slam Productions (and thus, PLH), the tone towards PLH in particular does not remain laudatory. Given his prominence in the early media coverage, his attitude could have had potentially determinative effects on the lasting conceptions of slam and its image. However, as I discuss below, his visions for and activity in slam, combined with his increasingly public persona and the negative image thereof, mitigate this.

5.3.2 PLH and hip hop

In addition to the discord over the practical application of a democratic ethos, there was also debate within the scene over the collaboration and exchange with hip hop scenes. This too became mediatised as PLH shifted his public discourse away from accepting rap to disavowing it. His attitude towards rap is reflective of a more general societal attitude towards rap and is suggestive of his concerns with aligning slam with hip hop culture in any way. Although not explicitly stated as such, there are indications that part of the motivation behind PLH's ideological shift towards slam as a rule-driven competition-based discipline came from a concern regarding the participation of rappers in slam and a secondary, but closely related, desire to distance slam publicly from rap.

In the beginning of slam's Parisian growth, there was an influx of people and influences from hip hop/rap into slam. As the specialist magazine *Hip Hop Flow* explains, 'De plus en plus de rappeurs fréquentent les soirées slam, soit parce qu'ils ont envie de partager leurs textes et de s'entraîner sur scène, soit parce qu'ils se sont lassés de la tournure commerciale que prend le rap en France' (Rach' 2002a). Thus, in addition to the lack of a commercial emphasis, slam appealed to rappers because it was démocratique—which incidentally, was touted by PLH in the media. Nevertheless, given the potential for stigmatisation or negative publicity as a result of being associated with rap and hip hop, Slam Production's desire to

distance slam from rap is not unprecedented.[126] For example, in 2001, Christine Gabin (who was director of Slam Productions at the time) explained that, although slam provoked negative reactions from some poets at the Centre du Livre, the real problem was the media and its portrayal of slam: 'On veut éviter de se faire étiqueter comme le rap l'a été' (Bernal 2001). As I discussed above, rap suffered from its stigmatization in the media and in culture generally. As PLH's mission for slam at that time appeared to be to legitimate it by presenting it at le Printemps des poètes and other events, by publishing anthologies, and by associating slam with *action culturelle,* any affiliation with rap—given its stigma—was potentially a threat to this endeavour. Accordingly, while especially earlier in his media coverage he is welcoming to rappers, as slam was beginning to thrive also in the *banlieue* and under the direction of hip hop affiliated collectifs that started to attract attention, his opinion on rap and its presence in slam shifts to hostile and exclusionary—despite his characterization of slam as democratic. This shift from slam being democratic as in non-elite to also being not rap is notable as it also marks a point of contention in the emerging schism: How could slam be democratic if it was exclusionary?

5.3.3 Nada v. PLH: schism mediatised

This particular discord was mediatised in its presentation—in particular, in an article which pitted Nada and PLH against one another. Nada and PLH were once colleagues at Club Club and are considered the pioneers of French slam. However, while PLH focused on his Slam Productions, Nada found a different path that led him to Uback concept in Saint Denis. Nada was open to rappers in the slam scene whereas PLH was at this point trying to discourage rappers and create distance between the practices. A 2002 two-page spread on slam in the Paris Ile-de-France supplement to the *Nouvel Observateur* overtly exploits the disaccord between PLH and Nada and is a particularly rich 'constitutive showing'.

[126] Indeed, even Fagerlid (2012) initially judged a slam scène she attended negatively based on her tacit stereotypes about both hip hop and the *banlieue*. Her bias is palpable: she admits to avoiding the subject because she personally does not like hip hop, insists that GCM's success is a product only of the 2005 riots, and quotes only anecdotes portraying hip hop/rap negatively.

In the spread, there are two articles, a blurb and information boxes within this spread. The first article is more of an overview of slam but manages to depict PLH as 'le grand manitou' of slam 'baba cool'. Whereas Nada is the other figure of slam, but for the hip hop crowd '9-3 oblige' and 'les rappeurs n'en croient pas leurs oreilles.' (Roger 2002). Not only are the two men pitted against each other, but this double-page feature on slam presents it as fractured between hip hop/ *banlieue* as 'les scènes dissidentes' (Nada) and *bobo/rive gauche* and Belleville as 'les scènes orthodoxes' (PLH).

The second article, 'Le combat des chefs' is especially evocative of the tensions between the men and within the scene, and is edited in such a way that the tension is palpable. It explains that they were early adopters of slam who seven years earlier at Club Club had collaborated but now 'se disputent un mouvement en pleine crise de croissance' and that PLH, 'très gardien du temple, se veut inflexible sur les règles édictées à Chicago'. Whereas Nada's position is representative of the 'original' French interpretation of slam and who interrogates PLH, 'Au nom de quoi le slam est-il forcément a cappella? Pourquoi n'aurait-on pas le droit d'organiser des combats oratoires?'. The article attributes PLH's 'hantise' towards other interpretations of slam to the integration of rappers into the scene and implies that this motivated him to trademark 'slam' and 'slameur'—a decision which led to accusations of him appropriating the movement for his own 'profit médiatique et financier' (E.R. 2002).

This article also reinforces PLH's growing reputation as 'le boutefeu' (Dupont 2002). First, PLH presents slam as 'une pratique ouverte à tous, les talentueux comme les nases […]' which could be perceived as arrogant or insulting. Then he appears to respond to Nada's question with mockery, 'Qu'ils appellent ce qu'ils font du slim ou du slum, mais pas du slam' Finally, he excuses himself from being responsible for any negative reactions to registering 'slam' under his name, 'Mon seul souci est de protéger l'esprit du slam, C'est moi qui ai mis le couvert à ceux qui, aujourd'hui, me chient dans les bottes.' (E.R. 2002).

Finally, this two-page spread also codifies the growing tensions in the scene by providing a list of 'les scènes orthodoxes (cinq minutes maxi sans support sonore)' on the first

page, and 'les scènes dissidentes' on the second page—notably, where the debate between Nada and PLH is).

Certainly, it would appear that there was disagreement between the two men, but media representations such as this elevate their professional (and possibly personal) differences to a spectacle for the amusement and intrigue of audiences. However, in doing so such representations also undermine slam's image as serious legitimate art, instead making it mere entertainment and thus, given that entertainment and art are assumed to be mutually exclusive, not on par with poetry or art. Furthermore, this characterization in particular, depending on the audience's perspective, presents PLH either as the villain, or as a steadfast hero defying trends and pressure from interest groups. However, given that slam has also until this point been presented as and declared itself to be underground, cool, and progressive, the representation of PLH as a conservative who rejects openness and diversity does not accord with this image and thus even to a sympathetic reader he may come across negatively rather than as the valiant hero protecting 'true' slam. Thus deepens the shift from PLH's own image as the leader-founder-hero of slam to a cantankerous, stubborn, selfish and soon to be deposed leader as the schism within slam deepens both internally and publicly.

5.3.4 PLH's reputation risks slam's reputation

It appears that PLH sought to legitimate slam as 'proper' poetry: he was an exhibitor at le Printemps des poètes, began his own imprint, and otherwise tried to cosy up to the PAW. However, given the similitude between his image and slam at this time, representations of him arguably contributed to slam being unable to shake its image as irreconcilably different from traditional poetry and unable to be of the same literary standard. There are two notable incidents where PLH receives so-called 'bad press' (*Le Parisien* and *Le Figaro*) that, although relatively minor, arguably add to this image construction.

The first is when in 2001 PLH's anthology of slam textes was placed in *collèges* in Seine-Saint-Denis in conjunction with Printemps de poètes. PLH was industrious and had secured financing from various government bodies for its publication and their logos featured

prominently on the cover. These logos—along with alleged approval by *l'Éducation Nationale*—indicated that this anthology had educational and/or cultural value and was appropriate for a general audience. However, the graphic drug-use and sexual references in his textes upset parents who criticised the council. Whilst Christine Gabin of Slam Productions was happy to remove them from schools, PLH was characterised in the press as confounded by the outrage and perhaps delusional about his talent, '[…] il [PLH] tombe des nues, «Le but des slameurs est de toucher le plus grand nombre avec des textes qui sortent des conventions de la poésie classique. Ce n'est pas parce qu'un poème est ennuyeux qu'il est meilleur ! » se justifie le poète qui se réclame de Baudelaire, Rimbaud et Villon.' (Saint Saveur 2001). The portrayal of his indignant attitude that shifts blame to traditional poetry rather than his own lack of common-sense does not paint a sympathetic picture of him. According to the gospel of PLH, slam was open to all ages, to all classes, to all styles and backgrounds; yet, his slam textes were targeted precisely for being inappropriate for *all* ages and audiences. Of course, the liberté of slam means that crude or vulgar lines and textes are acceptable; however, that is not applicable to a book published with financial support that strongly suggests that it is of educational value and positioned by his organisation as appropriate for *collégiens*.

The second incident occurred in 2002 after PLH performed some of his textes at a patrimony event at the *Centre des monuments nationaux* in Talcy. An article in *Le Figaro* describes the reaction of the government officials in audience to his texte bluntly, 'surpris. Voire fâchés.' And especially so given the tradition of literary prizes being awarded at the venue (Romero 2002). The article cites two lines from the texte as illustrative: 'J'veux être une putain de libellule/Niquer dans le ciel allègrement'. Even though his performance is only a minor, if not insignificant, part of the article, the title of the article nonetheless references his performance and mocks his verse with the inclusion of the phrase, 'La libellule de Talcy'.[127]

[127] Interestingly, he is also described as the leader 'du groupe Slam Poésie, un collectif "résolument porteur d'une pensée citoyenne"' (ibid.). This erroneous characterisation may be due to the author's ignorance of slam, or is an oblique remark on PLH's capacity to represent '[la] pensée citoyenne' through his verse.

While these were probably not particularly damaging to PLH personally, given his singular, over-mediatised voice as the self-professed head of slam at the time, such incidents may have further distanced slam from the PAW and tainted its image as something incapable of real artistic value—thus ironically, in step with spectacle rap.

GCM's mediatisation would not repair that image per se; his affection for hip hop and disappointment with traditional poetry instead arguably helped to further associate slam as poetry *pour les nuls*. However, GCM's undeniable talent, timing, support from Aznavour, and—unlike PLH—broadly palatable slam made him a media darling and thus anchored slam in the mainstream. The unprecedented attention left little room for the slam scene— still internally fractured and unable to coherently define itself in a sound-bite ready way—to control the narrative, let alone its image construction.

5.3.5 *Pre-Vague Prognostications*

Prior to his 2006 album, *Midi20,* GCM (aka Fabien Marsaud) was not entirely unknown. Both within and outside of the slam scene he was known for the sessions he hosted at Café Culturel as well as for winning tournoi like Slam United (in 2004). Furthermore, his talent and personal backstory were also already becoming the object of media attention. A 2004 article in *Libération* on Bouchazoreill' is exemplary of this and indicative of his future mediatisation. GCM is introduced thus:

> 'Les plus beaux mots.' Sans doute que ce soir-là, ce sera encore Grand Corps Malade qui l'emportera. Grand jeune homme, toujours accompagné de sa béquille depuis un accident de voiture [*sic*] en 1997, Fabien a déjà remporté trois fois ce slam mensuel. (Libération 2004).

Without missing a beat, his cane is mentioned. However, his reliance on it is misattributed to a car accident. This error is not repeated again since as his fame grows, his story becomes mythologised: his cane becomes a distinguishing and identifying feature in his mediatisation that signals a personal tragedy which he has overcome. Indeed, later representations of him in the press—and even his own image construction—paint slam as the fortuitous result of what could have instead been despair after having his childhood dreams

and ambitions taken away. Furthermore, his talent is highlighted by the journalist's presumption that, naturally he will win. This assurance indicates to the reader that this slameur is exceptional and someone to remember.

In addition to this characterization of GCM as a survivor whose disability unveiled his raw talent, his origins in Saint Denis and his love for rap are invoked—all of which become intertwined with his image and mythologisation. There is a certain irony to this article, which acknowledges that although he could have been a rapper, 'il n'avait aucune envie de faire de la retape auprès de maisons de disques' (ibid.). This of course became moot once he released an album in 2006. Importantly, he explains that he prefers slam to rap, because slam is:

> [...] juste de trouver les plus beaux mots. Le rap a capella peut être du slam, mais le slam, ce n'est pas que du rap a capella, c'est beaucoup plus ouvert. C'est de la poésie urbaine, une rencontre entre la tradition et la modernité. C'est aussi un esprit, celui de partager un texte avec le public.' (ibid.).

His attempt at clarifying slam here vis-à-vis rap is in line with the generally accepted interpretation of slam embodied in the scènes ouvertes and championed by the 'open'–as opposed to fundamentalist tournoi based—interpretation of slam. This attempt to distinguish rap from slam tries to respect both whilst differentiating them and without relying on stereotypes or the tournoi to characterise slam. Importantly, he evokes some of the core traits of slam's identity here and affirms that what characterises slam is ultimately its spirit. Interestingly however, he also explains that slam is 'poésie urbaine' –a term that has the effect of drawing rap and slam closer together rather than distinguishing them as appears to be his intent here. Indeed, as I discuss later in this chapter he later disavows this terminology after discovering its problematic ambiguity. Finally, although he aspires to explain slam clearly and distinguish it from rap, once his album is released whatever clarity he might have imparted with statements like this becomes lost in the momentum of the mediatisation that creates an atmosphere where nuance like GCM's above is lost and instead hasty generalisations dominate the discourse. The most salient pattern of this is with the rap-slam conflation which I address in the next section.

This 2004 article presages some of the characteristics that will be notable in GCM's and slam's mediatisation during the *vague*: a reliance on the availability heuristic of rap, invocations of his origins in Saint Denis and as a positive image of the *banlieue*, a story of personal triumph over tragedy, and admiration for his lyrical talent. These combine such that GCM's talent eclipses that of other activistes and he becomes emblematic of slam. In expressing his disapproval of being made the figurehead at the expense of others by the media, he better represents the aspiration of slam to be poésie démocratisée and thus usurps PLH as slam's dominant 'character' whose image becomes intertwined with that of slam: He becomes slam's reluctant yet near-perfect brand ambassador. The final incident of Phase I is symbolic of this transition and change in power dynamic: when GCM and PLH debate slam on television in 2006—in the midst of the rising *vague du slam*.

5.3.6 Symbolic Dethroning: GCM Usurps PLH on Late-Night Television

After his debut, GCM began to eclipse PLH in the media, even assuming distinctions previously given to PLH (i.e. a 2006 *Le Monde* headline declares GCM slam's 'chef de file' (Davet 2006)). Notably, a debate that erupted during an episode of the talk show, *Ce Soir ou Jamais* (2006), not only made the growing schism between the tournoi-based FFDSP faction and the scène ouverte faction of slam public, but it was also a metaphorical de-throning of PLH as both the mythic and practical leader of French slam.

The November 13, 2006 episode featured Dgiz, D' de Kabal, GCM, and PLH, and was complete with a showcase of their talents for a general audience. However, their differences regarding slam's definition and identity, turned the segment into a heated debate. Naturally, given the style of the show and the topic, there were interruptions, dismissals, filibustering, and the throwing of both glasses of water and insults. To summarise the key contention from the confrontation: PLH insisted the slam de poésie was the only true interpretation of slam, which led GCM to label him an 'intégriste'—as he, and the other two men, embraced the openness that had historically characterised the French scene whilst emphasising crucial

aspects like partage and diversité. PLH comes across as unwilling to listen, belligerent, and hostile. His slam performance is both the asseveration of his definition of slam and an ad hominen attack on GCM as an industry sell-out. He concludes his texte by repeating: 'C'est passé la masquerade des artistes dans l'escalade/ il y a toujours le slam de poésie à Culture Rapide tous les mardis'. Culture Rapide being the location of Slam Productions and PLH's scènes. However, GCM appears charismatic and reasonable with clear support from both D' de Kabal and Dgiz. Although—as D' de Kabal stresses—there is no leader of slam, in this moment it became clear that GCM had become the de facto figurehead. Not only does he reject that label, affirming the democratic (i.e. égalité) ethos of slam, his approach to slam further reifies the democratic, accessible, free and open, diverse, and colludique spirit of slam—and thus its image. PLH and the FFDSP do not disappear from slam, nor from the media; however, GCM's talent, mythic status and image, open-interpretation, and charisma all maintain his position as a bona fide slam star, throughout the *vague* and beyond.

5.3.7 Conclusion: Phase I

PLH/Slam Productions was enterprising in public relations and for a period dominated the mediatised and public discourse around slam. During this period, slam was primarily portrayed as *poésie démocratisée*—a characterisation that persisted. However, this characterisation that PLH lauded in the press, seemed in contradiction to his management strategy, professional activities, and vision for slam's future. Some of his actions suggest that he may have had ambitions like that of a naïve artist: although he was not schooled in the tradition and canon, he nonetheless sought approval and contact with the PAW. The irony in this being that he portrays the PAW as elitist, and slam the democratic underdog, yet appears to seek its approval and acceptance through his activity and narrative construction with slam.

During Phase I, slam's image—via PLH—is underground, anti-elite, punk poetry portrayed as a new way to get youth interested in poetry as a gateway to traditional poetry. Furthermore, it is contrasted with rap (qua commercialised and underclass) *only* when necessary or as a hangover from Phase 0. The message becomes convoluted however, as other

collectifs, *associations*, and activistes—in Paris, its *banlieues*, and outside of the capital—are drawing the media attention. The emergent stardom of GCM, the scène ouverte interpretation and its ethos of slam gain prominence in the public discourse, overtaking the narrative offered by Slam Productions, and become the basis for slam's brand image just as it begins to enter mainstream pop culture.

5.4 Phase II: GCM & 'La Vague du Slam'

5.4.1 Part 1: Rap-slam conflation

Following GCM's mainstream debut, both he and slam entered a period of intense mediatisation. This period had important effects on slam's image construction. With GCM there was a tangible product—his album—and as such, commercial interests changed the nature of the mediatisation. Aspiring artists seeking fame and success flocked to slam hoping to be the next GCM. Friends debated whether his music video was rap or not. GCM became a bona fide celebrity. This period, the 'vague du slam', brought an unprecedented level of attention to slam and forced the scene to reckon with misunderstandings, old tensions made anew, conflation with rap and the resultant stigma, scorn from poetry purists, and a deluge of opinions on and burgeoning interest in slam—for better or worse.

There are two notable features of this period: the bandwagon effect and a further conflation of rap and slam. Slam became trendy: to not be involved would be to miss out on the 'next-new-hot-thing'. Furthermore, not only was rap drawn deeper into the slam circus, but slam's own definition became problematically ambiguous in part due to GCM's album—which gave the wrong impression that slam was a musical genre. The increased interest in slam and the confusing, misleading, and incomplete narratives in the public discourse created a sort of fervour in which slam became dominated and defined by its image: its myths and representations.

5.4.1.1 Rap-Slam conflation

The seeds of comparison and amalgamation between rap and slam were planted when it arrived in France in the late 1990s, nourished by the film *Slam,* and multiplied in quantity and quality with the *vague*.

The mainstream success and mediatisation of rap acted as a fertiliser for this by establishing a ready-to-hand availability heuristic for commentators trying to introduce or explain slam. This availability heuristic, as well as GCM's hip hop-loving image, indicate why rap, rather than *poésie sonore,* became a primary reference point for slam in the public discourse. However, it is also arguably the American origins of both, the underground status of the two, and their superficial similarities that also contributed to a conflation with and reliance on rap to understand slam. In addition, to the spoken and rhythmic delivery, another easily identified superficial similarity is the use of blases. Blases are a recognised convention in hip hop and many prominent slameurs who received media attention also used blases, thus alluding to a shared heritage or common culture between the two. GCM's album used his slam textes—performed originally a capella—and overlaid them onto a breakbeat. Due to this, the public discourse vacillated between describing slam as a poetic genre and as a musical genre as the album created a superficial similarity between them. Furthermore, GCM's origins in Saint Denis and his album—a commercial product—served to give the impression that slam was a sub-genre of, or otherwise related to, rap music. Although activistes released albums before *Midi20,* they were independently produced and only received minor attention. The majority of public and mainstream recognition of slam prior to *Midi20* was on the slam sessions (tournois and scènes ouvertes)—in other words on the non-commercial, démocratisée, *populaire* underground poetry scene in the bars and cafés. Finally, AAM's album *Gibraltar* was released only a few months after *Midi20,* and although coming from the rap tradition, he relied upon a slower cadence and avoided hip hop clichés thus furthering still the illusion that slam and rap were of the same family.

Rap was an easy point of reference both in 2001 and in 2007, and I have selected a few quotations from mainstream media that illustrate this. These also show a tendency to

misrepresent slam's relationship with rap: either by exaggerating the relationship between the two, or more problematically, by positioning it as a more cultured and socially acceptable variant of rap, as *poésie urbaine*.

Le slam 'grand frère intello du rap, dont il dénonce les dérives commerciales. (Bara 1999)

[L]e slam, poésie parlée, rythmée, versant non commercial et libéré du rap, se glisse aux frontières de la littérature, des traditions orales, des joutes oratoires, des rythmes des mots et de la ville. (Bara 1999)

La version hexagonale du slam s'est néanmoins vite distanciée de la version américaine, dont elle emprunte le débit et le rythme, mais sans la musique ni la mentalité gansta [sic] rap […]. (Perreau 2001b)[128]

Le slam a un lien évident avec le rap, dont il emprunte le ton libre, le jeu sur les mots: de nombreux rappeurs viennent se produire sur des scènes de Slam. (Midi Libre 2004)

Fabien, alias Grand Corps Malade, […] Il pratique le slam, cet art de la rime hip-hop inspirée du pavé. (Hache 2006)

Un nom à coucher dehors, comme il se doit dans le milieu des adeptes du slam, cette nouvelle poésie proche du rap. (Dufay 2006)

Le slam, c'est le cousin du rap. Sauf que le slam est allé à l'école. (Comte de Bouderbala quoted in Le Parisien 2009[129]*)*

[128] Almost the exact same description also appears in France-Soir (Mereu-Boluch 2001) 'Pour autant, en France, le Slam s'est vite distanciée de la version américaine, dont elle emprunte le débit et le rythme, mais sans la musique ni la mentalité Gangsta rap.'

[129] This is a joke from his comedy opening act *for* GCM's *spectacle*. However, he is GCM's childhood friend—who encouraged him to try slam—and as such, the nature of the joke changes substantially. Without this knowledge, it can be interpreted that he holds a negative, derisory view of slam and/or rap and perpetuates stereotypes. As it is presented in the article, the joke lacks nuance and risks further conflation and negative image construction of slam vis-à-vis rap.

All of these instances either define slam vis-à-vis rap/hip hop—that is relying upon an availability heuristic—or they position slam as less subversive and closer to poetry than rap. Several of these examples also make the claim that slam has borrowed aesthetics and/or formal characteristics from rap: rhymes, speed, word play, et cetera. This assumes a direct, derivative relationship. It also presumes that rap is the only relevant source—'relevant' because rap is not only recognisable to a broad audience, but it is also 'attention-grabbing' given its history of mediatisation and controversy.

However, this reliance on rap as an explanatory reference for slam also appears to stem from the assumption of a close relationship between the two. For instance, the third quotation above (Perreau 2001b) explains that French slam has not imported the 'gansta [*sic*] rap' mentality—implying that it is a part of, or relevant to, American slam poetry. This appears to be a hasty generalisation based in fallacious assumptions: that slam (poetry) and rap are intrinsically related, if not the same; and two, that there is no meaningful difference between gangsta rap and rap. Therefore, in this logic, it follows that, in France, slam has both become a capella and distanced itself from gangsta rap. Notably, this comparison with rap is gratuitous, immediately following it, the journalist quotes Christine Gabin of Slam Productions, 'Le slam, au fond, c'est la poésie telle qu'elle existe dans la rue, sous forme d'art oratoire [...] entre la harangue et l'expression corporelle.' (Perreau 2001b). This description perfectly encapsulates the *populaire*—and even *urbain(e)*—aspect of slam, but without risking stigmatisation as it describes slam without relying on a comparison to rap. Nonetheless, the journalist appears to have been compelled to compare slam to rap: either because there was an assumption readers would need the relationship between the two explained, or because the journalist took for granted a connection between American slam poetry and gangsta rap.

This tendency to assume a direct, significant relationship between slam and rap suggests that either some in the media had limited experience with slam—and the slam with which they had experience was especially similar to rap—or that they were exposed to a greater variety of slam, but chose to ignore the diversité of slam and instead opted for an imagined family tree that makes slam the heritor of a shared genetic lineage with rap.

Whether the choice to establish such a family tree was based in knowledge of the shared influence between hip hop and slam poetry at the Nuyorican, on assumptions from *Slam,* or was derived from assumptions based on cultural origin, it nevertheless is reductive at best and misleading and erroneous at worst. The media-constructed relationship between the two insinuates a teleological cultural evolution whereby slam, albeit the offspring of rap, is culturally and intellectually superior to it due to slam's Frenchness and/or its literary sensibilities ('frère intello'). Conversely, rap is reduced to its commercialism and the rap spectacle. Even when slam is defined vis-à-vis rap, but without any added detail, by virtue of the associations between rap and the images of hip hop culture, the *banlieues,* and counter-culture, slam is thus simultaneously 'cool' or 'edgy' *and* at a safe distance from rap.

Slam thus benefits from rap, while further marginalising it, by offering a variant that sounds superficially similar, but without the baggage associated with *how* rap addresses its source material (poverty, racism, islamophobia, colonialism, and social marginalisation) which is deemed to be violent, vulgar, and devoid of artistic merit. Depending on the audience and their pre-existing biases, such a binary opposition of 'like rap but not rap' (i.e. none of the controversial aspects) reduces rap to spectacle rap and makes it a scapegoat, thus presenting slam as either, a morally or poetically improved variant at best, or its antidote at worst.

5.4.1.2 GCM's Image Construction vis-à-vis la banlieue and le rap

With the *vague*, GCM becomes a celebrity and the mythologised figurehead of slam. As his career blossoms, he naturally also develops his own personal brand: a young, disabled Frenchman with a rich voice and poetic verve, who loves rap—but hated poetry in school— and cares deeply about his home, Saint Denis. Importantly, GCM became a media-friendly representative and icon of the *banlieue*— presumably in part because he does slam, not rap, and therefore is seen as more acceptable to the mainstream (cf. 'La Rumeur' *infra*).

Unsurprisingly, this image[130] also becomes correlated with slam's and thus arguably had a shaping effect on the image and reception of slam. In an article with the reference-heavy headline, 'Le Villon du «neuf-trois»' for *Le Point,* GCM is deemed, 'Le nouveau chantre de la banlieue' (Dufay 2006). Here, his role as a symbol for the *banlieue* is validated thanks to texte 'Saint Denis' (2006) which, as he explains, 'Du coup, beaucoup de journalistes m'ont posé des questions sur la banlieue, et là je me suis rendu compte à quel point ils ne la connaissaient pas. C'était flippant.' (Binet 2008). This experience inspired another texte, 'Je viens de là' (2008) in which he touches upon both the negative and positive aspects of *his* 'banlieue', 'Quand on vient de banlieue, on a aussi à cœur de la défendre, car cette image très négative nous colle à la peau. Elle reste durablement imprimée: celle d'un territoire infréquentable où on est tous condamnés à l'échec. Notre vision, même chauvine, a au moins le mérite d'être plus réaliste.' (ibid.). Both defending his home and his art, he corrects the misperception that slam is a type of therapy for underprivileged *banlieusards*, 'le slam ne constitue pas une thérapie, n'en déplaise à certains journalistes.' (Lemancel 2008). However, at the same time he openly shares that he does not want to be pigeonholed as a *banlieue*-artist, 'Je ne me sens le représentant de rien: ni de la banlieue, ni du slam, ni des handicapés.' (Médioni 2007). Early on he has to try and keep separate sensationalism of the *banlieue*, his career, and slam's image.

Interestingly, he anticipates his own mediatisation in an article that appeared in *Libération* in advance of *Midi20*. This article was intended to generate interest in his upcoming shows (listed at the bottom of the article) and his forthcoming album. However, a critical look at this article also suggests that it may have established a template for his mediatisation: explanation of slam, his home in the *banlieue*, his negative relationship with poetry and love of rap, his life of sport and subsequent accident, and finally, how slam gave him a new journey after disability. The author, Stéphanie Binet (2006a), wrote many articles

[130] Anecdotally, it appears that he—his image—are better known and recognised than slam based on my experience discussing slam with native French speakers. Most of the time they do not recognise 'slam', 'le slam poésie', or other variants. However, when I mention Grand Corps Malade, they almost invariably immediately recognise him. It is only upon hearing his name that they know what slam is—or at least what they think slam is, e.g. a style of rap, a type of music similar to rap, rap-poetry, etc.

about slam during the *vague*, helping to steer the discourse. Accordingly, this article/template is an especially interesting constitutive showing.

After a brief introduction, she notes that his home 'surplombe la fameuse place du Caquet', setting the stage for the interview making clear that they are in Saint Denis. The matter of his home is at the top of the agenda as he clarifies that, 'Je veux faire attention de ne pas devenir le représentant "positif" de la banlieue. Je ne m'inscris pas du tout en opposition avec ceux qui ont brûlé des voitures.'. Here, he tries to prevent becoming a *porte-parole* for the *banlieue*, as happened to many rappers in the aftermath of the riots. The article continues explaining that the day after 'l'unique soirée «chaude» dans sa ville' he hosted a slam atelier wherein the topic naturally became the effects of the media publishing exact numbers of cars burnt in each city, 'Pour les gens ici, ça voulait dire: "Hey, Saint-Denis, on est des baltringues ou quoi? On n'en est qu'à six voitures. Oh, on a une réputation à tenir."'. This is followed by him admitting that by virtue of his provenance he can address the *banlieue* in his slam in a way that will resonate. Meanwhile, the rest of the article is a feature on him: it tells his personal history, affection for basketball, et cetera. It even addresses rumours that his cane is a prop or a marketing stunt. Perhaps in an attempt to get ahead of any negative press, she quotes his father regarding such rumours, 'Il n'y a pas que ça d'ailleurs qui énerve ce vrai gentil (dixit son père) mais aussi les clichés extrêmes sur la banlieue' which allows Binet to finish the article with a final quotation from GCM, 'Les gens qui ne passent jamais le périphérique mais qui sont persuadés qu'il ne faut pas s'arrêter aux feux rouges de ce côté-ci, ou ceux qui font dans l'angélisme en disant : la banlieue regorge de talents.' (Binet 2006a). With this final quote the article is able to remind the reader one last time that, despite his protestations, GCM is indeed a representative of 'la banlieue': *he is one of those talents*.

5.4.1.3 Portrait: Abd Al Malik

Despite a love for hip hop that nourished his creativity, GCM is only ever labelled a slameur—not a *rappeur*—in the media. Whereas AAM, despite being openly hip hop and even rejecting an association with slam, is frequently classified as a slameur (or, *rappeur-slameur*).

AAM's identity as a slameur is controversial; however, I suggest that his role as a brand character[131]—contributing to the image construction—is not. Although his relationship with slam is tenuous, he nonetheless became associated with slam in the mass media. This was arguably due in part to the timing of his charting[132] second solo album, *Gibraltar*, only months after the release of *Midi20*. Additionally, his aesthetic sensibilities inspired his sound, which was superficially reminiscent of GCM's and thus casual observers were quick to assume the two were related—thus constituting a new genre of music. That he became attributed as a slameur is indicative of the hunger felt by the media during the *vague* for more slameurs than just GCM. In this sense, his assimilation into the 'vague du slam' is an example of bandwagoning as well as the rap-slam conflation's effects, not only on slam but on rap as well.

For the media to latch onto him as part of the *vague*, it helped that AAM was also signed to a major label and had a media and PR friendly back story—his childhood was spent in a Strasbourg HLM and in Brazzaville, he was a former juvenile delinquent, a convert to Islam, dyslexic, and a student of philosophy and literature—the ideal picture of integration and salvation through the arts and humanities (RFI 2011).

Before embarking on a solo career, he was part of the rap group NAP (New African Poets). With *Gibraltar* in 2006 he found inspiration in Derrida and sought to 'déconstruire le rap' (Mandel 2008). Accordingly, he sourced slam, jazz, poetry, and Brel, wanting to change the sound of his rap from that of *le rap classique* as part of this deconstruction. This is the basis of the superficial similarity between his work and slam. He was inspired by a slam event in Brussels, where he saw the same energy that he felt during his early days with NAP and which he felt had disappeared from contemporary rap (Sweeny 2006). He felt that rap at that time (mid-noughties) no longer focused as much on lyricism and instead had been overtaken by gangsta rap aesthetics and influences (Mandel 2008). Accordingly, slam became an inspiration for him in making an album that returned to the poetic roots of rap; however, as

[131] See Chapter Four, 'brand characters'.
[132] *Gibraltar* peaked at thirteenth place , 09 March, 2007-15 March, 2007. (cf. *Midi20,* sixth that week) (Purecharts 2014).

he is also careful to emphasise, 'C'est vrai que le slam est un élément que j'ai utilisé, mais je fais du rap et ce disque est pour moi un disque de rap.' (AAM quoted in Sweeny 2006). Specifically, he was inspired by slam's liberté that allowed artists to write without needing certain tropes or motifs and that slam was free from the commercial pressures that encouraged the gangsta rap form. This however, was lost on many journalists and commentators who latched onto the superficial similarities between *Gibraltar* and *Midi20,* hastily declaring AAM a *slameur*.

His story, interest in republicanism, and his desire to make a rap album that Deleuze would approve of—a particularly *French* variant of rap, using the language to its full potential—helped make him an attractive subject for media attention.[133] The idea that a rap song would contain references to Derrida and Césaire was exciting, and it did not accord with the common image of spectacle rap. Accordingly, we can assume that it was easier and more satisfying of the hunger for slam to misclassify AAM as a slameur than deal with deconstructing the stereotypes of rap (despite this being AAM's intent). The slam scene did not accept him as a slameur; accordingly, such media representations of AAM also misrepresented slam. This, along with the fallout of the recently broached schism in the scene and the intense mediatisation of GCM created a situation wherein slam needed to drive the narrative to push its own vision of itself, rather than let outsiders looking-in define it. It is in this dynamic between the mediatisation, internal fractures, and the slam scene's desire to be truthfully represented that the co-creation of slam's brand image resides: in the narratives coming from the mainstream media, the counter-narratives coming from activistes and rappers, and also from the narratives of fans and outsiders adding to the competing and overlapping discourses that engender image construction.

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[133] As he explains in an interview, 'sa [Deleuze] pensée a profondément influencé ma façon d'écrire, mon envie de déconstruire le rap pour le ramener à sa source. Donc, je me suis demandé: "*Et si Deleuze écoutait un disque de rap, qu'est-ce qui se passerait dans sa tête?*" Eh bien, il fondrait en larmes. On a les poètes qu'on mérite.' He continues in this interview to explain that in the song Gilles he is critiquing in particular the posture of gangsta rap; which is too much copied from Americans. Instead he wants to represent France, and his patrimony 'Brel, Gainsbourg, Reggiani, Nougaro, le premier à avoir su faire swinguer la langue de Molière. C'est ça, le hip-hop, trouver sa singularité, sans écouter tel ou tel taliban autoproclamé du rap. Il existe un génie français, c'est un état d'esprit, un rapport au monde et à la langue. Tu peux être au Congo Brazzaville et avoir ce truc, grâce à la francophonie.' (Mandel 2008).

AAM's sound, GCM's commercial 'slam' album, and both of their personal brands/ histories in the context of the *vague* further conflated where rap began and slam ended. The positioning of slam as more poetic, more intellectual, more cultured, and less vulgar and low-culture than rap was reductive but rappers like AAM—mislabelled as slameurs—benefited from this mediatisation. Accordingly, the rap scene also contributed to the public discourse on slam by highlighting both the hypocrisy in valuing even the lowest quality slam over rap based on its stereotypes alone and the tendency to situate rap and slam in a reductive duality.

5.4.1.4 Rap Scene Response

GdB (2009) realised that to write her book on slam, she needed to speak to someone about rap—something she was unfamiliar with—and so went to an expert on French rap, Olivier Cachin. In this interview, he explains his view of slam[134] vis-à-vis rap, 'Pour moi, le slam c'est une forme artistique qui incite à la paresse «lyricale» et à la facilité. Ceci étant, le rap n'est pas exempt de facilité non plus. Y a un côté performance dans le rap qui est trop souvent absent dans le slam.' (81).

Cachin's criticism of slam appears to be based on criteria appropriate for rap, not slam. In this interview, ostensibly about slam, he is mostly focused on the technical and aesthetic aspects of rap and thus ignores its subcultural situatedness, allowing him to argue that rap is as accessible and democratic as slam: that rap is open to anyone—provided they have 'un *flow* et une présence' (GdB 2009:80). As I have argued, rap should not be detached from hip hop nor its subcultural context. To do so risks reducing rap to just a mode of delivery, ignoring its symbolic textuality and the culturally embedded meanings therein that make it rap. Cachin fails to see that slam can be (on rap's terms) poor quality while still providing creative and cultural value because he is working within the logic of the rap art world that, in turn, biases his image of slam negatively.

[134] His criticism is not based just on albums produced by slameurs. He also describes his experience at slam sessions as pretentious, filled with people who read *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 'Un peu à l'ancienne, un peu poussiéreux' (GdB 2009 :79).

Cachin is well aware of the effects of image. He suggests that AAM, while definitely a rapper, was also industry savvy in adopting a style that is reminiscent of slam, yet ambiguous, knowing that it would help carve a niche for him. He also shares that given the competition inherent in rap due to commercialisation, some would-be rappers confide in him that, 'si ça marche pas on fera du slam' which only adds to his perspective that slam is for those who do not have the skills to rap, but who witnessing the 'vague du slam' saw an opportunity (85). He compares the *vague* to what happened with rap in the 1990s where:

> [T]out d'un coup tu vois sortir des profs de fac, des poètes ratés, des *losers*. Si le rap est le rap est quelque chose d'existant c'est parce que c'est pas hérité de la poésie, y a un côté ennuyeux institutionnel comme à l'école et le rap sort de ce côté académique avec un côté plus flamboyant. Y a du rythme, pas de tempo, pas de *beat* dans la poésie. Le slam c'est quand même, pour moi, sauf dans le cas de mecs talentueux comme Souleymane Diamanka, Grand Corps Malade, c'est un peu le rap pour les gens qui n'aiment pas le rap. (Chachin quoted in GdB 2009:79-80)

He continues that slam is for 'les bien-pensants' who do not like rap, but who have finally found something similar to which they can comfortably say 'ça c'est beau' (ibid.). His view is that slam is derivative of rap, at best lacking in musicality (including poetic musicality, i.e. flow) and at worst lacking in anything of quality, a palatable quasi-rap for those who in order to maintain their social sensibilities dismiss rap due to its—to quote GDB's view of rap—'côté bling-bling, grosse bagnole, femme en string' (2009 :81).

He and others in the rap scene appear to be arguably destabilised by the surge in mediatisation and the rap-slam conflation that does not do justice to the aesthetic and technical demands of rap. In the same way that someone can view modern art and think, 'a child could do that', the mediatisation of rap—and rap via slam—is superficial at best, and a spectacle that portrays rap as sociopathic at worst. Accordingly, the labour and investment he and others in the scene have put into their art (and the critique of it) is devalued if slam—despite being fundamentally different—makes it appear easier than it is.

This perspective, which appears to have become most vocal following the 'vague du slam' is shared by other critics from hip hop. For instance, the rappers, Hamé and Ekoué of La Rumeur, produced a television mini-series, *De l'encre,* (2011) in which a young *rappeuse*,

needing money to support herself and her family, decides to become a ghostwriter for a slameur who has just been signed to a label. Their mini-series is a critique of the rap industry but is also a critique of the 'vague du slam'. They acknowledge that following this period it became *une tendance* to the detriment of rap's image. Importantly, given that slam was positioned as 'poésie urbaine' by the media it began to be positioned relative to rap and thus by virtue of slam's potential for banality the discourse and image of slam reduced rap further to its negative stereotypes:

> La montée en puissance du phénomène slam, si l'on regarde bien, c'était tout de suite après les émeutes, en 2005. A partir de là, il y a eu une pacification généralisée dans tous les domaines: associatif, social, éducatif, policier... Il fallait faire taire ces petits singes de la rue qui crachent sur le drapeau, insultent les flics... Et donc on a opposé le slam, une forme fréquentable des musiques urbaines, au sale rap de quartier, d'Arabes et de Noirs. (Hamé et Ekoué quoted in Barros 2011).

Their criticism continues that slam is elevator music, pseudo-rap, and again, rap for those who do not like rap. This was the reason why they decided their protagonist should be a ghostwriter for a slameur, their way of showing that the music industry cared more about 'image' and what was trendy rather than quality and accordingly signed a slameur who needed a ghostwriter. Importantly, they also show that the record label took issue with the ghostwritten material and wanted it such that the slameur remained 'un mec de rue, mais qu'on a envie de fréquenter.'– in other words, without being too controversial, subversive or too much a *banlieusard* (ibid.).

Through this dynamic of rapper-as-ghostwriter for a palatable-yet-*urbain* slameur they highlight what they and others see as the hypocrisy of the industry and of the effects of negative stereotyping of rappers. This frustration is also echoed by others, including Kery James who in a joint-interview with GCM compares their careers and discusses the support they both received from Aznavour. Specifically, he expresses the frustration he feels regarding the label 'rappeur' and the all but guaranteed stereotyping and baggage that comes with it, 'Quand on me présente en tant que rappeur, je suis souvent gêné parce que je sais que mon interlocuteur a cette image du petit con qui s'excite sur la musique en disant «Nique la police, je suis de la banlieue».' (Binet 2008). Conversely, although slam is stereotyped and misrepresented as derived from or related to rap (to the distaste of some slam activistes) or at

worst is stereotyped as bad poetry (e.g. Cachin, Zemmour, Verheggen above), it is not targeted as a social ill or vehicle for violence and social unrest in the same way that rap has been.

Others still[135] responded to the 'vague du slam', however, with a reluctant openness to it. For instance, the founder of the festival *Hip-Hop l'Original*, Jean-Marc Mongeot, shared the following about his thoughts on slam:

> Je me demande souvent si c'est du rap. En tout cas, le Slam s'est embourgeoisé. Le public a souvent la cinquantaine et ne va pas vers d'autres formes de Hip Hop. Abdel Malik [*sic*] cartonne avec son Slam, mais personne n'écoute son groupe de Rap. En fait, le Slam est une forme gentille et tranquille du Hip Hop, où il suffit de bien parler et d'aligner trois rimes pour intéresser les gens. Je préfère certains jeunes qui disent des choses de manière plus brutale et plus efficace (Deligia 2010).

His criticism is less concerned about the further stigmatisation and marginalisation of rap by contrast with slam, and instead is more welcoming of slam as potentially hip hop-adjacent or derivative. However, his response shows a genuine concern that while audiences were drawn to GCM and AAM, they would not explore other hip hop music. Instead artists would profit off of being hip hop-adjacent without bringing anything to the community; and therefore, slam would lead to a neglect of rap. Like Cachin's remark regarding the 'profs de fac' this indicates a concern that, for some, their interest in slam is not an interest in popular poetry per se, but rather, is an instance of social signalling and thus merely performative. These concerns are in response to the *vague* and its effects on taste and on the status of marginal art forms like rap, rather than a response to slam itself. Slam and rap complement each other; however, as this section shows, the mediatisation and potential media effects can mitigate mutual benefit, cross-fertilisation, and creative hybridity by pushing practitioners towards isolationism and orthodoxy.

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[135] Other reactions include: the opening scene in the rapper Nemir's music video for the track, 'Carences et parenthèses' (2010) shows a slameur take the stage only to have detritus thrown at him in disgust. The enraged audience is assuaged once Nemir takes the stage. In addition to mocking slam, it can be read as a criticism of the tendency for organisers to book a slameur to capitalise on its popularity while assuming interchangeability. The rapper Youssoupha also mentions slam in 'Menace de Mort' (2011). He criticises slam's public reception vis-à-vis rap, 'Ils m'auraient trouvé plus gentil si je ne faisais que du slam' referencing a history of hostility towards rap (Youssoupha 2012). This song is a response to Éric Zemmour's legal action beginning 2009 over the lyrics for 'A force de le dire': 'J'mets un billet sur la tête de celui qui fera taire ce con d'Éric Zemmour'. In 2011 this line was considered by the court to be injurious and contain an implicit threat, therefore not within the confines of free speech (Berretta 2011). However, the appellate court ruled in favour of Youssoupha, noting that Zemmour is a public figure and that rap is an artistic style that permits exaggeration (AFP 2012).

5.4.1.5 Conclusion Phase II, Part 1

With the *vague* it came to be that the image preceded the reality of slam. The conflation of rap and slam in the public discourse became increasingly problematic for both practices. Compounding factors such as GCM's love of rap, the pre-existing tendency to reduce rap to its controversial elements, and the ambiguity of slam due to its internal schism, all served to confuse the image of slam during this time. To further add to this, GCM's album included spoken rhymed-verse over a backbeat creating the illusion of a new genre of music—not poetry.

The mediatisation of slam neglected any nuance and allowed this confusion to persist, even augmenting it, via a reliance on the conflation of rap and slam to explain slam–sometimes to rap's detriment. Slam is thus represented as 'like rap, but not rap'–*rap pour les intellos et bobos*. Accordingly, rap denounced the hypocrisy in the rap-slam conflation.

5.4 Phase II: GCM & la vague du slam

5.4.2 Part 2: Poetry, chanson, and other 'outsiders'

Although slam is poetry, its relationship with the PAW is tenuous. By virtue of its identity and ethos, slam does not always result in textes that conform to *artworld* ideals. The primacy of orality in slam led to confusion with rap. However, when slam was not being misunderstood as a music genre, slam as oral *poetry* entered the media discourse.

Slam—as poetry—drew the interest of educators and public officials—especially given the trend to assume utility in working with disadvantaged youth in the *cités* and/or *issus de l'immigration* based in part in its mediatised image of 'cool' *urbain(e)* rap-like poetry. Accordingly, slam was also subject to the opinions, biases, and motivations of people from the PAW, cultural critics, academics and others who I suggest felt compelled to comment publicly on slam arguably because it was adjacent to their area(s) of interest and was a 'hot topic' during this time.

Finally, while GCM is open about his love for rap, he has progressively shifted towards chanson for practical and creative reasons. His exploration and collaboration with chanson of

course garners further media attention and new audiences, especially when it concerns duets with Aznavour or Céline Dion. However, one of the more interesting media incidents is GCM's role in the return of Renaud that symbolises a spiritual link between slam and chanson via GCM.

5.4.2.1 GCM: 'Je lis très peu [la poésie]'

With the 'vague du slam' and the intense focus on GCM, the poetic tradition of slam and how slam fit within the canon of *poésie française* began to be addressed. Asked whether he enjoys 'la poésie classique', GCM responds in an article in *L'Humanité*, 'J'en ai très peu lu. Le goût des textes m'est venu par l'oreille, par le rap. Mais aussi grâce à des chanteurs à texte que pouvaient écouter mes parents: Brassens, Brel, Barbara. J'ai une grande passion pour Renaud, aussi.' (Hache 2006).[136] Not only is this explanation repeated in different articles at different points in time, his dissatisfaction with poetry is further echoed when he writes textes criticising the education system, and in the various accounts of his childhood. For instance, 'Fabien ne lit pas, ou si peu, au grand dam de sa mère, bibliothécaire. «Harry Potter, c'est le seul livre qu'il a dû attraper, s'amuse son meilleur ami, Jacky alias John Pucc'Chocolat.' (Binet 2006a). And when asked about the term poet, '«Pour moi, ce mot était presque une insulte» reconnaît Fabien. La faute à l'école, qui, jure-t-il, lui a présenté Lamartine, Rimbaud et Apollinaire «avec un air bien prétentieux».' (Dufay 2006).[137] This argument about poetry being pretentious is also a line from one of his textes where he tells of discovering poetry, or his *rencontre* with it :

> J'ai rencontré la poésie, elle avait un air bien prétentieux/Elle prétendait qu'avec les mots on pouvait traverser les cieux/ Je lui ai dit Je t'ai déjà croisée et franchement tu vaux pas le coup/On m'avait parlé de toi à l'école et t'avais l'air vraiment relou/ Mais la poésie a insisté et m'a rattrapé sous d'autres formes/J'ai compris qu'elle était cool et qu'on pouvait braver ses normes. ('Rencontres' *Midi20*).

[136] This response regarding traditional poetry is repeated in various forms in several articles over the years. E.g. 'Mon goût des mots vient de l'oralité, non de la lecture. Mes parents écoutaient Brassens et Barbara. Moi, j'ai grandi avec Renaud et le rap français. Je connaissais NTM comme mon alphabet, et j'écrivais du rap, resté planqué dans mes tiroirs.' (Médioni 2007). (cf. Alaoui 2013, Dufay 2006, Billo 2013.)

[137] His childhood attitude towards poetry is often repeated in the public discourse. For instance, he also confesses to GdB that, 'poète c'était une insulte pour moi à l'école, c'est un peu le mec fragile, la poésie, ça m'emballait pas plus que ça.' (2009:276). Such a stereotypical view likely resonates with some people who are drawn to slam.

The entirety of his texte indicates that he has changed his perspective; nonetheless, it is his view that rap is a valuable source for poetic inspiration that is emphasised in the media, 'Son amour des mots lui vient de la cour de récré: «On se branche. C'est violent. Oralement, il faut exister.» Et puis de son goût pour les textes bavards du rap français: «Le premier album des NTM, je le connais comme mon alphabet.»' (Binet 2006a). And again, explaining that he found poetry in school to be pretentious, 'On me cite Prévert, mais je ne connais pas. La poésie traditionnelle ne me parle non plus. Pour beaucoup, elle a un côté ringard. Pour certains, le rap est très connoté.' (Médioni 2007).

In these instances, he makes it clear that, to the extent traditional poetry influenced his work, it is because of how un-relatable he found it. In addition to showing that rap was a source for his lyrical predilections, he also refers to *chanson française*; however, it could be read as a concession to compensate for his lack of adulation for traditional poetry. Indeed, this is how it comes across in the quotation cited above (Hache 2006) where his invocation of the chanson his parents listened to can be read as an attempt at connecting his work to a more respected and more authentically French creative product than rap is seen to be.

The relationship between GCM and chanson is both obvious and hidden. Although Aznavour helped to launch his career—and has continued to support him and similar artists like the rapper Kery James—the role that Aznavour played in launching GCM is not emphasised in the discourse. Instead, as is typical in mediatisation, GCM is portrayed as a raw talent whose beautiful voice and clever lyrics catapulted him to stardom *alone*. This is the myth we believe/construct about stars, and it is one that the media perpetuates in these sorts of characterisations of celebrity. Slam's image is intrinsically tied-up with that of GCM, therefore, how he—or the cultural myth he has become—is represented, can have trickle-down effects for slam writ large. Accordingly, his attitude towards chanson is more relevant for slam's image than the role that Aznavour has played in creating a slam-superstar.

5.4.2.2. Slam's critics from the poetry art world

Slam is poetry, but its star is often quoted in the media professing his love for rap and criticising poetry, 'On raconte le quotidien avec des termes de tous les jours: du verlan, des gros mots…La poésie classique, c'est trop abstrait.' (GCM quoted in Binet 2006a).This presents an opportunity for critics to intervene and criticise either, GCM for the quality of his poetry—suggesting that his work is not good because of his influences—or criticise slam in general based in the acceptation of the rap-slam conflation. This is exactly what the journalist for *Le Figaro*, Éric Zemmour and the spoken word/*poésie sonore* poet Jean-Pierre Verheggen did which represent two additional *constitutive showings*.

Ever the polemicist, Zemmour tried to incite GCM on an episode of *On n'est pas couché* (2008): '[…] j'ai lu vos textes et là, je vous avoue que je suis tombé de l'armoire. C'est un ramassis de rimes pauvres désespérant.' and 'Dans le fond, c'est une espèce de dissertation d'un adolescent de quatrième avec le sentiment qui va avec.'[138] In response, GCM pointed out that his textes were taught in schools, which led Zemmour to state it was evidence of the dire state of education. The exchange between the men on this episode was particularly heated, culminating with a member of the audience, who came from Saint Denis, interrupting their debate to defend GCM's poetic talent. This rupture arguably epitomised— and humanised— the tension between slam and the hegemony of high-brow taste culture when it comes to poetry.

The opinions of the Belgian poet Jean-Pierre Verheggen are similar and appear biased by the conflation with rap. For example, in an interview he explains 'La poésie est un travail sur la langue plus profond [*sic*]. Dans le slam, on a tendance à reproduire la une des journaux en la rythmant'. When asked to define 'quality' he explains, 'On ne coupe pas assez dans le slam, il y a trop de bavardage. Et puis, les slameurs ne font pas assez dans la périphrase. Or,

[138] Similarly, the linguist Julien Barret argues that in terms of rhythm and prosody, rap is more interesting than slam. He bases this upon GCM, who 'écrit des vers rimés au mètre régulier et déclame ses textes d'une façon qui peut rappeler les récitations poétiques de jeunes écoliers.' He claims this is characteristic of slam, and despite a few exceptions, is evidence of slam's relative poverty compared with rap (Barret 2010:84). However, he fails to consider whether such monotone delivery is actually characteristic of slam, or if it is the result of neophyte slameurs emulating GCM, therefore is merely characteristic of GCM.

la poésie, ce n'est pas dire “Mort aux flics” mais plutôt, comme je l'ai vu récemment sur un calicot dans les rues de Paris, “Plus de caresses, moins de CRS”.’ (N.D.K. 2006). Ironically, his criticism regarding ‘bavardage’ is precisely what slam’s time limit combats. Furthermore, if he thinks ‘mort aux flics’ is characteristic, and his poster slogan is not, this suggests his knowledge of slam is very limited. Likewise, in his anthology, *Sodome et Grammaire* (2008), he offers criticism to both rappers and slameurs to improve their work, which he views lowly. However, his points of contention apply more to rap than they do to slam, demonstrate an ignorance about rap and its aesthetics, and indicate a confusion between all slam and the more mediatised slam (like GCM and pseudo-slam AAM). His main criticism is that too many slameurs and rappers rely on the same stereotyped style: argot, verlan, vulgar language, and violent metaphors. He warns that using language from the *banlieue* risks marginalisation. By marginalisation he presumably means from people with tastes like his. He thus makes the mistake of assuming that some rappers and all slameurs naturally seek the approval of the PAW—not that they are making work for different audiences.

Criticism like this has been common with hip hop and now slam endures it too because slam’s liberté means that it does not rely on the conventions or taste expectations of the PAW—nor seeks to be a part of it. Furthermore, there is no typical slam texte and any stylistic similarities with hip hop are idiosyncratic to that author. The criticisms coming from critics like Zemmour and Verheggen are ignorant of the diversité in slam and its inherent liberté. Instead they come from a place of conflation with rap and of dismissal of poetry that does not accord to their personal or *artworld*-derived standards. This is what draws many people to slam given its diversité, liberté, and accessibilité and moreover, arguably why the notion of ‘poésie démocratisée’ resonates.

5.4.2.3 Bandwagon effect

During this period, not only did the mass media and the market become interested in slam, but also public officials, educators/academics, poets, record labels, and other outsiders. Given the curiosity around slam, thanks in part to its mediatisation and due to the difficulty

of explaining slam given all the conflicting images and lack of familiarity with it, there was arguably a rush to produce content on slam.

The conflation of rap and slam, and the presumption of a direct relationship between the two, contributed to slam's image—so greatly that there are instances where the image of slam as urban rap culture-derived precedes slam's in the public discourse. For example, in a book targeted to pedagogues, the poet Bruno Doucey's explanation of slam is used as the primary definition in the chapter dedicated to it. His contribution is historical revisionism: hasty generalisations and fallacious assumptions. It assumes the genesis of American slam poetry was with black American culture: '[le slam] est né aux États-Unis dans les années 1980 sous la houlette de Marc Smith, des ouvriers noirs se regroupent pour dire des textes, engagés qui dénoncent leurs conditions' (Siméon 2008:123). Slam poetry began in a white working-class environment and race-based, socio-economic criticism was not a defining orientation. It was much later at the Nuyorican where the influence of black American culture, especially hip hop, became notable (Aptowicz 2008; Kane 2003:204). It is understandable that Doucey would arrive at this conclusion given that the influence of black American culture on American pop culture is substantial; and that there are many, varied entities coming from black American/African culture that constitute a shared family of resemblance with slam.[139] And it *is* true that black American culture and hip hop culture have later become an important part of American slam poetry.[140] Importantly however, I suggest that such an assumption reflects the salience of the 'hip hop-urban-slam' construct: if slam is urban, and if slam is American, and given that slam is purported to be derived from or related to hip hop, it follows that, slam (poetry) is from black American culture; therefore its creator must be black, or embedded in black American culture.

This reasoning based in the rap-slam conflation—itself a flawed premise—is what both those from the hip hop scene and slam wish to avoid. The spaces of mutual influence between hip hop culture and slam are not problematic in and of themselves; rather it is the hasty

[139] E.g. Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, the west African griot, et cetera.
[140] E.g. *Def Poetry Jam* on BET and the cross-over work of rappers-cum-poets like Saul Williams.

generalisations that are drawn from it which mischaracterise both slam and rap—often to rap's detriment—that are of concern. The speed and magnitude of mediatisation like the 'vague du slam' arguably increases the propensity for hasty generalisations, poorly reasoned assumptions, and inadequate research, and knowledge. Especially as there are incentives—external or internal—for those who are unprepared to comment on the phenomenon during its peak period of interest.

I suggest that the 'vague du slam' created an environment in which there was a drive to comment—that is, pressure and/or a desire to be a part of the conversation about slam. Doucey, whether he volunteered his slightly incorrect history or was asked for it, participated in this. Others, like Zemmour and Verheggen, participated in this. Numerous think pieces and articles on slam from sources, usually outsiders, that appear around this time are indicative of this drive. Also indicative of this 'drive to comment' is how poorly researched the content can be. Doucey did not bother to learn who Mark Kelly Smith was. A simple internet search—even in 2008—would have shown that he is a middle-aged white man. Perhaps, Doucey did not have the time to fact-check when he was asked to comment. Others did have this ability, yet produced content on slam without due diligence, which I suggest is further indication of the fervour and haste with which people tried, but struggled to, explain slam from the outside-in, contributing to its image during this crucial period.

For instance, in the 2008 IUT Paris newsletter, a literary scholar there, Marie-Noëlle Campana, published a substantial article on slam and its history. However, approximately fifty-two percent (52%)[141] of the article appears to be plagiarised from the 2006[142] pedagogical

[141] Precisely, 51.8%. To arrive at this figure, I compared her essay with the 129H guide and found the passages where entire sentences or paragraphs were lifted out word-for-word. I also include in this figure sentences where one word was replaced with a synonym, e.g. 'souhaitait' for 'voulait'. This classic 'trick' suggests this was done consciously, as do instances where the author modified the word-order, but forgot to delete the original. In Campana: 'Il faut combiner la poésie et *le spectacle*, le travail théorique et la théâtralisations, *le spectacle*.' (2008:21, Emphasis mine). In 129H, only the first instance of 'le spectacle' occurs. This sloppy re-write add evidence to suggest this is plagiarism as legitimate usage would not require such a change. Even counting only the content that is exactly the same, the figure is 46.7%.

[142] This guide was first published in 2006 with support of EU funding and local municipal funding. It was re-published in 2013 to include updated information about Grand Corps Malade. It is widely referenced within the scene and several scholars including Vorger use it as a source.

guide, *Écrire et Dire: Petit guide méthodologique pour l'animation d'ateliers slam*, written by the collectif and *association,* 129H.[143]

What would compel an academic to re-constitute this article in such a manner? Arguably, she (or perhaps an assistant) felt confident cobbling together a few pages from sources that are both unscholarly and unlikely to be known by the presumed readership of the newsletter. That the author felt comfortable doing this perhaps says more about the herd mentality, 'hype' around slam, and it relative marginal, minor status than it does about the author. This may also tell us something about the nature of discourse on a topic that lacks substantial clarity and study: superficial understandings and subsequent 'hot-takes' on it have the potential to nonetheless shape the understanding of the topic at hand despite their inherently preliminary, and thus non-definitive, nature.

Furthermore, slam also showed promise as a possible educational tool. Accordingly, some working in education went directly to promoting it as a pedagogical tool and ignored the complex and slippery nature of its definition, genre status, and ontology. Tyszler (2009), a Lacanian psychologist, published on the potential for slam to provide guidance for young men in the *banlieues* who lacked father figures. She did this with what appears to be little knowledge of slam (or rap, which she incorporates into her argument) and instead prefers to instrumentalise its superficial image to hypothesise about its therapeutic potential. Indeed, many of the publications/commentary during this period focus on the use-case of slam: a tool for literacy, for cultural assimilation, and for *education*.[144]

5.4.2.4 Chanson & Renaud: Symbolic passing of the torch towards a 21st century poésie populaire

'Renaud: comment Grand Corps Malade lui a redonné envie' (É.B. 2015); 'Grand Corps Malade a réussi à faire chanter Renaud' (AFP 2015); and 'Grand Corps Malade refait chanter

[143] The article 'borrows' from multiple sections of this guide, however the majority is taken from the section on the history of slam. The 129H guide gives credit to Anneline Pétrequin and Xavier Lauretta for their respective contributions to this history. This history has also previously been published on the websites for *Planète Slam* (2003 earliest) and the slam *association* Les Polysémiques (2007).
[144] See bibliography.

Renaud' (Bureau 2016) are just some of the headlines highlighting GCM's role in Renaud's 2015 comeback, some implying direct, causal relationship. Whereas the lede in *Télérama* suggests that GCM benefits from Renaud. Even though GCM is a star, he is not on par with a national treasure: 'Il nous restera ça', le nouvel album de Grand Corps Malade, sort aujourd'hui. Jamais le slameur n'aura autant fait parler de lui…Mais pas à cause de ses textes, à cause de Renaud, qui livre là sa première chanson originale depuis six ans. […] (Lehoux 2015). These headlines portray GCM as the catalyst, rather than merely an accessory—with the exception *Télérama* which, cognizant of its readership's cultural repertoire, presents Renaud as the protagonist in this media tale.

Il nous restera ça (2015) is a concept album. It is based on a writing prompt in slam ateliers: write a texte on any theme, including the phrase 'il nous restera ça'. GCM enjoined various artists[145] to write these textes and perform them as they saw fit. But most important among them, Renaud wrote an entirely new song—his first in six years—for this concept album. Per *France Inter*, this song, 'Ta Batterie', was not a one-off, but signalled his return (France Inter 2015). Hence laudatory headlines like, 'Le public retrouve donc Renaud grâce à Grand Corps Malade.' (Doiezie 2016). GCM, who tends to show humility in interviews, downplays the opinion that, 'de l'avis de plusieurs proches de Renaud, c'est vous qui lui avez redonné envie d'écrire' (É.B. 2015). However, he concedes that he invited Renaud to participate:'à un projet collectif d'album de slam. A ma grande surprise, il a accepté'. He continues to explain that Renaud had an idea regarding the drum set he had bought his son for Christmas and so GCM '[a] commencé à écrire pour qu'il redémarre. Cela fait huit ans qu'il ne l'avait pas fait, qu'il n'avait pas d'idées. Il m'a dicté les paroles. […] Et, à la fin, il m'a dit: «C'est pas si difficile d'écrire une chanson.» […] Maintenant, il n'a pas besoin de moi pour son propre album.' (ibid.).

[145] Including: Richard Borhinger, Luciole (former slameuse, now singer), Aznavour, Erik Orsenna, and the rapper Lino or Arsenik. The album was also re-released in 2016 with additional tracks from artists including Véronique Sanson and L.E.J.

GCM also recounts in this article how in 2007, Renaud went to one of his slam sessions at Café Culturel with his daughter 'qui adore le slam'. According to GCM, nobody expected Renaud to participate, but while there he wrote a texte about the slameurs that, 'commençait comme un hommage et cela finissait en nous vannant parce que nos textes manquaient de meufs et de fesse.' (ibid.). This anecdote reminds the reader of Renaud's characteristic attitude, but also that slam is not, on the whole, comparable to spectacle rap.

The attention that came to GCM via Renaud's 'comeback' is interesting with respect to GCM's already-mythic status as the slam ambassador, as well as to his progressive association with *chanson française*. It elevates him as the *héros-slameur* alone capable of both assisting Renaud in writing again and, importantly, in getting sober from his well-publicised alcoholism. Indeed, an article in *20 Minutes* commemorating Renaud's six-month sobriety alludes to GCM's role as a catalyst to Renaud slaying his demons in order to return to song writing:

> Pendant des années, il [Renaud] s'est battu avec l'alcoolisme et a essayé à plusieurs reprises de combattre cette maladie. Et cette fois-ci, c'est un artiste qui lui a redonné le goût de vivre. « Il y a encore un an, je ne pensais pas revenir », avoue Renaud à Télérama. "Jusqu'à ce que Grand Corps Malade, que je connaissais déjà un peu, vienne me voir ici, et me propose de participer à son album collectif [...] J'ai écrit Ta batterie, en pensant à mon fils Malone, et ça m'a redonné le goût de l'écriture. (Renaud quoted in C.W. 2016).

This mythologisation of GCM as a hero—or a 'grand cœur malade' for *20 minutes* (Demoulin 2015)—is augmented in gossip magazines. *PurePeople* dramatises the concert they held together in 2016, 'Renaud dans les bras de *son sauveur* Grand Corps Malade : Un retour bouleversant' [emphasis mine] and further claims that Renaud returned to the stage especially for his friend, GCM—who helped him 'sortir une nouvelle fois de l'enfer de l'alcool' (PurePeople 2016).

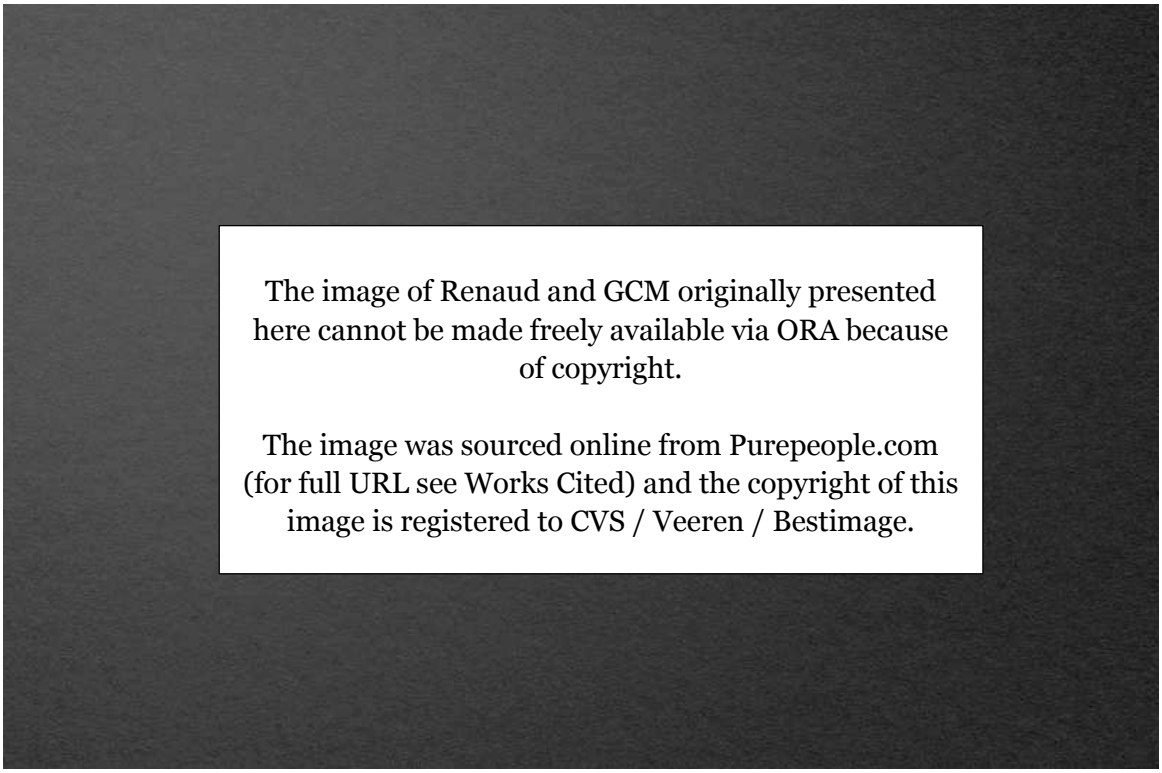


Figure 19. Image of Renaud and GCM (Purepeople 2016).

The claims of *Télérama* that GCM was more mediatised and publicised than ever thanks to Renaud may be hyperbole, but I suggest that it is indicative of the extent to which it was *important* that GCM collaborated with Renaud in particular. GCM's role in his comeback is covered in the press for over a year: from the release of *Il nous restera ça* (2015) to a joint-concert in 2016 at Trianon—celebrated as the great return of Renaud. However, the concert is also mythologised for GCM's career as it marks the ten-year anniversary of his first concert in 2006, also at the Trianon, which unveiled his talent to the world. The journalist Éric Bureau (2016) for *Le Parisien,* paints an image of the symbolic passing of the torch: a lineage reified between slam and chanson, immortalised with GCM and Renaud, 'Renaud repart en lançant des baisers. Grand Corps Malade le fait applaudir par la salle debout et fait immortaliser l'instant par son père. Exactement comme il l'aurait fait il y a dix ans.' GCM's career comes full-circle: from the protégé of Aznavour, to the *slameur-réalisateur-écrivain-héros* who in writing 'les deux premières phrases' for 'Ta Batterie' brought back from the brink of alcoholic despair a legend of *chanson française* (Demoulin 2015).

Importantly, this re-establishes French slam as both 'poésie urbaine' and 'poésie populaire', the former being associated with hip hop and the latter with working-class romanticism. Rap, GCM claims, gave him the desire to write; and ten years later, he—and consequently slam—is credited with giving Renaud back his. Slam thus becomes the proverbial link between rap and Renaud. That link has always been there, as I discussed in terms of slam's positioning relative to poetry, chanson, and rap; however, with this ultimate constitutive act of mediatisation it is fully reified.

5.4.2.5 Conclusion Phase II, Part 2

During the *vague*, slam takes on a mythic status. This is in part arguably because it lacks a clear, sound-bite ready definition and straddles the boundaries between art and low-brow entertainment—between poetry and rap—whilst simultaneously walking the *funambule*[146] between poetry, music, performance, and catharsis. This is not helped by slam insiders offering idiosyncratic and sometimes contradictory definitions. Accordingly, outsiders understandably try to comprehend slam through familiar concepts; however, such heuristics often fall short. They quickly move past trying to explain *what* slam is, to *how* it can be valuable for their interests. Although such a strategy does not always do slam justice, nor represent it on its terms, it nonetheless contributes to the image-construction of slam.

The increased attention from those coming from the PAW, the *artworld* generally, from a bias of high culture, or from education meant that slam's poetic credentials were also called into question. This happened earlier with PLH's poetry anthology; however, GCM's open dislike of poetry, preference for rap, and criticism of the education system added fuel to the debate over slam's poetic quality. There was little doubt over slam's potential as a pedagogical tool; however, whether slam can be on par with contemporary French poets, or with canonical poets like Rimbaud, has been contentious. Not only is slam more socially than aesthetically driven, the association and assumption of shared lineage with rap has further hurt the argument that slam can be 'good' poetry. The reduction of slam to GCM/AAM

[146] *Funambule* is GCM's fourth studio album.

obscured slam activistes whose work could fit within the canon of French poetry. Finally, Renaud's comeback and GCM's role in it has established a stronger spiritual link between slam and *chanson française,* thus also augmenting the link between chanson and *poésie populaire,* without however, effacing the history of rap and slam either. Slam continues to blur the line between poetry and music.

5.4 Phase II: GCM & *la vague du slam*

5.4.3 Part 3: Slam *intervenants*

The *vague* had some positive effects, notably, an increased demand for activistes to host ateliers and more people at the slam *scènes*. Conversely, the bandwagon effect also brought disingenuous participants to the slam scene. Such influx destabilises any sort of community—including a grassroots, decentralised, brand-driven one like slam's. Accordingly, this section addresses how the slam scene reacted to other voices in the discourse and how they contributed to its discursive image construction.

5.4.3.1 Authenticity

While there are those who protest GCM's primacy, regret the tendency for newcomers to copy his style, or are simply not fans of his work, it appears that he has maintained a sufficient level of authenticity to be perceived—at least publicly—positively by those in the scene. For example, in discussing the changes during this period, including his frustration with Abd Al Malik's misrepresentation as a slameur, Dgiz defends GCM, noting his authenticity and connection with the scene as well as how his fame has helped slam's growth:

> On s'est un peu fait piqué [*sic*] l'affaire par la société Abd Al Malik et la société Grand Corps Malade. Mais Grand Malade est un slameur que je reconnais, que je connais personnellement, et c'est un pur mec, je ne vois pas où est le problème. Sa production, son staff, c'est autre chose. C'est un mec, c'est important de le signaler, qui nous a fait manger, nous les slameurs. Il a amené le slam dans toutes les institutions, à l'école, tous les bahuts ont demandé des animateurs de slam… C'est infini cette histoire. Grand Corps aura toujours des choses pour lui et contre lui. (Maaroufi 2013).

While Abd Al Malik is perceived as exploiting slam and does not establish or retain any direct affiliation with the slam scene;[147] GCM has managed to maintain his commitment to the scene and is thus perceived as more authentic and legitimate. Indeed, despite his burgeoning celebrity, GCM was still active during the *vague,* hosting his regular slam session, Slam'aleikoum, at Café Culturel in Saint Denis (2004-2009).

In his mediatisation, he recognises that he has a responsibility as the de facto ambassador of slam, therefore he uses his platform to clarify misconceptions about slam, to encourage people to embrace poetry and writing, to promote and collaborate with other artists to support their careers, and finally, to defend the 'open' interpretation of slam. These attempts in the media discourse to distance slam from rap, to explain the importance of partage and accessibilité, emphasise the value of ateliers and the colludique atmosphere of slam, and GCM's expression of his dedication to where he got started, all reflect his continued attachment to French slam and thus establish him as authentic.

Accordingly, his image and voice in the public discourse continue to reflect and shape the image of slam by virtue of this authenticity. Had he been deemed a sell-out, we can assume that the slam scene would have tried to distance itself and establish its image independently. Rather, the scene has continued to affiliate with him and his public persona—the LSF makes no secret of his support of the organisation and their vision for slam (figure 20). His image and celebrity have both positive and negative effects on the scene; which have in turn affected the image and the identity of slam.

[147] AAM has explained that he was inspired by slam for his album; however, the discourse confuses this with him *doing* slam. As Dgiz elaborates, 'on l'a jamais vu sur une scène slam. Je l'ai vu une fois : j'animais une scène à Bruxelles en 2005, Avec D'de Kabal, Bams… Il était là, on lui a proposé de passer sur scène lire une petite page de son livre, il a pas voulu. Il disait « ah, c'est ça le slam, c'est quoi? » Bah viens, tu t'exprimes, t'es là pour ton bouquin… Donc voilà, un an après je le vois sur de grandes affiches à 100 000 euros la campagne mensuelle RATP, je me dis c'est qui ce type, avec le slam en grand… Faut pas abuser quand même !' (Maaroufi 2013).



Figure 20. Facebook post LSF (2017b). GCM pictured in an atelier to promote the LSF project, Slam à l'école. March 21, 2017 at 10:35 UTC.

5.4.3.2 Positive Effects of the la vague

> *Il y a plus de monde depuis que Grand Corps Malade ou John Pucc'Chocolat sont plus connus […] Ces soirées [au Café Culturel] permettent de prolonger les valeurs d'entraide, de solidarité, qui sont à la base du travail d'écriture dans l'atelier.*
> *—Handicapable quoted in Banse (2009).*

The *vague du slam* not only brought more people into the discourse around slam, but also brought them physically to slam scènes. Some slameurs recognise that his fame helped bring visibility and interest to their work. Dgiz, who was long-established in the scene, noted in an article on the *vague* that, 'C'est vrai que j'ai plus de boulot, le succès de Grand Corps ouvre des portes. Les médiathèques nous appellent: Clermont-Ferrand, Besançon, Chaumont…' (Binet 2006b).

The increased interest also disseminated slam outside of metropolitan France and GCM's name also became known throughout the Francophonie. For example, Narcisse, a Swiss slameur who is also active in France recounts his initial entry into slam:

> Je suis allé à une soirée slam à Lausanne, j'ai dit un texte, et les choses sont allées très vite: c'est à ce moment que Grand Corps Malade a explosé et mis ce mouvement poétique au grand jour. Tous les médias voulaient nous voir slamer, nous inviter pour des interviews à la radio, à la télé, dans des journaux. Les salles de théâtre voulaient toutes organiser des soirées slam. J'ai profité de cette vague, je pense. (Glévarec 2014).

Likewise, Bas Böttcher, a German slam poet, explains to Vorger that the celebrity and mainstream market attention on GCM made the French slam scene very different from that of Germany and elsewhere, '[in France] there is a real popularity. […] [I]n Germany you don't have slam poets in the top ten. There is no connection with the music business […]' (2012:48). The influx of commercial interests changed the dynamic, but also increased attention from governmental, educational, artistic, and other parties.

Although the release of *Midi20* and *Enfant de Ville* were catalysts for the *vague*, GCM's charisma and the existence of a substantial slam scene helped sustain it. There various slam related projects—including audio albums— either in production prior to, or coincidental with, GCM's ascendancy.[148] It would be a mistake to assume that even a majority sought to exploit the *vague* to achieve celebrity and commercial success. For instance, some activistes like D' de Kabal and 129H took this as a signal to come together in mutual support, avoid intra-competition and maintain the unity of the scene collectively and collaboratively (Binet 2006b).

5.4.3.3 'Les Petits Corps Malades'

While slam and its heightened prominence were appropriated by those who profited—intentionally or otherwise—from its visibility, there was also an increase in participation in the scene. This included genuine talent and activistes, but also GCM emulators—'Petits Corps Malades'[149]—who sought fame by copying his style, and other 'inauthentic' participants (e.g. journalists and record labels).

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[148] See bibliography for examples.
[149] To quote Dgiz (Binet 2006b).

Accordingly, some activistes began openly lamenting that the *vague* reduced slam to GCM, 'Le premier album de Grand Corps Malade, je continue à l'aimer. Mais j'ai vu en étant devenu animateur et slameur que quelque part c'était un arbre qui cachait une forêt immense de talents incroyables!' (Maaroufi 2013). In an article which self-referentially addressed the *vague,* Souleymane Diamanka also makes the point that, 'Grand Corps Malade ne représente pas tout le slam; il y a autant de styles que de personnalités dans cette expression.' (Diamanka quoted in Binet 2006a). However, due to the hyper-focus on GCM, this was lost on certain audiences. For instance, Narcisse recalls a tournoi in the Swiss mountainside, 'J'ai été étonné d'entendre à quel point ils faisaient tous du Grand Corps Malade copié-collé. Parce qu'il n'y a pas de scène slam dans la région, Grand Corps Malade était leur seule référence.' (Vorger 2012:44). On the one hand, GCM's growing celebrity and the 'vague du slam' brought slam to rural and culturally distanced areas; however, slam's mediatisation via GCM's mediatisation engendered a situation whereby some were quick to assume that his idiosyncratic style *is* slam: that his style was emblematic of the conventions or markers of a (non-existent) genre. The mis-categorisation of AAM as a slameur further validated this. Due to the nature of the *vague* and the accessibility granted by the recorded audio format, slam effectively *was* GCM for the general public, and to the chagrin of both the rap and the slam scenes, so was AAM.

5.4.3.4 Slam Takes Action

> *A l'arrivée de la deuxième génération, époque Grand Corps Malade, j'ai un petit peu divorcé d'avec tout ça, parce que c'était réducteur et que c'était un peu la poubelle de tout et n'importe quoi. J'avais envie de sincérité, de bonne vibe sans pression. J'étais un peu déçu par le business qui s'était emparé du mouvement—Dgiz quoted in Maaroufi (2013).*

As Dgiz explained (*supra*) it was not GCM with whom he had a problem, but rather the 'business' of GCM: agents and publicists, record labels, the *petits corps malades*, talent scouts, and journalists hungry for material or who reported only on GCM. The *vague* changed slam's environment and atmosphere, for better and for worse. On the one hand, slam was no longer underground and marginal, but on the other hand new external pressures appeared, like the

rapidly developing image of slam that was not always in alignment with the internal vision of slam. Thus, just as rappers were concerned about mere performative interest in rap from the 'vague du slam', the slam scene also shared this concern as audiences appeared at sessions to be a part of *la tendance,* rather than to share in a genuine appreciation of the spirit of slam.

5.4.3.5 Cris & Poésie

In 2013, the slam activiste Dame Gabrielle established the website *Cris & Poésie*. The presentation for the site explains her motivation and is worth quoting extensively:

> Cris & Poésie est une réponse médiatique aux considérations réductrices d'une scène Slam et Spoken Word plus riche et subversive qu'il n'y parait. Sortie de l'effet de mode, du vedettariat et des demandes d'atelier d'écriture, la production artistique mérite d'être vue autrement que comme une pratique amateur pour jeunes incultes. […] Cris & Poésie a donc comme haute ambition de faire-valoir cet art oratoire […] On a pris la décision de faire les choses, de tenter l'expérience sans attendre qu'on nous donne la parole et qu'on nous légitime. Cris & Poésie s'essaie à l'exercice dans un espace créé exprès et grâce à la mobilisation des acteurs eux-mêmes, assuré de l'intérêt artistique et politique de la scène Slam, du Spoken Word et de la poésie. On fait au mieux mesurant les mises sous tension et la nécessité d'aménager les égos, le plaisir comme moteur. (Cris & Poésie 2013).

Cris & Poésie was born out of the schism[150] and as its tagline— 'Cris & Poésie vues et revue sur le slam, le spoken word, la poésie…'—suggests a concern for poetry writ large. However, in practice it mostly concerns slam and to an extent, spoken word—the difference between being an ever-shifting, sometimes arbitrary, thin line decided by the author. Dame Gabrielle is a long time activiste in the slam scene and defends the status of oral poetry. For instance, an activiste and the journalist, Mârouf, took the time to publish a rebuttal on *Cris & Poésie* to an article in *Crieur* titled, 'Où est passée la poésie française?' by political scientist Anne Dujin (2016). He took issue with the myopic focus on page-based poetry: 'N'ont-ils [la poésie et le théâtre] pas pourtant en commun leur rapport à l'oralité ? Leur place dans l'édition n'est-elle pas due davantage aux impératifs de diffusion qu'à leur finalité artistique vis-à-vis du public ?' (Mârouf 2017). Mârouf's biting essay calls for a respect for orality and criticises

[150] Dame Gabrielle is another activiste who openly shares her conflicts with PLH including a dispute over terminology—PLH insisted upon 'orthodox' terms that reflected the 'legitimate' competitive format— in her former newsletter that escalated into misogynistic insults and verbal threats from PLH (Dame Gabrielle 2006).

the author for her biased and narrow-minded presentation of poetry.[151] Notably, he highlights her all-too-typical inaccurate, throw-away single mention of slam (as a 'genre' that is not poetry, but in which poetry exists, along with chanson and *les arts numériques*):

> L'article pourrait ainsi être reçu comme une tribune, explicitant les fondements d'une opinion, d'un parti pris assumé. Au lieu de cela, vous prétendez à une forme d'objectivité. Et bien sûr, vous ne citez qu'à peine le Slam, sans rien n'en dire, car n'y connaissant sans doute rien, n'y voyant qu'un style de comptines doucereuses et niaises, réservées aux ateliers des centres-sociaux. Pourtant, il ne s'agit pas là d'une mode mais d'un mouvement. Qui a son centre et ses périphéries, ses acteur.rice.s, ses ancien.ne.s, ses modernes, ses utopies, ses désaccords structurants. (ibid.).

Mârouf's retort is exemplary of the discourse for which *Cris & Poésie* was intended. Having a space to correct misconceptions, argue against biased opinions, and to share the scene's self-image and internal workings is the goal the platform. *Cris & Poésie* is aligned with the scène ouverte tradition, arguably because of Dame Gabrielle's personal convictions regarding slam and its identity. Nonetheless, its genesis was in the schism and its value reinforced during the subsequent *vague*. *Cris & Poésie* is a direct response to the lack of control over slam's narrative and thus its image.



Figure 21. Cartoon by Piz satirising the rap-slam conflation (Dame Gabrielle 2013c).

[151] Her overview of French poetry today focuses almost exclusively on page-based poetry to the extent that in searching for an example of amateur poetry, she resorts to writing about American Instagram poets who photograph their writing rather than, for instance, French slam. This is a further example of the bias towards page-based poetry and its effects on slam: here slam is ignored and American amateur poets get her attention instead in an article about French poetry.

Cris & Poésie has also addressed slam's image, in particular, regarding the rap-slam conflation. Dame Gabrielle (2013c) wrote an incisive article 'Rap et slam: la pénible comparaison' concerning this and the role mediatisation plays in it. She criticises the binary approach to rap and slam; and furthermore, how rap and slam are played against each other in the media:

> soit tu es gentil et tu slames l'amour et le printemps, soit tu es méchant et tu rappes la haine et la délinquance. On est donc très loin de la réalité sociale et artistique tant du Rap que du Slam. En vrai, ça ne fait qu'illustrer le processus de délégitimation des nouvelles créations, de neutralisation de toute critique soit en la disqualifiant, soit en l'ignorant (Dame Gabrielle, 2013c).

The false dichotomy of slam and rap as sacred and profane,[152] valuable and degenerate, are damaging to both scenes—and to art generally. This kind of attempt at image control has always been present, but there was extra pressure on the scene to do so during and following the *vague* given the risk of media effects and the damage possible to slam's brand.

The rap-slam conflation was problematic for everyone because it reduced slam to a sub-genre of something it was not (rap), misrepresented rap, potentially discouraged audiences from slam, and importantly, obscured the (both social and creative) diversity and freedom central to slam's identity. In response to this, some activistes tried to diminish the undue influence of the rap spectacle by embracing the rap-slam conflation creatively (e.g. D' de Kabal, Rouda, and GCM). This strategy was also employed by Aznavour to an extent as he publicly held up both rap and slam (especially his protégés, Kery James and GCM) as the new poets of the 21st century—albeit, without distinguishing between them in any meaningful way.[153] However, this is a risky strategy; others preferred instead to try to influence the public discourse away from the fallacious comparison to instead approach each form on its own

[152] In Durkheim's sense of sacred being for the well-being of the group, for unity; and the profane represents individual concerns, which can also be read as anti-social.
[153] In a 2008 episode of *Tenue de Soirée* on France 2, Aznavour and Kery James perform a duet, 'A l'ombre du showbusiness'. Prior to the performance, Aznavour explains that rappers and slameurs 'écrivent merveilleusement notre langue', conflating the two by virtue of not explaining the difference. He introduces Kery James with a call to recognise, 'comment c'est bien écrit, comment c'est beau, comment c'est *francais*'. Incidentally, this episode had 3.2 million viewers, 16.9% of the total audience that night (Première 2008).

merits. Dame Gabrielle's article on the rap-slam conflation is a clear example of this sort of activism on behalf of primarily slam—but also rap. In addition to denouncing the conflation—without resorting to defining slam as solely tournoi—she also highlights the existence of slameurs who work in *la nouvelle scène française*, rock or folk music, and theatre.

5.4.3.6 Conclusion, Phase II, Part 3

While the mainstream media has maintained a spotlight on GCM, the novelty of slam has progressively worn off after the *vague* dissipated—but not without leaving its marks on slam's image.

For those genuinely interested in slam, misrepresentations and confusion was easily rectified as organisations like *Cris & Poésie* entered the discourse. Whereas for the rest, the dominant stereotypes and the near-1:1 similitude of GCM and slam remain defining. In this discursive space, the semiosphere, it does not matter that slam is also tournoi, or typically a capella and live, relative to the persistent image that slam is *ce que fait GCM*.

As his career has progressed,[154] GCM has continued to try to be represented as an individual artist and not as the slam archetype, 'Je ne suis pas un porte-drapeau! Ni de la banlieue, ni des artistes à patte folle, *ni même du slam*! Je ne suis ni musicien, ni chanteur, ni rappeur! Je raconte le quotidien avec des mots de tous les jours, mes joies, mes peines, mes envies, mes erreurs, en fait, je ne représente que moi!' (Billo 2013, emphasis mine). Interestingly, in one interview he responds to being asked about moving from Saint Denis, 'J'étais certain que les journalistes me taquineraient à ce sujet. Non, ce n'est pas une trahison….' (Delassein 2014). Here he pre-empts a manifestation of the rap-slam conflation as local identity and loyalty can be an unassailable part of a rapper's image and music. Importantly, this article shows a discursive evolution. He and the journalist address the extent to which his slam has become interwoven with Saint Denis and his desire to attenuate its stereotypes. They also acknowledge slam's misrepresentation by the media as a musical genre,

[154] See bibliography for a non-exhaustive list of his creative endeavours and accomplishments which range from music to cinema to activism.

as well whether his later albums—which shift towards chanson—are conceding to the music industry, abandoning the authenticity from his slam background.[155]

The shift in attitude is notable. At this point (2014), GCM had become a bona fide celebrity and slam has ceased to be *la tendance* as it was during the *vague*. He is no longer the poster boy for slam, but a polymath beyond-genre artist who started in popular/urban poetry, inspired by rap, and expanded into *chanson française*, literature, and filmmaking—all characteristically French creative pursuits. However, the image of slam had *already* been affected by the *vague,* and any subsequent mediatisation, given his continued recognition as *LE slameur français*, has continued to shape slam's image. Interestingly, he has used his fame to promote a certain idea of slam: the scène ouverte—quintessentially French. Despite his career evolution, he is still recognised for his contribution in bringing French slam to the mainstream.

Since it was his celebrity that brought slam to the mainstream, his image and that of slam are inextricable. However, his image has also supported the celebration—and celebritisation—of other slam activistes, in particular those who fit a certain narrative of slam's social potential and value. Tata Milouda's mediatisation is an example of this thirst for particular narratives. The quality and quantity of opportunities she has received may be attributable to good management, her association with GCM, and moxie on her part; but I suggest that they are also because she contributes to a narrative of slam that reinforces cultural myths which speak to some of the ideals of French political ideology centred on equality and support of human rights.

Accordingly, I use her story as a case-study of the processes of mediatisation and myth construction that slameurs can be subject to and which, ultimately, shape the image of slam.

[155] Specifically, that his first album was just slam textes with music added, but that starting with his second album (2008) he moved towards a chanson format, 'même dans mes textes, avec des sortes de refrains. Si je n'y vois pas une concession faite aux radios, c'est que n'y crois plus tellement.' (Delassein 2014).

5.5 Portrait: Tata Milouda

A 60 ans, encouragée par Grand Corps Malade, Tata Milouda monte sur scène et passe définitivement de l'ombre à la lumière—L'Hérault (2012).

Tata Milouda (Milouda Chaqiq) has in her seventh decade become the 'grande dame du slam' and the 'mamie du slam' thanks to her remarkable life story—and arguably due to her affiliation with GCM. Her life story can be summarised as follows: She fled Morocco—'un pays qui maintient les filles dans l'analphabétisme'—to escape her abusive and violent ex-husband (Le Parisien 2011a). Illiterate, *sans-papiers*, and having left her six children behind, she arrived in France in 1989 'avec une soif d'apprendre, trois mots de français et 100 francs en poche pour tout bagage' (Ouest-France 2014). She spent at least five years working underground, a period she describes as, 'j'étais libre, mais perdue, seule' (Le Parisien 2011a). After regularising her status and divorcing her husband, she began to attend *ateliers socio-linguistiq*ues in Épinay-Sur-Seine in 1994.

The connection between these ateliers and the theatres in Saint-Denis helped her to discover slam starting in 2007. At these scènes ouvertes she met Grand Corps Malade—who affectionately called her 'Tata' as a sign of respect, which then became her blase (ibid.). She attributes her development to slam as an avenue for her *self*/expression that had been limited due to her gender, 'l'école, c'est pour les garçons, m'a dit mon père. Jeune fille, je chantais et dansais en cachette…' (ibid.).

In 2012 the mayor of Épinay gave a speech consecrating Tata Milouda as *chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* describing her as a symbol and product of liberalism and French values: 'qui a réussi à construire un pont entre le Maroc et la France. […] C'est la langue française qui vous a émancipée. Et c'est la République française qui reconnaît vos mérites et honore une femme libre.' (Le Parisien 2012). Interestingly, he attributes her emancipation to the French language, rather than to her bravery and courage. She is often represented as a shining example of the liberal, democratic, republican model of France—'un modèle de l'intégration' (Le Parisien 2012). Literacy gave her a new freedom she lacked and introduced

her to slam, which provided a platform for her to share her stories and poetry. Accordingly, she is symbol not only for the liberating power of the French language (despite whatever colonialist images this might evoke), for French-style freedom and equality, but also for the brand of slam that is démocratique and characterised by its accessibilité, métissage, partage, rencontre, and liberté— thus a space *pour s'exprimer*. Her media representation contributes to the image of French slam as a liberating force that is accessible to all and also provides essential support to those who are underprivileged or marginalised.

Just as GCM is a symbol of the *banlieue,* Tata Milouda becomes slam's symbol of liberalism, equality, and the power of education and *self*/expression, 'elle slame la liberté, le rêve, l'amour et la paix, avec un optimisme inébranlable En racontant l'histoire de sa vie et de son combat, elle aide les femmes à refuser la violence conjugale et les encourage à l'alphabétisation et à la culture.' (Ouest-France 2014). One of her textes, 'Mon stylo, mon cahier, ma liberté' works as her tagline embodying this relationship between self-actualisation and slam. She has had her own *spectacles*, been part of a documentary, played the heroine in a film,[156] and even appeared on an episode of *La France a un talent incroyable* in 2015.

The documentary film, due to its theme and the role she plays, is exemplary of how she—and her slam career—become mythic figures in the narrative of liberalism and equality. The film, *Patience, Patience, t'iras au Paradis* (2015) by Hadja Labib centres on six women in Belgium who had emigrated from the Maghreb decades prior. Labib, after encouraging her mother's friend to see Tata Milouda's one-woman show in Morocco, recruited Tata Milouda and sought out six women with similar stories to go on a journey of literacy, *self*/expression and discovery together (Les Passeurs de lumière 2014). Tata Milouda acted as a guide and inspiration, having a second act at an advanced age like these women. This film encapsulates

[156] In the film, *D'une pierre deux coups* (2016) she plays the heroine of the film, Zayane, an illiterate, Algerian, septuagenarian. Zayane embarks on a road trip that is also a journey of emancipation—for her and her children who in her absence learn about her life beyond being a mother. Again, Milouda's own history, made public and mythic thanks to her slam, is reflected in both the film and her character who symbolises the oppression of women. Because of this, the director approached her for the role despite not having any acting experience. Like GCM, her slam career is almost invariably mentioned in tandem with the film; accordingly, work like this also obliquely furthers slam's image and identity—especially as a démocratique space of liberté and *self*/expression (cf. Kaganski 2016, Diatkine 2016).

the image that Tata Milouda represents and the mythic power of slam to liberate. The film is and her role are indicative of how she and her slam have become a powerful symbol of women's rights, education, and liberal values, 'Elle découvre le pouvoir de l'écriture, commence à assembler des mots pour témoigner de la vie isolée des femmes des campagnes, de la douleur de l'émigration, suit les ateliers d'écriture d'un certain Grand Corps Malade…' (Tata Milouda 2018). Like GCM, whose name is frequently invoked in coverage of her, she has assisted in the construction of slam's brand image and accordingly now also represents the brand.

Chapter Conclusion

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980) suggests three positions for decoding messages: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. While the dominant implies hegemony over the receiver's decoding, and oppositional a total rejection of the message by the receiver, the negotiated stance is more nuanced. A negotiated process of representation takes place when the receiver (or decoder) is aware of the claim being made but does not accept it. They 'acknowledge the legitimacy and power of the message at the same time [as] they mark out their own position, adapting the message to their own local conditions and social relations' (Carah and Louw 2015:29). This dynamic is whence I suggest the co-creation of slam's essence comes via its image negotiation in public discourse. Slam developed alongside its own mediatisation and the discourses around it. These factors help to shape how it is represented and perceived. Importantly, slam in France is less a specific practice of poetry with clear boundaries, conventions, and consistent aesthetics than it is an organic cultural phenomenon. Cultural phenomena are never fixed and immutable. Images can appear more real than reality and the branding of a phenomenon frames its reception by new audiences.

Slam, vis-a-vis traditional poetry, appears 'cool'. This is part of its brand image. This sets it apart from similar forms like spoken word. It is also proximate to rap, but without the aesthetics of rap that some people might not appreciate or find accessible. It is also loosely associated with chanson, which gives it a sense of Frenchness and cultural legitimacy. Importantly, it is represented as open and democratic. The points of overlap and acceptance

of these discourses are negotiated and constitute over time a coherent set of associations that become the basis of the overall image.

Although the *vague* was brief, the intense mediatisation and resultant semiosphere helped to shape the image of slam. Its image persists from that period and remains tied to GCM. He is still referred to as a 'slameur', his work is called 'slam'. His continued success is helping to sustain the image constructed during the *vague* alive. Meanwhile, other activistes continue their work in the shadow of the myths, representations, and image of slam's brand. What was, in Benedict Anderson's (2016) terms, an imagined community, has better integrated and institutionalised itself to becoming more like an emergent art world superficially, but whilst maintaining its brand-driven nature that avoids some of the strictures of traditional organisations (Kornberger 2010).[157] As I have shown, its brand image is not incongruent with its identity; however, during the mediatisation waves, both slam's image and its identity have been contested, reformed, reinforced, and reified discursively.

[157] See Chapter One, 'Brand Organisation'.

Chapter Six

The ABCs of Slam: Brand Organisation

Tu vois le succès de Grand Corps, c'est un travail de fond aussi depuis dix ans, les ateliers, les scènes, les assos', tout ça résulte d'un travail commun, dont il est issu, auquel il a participé et auquel il participe encore—Da Gobleen quoted in GdB (2009:114).

The organisational significance of brand identity goes beyond simply providing an image and architecture of sensibility for how a brand is presented to and received by its potential customers. Brand identity directly impacts, indeed constitutes a shaping force for, the organisational institutions of slam. This important and reflexive link between the brand identity of slam and the tangible realisation of it in its institutions will be the focus of examination in this chapter. As such, this chapter will focus mainly on what might be called the 'internal' logic of the relationship between the brand of slam and some of its most important practical organisational manifestations.

With the above connection to brand identity in mind, I will discuss three of the organisational features that are—if not unique—characteristic of *French* slam: ateliers, blases, and collectifs, or what I call the ABC of *le slam*. These features, or institutions, are based in some of the identity traits I have outlined in Chapter Two. Accordingly, they reflect the brand identity, reinforcing and reifying its core values. Additionally, these institutions are a result of the positioning of slam: a hybrid but specifically French cultural product, its proximity and differentiation from hip hop, and its relationship to traditional poetry. For each of these institutions, I will note which identity traits are manifested through and/or inform the institution, and how this institution is specific to French slam—either due to the context of French culture or due to its position relative to similar products and forms (rap, traditional poetry, US slam poetry). There are naturally other institutions that are a result of the structuring power of the brand and which are also reflective and reinforcing of it. For instance, the norm of hosting slam sessions at bars and cafés which are accessible and low-brow/middle-brow and which help to reinforce the entertaining and social atmosphere as

opposed to a formal, pretentious, or academic one. However, these institutions are not as characteristic of *French* slam as I suggest the ABCs are. They are derivative of the greater, international brand of slam poetry—based both on the American tradition and on popular art generally.

These ABCs of slam, in addition to the brand image and identity, also help to identify slam as *slam*, and not generic spoken word poetry, *poésie sonore*, folk oral poetry, or a capella rap. The organisational structure of French slam, exhibited in particular through the ABCs of slam, also provides a topography for the brand given that it is not an engineered, planned, or pre-determined brand; but rather, as I have argued, it is an organic brand. In its development and evolution, it has differentiated itself and found a niche as a French cultural product by establishing itself as a brand of oral performed poetry rather than organising and defining itself as a genre of poetry with specific aesthetic, formal, and canonical or stylistic influence constraints. Rather, slam falls under the very broad genre of generic oral poetry—ideally performed live. Thus, what makes slam, *slam,* is its brand: its position, identity and personality, its image, and how these attributes provide brand equity and create a relationship with its 'customers'. The ABCs are key signals to this brand that provide information and clues to its values and position. They help to identify a product, like a session or a slameur, as slam affiliated. They also differentiate slam from certain similar phenomena like traditional poetry whilst simultaneously providing information as to the brand personality by referencing others like hip hop. The institutions of slam serve an important role in maintaining such understanding and keeping the integrity of the brand intact. In short, slam's brand creates a certain cultural outlook, a mindset, and an attitude of the brand, producing reflexive feedback loops between brand and slam practice.

I will address the ABCs individually; however, the analysis will not follow in the alphabetical order for the purposes of improving the sequence of analysis. First, I will discuss ateliers. These are a prominent symbol for indicating slam's values: in particular, the identity traits of accessibilité and démocratique. They are also, I argue, a product of French cultural policy in that there is an additional incentive for slam activistes to host ateliers: funding.

Furthermore, the history and underlying ideology of the *tissu associatif* in France is uniquely French and accordingly also differentiates these ateliers conceptually and experientially from workshops elsewhere. Secondly, I will address a related institution, collectifs. Collectifs are related to ateliers in that many collectifs decide to incorporate themselves as *associations* in order to benefit from publicly available funds for cultural and creative matters. Other researchers have noticed the *prégnance de collectifs* in French slam, which may be due to this incentive. However, the prevalence may also be explained by the role that collectifs play in slam's brand: they share a history with hip hop—which signals that slam is 'cool', diverse, multicultural and not pretentious— and furthermore distinguish slam from other forms of poetry which have been traditionally focused on the individual artist-genius creator rather than collective production. Finally, I will address the use and prominence of blases in French slam. Like collectifs, this institution or convention, is also one of hip hop and arguably may have originated in the relationship between hip hop and slam. However, while the use of blases may signal that slam is 'urban', through this association there are important differences in the ethos that characterises hip hop and slam which can be observed through an analysis of the use of blases in hip hop and how slam blases are thus only superficially a shared convention between the two forms.

6.1 Ateliers

In an interview for *Cassandre/Horschamp* and *Cris & Poésie*, the slam activiste Dgiz recalls how at the beginning of his relationship with slam in the early 2000s, the stigma attached to rap/hip hop was detrimental to creative/cultural production, including even hosting ateliers. As he explains, some rappers were drawn to the emergent slam scene as an alternative space that would allow them the freedom of expression and creativity that was at the time adversely affected by the societal stigma:

> Les rappeurs à l'époque, on s'est incrusté sur la scène de slam parce qu'il n'y avait que cet espace pour avoir un micro… Le rap a été boycotté, tu pouvais même pas [*sic*] animer un atelier avec des gamins, même en difficulté. Dès qu'il y avait le mot *rap*, t'avais pas un euro pour acheter des stylos! Donc l'émergence du slam, ça tombait bien pour le rap. D'ailleurs j'ai croisé beaucoup de rappeurs dans les soirées slam. (Maaroufi 2013).

In the above statement Dgiz touches upon several things of relevance to ateliers including the infiltration of rappers into the slam scene, the support given to them by slameurs, the dearth of spaces for rap and similar expression, and the stigma attached to rap. His lament regarding ateliers and the lack of funding also speaks to another, characteristically French, element: state intervention. Organising workshops and cultural activities–especially for disadvantaged youth–is generally supported if not promoted by the government as part of the tradition of *action culturelle*. However, as he alleges, any mention of rap and such funding and other support would become hard to come by. Accordingly, rappers became involved with the slam scene which affected slam and its relationship with hip hop. As I discussed in Chapters Four and Five, this may have contributed to the conflation between the two in the public discourse. However, the desire for spaces for creative development felt by participants in both phenomena helped ateliers become a characteristic institution of French slam.

Ateliers are a fundamental component of the practice of slam. Slam is not just the performance element, but also the preparation and sharing of skill development prior. Accordingly, slam values ateliers, even basing one's authenticity and legitimacy as an activiste on their degree of involvement with ateliers, 'Pour moi, activiste, c'est revenir souvent [au slam], c'est le défendre, c'est faire des scènes slam, animer des ateliers.' (GCM quoted in GdB 2009:287). Ateliers serve as an integral part of slam that is not only demonstrative of slam's ethos of being poésie démocratisée, but is an institution that directly realises this ethos in practice.

In this section, first I will look at how ateliers distinguish French slam from similar creative forms. Following this, I will discuss the slam identity traits that I argue are manifested through the atelier institution. Finally, I will address how the context of state intervention contributes to the prevalence of ateliers.

6.1.1 Slam Ateliers in the French Context

The engagement of French ateliers with the process of creating and performing slam helps to differentiate French slam from the American tradition. Unlike France where creative writing is a relatively new concept at the university level, in the USA undergraduate creative writing and MFA programs are common. Thus, while workshops related to slam poetry do exist in the United States, as Gregory (2008) explains, they tend to be targeted towards youth (especially disadvantaged), often in extra-curricular educational settings, and capitalise on affiliations with hip hop in an attempt to garner affection for poetry writ large.

Whereas in France, ateliers are not as narrowly targeted at youth; and furthermore, rather than a pedagogical tool with limited reach, they are seen as a foundational part of slam generally that contributes to accessibilité. They are an integral part of the slam soirée, are open to everybody, and are usually hosted by collectifs or individual slameurs/activistes as opposed to by language or writing teachers. They are by no means necessary but are often included as part of the overall experience. In both traditions, the atelier prior to the session enables those who may not have pre-prepared a texte to create one. And for the scène ouverte tradition, those who have worked on their writing in the atelier are immediately given a platform to have their texte heard, without competition pressures. This turns the scène ouverte into a communal learning space for poetic exploration, rather than merely a performance space that entertains unidirectionally, thus making it truly representative of slam, 'Beaucoup de slameurs précisent qu'ils se sentent véritablement slameurs quand ils animent une scène ouverte, quand ils donnent la parole aux gens tout en participant.' (Katia/Boutchou quoted in Vorger 2012 :137).

6.1.2 Identity Traits

> *Je n'apprends à écrire à personne, c'est un simple atelier avec des petits jeux, des exercices pour mettre les gens en confiance et qu'ils se lâchent. C'est avant tout une émulation pour donner envie d'écrire. C'est pour moi l'occasion de rencontrer des gens, ce sont des moments humains. Il y a toujours des contacts assez forts qui se créent. C'est ce que je recherche*
> *—GCM quoted in Alaoui (2013).*

Ateliers seek to enable a more equitable space and, as such, they are manifestations of the fundamental ethos of poésie démocratisée. However, the atelier encompasses not just this meta-concern, but several of slam's identity traits, all of which in turn reinforce the core aspiration for democratic poetry. Ateliers make tangible the values of slam and a vehicle and carrier of cultural action.

The identity traits relevant to ateliers as a slam institution are primarily: s'exprimer, colludique, accessibilité, démocratique, partage, and rencontre. Just as these traits are all interrelated in terms of slam's brand, they too are in their manifestation in the slam atelier. Therefore, I will not address them individually but rather holistically through the primary trait that the atelier reinforces: *le slam, c'est démocratique*.

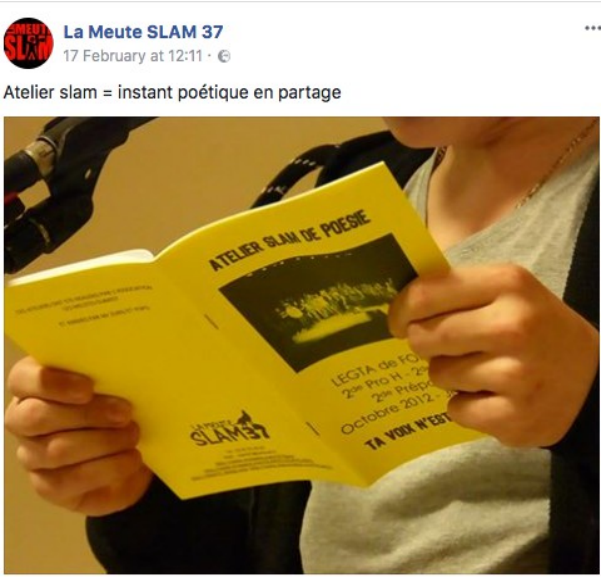


Figure 22. Facebook post from La Meute SLAM 37. February 17, 2018 at 12:11 UTC.

Slam aspires to be poésie démocratisée and brands itself that way. However, with the inclusion of the atelier in the slam soirée this ambition is better realised. It helps guarantee performers, breaks down the wall between performer and audience, and ensures access to the stage by giving even the most spontaneous audience member an opportunity to participate. Although slam is open to everyone; requires no entry fee; often takes place at *populaire* venues like bars and cafés; and has no restrictions on age, gender, language or other identity traits;

nor on the type, style, genre, or quality of poetry; there are nonetheless still barriers to participation. Such as being comfortable on stage and importantly, confidence and knowledge in the first instance on how to write poetry. As some activistes attest, they discover that atelier participants may have only a narrow conception of what poetry is and assume there are strict rules that must be adhered to— such as an alexandrine format. During an atelier, activistes can guide participants through knowledge lacunae and demonstrate the diversity of poetry, which enables accessibility. Without the atelier, we can assume that it is likely fewer would feel prepared or confident to share their poetry, especially given that creative writing can often be seen as a talent, rather than a skill that can be developed and honed.

Importantly, the atelier is colludique. It is a workshop rather than a classroom: Activistes take on the role of *animateur* rather than *professeur*. The goal is not to tell participants how to express themselves, instruct them in particular formats and practice them; but rather to guide and assist them in developing their *self*/-expression, 'C'était très ludique, nous étions là pour les épauler, pour les aider à construire, à structurer leurs textes mais pas du tout pour influer sur leur écriture' (Selecta Seb quoted in Genévrier 2012). The ambition of the space is marked with equality rather than hierarchy and is colludique: both fun and entertaining as well as being collaborative. Even though participants may develop their own textes, the overall atmosphere is one of collective collaborative learning and development, especially given that the scène ouverte that follows allows for partage amongst the participants and with the audience:

> Nos spectacles sont quasiment toujours suivis de scènes ouvertes, pour ne pas revenir au schéma classique du «nous somme sur scène et toi tu es dans la salle, et tu la boucles parce que nous, on sait et toi, tu ne sais pas». On cherche à démystifier tout ça: le mot poésie, la prise de parole, le fait d'être sur scène... les ateliers se font dans un esprit de partage, pour aider à passer le pas. S'essayer ensemble, tester, voir, donner des idées. Aider à accéder à la scène ouverte. C'est l'aboutissement. (Cat Mat quoted in H.M. 2013:59-60).

The experience of working together in the atelier creates a shared experience outside of the poetic partage and rencontre that happens during the scène itself: It initiates to slam, to poetry, to *self*/expression. It levels the playing ground, provides access, lowers barriers even further, and encourages. It minimises the possibility of a slam session being a narcissistic

parade of poets who want their fifteen minutes of Warholian fame by making it clear that one need not already be a 'poet' , because the atelier is there to turn listeners into writers, who can get on stage and become slameurs, 'L'idée [du slam], c'est de se réapproprier la parole, de se dire que les mots ne sont pas réservés à une élite, qui aurait une autorisation spéciale pour le faire.' (Cat Mat quoted in H.M. 2013:58).

6.1.3 State Intervention

In addition to the psycho-social benefits of ateliers, there are concrete benefits that can be measured: literacy, writing skills, public speaking skills, and other communication skills. For this reason, ateliers also fit within the greater historic tradition of *action culturelle* and its related ideology, *éducation populaire*.[158] *Action culturelle*, regardless of its specific manifestations, has always had at its core a concern with mediation: reducing the gap between art and people (Looseley 1997:213-214). There is a long history, tracing back to the *Front Populaire* and André Malraux in particular, of a concern for the democratisation of culture with the resultant ideology becoming the basis for government intervention in cultural activity. It is based on a belief that culture, namely art, can be moralising and equalising; therefore access is essential for a healthy citizenry. The realisation of this ideology has become a responsibility of cultural *associations* following the FP's education minister's failure to make arts education part of the national curriculum (Looseley 1997:13). Although *action culturelle* is not influential as it once was, its ideological spirit persists. The generous cultural policy in France provides substantial funding for *associations* as part of the ideological pursuit of providing culture to all. The nature of arts and culture education at the institutional level has a subtle, but nonetheless structuring, effect on the cultural specificity of French slam. This

[158] The history of *action culturelle* and the greater concept of culture and the role of authority over it—whether via Jacobin centralisation or attempts at decentralisation— is long and complex, pre-dating even revolutionary France. Although there have been significant changes over the past hundred years especially, there are the threads of the long-standing tradition and respect for a philosophical and humanistic concern for cultural access in the state Republican ideology. This history spans the 20th century with notable punctuations: the Front Populaire in the 1930s; the first ministry of culture in 1959 headed by Malraux and the ultimately doomed Maisons de la Culture; the Socialist government in the 1980s that resulted in a cultural budget exceeding full 1% of the state budget. Despite decreasing budgets and changes in ideological approach, technology, and globalisation, the cultural policy of France remains 'a peculiarly French invention that has no counterpart elsewhere' (Bousquet and Pessin 2003: 52). (cf. Drott 2011; Looseley 1997; Forbes and Kelly (eds.) 1995; Hammou 2012; Teillet 1991; Weber 1976; Weiner 2006).

cultural history, in combination with a respect and prioritisation of education—especially when it concerns language—means that it behoves a slam *association* to host ateliers and thus obtain funding and legitimacy.

Slam ateliers organised by *associations* provide arts and cultural education that is otherwise lacking; therefore, funding is justified and welcomed. Arguably, the generosity of the state in providing financial support for such activities helps partly explain the prevalence of these ateliers. This is not to say that they would not exist otherwise, but that their existence is safe-guarded thanks to cultural policy that ensures modest funding, accordingly being an *animateur/rice* is a modest but potentially viable vocation for activistes. The prominence and favourable view of these ateliers, in combination with talk of GCM's textes appearing on *le baccalauréat,*[159] and the laudatory rhetoric from government officials and educators has arguably helped to increase the demand for slam ateliers (Poole 2007; France Bleu 2013; Fagerlid 2012:292).

Additionally, in the tradition of cultural policy that aims to promote and preserve the French language ateliers are also a part of cultural outreach. The Alliance Française incorporates slam ateliers in their curriculum; introducing students around the world to both the French language and to the craft of poetry through slam ateliers. [160] This cultural outreach via ateliers also takes place through other institutions. For example, the French consulate in the United States has sponsored the LSF-organised French Slam Connexion's travel to Chicago to work with local schools in the area, hosting events and ateliers on slam, the French language, and French culture (LSF 2017c; French Slam Connection 2017; French Culture in the Midwest 2017).

Finally, as I mentioned above, while workshops in the US are, according to Gregory, often focused on underprivileged youth, or are part of university culture and aimed at writing

[159] Multiple sources, including those cited above, claim that his textes were/were to be included on *le bac*, either in France or France *outre-mer*. However, I have been unable to find exact confirmation of which year(s), which portion(s) of the exam, and which specific textes were used from an official source. Nonetheless, even the rumour of his work being included is relevant because the mere possibility of slam being a part of *le bac* gives slam legitimacy.
[160] For instance, Slam Tribu hosted ateliers at the Alliance Française in Chengdu, China (Rulliat 2012:23).

students; in France ateliers are for all people of all walks of life. There are ateliers at retirement homes, in bars and cafés, at universities, at cultural centres, in prisons and at schools. They are not just for those who are deemed underprivileged, but for anyone who wants to improve their skills relevant for slam—whether for slam or another activity that uses those skills.

Ateliers are not only a functional and identity-reinforcing part of slam's scene, but are also representative of slam's Frenchness in that they are supported—financially and politically—thanks to state ideology. This is not to say that workshops do not exist elsewhere—clearly, they do—but rather that the systems in place in France encourage the propagation of ateliers through funding and political support, and furthermore confer state legitimacy whilst helping slam spread beyond its underground niche. Slam gains official, that is state, legitimacy through its ateliers and their role in education and cultural outreach affording slam a particular status in culture that it might not have otherwise. The popularity and media attention of GCM in the mid-noughties forced his work to be considered by officials, educators, and critics thus offering further legitimacy to slam despite controversy over its poetic merit. This official acceptance of slam—whereby it became incorporated into education and cultural initiatives—and its value for language acquisition and literacy skills, as well as being a vehicle for French culture both at home and abroad, all give it status that, for example, rap has not had to the same extent. This further elevates French slam as something particularly French, rather than more-or-less homogenous and globalised. French slam is distinct in its exceptionalism, not quite identical to other iterations (viz. the scène ouverte tradition, cultural specificity), but also a part of a supranational cultural phenomenon.

6.2 Collectifs

> *Le slam c'est l'art collectif le plus solitaire, ou l'art solitaire le plus collectif—Grand Corps Malade and Ami Karim quoted in GdB (2009:274.)*

Collectifs are a prominent phenomenon in *French* slam. French slam, originally based in the scène ouverte concept, did not develop in concert with the Chicago rules (which permit only one poet at a time) and therefore there has always been the possibility and existence of

group production, even on stage simultaneously, rather than merely behind the scenes. Vorger's (2012) definition of collectif touches upon the key features that are especially pertinent to French slam and is therefore useful for our purposes:

> […] la notion de « collectif » désigne des regroupements d'artistes en vue de collaborer sur des projets de spectacles, d'organisation d'évènements et de publication. Cette collaboration induit une dynamique de groupe, d'où une émulation entre slameurs qui se répondent parfois par textes interposés, s'adonnent à des projets d'écriture collective ou se « donnent des mots » entre eux (641).

Collectifs are a manifestation of the colludique, démocratique, liberté and diversité/métissage identity traits in particular. Although collectifs may appear superficially indistinguishable from any art collective, I suggest their prominence as a slam institution is informed by these traits and is particular to French slam thanks to the scène ouverte tradition, the influence of French hip hop on the scene, and the cultural specificity of French creative production. These factors combined provide insight into 'la prégnance du collectif dans le slam' (Vorger 2012:618). Although not every activiste is part of a collectif, they are numerous[161] and powerful in the slam scene; for instance, organisations like the LSF have grown out of what were initially collectifs and the names of the collectifs are sometimes recognised above, alongside and/or on par with those of individual slameurs.

Below I will begin with how slam collectifs are characteristic of French slam and the scène ouverte tradition. Furthermore, I will examine how slam collectifs are at least partly influenced by hip hop collectives (crews); yet are also distinct from both hip hop crews and other art collectives in the underlying values, ethos, and culture that inform their existence. Then I will discuss state intervention; specifically, how collectifs and cultural policy affect each other which highlights some of the cultural specificity of French slam. Finally, I will address the identity traits that inform collectifs and their existential role as an institution of slam, and how this affects the social and creative aesthetics of slam.

[161] For instance, in Vorger's (2012a) study, among the 60 French activistes and collectifs she includes in her index, 22% are collectifs (N=13). There is a great deal of overlap as many of the activistes are the members of those collectifs, and several others belong/belonged to collectifs not mentioned (e.g. Slam Tribu, Spoke Orkestra, et cetera). Of the 15 (international) people she interviewed at length, 11 were or had been in a collectif (117). However, if we count only the French activistes, the proportion is even higher (10/12, or 83.3% versus 73.3%).

6.2.1 The French Slam collectif

Collectifs can be understood much like any other art collective. However, to do so would be reductive, ignoring the specific nature of French slam collectifs and their role in the cultural and creative phenomenon. The notable presence of collectifs in French slam is distinct from the American poetry slam tradition where, for the most part, slam poetry has been a largely solo affair. Not only is poetry generally seen as a solitary effort, but the rules of the poetry slam dictate that only one poet perform at a time the work that was written by the poet themself. Teams for the National Poetry Slam are the exception, organised by their regional affiliation (e.g. Chicago, Portland, etc.). Whereas French slam collectifs do not exist exclusively for the purposes of competition.[162] Rather than ad hoc entities, they are durable groupings: a community of practice, which may be associated with a geographic region or other factor, but are not tied to a specific venue only to qualify for official competition. Without competition as a defining paradigm and the associated rules which both limit the number of poets on stage at a time and reinforce the assumption of singular authorship—the latter which reinforces the value placed on the author in poetry—collectifs were able to expand their range of activities, beyond organisational and support functions, to the creative ones. Accordingly, their activity pervades all areas of slam.

Slam collectifs have established publishing houses, organised regular scènes and ateliers, produced recordings and concerts, implemented various forms of tournoi, published zines and websites, performed together on stage, formed competitive teams, and established bigger organisations. Collectifs can be comprised of individual creators who are affiliated with the collectif, but work solo; creators who work in groups or duos; creators who work together as the collectif (e.g. Spoke Orkestra) like a 'band'; or may also include creatives from other fields such as music, comedy, or theatre. They can be like 129H, who as a group—a collectif—

[162] It should be noted that some collectifs do compete—either wholly or in part—as teams in (inter-)national tournoi. Like in American slam poetry, the national tournoi sort teams by their city of affiliation with multiple teams from one city being subdivided according to host-venue. This venue affiliation comes either from personal connection or by winning a pre-selection trial hosted by that venue. For tournoi like the GSN, venues have to apply and pay to be full-members of the FFDSP to be eligible.

organise slam sessions, host radio shows and ateliers, do concerts/spectacles where they perform independently and/or together as a group on a single texte, and assist with the production of individual works (e.g. Rouda's album *Musique des Lettres*).[163] But some collectifs are ephemeral. For example, in 2004 GCM along with several other activistes created the ad hoc collectif, 'Le Cercle des poètes sans instru' which performed at various festivals and the *spectacle* 'Urgence de dire' (GdB 2009:31). Similarly, there was the dyad 'Le meilleur ami des mots' (John Banzaï and Souleymane Diamanka) who wrote 'à quatre mains' a joint-anthology (2007) and performed in duet for their concert series. Crucially, collectifs are social networks for creative support, collaboration and development; in addition to being an organisational structure which may or may not manifest as a group production or ensemble pieces.

6.2.1.1 Connection with, and Differentiation from, Hip Hop

Although slam is independent and distinct from hip hop, slam collectifs share some similarities with hip hop collectives: slam collectifs place high value on collaboration, collective activity, and experience; and the inseparability of their immediate social context from their creative production. However, there are important differences from hip hop collectives that are rooted in the subcultural logic of hip hop which are worth exploring since in doing so it highlights how collectifs reflect slam's brand identity. Structurally, this section will begin with the similarities between slam and hip hop collectifs, to then shift to the crucial differences between the two. But, before I discuss hip hop collectives, a brief accounting of art collectives is needed for clarification.

Both the terms 'art' and 'collective' are sufficiently general that an 'art collective' could be anything comprising multiple individuals organised around any creative art activity. However, in common and even specialist parlance, when we speak of an 'art collective' it

[163] One of the tracks is credited, 'Rouda avec 129H', in other words featuring 129H—or Neobled and Lyor. The collectif is able to stand on its own without him, yet alongside him, unlike a band. Featurings are collaborative, representing an important distinction between collective and collaborative work: the collectif is collective work, the featuring is collaboration between the collectif and the solo artist.

usually refers to those that belong to a selective, highly organised, and hierarchical established art world, *the artworld*. Therefore, the broad distinction between slam collectifs and art collectives can be reduced to that of cultural provenance: their relative status vis-à-vis *the artworld* within the field of cultural production. However, the simultaneous social-and-creative orientation of slam further distinguishes collectifs from art collectives, not because art collectives are not social, but they are organised around the artistic production first. In this sense, slam collectifs, are closer to hip hop collectives, which are based in a historical alternative family structure.

Collectives have a long and important history in hip hop. Accordingly they were already established in the fully-fledged hip hop scene in France when slam emerged. A related concept, the crew, is a historically significant part of hip hop. Crews are primarily social groupings often tied to a geographical location; whereas collectives are better understood as a community of practice. For hip hop, although the two are closely related; for the purposes here I will use both terms interchangeably.

As slam began to flourish in Paris, some of the hip hop collectives in the *banlieues*, like Uback concept and 129H, took an interest in it and became key players in slam's development (see Chapter Four). Uback concept was a hip hop collective since 1996, but pivoted to slam in 2000. The founding members of 129H, who all had a hip hop background, came together in 2000 to form the first slam-specific collectif. In doing so, they maintained a connection to their hip hop background whilst supporting the diverse and open ethos of slam by embracing rappers and slameurs alike. Importantly, their early influence and work in developing a slam scene has helped to set a precedent for slam collectifs. Just as many activistes in slam cite the film *Slam* as their gateway, others trace their slam practice back to a scène or other activity organised by these two collectifs in particular.

Although some of the seminal slam collectifs have roots in hip hop, it is important to note that not all do. Rather, and perhaps unsurprisingly given its influence on pop culture writ large, individual members of a collectif may slam *and* work within the hip hop idiom on other works. When we look at some of the specifics of certain slam collectifs they mirror that of hip

hop crews—in particular, regarding the idea of a social network as a font of creativity as well an alternative 'family'.[164] Many slam collectifs, however, are primarily individuals with an interest in the practice of slam—though they often include members who also engage in other creative forms like music composition, dance, song, or even visual forms like street art.[165] Although such diversity is not the standard, its not too uncommon existence indicates that collectifs can be organised around more than just a creative practice and be based on a solidarity that stems from broader concerns or social connections.

Finally, accounting for the similarities between slam collectifs and hip hop collectives, one must touch upon the notion of the 'underground' as this concept applies to both practices; however, it affects slam differently, arguably thanks to the precedents set by hip hop. Hip hop is a subculture and developed underground as opposed to within legitimated, established, and (possibly) mainstream, structures and networks. Underground movements, like hip hop and slam, are often unable to rely on any pre-existing structures or institutions as there are none appropriate for the practice's needs or they are inaccessible. Accordingly, hip hop crews were traditionally not only sources of personal support, but they also took on an organisational role. Rap and DJ crews organised block parties and rap battles; graffiti crews disseminated mix-tapes; and crews of all sorts helped with the networking, logistics, distribution, marketing, and reputation-building as well as by securing territory for rappers and DJs to perform and sell their mix-tapes on street corners. Working in crews, hip hop artists were able to self-produce work despite lacking the benefits of, and access to, already-established institutions and creative networks. These crews provided the human capital needed for the roles in the division of labour inherent in any art world. Crews are thus essential to grassroots production: group cooperation is necessary in a fledgling emergent art world lacking the pre-existing structures and institutions for the production, legitimation, and dissemination of work. Underground

[164] This was epitomised eponymously by the now defunct slam collectif, Slam Family (See Chapter Four).
[165] For instance, in 2009 GCM and others formed an ad hoc collectif, 'Ça peut chémar' for a 'cabaret urbain' of the same name that was later broadcast on Canal +. This was broad in scope, encompassing slam and a variety of 'arts urbains'. Ça peut chémar included not just slameurs but also rappers (viz. Oxmo Puccino, Soprano, etc) dance groups (e.g. the hip hop dance group R.A.F. Crew), and others like a freestyle/street basketball crew and stand-up comedians (Le Parisien 2011b).

movements, as they become established, build upon whatever pre-existing structures available to them, adapt to those structures and/or modify them if possible, and ultimately create their own institutions.

While both hip hop and slam began as 'underground', in the case of slam, French hip hop had already done much of the groundwork in establishing both underground structures and institutions as well as entering into mainstream ones. Following the shift to slam by former hip hop collectives like Uback Concept in the *banlieue*, the emergent yet more fully-fledged slam scene began to blossom. Slam built on some of the experience of hip hop creatives and collectives, but also developed these institutions and organisational modes itself. A significant factor shaping the development of collectifs and other organisational institutions in slam (like ateliers) has been the cultural policy of France (see below). Even without the precedent set by hip hop, slam likely would have taken advantage of the structures set in place by cultural policy. However, the undeniable influence from hip hop helped to establish a 'kindred' connection (and image based conflation!) between the two—even though there are fundamental ideological and cultural differences. Crucially, hip hop is an established subculture and slam is not. Hip hop crews exist and work within the hip hop idiom, their existence and the work they produce is informed by the subculture. Whereas slam collectifs are not subject to such constraints and are free from norms and expectations that would otherwise be determinative were slam a bona fide subculture, '[…] dans le rap y a une certaine image, une posture à «Avoir», dans le slam il n'y a rien de tout ça.' (S Petit Nico quoted in GdB 2009:122). Indeed, slam collectifs may—in full accordance with its anti-genre, non-subcultural ethos—simultaneously belong to and represent both a given subculture as well as slam.[166] This is the characteristic liberté and diversité of slam's identity in action.

[166] This is often hip hop; however, it could equally be another music subculture or subcultural affiliation, such as a LGBTQ derived subculture—or a mixture thereof, either amongst its members or for the collectif itself.

6.2.1.1.1 Crucial Differences: Hip Hop Collectives and Slam Collectifs

Having thus far focused on some of the most important connections and similarities, I will now shift focus to some of the crucial differences between slam collectifs and hip hop collectives. This comparison clarifies some of the superficial similarities both between slam collectifs and hip hop collectives, as well as between slam and hip hop generally.

Historically, hip hop culture was a source of alternative identity formation and social status in contexts where there were insufficient other support institutions and which were marginal to the dominant culture. Community is a significant part of hip hop culture, local community in particular, given the history of hip hop's cultural geography. Accordingly, hip hop collectives, sometimes based on crews, are often anchored and organised around physical geography: a city, a district within a city, or even as specific as a certain street or post code. As Rose (1994) explains, 'identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family.' (34). Furthermore, she elaborates that crews were new kinds of 'families' that were 'forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements.' (ibid). Importantly, the post-industrial city 'provides the context for creative development among hip hop's earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education.' (ibid). The concept of crews is tied up with this history.

This emphasis on space—that is, on the physical built environment—and identity is an undercurrent in hip hop culture stemming from what can be described as a reappropriation of space by those from whom agency over their physical and social environment had been wrested away or otherwise limited. This is the crucial difference between all hip hop crews/collectives and the slam collectifs that are geographically based. While some collectifs like La Meute 37[167] focus on their local area and represent that region, there is not the same

[167] 37 represents their *département*, Indre-et-Loire. They do not always use the name La Meute 37, which is predominant on social media. According to their website, La Meute Slam or SLAM 37 is the slam project organised by the *association*, named Les Meutes (La Meute Slam 2013).

quality of disenfranchisement. Uback concept and collectifs from the *banlieues* are similar in the structural geography; however, for collectifs like La Meute 37 it is less about racial or socio-economic disparity than the centralisation of cultural activity in Paris rather than *en province*. This tension between Paris, its periphery, and *province* is specific to France and informs the organisation of various entities. However, the underlying discrimination and disenfranchisement for *province* is wholly different from that experienced by communities in the South Bronx or Harlem in NYC since the structural inequality is not based in racism but regionalism.

Hip hop was born in a context of strife and conflict with the dominant society and between communities as a result of oppression. Accordingly, in the history of hip hop, different crews would dominate various neighbourhoods and feuds between crews would emerge as a result of the fierce creative competition between them for status and symbolic power.[168] This is all in contrast to slam collectifs which are not vying for 'turf', even when geographically oriented, with organisations like the LSF demonstrating that there is an underlying current of cooperation and collaboration rather than conflict between collectifs. Performative conflict— theorised as practice for a hostile world, while foundational in hip hop is comparatively rare in slam, 'Contrairement au rap, le slam ce n'est pas des battles, des clashs: on ne s'insulte pas, on n'essaie pas de rabaisser les autres. On essaie juste de trouver les plus beaux mots.' (GCM quoted in Libération 2004). Slam collectifs, by contrast, exist as an organisational structure concerned with mutual benefit— within collectifs as well as between them. It is essential to separate this foundational point of differentiation from the *political* schisms found within slam. Indeed, it is not uncommon for there to be significant dissent in the slam community and its collectifs, like there is in any community; however, such discord does not undermine nor change the nature of the fundamental focus on cooperation in the core collectif structure of slam.

[168] By feuds I mean artistic ones however, given that these crews overlapped with geographic, cultural, ethnic, and community based crews, the strife between them was sometimes real and escalated into real violence from the antagonism inherent in the symbolic violence of the competition.

6.2.2 State Intervention

France's comparatively generous cultural policy provides funding and support for cultural associations (*associations*). Indeed, I suggest that the support available due to state intervention has helped to establish collectifs not only as a creative and social institution for slam but also as a political institution that serves its ambition of *poésie démocratisée*. It also has the effect of cementing the presence of collectifs in the French slam scene.

Unsurprisingly, due to the financial advantages many slam collectifs become *associations*; and accordingly, they not only acquire legitimacy through this designation but are also able to acquire funding for their activities provided they can be justified as culturally significant and ideally also contribute to one of the aims of broader policy (e.g. literacy, women's rights, et cetera). Almost invariably these activities will include ateliers. However, the activities can also include spectacles, publishing, and other modes of promoting and disseminating poetry and self-expression or cultural outreach. For example, *l'association* Slam Productions was offered a grant of 14,500€ in 2013.[169] In line with the social ambitions of such funding, this grant was earmarked, as '10.000 euros au titre de la culture, 1.500 euros au titre de l'égalité femmes/hommes et 3.000 euros au titre de la jeunesse, pour ses activités dans le domaine du slam in 2013.' (Le Mairie de Paris 2013).

Without becoming an *association*, a collectif has to find other means to support their on-going activity such as crowdfunding. Accordingly, many collectifs decide to re-structure as *associations* to pursue their creative work and their aim of disseminating poetry 'au plus grand nombre'. For instance, the collectif La Meute Slam (est. 2006) became an *association* in 2007 (La Meute Slam 2013).[170] Beginning in 2008, the collectif/association's members, Mr. Zurg and Yopo went on as co-founders to establish the *association* La Ligue Slam de France-Réseau

[169] The activities included La coupe du monde de poésie; le Grand Slam national; '117 scènes de slam poésie et 58 ateliers d'initiation et de création'; as well as their venue, Culture Rapide in Belleville, that also serves as the *siège social* for Slam Productions (Mairie de Paris 2013).

[170] Not all collectifs decide to incorporate as *associations*. Some collectifs are temporary or established ad hoc for certain projects. For example, in 2004 GCM along with several other activistes created the collectif, 'Le Cercle des poètes sans instru' which performed at various festivals and the *spectacle* 'Urgence de dire' (GdB 2009:31). Similarly, there was the dyadic collectif 'Le meilleur ami des mots' that comprised Souleymane Diamanka and John Banzaï. Together they wrote collection of textes 'à quatre mains' which they published as the book *j'écris en français dans une langue étrangère* (Banzaï and Diamanka 2007) and performed as a concert series.

national et francophone (est. 2009).[171] The LSF benefits from donations, revenue through ticket sales and merchandise among others, and of course government grants. For instance, in 2017 they were provided 14,000€ from *Education Nationale* for their project of ateliers in schools, 'Slam à l'école' among other grants (LSF 2017c).

The generous cultural policy that provides funding for such *associations* to promote slam, *cultures urbaines*, and self-expression is notable in France. It arguably has the effect of cementing the presence of collectifs qua *associations* in the French slam scene. If they may have initially been prominent in slam thanks to a migration of collectifs from hip hop to slam, they have remained and multiplied given the creative freedom of French slam and in light of the practical benefits of becoming an *association*—namely, financial support but also state legitimacy. The funds available to *associations* allows collectifs to exist and explore creatively without restrictions from patronage or pressures from the market (as commercial hip hop is subject to). Accordingly, the *tissu associatif* enables collectifs in the slam ambition of *poésie démocratisée*, which would have been a goal regardless, however, state intervention facilitates it and helps to entrench it, while also making it distinctly French. In light of this understanding, it can be seen that collectifs are a reinforcing organisational manifestation of the meeting of identity based core values and cultural/geographical context (i.e. the brand DNA and positioning of slam).

6.2.3 Identity traits

Collectifs, as an early and integral part of the French slam scene, have persisted and are important organisationally wherein they support slam activity. But specifically, with regards to the aesthetics and brand identity of French slam their presence emphasises the communal, extraverted, social, and shared aspects of slam over the individualistic, introspective, or introverted alternatives. As I discussed in Chapter Two, they are a direct manifestation of colludique; however, they also play a part in reifying the ambition of being démocratique.

[171] Their aims are similar, but La Meute Slam is focused locally in the Loire Valley whereas the LSF is national.

Slam collectifs have become an institution of slam in their own right—as a collectif or *association*—and are reflections of the identity characteristics and core values of slam like rencontre, démocratique, partage, liberté, accessibilité and importantly, colludique. They support both the social and the creative axes of slam—the two faces that are fundamental to its ontology:

> [le slam c'est] une forme où tout le monde se sent concerné et participe, comme de performances collectives ouvertes et à dimension sociale. […] Et que ça donne l'opportunité de proposer de nouvelles choses, de révéler des poètes, des écrivains, des chanteurs, que ce soit comme ça l'a été jusqu'à présent pour certains, une finalité, pour d'autres un passage afin d'accéder à autre chose. (Lynx K quoted in GdB 2009:102-103).

Collectifs also assist in the goal of poetry that is démocratique, as well as diverse and exemplary of métissage in that—to use a cliché—there is strength in numbers. For example, the collectif Slam Ô Féminin began in 2003 with the encouragement of the then-president of Café Culturel, Christina Lopez, who had noticed a gender imbalance at the slam sessions there organised by Uback concept. In 2003, since the next regular Friday slam session happened to fall around international women's day—and during Le Printemps des poètes—she suggested that there should be a special event focused on women and featuring slameuses, 'Slam Ô Feminin'. This event evolved into a bona fide collectif and eventual *association* (H.M. 2013:58-59). Cat Mat explains that by virtue of being a collectif, by being in a group, their voice—as women—was louder and better heard than it was as individuals, especially in regards to what they observed in terms of disparities amongst the genders in slam (H.M. 2013:59). Being a collectif gave them power and attention that they were unable to demand as individuals. Their (and other's) work in ateliers also demonstrates how by being a collectif they are able to demonstrate the diversity of poets and poetry, as opposed to a sole slameur becoming representative of the craft. In this way, collectifs also assist in the accessibilité and diversité/métissage of slam. Furthermore, in terms of liberté—that is, freedom from artistic production constraints—collectifs represent the challenge slam poses to theories of original genius. In openly showing that poetry can be a group effort—and that such collaboration may

be a fruitful source of artistry—collectifs disrupt the myth of the solitary artist-genius poet whose talent is innate and internal.

Collectifs demonstrate that not only can poetry be collaborative in its modes of sharing but importantly, it can also be collectively *produced*. This production is not just for the sake of collective production as such, it does not need any avant-garde radical manifestos, nor to anchor itself in any Dada-esque sensibilities. Rather, collective production can occur out of collective sentiment and expression. It can be an instance of co-creation that is transparent, acknowledging the collective labour and love that goes into a work of art. The accessibilité and liberté demonstrated by collectifs, in production or performance, reinforces that all expression is valid as poetry when done 'poetically'—that is, with poetic intent. For slam, whether a texte comes from individual or collective production, and whether it is deemed 'good' is ultimately less relevant than the ethos underlying its production and moment. Accordingly, the collective production from shared poetic intent makes collectifs a direct manifestation of the colludique trait. Furthermore, collectifs arguably also help in creating a démocratique poetry space through their active valorising of collaborative and collective work, including by opening the space of self-expression to all—including those who may feel they need support.

How collectifs function and what they represent are part of slam's brand and distinguish it from spoken word/oral poetry and traditional poetry:

> Le spoken word, c'est un mouvement des années soixante/soixante-dix, mais on peut aussi dire que c'est une pratique. L'idée, c'est de clamer des textes, dans une performance individuelle, où l'artiste est là pour faire son show. Et le slam c'est plutôt une performance collective ouverte. (Lynx K quoted in GdB 2009:101-102).

Conversely, they also may lead to 'brand confusion' with hip hop; however, this confusion arguably contributes to slam's image in a positive direction by emphasising the familial, convivial, and shared experience of creative production—which in turn, can appear to be more social, more experiential, and thus more 'fun' than the image of solitary creative labour done for art's sake, rather than for the joy and pleasure of it.

6.3 Le Blase

Blases are the stage names or aliases used by many slameurs.[172] The use of these blases is characteristic of French slam and has arguably become a convention. Importantly, their presence helps to identify a performer or an event as likely to be associated with the slam scene. As such, they work as a signalling device that can also be an indicator of the presence of slam's brand. However, while the use of blases is characteristic of French slam, and is comparatively rare in both American slam poetry and traditional French poetry, blases are not unique to slam within the greater context of creative oral expression. Indeed, blases are even more established being near-ubiquitous convention in hip hop, with rappers who do not use a blase being the exception.[173] This shared convention along with other similarities between the two phenomena contributes to the blurring of them in the public imagination. However, while the use of blases in slam may arguably be influenced by hip hop; the underlying cultural logic and history of hip hop explains their presence and differentiates them from slam blases. As for slam's identity, I suggest that blases speak to several characteristics including, accessibilité, colludique, and liberté.

In this section, I will first examine the folk history and etymology of slam blases which indicates a historical link with French hip hop. Then I will analyse the differences and commonalities between blases in hip hop and in slam to demonstrate how, despite their presence and possible shared origin, they differ. Unlike the other two institutions (collectifs and ateliers) the presence of blases in slam is not affected by state intervention. Therefore, following the dissection of slam blases vis-à-vis hip hop and the difference in underlying ethos, I will move onto how blases are related to specific identity traits of slam and are thus a marker of slam's brand that distinguish slam from generic oral live poetry.

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[172] Vorger (2012a) finds that a majority of slameurs she studies use blases, and not just whilst performing but as their slam persona generally (76). There are a few exceptions, for instance Souleymane Diamanka and Fréderic Nevchehirlian; and some, like GCM, are known primarily by their blase, but their legal name is also widely known and recognised. Despite this, GCM uses his blase in other works (e.g. for his voice work in *Jack et La Mécanique du Coeur* (2014) he is credited as Grand Corps Malade, not Fabien Marsaud).

[173] Two of the more prominent exceptions are Youssoupha (Youssoupha Mabiki) and Sofiane (Sofiane Zermani). Even artists like Kery James or Seth Gueko are blases, despite sounding like credible legal names.

6.3.1 Folk History

The term 'blase' (alt. blaze, blazz, other variants) is argot; accordingly, its origins are both ambiguous and based in folk etymology. It is not a new term: in addition to speech, there is evidence of its usage in print[174] which predates hip hop and slam significantly. In her account of French slam, GdB (2009) suggests that 'blase' derives from 'blason'–the crests or coat of arms that would adorn a knight's armour, especially in the middle ages (174-175). Other etymologies trace 'blase' back to military slang or to the markings used to identify prisoners.[175] Vorger primarily cites GdB's etymology alongside those of linguists Alain Rey and Jacques Cellard (2012: 61,112). In addition to presenting the theory that 'blase' is the apocopation of 'blason', GdB also claims that it originates in Saint-Denis specifically, 'provenant du 93' (2009:174). Folk etymology and armchair linguistics have also traced its origins to this region.[176] Despite the unreliability of folk etymology and the impossibility of pinpointing such a precise origin, further examination suggests that there may be some merit to this claim—at least regarding its contemporary usage in slam given the connections between hip hop and slam in this area.

Although GdB does not mention it, 'blases' are used by rappers, graffiti writers, taggers, and others for whom it signifies their signature and/or alias with which they mark their work.[177] Furthermore, the use of stage names/alter-egos has always been present in the

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[174] For instance in the 1959, *Zazie, dans le metro* (Queneau 2017): Et puis, ne m'appelez pas Pédro-surplus. Ça m'agace. C'est un blase que j'ai inventé sur l'instant, comme ça, à l'intention de Gabriella […].' (191). 'Blaze' also occurs in the 1937 anti-Semitic publication by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*: 'Ils sont prêts à tous les crimes pour voir leur blaze en compte rendu élogieux.' as well as several other instances (11 total as of February 2018 under 'blaze', the earliest in 1885) in literature according to crowd-sourced data from the online argot dictionary, Bob Dico (Bob 2017 'blaze').

[175] Aside from armchair etymologists, more reliable sources, such as those referenced in the etymological database for the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL), trace 'blase' and 'blaze' back to as early as 1889 to signify various things including 'nom', 'caractère', and 'numéro'; the latter being linked with thieves' slang (2012).

[176] Specifically, an article for Rue89 the online only publication run by the *Nouvel Observateur*, traces the origin of 'blase' / 'blaze' again coming from 'blason' but becoming a part of Seine-Saint-Denis specific argot that 'permettant de différencier les prisonniers entre eux. Les bandits, et autres délinquants se sont alors approprié le terme qui, au fil du temps, s'est fait une place dans le cercle des classiques de l'argot français.' The article relies on Mariette Darrigrand, who works as a semiologist for the mass media, and on the observations of various residents from the region (Kefi 2011).

[177] Vorger (2012a) mentions this only in passing (546). She also cites D' de Kabal's interview in the documentary *Trait Portrait* where he says that the use of 'blases' is common to both graffiti and rap (111). Otherwise she does not explore this commonality further, preferring to instead focus on the creativity involved in choosing a blase in her workshop experiments. She does however state that, 'le blase constitue donc, pour un jeune de cité, la marque d'une identité potentiellement masquée' (113).

aural/oral hip hop arts (rap, MCing, DJing). Nevertheless, the use of blases, while characteristic, is not unique to hip hop. The use of a pseudonym is widespread— and not just in the arts and other creative industries, but in many situations and domains. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to assume that the use of 'blases' in slam is exclusively attributable to hip hop culture as opposed to being a widespread and common practice or coming from influences such as punk. Indeed, two of the pioneering slam activistes, Nada and Pilote le Hot, both use blases despite not having ostensible association with hip hop.

Indeed, Club Club appears to have been part of other underground scenes (Nada 2002b). Nada describes himself, 'Je suis un ex-punk, un ex-junky, qui a centré sa vie autour de la littérature et de la poésie et du rock'n'roll et puis c'est tout, tu vois.' (GdB 2009:71).[178] The use of blases is also common in punk subcultures—which are also sometimes associated illicit or underground activity wherein pseudonyms are often used. An early description of slam by Pilote le Hot suggests as much and makes clear the links with hip hop *and* punk (as well as the diversité of slam):

> Le slameur est un individu généralement issu des mouvances punk ou hip hop, rien ne s'oppose toutefois à ce qu'il ou elle soit gay, lesbos, architecte, éboueur, travesti, toxicomane, salope, nympho, obsédé, conducteur de rames de métro, griot, clodo, talentueux ou nul à chier peu importe, l'amalgame du tout contribue à crédibiliser l'ensemble. (Bernal 2001).

Accordingly, we can assume that at least for early activistes, the use of blases was, in addition to hip hop influence, also derived from punk[179] and underground street subcultures and lifestyles—all of which share a use for aliases either practically or symbolically.

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[178] In addition to the punk influence, Nada himself suggests his history with drugs is related to his aliases 'l'abus des drogues durant une bonne décennie m'a occasionné des troubles de la personnalité [...] j'ai souvent cette impression d'être habité par plusieurs entités, vous ne verrez donc pas inconvénients à ce que j'officie sous différents pseudonymes (hormis Nada, les plus connus sont l'Ange Noir, le Chacal, Déjà Mort).' He further explains that oral poetry is a necessity for him as it can be a response to existential questions, that while on stage, it gives you access to other people and other existences. (Nada 2002a). Following the closure of Club Club, Nada went to Café Culturel where he became involved with the emergent hip hop-influenced slam scene there. Consequently, he also describes himself as 'à mi-chemin entre les cultures punk et Hip Hop, j'ai un pied planté dans les deux. Comme j'ai parfois la sensation d'être habité par divers personnages, je me crée divers pseudonymes.' (Rach' 2002b).

[179] According to the journalist Thomas Hahn, 'On le croit rap avant tout, mais le slam, c'est plutôt punk.' (2002:49). He bases this on the lack of direct competition (battle) in slam, on his tracing of French slam back to the lower east side poets tangentially affiliated with punk, and on Nada's testimony. Indeed, there are more similarities between hip hop and punk than might be apparent at first glance given the different socio-ethnic origins of the two movements (white working- and underclass class in the UK and then NYC versus black and Latinx working- and underclass in NYC). Briefly, both are revolts against a dominant mainstream culture that

Although certain activistes may have adopted a blase prior to practicing slam qua slam, what is crucial is that they were both publicly recognised by their blases in conjunction with slam and before any significant public conflation of slam and rap. That said, it remains uncertain whether the term 'blase' was used as the standard as it is now. Indeed, in these early blog posts, writings, and interviews they use 'pseudonyme' and other variants rather than 'blase'. The earliest exception I can find is in the magazine, Hip Hop Flow where Neobled (of 129H) refers to his blase, whereas the other slameurs interviewed do not use this term (Rach' 2002c). Importantly, Neobled came to slam from hip hop and this history is suggestive of his vocabulary choice at that time. It appears that blases entered the public discourse and became a recognised part of the slam technolect concurrent to the imagining of slam and hip hop's convergence. This suggests that GdB's claim regarding the geographic provenance of 'blase'—at least in slam—merits consideration. Given the clear influence of hip hop on slam and its image—including the cultural geography of French hip hop that has 'le 93' as an important locus—it seems probable that her etymology is valid.

Although there are usage examples of 'blase' that pre-date French hip hop, given the historical importance of Saint-Denis in French hip hop's development it is not unlikely that its use by street artists and MCs originated in the '93'. The '93' here, pronounced '*neuf-trois*' can be taken literally (referring to the department number), as a synecdoche (referring to the poorer Parisian *banlieues* and other such neighbourhoods more generally), or as a metonymy whereby '93' represents the intersections of hip hop and *banlieue* culture. GdB's usage of '93' suggests she is referring specifically to Seine-Saint-Denis, and perhaps even more narrowly to the commune, Saint-Denis. As I stated earlier, such folk etymology is difficult to substantiate and I do not offer this as irrefutable evidence for GdB's claim. However, given the influence of

oppresses based on race or social class; comprise music and visual expression; rely heavily on DIY and low-fi technology for their aesthetic, based in necessity and as a statement; reject formal training and traditional aesthetic standards; use metaphorical, and rarely literal violence; value authenticity; are anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment; seek to break down barriers and incorporate a collective artistic expression that includes eradication of the 'fourth wall' (e.g. ciphers, stage diving); and ultimately seek revolution of the status quo. From this brief list alone it should be apparent that there are traces of both subcultures and their creative expression in slam.

hip hop and this likely origin of the term, it is valuable to examine the symbolism and function of blases in hip hop compared with their place in slam.

6.3.2 Slam Blases and Hip Hop Blases: Shared History, Different Manifestation

Despite the caveat of some necessary uncertainty in this area, it would appear that either the hip hop background of influential slameurs may have led to hip hop conventions being introduced to slam, or, given the emergent nature of slam, there was intentional emulation of hip hop conventions with regards to the use of 'blases'. Whether the preponderance of blases in slam is directly imported from hip hop or elsewhere, their eventual near-ubiquity is likely the result of a path dependency and mimicry whereby neophyte activists followed in what they assumed was a standard and expected practice—what was becoming a convention. Slam blases are a convention and support some of the values and identity traits of slam's brand; however, unlike hip hop blases they are not based in a particular (sub-)cultural history as slam is not, nor stems from, a bona fide subculture. However, given their likely transmission from hip hop to slam, the history of blases in hip hop is also the history of slam blases, even if their contemporary manifestation is detached from that history.

Blases are practically ubiquitous in hip hop; however they not simply a stage-name for performers, but derive from the cultural history of hip hop as a subculture. Historian and scholar of African-American culture, Tricia Rose explains, 'As in many African and Afrodiasporic cultural forms, hip hop's prolific self-naming is a form of reinvention and self-definition.' (1994:36). This reinvention and self-definition is essential to the subcultural dimension of hip hop: it is reinvention from the discriminatory image put upon you by the dominant culture and self-definition in the face of a dominant culture that denies you that right elsewhere. In Gates's (1988) classic work, *Signifying Monkey,* he argues that naming be 'drawn upon as a metaphor for black intertextuality' and that this is essential to the creative strategy for hip hop (Rose 1994:192). However, as for all elements of hip hop, an alias is also symbolic, 'Rappers, DJs, graffiti artists, and breakdancers all take on hip hop names and identities that speak to their role, personal characteristics, expertise, or "claim to fame" [...]

nicknames that suggest street smarts, coolness, power and supremacy [...] Some names serve as self-mocking tags; others critique society [...]' (Rose 1994:36). Many of the tropes in hip hop are a form of self-aggrandisement, the proverbial ego-trip. Indeed, the tropes and motifs that sometimes cause consternation in hip hop are those ultimately derived from this concern for the ego. This includes boasting about wealth, sexual prowess, physical strength, and also battles.

Indeed, as mentioned above, battles are an essential part of hip hop: rap battles, breakdancing competitions, and even battle albums and 'diss tracks'. The emphasis on ego and conflict in hip hop derives from a desire to prepare young people for a hostile world 'that denies and denigrates young people of color.' (Rose 1994:36). Conflict (battle, beefs, et cetera) is discursive in hip hop. It is a constantly flowing energy that permeates the hip hop sphere and which drives its energy, 'Hip hop remains a never-ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved.' (ibid.). Aliases can change over time to reflect a change in status and their symbolism plays an important role in this discursive conflict foundation. Some artists in hip hop also construct alter-egos through which they play out different scenarios metaphorically and expand their rhetorical, discursive tapestry.

Blases in slam may also be self-effacing, a critique of society, a pun, a notable characteristic et cetera. However, there is not the same assumption that these serve as symbols of reinvention or self-definition against a hostile society in the same way that they do in hip hop as part of its subcultural history, 'Même si beaucoup de slameurs considèrent le rap comme une source d'inspiration décisive, les différences entre les deux mouvements sont nombreuses. Chez les slameurs, la scène est ouverte au public, et elle est nettement moins codifiée, sexiste et violente. [...] La compétition n'est pas aussi omniprésente que dans le rap.' (Martinez 2007:13). Accordingly, although blases may, etymologically speaking, be derived from heraldry and this origin finds continuity with the conflict that is inherent in hip hop expression, it is not informative for slam which instead seeks rencontre and partage. Even

exceptions, such as Boucha'zoreill or the classic tournoi, while combative and competitive, are not combat-based in the same ideological underpinning as that of hip hop:

> En France, la mise en scène du tournoi slam n'est pas aussi présente qu'aux États-Unis. Il existe des tournois comme le Bouchazoreill', par exemple, où les slameurs sont sur un ring et se font face mot à mot. Il y a donc mise en scène mais la parole reste libre. Les scènes ouvertes c'est être ensemble, jouer ensemble, et non pas «combattre» ensemble. (Gdb 2009:138).

Hip hop is a subculture that was born out of the struggle of largely black but also Latinx people in a dominant white culture and society, 'this tension filled double-consciousness[180] *always* inflects hip hop discourse.' (Perry 2006:43, emphasis mine). Hip hop is the creative expression of that struggle and 'manifests a commitment to otherness. It centralizes a realm of black existence and yet commits to the otherness of that location with respect to the larger society.' (Perry 2006:47). Conflict is in its essence and explains part of its global popularity and spread in particular to areas and groups that also experience some level of discrimination and inequality; such as the French *banlieues*. Slam is not based in any social or cultural struggle. Even though the portrayal of slam in the film *Slam* may confuse viewers into thinking as much, the struggle depicted in *Slam* is that of an African-American man and is the same struggle that is addressed in hip hop. Slam poetry in the United States has developed a close relationship with hip hop (i.e. *Def Poetry Jam*) and has become another form of expression for that struggle. However, slam poetry is not specifically derived from that particular cultural struggle; rather, hip hop culture has embraced slam poetry along with its own oral expressions that include rap and poetry (i.e. The Last Poets, Black Arts poetry and literature, sermonic oration, et cetera). The same can be said of French slam. French hip hop has influenced French slam; however, French hip hop remains embroiled in the symbolic struggle of inequality and discrimination; whereas slam is not tied to any particular great social group or socio-political struggle.

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[180] 'Double consciousness' is a concept coined by W.E.B. Du Bois specifically in reference to the daily lived experience of black Americans in the United States, which can be applied to other groups experiencing social inequality. The double consciousness is the result of both living within a society and being perceived by others in that society as not properly of it and having to view oneself in that tension creating a sort of cognitive dissonance. For black Americans that means existing within a white dominant society that is racist and viewing oneself, even measuring oneself, from that perspective. Paul Gilroy built upon this and used double consciousness to describe the constant struggle experienced by being both European and African—to hold both identities simultaneously despite clear contradictions and paradoxes (Gilroy 1993).

Accordingly, although blases exist in both, there are different underlying factors that inform their presence as a convention. In Hip hop, 'taking on new names and identities offers "prestige from below" in the face of limited access to legitimate forms of status attainment.' (Rose 1994:36). For some, a slam blase may offer this, but since slam is not a subculture nor based on the marginalisation of a particular socio-economic or cultural group and is inherently diverse, such an assumption is not tenable. Indeed, some slameurs when asked about the origin of their blase, admit it is for the fun of it and do not suggest that there is any greater significance to it. Slam aspires to be democratic and inclusive of everyone: It is not diverse in the sense of including those normally excluded but rather, inclusive of everyone. What I suggest blases offer specifically for slam and in line with slam's brand identity is access to the colludique. They do this either by being a beginning point of the ludic and/or they can provide a helpful mask that empowers participants to engage in the colludique space of slam.

6.3.3 Slam Identity Traits: Blases as a Marker of the Brand

Slam blases are sometimes amusing or contain word-play, further extending colludique poetic expression of the self beyond the textes and into the slam space. For instance, GCM recounts, 'J'ai participé à ma toute première scène ouverte sous le nom de Fabien. Et puis, pour déconner, j'ai choisi en 2003 un nom de Sioux: Grand Corps malade [*sic*].' (Médioni 2007). His choice of blase was intentionally self-effacing, and perhaps helped him to feel less self-conscious on stage as a result of his reliance on his cane due to its humoristic sensibility. Word-play is prominent in slam generally, including for blases and names of collectifs (Vorger 2012:113-114). Catherine Mahon uses the rhyming blase, Cat Mat; Barbie Tue Rick is a play on the word, 'barbiturique*;* for D'de Kabal, 'D' is to be read 'déprime' but pronounced 'D'; Ysae is *verlan* for the English word 'easy'; and Ami Karim is double word-play, as 'ami' means 'uncle' in Arabic and 'friend' in French–this being how he was called at school, '[mon] ami Karim' (Vorger 2012:113,214; GdB 2009:234; Cassandre 2002; Nada 2002a; Perron 2007; d2kabal.com 2018). Others have symbolic or personal meaning, and others still may have

originated in hip hop practices (e.g. Luciole and D' de Kabal respectively).[181] Others are just variants of their legal name (e.g. Selecta Seb/Seb for Sébastien Gavignent or Félix J. for Félix Jousserand). These are still blases; however, the similarity with one's legal name is indicative of the political difference between blases in slam and blases in subcultures like hip hop. For slam, they are less of a new identity per se, but rather more of a playful mask to signal entry into the colludique slam space.

Blases offer a mask, an alternate identity, that allows the individual to step into the magic-circle that is slam's ludic foundation. The magic circle is a concept developed by the philosopher Johan Huizinga (2014) to describe the mutually recognised invisible-yet-felt barrier between play and not-play states. When an individual enters the 'magic circle' they are aware that they and others are in a play-state and therefore certain social norms and rules no longer apply. Complementary to this concept of the magic circle and the colludique aspect of blases in slam is Clifford Geertz's (2017) concept of 'deep play'. His famous study on Balinese cock fighting exemplifies this concept: the men are engaged in a game of cockfighting; however, to the observer it is only the birds who are actually fighting. Geertz's concept of deep play explains however, that in fact, the men are their cocks and the cocks the men. They men are projecting themselves into their birds and are engaged in the cockfight as if it were their own physical body in the fight. The birds symbolise their selves and so the cockfight is far more than just a competition between birds, it is a game of role-play that is a competition of male ego, of pride, and of status. The use of a blase in slam can enable this sort of 'deep play' in addition to signalling entry into the magic circle, and by so doing allow greater freedom in exploring self-expression, identity, performance of the self, and social norms and mores (cf. Goffman 1990). As one atelier *animatrice* explained to Vorger, she likes to introduce slam 'sous l'angle du jeu pour démystifier l'acte d'écriture' and suggests to the participants they choose a blase, 'une nouvelle identité, ça peut aider' (Vorger 2012:450-451). In this sense, the

[181] Kabal was the name of the rap group he co-founded. He decided to adopt de Kabal as his surname because he felt that his legal name, a slave name given to his family, was not as representative as the time spent with Kabal. Accordingly, his name is both a blase, an evolution of his hip hop blase, and his identity (d2kabal.com 2018).

colludique exhibited in the blase convention interrelates with liberté, s'exprimer, and even accessibilité as it can be argued that adopting a blase may make the act of performance and partage less intimidating and more accessible for certain would-be activistes. Accordingly, John Banzaï describes his blase as 'un écrit de guerre qui (lui) donne de la force et du courage' (Vorger 2012:110).

In conclusion, slam blases are manifestations of slam's brand identity and the values that inform that identity, as well as of slam's playful and entertaining personality. They serve an important role in identifying someone as a slameur/-euse and not a spoken word poet or other performer. However, they can also create 'brand confusion' between hip hop and slam. This can be beneficial to slam for those who hold positive associations of hip hop, and conversely it may be negative for those who hold negative associations.[182] This brand confusion and/or the stigma of hip hop may also lead an activiste to choose not to adopt the convention of a blase despite its symbolic, ludic, and identity (including collective identity as part of slam) building power. Activiste Laureline Kuntz told Vorger (2012) that her surname already reflected her Alsatian origin, but as Vorger explains, 'A ses yeux, le choix d'un *blase* fait sens dans la culture hip-hop plus que dans le slam. De fait, plusieurs slameurs interrogés ont conservé leurs pseudonymes de *graffeurs* [...]' (113).

It is the understanding of blases in situ, in the slam brand, in conjunction with its positioning and other identity traits that helps to clarify this potential confusion. Slam's emphasis on being democratic and accessible distinguish it from hip hop's subcultural status and organisation. Accordingly, the use of blases is not exclusionary, they do not function as a signal to outsiders that they are not part of the group. Rather, they can act as a social 'mask' that allows for greater participation in the colludique experience of slam. This improves the accessibility of slam, the sharing and meeting of different individuals and their experiences. It facilitates entry into the 'magic circle' and allows a freedom that might not be available otherwise.

[182] See hip hop's stigmatisation, Chapters Three and Five.

6.4 ABC: Le Slam

One of the criticisms of the American tradition of slam poetry is that competition can create a barrier. Some would-be poets are intimidated by competition and if they should not do well in a poetry slam may feel discouraged and not pursue their craft further. The French tradition of the scène ouverte arguably minimises this. The addition of ateliers prior to the session and the ability to use a blase further help to establish an environment that is ludic and convivial. The very presence of collectifs reminds the audience and other would-be activistes that they are not alone, either on stage or elsewhere. This may make, and indeed intends to make, poetic practice seem less risky and pressurised, indeed reducing the sense of isolation that can accompany the seriousness of traditional poetry. All of these institutions of slam help make it inviting, entertaining, colludique, more informal, and more fun—that is, compared to other oral poetry that may carry the weight of oral tradition and the history of transmission. This sense of freedom extends, in the liberating sense, even to other poetry like spoken word, or to *poésie sonore* which still carries the burden of the French poetic tradition and the weight of its canon. Slam's liberté is enacted through these characteristics, through this particular sense of freedom, making it specifically French and distinct from spoken word poetry, rap, traditional poetry, and even American/international slam poetry. The presence of blases, collectifs, and ateliers thus form an integral part of slam's unique brand: that of poésie démocratisée. They reify and reinforce some of the identity traits I have identified and help to differentiate slam from similar phenomena. They form a part of slam's unique brand promise and offering. To extend the brand metaphor, it offers a solution to a problem the customer has. Slam ateliers solve for a dearth of widely-available creative writing education. Collectifs, in turn, offer a solution for the tyranny of the narrative of the solo artist-genius who relies only on his intrinsic talent to produce art. Blases, finally, offer a solution for feelings of self-consciousness, intimidation, inexperience, and importantly, outsiderdom—both to would-be practitioners of poetry as well as to all other socio-cultural and socio-economic groupings. The mask that can be worn in slam allows for *self* expression (expression of the self) and creative self-expression and can be, at the very least, an analgesic to the existential problems of life.

Slam is a space and experience of sharing poetry, 'le slam, c'est ça. Une forme de soirée qui a été créée pour rendre la poésie accessible, vivante, intéressante. Le slam n'a pas révolutionné la manière d'écrire la poésie, mais il a complètement transformé la manière de la dire et la manière de l'écouter.' (Narcisse quoted in Glévarec 2014). Therefore, and as such, it cannot be considered a genre distinct from other variants of oral poetry due to genre constraints. Yet it is evident that slam is more than just the place or the way in which poetry is practiced, it is also a brand of oral poetry realised through various cultural practices and symbolically laden institutions, distinguishing itself through its ethos and its discursive construction from other forms of oral poetry that may share its mode of existence, like spoken word. It is a cult brand of oral poetry that offers two products: the tournoi and the scène ouverte. It proposes a certain ethos and identity that attracts people to it for that identity and personality. It provides solutions to potential problems through its institutions. It is itself a form of solution to the dichotomy, indeed chasm, between popular subculture forms of poetic expression like hip hop and the high cultured, yet burdened by the conventions of fine art, practice of traditional poetry. It is a hybridisation of an American tradition that incorporates specifically French concepts and institutions (like the *tissu associatif*) to create a brand that is both French and global, but which can and does address specifically French concerns. It is not merely competition, nor spoken word in a generic sense, but a specific amalgamation of all of these things, together creating the unique concept, and I suggest brand, that is slam. By calling something ‘slam’ we know what to expect, we have assumptions about the underlying ethos, about the products on offer, about the energy and ‘vibe’ we might expect. We have an idea of who might also attend a slam session and what kind of interactions might be valued. We also know that slam is more than just the poetry, more than just a place or a method of poetry production, that it is also the social experience that goes hand in hand with poetic expression, and that within slam the two can never truly be dissociated. That is slam’s brand. That brand is what makes slam not merely spoken word nor merely a French variant of American slam poetry, but something wholly unique and specific to its context and history.

It is slam, and we know what that is because of its brand.

Conclusion:
Slam's ontology: a Brand of Poésie Démocratisée.

Initially in France 'slam' referred to open-mic, oral poetry performance events oriented around a philosophy of the liberative power of the word, held at bars and nightclubs in Paris. In other words, slam referred to mostly amateur, underground, grassroots oral poetry—loosely defined. Through the course of its history, it has re-aligned with the American tradition and then—as a rhizomatic, grass roots phenomenon—also distinguished itself from it once again as a uniquely French cultural phenomenon. What has remained consistent is the ambiguity of slam. It is neither a genre nor a coherent unified movement. It is not just performance, nor competition, nor recorded spoken word—with or without music. Slam is certainly not 'rap pour les bobos', nor is it merely amateur poetry. Slam is rencontre—meeting—that is, presented as poésie démocratisée.

In this thesis I have presented a substantive theory of slam's ontology. Through a grounded theory approach using a constant comparative analytical method and coding of close, deep readings and content analysis I have arrived at what I contend is the core identity traits of slam: immédiateté, partage, métissage, diversité, s'exprimer, liberté, accessibilité, démocratique, colludique, and the core category that unites them all: rencontre. These ten traits sustain slam and provide the basis for its recognisability as distinct for not only proximate cultural production like rap or chanson, but also from generic oral poetry and spoken word. These traits also provide the foundation for the organisation of slam—its institutions and conventions—they are its ethos, they provide the ideological justification for how slam interacts with other cultural forms, and they inform the image of slam which in turn—as a discursively co-constructed conception of slam—defines and structures it.

In addition to identifying these traits, I have presented an argument for viewing slam not merely as a poetry movement or an unorthodox genre of oral poetry, but as a brand: a disposition and attitude towards creativity and poetic production that is recognisable as 'slam'

and which is distinct from even very similar products. To elaborate slam's ontology and understand it as a brand, I have provided a multi-pronged analysis of slam through a branding framework that comprises brand positioning, brand DNA, brand image, brand organisation and foundational to all of this, brand identity (the identity traits of slam).

To start, I have looked at the cultural context into which slam entered and how rap, chanson française and traditional poetry have informed the reception and understanding of slam. This *brand positioning* of slam highlights how it has become a French cultural product in its own right through a hybridisation of some of the conventions and norms of these proximate forms. Importantly, as a brand, slam is able to be an alternative space to these forms and genres, complementary to all of their respective art worlds.

Despite slam's rallying cry of democratising poetry, slam is not a radical poetry movement aiming to wholly revolutionise contemporary poetry. Rather, it exists alongside it as an alternative poetic space. Importantly, just as slam is outside of the PAW, it is also outside of the canon. Slam is not avant-garde—as in trying to subvert the aesthetic status quo or trying to subvert the canonical hierarchy. Individual slameurs may draw upon the canon, but also use influences from other poetry traditions, hip hop, and chanson. Slam is not defined directly vis-à-vis contemporary poetry, but rather is better understood as a brand of oral poetry under the encompassing genre of poetry which includes folk poetry, amateur poetry, and all other iterations.

I have also provided a rich history of slam that outlines its *Brand DNA*—a framework proposed by Jean-Noël Kapferer (2015) that helps to understand the identity of brands, their audience, and how to position them. This history importantly also details the ideological schism that happened in the Parisian scene that prevented a re-alignment with the American tradition and instead allowed for French slam to develop its own unique cultural identity—one that, ironically, has developed a special relationship with the American creator of slam poetry, Mark Kelly Smith. Smith finds that the French scène ouverte tradition better represents the ideals he aspired for in creating slam poetry in the first place as it embraces tournoi but does not define slam only as competition, as Smith says 'The points are not the point.' (Smith and

Kraynak 2009:10). The Slam Productions/FFDSP concept of slam (tournoi-based) still persists; but as *part* of the overall slam brand. Indeed, slam is best understood as a brand that comprises both conceptions of slam: that is, its two most typical products, the tournoi and scène ouverte. It is the underlying core ambition (or unique product offering)–democratising and sharing poetry—that unite the two under the same brand umbrella.

Thirdly, I have analysed the image construction of slam through the three dominant voices, with a special focus on a period of intense mediatisation of slam that created a celebrity slam 'rockstar' and forever changed the position of slam in French pop culture. This look at the *brand image* of slam shows how its identity and image have been discursively negotiated in the public sphere, how the slam scene has reacted to this discourse, and how ultimately, the dominant images and cultural myths that came out of that discursive co-construction have come to define slam generally.

Finally, I have looked at slam's *brand organisation*. I suggest that not only is slam a brand, but specifically it is most akin to a corporate brand. Corporate brands are unusual in that the brand identity also affects how its people, institutions, norms, and culture are structured and understood. Accordingly, I have traced how two institutions of slam and one convention are reflective of slam's identity *and* a product of the cultural context. The first institution are the ateliers. Not only is there an incentive to host ateliers as it provides justification for public financial support, ateliers also help to realise some of the values of slam characterised by its identity traits like accessibilité. The second institution is collectifs. Not only is there a significant proportion of collectifs in French slam, they often incorporate to become *associations* which provides them with additional support and importantly, cultural legitimacy. Finally, blases are a convention of French slam. Not only does their presence in slam suggest a shared history with French hip hop (like collectifs), they provide a valuable tool for ensuring the ethos and ambition of slam. They can provide a mask to indicate the colludique space of slam, thus enhancing its social space and creative potential through the collective and collaborative play-state. All of these aspects of slam—identity, positioning, DNA,

image, and organisation—are aspects of a brand and taken together, they holistically illustrate the ontology of slam.

Slam is not just oral, live, open-mic poetry performance nor is it just a movement for the democratisation of poetry. Slam is not just creative/artistic, it is simultaneously social.

These two cannot be separated in slam and are crucial to its image that sets it apart from similar forms. Poetry is seen as not socially inclusive enough (accessibilité). Rap can be not creative/artistic and not 'free' (liberté) enough for some people (free in the sense of lack of conventions). Slam is simultaneously both creative, artistic self-expression as well as inclusive, accessible, democratic, egalitarian, collaborative and fun *self-/* expression.

The rencontre of slam that unites all of its identity traits and is found consistently through all its aspects is both a creative rencontre of diverse poetry and creative expression *and* a rencontre of different people and their voices, perspectives, experiences, and emotions. The slam spirit is found in the intersection of that diversité, where it enters into a multi-way rencontre, becoming a métissage of what is now, poésie démocratisée.

Slam, a Cult Brand

While we can define slam simply as *oral, open mic, live poetry structured around tournoi or a scène ouverte based in an ethos of democratic poetry*, it is also much more than that. It is a metaphorical and literal space for creative expression that is inherently social and which is complementary to both everyday life, to the social sphere, and to creative production across a variety of genres. I contend that slam is best understood as a brand of oral poetry. Importantly, I argue that it is not just a brand, but a cult brand.

People gather around causes, ideas, ideals and values and cult brands tap into one or more of these things, fostering a community around the brand through them (Kapferer 2015:160). Importantly, cult brands also respond to a cultural or social development, situating themselves as symbols of that cultural myth in action. Accordingly, having cult status can sustain a brand even if it never catches on with the general public. Finally, cult brands sell an image and/or a lifestyle, rather than just a product. Slam, in this sense, sells poésie

démocratisée. Slam is the product and community that taps into a greater movement of democratising cultural products—that is, providing equal and low-to-no-barrier access to cultural forms that have been hitherto restricted in some way.

Slam has very low to no barrier to entry, but by being flexible, open, and ambiguous, it sustains itself with a high barrier to exit. If a slameur wants to make music, they can still perform and develop their song writing at a scene ouverte and put together a slam concert with their music and textes. If a slameur wants to embrace theatre, again, they can use slam as part of their theatre work and since the French tradition can be very elastic in what falls under the spectrum of slam—broadly, orality—theatre can be a part of slam broadly speaking. Naturally, the tournoi and slam sessions remain dedicated to poetic orality and liveness, but 'brand extensions' (like theatre or music) are also still within the greater concept of slam given that they come from the slam spirit. The barrier to exit mentioned above is the sense of community and freedom that the creative and social opportunities of slam brings with it. Slam is not merely artistic and not just about poetry. Slam is also a social space in which both the meeting of people and the meeting of creativity happens. The two, creativity and sociality, are inextricable to slam and they feed each other, making the slam 'sense' stronger. This is all indicative of a cult brand, including the social aspect of an imagined community coalescing around it.

The imagined community of a cult brand is held together by both the connection to the brand as held by individuals and the connection such individuals develop with each other, from seeing each other with a consciousness-of-kind. In slam, AAM is rejected as a slameur by the scene because he does not embody the right values or kind of commitment to the product (slam) that other community members identify with. GCM, despite being a commercial star, is however welcomed by that same community because he exemplifies these values such as partage, rencontre, and so on. Unlike anti-establishment subcultures, mainstream success and commercial production is here not justification for ostracisation because they are not incompatible with the ethos of slam. As long as it is democratic, it is slam. Commercially produced music that is based in slam textes is nonetheless still highly

democratic because it enables the sharing of poetry to a broader audience. It allows for greater dissemination, for more people to access poetry—for poésie démocratisée.

Cult Brands Address a Cultural Moment: Slam is Popular Poetry for the 21st Century

Slam is both as old as time as well as incredibly contemporary. There is nothing inherently new about people standing up, in front of one another, and sharing their poetry. However, for a long time poetry has been mediated, by the page or now by a screen. Slam takes away that intermediary for its rencontre and moment of pure slam. It is not merely a return to orality nor a rejection of writing, but an awakening of a disposition towards poetic creative self-expression. Despite such timeless concerns, however, the ideologies which inform slam, the celebrity of GCM, the mediatisation of slam (and nature of new media), the process of branding it—both explicitly by PLH and organically by everyone—and the globalised-yet-local nature of it, are all very current.

In its process of formation, the slam format (rules and structure like tournoi) met with a zeitgeist of democratization in culture generally that we can observe over at least the past twenty to thirty years (e.g. democratisation of knowledge with web 1.0, of public speech with web 2.0, the free software movement, decentralisation and the broad drive towards consumer choice driven cultural products). It is in midst of this democratising of culture that the slam format finds resonance and is able to manifest an ideology and brand itself as poésie démocratisée. This did not, of course, occur in a vacuum. The formation of poésie démocratisée also combined with and was influenced by the cultural products positioned around slam as it evolved; traditional poetry, chanson, rap, not to mention French logocentrism generally. In this specifically French context, slam is able to capitalise on a desire for poetry that is unburdened by the weight of the canon and the importance of the written word to French cultural identity. I argue that slam becomes a cult brand in France especially because it addresses this social need in the context of logocentrism and the French literary tradition. Arguably, in a country where orality is the standard and/or is valued on par with logocentric-oriented high culture, slam would not have the same symbolic importance that

draws a community around it. This contributes to slam as a uniquely French cultural product that could only have formed and grown as it has in the French cultural landscape As I have argued, slam does not upend traditional poetry, chanson, or rap. It provides an alternative space that was seen as lacking and through its branding attracts a community who find meaning in its message and who through their participation then sustain its ethos and ideology. The slam brand is born from the meeting of a space for *self*-/expression and a will for the democratisation of culture. The brand reifies and communicates the spirit of slam. This spirit, in turn, is what can be felt by audiences and observers when they engage with slam, whether as insiders or outsiders to the phenomenon. The particularities of that spirit is also what makes slam not just a brand, but a cult brand.

Limitations of this Project

Two limitations to the study must be briefly discussed. The first is that the tenets of diversité and openness (accessibilité)—even regarding what or how slam is—are fundamental and thus make slam *inherently* ambiguous. Indeed, the open nature of slam means that everyone who comes into contact with it has their own quite idiosyncratic understanding of it: slam seen as a place,[183] format,[184] rencontre,[185] exchange/partage,[186] or something else and completely different. This is both the strength and the weakness of slam, and by extension a potential weakness in any research seeking understanding of slam. Slam is—as a cultural phenomenon—discursively constructed and therefore its image (that is, its dominant understanding) is subject to change over time. Accordingly, although this study identifies slam's current image-understanding, this may also change given precisely this discursive

[183] «Le slam, c'est juste un terrain. Un endroit où l'on peut faire de la poésie, un spectacle,» résume-t-il. Sans décor, ni costumes. Avec son corps. Et pas seulement pour se faire plaisir. Pas seulement pour draguer. Pour se raccrocher plutôt à une chaîne de minuscules histoires. « Une poésie communautaire» à haut débit et en roue libre.»' (Paris Normandie 2003).
[184] 'Pour moi, le secret de la vitalité du slam se cache dans sa recette. Le slam n'est qu'un mode d'emploi: quelques minutes à égalité partagées par tous sur une scène. J'ai depuis participé à près de mille événements. La recette est bonne: je n'ai pas encore d'extinction de voix.' (Normal in GdB 2009:159).
[185] 'Le slam, ce sont des moments de rencontre où la scène est partagée par tous ceux qui le veulent' (GCM in Dicale 2008) and ' Le slam est une rencontre soudaine entre des publics différents, des écritures éparses et diverses, et souvent des verbes, des interprétations, des façons de dire différentes.' (Ligue Slam de France 2009:8).
[186] 'Rappelons que le slam est un moment de libre expression et d'échange avec le public à travers un texte, limité à trois minutes, dit ou lu.' (L'Union 2012).

nature of the image creation. However, this must be separated from the essential traits of slam that I have identified and which I argue comprise the core immutable essence of slam, its identity distilled down to ten characteristics that self-sustain one another under an organising concept of 'rencontre' and 'poésie démocratisée'. I have proposed that this identity is the brand identity of slam. This core identity of the brand will remain more or less intact, which is especially crucial for cult brands where any change in identity can result in the loss of cult status. Of course, though brand identity is difficult to change it can happen. In branding, if *part* of the identity should change substantially this is called re-branding. Often, re-branding takes the form of a modification of a name or name change and/or a new logo. However, more substantial re-branding, such as changing the most typical products entirely results in an entirely new brand that happens to share some of its DNA with the previous—now defunct— brand. Importantly however, while these aspects of the brand DNA can change to a certain extent, any substantial change will result in a new phenomenon—not slam— and any minor changes to the surface of slam will bear the traces (or scars!) of the identity traits I have identified and thus the ontology of slam provided here.

Another limitation is that this study has focused only on 'public texts'. This is intentional, and based on two assumptions. The first being that the closest to possible objective 'truth' of slam that is relevant to our understanding, is what can be found in the intersection, thus overlap, of difference subjective truths of slam. Accordingly, it is the discursive construction of slam that reifies it. The second assumption behind the choice for public texts is based on the premise that images are more 'real' than reality in terms of how they affect our understanding and interaction with cultural phenomena around us. Accordingly, it is what is said in public—either with the intention as public, perhaps even performative, speech, or with the recognition of it accessible to a public— that matters the most, not what is said between friends that may never travel beyond that intimate space. Thus what slameurs say about slam publicly is how they wish for it to be seen, likewise for outsiders. This aspirational image (identity ideal) is what ultimately will be constructive of slam itself,

since it is what can be observed and recognised by people new to the concept who then act according to their preconceived impressions, beliefs, and framing of it.

Accordingly, while I have used public texts in this manner to uncover the ontology of slam and to apply the discourse to a framework of sui generis brands, further research using interviews, participant-observation, surveys, and others methods with either quantitative or qualitative analyses would be complementary to the work done here.

Slam, a Brand of Oral Poetry: Poésie Démocratisée and Cultural Studies

Slam has been a cultural phenomenon for at least twenty years, but the research on it only began in the past ten—spurred in part, like many others things, thanks to GCM. As I have shown, French slam is not simply the American tradition of slam poetry done in French but a hybrid, culturally situated and distinct iteration all its own. This alone warrants the study of slam for cultural studies. But in addition, given the history with French rap and developing connections with chanson française, slam comes into play with two of the predominant research areas of popular culture in cultural studies and this study provides a thorough analysis of it in English and suited to classic cultural studies—that is, studying it on its own terms, as popular poetry, and not through a lens of high culture.

In addition to contributing to the French cultural studies literature generally and building on the substantive theory of slam developed here, I have also sought for my approach to be potentially applied in the forming of an inchoate formal theory of sui generis brands that I suggest may be informative for contemporary cultural phenomena. I have argued that for slam specifically, the concept of a brand is more informative and appropriate for slam than even the loosest interpretation of genre.

Applying a different model onto creative production can allow for different aspects of the production to emerge. Much in the same way that Becker's Art Worlds took the focus away from the individual artist and allowed a recognition of the collaborative work that happens 'behind the scenes' in the production of art, rather than contorting the concept of a genre to fit slam, or forcing slam to fit into a genre model, using the concept of a brand has allowed for

exploration of more than just the textes or the performances themselves, but also the image construction of slam, the way its institutions interact with proximate art worlds, how the cultural policy affects the growth of slam and the symbolic meanings ascribed to slam by its practitioners. This approach has allowed for taking into account simultaneously both the creative, art-producing aspects of slam and the social, culture-producing aspects.

By way of an example of what can be at stake in using these theoretical models, and to illustrate how rigid application can invite misconceptions, the linguist Julien Barret (2010), who is specialised in French rap, has argued that while GCM's live performances are slam, his albums are 'spoken word'. However, despite his use of the English term 'spoken word' his (re-)definition of it particular to French slam recordings like those of GCM and Souleymane Diamanka: spoken word is voiced poetry with music (i.e. all rap and slam albums) but can be, sometimes, a capella (81-84). Arguably, it appears that in lacking a genre into which to place GCM's albums, he has instead appropriated an English language term and defined it expressly to exemplify published works like 'Les voyages en train' and 'Je viens de là' as physically apart from the slam scene and to legitimate them on par with rap. Accordingly, when performed a capella and live, they return to being consistent with what he argues is slam. They are the same texte, written with the same authorial intent—and importantly, unlike rap, the music is complementary, not integral, to the work. Furthermore, by recording them it arguably allows for greater dissemination of poetry—a goal of poésie démocratisée. Like Narcisse argues regarding making a record of a slam texte, 'Certains slameurs refusent d'être mis par écrit sous prétexte que le slam doit être un moment vivant. Je comprends cette idée, mais je ne suis pas d'accord pour autant: arrêtons de dire que le slam doit être ceci et ne doit pas être cela.' (Narcisse quoted in Glévarec 2014). As such, I disagree with this approach that I suggest comes out of the constraint of trying to define slam within poetic (or musical) genres. This distinction he offers between spoken word and slam is unhelpful because as I argue there is a meaningful difference between generic spoken word and slam—slam is a brand of oral poetry (or a brand

of spoken word depending on the definition).[187] Furthermore, to reduce both slam and rap to the same genre 'spoken word' as he does minimises the important, foundational differences between them.

In this study I have argued that slam is less determined by such boundaries and rather is better understood as determined by *l'esprit slam*—or its brand. This concept of a brand is useful because in addition to providing multiple angles of analysis that take into account both the creative/artistic and the social of a cultural phenomenon, it also allows for concepts like that of a 'brand extension': a new product(s) that differs in kind from a brand's most typical products, but which carries with it the essence of the brand. Rather than argue that GCM's albums are one genre (spoken word) and his live performances another (slam) it is much more informative to see slam as the parent brand and albums like those of GCM or Rouda as brand extensions of slam—or, as slameurs say, 'un album issu du slam'. This is of course just one example, but perhaps an informative one, to illustrate how such theoretical developments can improve and nuance our understanding of cultural phenomena.

Possibilities for Further Research

I have presented herein a substantive theory of slam's ontology. In presenting it I have applied the framework of branding and brands to slam in order to better elaborate and explore it. However, in order to conceive of slam as a brand, it has been first necessary to account for the lack of centralisation in slam that would be found in traditional brands. Accordingly, I have proposed the concept of a sui generis brand: an emergent, likely rhizomatic and grassroots brand without a highly organised and integrated brand management, the brand identity of which is co-constructed through the discursive construction of its image by all the stakeholders, including potential 'customers'. This co-construction is only possible in situations of public discourse and exposure, augmented often by social media discourse that contributes to the reification of certain ideas and impressions that resonate. Sui generis brands

[187] As mentioned in the introduction, there are various definitions of spoken word and oral poetry that differ from how I have used them in this thesis. I prefer oral poetry to encapsulate the destination of orality, however, slam can also be called a brand of spoken word, when spoken word is used to mean modern oral poetry.

are a type of cultural phenomena whose symbolic tapestry is emergent and self-sustaining, but which coalesces into a brand allowing people to recognise and infer what makes it distinct from anything similar to it.

I suggest that this concept of sui generis brands may be informative for studying cultural phenomena like slam that are subject to mediatisation, all the more so today with the influence of social media on public discourse, meaning-making, and conceptions of 'truth'. Furthermore, this concept of a sui generis brand may also be informative not just for general cultural phenomena but specifically for ones in the arts and humanities that may not be amenable to categorisation as genres, movements, styles or traditions without extensive contortion.

As I have shown, slam is a highly complex phenomenon that resists easy categorisation. However, it has not been studied as much as other popular forms given its relative youth and, arguably, due to its complexity. Globally, scholarly interest in popular poetry and slam poetry in particular is increasing and accordingly there is a plethora of research, too much to address here properly, that can be undertaken regarding slam.

What I have presented here demonstrates that cultural phenomena and products which are culturally hybrid are nonetheless, in their ideological manifestation, often still highly culturally situated. Slam was not imported into France via the American tradition but rather through a mediated image of slam poetry that resonated with individuals in France engaging in folk oral poetry practices. It retained some of the democratic, inclusive, accessible spirit from the American original while making those values distinctly French. American slam poetry was designed to facilitate and make entertaining spoken word poetry. French slam went a step further and provided a space for poetic oral expression in the first instance. The differing traditions of poetic writing and orality in the two cultures affects the historical position of slam (poetry). Accordingly a fully comparative study of the two traditions would further highlight the extent to which French slam *is French*. And furthermore, to the extent that the USA has a rich history of oral tradition, whereas France is renowned for its writing and literature, such a comparative study would identify the effects of each culture's respective canon on slam

(poetry). Furthermore, in light of the Critical Race Studies angle taken by Somers-Willet in her study of American slam poetry, a comparative study of French and American slam could further elaborate the differences in understandings, implications, and negotiations of racial identity in each country through a study either of the poetry itself or how the slam (poetry) addresses these issues. Finally, given the effect of GCM's celebrity on French slam, and the distinct celebrity culture of each country, a comparative study could address the marginal position of American slam poets in the record industry and charts. Any of these comparative studies will be aided by the work done here that identifies how slam *is* poésie démocratisée, what tenets support that cultural myth and ideal as its identity, how slam is perceived, and how it is organised within the French context.

«Rêver, chercher, apprendre…

Explorer sans relâche et la forme et le fond, et puis l'oeuvre achevée, tout remettre en question…

Écrire»[188]

—Charles Aznavour (1924-2018)

[188] An excerpt from 'Écrire' by Charles Aznavour, posted as above by Grand Corps Malade on his social media accounts in honour of Aznavour following his passing, October 1, 2018.

Post Scriptum

After the completion of this thesis, a minor but significant event occurred concerning the French slam scene and its place in the world that merits mention here. The website for the FFDSP has disappeared and the Coupe du monde hosted by the FFDSP/Slam Productions was subject to boycotts from several national finalists from across Europe following the 'banning' of two slam poets from the Coupe by Slam Productions. These poets—Frej Haar (Sweden), queer activist and the European slam champion 2017, and Rudka Zydel (Polish national champion) shared on social media that they had been banned in late March and early April from the tournoi in response to their complaints regarding how the organisers were managing the event. As a result of their public pronouncements and the subsequent discourse engaged in by PLH on their Facebook profiles, other European competitors decided to boycott the tournoi, voice their negative experiences with PLH and Slam Productions, and even call for a new Coupe to be organised by someone other than Slam Productions. This clearly has ramifications for the future of slam in France and is reminiscent of the tensions that led to the schism I detailed in Chapter Four. Accordingly, I will briefly document some of the controversy as it pertains to the continued brand image of slam (poetry) in France, especially the orthodox competition-based interpretation associated with the FFDSP/ Slam Productions.

The controversy began when Frej Haar (Frejdel Haar), who is disabled and requires the use of a cane, made accommodation requests in response to a *nineteen* hour flight that Slam Productions booked for her from Gothenburg to Paris for the Coupe du monde. This booking also came with the expectation of sleeping in the Riga airport terminal as they would not arrange a hotel for the extraneous layover.

Her request to change to a shorter flight to better accommodate her disability resulted in her being disinvited from the competition both in the form of comments PLH made on her Facebook post using his 'Patrick Binard' Facebook account (he responds from several different

accounts) and in the form of emails with Slam Productions (an employee name Charlène) which Frej Haar also published on her Facebook page. Following her Facebook posts, where she remarked on the rumours she had heard about PLH being 'crazy', other poets began to call for a boycott of the Coupe du monde and to speak out about the 'bullying' they had experienced and rumours they had heard of PLH's personality (Frej Haar 2018a).

The other banned poet, Rudka Zydel, commented extensively on these posts and was soon also banned from the Coupe du monde. PLH took issue with her comments. According to Rudka Zydel, he then contacted the organisers of the Polish national poetry slam, 'implying they need to tell me [Rudka Zydel] off and keep their poets in line in the following years if they ever want to work with him again' (Rudka Zydel 2018a). According to Rudka Zydel, this was over Easter weekend, therefore, nobody replied immediately, which upset PLH further. She was then banned from the Coupe either due to the delayed response over the holiday as she claims, or as Frej Haar suggests, because Rudka Zydel offered a critique on Frej Haar's posts that the Coupe's website was not available in English despite being for an international audience (Rudka Zyel 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Frej Haar 2018b).

One of the statements Rudka Zydel made on Frej Haar's Facebook page stands out as it echoes the same criticisms the French slam community has had with regards to PLH/Slam Productions/FFDSP: 'The main spirit of poetry slams apart from the sense of community is free speech, which we can exercise on stage and online. And with which for some reason you don't seem comfortable with [*sic*] apparently [...]' (Rudka Zydel 2018c). Furthermore, the claims of how she was treated by PLH/Slam Productions is reminiscent of those of others, women in particular, like Dame Gabrielle (see Chapter Five, 'Cris & Poésie'). For instance, that PLH called her a 'princess' for asking that the website be available also in English, which she and others interpreted as misogynistic in intent (Frej Haar 2018c; Rudka Zydel 2018a).

The public sharing of these women's experiences has led to other poets (Sofie Frost,[189] Norway's representative; Niklas Mesaros,[190] Sweden; and Venla Moisala, Finland's representative) slam poetry organisations (Norway's SLAM! Kollektivet, Finland's Poetry Slamin SM-kilpailut), queer rights groups (Guerilla Resistance in Belgium) and others to speak out and call for boycotts with many international poets no longer wishing to participate in any events organised by PLH due to his attitude and behaviour—something that until recently many had generously assumed to be a result of the 'language barrier' (Sofie Frost 2018; Niklas Mesaros 2018; Poetry Slamin SM-kilpailut 2018; SLAM!Kollektivet 2018; Guerilla Resistance 2018). While some of the global slam poetry scene are upset with the lack of respect for disabled poets, others are concerned about how PLH insists that poets respect him and his organisation, to do things his way or not at all. One Hungarian slam poet even went as far as to compare PLH to a dictator or George Orwell's *1984* (Péter Mészáros 2018). The Norwegian slam poetry organisation that supported Sofie Frost's boycott, SLAM!Kollektivet, wrote in an open letter to the FFDSP their concern for the lack of respect the organisation was showing towards the values of slam poetry.[191] This outcry from the

[189] Sofie Frost, a noted feminist slam poet, boycotted the Coupe du monde because of how Frej Haar was treated, the lack of respect for people with disabilities, and as a result of the email exchange she held with PLH concerning her food allergies where he was belligerent and rude, refusing to make any accommodations and blaming her for the situation. She also claims that after sharing on her blog her experience with PLH, she heard from others 'stories about violence, threats of violence, misogyny, and transphobia [Historier om vold, trusler om vold, misogyni og transfobi.] [translation, mine]' (Sofie Frost 2018).

[190] Niklas Mesaros posted on his Facebook page in response to the controversy with Frej Haar and Rudka Zydel, 'Regarding the shitstorm surrounding the world cup slam i Paris [*sic*]. I've been to the world cup in Paris twice as a national slam champion of Sweden and can only confirm what other poets are now shining a light on. The organization is a clusterfuck run by a bully who hides behind smiles and the language barrier. People where [*sic*] genuinely scared of asking about basic information like translations of their poems or just when to be where. Any questions or concerns I had during my stay was met with aggression and threats of being excluded from the competition. There where [*sic*] actually physical confrontations between Pilote and staff, which made everyone feel really uncomfortable and uneasy. He was extremely short tempered and could be at one moment yelling someone into tears and the next second be smiling and laughing. […]' (Niklas Mesaros 2018). This excerpt was included in his call for a boycott of the Coupe du monde. In the comments, slam poets who had participated in the Coupe previous corroborated his statements, with only a few trying to defend PLH personally. One comment on Niklas Mesaros' post from a Danish slam poet is alarming, but consistent with the majority of the discourse: 'Pilote is a psycopath [sic] (who tried to hit one of the female volunteers (among other things) and I'm glad more people are now calling for a boycott… and I hope this will eventually lead to a world cup that is a legitimate competition…' (Michael Dyst 2018). There is one comment—that has not been deleted—from the Grand Poetry Slam (formerly, Coupe du Monde) account here. It reads simply, 'poor little niklas! [*sic*]' which appears to be characteristic of the attitude these and others poets have been concerned with starting in France in the early noughties and now across Europe.

[191] 'The event and the organisers should represent the same values as Poetry Slam does all over the world: openness, free speech, sense of community and solidarity. Failing to follow these basic principles, the event becomes a mockery of the whole idea of Poetry Slam. The World Cup should be about celebrating the various forms of poetry on stage and the wonderful opportunity to bring poets together from all over the world. This should be FUN. This should be done TOGETHER. And the event should be a SAFE SPACE for everyone, from

European competitive slam community is similar to those tensions, and even uses some of the same language, that precipitated the schism wherein the scène ouverte tradition felt that what PLH was espousing was not democratic and therefore not in alignment with *le slam*. The events this summer may well be the start of another splintering of French slam or a downgraded status of French competitive slam poetry in international competition. That Slam Productions and PLH have been running the Coupe du monde for over a decade now, and it was just this spring, 2018, that these concerns have resulted in action may be a result of our current wave of 'calling it out', an era where #balancetonporc among the myriad of other activist movements (feminist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, etc.) are calling time on discriminatory behaviour that has long gone unchecked. This boycott, however small, may be the start of French slam/ European slam poetry's own #metoo moment.

Importantly, this reaction against Slam Productions that has taken place on social media also includes French and francophone slameurs. In response to the open letter published by the Finnish team, the director of a Belgian urban arts foundation, Simon Raket, remarked on his belief that PLH is incapable of change and declared it 'time to reappropriate the world cup' (Simon Raket 2018). Meanwhile, in a change from the rest of his comments on Frej Haar's page written in French, the slameur Faithful Baana Enono Arnaud wrote in English: 'Please you have to boycott this event and organize meeting with every structures slam poetry in world for true world Competition because hot pilote is shame of Slam' [*sic*] (Faithful Baana Enono Arnaud 2018a). He also pointed out that the Coupe du monde is not a 'world cup' since it does not include any African countries (ibid. 2018b). His criticism is indicative of the current state of exchange (or lack thereof) between African francophone slam and the slam scene in France *métropolitaine*. Why, if Slam Productions insists on making an ostensibly international event French language-based by not providing even an English language website, does it not then reach out to the international community in the francophonie beyond Switzerland, Belgium, and Quebec? Along with the rest of the

competitors to organisers and followers. In the future we wish to see even more diverse range of representatives from across the world participating in The World Cup.' (SLAM!Kollektivet 2018).

francophonie, there are thriving slam scenes in both French and English speaking African countries, with artists travelling between Europe and Africa regularly. It appears that PLH replied to these criticisms and an argument ensued, but PLH's comments were later deleted. It is clear from the replies that whatever discussion transpired, it was not cordial.

The deletion of almost all the comments from Slam Productions or PLH's personal account(s), alongside the deletion of the FFDSP website may be connected as a form of damage control—especially as more people outside of France become privy to the rumours and evidence of PLH's reputation leading them to accuse Slam Productions/FFDSP/PLH of 'spitting on the basic foundations of the poetry slam' (Hungarian slam poet, Péter Mészáros 2018). Meanwhile, the LSF continues to pursue their vision for *le slam français* and have success as the network for '*le slam français et francophone*'. It may be in the future that the LSF will open further into the international competitive scene, rather than focus on *slam français* and replace the FFDSP/Slam Productions to rebuild the reputation of French competitive slam poetry. Ironically, beginning in the early noughties, the FFDSP/Slam Productions sought to align itself with the international slam poetry scene based in the American tradition but a little over a decade later, it is the uniquely French variant—*le slam français*—which has established better connections with key figures like Mark Smith and maintained a consistent vision and brand that upholds its core values. Furthermore, on the issue of language, the LSF, despite being focused on francophone slam, has already established international connections (e.g. the French Slam connection) and proven capable of networking with poets in other languages—which is a repeated complaint of the European poets regarding Slam Productions/FFDSP. Importantly, they are also encouraging the learning of French as a result of being able to communicate and share French slam with non-francophone speakers. Thus, it may be that the time is ripe now, with France as a nation embracing its international role as a leader in Europe, that organisations like the LSF also open up their vision for poetic expression to the rest of Europe and the world whilst maintaining their authentic 'Frenchness' and the brand of *le slam français*. Finally, it is interesting to note that as I have argued that French slam is a brand, a sui generis brand, there

is no central authority to deal with the damage that this controversy may have done to the international (and domestic) image of French slam. Instead, the brand will arguably continue to evolve discursively and unpredictably.

Sources cited

As the names used by the poets cited are their Facebook profile names and/or pen names, I have retained the exact spelling and treated their names as a contiguous whole rather than treat them as legal forenames and surnames.

Faithful Baana Enono Arnaud (2018a) Comment on Facebook post (Frej Haar 2018a) 30 March, 2018 at 09:13UTC
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1799876923366097&reply_comment_id=1799887086698414

Faithful Baana Enono Arnaud (2018b) Comment on Facebook post (Frej Haar 2018a). 30 March, 2018 at 09:14 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1799876923366097

Frej Haar (2018a) Facebook post on her page. 29 March 2018 at 16:33 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?hc_location=ufi

Frej Haar (2018b) Comment on Facebook post Frej Haar (2018a) 2 April, 2018 at 08:16 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1803040906383032

Frej Haar (2018c) Comment on Facebook post (Frej Haar 2018a). April 2, 2018 at 08:16 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1803040906383032

Guerilla Resistance (2018) Facebook Post. Guerilla Resistance. April 2, 2018 at 12:25 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/expect.guerrillaresistance/posts/179158679396020

Michael Dyst (2018) Comment on Facebook post by Nikalas Mesaros (2018) April 2, 2018 at 10:47 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/niklas.mesaros/posts/10155293999197466?comment_id=10155294107542466

Niklas Mesaros (2018) Facebook post. April 2, 2018 at 10:03 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/niklas.mesaros/posts/10155293999197466

Péter Mészarnos (2018) Comment on Facebook post (Frej Haar 2018a) 30 March 2018, 14:59 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1799876923366097&reply_comment_id=1800146120005844

Poetry slamin SM-kilpailut (2018) ‘Open letter to FFDSP’ Facebook post. Poetry slamin SM-kilpailut page. April 9, 2018 at 13:29 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/finslam2018/posts/1717786981644431

Rudka Zydel (2018a) Facebook post. Rudka Zydel. 1 April, 2088 at 23:27 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1933358190309085&id=100009047686074

Rudka Zydel (2018b) Comment on Facebook post. Frej Haar (2018a) March 30, 2018 at 08:54UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1799876923366097

Rudka Zydel (2018c) Comment on Facebook post. Frej Haar (2018a) March 30, 2018 at 18:20 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/frej.haar/posts/1799234093430380?comment_id=1799865613367228&reply_comment_id=1800333373320452

Simon Raket (2018) Comment on Facebook post (Poetry slamin SM-kilpailut 2018). April 10, 2018 at 00:50 UTC.
https://www.facebook.com/finslam2018/posts/1717786981644431?comment_id=1718401731582956

SLAM!Kollektivet (2018) ‘Open letter to FFDSP’. Facebook post. April 12, 2018 at 07:34 UTC. https://www.facebook.com/slampoesi/posts/829626397243056

Sofie Frost (2018) ‘Slampoesi VM starter i morgen, skulle sittet på et fly til Paris nå.’ Blog post. Sofie Frost. 7 May, 2018. http://www.sofiefrost.com/2018/05/07/slampoesi-vm-starter-i-morgen/

Appendix i:
Glossary

NB: Some of the terms here, especially those referring to slam events, are used idiosyncratically within the scene. The definitions here explain how I use them for the purposes of this thesis. Their usage in direct quotes may imply a different nuance or interpretation; however, I have attempted to define them such that they encapsulate the majority interpretation.

Activiste

Activistes refers to *all* who are active in and integrated into the slam scene. I borrow this term from Fagerlid (2012) referring to the broader community of slameurs, slam 'insiders': atelier *animateurs*, producers, venue owners, and dedicated fans who are active in the scene—all of whom may or may not do slam. In slam, most of these 'support' positions are held by slameurs themselves, but 'activiste' better represents their additional role in the image construction, brand building, and maintenance of the phenomenon and community.

Atelier

See Chapter Six. A workshop, mostly focusing on writing (*atelier d'écriture*) but may also focus on other aspects of slam like performance, enunciation, et cetera.

Blase

See Chapter Six. A blase is a pseudonym or stage-name. It may also be used as an alias; that is, used full-time outside of slam or other creative scenes.

Collectif

See Chapter Six. A collectif is a group of activistes, often all slameurs, but sometimes comprising a mix of slameurs and other creatives like musicians. NB By virtue of being in a slam collectif, these musicians are, by extension, slam activistes.

Freestyle

Freestyle is a term that comes from rap and refers to rapping without music. It is also when a rap is composed extemporaneously, with a few or entirely of pre-written lines/verses. It can be wholly improvised, no-prewritten lines, but this is relatively rare. Finally, it can refer to an unpublished work, *un rap inédit*. It can be applied to slam; however, this is rare as most slam textes are carefully crafted and written despite their destination on the stage.

Scène

1. A stage. Usually a space cleared in a bar or café with a microphone. Less commonly an elevated or otherwise partitioned stage.

2. Shorted form of 'scène ouverte' referring to the open mic portion of a session.

3. Alt. for slam session or slam soirée.

Scène ouverte

1. The 'open' tradition of slam (see Chapter Four). Culturally French and less concerned with competition than it is with being democratic poetry.

2. The open mic portion of a slam session/soirée.

Slam de poésie

See tournoi. Alt. *chelem,* tournoi, slam, slam session.

Slam de poésie is an alternative term for the competition format that is often used to purposefully allude specifically to the American tradition.

Slam session

Slam session is used ambiguously in the scene, with different nuance depending on who uses it. Here, it means a slam soirée that follows a typical format of atelier(s) followed by a scène ouverte. If there is a tournoi, it is more playful than serious.

Slameur/-euse

One who does slam: writes and performs slam textes. May or may not participate in tournoi. All slameurs/-euses are activistes, not all activistes are slameurs/-euses.

Soirée

A slam soirée is used to refer to the evening during which slam events are held. It can comprise a mix of ateliers, scène ouverte, tournoi, a one-man show, group performance, other *spectacle,* et cetera —or any combination thereof.

Spoken word

Rare. Slam, slam poetry, stand-up poetry, *un poème à voix haute*, *la poésie sonore*. Spoken word tends to be used in Anglophone scene (in France and internationally) to mean modern oral poetry. The difference between American-style *competitive* slam poetry and spoken word is the competition element. Colloquially, some English speakers have taken to using slam poetry as a synonym for def poetry or any poetry with an urban-infused lyric (Somers-Willet: 2009:100). Note that spoken word is not limited to poetry, but this is the dominant form.

Texte

'Texte' refers to the poems that are crafted with the intent of performance/orality and therefore may range from just a few prompts or be published as if it were written originally to be read. In the greater context of slam then, 'texte' refers to the slam product, whether it is performed orally or written down—in whatever state or form. Finally, 'texte' should not however be confused with the English 'text' either in the literal sense or as something that can be read: a set of signs that can be decoded.

I use 'texte' rather than the alternatives, 'slam' or 'poème'. Slameurs often refer to their product as 'slam' (e.g. Il déclame son slam) and less commonly as a 'poème'. Arguably, they prefer 'slam' to avoid the connotations of 'poème'; however, for this thesis, this usage is sense is liable to cause confusion and therefore I have opted to use 'texte'.

Tournoi

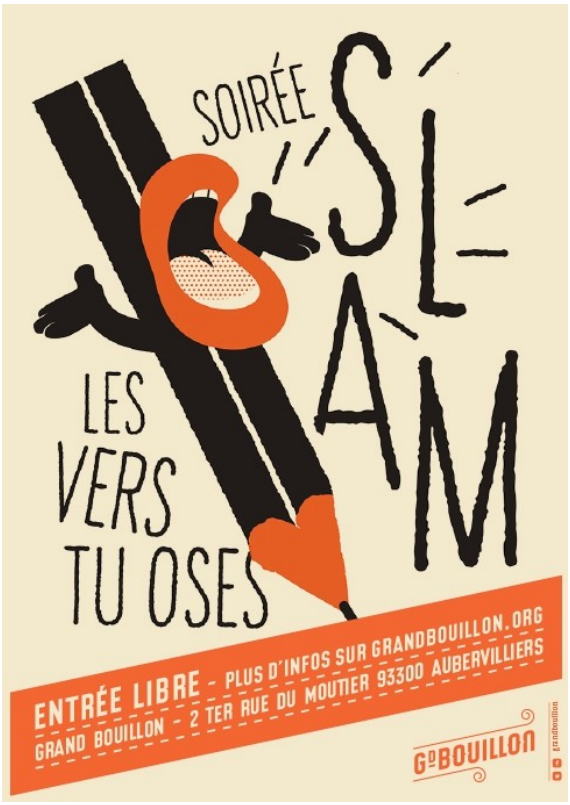
The slam competition. Depending on the interpretation, the tournoi will follow either the 'Chicago rules' with a detailed scoring rubric or the simplified French rules (3-5 minute maximum; a capella; one person at a time; no props, mise en scene, or costumes. Scoring, if any, and tournament structure vary). Tournoi also is the general term referring to a slam event that is competitive in nature. This includes also duels, *concours*, et cetera in addition to the above traditional competition formats.

Appendix ii:

Slam ephemera:
Flyers for Slam Events

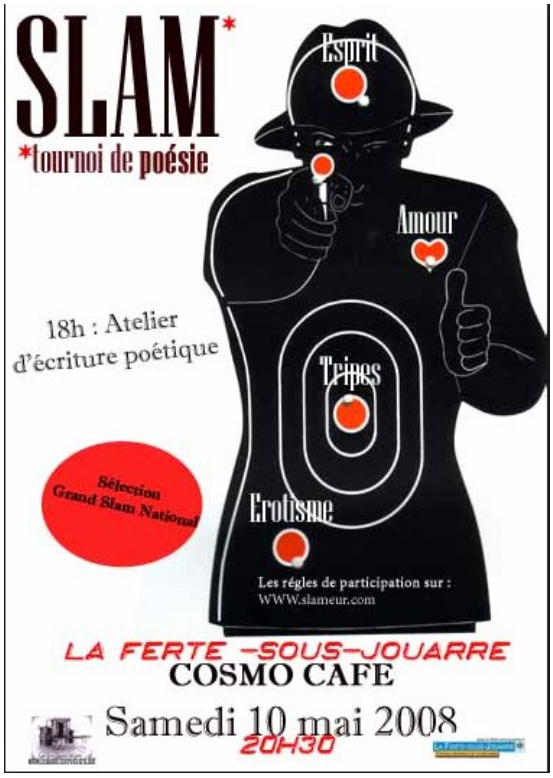
Ephemera showing the diversity of visual style, logos and motifs (Chatper Four), what can be seen as recognisable brand.

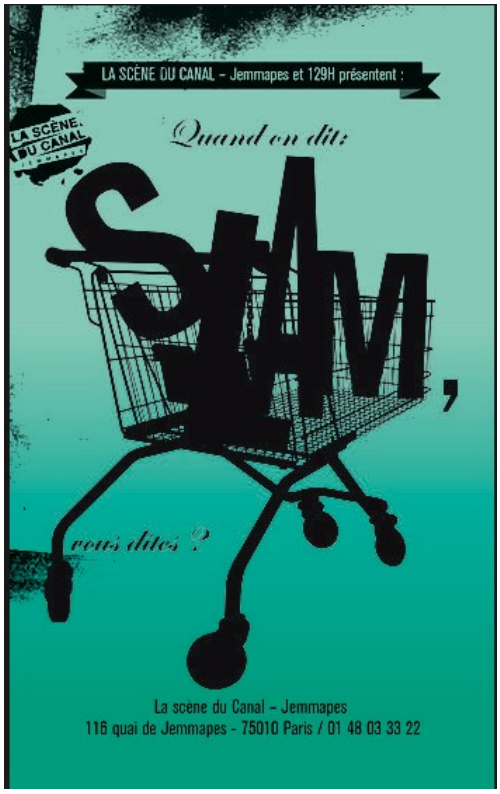



SOIRÉE
SLAM
LES VERS TU OSES
ENTRÉE LIBRE - PLUS D'INFOS SUR GRANDBOUILLON.ORG
GRAND BOUILLON - 2 TER RUE DU MOUTIER 93300 AUBERVILLIERS
GdBOUILLON

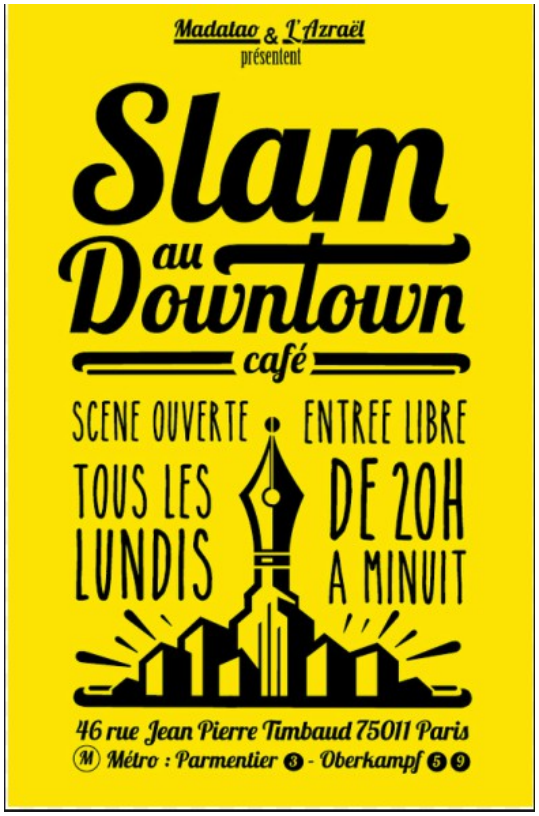

SLAM DE POESIE
QUALIFICATION POUR LE TOURNOI
DE L'ECOLE DU MAGRET D'ARGENT
SAMEDI 30 SEPTEMBRE 2017
20H A L'ATELIER MANDINGART
www.magretdargent.net
www.mandingart.com
www.contrecourantprod.com
ENTREE LIBRE 20H / A L'ATELIER MANDING'ART / 1 RUE DU DR PAUL PUJOS
(FAUBOURG BONNEFOY) TOULOUSE / M° MARENGO, BUS 38, 39,42 ARRET ARAGO
L'ECOLE DU MAGRET D'ARGENT


soirée
SLAM
AU CAVEAU
St Affrique
CONCERT
21h00
KKC Orchestra
swing electro Hip-Hop
http://myspace.com/iekkcorchestra
DJ no breakfast
Cool and strange music / cut and paste technique
http://djnobreakfast.tumblr.com
Enterré sous X
spoken word, rock et chanson
18 AVRIL 2009
association
POLY SONS
http://polysons.free.fr
polysons@gmail.com
paf 8€ / réduit 6€
(chômeurs, étudiants, rmistes)
n° d'entrepreneur du spectacle : n°2-1019855 / n°3-1019856
imprimé par nos soins / ne pas jeter sur la voie publique


SLAM*
*tournoi de poésie
Esprit
Amour
Tripes
Erotisme
18h : Atelier d'écriture poétique
Sélection Grand Slam National
Les régles de participation sur :
WWW.slameur.com
LA FERTE -SOUS-JOUARRE
COSMO CAFE
Samedi 10 mai 2008
20H30


LA SCÈNE DU CANAL - Jemmapes et 129H présentent :
LA SCÈNE DU CANAL
Quand on dit:
SLAM,
vous dites ?
La scène du Canal - Jemmapes
116 quai de Jemmapes - 75010 Paris / 01 48 03 33 22


PRINTEMPS DES POETES
ET
SEMAINE DE LA LANGUE FRANÇAISE 2008
du 3 au 31 mars 2008
SLAM
POÉSIE
Résolument
porteur d'une
mission citoyenne,
le slam donne la parole à celui
qui la veut,le temps d'un poème et quelque soit son style.
MAIRIE DE PARIS
Livre
îledeFrance
CLOSE


Madalao & L'Azraël
présentent
Slam
au
Downtown
café
SCENE OUVERTE
TOUS LES
LUNDIS
ENTREE LIBRE
DE 20H
A MINUIT
46 rue Jean Pierre Timbaud 75011 Paris
Métro : Parmentier 3 - Oberkampf 5 9


Parlez court
jeudi 7 avril a partir de 20h30
L'underground slamme et fait son film chaque premier jeudi du mois.
Pour cette première, projections de courts-métrages, vidéo clips, documentaires
avec la participation de
- Col et Gram
- Florent Sauze
- Carine
Kameha prod.
Slam un texte dit un verre offert
Orchestre par :
- Le Chat Sauvage
- Black Jesus
avec le soutien de Uback Concept
www.ubackconcept.org
contact : 06 60 38 09 62
Entrée libre
le Petit Egyptien
14, rue Thouin 75005 Paris
Métro : Cardinal Lemoine ou Place Monge


VENDREDI
11
MAI
2012
20h00
Round
#2
Le tournoi
de Slam !


S L A M
SCENE OUVERTE
ANIMÉE PAR
TSUNAMI
LA MILONGA
LES 1ERS VENDREDIS DU MOIS A 21H
280 AVE VICTOR HUGO
94120 FONTENAY SOUS BOIS
PLANETESLAM
.COM
Radio Campus Paris
93.9 FM
17h30 > 05h30


Mam'zelle Djohara - Noamat - ZenMasta - Snoozz
présentent
slam&co
la petite scène !
Mercredi 15.01.2014
19:45
Café Citoyen
7, place du Vieux Marché à Chevaux
59000 Lille | Métro République
/events/657382204308488


SLAM
MASSACRE 2
Micro ouvert
+ Tournoi à 2 équipes
+ Live session


Hip Hop
16/11
MAGIC MIROR METIS
15H00 ///// Entrée libre
SLAM
CLASH et DJ'S
Ambianceurs/MC:
Collectif Slam au Féminin,
Lynx K (Uback Concept),
Shakiamuni, Sunami
Dans le cadre du Forum Social Européen
93 HIP-HOP FESTIVAL
Du 12 au 16 Novembre 2003
BATTLE INTERNATIONAL/CONCERTS/CINÉMA/SLAM/DJ'S/DÉBATS

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Diamanka, Souleymane (2007) *L'Hiver Peul*. Audio CD. France : Barclay.

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Pilote le Hot (2000) *Culture Rapide*. Slam éditions & Le Castor Astral: Paris.

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Rouda (2007) *Musique des Lettres*. Audio CD. Paris. Le Chant du Monde.

Spoke Orkestra (2007) Spoke Orkestra n'existe pas. Audio CD. France: Basaata Productions.

Grand Corps Malade body of work, accolades, other

Listed below is some of the work that GCM has done that has kept him in the spotlight as a creator. Despite the diversity of these projects, his slam legacy defines him and in turn, he continues to be emblematic of slam.

Studio Albums and select singles

Grand Corps Malade (2006) *Midi 20*. Audio CD. France: Universal Music France.

Grand Corps Malade (2008) *Enfant de la ville*. Audio CD France :AZ

Grand Corps Malade (2010) *3eme temps*. Audio CD. France :AZ

Grand Corps Malade (writer and performer) and Reda Taliani (singer) (2011) *Inch'Allah*. CD single.

Grand Corps Malade (2013) *Funambule*. Audio CD. France : Anouche Productionss - Believe recordings. [Includes duets with Francis Cabrel and Richard Borhinger.]

Grand Corps Malade (2015) *Il nous restera ça*. Audio CD. France: Anouche Productions – Believe Recordings.

Grand Corps Malade (2015) '#Jesuischarlie'. [Unpublished slam texte, released on his social media the day after the terrorist attack at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015]

Grand Corps Malade (2018) *Plan B*. Audio CD. France : Anouche Productions.

Select Collaborations, contributions.

Grand Corps Malade (2006) cover of 'Les Trompettes de la renommée' on (2006) *Putain de Toi: Un hommage à Brassens*. France: Mercury France.

Grand Corps Malade (2007) wrote and performed 'Le Retour de Joe' and 'Thème de Joe' on the concept/story gold record album by Dionysos (2007) *La mécanique du coeur*. France: Barclay France.

Grand Corps Malade (2008) wrote 'Je m'écris' and performed with Zaho on Kery James's critically acclaimed album *À l'ombre du show business'*.

Grand Corps Malade (2010) performed in duet 'Tu es donc j'apprends' with Charles Aznavour. On Grand Corps Malde (2010) *3eme Temps*.

Grand Corps Malade (2011) Recorded *Inch'Allah* with noted Raï singer, Reda Taliani. This song charted in the hit parade. The music video features cameos by Yannick Noah, Soprano, and others.

Grand Corps Malade (2013) wrote 'La mer et l'enfant' for Céline Dion (2013) *Sans Attendre*. France: Columbia Records.

Grand Corps Malade (2014) cover of 'La Médaille' on the tribute album *La Bande à Renaud*. France: Universal Music France.

Grand Corps Malade (2016) wrote the text/co-wrote 'L'étoile' and 'Les Yeux aux Ciel' for Céline Dion (2016) *Encore un Soir*. France: Columbia.

Select Filmography

Grand Corps Malade (2010) voice of 'Rictus' in *Toy Story 3*. Animated feature film. Ver. Française. Unkrich, Lee (dir). USA:Pixar Films.

Grand Corps Malade (2013) voice of 'Joe' in *Jack et la mécanique du coeur*. Animated feature film Malzieu, Mathias and Stéphane Berla (dirs). France and Beligum: Europa Corp.

Grand Corps Malade (2015) Cameo, in *Patience, Patience, t'iras au paradis!* Labib, Hadja (dir.) Belgium: Les Passeurs de Lumière.

Grand Corps Malade (2017) *Patients*. Feature film Grand Corps Malade and Mehdi Idir (dirs.) France :Mandarin Production and Kallouche Cinéma. [NB nominated for three César in 2018.]

Books

Grand Corps Malade (2012) *Patients*. Paris : Don Quichotte.

Accolades

Chevalier in 2008, *officier* in 2014, and *commandeur* in 2017.

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Booba (2004) *Panthéon*. Audio CD. France: Tallac Records.

Booba (2006) *Ouest side*. Audio CD. France: Tallac Records.

La Fouine (2005) *Bourré au son*. Audio CD. France: Jive-Epic/Small Stone.

La Fouine (2007) *Aller-retour*. Audio CD. France: Jive-Epic.

La Haine (1995) dir. Mathieu Kassovitz. Film. France: Canal +.

Rohff (2004) *La fierté des nôtres*. Audio CD. France: Hostile Records/Delabel (EMI).

Rohff (2005) *Au-delà de mes limites*. Audio CD. France: Hostile Records/Delabel (EMI).

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Theoretical, Academic, and Other literature

NB Edited volumes with an obelisk † indicate the majority/whole work was of use. However, certain chapters from such volumes are especially pertinent and therefore also occur as a source independently.

Edited volumes for which only a couple of chapters or sections were of use (less than half) will be without an obelisk and if applicable, the relevant chapter listed under its author separately.

General French and Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies, Sociology, Media Studies, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Art History, Performance Studies, Literary theory

Ager, Dennis E. (1999) *Identity, Insecurity and Image: France and Language*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Allen, Robert C. (ed.) (1987) *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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Austin, J.L. (1962 [1975]) *How to do Things With Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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