



SCHOOL of  
GRADUATE STUDIES  
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University  
Digital Commons @ East  
Tennessee State University

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

---

8-2012

# An Ethnographic Study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM

Catherine Jo Janssen  
*East Tennessee State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Janssen, Catherine Jo, "An Ethnographic Study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM" (2012). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1461. <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/1461>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [dcadmin@etsu.edu](mailto:dcadmin@etsu.edu).

An Ethnographic Study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM

---

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Reading

---

by

Catherine Jo Janssen

August 2012

---

Joseph Sobol, PhD, Chair

Delanna Reed

Melissa Schrift, PhD

Keywords: storytelling, ethnographic study, performance event, slam, Detroit

## ABSTRACT

### An Ethnographic Study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM

by

Catherine Jo Janssen

The Moth Detroit StorySLAM is one of many storytelling events staged in urban bar environments. Unlike the increasingly aged audiences attending the National Storytelling Festival and similar story festivals, the Detroit StorySLAM consistently yields “at capacity” crowds of college students and young professionals.

Participants were informally interviewed during the September, October, and November slams of 2010 and the January 2011 slam. In addition to conducting these interviews, the researcher was a participant observer – throwing her name into the hat and being twice called to the stage. Data are presented as a thick description organized according to Richard Bauman’s 6 situational factors of the performance event.

Until now questions about the nature and meaning of storytelling have been largely considered from the storyteller’s perspective. By redirecting those questions to the listeners, this study reveals the ethos of hundreds of story enthusiasts – an undisputed admiration for the revelation of authentic, individual truths.

## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
3. METHODOLOGY.....	23
Research Design.....	23
Sample.....	23
Instrumentation.....	23
Procedure Details.....	24
Data Analysis.....	25
Limitations.....	26
4. RESULTS.....	28
What Happens at the SLAM ?.....	29
Situational Factor 1: Participant Identity-Role.....	32
Situational Factor 6: Action Sequence .....	33
Situational Factor 2: Expressive Means of Performance.....	36
Situational Factor 3: Social Interactional Ground Rules-Norms.....	37
Situational Factor 4: Social Interactional Performance Strategies.....	42
Situational Factor 5: Criteria for Performance Interpretation and Evaluation.....	46
Reflections from Participants .....	51
5. THE STORYTELLERS.....	62
John.....	63

Bill.....	66
Shannon.....	68
The Participant Observer: Cathy.....	69
6. CONCLUSIONS.....	74
Discussion.....	74
“The BS Detector”.....	75
Directions for Further Research.....	86
REFERENCES.....	91
APPENDICES.....	94
Appendix A: Field Notes: Thursday, September 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2010.....	94
Appendix B: Field Notes: Thursday, October 7 <sup>th</sup> , 2010.....	113
Appendix C: Field Notes: Thursday, November 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2010.....	132
Appendix D: Field Notes: Thursday, January 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2011.....	142
Appendix E: Provenance of Slam Participants.....	160
VITA.....	161

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 2005 Dr. Caren Neile of Florida Atlantic University, then managing editor of *Storytelling, Self, Society*, lamented the relegation of storytelling to child audiences in “A Place at the Hearth: Storytelling, Subversion, and the U.S. Culture Industry.” In this paper Neile questioned storytelling’s absence from “night-clubs, top-flight theaters, [and] the media”, suggesting that storytelling’s reputation as a folk art, combined with its association with children’s entertainment and a general ignorance of the art form in adult circles, were at fault (p. 9-10). Arriving 32 years after the first National Storytelling Festival, Neile’s theory coincided with the general graying of the festival’s audiences. The gathering that was to become the National Storytelling Festival and later recognized as the beginning of the “American Storytelling Revival” began in the little town of Jonesborough, Tennessee in 1973. The festival is still staged every October in that same little town. But this festival – and the numerous regional festivals that have followed in its footsteps and its mold – is no longer representative of the increasingly diverse world of American storytelling. Looking into the tents of the festival, it’s possible to count hundreds of adult heads and feel assured that storytelling is working for adult audiences. But a closer look reveals that most of those heads have gone gray, leading to the question, “Is there a next generation of the American storytelling revival, and if so, where is it?”

In the past decade and a half, storytelling has stepped out from under the brightly striped tents of the festival grounds and into the dark, smoky atmosphere of urban night clubs. And although bars have always been the place to find beer-holding raconteurs, something has changed. These storytellers are now holding microphones, as well as pints, and tickets are being sold. This is where you will find young Americans telling stories. Many members of the

festival-going storytelling community do not know what this younger generation looks like or how it operates. Likewise, the people crowding into the story slam and climbing behind its microphone may have even less awareness of that community or the American Storytelling Revival.

Young adult and middle-aged story enthusiasts are flocking to bars and night clubs, places – not surprisingly – to which those age groups have been gravitating for generations. Cliff Bells is one of those venues. The Detroit jazz club is now home to The Moth Detroit StorySLAM. The Moth first appeared in New York City back in 1997 as a storyteller’s collective. It has since exploded into what the *Washington Post* has called “the literary crowd’s answer to stand-up,” operating large, so-called “Main Stage” events as well as smaller, monthly StorySLAMs in L.A., Chicago, and Detroit. The Moth also goes on tour, staging events across the nation. Meanwhile, other groups are producing events along similar lines as The Moth. There’s San Francisco’s *Porchlight*, Milwaukee’s *Ex Fabula*, and DC’s *Speakeasy*, to name a few. A broad survey of these adult-centered and urban-situated story events would be interesting but beyond the scope of this investigation.

This is an ethnographic study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM with fieldwork carried out by the student researcher in the role of participant observer. Field notes on the performance event were gathered while interacting with members of the audience as well as adding my name to the lottery of potential storytellers. To be clear, any audience member could be one of the evening’s featured tellers. All hopefuls were asked to enter their names via a consent form into a lottery. No one knows who will be telling until the emcee draws the teller’s name from a hat and calls that person up to the stage.

This project examines The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM, which is just one of the many storytelling events being staged in urban bars across the country. My intent in conducting this study was to produce an in-depth rendering of one particular story event that is regularly and successfully reaching an urban adult population (in many months, selling out of tickets) and initiate within the academic storytelling community through a thick description of that particular event a conversation about this new generation of the American storytelling.

It is important to note that I conducted this research and wrote this thesis from the emic perspective of someone who was raised in the periphery of suburban Detroit. Though not a resident of metro Detroit, I did spend the first 18 years of my life in a small suburb outside of the city. This meant that my news, my music, and my sports came out of the city of Detroit. At the same time, I am currently a graduate student in East Tennessee State University's Storytelling Program. I am no longer a Michigan resident. Admittedly, my observations were passed through the double lens of a southeast Michigander and a student of storytelling tradition and craft.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Imagine what it feels like to enter a crowded bar during an event. It could be any event – stand-up comedy, indie-rock concert, poetry slam. Now, try to imagine how you would begin describing that event and the sights, the sounds, and the smells that it entails. Add to those notes the behaviors and roles being played out around you by the people present at the event. That may be a dauntingly large amount of sensory input to note down and then relay to a reader, especially when the goal is to explain that event in such a way that is both understandable to an outsider and recognizable to one its participants. This simultaneous responsibility to the reader and to the participant is central to the anthropological tradition of “thick description.”

The concept of thick description is often attributed to Clifford Geertz, one of its earliest practitioners. In fact, Geertz borrowed the term from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle who coined the phrase during a university lecture that would then go on to be published under the title, “What is *le Penseur* doing?” Ryle explained that there are layers of meaning associated with any action and that two identical, physical actions may be accompanied by very different sets of meaning. Geertz adopted this idea and used it in his own ethnographic research. Doing so meant not only describing what he witnessed during his fieldwork but also presenting his observations alongside the cultural context of the communities in which he had immersed himself. In effect, Geertz became a collector of reflections, carefully detailing not only what he witnessed while in the field but also the reflections and understanding of the people he both interviewed and observed. In the tradition of thick description, this thesis shares the perception of the slam in the eyes of its participants as well as detailing what takes place at the Moth Detroit StorySLAM. (Geertz, 1973, p. )

I anticipated presenting those observations and perceptions would lead to a large pool of data. In preparation for that eventuality, I began looking for a system by which to organize and present my observational data. In other words, I set out to find an established methodology that would be amenable to me as a participant observer in a cultural event. This led me to the work of Kristin Valentine and Gordon Matsumoto on “Cultural Performance Analysis Spheres”, also known as CPAS. The CPAS methodology of ethnography is particularly well-suited to the investigation and recounting of such an event as the StorySLAM because – as Valentine and Matsumoto purposefully highlight in their presentation of the methodology – it addresses the seemingly impossible task of “communicating scholarly discourse that must necessarily give linear form to experiences where there is simultaneous perception of multiple phenomena” (Valentine & Matsumoto, 2001, p. 68).

According to Valentine and Matsumoto a cultural performance event can be reconstructed for the reader through the elaboration of six principle domains, all of which influence one another and therefore have “fluid and fuzzy” boundaries (p. 71). These six spheres are:

1. Sphere E: Ethnographer[s]/Ethnography
2. Sphere C: Cultural Contexts
3. Sphere I: Performance In Situ/ Immediate Ambiance
4. Sphere A: Audiences
5. Sphere PP: Primary Performers
6. Sphere P: Performance, the Semiotic Text

Initially, this overlapping categorization appeared to be the answer to my looming pile of data.

Describing my position as the ethnographer (Sphere E) allowed me to explain my two-fold

interpretation as a graduate student of storytelling and a former resident of southeast Michigan. Valentine and Matsumoto allowed for the sharing of the “unique set of interlocking personal and public stories, rituals, customs, values, and beliefs” that characterizes the Detroit slam (Sphere C) (p. 73). And the emphasis on the setting and the ambience of the performance (Sphere 1) introduced a discussion of the unique story space offered at Cliff Bells during the slam.

When I returned to my first set of field notes it was apparent that I had amassed data that refused to be conveniently separated into those categories. The audience had become the great, categorization-defiant conundrum. Following the CPAS model did not reveal how, when, and in what manner the audience members responded to the words, actions, and behaviors of the storytellers. Likewise, the event and venue staffs were dealt with insufficiently. Furthermore, the sample included participants who, in different moments during the same event, were transformed from “Audience” to “Primary Performer” and back to “Audience” again. This role shifting made translating my observations into separate spheres of Audiences and Primary Performers extremely difficult. But perhaps the most challenging aspect of adapting CPAS to The Moth was the near impossibility of recording the performances compounded with the necessary choice between speaking with the crowd (audience members, storytellers, and staffers) during the show or taking notes on the performances themselves.

Hoping to find a more amenable means of presenting this variety of data, I turned to Richard Bauman’s “six situational factors of the performance event.” According to Baumann, a performance event may be recounted for readers by the careful elaboration of these six factors:

1. Participant identity-role
2. Expressive means of performance
3. Social interactional ground rules-norms

4. Social interactional performance strategies
5. Criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation
6. Action sequence

These situational factors were accessible to me, as a participant observer, and more readily noted during the event than the spheres outlined by the CPAS methodology. In part, this may have been due to the operational definitions of Bauman's outline. Consider the definitions of the factors. (Bauman, 1986, pp.4-7)

First, the *participants' identities-roles* are defined by what they *do* at the event. In the simplest terms people were tellers *because they told* stories and servers *because they served* food and drinks. Second, *expressive means of performance* are defined by what mediums are used and how they are manipulated. The *social interactional ground rules and norms* are the actions that are expected or appreciated and those that are not approved of by the participants. This can be determined by the reaction of audience members, as well as staff, to the actions of other participants. Similarly, *social interactional performance strategies* could be observed in the actions, words, and sounds produced by the performers as a means of involving the audience. Furthermore, the *criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation* could be determined by noting the response of the audience members (positive, negative, or mixed) to those performance strategies as well as the recounting of the official rules and regulations stated by the host. Finally, the *action sequence* – information that may seem of initially minimal consequence – is the relation of which happenings occur at which points in the event.

These six situational factors, however, only account for one portion of the data collected from the StorySLAM – the observational data. The second data set pertains to reported data. This is the information gathered through informal question and answers with the event

participants. These data reveal the participants' means of contact with the event, their motivation for attending the event, and their perception of the event. As previously stated, the goal of this investigation is to initiate a conversation about story slam events within the storytelling community. Suggesting that the Detroit Moth's StorySLAM may be considered the *nouvelle vague* of the American storytelling revival may be too much of an assumption. It may be that these story listeners and tellers are not aware of the so-called American Storytelling Revival and they may not associate their storytelling activity with that cultural phenomenon.

And yet, any effort to analyze this story event within the larger framework of the greater American Storytelling Revival demands careful consideration of the story movement, its origins, and its participants. Joseph Sobol's *The Storyteller's Journey* provides a historical account of the movement's conception and its development over the 30 years following the first National Storytelling Festival in 1973. He posits his rendering of the movement within anthropologist Anthony Wallace's framework for a culture change phenomenon known as a "revitalization movement."

According to Anthony Wallace a *Revitalization Movement* is a culture change phenomenon in which the members of a society make a conscious effort – in a deliberate and organized fashion – to “construct a more satisfying culture.” This phenomenon consists of five stages: the steady state, individual stress, cultural distortion, revitalization, and a new steady state (Wallace, 2006, pp.10-14). The *steady state* is a time period during which the majority of a population's needs are met by culturally recognized techniques. This is not a utopian society free of stress; rather, society members live in a steady state of tolerable stress (pp. 14-15). The society then moves into a period of *individual stress* as increasing numbers of individuals experience growing levels of stress produced by their culture's inability to meet their needs (p.

15). This prolonged experience of stress leads the members of the society to experience disillusionment with the mazeway and apathy toward adaptation that Wallace identifies as *cultural distortion* (pp. 15-16).

*Mazeway reformulation:* A mazeway is an individual's perception of nature, society, culture, personality, and body image (Wallace, 2006, p. 12). A mazeway reformulation occurs when an individual experiences a moment of insight – sometimes called inspiration or revelation – revealing how a mazeway can be restructured. When revitalization movements are religious in nature, this individual is referred to as a prophet. In secular instances, this individual may be referred to as a leader or pioneer. In the American storytelling revival, this person was Jonesborough local Jimmy Neil Smith. Smith was driving his car and listening to the radio one fateful afternoon in 1972 when he received his revelation. The streets and morale of his historic town were in disrepair and he had civic renewal on his mind. Then the music stopped and someone began to tell a story. Smith claims that in that moment he knew they could use stories to bring his town back to life. They would have a festival and bring in storytellers, who would bring in tourists, who would bring in money, and with that money their civic repair. (Sobol, 1999, pp. 18-26)

*Revitalization* is then the process undergone by the society in its efforts to establish a new means of satisfaction. (Wallace, 2006, pp.16-26). This process is comprised of six steps: *mazeway reformulation, communication, organization, adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization*. Finally, the society reaches a new steady state “once a cultural transformation has been accomplished and the new cultural system has proved itself viable, and once the movement organization has solved its problems of routinization.” (p. 23)

Analysis of the participants' responses takes these stages of cultural change into account. The extent to which the Detroit Moth's StorySLAM has provided its participants with a means of "constructing a more satisfying culture" is considered in the conclusion of this thesis. The storytelling event produced for the Detroit StorySLAM may constitute the latest cycle in an ongoing process of refinement within the American Storytelling Revival. At the same time it is equally possible that the Detroit StorySLAM is a unique social phenomenon with antecedents in other, nonstorytelling, performance genres. Therefore the extent to which the slam folk identify with the storytelling movement is up for debate. Thus, it is necessary to consider other possible predecessors. These include the "open mic night" (both for literary and musical artists), poetry readings, comedy clubs, the one-man show, and slam poetry. This story event may be some combination of multiple performance genres. Attempting to comment on their art prompts an ethnographic approach that speaks to their performances – not only the content of their words but their delivery, their creation, and the environment in which they are shared. Using Richard Bauman's characteristics of the performance event (defined above) to define these StorySLAMS eschews the treatment of these oral narratives as autonomous texts, preferring to analyze multiple aspects of the event.

Looking beyond the words, as Bauman recommends, it became clear that a storytelling event situated in a bar is necessarily very different from those produced under festival tents. Consider the fact that the National Storytelling Festival features platform tellers. This term denotes precisely what it suggests – tellers who stand on a platform to deliver their performances. The term also connotes a degree of celebrity status. Michael Wilson refers to this celebrity as mega-identity in *Storytelling and Theatre: Contemporary Storytellers and Their Art*. Wilson argues that platform tellers not only fashion this public persona for the stage but also for

the people they encounter offstage – whether they be audience members, reporters, or potential employers. According to Wilson, the mega-identity is executed and recognized by the platform teller’s characteristic use of space, gesture, and costuming; however, I go even further and say that the platform teller’s mega-identity is introduced onstage through those elements but then groomed and maintained via their professional websites and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The platform teller is a consumer product. This storyteller offers a particular brand of storytelling that consumers can witness at a festival or sample online, and the storyteller is then hired to deliver that same brand in performance. The Moth’s Detroit StorySLAM, however, has yet to book a celebrity storyteller for one of its shows. (Wilson, 2003, pp. 59-94)

Unlike the platform tellers at a festival, those telling at the slam are not preselected by the event organizers and they are not paid to perform. Those tellers are audience members as well as performers. Ask them what they do for a living and none of the performers at the slam will tell you that they are a professional storyteller. Yes, many of them work in fields that demand the telling of stories to some extent, but they don’t write “storyteller” on their tax forms and they don’t have a professional storytelling website. And so it appears that the platform teller at a festival and the tellers performing at the Detroit StorySLAMs are operating from within very different identities.

The platform teller *is a storyteller*. That is the platform teller’s profession, the teller’s job. The audience member who goes onstage at one of these story slams is not necessarily a storyteller by profession, although the slam teller *is telling a story*. Where one teller owns the noun, the other temporarily exercises the verb. It was interesting to learn how slam tellers identify if they don’t consider themselves storytellers. Perhaps the means by which the slam tellers form their tales would suggest how they classify their performance. The Moth’s website



offers directions for those wishing to tell a story, but it does not explicitly say “write your story down.” Writing is suggested as an option. So is telling your story repeatedly to your houseplants. So with regards to participant directions, the site does not appear to be targeting writers (Hixson, 2012).

And yet, there is this emphasis on composition. This preoccupation is particularly interesting given the fact that composition – the manner in which a story is created – is something of a hot topic in both the storytelling and the oral poetry worlds. The conversation about composition within these two worlds could be divided into two subcategories. On the one hand there is the question of motivation and on the other hand there is the question of process. A poet or a storyteller may create works with the intention of fashioning the best performance. The poet or storyteller might also consider the multiple performances of a story or poem as simply a part of the creative process. In other words, is the artist motivated to perform as a means to an end – that end being a more perfected version of the story or poem – or is the performance itself the goal?

Now, add to this question considerations of composition – or, rather, the manner in which the artist creates the art. Tell someone that you are a storyteller and that person will eventually ask you what you *write*. Here, the curious party assumes that a storyteller does indeed write her stories. In many cases, this is simply not true. Some tellers never involve the written word – whether on their computers or an actual piece of paper – in their creative process. Many speak their stories into existence, forming them out loud (sometimes in front of witnesses and sometimes not) and pulling them into form via repetition. And even in those cases, the repetition does not necessarily produce an unchanging artwork. In other words, the story is not memorized and is not fixed (this of course, is not to say that written stories are memorized and delivered as

identical performances time and time again). Additionally, creation is not limited to writing and speaking. Some storytellers eschew the vocalization of their tales until they are actually performing them for an audience, preferring instead to remain in the imagistic world of pictures or simply their visual imaginings until they are placed in front of the audience. There are some storytellers who will cull a story from pages of written words and doodles pictures that are more plastic brainstorm than storyboard or story paragraphs.

Sobol (1996) provides some working terminology for this discussion in the article “Innervision and innertext: Oral and interpretive modes of storytelling performance.” That “innervision” corresponds to what Sobol terms the “conversational” or the “oral traditional” mode of storytelling in which stories are composed orally and then recognized as such during performance. Meanwhile, the “innertext” refers to those tellers who work from a written piece they have committed to memory. This is referred to as the “literary” or “oral interpretive” mode of storytelling. Similar to the conversational mode, the literary mode can be recognized in performance. (pp.198-220)

Listeners may arrive at this recognition by attending to the degree of syntactic autonomy, intonational autonomy, and integration; a tendency toward or lack of imprecision and repetition; use of spontaneous side-comments and response units; and the number of open and closed elements (pp. 216-218). In the article Sobol demonstrates the use of these markers in an analysis of two platform tellers – Syd Lieberman and Jim May. As his analysis demonstrates, May represents the oral traditional mode while Lieberman exemplifies the oral interpretive mode of storytelling. Conveniently, Lieberman is a former English teacher and newspaper writer; whereas May grew up in a storytelling family in a small town (pp. 210-211). May and Lieberman typify the two extremes both in origin as well as in performance style.

But it is important to note that these two modes are considered the opposite ends of a spectrum. They are not mutually exclusive. A teller may orally compose and write segments of the same story. There does not appear to be a fixed point at which a storyteller is more literary than conversational. Interestingly, this notion of composition has manifested itself in the oral poetry scene as yet another spectrum. This time, that spectrum ranges between what Katharyn Machan Aal refers to as the “writer-performers”, or “stagers”, and the “performer-writers”, or “paggers.” These two titles represent two poles of possible orientation. Both types of artists perform pieces they themselves have composed. However, a writer-performer’s main goal is to give a great performance and this goal leads the artist to write. The performer-writer, on the other hand, is hoping to achieve the best piece of poetry. This artist views performance as a means to an end, as a refining process where the end result is a text. (1984, pp. 112-113)

The “Which came first, composition or performance?” debate doesn’t end there, however. John Gentile addressed the matter in *Cast of One, One-Person Shows from the Chautauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage*. Gentile chronicles the modern role of the writer as a solo performer in order to explore the writer’s motivation for performance and the effect of such a performance on a written piece. Gentile’s inquiry is guided by the assumption that composition and performance are mutually influential. Gentile’s methodology combines historical and content analysis, including several newspaper reviews of and interviews with his subjects (Dylan Thomas and few of the Beat Poets, including Allen Ginsberg). He then adapts Aal’s concept of “the pager” and “the stager” to a continuum of artists’ valuation of writing and performance. He examines modern writer-performers and performer-writers according to their placement along that continuum. (1989, pp.189-191)

Gentile found that artists are indeed divided over the value of performing their works, but they do agree that a written piece will inevitably be altered by performance – whether that alteration results from the intentional crafting of the written word for performance or the subsequent editing of a performed piece. His findings support the hypothesis that a storyteller’s creative orientation – as oral composer, poet, comedian, or other – will affect the storyteller’s compositional and performance choices. Unfortunately, Gentile published his inquiry over 20 years ago. As a result, the “contemporary” writer-performers and performer-writers have changed.

In a more recent treatment of the issue, Kenneth Sherwood suggests that performed poetry, or voiced texts, should be considered emergent performances (Sherwood, 2006, pp.122-123). In his article “Elaborate Versionings” Sherwood examines the performances of three print-oral-aural poets – Amiri Baraka, Cecilia Vicuña, and Kamau Brathwaite. Each performance featured the poet performing previously published pieces. In one sense, those published works could be considered the official versions of their respective poems. According to Sherwood this is not the case. He holds that the poets’ use of elaboration and versioning establishes their performed pieces as dynamic, or in flux, and therefore to be considered emergent pieces (p. 126).

In Baraka’s case that dynamism is witnessed in his paralinguistic manipulation of his poem. His performance of “In the Funk World” contains changes in rate, rhythm, pitch, tone, and stress. The text of this poem is not printed in a manner that suggests those variations. In his study Sherwood transcribes a text for the “significant instance” of the poem that he witnesses as a voiced text (pp. 125, 136). Similarly, he transcribes one of Vicuña’s and one of Brathwaite’s poems. Each of the poets demonstrates some form of paralinguistic meaning that is not present in their published text. Additionally, Vicuña uses other media beyond her voice to create the

experience of her poetry. When she delivers “Adiano y Azumbar ” at the opening of her set it is in a room that she has laced with string prior to performance. She enters from behind her audience, singing while she uses a flashlight to trace thread-like beams on the walls (pp. 128-129). When Sherwood experiences Brathwaite’s performance of “Angel/Engine”, he experiences a rhythmic patterning of the verses and witnesses the spontaneous commentary the poet posits between idea units (pp. 132-134). This sort of elaboration and versioning represents the dynamic nature of emergent performance. Sherwood suggests that literary critics should move beyond the treatment of poetry as an autonomous text and consider the performativity of oral-aural poetry in their analysis.

This brings us back to Bauman and the performance event. Consider Bauman’s third factor – social interactional ground rules. These rules in the simplest sense are the dos and do nots of a performance event. That makes for a lengthy list that won’t be enumerated here, but it is worth discussing one rule that distinguishes the performance event of the urban-bar storyteller from that of the storytelling festival. At The Moth’s Detroit StorySLAMs tellers often speak about sex. This is not the general case at storytelling festivals. It’s not entirely clear why sexual content is à la mode in one venue and inappropriate in another. But one thing is clear – these sexy tales are winning laughs. The Moth warns hopeful tellers that they are not looking to showcase stand-up comedians, and yet many of the performances are strikingly similar to those given in comedy clubs. The audience is seated at tables in a dark room and usually imbibing. The performer is onstage, holding a microphone, delivering a rehearsed (supposedly) and intentionally funny (hopefully) piece. And people are laughing loudly, and often, at the (often sexual) foibles of the performer. Given these similarities, it seems worthwhile to consider the

stand-up comedian as one of the possible predecessors of the slam storyteller. But how, exactly, is stand-up comedy to be recognized?

If you're a member of the Comedy Central generation, it may be difficult to recall a time when you weren't watching stand-up on television. Posing the question, "what is stand-up?" might conjure up memories of Paula Poundstone, Dana Carvey, Margaret Cho, or Dane Cook. If you're of another generation, those memories might feature George Carlin or Richard Pryor, maybe even Lenny Bruce. But those are all vastly different performers and it's difficult to glean one theory from their disparate examples. Attempting to do so might lead you to the writings of John Limon.

Limon outlines what he refers to as the "topography of stand-up" in *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. In that topography, Limon presents stand-up as an absolute genre ruled by three theorems. First, if the audience finds something funny, it is. Therefore the audience is never wrong. Second, if the audience doesn't laugh at a joke, it wasn't funny. Third, for stand-up comedy to occur there must be both a comedian and an audience. The performer is not distinct from but dependent upon his audience (Limon, 2000, pp. 11-13). Furthermore, laughter is an exercise in abjection – both as an abasement of the self (in this case of the performer) and as a sloughing off of what the self finds shameful. This might explain the largely confessional nature of so many stand-up and funny storytelling performances.

Limon presents stand-up comedy as a necessarily coproduced performance of both comedian and performer. To some extent the assertion seems obvious, and yet storytellers are finding that they too must call attention to that fact. Storyteller Carol Birch speaks to this in her essay "Who Says? The Storyteller as Narrator." In that essay Birch calls upon her own experiences as a professional storyteller to argue that one of the key elements of the storytelling

event is dialogic and that the audience expectation is that their presence will help create a “singular occasion.” Birch suggests that this is what sets the storytelling event apart from the speeches and plays – those are immovable presentations of a text, whereas the storyteller is continually adjusting to the audience response. It is this responsorial nature that according to Birch makes storytelling a “unique event” and also perhaps an “emergent performance” in accordance with Sherwood’s framework. At the same time the appellation of “unique event” or “emergent performance” could be applied to stand-up comedy and, for that matter, many other forms of oral performance. (Birch, 1996, p. 107)

Certainly, there is a wealth of writing on the nature and theory of oral performance, writings that informs this study’s investigation of the Detroit StorySLAM. Much of that writing details the creative methods and performance experiences of the performers. And yet, there is no considerable body of writing about the oral performance audience – neither their motivation for attending the events nor their perceptions of the performances after the event. The degree to which the observed situational factors of the performance event and the individual orientations of the participants - both tellers and listeners - conform to theories of any of these performance genres is of great interest both to this investigation as an ethnographic piece, and also to the larger context of the American Storytelling Revival. When asking questions about the “next generation” of storytelling in American, it’s important to remember that we’re asking questions about both the people telling stories and the people seeking out stories. If the storytelling movement does eventually start looking in urban night clubs for its future, the question may no longer be “What do we know about the next generation?” but rather, “Does the next generation know about us?”

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this investigation is to produce an in-depth rendering of one particular story event that is regularly and successfully reaching an urban adult population (in many months, selling out of tickets) and initiate within the academic storytelling community through a thick description of that particular event a conversation about this new generation of the American storytelling. In an effort to present the nature of this performance event as holistically as possible, this investigation took the form of an ethnographic study supported by data observed and recorded in the field and responses gathered from the audience members during the event as well as information collected from event organizers and staff during informal interviews.

Sample

The observed sample includes all persons attending or working at the monthly Detroit StorySLAMs in September, October, and November of 2010 and January of 2011. These slams were held at Cliff Bell's, a Detroit night club known for its live entertainment. Therefore, the sample includes venue staff (waiters, bartenders, bouncers) and event staff (WDET station employees and volunteers) as well as the bar patrons, audience members, and storytellers.

Instrumentation

Observational data have been collected during the performances with the focus directed at the six situational factors performance events as outlined by Richard Bauman. These factors are (1) participant identity-role; (2) expressive means of performance; (3) social interactional ground rules-norms; (4) social interactional performance strategies; (5) criteria for performance



interpretation and evaluation; and (6) action sequence (pp. 3-4).<sup>1</sup> The storytellers, the staff at Cliff Bell's, and the event organizers have been informally interviewed with the hope that the respondents would elaborate on their experiences with the StorySLAM. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain data on the respondents' perceptions of their individual roles in the StorySLAM, their individual reactions to that role, and their expectations and perceptions of the event. Meanwhile, I socialized with the audience members and bar patrons and collected anonymous commentary from these persons on their exposure – or lack thereof – to the event's publicity and their opinions of the show. The geographical location from which these persons traveled in order to be at the show was also of interest.

### Procedure Details

I attended four of Detroit's StorySLAMs as a participant observer. I mingled with other audience members and submitted my name to the lottery of potential storytellers. Observational data were written in the form of field jottings during the event and later composed into field notes. Event personnel were fully aware of my presence and research objectives prior to the event. I approached the storytellers after the performance whenever possible and explained my research interests and gathered any reflections upon the experience of their performance that the tellers wished to share. Any verbally communicated data collected from participants – whether they were audience members or event organizers or venue staff – were recorded only after participants had been made aware of my name and university affiliation as well as my intent to use collected data in this graduate thesis.

Respondents from the pool of audience members were asked the following three questions: (1) *What brings you here tonight?* (2) *Where are you from?* (3) *Do you hope to tell this evening and why or why not?* Respondents from the pool of venue staff were asked the

---

<sup>1</sup> These factors are explained further in "Key Terms."

following two questions: (1) *What is it like to work the story slam?* (2) *How does this crowd compare to crowds that you service at other events?*

Because these open-ended, informal interviews were conducted during the course of the event, the quality of the audio recorded interviews did not permit transcription. Therefore, I relied entirely upon my own field jottings and subsequent personal communications with the tellers via E-mail. The interviews with venue staff and audience members were brief (2-10 minutes) unless participants independently expressed an interest in expanding upon any of the questions posed.

### Data Analysis

Information related in the interviews was initially coded for expressions of community identity (such as “I’m from the metro”, or, “I live in the 313”), artistic identification (such as “I’m a writer” or “I’ve done some slam poetry”), and evidence of a familiarity with the storytelling revival as well as evaluations of the event. Additionally, I discovered emergent themes shared between the different participants. These included contact stories (in which respondents detailed how the first became aware of The Moth) and persuasion tales (in which respondents reported how they had been persuaded to attend the event).

Observational data of the performance event followed Richard Bauman’s aforementioned approach to the analysis of performance events. Additionally, observational data pertaining to the age, gender, and ethnicity of event attendees were also recorded. In an effort to capture the social interactional norms of the event, I also noted the material culture of the event as it pertained to the audience’s dress (and how those style choices reflected their expectations of the venue and the event) and the audience’s patronage of the bar. Were people balancing martinis, sniffing wine, or maybe holding long necks? Those choices that dictated behavioral norms and

that were of particular interest to me as the ethnographer as I attempted to gauge the expectations and self-perceptions at play in the audience. The observational data were then used in conjunction with interview data to compose an ethnography of The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM that presented a holistic rendering of its local culture and its broader conscious and unconscious relation to the American Storytelling Revival.

### Limitations

This study focused on only one performance event – The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM – in September, October, and November of 2010 and January of 2011. Because The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM is of particular interest to this study because of its consistent ability to draw an adult audience to a storytelling event, it was my intention this to gather information on the specific culture of this particular local event – who attends, where those attendees are arriving from, their motivation for attending the event and possibly participating in it as a performer, and the environment created by the material and behavioral culture of these attendees.

It was not my intent to analyze the content of the stories during this study. Indeed, the stories themselves were only of interest as far as they relate to the persons telling them. More specifically, whether or not the story demonstrates a teller's intent to please the audience with wit or pathos was the determining factor in the teller's success. In other words, a storyteller was considered successful when the intention to tell a humorous story resulted in a performance that made the audience laugh. Likewise, the storyteller was equally successful if the expressed desire was to tell a sad story and the audience grew teary and quiet. Mere volume of audience response was no meter for a story's success; rather, the degree to which emotions were mirrored between teller and audience was a finer gauge of a story's success. Story content was considered according to its influence on the social interactional norms of the event. For example, cheering,

jeering, or cringing were all audience reactions that, when coming as a response to the sharing of some part of a story, revealed a storyteller's transgression of or proper execution of the social interactional norms expected of a performer at this event.

Prior and subsequent story events were of interest as they pertained to information shared by an interviewee, particularly if that information was offered as a comparison between any of these specific productions of the Detroit StorySLAM and other slams or story events that the interviewee had experienced. Excluding such cases, a comparative analysis was not drawn between the story event at these particular Detroit StorySLAMs and those occurring with different groups at different venues. Rather, this was a thick description of a particular performance event as it occurred over several months.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Between September 2010 and January 2011 inclusive I attended four of The Moth's Story SLAMs in Detroit. These included the September, October, November, and January shows. Within minutes of my first visit it was immediately apparent that my original intention of meeting and interviewing all of the tellers was not going to be practical. That September there were so many people crammed into Cliff Bell's that the bouncer was forced to turn people away. I did not have a seat and at many points in the show I could not even see the stage. Logistically, gaining physical proximity to each of the tellers was not going to work. And even in those cases where I did manage to meet a teller and engage him or her in an interview the club was so loud that it rendered my recordings useless and the time between tellers was so brief that I sometimes only managed to engage them in 1 or 2 minutes of conversation. Meanwhile, I would be missing the next teller's performance and the audience's reaction to that performance. Indeed, the audience proved to be the most accessible sample group. It was apparent that after observing, meeting, and interviewing hundreds of audience members while routinely surfing the crowded SLAMs that this ethnography would be largely the study and presentation of a group of spectators, rather than an in depth portrayal of a collection of performers.

This chapter is presented in two parts. The first is an endeavor to deliver readers into the observable environment of the slam. In this first section I borrow heavily from Richard Baumann's six situational factors of a performance event to detail my experience of the slam as a participant observer. The second half of this chapter conveys the unobservable data that I gathered during audience interviews. The perceptions of the event as reported by multiple audience members – along with their motivation to attend and possibly to tell – are the thoughts

and feelings that allow a discussion of the slam to move beyond wondering *what happens at the slam* and toward an understanding of *what the slam means*.

### What Happens at the SLAM?

The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM is only one manifestation of a performance concept that has taken hold all over the United States. Before presenting the particulars of this one slam, it's worth considering what you might expect from any slam in any city. In the most basic sense, a story slam is an event where a limited number of persons compete to tell the best true, personal story of a specific length to an audience. These tellers are typically performing from behind a microphone. These performers are not typically persons who refer to themselves as professional storytellers, although many of them do work in fields that demand the crafting or use of stories. Slams are often facilitated by a host. Many slams are staged on a recurring basis at one venue and are produced by the same organization each time. In some cases the tellers are preselected by a committee that reviews potential stories (this is not the case with The Moth StorySLAM). Often times the stories are judged and a winner is selected. And although not explicitly defined as being for adults, many slams are exclusively attended by persons who are 21 years of age or older – a fact that is unsurprising given the frequent staging of these events in bars and nightclubs.

How are these general qualities, which are common to any slam, specifically interpreted at The Moth Detroit StorySLAM? The slam is held on the first Thursday of every month at Cliff Bell's – a jazz club, restaurant, and bar on Park Avenue in downtown Detroit. The event is produced and sponsored by the local public radio station, WDET 101.9, which is operated from the campus of Detroit's Wayne State University. Cliff Bell's has a capacity of 200 people and, as a result, there is always a staff member of the venue stationed at the entrance to not only check

identification and collect the five-dollar admission fee but also to conduct a head count. There have been slams where the club was at capacity and this meant that space inside the venue was reduced to standing room only, while a line formed on the sidewalk outside the club.

Any discussion of what makes The Moth Detroit StorySLAM unique or special needs to take careful account of Cliff Bell's itself. Jennifer Conlin wrote in The New York Times that "entering Cliff Bell's is like walking onto the set of a Fred Astaire film." If not for recent legislation prohibiting smoke of any kind in Michigan bars, I would completely agree with her. Designed by Albert Kahn in 1924, Cliff Bell's is now a jazz club, bar, restaurant, and Art Deco fantasy brought to life. The club gets its name from former owner Clifford Bell, who opened a speak-easy in the building back in 1935, thus beginning the venue's long tradition of catering to thirsty Detroiters with deep pockets. Sadly, the club fell into disrepair and was eventually closed between 1985 and 2005, at which point it reopened its doors to reveal a fresh new look that could be called "Art Deco à la facelift."

When I first entered the space in September of 2010, I was immediately struck by its beauty. The lighting is warm, not harsh as many bars can be, and the walls are painted a deep, warm, red-brown. The ceiling is concave and highly polished wood, giving viewers the impression that they are looking up at the bottom of a beautifully crafted boat. The bar itself is of similarly lustrous wood and located in the right half of the space. It is a rectangular bar with supple, curving edges that are hugged by patrons all around. Its rim is dotted with small, wooden tables in the shape of half-moons. They are no more than two square feet each and they are flanked on either side by tall stools. More stools fill the spaces in between them. There are four larger round tables to the right of the bar that seat between five and eight people. These tables are tall and the people seated at them can see over the bar to the rest of the club.

To the left of the bar the room becomes a long rectangle, stretching away from the door and up to the elevated stage. Above the middle of the stage there is a disco ball, roughly the size of a soccer ball, and behind the drum set there is a mosaic of earth tone tiles arranged in the pattern of stylized sunrise (or sunset, depending on your disposition). There are several small café tables forming a semicircle in front of the stage and there are more on the elevated space next to the stage, behind which there is a wooden staircase curving up to the restrooms and a space for private parties. During the show it is nearly impossible to make your way through the standing crowd at the base of the stairs that lead to the elevated stage space and its café tables.

If you do make it that far, it can be even more difficult to find passage up the stairs toward the restrooms. If you are successful, and if you happen to enter the door labeled “LADIES,” you will find yourself in a pentagonal powder room, three sides of which have individually lighted mirrors and wrought iron chairs with tufted cushions. The room is dark but the mirror lights are warm. No matter how you felt when you left home, these mirrors and these lights have the power to make a woman feel more fabulous than she did when she entered. Beneath your feet the carpet is a black and tan zebra print. This powder room opens to a smaller bathroom containing three wooden stalls. They have beveled glass in a pyramid pattern at the top of each of their doors. When I first entered one of these cabins, I was delighted to find a three-prong hook to accommodate both my coat and my handbag. The sinks, meanwhile, are porcelain and they have separate spouts for hot and cold water.

The remainder of that long, rectangular space below is filled with two parallel rows of square tables that have been pushed together without spaces in between. There are chairs along either side of each row and these spaces will be all taken before there is an hour left to show time. Clearly, unless you arrive with 40, sitting at one of these tables means sitting with



strangers. This longer space is set apart from the bar area, or at least partially, by three large columns. There is a half wall about four feet high between the two columns closest to the door and there are more tables against this wall. Depending where you are sitting or standing at the bar, your view of the stage may or may not be obstructed by these columns and the sea of cocktail-balancing latecomers who will position themselves there during the program.

When I first entered the venue as a participant observer, I had elected to collect observational data corresponding to six categories of the performance event. These categories were borrowed from Richard Bauman's *six situational factors of a performance event*. These categories, introduced and briefly explained in Chapter 1, are now presented with their corresponding data as these six situational factors were manifested at the Detroit StorySLAMs I attended between September 2010 and January 2011.

#### Situational Factor 1: Participant Identity-Role

Everyone attending the StorySLAMs, whether for work or play, were considered participants. Their specific identities dictate their role in the performance event and therefore their behaviors. The participants in this ethnographic study are divided into two basic types of folk – work folk and recreation folk. The work folk are further divided into two subtypes – venue folk and show folk. The venue folk include all persons working at the event who are paid by the establishment, Cliff Bell's. The wait staff, mixologists (also known as bartenders), bouncer, and technical staff (the person working the sound board and the person working the lights) all belong to this subtype of venue folk. The show folk also present themselves at the slam in a paid capacity. They – the host, cohosts, interns, swag table operators, and the people working the consent table – are all working for 101.9 WDET. This radio station is the public

radio station broadcast from the campus of Wayne State University, located in downtown Detroit, and the sponsor of the event.

Recreation folk compose the second basic type of folk present for the story slam. This folk type also consists of two subtypes – teller folk and listener folk – that are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, all teller folks are listener folks, but not all listeners were tellers. Some listeners never intend to tell, some hope to tell, and 10 of them actually tell by the end of the event. All of these folk types – work-radio, work-venue, recreational-teller, recreational-listener – were observed for their distinct, identity-determined behaviors. Additionally, there will be description of the material culture of the slam as it pertains to identity-specific apparel across these various folk types.

#### Situational Factor 6: Action Sequence

Understanding the significance of the other four factors (*expressive means of performance, social interactional ground rules-norms, social interactional performance strategies, and criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation*) without first understanding what happens during the slam can be difficult for the reader. The action sequence is the “what happens when” of the performance event (Bauman 4-7). This includes information such as whether or not people are sitting or standing when the performance begins (they do either), whether or not there is an intermission (there is), and whether or not the storytellers mingle with the crowd after the performance (some do and some do not). Therefore, at this point the discussion skips ahead to Bauman’s sixth factor – *action sequence*.

The action sequence of the story slam starts long before 7:30 in the evening, when the storytelling performances begin. The audience – and the hopeful tellers included in that

audience – begins arriving around five o'clock. After finding parking spaces, paying five dollars at the door, and showing their IDs, these people enter Cliff Bell's. Once inside they will see that the WDET staffers have already filled an alcove with Moth and station products, set-up a folding table for sign-up sheets, and placed the free-standing scoreboard on the stage. All of the tables will be taken by 6:00, so by that time all of the audience members will be either drinking – and possibly eating – at a table or the bar or standing in whatever open space they can find. Hopeful tellers may “put their name into the hat” at any point from the time they arrive up until the final teller's name is called. Until the show begins, the audience will be simultaneously eating, drinking, and talking.

The host, Alex Trajano, steps up to the microphone around 7:00 and welcomes the crowd. He informs everyone that they are “at a story slam” and anyone can participate. He points out the sign-up sheets near the entrance, informs the audience of the evening's theme, and tells the crowd that the show will begin in half an hour.

The eating, drinking, and talking that begin prior to the show do not stop when the show begins at 7:30. People continue to order drinks at the bar and waiters continue to take food and drink orders from the seated audience. Audience chatter is lower and less audible during the performances, but it rarely ceases entirely. After Alex introduces himself, The Moth, WDET, and his cohost for the evening, he then calls on the three tables of judges that have been selected from the seated audience. They are asked to share their team names and then the scoring rules are explained. Alex then reminds the audience of the theme and explains the “Tweets” that are placed on the tables. These are tiny slips of paper on which audience members may anonymously scribe a few words reflecting on the evening's theme. He says that he will randomly select Tweets to read for the audience throughout the show. He then calls out the

name and hometown (the sign-up sheets contain a consent form that requires the teller's address) of the first teller.

The first teller, like all nine of the others, makes a path to the stage from some spot elsewhere in the club. This may take a few minutes or a few seconds. Either way, music is played and the audience claps as the teller climbs up to the stage. Alex adjusts the microphone for the teller and then retreats to sit at the side of the stage. A tone will be made by one the WDET staffers if and when the teller goes over her allotted 5 minutes. If the teller is still speaking after 6 minutes, the tone is blown again. When the teller finishes the story a hat containing the combination sign-up sheets and consent forms is handed over and that teller pulls the name of the next teller, which is then handed to the host.

The teller is clapped off the stage and then Alex begins speaking to the audience while the judges deliberate. This can take anywhere from 3-10 minutes and that time is usually filled with the host's commentary on the story, jokes that may or may not be related to that story or the show's theme, and references to the radio station and any upcoming events affiliated with the station, The Moth, or Cliff Bell's. He then calls on each of the teams of judges who hold up a sign indicating the teller's score. All three scores are then written by the assistant on the scoreboard next to the teller's name. Alex calls out the name and hometown of the next teller while his assistant is writing out the previous teller's scores. This process is then repeated until 10 tellers have been brought to the stage. The only exception in this repetition is the 20-minute intermission between the fifth and sixth teller. The extent to which the audience's eating, drinking, and talking is silenced or paused by any of the tellers helps gauge the extent to which the audience is not only attending to, but also enjoying, the performance.

After the final teller has left the stage, each teller's three scores are then tallied for a final score. All the participating tellers are welcomed back up to the stage while the tallying is taking place. Once all of the tellers have reached the stage, Alex reminds the audience that the winner of that evening's show will be appearing at the Grand SLAM at the end of the season. The winner's name is then called out and applause follows. At this point, anyone whose name was not drawn from the hat is then invited up to the stage to share, in rapid-fire manner, the first line of their story. The audience begins to dissipate at this point. A portion of the audience may immediately depart after the winner is called. Some people may stay to drink and socialize. Other people may stay to enjoy the live music that may or may not be following the show.

#### Situational Factor 2: Expressive Means of Performance

The expressive means of a performance denotes the medium through which the performance is delivered and the manner in which that medium is manipulated (Bauman 4-7). At The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM the medium is the voice as heard through a microphone. This is an absolute necessity at Cliff Bell's, which may have up to 200 patrons present for any given slam. On the nights that I attended as a participant observer, the crowd was always within a few dozen of that number. The social interactional ground rules, or norms (discussed below), of this performance event necessitate this form of voice amplification. Additionally, the physical geography of the space obstructs the view of many recreational folk, despite the fact that the teller is elevated upon a three-foot stage. This means that the teller's voice may be the only expressive means of performance to reach a significant portion of the audience.

I myself was not always fortunate enough to find a view of the tellers. Therefore, incomplete data were collected on the tellers' appearance and physical performance (gesture,

posture, and movement) while each teller's voice – and therefore the teller's skill with the microphone – was noted. That skill was determined by the teller's ability, or inability, to properly modulate the voice according to the sensitivity of the microphone and the possibly variable volume of the voice during the story. Also, a tendency to “pop” the microphone represented an obvious lack of skill with the equipment. However, it's important to note that this degree of skill with the microphone is not necessarily indicative of the audience's reception of the teller. In other words, skillful manipulation of the microphone does not represent a positive correlation to scores. (Scoring is discussed below under situational factor 5: criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation.)

### Situational Factor 3: Social Interactional Ground Rules-Norms

The social interactional ground rules-norms are the dos and don'ts of the performance event. These rules may or may not be explicitly stated at the venue or during the event. Whether or not it's acceptable for an audience member to rise from a chair and yell at the performer is a social interactional ground rule-norm (which I never witnessed), as is the acceptability of serving and imbibing alcohol at the event (I witnessed this continuously). While it would not be acceptable for festival volunteers to deliver pitchers of beer between the aisles of the National Storytelling Festival, this same activity is commonplace among the wait staff during the slams at Cliff Bell's.

The program itself only follows three explicit rules. First, stories may be no longer than 5 minutes. While a participant is telling a story, an assistant host runs a stopwatch. When this timer reaches 4 minutes a whistle is blown. Before the show, the host informs everyone that this whistle is a warning and needs to be taken as a cue to bring the story to a close. The whistle

blows again at 5 minutes. At this point, the judges are meant to begin penalizing the storyteller. There is no rule dictating precisely how many points should be taken away from a teller's score for running over the time limit.

The second rule dictates that stories told must be true and those stories must be taken from the teller's personal experience. This means that, although a story about the French and Indian War may be true – and yes, potentially even enthralling – there's no place for such a tale on the stage at the Detroit StorySLAM because that story would not be told from the participant's personal experience. The notion of truth, however, is less clear. During my fieldwork at the slam, I never once witnessed a teller sharing a story that was blatantly untrue. Yes, some stories were hard to believe – and in fact, the prospect that these wild tales were actually true added to my enjoyment of them – but they were never challenged (at least not within the view or hearing range of the audience) by any members of the WDET staff or other persons in the crowd. This requisite truth is communicated to the audience and prospective tellers through the host, during his opening remarks on the rules, and through The Moth's media outlets – the organization's website, podcasts, and mailings all state that stories told at the slams must be true. And while it may be uncertain how many of the audience members read that recommendation online or on paper, it's unlikely that any of them miss that rule when host Alex Trajano says, "Please don't bullshit us, we're from Detroit and we *will* kill you" (FN, Jan., 233-234). Yes, that is said in jest and yes the crowd does laugh, but the humor promotes the understanding that liars are not welcome on the stage.

Beyond length, truth, and the expectation that "it happened to me," there is no specific rule dictating the content of stories shared at a story slam. However, many slams do have a theme for each show. The third rule at The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM is that stories pertain to

the evening's theme. The themes were "Backfired," "Near Death," "Secrets," and "Vices" during the months that I attended the slam in Detroit. These themes are open to interpretation and are typically broad enough that they will give rise to a number of unique stories. And yet, the combined effects of the venue, the average age of the audience, and the geographical location of the event have the potential to produce similarities in style and content that are not the result of rules or recommendations. Rather, social norms and local knowledge have the potential to manifest themselves on the stage without any interference from regulations.

Different slams use differing methods for the selection of their performers. At The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM, there are always 10 tellers. Anyone at the club during the show could potentially be a storyteller. The system for selecting these tellers is very much like a lottery in that their names are drawn at random. Near the entrance to the club there is a table where an employee, or sometimes two, from the radio station sit or stand with a few clipboards on which there are stacks of consent forms. These forms, once filled out, are the papers that are drawn to select the tellers. The consent forms ask for the prospective teller's name, address, and telephone number, as well as a signature in agreement that the station and The Moth may use recordings of the performance online, in CD distribution, or in their promotional materials. During the show, the host draws the name of the first tellers and each subsequent teller draws the name of the next performer before exiting the stage. There was only one occasion during my fieldwork in which a name was drawn and the person did not come to the stage. The host was surprised by this and stated that this had "never happened before" (FN, Nov., 11-13)

There are some rules that are spoken. There are some rules that are never spoken out loud, but everyone knows them. At The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM, the rules are stated out loud that there will be 10 tellers, there will be only true stories, and you will use your 5 minutes



to stick to the theme. However, it is never said out loud that you will wear a certain thing, or do your hair a certain way. But, undoubtedly, people who walk into Cliff Bell's on the night of the StorySLAM will instantly know if they are following the unspoken dress code.

When I entered Cliff Bell's back in September 2010 for my first StorySLAM, the bartenders and wait-staff struck me as sharply dressed. They were all dressed in some variation of black, white, grey, or denim. I saw men dressed in stiff collars and sporting suspenders or vests and in one case even a bow tie. The men had obviously spent time on their grooming, as they had all gelled their hair into careful side parts, faux hawks, or curls. The female staff members had also spent obvious time on their hair. Many of these women were wearing patterned scarves or sparkling clips in their hair. One woman had tucked a large black flower in to the curls that she had secured on one side of her hair. Nearly all of these women wore dresses or skirts with opaque tights. I later began referring to this look – the artful revelation of inked skin from beneath tights and body-hugging, tailored clothing – as “tights-over-tats.” During the course of my fieldwork, tights-over-tats was a look consistently chosen by the venue folk.

The show folk, however, chose different attire. While the male host did wear fitted oxfords and he did gel his hair into a faux hawk, his two female counterparts never revealed any tattoos. They wore high-heeled pumps or high-heeled boots in combination with form-fitting sweater dresses or pencil skirts that they combined with sleeveless blouses. And while the host's shirts may have varied from black on one evening to white on another, the female cohosts never wore the monochromatic and dark palette preferred by the venue folk. Instead, these women selected blouses that were jewel-toned and sweater dresses in skin-tone matching shades of caramel and chocolate. They wore their hair long, loose, straight, and shining.

Meanwhile, the recreation folk – the group to which I as a participant observer belonged – adopted some variation of either of these two looks. I found that the majority of these people were between the ages of 21 (IDs are checked at the entrance to Cliff’s) and 35. This meant that many of the recreation folk were either college-aged students or young professionals. This fact translated into a number of audience members in their late 20s and early 30s arriving at the show in clothing that could be considered office attire. In general, the look of the recreation folk is one that I would describe as “adult-hipster” or “posh-hipster,” which is not to be confused with the hipster look of many high-school and college-aged students that, although hip, do not have the access to the same funds and expensive materials as young professionals.

As I learned in January, I was not the only observer ascribing the term “hipster” to the recreation folk. At that slam I ran into a man in his late 20s who I had met back in October. We had spoken at the bar before the show began and I had learned that he was from suburban Detroit and that he had come to the show that evening hoping to tell, which he did do. I encountered the same man at the November slam when he was sitting with a table of work friends who had all been selected as a group of judges. When we ran into one another at the January slam, I complimented him on his new glasses – a pair of thick-rimmed tortoise shells. We went on to discuss his thoughts on the experience of being a teller and then going on to be a judge. He reported enjoying both but mentioned his suspicion that the scores get higher as the evening wears on. When asked why he thought this might be, he said, “I suppose the audience and the judges have had more to drink, but I don’t think the hipsters at Cliff’s drink as much as people at other bars.” Exploring his use of the appellation “hipster,” I said, “So you think there are a lot of hipsters here?” He smiled in response to my question and leaned in to say that he supposed his new glasses “are going to be my gateway drug to being a hipster.” We laughed together and as

he departed I began looking around the room for more of the hipster glasses. I lost count somewhere north of 25. (FN, Jan., 100-108)

#### Situational Factor 4: Social Interactional Performance Strategies

Social interactional performance strategies are the actions, words, or sounds produced by the performer as a means of involving the audience (Bauman 4-7). At the Detroit Moth Story SLAM, winning stories have very little in common thematically. However, winning storytellers routinely achieve emotional synchronization with the audience. Likewise, tellers receiving poor scores exhibit an unawareness of or inability to respond to the audience's emotions. Regardless of the story's emotional tenor – and stories do range from the very somber to the riotously hilarious – the teller skillfully elicits emotions from the audience that are present in the narrative. If the teller shares a personal victory, the audience cries with the teller victoriously (as was the case with the September winner) (FN, Sept., 309-318). If the teller's words grow quiet while remembering guilt, the audience is similarly quiet and reflective (as was the case when one winner paused over the death of a former lover). As I will explain under the next factor, *criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation*, the degree of such emotional synchronization often informs the judges' scoring.

One of these performance strategies, when skillfully employed, immediately turns the teller into a sympathetic voice. Time and again, high-scoring tellers demonstrate the ability to grab the audience's attention with their very first line. Because anyone's name could be pulled, there is no assumption by the audience that the person behind the microphone is worth listening to until that teller demonstrates the ability to be interesting. Opening lines are essential to the teller's success because the social interactional norms of the event are such that it is perfectly

acceptable for audience members not to listen. Hoping for high impact, successful first sentences do not begin with extraneous exposition; rather, tellers often initiate their tales *in media res* or with a startling or comical line. For example, S'Tori, the January runner-up began her story on "Vices" by announcing that, "God put two little vaginas in my feet and if you rub them long enough I will have a 'footgasm'" (FN, Jan., 267-268). After that line, it was impossible not to wonder what S'Tori would say next and it was equally impossible to talk during her story without getting dirty looks from other audience members.

The opposite of the socially acceptable chatter, this peer-regulated attentiveness is easily witnessed in the shushing and frowning dealt out to fellow crowd members who have failed to notice the success of an opening line. This was evident during the January winner's tale. John, the champion of the evening, delivered a comical and intriguing first line. He began by saying, "It was like any other Saturday night in the 70s – I was in my basement, I was alone, and I was horny." The room roared at this announcement. Admittedly, John looked precisely like your stereotypical, suburban lawn-mowing, middle-American man. His line was so unexpected that the room was startled into laughter. He immediately had the audience's attention and he followed that line with multiple laugh-inducing and self-deprecating comments before getting to the deeply emotional, dark side of his tale. By the time the story turned emotionally, the audience was already sympathetic to John. He had so successfully won them over with his first line that they were willing to follow him into a darker realm, a landscape where his call-girl lover was murdered and he was tormented by guilt. Despite the initial laughter, there were many teary eyes by the end of his story. I suspect that would not have been the case if John had not initially endeared himself the audience through laughter.

The value of the first line is so integral to storytelling *à la* Moth that the show concludes when all of the hopeful tellers whose names were not pulled are summoned up to the stage to share their first lines with the audience. Often times, these solitary lines will be so intriguing that audience members will whisper to one another, “I hope we get to hear that sometime.” One of my favorite examples of this happened at the end of the November show when Greg, a previous winner, pointed to the club’s entrance and said, “If you walk out that door, turn left, and go down two blocks you’ll see the corner where I discovered that my father was a pimp.” The audience alternately gasped, squealed, and yelled “Nuh-uh!” I’m still hoping to hear that story one day.

Another notable social interactional performance strategy employed by storytellers at the slam was the use of references to places and activities that held specific connotations for certain audience members. For example, one storyteller said, “I was a freshman at MSU so, you know, I was going to do a lot of studying.” MSU, or Michigan State University, is known to many Michiganders as a “party school.” The teller’s comment was a sarcastic one and one that brought laughs initially and later on in his story when he told the audience about setting up a study group with the girl down the hall (FN, Jan.,311-314)

Similarly, another storyteller began a story by telling the audience it was about “crossing the bridge to Canada” when she was 19. (May 2012) This brought many smiles, some laughter, and a few cringes from the audience. Due to the lower legal drinking age in Canada, “crossing the bridge”, is something of a rite of passage for many Michigan natives who grow up in proximity to the Ambassador Bridge. The Ambassador is located in Detroit and, before 9/11 and the advent of certain passport checks at the border, funneled hoards of teenagers into the bars and clubs of Windsor, Ontario for their first legal drink. Calling up those memories brought up a

warm nostalgic feeling for me and, judging from the smiles and nods I witnessed, for a number of other listeners as well.

These are just two examples of cultural reference points that were employed by storytellers onstage at The Moth StorySLAM. In some cases they briefly mentioned a street or a neighborhood. In other cases they mentioned restaurants or shops that “used to be” in certain towns. And on some occasions they mentioned Michigan-specific seasons like deer hunting season, vacation months on Mackinac Island<sup>2</sup>(FN, Oct. 222-226), and summer boat rides to Boblo Island.<sup>3</sup> Any teller who chooses to use such a cultural reference point in a story gives the audience an impression of the teller’s identity, whether or not the teller does so intentionally or unintentionally. Different members of the audience hear a reference to deer hunting season and experience different connotations based on their own inevitable contact with deer hunting in Michigan. The same is true when mentioning a particular street or suburb.

In addition to well-selected opening lines and local references, there are innumerable stylistic choices available to the storytellers at the Detroit StorySLAM. I cannot speak with certainty about those choices given the impracticality of capturing recordings of the tellers during my fieldwork. Complete recordings of their performances and subsequent transcriptions would likely provide an informative survey of the vocal techniques employed by the slam tellers. Within the limitations of this project, the discussion of the performance strategies are limited to the audiences’ reactions to the stories and the tellers’ own reporting of their processes, techniques, and performances. Interestingly, my notes on audience response during the storytelling revealed three common emotional response patterns among the stories. I refer to these patterns by the shorthand I assigned to the audience reactions – laugh-laugh-LAUGH,

---

<sup>2</sup> Resort island located between the two Michigan peninsulas and traditionally only opened to tourists during specific months.

<sup>3</sup> An amusement park located on Bois Blanc Island, Ontario that was closed in 1993.

laugh-laugh-GASP-laugh, and laugh-laugh-CRY. When I returned to the slam in May of 2012, one of the friends who joined me supplied me with her explanation of the “what the stories are supposed to be like,” saying, “I get it now, it’s like stand-up but not.” Clearly, all of those laughs leave a strong impression.

#### Situational Factor 5: Criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation

The criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation are the expectations that the audience has of the performer and the grounds on which the performer is judged successful or otherwise (Bauman 4-7). When the stories are penalized in the point system for having been overlong, off topic, or just plain uninteresting, it’s the judges who assign the points. These judges are selected from the audience. About an hour before the program begins, the radio crew looks into the audience and identifies tables of people to serve as teams of judges. There are always three teams and they range in size from two to six people. The teams are given sets of numbers between 9 and 10 that have been printed on 8”x11” sheets of paper. During the show, they have between 5 and 15 minutes after each story – during which time the host entertains the crowd – to come to a consensus on a score. These teams of judges are required to name themselves and their names typically reflect the theme of that evening’s show. When the October theme was “Near Death,” for example, the judges were named, “The Hanging Judges,” “Team Near-Death Experience,” and “The Grim Reapers.”

The judges deliver their scores by holding up their pieces of paper. These scores generally range of 7.5 to 9.8 points. The assistant host writes these numbers next to the names of the tellers so that there are five columns running down the scoreboard – one column of names, three columns of scores representing the three tables of judges, and one column of score totals.

This scoreboard is a large white poster board that has been tacked to an easel. This is left center stage, just behind the microphone, throughout the entire program. This means that anyone can look at the scoreboard at any point in the show and determine which storyteller is in the lead.

The common denominator between all of the teams of judges that I observed was the fact that the people on the teams knew each other before the show and were in the venue and seated together at least an hour before the program began. This commonality is remarkable in light of the fact that finding group seating for a party of up to six people requires arriving at Cliff Bell's at least an hour and a half early, sometimes more, on the night of a slam. Realizing this and adjusting their plans accordingly reflects an awareness of the slam and the large crowd that it draws. These persons may have gleaned that knowledge coincidentally when calling Cliff Bell's in pursuit of a reservation. At the same time having the wherewithal to arrive early may also be the result of having previously attended the StorySLAM. In that instance these are judges who have already witnessed a slam and are arriving with some notion of what they can expect to see during the evening's program.

In speaking to the judges I discovered varying degrees of story experience but a similarity in terms of their expectations or rather, as Bauman might call it, their "criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation." One group of judges, for instance, was comprised of an African-American man and Caucasian woman, both of middle-age. She was from Livonia and he was from Ann Arbor and an active member of the city's storytelling guild. Both of them were attending the slam for the first time but reported that they had been listening to The Moth on the radio "for a while now." Their knowledge of storytelling was informed by this past experience and, for the gentleman, his many experiences within his local guild. When I asked them what they were hoping to hear from a "good story," the man replied that he wants to see if the



storytellers can “connect” with the audience. I questioned him further, asking, “What does connecting look like? What does it sound like?” He told me that “It’s eye contact and in their gestures.” At this point his fellow judge interrupted him to say that “Yes, connecting is laughing with them, but is the audience also silent enough? Are they quiet enough to hear a pin drop?” (FN, Oct., 62-71)

These judges did not relate an interest in the composition of a story or its content. Instead, their explanations of a good story were concerned with the teller and the teller’s ability to “connect.” According to these judges, that connection is something that can be witnessed in the mirroring gestures, the sharing of eye contact, and the matching of a mood between the teller and the audience. That mood may be light and comedic but it may also be somber and prove equally impressive. This proved true of storytellers who won the four slams that I attended. In terms of content, the stories were vastly different. But each of the winning storytellers held the attention of the crowd. In other story venues, it may be difficult to judge how many of the audience members are truly paying attention to the performer. But at Cliff Bell’s – where the conversation, clinking of glasses, and crashing of food trays continues throughout the show – silence is the most evident sign of an attentive and pleased audience.

The overt evaluative mechanism built into the structure of the Detroit slam via the scoring system is a gauge for the larger and less explicit evaluative criteria on display in the audience’s reactions. After all, the judges are themselves members of the audience and their scores are expected to be representative of the group. This expectation is evident when the audience boos judges after they hold up inappropriately low numbers. I witnessed one of the nonexplicit evaluative criteria when I returned to Detroit slam in May of 2012. One of the tellers

at that event was a woman who performs professionally and who won a StorySLAM at the Moth in the New York during the previous year. She was not as well-received in Detroit.

When she was called up to the stage the room was full of chatter and clinking glasses. Like most tellers at Cliffs, she did not automatically have the rapt attention of her audience. As previously mentioned under social interactional ground rules, slam audiences in Detroit do not feel compelled to listen to just anyone and they feel justified in ignoring any teller with whom they do not connect. Instead of grabbing her audience's attention with an intriguing or startling first line, this teller looked at the room and announced, "I'm waiting for you to be quiet." Hearing that, my jaw dropped and I look around the room. My friends, who were attending their first slam, sat back from our table and unconsciously leaned away from the teller. I noticed several knitted brows at the bar and a general shift in posture among the audience members. Her comments were received as an odd scolding because, from the audience's perspective, no rule had been broken. Throughout the rest of her performance, the chatter was somewhat dimmed but many people looked to the persons seated next to them and not at the teller. Needless to say, this teller was not well-received.

Unfortunately for the scolding teller, she failed to gauge the audience's expectations. During my visits to The Moth, I often tracked a teller's success by watching for signs that the teller was or was not responsive to the audience. In other words, I was watching for signs that the teller could realize that the audience was having a negative response to some aspect of a story and somehow alter the telling – possibly in tone, content, or pacing – in order to regain the audience's favor. I witnessed an uncomfortably awkward example of a teller failing to notice a negative response and make appropriate alterations at the October slam.

The teller, Sean, was a Caucasian male in his 30ies with a buzz-cut, glasses, and untucked Oxford. He surprised everyone when he stood at the microphone and delivered his first line: “And what else do you do when you have a lay-over on a business trip except answer a sex ad on Craig’s List?” (FN, Oct., 194-195). The room issued what I would call a “collective gasp” and he continued with his story. Sadly, Sean’s performance took a turn for the worse when he began recounting the subsequent, painful swelling of his penis. His descriptions of his recently diseased and “pussing” member weren’t well received (people were shaking their heads, looking away, and in some cases looking a bit faint), nor was his retelling of how the ER doctor “drained it with a 12-gauge needle.” Not only did Sean gross everyone out, he also went over the time limit – twice. He appeared painfully unaware that the audience was grossed out. In the end his scores were 6.9, 7.0, and 7.0 – almost the lowest scores I ever saw at The Moth.

Shaking heads and covered faces are not always bad signs however. In November, the runner-up told a very funny story about the year he was given a camcorder for Christmas. The storyteller, a fashionable Caucasian male in his mid 20s, was a mere preteen in his story. That Christmas, he was vacationing with his extended family and spent the entire get-away filming his family doing various quintessentially cozy family activities. Then, near the end of the trip he had the grand idea that he would film himself in the bathroom, masturbating. “What could go wrong?” he thought. “I’ll just erase this part of the tape.” At that admission, the audience began to squeal and shake their heads. We all knew this would end badly. Don’t all sex tapes come back and haunt their makers? This one certainly did. By the time his narrative reached its climax, his younger self was helplessly sitting on the couch between his grandparents watching the video and we the audience were breathless with laughter. “No!” cried many of us, and we didn’t mean it the way we had during Sean’s disturbing phallic mishap. (FN, Nov., 110-120).

On a basic level “Masturbation Christmas” was a successful story because its teller responded to the audience. Meanwhile, “STD Layover” was not a successful story because its teller did not respond to the audience. He may not have picked up on their cues or he may have seen those cringes and simply not known how to respond to them. During “Masturbation Christmas” the audience cringed but the teller aptly understood that they were both cringing and genuinely enjoying the anticipation. He drew out his tale in response to those emotions and painstakingly described the seating arrangement of his family right before the tape was popped into the VCR. His sister was there. His mother was here. His grandmother was right beside him. It was an impressive display and the audience was thoroughly pleased.

#### Reflections from Participants

Before attending my first story slam at Cliff’s, I found myself wondering, “Who comes to the slam?” I didn’t know what to expect, but I did know that the event was produced by 101.9 WDET, Detroit’s public radio station. It was then my assumption that the station, if it was willing to invest the time and money into such a production, must have begun the venture under the assumption that this would be the sort of event that would appeal to their pre-existing listening audience and offer the prospect of broadening that listenership. Perhaps the station viewed the regular patrons of Cliff Bell’s as potential new listeners? At the same time the club may have seen WDET’s viewers as an as yet untapped demographic. Regardless, the collaboration between the station and the venue suggests that there must have been some common denominator between the pre-existing and the hoped-for viewers and patrons.

What I discovered in the course of almost 200 informal interviews, was that The Moth’s Detroit StorySLAM was indeed drawing people to Cliff Bell’s for the first time while also

introducing Cliff's regulars to their first story slam. The first question that I asked respondents was, "What brings you here tonight?" That question was purposely selected in an effort to avoid projecting the assumption that anyone might be at the club expressly to witness the slam. What I discovered was a mix of both regulars who arrived at the club for various reasons – celebrating the completion of exams, a birthday, a night out with girlfriends – that excluded any foreknowledge of the event and persons who had planned their evening expressly to attend the slam.

The latter group reported becoming aware of the slam through various means. Some people reported being fans of *The Moth Radio Hour* on NPR. Other respondents said that they were fans of the radio program, *This American Life* and had heard this event advertised on the NPR station (WDET Detroit) and, assuming that it would be similarly entertaining, made plans to attend the slam at Cliff's. Many others reported that they were "brought by" someone who was a fan of The Moth podcast. Indeed, when conducting informal interviews in the field, I found myself most often approaching groups of three to five people (sometimes seated at the bar or a table, other times gathered in the "standing room only" section), only to find that one of them was a fan of the podcast and the rest had been "brought along by" this one fan.

Another common combination was the "social-pair"; these were hetero-social or homo-social pairs of Moth enthusiasts who attended the slam in pairs rather than in groups. Unlike the larger groups, in which all members pointed to one person as having "brought us," these pairs both reported being fans of some form of story-disseminating media. In some cases this was The Moth podcasts. Other respondents reported that they were fans of *This American Life* or *Story Corps*. The majority of the social pairs that I spoke with were attending the slam for the first time and were delighted that they had "finally made it" to the show. These pairs had "been

trying to make it” to past shows, been “too late” for others, or sometimes “couldn’t get in.” In these cases, the social pairs expressed a delight in simply being in attendance at the show and an undoubting expectation that the program would be “good.”

I discovered that the majority of the audience, both the larger groups and the social pairs, were coming to the slam from southeastern Michigan.<sup>4</sup> Many of the audience members stated that they were students at Wayne State University, which is located within Detroit. These students, although they arrived at the slam from within the city, did not necessarily identify as being “Detroiters” or “from Detroit.” Note that these students were asked “Where are you from?” They were not asked, “Where do you live?” The table below (Table 1) lists the cities represented among the audience members at the slam. Notice that the majority of these towns and cities are within a half hour’s drive from metropolitan Detroit.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for map of Michigan.

Table 1:  
*“Where Are You From?”*

City	Approximate Distance from Detroit	Estimated Drive Time to Detroit
Windsor, Ontario	6 miles	20 minutes
Dearborn, MI	7 miles	11 minutes
Grosse Pointe, MI	9 miles	22 minutes
Ferndale, MI	12 miles	17 minutes.
Pleasant Ridge, MI	13 miles	17 minutes
Royal Oak, MI	14 miles	17 minutes
Oak Park, MI	14 miles	18 minutes
Huntington Woods, MI	15 miles	20 minutes
Garden City, MI	15 miles	27 minutes
Clawson, MI	17 miles	22 minutes
Livonia, MI	19 miles	22 minutes
Farmington Hills, MI	23 miles	26 minutes
Trenton, MI	23 miles	29 minutes
Bloomfield Hills, MI	25 miles	32 minutes
Novi, MI	28 miles	30 minutes
Canton, MI	30 miles	36 minutes
Ypsilanti, MI	34 miles	38 minutes
Monroe, MI	39 miles	41 minutes
Ann Arbor, MI	43 miles	46 minutes
Holt, MI	88 miles	1 hour, 30 minutes
Frankenmuth, MI	93 miles	1 hours, 34 minutes
Grand Rapids, MI	157 miles	2 hours, 32 minutes
South Orange, NJ	601 miles	10 hours, 23 minutes

Looking at the names of these cities and towns, it might be easy to see how closely they lay to one another on a map and assume a certain shared social demographic. And yet, in the case of Detroit and some of the nearest hometowns in the table above, proximity has very little to do with commonality of social strata. Keep in mind that the slam is staged at a club in Detroit. The average per capita income for Detroit, as it was recorded in 2010, was \$15,062. In that same year, the average per capita income for Grosse Pointe – located a mere 9 miles and 22 minutes from the city of Detroit – was \$48,808. Grosse Pointe, however, is an extreme example. This is a beautiful, well-manicured, mansion-dotted community adjacent to Lake St. Clair. It is not the

typical, southeastern Michigan suburb or even a large Michigan city like Dearborn with a per capita income of \$23,024. Indeed, the economic milieu represented at the slam seems less than indicative of the general population within the event's host city. And yet, this economic disparity is not the only incongruent factor between the community inside and the community directly outside of Cliff Bell's.

During my first trip to the slam, I introduced myself to a group of young people who were standing at the bar. There were four of them. Two of them were African-American women, one was a Caucasian woman, and the fourth member of their party was an Asian man. They all appeared to be in their late 20s or early 30s. When I asked them if they were from Detroit, one of the African-American women replied that she had grown up in Detroit but no longer lived in the area. Gesturing to her friends, she told me that she had met them all while they were students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Our conversation continued and I learned that it was this woman who was a fan of *The Moth Radio Hour* and had convinced her friends to come to Detroit for the show. We then looked around the room and I noticed her shaking her head. Deciding not to continue ignoring the great, very white, elephant in the room, I asked her, "Is it what you expected?"

"No, it's not," she replied. "I'd like to see an event like this with a crowd that is more representative of the city of Detroit." At this point, I'd already assumed that she was lamenting the overall whiteness of the room – looking around, I could only spot five other black people in the crowd – but I wanted to be certain that we weren't misunderstanding one another.

"In what way?"

She smiled a closed-mouth smile and said, "I'd like to see more African-Americans here."



I admitted to her that it was only my first time at the Detroit StorySLAM and confessed that “I had anticipated tonight wouldn’t be so, well, white.” She smiled at that remark and gave it a nod.

Indeed, The Moth Detroit StorySLAM is a generally white affair. It’s true that the host is an Asian-American, but the bar patrons and the majority of the venue’s staff are Caucasian. This is inconsistent with the racial make-up of the city of Detroit, but not necessarily with that of its nearest neighbors. According to the 2010 Census, 82.69% of the persons living in the City of Detroit are African-American, while 10.61% are Caucasian and 6.82% reported being “Hispanic or Latino of Any Race.” In contrast, the city of Dearborn’s African-American population was only 4.04% of the city’s total 98,153 people. And what about the fair shores of Grosse Pointe? The African-American population for the city of Grosse Pointe was totaled at a mere 180 people – 3.32% of the city’s total population.

The winner of the October StorySLAM was a middle-aged black man who had been the speechwriter for Detroit mayor Dennis Archer during his tenure in the 1990s. He attended the show that evening with two male friends, both of whom were also middle-aged and also African-American. I approached them after the show, wanting to speak to the winner and gather his thoughts on the performance. They were lounging at the three café tables that were gathered near the edge of the stage. As I approached them, I noticed that all three of the men were similarly dressed in slacks, dress shirts under fine-gauge sweaters, and expensive leather shoes. They struck me as dapper and yet relaxed. They were drinking gin cocktails and when I joined them, one of the men promptly summoned the waitress with a wave of the hand.

“What are you having?” he asked.

That was a good question. These were serious and impressive men. I needed and wanted them to take me seriously. A cranberry and vodka was out of the question. Turning to the waitress, I replied, “Dirty martini with vodka. Goose, please.”

The gentlemen smiled and the one to my left said, “A dirty martin it is then.” It was the most speedily delivered drink I’ve ever had at Cliff Bells. During the course of that round, and the next, we discussed their impressions of the slam. None of them had been to one before. They had, however, been to Cliff’s a number of times for other events. It was the two friends, in fact, who had pressured the teller into throwing his name into the hat. When I asked them what they thought of the crowd, if it was what they had expected, the men shrugged. One of them told me that he hadn’t even thought of it. I admitted that I was asking them this question because I had spoken to a few people early in the evening that had expressed a desire to see more African-Americans at the show. Two of the men laughed at this. But the third man responded by saying that “if you were to tell some black people, ‘hey, come to this story slam tonight,’ they wouldn’t know what that means. Now if you were doing a poetry slam, that would be different.”

I found his last comment intriguing, given a conversation that I had had with one of the bartenders before the show. This particular bartender and I had spoken previously during the September show. In a nod to my graduate school, he calls me “Tennessee.” I call him by his first name, but for anonymity’s sake, and the satisfaction of my own imagination, he’ll be known here as “Posh Tender.” He makes the best Hot Toddy I’ve ever had, he belongs to no obvious ethnic category, and his clothes are perpetually dapper – alternating between a fitted vest and a pair of dark suspenders. Most importantly, I would never have been able complete my research without the help and concern of Posh Tender.

During the course of my fieldwork, I was a single twenty-something with a notepad and no obvious date. Given the fact that I was during most of the performances, I was also in the path of men and women who were looking to “pick someone up.” At the October show alone, 12 martinis were brought or sent to me by other patrons. If not for Posh Tender’s willingness to pour significantly less vodka than normal, I would surely have been too drunk to do anything, let alone take legible notes. I don’t share this piece of information to be entertaining or merely self-aggrandizing. In truth, it reveals two very important aspects of the social scene at Cliff Bell’s during the StorySLAM. First and foremost, this is a venue where people go to not only look at the performers, but to look at and flirt with other audience members. Secondly, Posh Tender is not an anomaly at Cliff Bell’s. He and his colleagues behind the bar get to know their patrons and are mindful of their well-being. There are not scores of college kids getting loaded on shots and Budweiser’s at this bar. Rather, if you go to Cliff Bells for The Moth Detroit StorySLAM, you’ll find college-aged persons and young professionals being served classic cocktails, craft beers, and fine wines by knowledgeable and attentive staff.

So when I say that I had a conversation with one of the bartenders about the slams and entertainment at the club, I’m saying that I asked the opinion of an attentive and keen observer. When I asked Posh Tender if slam night was a good night for him and his colleagues, he said, “Yeah, it’s a good night.” When asked if they held other events like the slam at Cliff’s, and if it yields the same crowd, Posh told me that they “did poetry slams for a while, but we canceled them.” He smiled at this and then went on to say that “the poetry people didn’t drink much. There were a lot of people coming up to the bar and asking for water. So we don’t do poetry slams here anymore.”

“And the storytelling crowd,” I asked, “Aren’t much into water?”

He laughed at this. “No, the story people drink.”

Yes Posh, they certainly do. At a venue where the typical drink is 10 to 12 dollars, there is a lot of money to be made at the bar. And the food, the first thing friends and family squealed over when I announced that I would be at Cliff’s on a monthly basis, is certainly not cheap either. A typical dinner, with appetizer and drinks, will cost roughly 50 dollars before the tip. Now suppose that you are interested in an evening out at Cliff Bell’s. Including the price of dinner and drinks for two, cover for two, and the 10 to 20 dollars you might spend parking your car in a garage (or paying someone to guard your car in one of the nearby lots created from a now nonexistent building), you might spend \$140 before tips and tax. Granted, not everyone who comes to the slam is there for dinner. At capacity, Cliffs can only hold 200 people and there is only enough seating for half of them. That means that only half of the people at the slam on a full night will have the available space that’s required to enjoy a multi-course meal. But in all my time at Cliff Bell’s, I never saw more than a handful of people without a drink.

I had every reason to believe Posh when he told me that poetry slams were canceled because bar sales were low on those nights. Cliff’s, after all, is a business and it appears that the StorySLAM is very good for business. Is the cost of a night at Cliff’s the reason why there are far fewer African-American people than Caucasian people in the audience at the slam? It may be merely coincidental that the largest racial category in the area immediately surrounding the club is also living in the city with the lowest per capita income in southeast Michigan.

On the night of the January slam I quickly walked the block of Park Avenue between my car and the club. It was windy and the cold was finding its way past my furry boots and parka to the sweater dress I wore beneath it. There was a woman ahead of me, also in her 20s and similarly dressed in knee-high boots and a long parka from North Face. With my eyes on the

prize, I saw that the burly man who usually collects the cover outside the entrance was not stationed on the sidewalk this evening. Nearly 6 hours later, when I re-emerged onto that same street, flurries were falling. Only 10 feet from the door, I was approached by a tall, thin, African-American man. He was missing some teeth and wearing a knit cap and an athletic jacket – not enough clothing for such a night. He held out his hand and asked me for money.

Did I feel horrible? Yes. Did I stop and open my purse when walking to my car alone at 11 o'clock at night in downtown Detroit? No. What I *did* do was lie and say, "Sorry, no cash." Then I sped up until I was right behind a group of three white people – one man and two women – who were heading in the same direction. Another African-American man approached this group asking for money and they shook their heads, avoided eye contact, and kept moving. I got to my car, scraped off two inches of snow, and within 2 minutes was back in my vehicle heading south on I-75. And because I'm a speeder, in 25 minutes I was back at my childhood home and crawling beneath a down coverlet.

That scene is not an easy one to share, especially within the context of my graduate thesis. However real or unreal any danger may have been in that instance, I want to convey to readers that my solo attendance at the slam and consequential night walks in Detroit were cause for concern among a number of my family and friends. Most of those people are white, suburban Michiganders. And until that moment outside of Cliff's, I had refused to acknowledge my own fear. I stayed at my mother's house in Monroe each time that I came up to Michigan for a slam. And every time that I left, she made me promise that I call her as soon I was "safe and on my way home." Whether it was midnight or 4:00 a.m., I would come home to find her sitting up in her easy chair watching the news for word of my certain mugging and demise. I had lived in other, larger metropolitan neighborhoods and walked alone at night. I had been asked for

money by homeless people of various ages and races in the past. But on that night outside of Cliff Bell's, I felt a fear that harkened back to my earliest memories of "Channel 7 Action News" and felt in my gut that if I did open my purse and survive, my mother would hear of it and make me wish I hadn't been so lucky.

My mother's fears and my own adventures getting to and from the slam warrant discussion here because I'm not the only privileged white chick commuting to Cliff Bell's from a suburb. And I doubt that I'm the only one who was raised to think of a trip to downtown Detroit as the epitome of risk-taking. Whether or not that was true then, and whether or not it's true now, that mindset was a part of my experience of the slam. Ignoring that fact would be lying by omission. Now, as I look back through my notes and dictations, one of my greatest regrets is not having asked the respondents who came in from the suburbs, "What are your thoughts as you drive away from home and make your way down Park Avenue to Cliff's?"

## CHAPTER 5

### THE STORYTELLERS

When I began my research on The Moth Detroit StorySLAM, I was a graduate student at East Tennessee State University and I had only just recently made the transition from “the girl who tells stories at parties” to an academic in the field of storytelling and a professional, i.e. paid, storyteller. I had met and taken classes taught by a number of people who made their living telling stories. Public libraries, school systems, festivals, and private companies were paying them to appear for fixed amounts of time to both instruct and entertain. I had only just begun to think about the broad range of performances and people occupying the spectrum of storytelling performance between oral and literary traditions. So when I set out to meet and to interview the people participating in the slam, I was keenly interested in the origins of their performance – what led them to tell their stories, in what manner those stories were created, and in what other contexts they might also tell stories.

During the course of my research it became immediately apparent that meeting and interviewing each of the storytellers was an unrealistic goal. Obtaining a physical proximity to the tellers in the crowded club was the first challenge. Then there was the difficulty of observing subsequent performances and the audience’s reaction to those performances while trying to make my way over to the previous teller. On the few occasions where I did manage this, I was most often unable to speak to the teller as he or she would be surrounded by congratulators and friends. In the few cases where I did establish contact and engage in conversation with the teller, the noise in the club was such that a conversation simply wasn’t recordable. I did, however, have the privilege of meeting and speaking with a few of the slams repeat performers over the course of multiple shows. This chapter profiles those tellers with whom I was able to carry out

an extended interview after the performance. These profiles include two repeat tellers from The Moth Detroit StorySLAM – John and Bill – as well as me.

Unlike many of the tellers whom I spoke to briefly and who reported being pressured by their friends to enter their names or personally moved by the show's theme to share their tales, John and Bill are what I refer to as self-motivated tellers. They, unlike many others, do not name someone else or something else as the instigator for their participation. They neither need, nor report, any prodding from outside forces. And yet their motivation and their respective creative processes differ greatly. It is my hope that presenting these tellers' preparations for and responses to the slam will begin to illuminate how the Detroit Moth StorySLAM is perceived by its participating performers. This is a limited sample and therefore only the beginning of the exploration.

### John

John is a middle-aged man from Holt, Michigan. On the night that we met we were both attending our very first story slam. Eminem was in concert at Comerica Park that evening. Comerica is a few city blocks from Cliff's and I was flustered by the traffic and my resulting tardiness for the show. My plans to arrive early and snag a table had been foiled. I knew I had found my first interview when I saw a man sitting alone at a table for two. I soon learned that we were both hoping to tell that night. John, in fact, had been meaning to tell at the slam since it began in 2009 and had been telling himself for months that he would go. John reflected in our later conversations that, "Every time, I talked myself out of it. Finally, one Thursday I just went."

My first impression of John had been that he was a sweet, older man. In his dark fedora and suit jacket he looked sharp and yet innocent at the same time. I took note of the fact that he,



unlike most of the patrons, was drinking a soda. He had a menu on his table and lamented the fact that it seemed unlikely he would be getting a meal. I remember thinking, “Oh this poor fellow, he’s being overlooked.” There was nothing immediately risqué about him.

And then I heard the first line of his story. That night, John was not called up to the stage to tell. However, at the end of the program all of the hopefuls whose names were not drawn are called up to the stage and given the opportunity to share the first line of their story. I had gotten to tell and so I was standing at the back of the stage with the other participants when John stepped behind the microphone. He announced:

*It was like any other Saturday night in the seventies – I was in my basement, I was alone, and I was horny.*

Immediately, the entire club exploded with laughter. John had shocked and delighted the room. Months later, John kindly answered a number of my questions via E-mail. At that point he had already won two story slams and was looking forward to appearing at both the Chicago and the Detroit Grand SLAMs in the New Year. When I asked him if he would describe himself as a storyteller, he replied:

*In a word, yes. From an early age, I’ve always been able to remember jokes. My repertoire is almost endless and I learned so much of the art from my father, who was a consummate salesman. At parties throughout school, people always came to me for funny stories or jokes to entertain and amuse. I like the limelight of course, but also enjoy making people laugh.*

Unlike everyone else I met and spoke with the Detroit slam, John is the only person I encountered who regularly attends both the Detroit and the Chicago slams. He is a devoted fan of and participant in the slams and his enthusiasm has created an unusual precedent – John told

the same story at both slams and won in both cities. This means that he will be appearing in two Grand Slams in the same year. After winning in Chicago with the same story that won in Detroit, the producer of the Chicago slam asked John that he “not recycle winning Detroit stories in the Chicago venue.” When I asked John about his creative process, he shared the methods that had preceded both his Chicago and his Detroit win.

*Right after the Detroit show...my mind begins searching memories for events relating to the next month's theme...Eventually, I hit on a particularly poignant memory and begin telling the story out loud to myself. They always run 20 minutes or more. Then as I practice, I cut, cut, cut to get it down to its fighting weight. I always go the maximum minute of 6 minutes and trim a few seconds off here and there to allow for audience responses and mind lapses. I never write anything down. When I feel the story is solid enough, I record the audio on my PC with my web cam focused on a still shot of me on stage in Detroit. I then post to YouTube and ask friends to listen and give feedback.*

Note that John is careful to point out that he never writes anything down. He does not consider himself a writer, although he does identify as a storyteller. When asked whether he describes himself as a storyteller, John is quick to claim that he has always “like[d] the limelight” and “enjoy[ed] making people laugh.” John has multiple relationships to storytelling. He has a familial relationship in which he acquired his storytelling ability – perhaps genetically or perhaps merely by exposure – from his father, the “consummate salesman.” Then there is his reputation as the funny guy at parties, the one that people always came to “for funny stories or jokes.” Also, John points to an innate ability when he uses the phrase “from an early age.” And

finally, John's lengthy and deliberate creative process makes him a storyteller in practice. Altogether, John is a storyteller by tradition, reputation, nature, and practice.

### Bill

My first words to storyteller Bill were, "I'm so sorry." It was the October slam and Cliff's was at capacity that night. The bouncer was turning people away and those of us who had made it inside were standing and vying for anything that might offer the least bit of a view to the stage. I was standing near the entrance, at the very farthest point from the microphone, and I had just stepped on Bill's feet. A tall man, Bill was leaning against the back wall and enjoying a far better view than mine. Apologies offered, I introduced myself and asked if he and his friend – a white male in his mid-30s and a tucked-in Oxford – were hoping to tell or just there for the show.

I had the opportunity to see Bill perform at two Story SLAMs during the course of my research. On the night that I first met Bill, he was the ninth teller of the evening. He told the story of the night he went for a walk in Detroit and was mugged on his way to a convenience store. He said that "this was back in the 90s now, over by the Third Street parking lot, you know, the one without the lights." This line, like all his others, came out so quickly that he was onto his next line before there could be a response (negative or affirmative) from the audience to that, albeit rhetorical, question. The bells sounded for him, he went over time, and he quickly wrapped up his tale. *I was breathless for him*, even though he didn't seem the least bit winded, which convinced me that he was no stranger to the stage. I found myself wondering how successfully his degree of preparation would play at Cliff's. It wasn't long before his scores were read. He received an 8.9, 9.5, and 8.7. They enjoyed it, but not so much that they didn't want to leave room for the final contender.

Later that night, I had the opportunity to interview Bill and he graciously shared with me his approach to the slam. He confirmed that he had performed onstage before and added that he did a lot of writing beyond that which was required of him as a high school literature teacher. He described performing at the slam as a means of “keeping up [his] performance chops.” When I asked him how he approached the creation of his story he proved me wrong – his story was not entirely memorized. Instead, he had identified pieces of the story that he knew he would “hit.” Those individual points were committed to memory, as was the order in which he meant to share them, but their linkage onstage was spontaneous. He then listed his seven points:

1. *Mention the title, “Near Death,” and clarify that you don’t need to be in the medical profession to be near death.*
2. *Explain the difference between a glass bottle of ice tea and a plastic bottle of Dr. Pepper.*
3. *Explain how not to walk in Detroit so as not to violate every safety precaution.*
4. *Describe the rush of blood when the body goes into self-defense mode.*
5. *Describe the feeling of the light going out behind me.*
6. *Describe the sound of the keys and my own scream.*
7. *Coda: Take it back to the medical world when I tell about receiving late night first aid there on the pavement.*

Bill identifies as a performer and sees himself as someone with a set of skills that needs to be maintained. And yet, Bill does not write and memorize a performance text despite his experience as an actor. His performance skills are much more improvisational than rehearsed. And yet, I spoke with audience members who were convinced that Bill’s storytelling was “too rehearsed.” This discrepancy between Bill’s preparations and the perception of his performance is discussed in the following chapter.

## Shannon

Many people throw their names into the proverbial hat hoping to tell their story at the slam. Many of them are doing it for the first time, some for their fourth or fifth. They're hopeful, they've prepared, and they want to tell the best story. Not every teller feels this way. I met one such teller in October. Her name was Shannon and she was the eighth teller of the evening. She began her tale by declaring, "I promise you it isn't gross and it isn't funny, but it is sad." At that point I was as intrigued by the novelty of her promise as I was by her use of parallelism.

Shannon then began the story of how she was raised by her self-sacrificing, single mother. Choking up, she told us of how she eventually went off to college without ever knowing that her mother was undergoing treatment for cancer. She then told us how her mother passed away during her final semester at school without Shannon ever knowing she was "that sick." She closed her story with these words, "To my mother and my family, for their concerted efforts to keep me sheltered from what was going on, thank you." She received a large applause from the audience and a large score from the judges – 8.5, 9.0, 9.1. Meanwhile, I was curious as to her motivation for telling this particular tale to a room full of strangers.

I found Shannon sitting in the audience later that evening. Unlike other tellers who receive high scores, I did not find Shannon surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers. No one was patting her on the back. She wasn't cornered by anyone wanting to know, "Did that really happen?" Instead, Shannon was seated at one of the small café tables that were pushed up against the farthest column from the stage. Her dark hair was swept all to one side and hanging loosely toward the tabletop, where she and her companion – a middle-aged black woman – were

regarding the menu. There was a glass of wine on the table and a glass of water. It was unclear which one belonged to whom.

When I asked Shannon what led her to tell her story tonight, she told me that she “didn’t want to tell the story” but that she felt she “had to tell it.” She told me that she was a fan of the podcast and that when she discovered this evening’s theme via the podcast that she decided at that moment to come to the show and tell this story. Looking back, I wish I had felt comfortable enough with Shannon – that we had enough of a familiarity and safeness between us – to ask her what she gained by telling the story. I perceived a renewed sense of Carpe Diem amongst the audience after that brief brush with death, but I wasn’t certain what she felt she’d gotten out of it. Did Shannon find some sort of closure in the telling of that story that she didn’t have the opportunity to find while her mother was alive? Did telling her story to strangers bring her some peace or closure that she hadn’t yet found? I don’t know.

#### The Participant Observer: Cathy

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, I went to my first story slam. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, I told a story at my very first story slam. As soon as I heard the emcee saying, “All the way from Jonesborough, Tennessee,” my vision narrowed and I began taking deep breaths to calm myself. The five steps between my café table and the microphone were the most deliberate ones I had taken in recollection. I remember the emcee made some joke about my height as he adjusted the microphone to my 5 feet and 11 inches. Then he stepped away and I looked out over the crowd and felt the exhilaration of roughly 200 adults pausing briefly for me to speak.

Up until that moment, I had realized that the lights had been set at such an angle that the tellers were unable to see anyone who wasn’t immediately at the foot of the stage or standing off

to the side, near the bar. The thought, *“I can’t see you, but I can feel you”* ran through my head as I urged myself to be still. I was a storytelling student. I had performed often, but never for such a crowd.

The story that I was about to tell was one that I had never performed before. Yes, I had recounted bits and pieces of it to friends but I had never pieced it together intentionally, never sought critique, never made it into something so deliberate as this was about to be. It was the tale of my decision to attend graduate school in the far-away land of Appalachia, and the stranger-in-a-strange-land awkwardness that ensued. This story was not one that I had memorized. I had no degree of certainty which words were about to come out of me.

“Free,” I began quietly, “we’ll give it to you free.” Then even more quietly and slowly, I whispered, “Dirty, happy words.” As I finished those words, the room felt abnormally still. I felt as though everyone was intrigued. I was relieved by that impression. Even though this was only my first time at The Moth, I had witnessed enough by that point to know that I only had a few seconds before the audience would either be intrigued by me or dismiss me altogether and turn their attentions back to their drinks and neighbors. I had been too busy gathering information from the participants and witnessing the actions of the event to be too preoccupied with thinking about my story during the hours between filling out my consent form and being called up to the stage. Instead, I had asked myself, “What can I say right away that will make me interesting?” In the past I’ve needed a plot to build humor so I decided against an opening with a joke. Instead, I decided to startle and intrigue the room. It was very loud at Cliffs and I knew that I could startle them by contrasting a quiet, slow voice with the babble of the club. Also, I hoped it would be intriguing to open my story with the line, “Free, we’ll give it to you free.” My

rational was that most of the people in the club wouldn't be able to help but wonder what it was that I was getting for free.

After my opening line, I went on to tell them about the incidents that should have warned me that I was a stranger in strange land – the gas station attendant who laughed at my accent and drawled, “you're not from around here are you?”; the local who laughed when I asked if the rink had “open ice time”; and the late-night Wal-Mart shopper who loudly propositioned the person on the other end of her cell phone by saying, “Are you gonna suck my toes later, 'cause I like it when you do that.” Each incident was more ridiculous than the last. I increased my exaggeration of the accents with each successive character, hoping to emphasize their otherness while creating a sense of “us” between me and the audience. Then finally, I told them of my tipping point, of the day I stopped trying to act like I could “fit in”, I told them about my near nervous breakdown in front of the Daylight Donut Shop. I, a Catholic northerner who had been accustomed to eating donuts on Sunday mornings, could not fathom why a shop that sold such delights would be closed on that particular day. I told the crowd how I feared the worst; that “surely that sweet old lady who drops the dough must have fallen and broken her hip...or maybe everyone perished in a flash fire.” I told how I shed my tears and returned the next day, only to have my concerned questions answered by the same old lady in rather curt words – “Sunday is the Lord's day.” To that, I replied, “I know, that's why I want a donut! Jesus loves Donuts!”

As I delivered that line, I felt a burst of energy as the room erupted in laughter. I exited smiling and feeling electrified by the applause. I wasn't cognizant of the host's jokes until the scores were read out. I had the highest numbers yet that evening and there was only one teller left. The emcee even made said “boo” to one table of judges who gave me a 9.6, saying that “there's some cattiness up in here, they would have given her a better score if she wasn't so hot.



You all are some mean bitches!” The crowd laughed at this, even the so-called “mean bitches.” He went on about the story, repeating my line about the shade of “sexy lilac” polishes that had initiated my interaction with the Wal-Mart shopper. “I felt the sexy undertones in that,” he said, “how ‘bout y’all?”

There was more applause and I was delighted.

Much of that delight came from the simple pleasure of hearing applause that’s meant for you. To a certain degree I would have been felt just as gleeful if I had elicited the same applause after twirling a baton while conjugating irregular verbs. It just feels good. But added to that basic response to mass approval was the deeper satisfaction that my emerging theories about The Moth audiences had proved correct. I was beginning to understand the audience as a group of people that had no expectation that the tellers would be talented or even entertaining. Instead, they arrived at the venue hoping to hear a few good stories but expecting to have a good time either way. This meant that most of them were giving their attention to their drinks, meals, and neighbors and not necessarily to the tellers. Therefore, I knew that I had to immediately attract their attention by whatever means were most fitting to my story, my personality, and my physical appearance on stage. This resulted in my decision to startle and intrigue my audience. That worked and it was gratifying.

Also, I had noticed in the very beginning of the evening that there was a definite feeling amongst the audience members that they belonged to an “us” and everybody else – especially the hordes of fans in town for the Eminem and Jay-Z concert – were considered as “them.” I felt surge of camaraderie and pride when Alex Trajano opened the show by shouting “FUCK EMINEM” and the audience burst into cheers and applause (FN, Sept., 145). It seemed like the self-congratulations of an in-crowd. And to a certain degree I was with them in that feeling. I

too had forged a path to Cliffs through the thousands of Ohio and Indiana license plates that were streaming into the city for that concert. I was annoyed by them but pleased with myself for having “made it” to the show. My assumption was that most of us shared those feelings. When I elected to tell a story about my relocation to Tennessee, I was choosing material that I was hoping would highlight the common ground I shared with the audience as a Michigander and thereby reinforce the “us v. them” vibe that pulsed through the room during the show.

CHAPTER 6  
CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The Moth Detroit StorySLAM is not the next generation of the American Storytelling Revival. The participants' explanations of the event and their behavior while in attendance suggest that the Detroit StorySLAM is part of a separate cultural phenomenon and not one that was spawned in reaction to the earlier revival. When I set out to write this ethnography, I did so within the anthropological framework of thick description, hoping to learn from the slam participants themselves the nature and meaning of the event. What I discovered was a group of story enthusiasts who had never heard of a storytelling festival or a professional storyteller. These are people who pay to attend public, amateur storytelling while hoping to be present for moments of peer wisdom in the course of a uniquely democratic entertainment. I encountered hundreds of story enthusiasts – people who seek out and enjoy stories regularly – among the audience members and patrons. However, with the exception of two judges, none of these enthusiasts revealed any awareness of the National Storytelling Festival, the National Storytelling Network, or any of the platform tellers that regularly perform at the festival. And yet these fans did report enjoying other story interests in addition to The Moth, including *StoryCorps* and *This American Life*.

All of these story consumers are logging on and tuning in to these programs in pursuit of one thing – truth. However, the Detroit StorySLAM audiences aren't seeking just any truth; rather, these persons arrive at the slam hoping to witness authentic, individual truths. The high value placed on the revelation of the authentic self at the slam allows for a vast multiplicity in story tone and content that has not yet been seen from the National Storytelling Festival or the numerous story events that followed in the wake of that model. And while there is a great deal

of research to be done in service to uncovering and analyzing those differences in story content and tone, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I would like to focus on the ethos at work at the Detroit StorySLAM from which I believe all those differences flow. That governing ethos is a belief in the indisputable value of an authentic individual truth however proximal or distant from your own experience that truth may be.

### “The BS Detector”

One of the few rules governing The Moth’s Detroit StorySLAM is the requirement that stories be true. There is not, however, any system in place to ensure the truth of any story. There is no fact checker. No one is buzzed off the stage for telling a story that sounds untrue. The judges are not instructed to deduct a specific number of points for obvious falsehoods; rather, the point system is left to their discretion. And yet the expectation is clear – you must tell true stories. Or, as host Alex Trajano once said, “Please don’t bullshit us, we’re from Detroit and we *will* kill you” (FN, Jan., 233-234). Those words were meant to both entertain and forewarn his listeners. The audience burst into laughter and it was immediately apparent that he’d achieved his goal of entertaining the audience. The second goal, however, wasn’t fulfilled until the end of the evening when the show concluded and not a single teller told an obviously untrue story.

Of course, many of the stories could have been false but there’s a distinction to be made between stories that are true and stories that are perceived as true when they might actually be false. During a slam the audience only has the *impression* that the storyteller is telling the truth and that impression is all that matters (at least during the slam). The social scientist Erving Goffman wrote about the important distinctions between truth and the impression of truth in

“The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.” Goffman’s model of social interaction as being bounded by time and therefore limited by the impressions people glean from another person’s expressions is consistent with the slam environment (1959, pp.8-10). I’d like to invite the reader to consider the slam within Goffman’s terms in order to demonstrate the function of truth at the Detroit StorySLAM.

Think of a performance event as a social interaction in which a series of performers say and do things in front of an audience. At the StorySLAM, these performers are the storytellers and the audience is comprised of not only the literal audience but the venue and radio staff who are also witnessing the performances. During the storyteller’s performance (when that performance actually begins is up for debate) she makes what Goffman refers to as *expressions*. The performer simultaneously *expresses* and *gives off expressions*, some of which are intentional and some of which are unintentional. When the performer expresses something she uses “verbal symbols or their substitutes which [she] uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that [she] and the others are known to attach to these symbols” (2). Meanwhile, the expression that the performer *gives off* is communicated through a series of non-verbal signs. At the StorySLAM, these signs include a storyteller’s apparel, her posture, her coif, her mannerisms, her accent, and this list goes on and on. The impression that the audience forms of the storyteller in their brief time together has everything to do with this signaling behavior and very little to do with a verifiable, fact-checkable truth.

Consider storyteller Bill from the previous chapter. Bill told a true story about the night he was mugged. I interviewed Bill and he revealed how he had created his story and the thought process behind his performance (given in Chapter 5). Essentially, he had a number of points that he wanted to “hit” and a few phrases that he especially liked and planned to say. He did not

memorize his story. During his performance, Bill spontaneously spun these elements together into his narrative. And yet, when I heard his story my *impression* was that Bill had memorized lines. I believe I drew that conclusion because his words were so rapid, the story structure so free of extraneous detail, and his breathing so well controlled. Those aspects of his story – pacing, structure, voice control – were all elements that I was being trained to observe and manipulate in my own performances as a student of storytelling. Therefore, I was perhaps more likely to take notice of those elements and they in turn were likely to weight my impression of Bill’s performance. Through the lens of my personal experience, Bill *gave off the expression* that he was an experienced performer. I did not, as Alex Trajano might say, have the impression that he was “bullshitting” me.

During my research, it was necessary to share my purpose at the slam with the people I interviewed and those conversations, perhaps not surprisingly, demonstrated the audience’s understanding of a certain type of storytelling as a form of “bullshit.” Our conversations generally followed this model:

*“I’m a graduate student gathering information for my thesis, would you mind if I asked you a few questions?”*

*“Not at all, where do you go to school?”*

*“East Tennessee State University.”*

*“Never heard of it. What are you studying?”*

*“Storytelling.”*

*“Seriously? You’re kidding. [laughing] Sounds like a masters in bullshit to me.”*

I would laugh at this, there would be some small talk concerning the general bullshit factor of any graduate program, and then the obliging stranger would answer *my* questions. But by this

point in the dialogue the participant has already revealed a cultural context for storytelling that is very different from my own. I have a frame of reference as a student of storytelling that is distinct from those of the typical audience members at the Detroit slam. My narratives, which are derived from folktales that have been told innumerable times, do not contain events that are novel or particularly groundbreaking for folktale audiences. Therefore, my skills as a teller are best revealed by the manner in which the tales are delivered. The slam tellers, however, are relating exceptional real-life experiences – effectively “reporting back from” their lives. The bar patrons and the slam audience, who are one in the same, are prepared to turn their eyes and ear from their friends and their drinks *if* a story is sufficiently intriguing, compelling, or funny. Slam audiences attend to the exceptional in much the same way that a listener will stop turning his radio dial when he catches a particularly interesting statement on the *This American Life*.

Remember, a majority of these people are led to the slam by distinctly non-performance-based media projects and programs. *This American Life*, for example, is a radio program organized around a documentary-like approach to radio journalism. The stories shared during the program are curated from interviews and spliced into the program around a central theme that is narrated by host Ira Glass. When storytelling is taught it’s presented as a form of art and not generally conceived as a journalistic endeavor. Therefore, on the one hand there are the slam participants who arrive at their evaluations of the stories through a previous understanding of investigation and testimony; whereas persons such as myself arrive at the event with a set of expectations and a means of evaluating the stories that are based in a perception of storytelling as a performance art form. The unique forms of storytelling that led me and many of this event’s participants to the slam are grounded in such divergent traditions that they yield equally divergent criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation. Furthermore, even though I’m

convinced that Bauman's situational factors of the performance event are useful tools for analyzing The Moth Detroit StorySLAM, it may be that many of the person's attending the slam would not use the term "performance" to describe the event.

I am convinced that, unfortunately for his scores, Bill's storytelling experience at the slam resembled something too similar to performance art in the eyes of the audience. Bill did not win the StorySLAM that night. Another man, Greg, was the winner and I was lucky enough to sit with Greg and his friends after the show concluded. They willingly answered my questions regarding Cliff Bells, the audience, and the storytellers. When I asked Greg if he wrote his story out beforehand he said, "No." In fact, he said that he didn't know what he was going to talk about until he was up behind the microphone. When I asked him what he thought made a winning performance he told me that "it can't be so emotional" or "too rehearsed." He then mentioned Bill's story. Greg said that he thought Bill would have received better scores if he hadn't been so obviously rehearsed. His friends nodded in agreement.

At that moment, I was the only person in the club who knew the "truth" about each of their performances. In one version of reality, neither Greg nor Bill had memorized his story. But in another reality, in which the audience presumably shared the impression of Greg and his compatriots that Bill was "too rehearsed," Bill had indeed memorized his story. The verifiable fact that he hadn't was irrelevant. All 200 people were not going to ask Bill, "How did your story come about?" before deciding to boo, clap, or laugh. Furthermore, it's contestable whether booing, laughing, and clapping are even actions that are premeditated and therefore may be considered decisions. Ultimately, the impression that Bill had memorized the story was all that mattered within the finite moment between himself, the audience, and the judges. Recall the various identities, or roles, played by the slam participants. Bill has a storyteller identity within



this particular slam environment that is unlike the storyteller identities at play for the platform tellers within the festival circuit. When Bill leaves Cliff Bell's he is not followed out the door by a mega-identity. The audience members at the slam are not his fans in the manner that many festival attendees are the fans of platform tellers. They do not follow him on Facebook, view his website, or ask him "Was that story true?" while he's signing their story CDs. Their time together and therefore the audience's access to Bill are truly bounded by the limited timeframe of the slam.

When I asked Bill what drew him to the Moth stage, he told me that he saw it as a way to "keep up my chops" (FN, Oct., 17-19). Coincidentally, both Greg and Bill exercise storytelling "chops" in their professional work. Bill does so in his role as a high school English and Drama teacher while Greg translates his storytelling skills into speechwriting, most notably for former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. Consider the expectations of truth and the dangers of "bullshitting" in either of these roles. In teaching his students how to write characters or perform them onstage, Bill is not preoccupied with giving off the expression of truth. During a high school production the success of a play is not endangered by the knowledge that when Willy Loman steps offstage he is once again Timmy, the senior class president. The audience is aware of this fact and if his performance is skillful isn't bothered by it. On the other hand, it is absolutely imperative that the citizens of Detroit believe that the man behind the mayoral podium is the same man doing business in City Hall. Timmy the actor and Mr. Mayor both memorize their lines. Timmy, however, will be applauded for his ability to make you believe he is someone that he isn't. That's considered a laudable skill. Mr. Mayor, on the other hand, can expect a career-damaging drop in public opinion if he is considered "two-faced" or duplicitous. Unlike Timmy, Mr. Mayor isn't supposed to be giving a performance. He is supposed to "be

himself” in his dealings with constituents and government officials alike. In this scenario divergent criteria for performance interpretation and evaluation are again at work.

In the future it would be interesting to record StorySLAM performances and ask multiple audience members to indicate the moments in stories where they had the impression that the storyteller was not truthful, was too rehearsed, or was working from a memorized text. Their comments on multiple stories and storytellers could then be tagged with the corresponding transcription of those moments in the performance. It’s possible that audience members consistently receive *impressions* of truthfulness, rehearsal, and memorization from the same verbal incidents. It’s equally possible that those impressions arise for different people from different verbal incidents. Remember that Greg and his friends believed that Bill’s story failed to receive better scores because he was “too rehearsed.” In retrospect, I wish I had asked them what they meant by “too rehearsed.” This could mean that they felt he had told the story too many times and that, in doing so, he had somehow detracted from their enjoyment of the story. They may also have meant that they believed he had memorized his story from a written text and somehow that particular choice in his creative process had lessened the quality of his story. It would be interesting to find if when interviewed individually each of the men would identify the same gestural moments and the same verbal incidents as indicating the story was “too rehearsed” or akin to a theatre performance.

In September of 2010 Patrick Dunn of *Hour Detroit* interviewed three storytellers from The Moth for a piece titled, “An Evening at the Moth StorySLAM at Cliff Bells.” Dunn asked slam teller Brian Wecht why he “engage[s] in public sharing” and Wecht’s response is particularly interesting in light of this conversation about truth and the impression of truth. Wecht replied that he’s attracted to the slam stage because, “It has immediacy, and it’s not too

actorly” (Dunn, 2011). Being someone else is the actor’s craft and that action is the exact opposite of recommended slam behavior. Indeed, when he was interviewed for the social blog *Detroit Girls About Town*, producer-host Alex Trajano advised first-time tellers to, “Take a deep breath and be yourself” (Detroit Girls About Town, 2010). I suspect a correlation between the slam teller’s wording – both the choice of words and the manner of their delivery – and the audience’s impression that the teller is somehow acting as opposed to being himself. Rather than failing to be truthful because he is purposely lying, the slam teller transgresses against the slam’s venerated authentic, individual truth if his audience has the *impression* of failed authenticity. The difficulty in analyzing that possibility lies in the current inability to say with certainty what audiences are experiencing aurally and visually that leads to their impression that a slam teller is not sharing his authentic truth.

In “Innervision and Innertext: oral and interpretive modes of storytelling performance,” Sobol suggests that a storytelling performance can be analyzed according to its verbal elements and, based on the prevalence or absence of certain elements, placed along a continuum between stories conceived within the oral tradition and stories produced within the literary tradition (1986, p. 216-219). Unfortunately and as previously mentioned, I was unable to collect recordings of the stories and I was equally unsuccessful in transcribing those stories during the event. So although some of the elements that Sobol mentions are precisely those that I noticed in Bill’s performance and that led me to form the *impression* of Bill as a seasoned performer, I cannot provide a thoroughly accurate reproduction of those elements. I can say that I was most struck by his lack of imprecision and what I perceived as the complete lack of spontaneous side-comments and response units. When I spoke to Bill about his creative process and how his preparations came together while onstage, he described how he had planned to touch upon six

different points. He reported that the manner in which he strung these points together was completely improvisational, or in other words, spontaneous.

And yet it's curiously unclear as to what informed this spontaneity. Borrowing from storyteller Carol Birch's language, Bill may or may not have been cocreating the story in response to the "singular occasion" of the slam and a unique dialogic cocreation with the audience. Perhaps his choices were coming from a place that took limited or no heed of that unique assemblage. The impression I heard from audience members that Bill's performance was "too-rehearsed" could have been another way of saying, "it felt like we didn't matter." Indeed, Carol Birch explains that storytelling audiences expect, by their very presence, to be cocreators of the stories they witness. The verbal elements of a story cannot always be taken at face value. Although Bill exhibited some of the tendencies that may be ascribed to the oral interpretive or literary tradition, he was in fact performing from an "innervision" he'd created through an oral traditional method. Even though he never wrote out his story or memorized a text his storytelling may have appeared fixed and therefore unresponsive to the audience. Meanwhile, through one interpretive lens Bill's performance appeared highly skilled. And yet, through another lens, the same abilities that hinted at skill were seen as faults – indicators that he was "too rehearsed."

Giving the impression that one is rehearsed can be perilous on the slam stage because it suggests a premeditation that can feel contrived and somehow false to the audience. The authenticity of the storyteller and the experience the storyteller narrates are somehow diminished by that impression and a storyteller who may have intended to share an authentic, individual truth is instead perceived as "bullshitting" the audience. Recall the words of the slam's producer-host, Alex Trajano. In explaining the rule that stories must be real, Trajano cautioned

the audience, “Please don’t bullshit us, we’re from Detroit and we *will* kill you.” Here, “bullshit” is synonymous with “lie.” Now consider a recent interview with Trajano that was posted among “The Moth Profiles,” on the organization’s website. In the interview, Jenifer Hixson – senior producer of The Moth – asks Alex for his “best advice for storytellers.” In response, he offers six pointers, one of which cautions tellers against bullshit. Trajano warns, “Don’t workshop your audition material or one-man show at our expense. We’re Detroiters. The BS detector is finely tuned.”

Granted, an actor’s “audition material” or his one-man show might be true. Those performances may or may not contain the retelling of events that actually happened to an actor. And yet, those performances are not welcome on the slam stage because they are considered “BS” – another term for bullshit. Those performances give the *impression* of falseness even if the performer is *expressing* truths. What Alex is hinting at with his witty recommendation is the audience’s ability to sense something fake. His statement implies that – at least for audiences at the Detroit slam – liars and actors are one in the same. Therefore, that which gives an audience the *impression* that someone is acting is also going to give them the impression that the person is lying and that will not be tolerated.

Consider the words that The Moth uses to describe itself. When *The Moth Radio Hour* won a Peabody in 2011, the show’s producer – Jay Allison – had these words to say:

“I love the feeling of The Moth. You can feel the risk each storyteller takes, getting up before us to recount something spellbinding and *real*. It makes you recognize how rare it is to hear truly *honest, vulnerable* voices on the airwaves.” [Italics my own]

(<http://blog/prx.org>).

Notice Allison's emphasis on the "real" and how he expresses the reception of that reality as something that is felt rather than known. What he describes as "the feeling of The Moth" could just as easily be considered the *impression* of The Moth. Furthermore, he highlights the exceptional nature of The Moth Radio Hour by expressing the rarity of hearing "truly honest, vulnerable voices on the airwaves." He does not use words like "craft," "ability," or "skill," to describe the performances that are played on his radio program. "Honesty" also appears on Atlantic Public Media's description of the program. APM is one of *The Moth Radio Hour's* sponsors and their website features a brief description in which the stories told are said to "captivate, surprise, and delight audiences with their *honesty* and bravery."

Yes, *The Moth Radio Hour* is not the same entity as The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM; however, the majority of the audience members with whom I spoke reported that their interest in attending the slam had been initiated by their prior exposure to "the podcast" or "*The Radio Hour*" or the recommendation of a friend who was already a fan. Therefore, the expectations of the majority of the audience members are shaped by their acquaintance with *The Moth Radio Hour*. It's no surprise then that both the producer of *The Moth Radio Hour* and the producer/host of the Detroit slam speak about the "honesty" of the slam tellers.

Ultimately, young people are making the monthly pilgrimage from homes throughout southeast Michigan and beyond for the chance to be present for The Moth Detroit StorySLAM. Many of them have been listening to Moth stories on the podcast for months before they are able to make it to Detroit for the show. They bring along fellow fans and story virgins alike. Some of them arrive hungry and road-weary only to be turned away at the door. The bouncer will declare Cliff Bells to be "at capacity" and these pilgrims will either stand out in the most likely chilly Michigan weather hoping for a chance to enter, or they will get back in their cars and drive back

to Ann Arbor, or Frankenmuth, or Grand Rapids. Amazingly, many of them will return next month. They are eager. They are determined. They are in pursuit of authentic, individual truths.

#### Directions for Further Research

In my opinion The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM does not represent the next wave of the American Storytelling Revival. The slam was not born out of some disillusionment with the former state of storytelling à la the National Storytelling Festival. Its participants are so completely unaware of the festival's existence that their activities could hardly be considered responsorial to that earlier cultural phenomenon. Instead, The Moth Detroit StorySLAM represents an entirely new species of story event whose parentage lies not in the folk life resurgence of the earlier American Storytelling Revival but in a range of media and cultural trends that encourage fans to not only embrace their televisions but their laptops, I-phones, and Sirius radios too. Unlike the festival fans who seek out the entertainment and wisdom of a select number of platform tellers, slam audiences attend to any voice with which they "connect." That may be the voice of the raconteur behind the microphone or it may be the voice of the raconteur drinking next to them at the bar. In either case, the intriguing factor lies not solely in the creative choices of the tellers but in the desire and motivation of the listeners. Thus far, academic conversations about storytelling have unearthed a deep understanding of the art form and the techniques of its practitioners. And yet, we still know so little about the experience of storytelling for listeners. After my time at the Detroit Moth, I'm convinced that there are a multitude of questions to be explored regarding the slam audiences and, by extension, the larger demographic of story consumers. This ethnography is only the beginning of that conversation.

The inability to conduct numerous in-depth interviews with audience members was one of the greatest difficulties concerning my fieldwork. The limited number of audience members

that I was able to speak with and the limited time I was able to spend in conversing with any of them inhibited the degree of reflection that I was able to solicit. After hearing so many respondents claim that they had been brought to the slam by someone who was a fan of The Moth's podcast, I lament the fact that my urge to move-on and ask more participants where they came from and why prevented me from discovering more about that initial contact.

In the future it would be interesting to follow the trail from the person who is "brought by", to the person who does the bringing, to the original source of story revelation – the podcast, the advertisement, or maybe even the accidental stumbling upon of an online story source like *Story Corps*. Tracing that path of awareness could reveal some interesting patterns of transmission between media, the people it reaches, and the exponential number of people that they then go on to inform. Indeed, I began to wonder if there wasn't something viral happening when group after group of audience members pointed to the person they were "brought by." In a way, that sort of transmission study could resemble a sort of epidemiological investigation where, instead of "patient zero", multiple "listener zeroes" would be traced.

At the same time asking audience members "what brings you here tonight?" opens the door to a variety of responses that can lead down separate trails of inquiry. The audience folk may be divided up into five categories: 1) people who arrive intending to tell, put their names into the hat, and are called up to the stage; 2) people who arrive intending to tell, put their names into the hat, and are not called up to the stage; 3) people who arrive not intending to tell, change their minds, and then end up telling a story; 4) people who arrive not intending to tell, change their minds, and still do not end up telling a story; 5) people who arrive not intending to tell and who never change their minds on that matter. Ask someone in the audience "what brings you here tonight?" and they may be interested in listening, listening and telling, or just telling. Some



of them may have even arrived at the venue for a few cocktails and decided to stay. So the reasons why someone has arrived at the event don't necessarily reveal their attraction to it over time. This is especially true of interviews conducted with first-time attendees before the show or during the course of the program.

One productive line of inquiry might be to interview departing attendees and ask them, "Would you come again and why or why not?" or perhaps, "Would you bring a friend next time and why or why not?" Similarly, for those audience members who shared the fact that they had been "brought by" someone it would be helpful to ask, "How did they recommend the Moth to you?" But again, these questions are only the beginning of the conversation. These questions only begin to grapple with an understanding of origins and the beginnings of listenership. It could be revelatory to track the responses of various listeners to different stories over time and look for any patterns or changes in their tastes and preferences. The listeners may develop increasingly conscious criticisms of the storytelling performances based on their accrued exposure. An evolving set of evaluative criteria amongst listeners would be an interesting research subject unto itself and one in which it would be interesting to look for the development of parallel critical languages across different listening groups with similar or dissimilar story exposures.

In the future much could be learned by entering another slam environment and conducting exit interviews with audience members regarding the story content. There are so many factors that make the Detroit Moth's StorySLAM different from the experience of storytelling festivals. Some people who have witnessed both environments will tend to focus on what they consider the major, dividing factor – sexual content. They want to talk about the fact that storytellers *never* talk about sex at festivals and the assumption that *most* storytellers do talk

about sex at The Moth. That's not entirely true, nor is sex – either its presence or its absence – the primary factor differentiating between the festival and the slam experiences. Based on my fieldwork at The Moth's Detroit StorySLAM, the more likely presence of sexual content at the slam is indicative of an overall ambience – as created by the physical realities of the venue and the situational factors of the performance event that are present during the slam – that makes it possible to discuss subjects at the slam that might be taboo in other realms. Sex is only one such topic. I'm curious to know if the listeners themselves perceive trends in story content and why they might suppose those trends do or do not exist. Furthermore, if listeners identified certain story topics or styles of telling that are inappropriate for the slam, they could then be asked to elaborate on what factors make a story “right or wrong” or “good or bad” in the slam environment.

Those terms – “right and wrong” and “good or bad” – exemplify an overall ambiguity in the language used by story listeners when describing the stories they've witnessed. In the moments before the show it was common for interviewees to say in reference to the stories, “I hope they're good.” These words are problematic because they reduce the listener's critique of the story to their basic response of liking or not liking the story. Saying that a story is “good” or “bad” communicates very little until the commentator articulates *what about* the story struck them as increasing or depleting their enjoyment of the tale. Then, beyond commentary on their own enjoyment, I witnessed little conversation appraising stories or their tellers on their larger appeal as opposed to their personal appeal to the reviewer. In other words, audience members weren't conceding the merit of a story outside of their own response with statements like, “It wasn't my taste, but it was nicely done.” Granted, my questions weren't oriented toward those

responses and such conversations could have been taking place outside of my conversations with participants.

In the end the environment at Cliff Bells during the slam only permitted a limited number of participant interviews and those interviews were similarly limited in length. There are innumerable questions that researchers could be asking the slam participants. Those same questions could be pursued with story listeners throughout the greater world of storytelling events. Currently, storytelling events are yielding drastically polar audiences – urban or rural, young professionals or retirees, daytime festival grounds or night time bars – and merely chronicling the statistical differences between those audiences will never reveal why storytelling can be so successful with so many different crowds and yet fail to combine those crowds at one event. Attempting to bring those groups together may or may not be worthwhile but we cannot begin to attempt it until we understand how these listening groups are self-selecting. Now is the time to move beyond our analysis of the storytellers and turn our attention to the story listeners.

## REFERENCES

- Aal, K. (1984). *The writer as performer: A study of contemporary poetry and fiction readings, based in Ithaca, New York*. Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (AAT 84213195).
- Atlantic Public Media. *The Moth Radio Hour*. <http://atlantic.org/national/the-moth-radio-hour> . [viewed May 22, 2012].
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Birch, C. (1996). Who says? The storyteller as narrator. In C. Birch & M. Heckler (Eds.), *Who says? Essays on pivotal issues in contemporary storytelling* (pp. 106-128). Little Rock, AR: August House.
- Dunn, P. (published June 2011). Hour Detroit. *An evening at the Moth StorySLAM at Cliff Bells*. <http://www.hourdetroit.com/Hour-Detroit/June-2011/Moth-StorySLAM-at-Cliff-Bells/> . [viewed September 20, 2011].
- Detroit Girls About Town. (published September 22, 2010, posted by nikka). *A GrandSLAM StorySLAM*. <http://www.dgatmag.com/2010/09/22/the-moth-slam/> .
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays by Clifford Geertz*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gentile, J. (1989). *Cast of one: One-person shows from Chautauqua platform to the Broadway stage*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hixson, J. (2012). *The Moth profiles: Alex Trajano*. <http://themoth.org/posts/moth-blog/the-moth-profiles-alex-trajano>. [viewed May 22, 2012]

- Jackson, B. (1987). *Fieldwork*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Lee, J. (2009). Open mic: Professionalizing the rap career. *Ethnography*, 10, 475-495. doi: 10.1177/1466138109347001.
- Limon, J. (2000). *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Neile, C. (2005). A place at the hearth: Storytelling, subversion, and the US Culture industry. Retrieved from <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit4/papers/neile.pdf>
- Public Radio Exchange. The Moth wins a Peabody. Friday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011  
<http://blog.prx.org/2011/04/press-release-the-moth-wins-a-peabody/> .[viewed May 22, 2012]
- Sherwood, K. (2006). Elaborate versionings: Characteristics of emergent performance in three print/oral/aural poets. *Oral Tradition*, 21 (1), 119-147.
- Sobol, J. (1996). Innervision and innertext: Oral and interpretive modes of storytelling performance. In C. Birch & M. Heckler (Eds.), *Who says? Essays on pivotal issues in contemporary storytelling* (pp. 198-221). Little Rock, AK: August House.
- Sobol, J. (1999). *The storyteller's journey: An American revival*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- The Idler. (posted by Lindsey Malta on March 8, 2011). Slammed at the Moth Story Slam. <http://idler-mag.com/2011/03/08/slammed-at-the-moth-story-slam/> [viewed September 20, 2011]
- US Census Bureau. (2012, January). *State and country quick facts: Dearborn*. Retrieved May 24, 2012 from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2621000.html> .

- US Census Bureau. (2012, January). *State and country quick facts: Detroit*. Retrieved May 24, 2012 from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html>
- US Census Bureau. (2012, January). *State and country quick facts: Grosse Pointe*. Retrieved May 24, 2012 from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2635480.html>
- Valentine, K., & Matsumoto, G. (2001, February). Cultural performance analysis spheres : An integrated Ethnographic Methodology. *Field Methods*, 13 (1). 68-87. Retrieved February 23, 2012, from Sage Publications, Inc.
- Wallace, A. (1956). Revitalization movements. *American Anthropologist*. 58, 264-281.
- Wallace, A. (2006). Revitalization movements. In *Revitalizations and mazeways: Essays on culture change, volume 1*. (pp. 9-29). Grumet, R.S. (Ed.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Wilson, M. (2003). Platform storytelling. In G. Ley & J. Milling (Eds.), *Storytelling and theatre: Contemporary storytellers and their art* (pp. 59-94). London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Wiltz, T. (2005, April 24). Raconteur stop. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved July 12, 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

1 Field Notes: Thursday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

2 It is somewhere close to 5:00 p.m., and I have been sitting on interstate 75 since ten o'clock this  
3 morning. I am stranded here on this straightest of straight highways because I am attempting to  
4 get myself to downtown Detroit for the Moth StorySLAM. The event is held every month at  
5 Cliff Bell's on Park Avenue, and although I've never been to the jazz club, I'm not a stranger to  
6 the neighborhood. Cliff's is a mere city block from the entrance to Comerica Park – home of the  
7 Detroit Tigers. Having grown up south of Detroit, I was accustomed to hopping on 75 and  
8 driving the 30 minutes north into the city. Musicals at the Fisher Theatre, exhibits at the DIA  
9 (Detroit Institute of the Arts), games at Comerica or the Joe. Those were the reasons we – my  
10 family or my classmates and I – went to Detroit. So when I left northeast Tennessee at 5:00 a.m.  
11 this morning, I had done so with the expectation that I would roll into my mother's driveway at  
12 3p.m. (yes, it is a ten-hour drive), quickly shower off some road grime, and be back on the road  
13 at 4:00, thus putting myself safely within Cliff's at the proscribed hour of 4:30. I had, however,  
14 made a disastrous oversight. I hadn't bothered to look online and see what else might be going  
15 on in the city. The Tigers had ended their season so I thought, "no game traffic, I'll be fine."  
16 Had I bothered to check the local paper at my mother's I would have realized that no, I would  
17 not "be fine", that I would in fact be creeping my way up to the city at a snail's pace. Eminem,  
18 hometown rapper and Grammy-winner is giving his "coming home" concert tonight at Comerica  
19 Park. He is headlining with Jay-Z.

20 At 5:30 I am not moving, but I can see my exit nearly half a mile up the road. I have my radio  
21 tuned to 97.9, “The D’s Hip Hop and R&B.” I should be listening to the local public radio –  
22 WDTE 101.9 – sponsor of the Moth Detroit, but I can’t help myself. I want to listen to the music  
23 of the men who have managed to make thousands of people gravitate in precisely the opposite  
24 direction in which they have been fleeing – toward *Detroit*. I feel like an insider and an outsider  
25 at the same time. I grew up watching Channel 7 Action News with Diana Lewis and driving into  
26 the city for events of all kinds, but I’ve never lived here. My hometown of Monroe is a suburban  
27 locale, far from the immediate periphery of the city and yet still within in the influential zone of  
28 its news, music, and sports teams. On the one hand it is my city, but on the other, it is not. So  
29 here I sit, a white girl sitting in her Nissan listening to Eminem’s “White Trash Party” while  
30 trying to make my way downtown.

31 There are middle-aged African American men walking between the lines of cars hawking  
32 concert t-shirts for \$20.00. They have color-block images of Eminem and Jay-Z emblazoned on  
33 their fronts in a style reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe. To the left of the exit  
34 ramp there is a sharp incline of grass-covered hill. At the top, a line of trees border a chain link  
35 fence. The Fisher Freeway is on the other side. I watch as one of the T-shirt men scrambles up  
36 the hill. He reaches behind one of the trees and pulls out a white bundle. It is a stash of T-shirts.  
37 He is restocking his merchandise. Hundreds of people sitting in their cars now know where he’s  
38 been storing that merchandise and his actions strike me as bizarrely confident. Who knows how  
39 much money will be made on these shirts or how much this man had to pay to buy them or have  
40 them made for resale. Whatever the investment, it is now sitting out in the open – or at least it  
41 was until he grabbed the remains from behind the tree – and, in my mind, is vulnerable to theft.  
42 But then I question myself, “Would he have risked his investment in this way if he thought there



43 was a real chance of someone stealing his merch?" I don't know. I'm tempted to buy a T-shirt  
44 just to have the pretense of engaging the man in conversation. But I'm going to need my money  
45 for the show.

46 6:00 p.m.

47 I am finally exiting off of 75 onto the Fisher Freeway. In ordinary traffic I would be making my  
48 right turn onto Park in two minutes. But again, this is no ordinary day. Looking around, I see  
49 license plates that say "Indiana" and "Ohio." The blue Michigan plates have been diluted. I'm  
50 seeing red. I'm also seeing large vehicles – SUVs loaded down with teenagers but driven by  
51 adults. These teens are most likely being dropped off at the concert by consenting parents – who  
52 could go on to gamble at the nearby Greektown casino – or they may even be chaperoned at the  
53 show by parents. I start wondering how much their tickets cost and how many Detroiters, or  
54 even southeastern Michigan folk, will be at this show. When I look to my left there is the other  
55 lane of traffic on the Fisher and then the steep drop down to 75, but across the highway's six  
56 lanes and at eye level with the people on the Fisher are lines of "abandoned buildings." They are  
57 all at least six stories high. They are brick – some white, some red, some brown – with  
58 crumbling stone work. Many of the windows on these buildings are missing and some have been  
59 replaced with plywood, still others have been left gaping. It's not a pretty sight, but the view  
60 isn't novel for me. This is the Detroit of my childhood, viewed briefly while exiting the highway  
61 as close to whatever venue we were visiting as possible. As I take in that view now, I find  
62 myself able to stare longer than I ever have before, it's an opportunity made possible by this  
63 concert and these throngs of out-of-towners. But then I see it, the teens in the nearest SUV are  
64 holding their camera phones out their windows. They are snapping photos of the abandoned

65 buildings! A mix of emotions erupts from me and while I let loose the expletives I am feeling  
66 embarrassment, annoyance, and even anger.

67 I realize that these dead buildings, for me, are a sadness. For them, it is a spectacle, they strike  
68 me as voyeurs of decay, reminding me of a man I once saw at a funeral home. He was snapping  
69 shots of my grandfather in his casket. I was repulsed then. I feel that repulsion returning to me  
70 now. In this moment, my inner debate is settled. I had been wondering how to approach this  
71 project. Am I a Detroiter? Am I not a Detroiter? Emotionally, a line has been drawn – I begin  
72 to consider myself a product of the city and its orbiting burbs. Those teenagers in the SUVs with  
73 their camera phones, are outsiders. I feel distant from *them*. And that distance is a relief. I feel  
74 a longing to be gathered up into some an *us*, the *us* of Detroit, however valid or invalid it may be.  
75 Of course, I'll always know that I am not a "real" Detroiter.

76 Pulling onto Park Avenue, there are multiple parking lots outlined in chain link fences on the left  
77 side of the street. Buildings used to sit in these spaces. Now, they are filled with cars. I begin to  
78 get worried when I see that the bright orange signs in the road labeled "PARKING" also say  
79 "\$20.00." It's a good thing that I didn't buy that T-shirt. Not seeing any open spaces, I roll  
80 down my window and address a woman standing at the intersection. She is wearing an orange  
81 nylon vest over her jacket. "Do you know where I can find a parking spot?" "Follow me," she  
82 says and takes off jogging down a side street. She enters one of the lots and motions me in.  
83 There are no empty spaces but she continues to wave, urging me with a waving hand and  
84 nodding head to park my car perpendicularly to two vehicles that are facing each other from  
85 opposite rows of cars. "Are you sure about this? It looks like I'm blocking them in." "No, it's  
86 alright. Where you headin'?" I tell her that I'm going to Cliff's for an event. She nods her head  
87 and says, "Oh that's fine, that's fine. These people will be here all night for the concert." She

88 asks me how long I think the event will go and I tell her that I have no idea, but it starts at 7:30.  
89 “It’s fine, it’s fine.” Everything is not fine however. I only have so much cash. I’m anticipating  
90 that I’ll need cash for the cover charge (knowing it was \$5.00, having looked it up online the day  
91 before) and I won’t have enough if I give her both of my tens, one of which is in the outer pocket  
92 of my leather jacket, the other one is tucked in the interior pocket near my breast. I pull out one  
93 ten dollar bill. “All I have is a ten, is that gonna be okay?” She doesn’t hesitate, she takes the  
94 cash. As I walk away she calls after me, “just be back here by midnight,” and I make my way to  
95 Cliff’s feeling like Cinderella.

96 I walk a block to the club. There are groups of teenagers and twenty-something’s passing me on  
97 their way to the concert. The entrance to Cliff’s is beneath a circular awning and a semi-circular  
98 opening is cut into the building to make the entrance, as though a revolving door had once been  
99 there. A sandwich board sign sits outside the entrance announcing “The Moth StorySLAM  
100 Tonight!” and a tall African-American man of middle-age is standing outside the entrance. He  
101 is joking with another man standing at his side when I walk up to them. I hand him my ten and  
102 he produces change while I dig out my ID. I hand him my Tennessee license and he exclaims,  
103 “Oooo we’ve got a Southern Belle here tonight!” I laugh, he smiles and hands it back, and I  
104 walk inside.

105 Entering the club, I am struck by two things – the freshness of the air (I’d forgotten that  
106 Michigan had banned smoking in bars and restaurants) and the beauty of the space. The lighting  
107 is warm, not harsh as many bars can be, and the walls are painted a deep reddish brown color.  
108 The ceiling is a curved and highly polished wood, giving in the impression that you are looking  
109 up at the bottom of a beautifully crafted boat. The bar itself is of similarly lustrous wood and  
110 located on the right of the space. It is a rectangular bar with rounded edges and there are patrons

111 surrounding it on all sides. I estimate that the bar is thirty by fifteen feet. Its rim is dotted with  
112 small wooden table tops, about 2 square feet, that jut off from the bar and are accompanied by a  
113 tall stool on either side. More stools fill the spaces in between. There four, larger round tables to  
114 the right of the bar that seat between five and eight people. These tables are tall and the people  
115 sitting at them can see over the bar to the rest of the club. To the left of the bar the room  
116 becomes a long rectangle, stretching away from the door and up to the elevated stage. Above the  
117 middle of the stage there is a disco ball and the behind the drum set there is a mosaic of earth  
118 tone tiles arranged in the pattern of a stylized sunrise (or sunset, depending on how you look at  
119 it). There are several small café tables forming a semi-circle in front of the stage and there are  
120 more on the elevated space next to the stage, behind which there is a wooden staircase curving  
121 up toward the restrooms. The remainder of that long, rectangular space is filled with two parallel  
122 rows of square tables that have been pushed together without space in between. There are chairs  
123 along either side of each row and these spaces are all taken. Clearly, unless you arrived with  
124 forty friends, sitting at one of these tables means sitting with strangers. This longer space is set  
125 apart from the bar area, or at least partially, by three large columns. There is a half wall, about  
126 four feet high, between the two columns closest to the door and there are more tables against this  
127 wall. Depending where you are sitting or standing at the bar, the view of the stage may or may  
128 not be obstructed by these columns.

129 I have no choice but to stand amongst the crowd who are milling about in the bar. I see people  
130 with martinis, wine glasses, and bottles of micro-brewed beer. The bartenders are in constant  
131 motion. They, and the waitstaff who are bringing food to people seated both at the bar and at the  
132 long rows of tables, strike me as being sharply dressed. They are all dressed in some variation of  
133 black, white, grey, and denim. I see men on staff dressed in collars that are stiff and sporting

134 suspenders, or vests, or in one case even a bow tie. They've paid attention to their hair and I  
135 notice their careful side parts, "faux hawks", or curls. The female staff members have also spent  
136 time on their appearance. Some of the women are wearing pretty scarves or sparkling clips in  
137 their hair. I see one woman with a large black flower tucked securely into the curls she'd  
138 gathered to one side. Many of them are wearing skirts or dresses. All but one members of wait  
139 staff are Caucasian. The one non-white member of the team is racially ambiguous – white,  
140 black, Asian, Latino, Middle-Eastern, he could belong to none or some of all these groups.

141 7:30

142 The show begins. The emcee takes the microphone. He is Asian and he is in his late twenties.  
143 He is wearing dark, wide-rimmed glasses and his hair is gelled into a faux hawk. He works at  
144 WDET 101.9 and is recognized in the city as the member of a well-known band. The first words  
145 out of his mouth are, "Fuck Eminem!" I am standing near the back of the bar and this point and  
146 as I hear the cheering brought on by this remark I see a many hands raised over heads in  
147 applause. The synchronicity of this reaction seems to unite the crowd. Here we are, the united  
148 few hundred who made it through the traffic sea of thousands to be here tonight. It feels very  
149 much like the self-congratulations of an in-crowd. Also, our emcee has established that profanity  
150 is acceptable on the microphone. I anticipate that there will be more swearing.

151 The emcee goes on to explain the rules. Anyone who wants to tell must fill out a consent form  
152 and drop it in the hat. The stories must be true. You cannot go on for more than ten minutes.  
153 A warning bell will sound when you are out of time. He introduces the three tables of audience  
154 members that have volunteered to be judges. The scores for each teller will be cumulative from  
155 these three groups of judges who will hold up cards showing a number between one and ten.

156 The teller with the highest score at the end of the night will be invited back to the birthday  
157 celebration, where all of the year’s winners will tell another story based on a theme that will be  
158 announced one month before the celebration. He then introduces his “lovely co-host”, a petite  
159 middle-eastern woman in her late twenties or early thirties who is wearing very high heels, a  
160 pencil skirt, and a sleeveless blouse. She too, works at the radio station. She will be writing the  
161 judges scores on the board that will remain on stage, just behind the tellers, during the event.

162 The emcee then “gives a shout out” to the event’s sponsor – WDET 101.9. He mentions all of  
163 the “exciting, new things happening at the station” and the audience applauds. He then mentions  
164 that he has to say something about this “awesome venue, Cliff Bell’s” and the audience applauds  
165 even more loudly. He then goes on to say that tonight’s theme is “Backfired.” He invites  
166 anyone who isn’t “brave enough” to tell to fill out of the sheets of paper that are scattered around  
167 these venues. These are anonymous submissions asking for tweets on theme of 140 characters or  
168 less. I consider this event genius because it will furnish the emcee with comic fodder while  
169 creating another means of audience participation. The emcee explains that he will draw the first  
170 name and then each teller will be responsible for drawing the subsequent teller.

171 At this point, I am becoming very nervous about my ability to take notes in my small pad of  
172 paper. I arrived too late to snag a table, or even a perch at the bar, and I am struggling to scribble  
173 into my notebook in the midst of this crowd. There are roughly 200 people here tonight and,  
174 because there aren’t nearly enough seats for us all, over a third of us are standing shoulder-to-  
175 shoulder in the thoroughfare between the bar and the seated patrons. I resolve to be here much  
176 earlier in October and tell myself that I’ll just have to make due with whatever I can manage to  
177 write out while simultaneously attempting to watch the show, avoid elbows, and steer clear of

178 the wait staff, all of whom are threading through this crowd with an impressive degree of agility  
179 and balance. I am surprised that there aren't more people wearing food than eating it.

180 The emcee calls the first teller to the stage. She is a twenty-something Caucasian woman. She  
181 tells a story about a very bad prom date. She receives a few laughs, but nothing substantial.

182 When she finishes, the crowd applauds and then the emcee makes a few jokes and reads a few of  
183 the tweets, thereby allowing the tables of judges time to deliberate. While this is going on, I  
184 introduce myself to a group of young people who have just arrived and are standing near me at  
185 the back of the bar. There are four of them. Two African-American women, one Caucasian  
186 woman, and an Asian man, all of whom appear to be in their late twenties or early thirties. They  
187 are looking around for seats. I don't have the heart to tell them that they are searching in vain.

188 When I ask them if they are from Detroit, one of the African-American women says that she  
189 grew up there but no longer lives in the area. She says that they all met at the University of  
190 Michigan. I ask them how they heard about the event and she tells me that she has listened to the  
191 Moth Radio Hour. She says that she told these friends about it and convinced them to come here  
192 with her tonight. I ask her if the crowd is what she had expected. She looks around and shakes  
193 her head. "No, it's not. I'd like to see an event like this with a crowd that was more  
194 representative of the city of Detroit." I'm guessing that she's referring to the whiteness of the  
195 event – indeed, I look around and I can only find five black people in the crowd – but I want to  
196 be certain that I'm not mistaken. "In what way?" She smiles a closed-mouth smile and says,  
197 "I'd like to see more African-Americans here." I tell her that this is my first time at the event  
198 and I confess that I had anticipated that tonight "wouldn't be so, well, white." She smiles and  
199 nods. I thank the group and move on toward the back column.

200 There is an older man, probably in his late fifties, seated at the tall café table near that column.  
201 He has a menu in front of him as well as a small notebook. He is wearing slacks, a blazer, and a  
202 black cap. I can't be certain, because of the cap, but he appears to be balding. He is seated alone  
203 and this, in combination with the notebook, suggest to me that he is most likely here hoping to  
204 tell. I walk up and introduce myself, sharing my name, my research, and the fact that this is my  
205 first slam. I ask him if I can ask him a few questions. He eagerly agrees and invites me to sit in  
206 his chair (the other one is gone). I hesitate but he insists. His name is John. This is not his first  
207 slam. He is hoping to tell. He is from Holt, MI. I say that this is quite a drive from Detroit and  
208 ask him if he will be upset if, after having come all this way, he will be upset if he isn't called.  
209 He smiles at this, saying that it will be okay, "there's always next time." I ask him if he is a  
210 writer and he says that he is not, but that his friends and family have often told him that he is in  
211 the wrong field. He listens to the Moth on the radio and he is very happy to be here tonight. He  
212 is fidgeting with his hands and I can't tell if this is nerves or excitement (a difficult distinction to  
213 make when the two are so akin to one another). I decide not to ask him about this. If he is  
214 nervous, I don't want to make him feel even more so.

215 John asks me if I would like to keep this seat. He explains that he doesn't care to sit any longer,  
216 as it looks as though he won't be able to get any food. I agree to hold his seat and he takes off in  
217 the direction of the stage. He is not a tall man and I lose sight of him as soon as he enters the  
218 crowd. By now, the second teller is on the stage. Another woman in her twenties, she is  
219 Caucasian and she has come here tonight from the city of Canton. She tells the story of a  
220 camping trip gone wrong. I find it unremarkable, as do the judges. Teller number three is a  
221 twenty-something white male from Novi. Again, I am unimpressed. He is followed by a  
222 twenty-something, white female from Dearborn who details an embarrassing event at her high



223 school graduation party. The fifth teller is a middle-eastern male in his late thirties. He reveals  
224 that he is a doctor at a nearby hospital and he tells the story of an evening when he, still young  
225 resident, drove an elderly patient home from the hospital at the end of the shift. In the course of  
226 the good Samaritan-like service he realizes that the patient is not just dazed from the injury-  
227 causing accident but also senile and unable to remember where she lives. Hilarity ensued.

228 We are half-way through the show now and it is intermission. Before stepping away from the  
229 microphone, the emcee encourages us to tip the waiters and bartenders well. It's good advice.  
230 I've never seen a busier wait staff. I steps away from the microphone. My new acquaintance  
231 returns to the table and I relinquish the seat. This is my chance to speak to the emcee.

232 I walk up to the stage and introduce myself to the emcee, telling him my name, that I'm graduate  
233 student from Tennessee who has come here tonight specifically to observe the event and gather  
234 research for my graduate thesis. This is a high-anxiety moment for me because I am not in the  
235 habit of approaching attractive, charismatic men in any social setting. But he smiles after I blurt  
236 out my introduction and appears psyched. I ask him if he'd be willing to answer a few questions,  
237 perhaps after the show when he isn't quite so busy. He tells me that it won't be very feasible but  
238 gives me his e-mail and encourages me to send him an E-mail, telling me that "we'll figure  
239 something out." He then asks if I intend to tell. I tell him that I'm considering it. He says, "You  
240 should do it." "Okay, I will." I thank him and walk back toward the entrance, fill out a consent  
241 form, and then make my way up to the café tables at the left of the stage.

242 Amazingly, there is an empty table with two empty chairs on the edge of the wall near the stairs  
243 leading to the bathrooms. I take a seat. Soon, an African-American woman who appears to be in  
244 her late twenties walks up to my table. "Is this seat open?" "No, please, sit." She sits, we shake

245 hands, we exchange names, and she notes my little pad of paper. “Are you a journalist?” “No,  
246 I’m a graduate student. I came here from East Tennessee to gather research for my thesis.” She  
247 seems surprised and says, “that seems like a long way to go.” I agree, but tell her that my folks  
248 live downriver, so at least I’m not paying for a hotel. We laugh. I ask her if it’s all right if I ask  
249 her a few questions. “Sure.” “Are you from Detroit.” She tells me that she grew up here but no  
250 longer lives in the area. She pre-empts my next question by saying that she’s in town visiting  
251 because she’s thinking of starting her small business here in Detroit. She tells me that she listens  
252 to the Moth on the radio and she was excited when she realized that her visit coincided with  
253 tonight’s show. Our conversation is cut short when the show begins again.

254 And then the worst possible thing happens. I drop my pen. I feel around on the floor beneath  
255 our table and those nearby. The light is too dim to actually see anything, especially my black  
256 pen. I ask around. No one has one that they can lend. In the effort to recover my pen I miss the  
257 sixth teller. I miss the seventh when my table mate announces that she needs to head out, she has  
258 an early morning and it is now ten o’clock. Teller number seven is a tall, thin, blond woman in  
259 her early thirties. Her top reveals her midriff and she tells the story of the time a local pharmacy  
260 developed her naked photos of her, taken by her then boyfriend, and then informed her mother.

261 Before the eighth teller is called up I look to my left and see two Caucasian females who appear  
262 very young. They look as though they are barely out of high school and their long, dark brown  
263 hair is so similar, as is their height and build, that I wonder if they are sisters. I introduce myself,  
264 explain my intentions, and ask if I can ask them a few questions. They agree. They are here for  
265 their first ever Moth event. They are students at one of the university’s in the city. One of the  
266 girls tells me that her older brother is a fan of the Moth and has been to a number of the shows.  
267 He couldn’t make it tonight, but she wanted to check it out and brought along her friend. I ask

268 them if they are hoping to tell and they giggle and say “No way” and “definitely not.” They ask  
269 me if I want to tell. I reply by saying that I did put my name in the hat but I don’t think it’s very  
270 likely that I’ll get called.

271 The eighth teller is now on the stage. She is a tall Caucasian woman in her late twenties and she  
272 has long, strawberry blonde hair. She is wearing a black shirt dress and heels. The crowd is  
273 laughing a lot, but I’m not certain if they are laughing at her jokes or her tipsy, rambling  
274 presentation. I cannot mark her scores, no pen, but I remark that they are the best scores yet.  
275 She finishes and pulls the next consent form out of the hat. And then it happens. The emcee  
276 says, “All the way from Jonesborough, Tennessee, please welcome Cathy Jo Janssen to the  
277 stage.”

278 My vision narrows and I take deep breaths to calm myself while I take five large steps from the  
279 café table to the microphone. Alex makes some joke about my height (5’11” and necessitating a  
280 major adjustment in the microphone) and then steps away. I look out at the crowd and feel the  
281 exhilaration of roughly 200 people going silent and waiting for me. Up until this moment, I  
282 hadn’t realized that the house lights were set in such a way that the tellers would be unable to see  
283 anyone who wasn’t seated in the light of the bar or at the café tables immediately lining the  
284 stage. I cannot see them, but I can *feel* all of them. I am a storytelling student. I perform often,  
285 but usually for children and never for this many people. Also, this is the first time that I will tell  
286 this particular story for an audience. It is the tale of my decision to go to a university in  
287 Appalachia for graduate school. I do not have this tale memorized. I’ve told pieces of it to  
288 friends on multiple different occasions. I open with the words “Free, we’ll give it to you free.  
289 Dirty, happy words.” I sense that the room is immediately intrigued. I go on to tell them about  
290 three incidents that should have warned me that I was a stranger in strange land – the gas station

291 attendant who laughed when I asked about a hockey rink, the woman at Wal-Mart who loudly  
292 propositioned the person on the other end of her cell phone by saying, “Are you gonna suck my  
293 toes later ‘cause I like it when you do that.” I exaggerate each character’s accent in an effort to  
294 emphasize their otherness. I am trying to create a sense of “us” between myself and the  
295 audience. The story ends with my near breakdown at Daylight Donuts. I, a Catholic northern  
296 from Detroit accustomed to eating donuts on a Sunday morning, cannot fathom why a donut  
297 shop would be closed on that particular day. I tell the crowd that I later returned and was told  
298 “Sunday is the Lord’s day.” To this, I replied, “I know, that’s why I want a donut. Jesus loves  
299 donuts!” I get many large laughs from the audience during the story. I exit smiling and feeling  
300 electrified from the applause. I am not even cognizant of the host’s jokes until the scores are  
301 read out. I have the highest scores yet for the evening and I am the ninth teller. The emcee even  
302 boos one table that give me a 9.6, saying “There’s some cattiness up in here, they would have  
303 given her a better score if she wasn’t so hot. You all are some mean bitches.” The crowd laughs  
304 profusely at this. He goes on about the story, repeating some of my lines and saying “I felt the  
305 sexy undertones in that, how ‘bout you all?” More applause here. I am delighted.

306 Back in my seat, the two university students congratulate me and tell me that my story was their  
307 “favorite so far.” I thank them and can’t help feeling relieved. It would have been embarrassing  
308 as a storytelling student to get up there on the microphone and do a poor job.

309 The last teller is called up to the microphone. She is a Caucasian woman in her late fifties and  
310 she is dressed elegantly in linen pants and a cape-like top that is artfully draped over her left  
311 shoulder. She has a short and very modern-looking haircut. Her posture is impeccable. She  
312 speaks slowly and confidently with no hint of a tremor or alcohol in her voice. She tells the story  
313 of her efforts to reconnect with her teenage son after her divorce. In so doing, she entered the

314 two of them in a sailing competition. Her plan went horribly awry when the friend her son had  
315 brought along was overcome with a projectile case of sea-sickness. The crowd laughed heartily  
316 at the scenario. She ended her story with a chant in which the audience spontaneously joined.  
317 Hearing that, I remember everything my storytelling professor says about the power of  
318 synchronicity and audience participation and I think to myself, “Better luck next time Cathy.”

319 Before getting her scores from the judges, the emcee announces that we’re going to end the night  
320 by calling everyone who had entered their names in the hat up to the stage. He thanks the  
321 sponsors again and announces next month’s theme – “\_\_\_\_\_.” The scores are  
322 announced. Teller number ten has beaten me by a tenth of a point. The emcee calls us all back  
323 up to the stage starting with the first teller. Then he calls up everyone whose name was not  
324 drawn. Once we are all assembled he instructs all of the uncalled voices to step to the  
325 microphone and say the first line of their story. My friend from the column is among them. He  
326 looks like such a serious man, which contrasts sharply with his first line in which he announces,  
327 “It was like any other Saturday night in the seventies – I was in my basement, I was alone, and I  
328 was horny.” The crowd explodes with laughter and I’m certain that I’m not the only who’s  
329 wishing that we’d heard that story. When they are all done, the emcee wishes the crowd a final  
330 good night and we all file off the stage. Before I make it onto the ground level, I am stopped by  
331 a woman in her early thirties. She tells me that she loved my story and she thinks that I should  
332 have won. I thank her and she goes on to tell me that she too is from Monroe. She thinks that  
333 we may have gone to high school together and asks where I went. When I tell her that I attended  
334 the private, Catholic high school she says, “Oh,” and makes a face that I cannot read. Since I  
335 don’t know how to interpret that, I thank her again and ask her if she still lives in Monroe. She  
336 tells me that she has moved out of state and is only back in the area visiting. I tell her that I too

337 have since moved away from home and am only here this evening gathering research data for my  
338 graduate thesis. She wishes me good luck and I wish her good night.

339 In the ten feet between my spot near the stage and my destination – an open bar stool – I am  
340 stopped by five more well-wishers. They all tell me that the story was funny and some of them  
341 even tell me that they think I should have won. It’s flattering and I’m flushed when I finally  
342 make it to the bar. It’s been hours since I’ve had anything to drink. I sit down next to a man in  
343 his thirties. He is wearing dark jeans and a dark fitted shirt. His head is shaven and he is  
344 drinking a beer and doodling on a napkin. I ask the bartender for a pen and start going back  
345 through my notes. Seeing this, the man asks me if I’m a writer. I explain my reasons for being  
346 there and taking notes. I ask him if it would be all right if I ask him a few questions. He agrees  
347 and I learn that he is a Detroiter.

348 He asks me why I would come all the way up here for this event and I tell him that it’s not so  
349 very far, that I am in fact a native of the area. His eyes light up and he asks me if I’m a Detroiter  
350 too. “Not quite, I grew up in Monroe.” He asks me how I like living “down south” and I confess  
351 that the hills make me claustrophobic, that I miss looking out over the distances of the lakes. He  
352 nods his head and our conversation turns to hockey. We talk for a long time. He is part of the  
353 music scene here in the D and I ask him what he thinks of “all the hoopla” over the Eminem  
354 concert. He rolls his eyes. I mention my experience with the teens taking photos of the  
355 abandoned buildings and I ask him if, as a resident, that is something he sees frequently. “Yes,”  
356 he says. “It’s fashionable now.” I ask him how that makes him feel. He hesitates and looks into  
357 his beer. Then, looking up, he says with a smile, “It’s like living in a failed terrarium.” I recall  
358 my elementary school days and the lines of upturned two liters with their miniature ecosystems.  
359 “How so?” He explains that the class always sets out with the same set of directions and all the

360 kids bring their stuff and they all make a terrarium. And it goes fairly well, except for that one  
361 kid whose terrarium doesn't pan out. Everything inside turns brown and collapses and all of the  
362 other kids – kids whose projects are fine – come by and take turns picking it up, shaking that one  
363 kid's terrarium.

364 This is such an apt metaphor that I ask him if I may use it when I'm writing my thesis. He holds  
365 up his palms and says, "It's yours if you want it." I thank him. By this point, Cliff's is almost  
366 entirely empty. There are maybe twenty-five people left in the bar. He buys us another round  
367 of beer and I listen as he tells me about his vision for the city. He sees events like this as a part  
368 of the city's upward swing. He tells me about projects that are happening all over the city, led  
369 mostly by artist collectives. He seems to genuinely believe that Detroit is in a process of  
370 rejuvenation. I find myself hoping that he is right. Soon our beers are gone. He asks me if I'd  
371 like another. I decline the offer. I need to drive back to Monroe tonight. He tells me where he's  
372 parked and asks me if I am nearby. In fact, I am and we agree to walk to our vehicles together.

373 Very few people are exiting the club at this point and the streets are strangely empty and filled  
374 only with the sound of the concert that has not yet ended. When we make it to my car there is an  
375 African-American woman in her thirties standing beside it with boy who looks about eleven  
376 years old. She is yelling into the phone, pointing at my car, and although I can't quite make out  
377 what she is saying, I do recognize the words "police" and "my lawyer." When she sees me she  
378 closes the phone and begins directing her cries at me.

379 "Why would you park here! Why would you park here! It's almost midnight, my boy has to go  
380 to school in the morning!"

381 “I’m sorry ma’am. When I paid for the spot I was told that it would be fine if I made it back  
382 before the concert let out. I’m sorry. I’m leaving now.”

383 “My boy had a game at Ford Field. We’ve been sitting here for two hours! Why would you do  
384 that?!”

385 “I’m sorry, I’m moving it right now.” I say good night to the fellow and he asks if I’m going to  
386 be all right. I’ll tell him that it will be fine. He leaves, saying maybe he’ll see me at the next  
387 slam. I close the door to the car and begin inching back and forth out of the spot. The woman is  
388 still yelling at me. She steps up to the car and begins hitting my window with the palm of her  
389 hand. I stop moving for fear of hitting her. She is holding up a pen and paper. I roll down my  
390 window and tell her that I’m not going to be able to get out of her way if she doesn’t step away  
391 from the vehicle. She tells me that she wants my phone number, that she’s going to report these  
392 parking lot people to the police, that this is a crime and she’ll need my number so that she’ll be  
393 able to call me when she’s ready to have me testify in court.

394 This seems wildly unlikely to me. My impression of the Detroit court system is that they have  
395 “far bigger fish to fry” as my father would say, and the odds of them spending time and money  
396 on this woman’s hour and half wait are slim. But I’m tired and we all want to get home. I give  
397 her my number and apologize one more time, telling her that I had no idea there were people  
398 parking here for Ford Field as well. With my phone and license plate number in her hand she  
399 leans away from my car and I resume inching my way out of the spot. Soon I am pulling onto  
400 75 and making my way south to Monroe.



## Appendix B

### 1 Field Notes: Thursday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011

2 I am back at Cliff Bell's for my second Story SLAM. It's about an hour before show time and  
3 the bar is already crowded. There are about 25 people seated around the bar and this doesn't  
4 include the people leaning over them in some stage of drink acquisition. I see five tables of four  
5 seated throughout the club and these groups appear to be in various points of multi-course meals.  
6 Looking around, the wait-staff is once again groomed into variations of a look I'd describe as  
7 "tights-over-tats" – shades of black and gray street wear in shapes that hug the body and reveal  
8 well-planned and generally well-inked spaces of skin. All of the bartenders are wearing at least  
9 one of the following items: tie (bow or otherwise), vest, suspenders. I'm wearing opaque tights,  
10 a mini-skirt, and a leather jacket with enough zippers and interior pockets to store my note-taking  
11 supplies, keys, and cash while also helping me blend in with the clientele, all of whom are well-  
12 heeled but deliberately not overdone. Thank you, leather jacket.

13 I spot an open space at the bar and walk up, am greeted by a vested bartender, and we begin to  
14 chat while he fixes me a Hot Toddy (I did just come in from the cold). I ask the bartender what  
15 he thinks of the slam crowd, asking "is it a good night for you guys?" and implying the behind-  
16 the-bar crew. "Yeah, it's a good night." I ask him if they do other events like the slam here at  
17 Cliff's, and if it's the same sort of crowd. "We did poetry slams for a while, but we canceled  
18 them." The bartender smiles before going on. "The poetry people didn't drink much. There  
19 were a lot of people coming up to the bar and asking for water. So we don't do poetry slams  
20 here anymore." "And the storytelling crowd," I ask him, "aren't much into water." He releases

21 a short laugh at that remark. “No, the story people drink.” I smile back at him, thinking, “It  
22 helps.”

23 It’s now about 30 minutes to show time and the crowd at the club has grown to the point of  
24 standing room only. I look away from the bar toward the back of the sit-down section extending  
25 from the stage and I see the gentleman from Holt, John, who I met at the last show. I assume  
26 that he is here tonight hoping to tell since his name was not called at the last show. I think about  
27 how long that drive is from Holt to Detroit and I hope that his name is called.

28 There are is a group of four young people near me at the bar who look to be in their late twenties  
29 or early thirties. Three of them are female and two of the women are African American. I  
30 approach their group, apologize for interrupting them, and tell them that I am here doing research  
31 for my thesis. I ask if I can ask them a few questions. They agree and I begin by asking them  
32 where they are from. Three of them are from Ann Arbor, but one of the Ann Arborians – one of  
33 the African American females – tells me that she is actually from Detroit, “born and raised” in  
34 fact and that the other black woman is a friend of hers from Detroit. She tells me that she listens  
35 to the Moth on the radio and that she convinced her two friends from Ann Arbor to come here  
36 for the show tonight. She says that she is “happy to see something this exciting in Detroit” but  
37 tells me that she is disappointed because she would have like to see a crowd that “looked more  
38 Detroit – more ethnically mixed.” I confess that I didn’t know what to expect in that regard  
39 before I showed up. I ask her why she thinks that is, why the crowd is so homogenous. She  
40 shrugs her shoulders. I thank them all, tell them that I hope they enjoy the show, and scuttle  
41 back to the bar.

42 I speak to a white man in his thirties who is sipping a cocktail at the bar. I ask him if this is his  
43 first time at the slam and he says that no, in fact it is his third visit. It is, however, the first time  
44 that he's put his name in the proverbial hat. I ask him why and he tells me that it's the first time  
45 that he's had a story for the topic. I ask him what he thinks of the bar and the show and he tells  
46 me that there are a lot of "cool people" here and that he suspects most of them aren't listening to  
47 the stories half of the time. I ask him if he's a Detroitier and he replies, "No, I'm from the  
48 suburbs." He volunteers that he's an engineer and my instinct is to ask him if he commutes into  
49 the city for that, but I hold back, realizing that I don't necessarily have justification for prying  
50 that far into his life.

51 Next, I chat up three twenty-something's - two females and one males. All three of them are  
52 students at Wayne State University. This is their first time at Cliff's for a slam and none of them  
53 have any intention of telling tonight. One of the girls listens to the Moth podcasts and the other  
54 two came along at her insistence. The podcast listener tells me that she thinks "a lot of people  
55 hear about it that way - someone listens and then it's word of mouth." Judging from what  
56 people have told me thus far, I suspect she's correct.

57 The show will begin in ten minutes and the host handles a few preliminaries - explaining the  
58 rules, pointing out the three groups of judges, and requesting that they call out their names -  
59 before taking a 10-minute break before the actual start of the show. I make a note of where they  
60 are sitting because I plan to approach each group of judges at some point in the evening. One  
61 group is nearby at the end of the bar and I approach them. It is a man and a woman, the third  
62 member of their group has gone to the restroom. The man is black and the woman is white. He  
63 is from Ann Arbor and is a member of that city's storytelling guild. She is from Livonia. Both  
64 of them are here tonight for the first time, but they've both been listening to the Moth on NPR

65 “for a while now.” The man tells me that he sees this as “a continuation of an old tradition,  
66 people were doing this in villages long before we came here tonight.” I ask them what they’re  
67 looking for from the tellers. He tells me that he wants to see if they can “connect” with the  
68 people. I ask him “what does connecting look like, what does it sound like?” He tells me that  
69 “it’s in eye contact and in their gestures.” The woman interrupts and says that connecting is “yes  
70 laughing with them, but is the audience also silent enough, are they quiet enough to hear a pin  
71 drop?” I thank them both and excuse myself before the show starts.

72 I make my way to the back of the venue near the column at the end of the seated area. There is a  
73 group of three thirty-something’s seated there and I approach them. There are two males and  
74 one female. They are all white. There is a beer, a cocktail, and a class of wine on the table. One  
75 of the men works downtown and tells me that he’s expecting this to “be a good time.” The other  
76 man tells me that he might have a story to tell but he’s not sure if he’ll put his name in the hat.  
77 The woman says that she has a story to tell but she knows she’s not telling it. She says that she’s  
78 hoping “it’s not a bunch of drunk people on stage” and I ask her what she’s hoping for tonight.  
79 She says that she’s hoping for stories that are “meaningful or heartwarming, that resonate.” I tell  
80 that I think it’s possible and then I thank them and move on.

81 The show starts, the music stops, and Alex the host takes the microphone. The crowd is rowdy  
82 tonight though and they don’t automatically quiet down. He calls out to the room saying, “Okay,  
83 let’s bring it right here people,” and he points to the space immediately in front of him on stage.  
84 He asks the judges if they are ready, calling out to each group in turn – “The Hanging Judges,”  
85 “Team Near Death Experience,” and “The Grim Reapers.” He makes a joke about how “dark”  
86 they all are.

87 Alex calls up the first teller. His name is Verlaine and he was one of the tellers at the recent  
88 Grand Slam. He is a large white man with glasses and an earring. He stands at the microphone  
89 with his hands on his hips and he tells the first story on tonight's theme – "Near Death." His  
90 story is a dark one and his scores are 7.9, 7.5, and 7.5.

91 Next up is a middle-aged white man from Ann Arbor. He is a Physician's Assistant and he tells  
92 a story about the death of patient he tended to in the emergency room. I do not hear the end of  
93 his story, nor his scores or much of the next teller's tale because the room has gotten so crowded  
94 that I am threading my way through the standing-room-only space at the back and apologizing to  
95 people for poking them and/or standing on them in my pursuit of finding a spot from which to  
96 see the stage. By the time I accomplish this, the third teller is already receiving his scores. He  
97 gets an 8.3, 8.0, and an 8.7. "Crap!" I think, "I missed a good one."

98 I now find myself wedged against the back pillar and looming over the couple seated nearby in a  
99 manner that would be super creepy if the room was not so crowded. I figure that, since I'm all  
100 the way in the back anyway and am holding out little hope of a good view of the rest of the  
101 show, I might as well through my name in the hat (which is conveniently located in the back near  
102 the exit). Getting called up to the stage, after all, is my best shot at improving my view of the  
103 room.

104 Before calling up the next teller, Alex announces to the crowd that he wants to know who came  
105 from the farthest away. I hear people call out the name of far-flung Michigan cities, even a few  
106 "Ohio's" and "Indiana's", before I call out "Tennessee!" I, however, am way back in the room  
107 and he doesn't hear me. People standing nearby begin to point and they too call out "Tennessee!"  
108 Noticing this, Alex says "someone get that girl a drink! What are you having Tennessee?" I

109 figure it's not likely that someone is going to buy a stranger a cocktail in a room this crowded, so  
110 I decide to go for my favorite martini, which also happens to be in the more expensive section of  
111 the drink menu – "Dirty Martini!"

112 The fourth teller is called up to the stage. She is a middle-aged white woman named Jamie from  
113 Huntington Woods. She tells a sad story about her grandmother, whom she visited every  
114 summer at the family home in the Smokey Mountains. She appears nervous, as though she  
115 would rather not be behind the microphone. I make a mental note of her face and I watch her  
116 return to her seat when she's done. I want to be able to find this woman later so I can ask her a  
117 few questions. Before her scores are called out, Alex remarks on the heavy, emotional feeling in  
118 the room and says, "Okay, as soon as you are done we're gonna go to happy time because we're  
119 stirring up all kinds of shit tonight." There is a big laugh from the crowd and I find myself  
120 feeling grateful toward Alex for giving us that release from the emotional tension. I'm also  
121 impressed with him for sensing that it was necessary and executing that release so skillfully.

122 The fifth teller is called up to the stage. She is another middle-aged white woman. Her name is  
123 Lou and she is from Ann Arbor. She tells a travel adventure tale about a trip she took to  
124 Australia. I am struck when she references "Baz Luhrman's Australia" and I find myself not so  
125 much surprised by the reference to the director but the fact that so many people in the crowd  
126 obviously knew what she was referring to – the reference to Luhrman was the punch line to a  
127 joke and many people did laugh. I do not catch the end of her story, or her scores, because I am  
128 once again caught in conversation with my fellows in the standing-room-only crowd. I find  
129 myself apologizing to two men whose view of the stage I have just cut off. They are both white.  
130 One of them is in his fifties and he has grey stubble on his face. The other is in his thirties and  
131 his blonde hair is as neatly gelled as his oxford shirt is tucked. The younger man is a doctor who

132 lives on Grosse Pointe and his children are in school with the older man's children at "The  
133 Waldorf School." (This school is in Rochester Hills and, although it is known to many as "The  
134 Waldorf School," it's official title is Oakland Steiner School.) When he mentions Grosse Pointe  
135 I try hard to conceal my impression of that particular community, but it must not be working  
136 because the man looks at my face, smiles, and says, "Ah, so you're familiar with Grosse Pointe  
137 then?" I say, "Who isn't?" and he asks, "Are you from the area?" "Grosse Pointe? No. I grew  
138 up downriver. But my parents did take us there on Sunday drives to look at the castles, I mean,  
139 the *homes*." We both smile and we both know that there was no accident in that last sentence.

140 The older man teaches English at a high school in Oak Park. He tells me his name is Bill and  
141 that he has listened to the Moth on the radio "for some time" and convinced his friend to come  
142 here with him tonight. He tells me that he's thrown his name in the hat and asks if I have done  
143 the same. I tell him that yes, I have thrown my name in, but seriously doubt whether I'll be able  
144 to make my way up to the stage if I am called. All three of us chuckle.

145 Alex, the host, passes by at one point on his way to and from the table containing the consent  
146 forms. We make eye contact and I wave. He comes up and asks if I've put my name in the hat.  
147 I tell him that I have and he smiles and says "good, good" and continues mingling his way back  
148 up to the stage.

149 The three of us – myself and the parents from The Waldorf School – continue talking throughout  
150 the intermission. The younger man tells me that this is his first time at Cliff Bell's. He looks  
151 around and uses the words "warmth" and "comfortable" to describe the place. I ask him "what  
152 brings a Grosse Pointe-er downtown?" He tells me that he's a doctor at a clinic here in Detroit.  
153 He too is "surprised that there aren't more Detroit-ers here." I want to ask him how he's so sure

154 that there aren't, but I don't get the chance. The intermission is over and I have been called up to  
155 the stage as the sixth teller.

156 It takes me a while to make it to the front of the venue. It is crowded and people give me a few  
157 looks implying that I'm being rude. Still others begin to point at me as Alex repeats my name.  
158 It's taking me so long to get up there that he supposes that I've run out. I've never told this story  
159 out loud before. I know what I'm going to talk about but as I make my way to the microphone I  
160 have no idea how these words are going to come out of my mouth. I've decided that my "Near  
161 Death" story would not be some story about a time when I had almost died, but a story about a  
162 time when I was literally near someone who was dying, in physical proximity to someone's  
163 death. I am at the microphone. Alex raises it to my height and tells the crowd how far I've come  
164 to be here tonight and how I told a great story at last month's slam. I am praying that he won't  
165 say something about how funny I am. He doesn't and I am grateful – I don't want the audience  
166 to be expecting to laugh, not because I don't plan to give them laughter but because for it to work  
167 I'm going to need for it to be a surprise.

168 These are the first words out of my mouth: "Tonight everyone has talked about how they came  
169 near to dying, but I'm going to tell you about a time that I was close to death, a time when death  
170 was in the next room. You see, when I was ten years old my Aunt Mary came home to my  
171 grandmother's living room to die."

172 From there I launched into the story of our family's experience with Hospice and my own  
173 childish desire to look up into my grandmother's face for wisdom, some piece of old-world  
174 wisdom to make it all make sense. I told them about how the presence of death was frightening  
175 and how my family responded to it. Finally, I told about the afternoon that my aunt –



176 hallucinating on her painkillers – began to scream as she mistook a fallen hairbrush for a snake.  
177 I told them about how my uncle, whom I had already described as the most prim and  
178 conservative of all my family members, rushed in and without a moment’s hesitation, picked up  
179 the supposed snake saying, “Don’t worry Mary, I’ve got it!” and threw the brush outside. I could  
180 feel how stunned the people in the room were at that point. They seemed uncertain as to whether  
181 it was socially acceptable to laugh at such a thing. I was pleased with that. I delivered my final  
182 line: “And that’s when I looked to my grandmother, hoping that in all her age and experience she  
183 would have some words of ancient wisdom to explain this newest side of death, and she just  
184 looked at me and smiled and said, ‘that’s what happens when you do the doobie.’”

185 There was a brief moment of silence and then the room erupted in laughter. I knew it wasn’t my  
186 funniest or best constructed tale, but I knew that I had opened and closed the story well. I  
187 stepped down from the stage and by the time I made it back to the other end of the room the  
188 judges were announcing my scores: 8.3, 8.5, and 7.5. Not good, but not terrible either.

189 Next, someone named Sean was called up to the stage as teller number seven. I realized that it  
190 was one of the men I had spoken to earlier in the group of three – the one who had said he had a  
191 story to tell but was uncertain whether he wanted to share it. Sean is a heavy-set guy with face  
192 stubble, a buzz cut, and thick-rim glasses. He’s wearing dark jeans and an un-tucked collar-ed  
193 shirt. He begins his story by telling us that this takes place while he was on a business trip and  
194 had a lay-over at the Saint Louis Airport. “And what else do you do,” he asks, “when you have a  
195 lay-over on a business trip except answer a sex ad on Craig’s List?” A loud collection of gasps  
196 and shocked exclamations rise up from the crowd. Sean continues with his story and we learn  
197 that he contracts something horrible from this tryst and returns to his office the next day, only to  
198 be forced to go to the emergency room when he begins experiencing severe swelling and redness

199 of the his penis. More gasps and grossed out exclamations rise up from the audience, but Sean  
200 continues to describe his afflicted member. He goes over the time limit and the whistle sounds.  
201 He continues and the whistle sounds a second time. Finally, Sean ends his story with the  
202 draining – by needlepoint – of his penis. I don't see a single face in the room that doesn't look  
203 grossed out to some degree. His scores are announced and I'm not surprised to hear that he  
204 receives a 6.9 and two 7.0's.

205 The next teller is called up to the stage. Her name is Shannon. She is white and in her thirties.  
206 She begins by telling us that "I promise you it isn't gross and it isn't funny, but it is sad." She  
207 tells the story of being raised by her self-sacrificing, single mother. She tells us how she went  
208 away to college and never knew that her mother was undergoing treatment for cancer. She then  
209 tells us that her mother died during her final semester at school and she never even knew that she  
210 was "that sick." She gets choked up at several moments in her story. Shannon closes her story  
211 with these words: "To my mother and my family, for their concerted efforts to keep me sheltered  
212 from what was going on, thank you." She receives a large applause. I find myself surprised by  
213 the fact that she was thanking those people for having denied her an awareness of the severity of  
214 her mother's illness and therefore the ability to say good-bye to her, but that's not to say that I  
215 wasn't moved.

216 Alex retakes the microphone and thanks Shannon, giving her a pat on the shoulder. As she exits  
217 the stage he tells the crowd, "Sometime stories are like that but it's real right folks?" There's an  
218 applause for this and asks the judges for her scores. Shannon's story wins an 8.5, 9.1, and 9.0.  
219 Alex announces that the theme for next month will be "Secrets" and the announcement is met  
220 with a loud "oooooooo" from the crowd. I expect that that show will be very well attended.

221 Alex reads a few of the anonymous submissions. One of them reads, “I dated a mortician once,  
222 she’s such a good...” (Alex actually reads that as “dot, dot, dot”). Another submission  
223 references Alex looking dead. Yet another reads, “Dead things, kind of like that island. What’s  
224 it called, Mackinac Island?” (Mackinac is an island between the upper and lower peninsulas of  
225 Michigan that is known for its historical buildings, prohibition of automobiles, and fudge-loving  
226 tourists).

227 There are only two more tellers left to go tonight and the venue is still packed. No one appears  
228 to be attempting to slip out early. I wonder if this has anything to do with the fact that unlike  
229 sporting events, you really don’t know who the winner will be until the very end of the spectacle.  
230 Also, parking was much less hectic this evening than it was the night of the September slam.

231 The ninth teller is called up to the stage. His name is William and it is the high school teacher  
232 that I was chatting with during the intermission. He is announced as being from Detroit and I’m  
233 not certain to what extent that is true. William is wearing jeans and a blazer over a bright red  
234 tee-shirt. He looks sharp. From the minute he opens his mouth I am convinced that he wrote  
235 and most likely memorized his story before this show. His words pour out in a rapid and  
236 seemingly controlled rhythm. He tells the story of the night he went for a walk in Detroit and  
237 was mugged on his way to a convenience store. He says, “This was back in the 90’s now, over  
238 by the Third Street parking lot, you know, the one without the lights.” He’s onto his next line  
239 before there can be a response (nugatory or affirmative) from the audience to that, albeit  
240 rhetorical, question. The bells sounds for him, he’s gone over time, and he quickly wraps up his  
241 tale. I am breathless for him and although I’m convinced with his speech and breath control, I’m  
242 also wondering how successfully his degree of preparation will play for this audience. It’s not  
243 long before his scores are read and William receives an 8.9, 9.5, and 8.7. They enjoyed it, but

244 not so much that they didn't want to leave room for the final contender. I find myself wishing I  
245 had kept better track of the cumulative scores all along. The three sets of scores are recorded on  
246 the board, which is visible to all (if you're in a good spot) but the totals are not posted.

247 The final teller is called up to the stage. His name is Greg and he is a black man in his 50s or  
248 60s. He is very tall and his build is athletic. He's wearing sand-colored trousers and a matching  
249 crewneck sweater in a fine-gauge knit. A polo shirt peeps out from beneath it. He holds the  
250 microphone with his right hand and steps to the side of the stand. He tells a story about the day  
251 he almost drowned as a child. His mother, a single-mother, had moved him and his siblings  
252 away from Detroit for a time only to return with them a few years later. He mentions the name  
253 of what must be a well-known swimming pool in the city because several people nod their heads  
254 and/or say "mmhmm."

255 I do not get to hear the end of Greg's story, nor hear the beginning of his scores because I have  
256 moved into the bar area for a better view and a man is trying to start a conversation with me. I  
257 attempt to politely indicate that I'm not interested, pointing to my notebook and then pointedly  
258 looking away, but he doesn't take the hint and offers to buy me a drink. I decline and, now very  
259 frustrated, say, "I am just so not interested." He looks miffed, but at least I've got him to leave.  
260 And just in time. I catch Greg's last two scores – 8.9 and 10.0. I am even more upset that I  
261 missed the rest of his story because evidently it was a good one. This is the first time that I've  
262 witnessed anyone receiving a "perfect ten" and I immediately decide that I need to talk to this  
263 man. Unless his first score was extremely lower than the other two (so far that seems rare), Greg  
264 is going to win.

265 There is a quick break while one of Alex’s assistants begins to tally the scores. Alex asks that  
266 all the tellers from tonight’s show return to the stage. As we file through the crowd and make  
267 our way up the few stairs to the stage, Alex requests that anyone who put their name in the hat  
268 now come up to the stage as well. When there are about twenty of us on the stage and there no  
269 longer appears to be anyone making their way stage-ward, Alex ask that everyone whose name  
270 was not pulled this evening step behind the microphone and say the first line of their story.  
271 While this is happening I turn to my left and see William standing nearby. I congratulate him on  
272 a job well done and ask him if I could ask him a few questions about his story after the show. He  
273 agrees.

274 Greg is announced as the winner and he slowly makes his exit from the stage. It is slow going  
275 because he is swamped with congratulators and people patting his back. I decide that my best  
276 chance of talking to him will come later after the crowd has thinned. I decide to pursue William.  
277 I meet up with him at the back of the room, where we had first met. He asks me to call him  
278 “Bill.” I agree and I tell him that I was impressed with his story and, asking him to correct me if  
279 I was wrong, said that he seemed like he was accustomed to the stage. He said that this was  
280 true. That he does a lot of writing beyond his obligations at the high school and that he saw  
281 performing at the slam as a means of “keeping up my chops.” I ask him about the structure of  
282 his story and how he organized it. He tells me that he didn’t have the tale entirely memorized,  
283 but that he had seven points or thoughts that he knew he was going to “hit” in a specific order.  
284 He told me that those points were:

- 285 1. Mention the title, “Near Death” , and clarify that you don’t need to be in the medical  
286 profession to be near death.
- 287 2. Explain the difference between a glass bottle of ice tea and a plastic bottle of Dr. Pepper.

- 288 3. Explain how not to walk in Detroit so as not to violate every safety precaution.
- 289 4. Describe the rush of blood when the body goes into self-defense mode.
- 290 5. Describe the feeling of the light going out behind me.
- 291 6. Describe the sound of the keys and my own scream.
- 292 7. Coda: Take it back to the medical world when I tell about receive late night first aid there
- 293 on the pavement.

294 I thank Bill for sharing his methods with me. I ask him if I will see him at more slams and he

295 tells me that he's a regular. He says that he remembers me from last month and that he enjoyed

296 my story very much. I thank him and tell him that I look forward to hearing him tell again,

297 making a mental note that I should acquire his contact information the next time that we meet. I

298 have a feeling that Bill has a lot more to say about stories and his approach to the slam. I decide

299 not to pursue these questions right now because I want to catch the winner before he makes his

300 exit. I begin making my way toward the stage along the far wall, the one parallel to the bar.

301 There's less traffic here and it's easier to navigate the crowd. I see that Greg is sitting at one of

302 the café tables near the front of the stage. There are two other middle-aged African American

303 men sitting with, all similarly dressed – slacks, dress shirts or sweaters, expensive leather shoes.

304 Before I approach them they are greeted by two other people that they seem to know and I

305 hesitate to interrupt. Deciding to wait, I look around the crowd remaining near the stage.

306 I see five twenty-something's huddled together and make my way toward them. I apologize for

307 interrupting their conversation, introduce myself, tell them about my project, and ask if I can ask

308 them a few questions. Four of them are white, and one of them is black. All but one of them are

309 female. They are all undergraduates at the University of Michigan. Their majors are business,

310 environmental studies, creative writing, political science, and "undecided." This is their first

311 slam but they are all long-time fans of the Moth podcasts. They tell me that they are hoping to  
312 start a slam in Ann Arbor. They are here tonight to learn more about how slams operate. I ask  
313 them what made them want to start a slam in Ann Arbor and they tell me that, besides the fact  
314 that they are fans, they hope that a slam will be a means of getting university students and people  
315 from Ann Arbor to mix socially. I ask them if they know how many of the people at tonight's  
316 show were local college students or just plain locals and they tell me that they haven't spoken to  
317 many other audience members. I tell them that I have no official numbers, but that I've spoken  
318 to a mix of both locals and students in the past two months and that most of them all seem to be  
319 previous fans of the Moth (via podcast or NPR) or were brought to the show by a fan. I ask if  
320 any of them were from Detroit or the Ann Arbor area. One hails from Ann Arbor, in fact she  
321 attended Ann Arbor Pioneer (a team that I recall playing in regionals as a high school student).  
322 One is from Royal Oak, Michigan. Another is from Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The fourth is  
323 from South Orange, New Jersey. The fifth is looking around the room and no longer  
324 participating in the conversation. I ask them if they're familiar with other community story  
325 projects and two of the girls mention that they are fans of Story Corps. I thank them for their  
326 time, wish them luck, and look over that the winner's table. He and his friends are still occupied  
327 with well-wishers. I decide to continue circulating.

328 I approach a table of five on the far side of the room behind the bar. They are all in their late  
329 twenties or early thirties. There are three females and two males. They are all white. The men  
330 are wearing dark jeans and collared shirts, the women are wearing skirts or dresses. They tell me  
331 that they came over from Windsor. This is not their first slam. Three of them tell me that they  
332 listen to the podcasts on the radio in Windsor. One of them was hoping to tell tonight. They  
333 look tired and ready to head out so I thank them and move on to another table.

334 I approach two women in their twenties. They are sitting at a five-person table and there are five  
335 glasses on the table so I assume that three of their friends are either fetching more drinks, visiting  
336 the restroom, or circulating in the bar. They are from Ferndale, Michigan and this is their first  
337 time at a slam. They tell me that they are “definitely” coming again. I ask them what they  
338 thought of the show and the theme and they tell me that they were interested in how differently  
339 everyone interpreted the theme “Near Death.” They weren’t expecting the tales to be all that  
340 different. I thank them and move on.

341 I see the teller named Shannon sitting at a two-person table near one of the back columns. She is  
342 sitting with a black woman who looks to be in her thirties. I conduct the usual interruption and  
343 introduction and tell Shannon that I was very moved by her tale. I ask her what led her to tell  
344 that story tonight and she confesses that she didn’t “want to tell” the story, but that she felt she  
345 “had to tell it.” I tell her that she did a nice job and she smiles and looks relieved. I ask her how  
346 she found out about the show and she tells me that she has been a fan of the podcasts for a while  
347 now. She tells me that she decided to come tonight when she discovered the evening’s theme. I  
348 thank the ladies and move on again.

349 I see that Greg and his friends are alone and I approach them, asking if I may join them. I  
350 congratulate Greg on a job well done and before I have a chance to explain why I want to ask  
351 him questions, one of his friends asks if I am a reporter. I explain that I’m conducting research  
352 for my graduate thesis and ask if I can ask them a few questions. They consent. Before I can  
353 continue, their waitress returns with another round. They are all having gin or scotch. Greg  
354 asks me what I’m having. I turn to the waitress and say, “Dirty Martini, vodka, the Goose.” One  
355 of the men whistles and I realize that I’ve surprised them.



356 I ask Greg what led him to tell tonight and he tells me that it was actually one of his friends, he  
357 points to one of the men who then tells me that Greg was actually a speech writer for mayor  
358 Dennis Archer back in the nineties. I apologize, telling Greg that I hadn't realized. I ask him if  
359 he wrote his story out beforehand and he tells me no, that he didn't know what he was going to  
360 talk about until he was up behind the microphone. I ask him what he thinks makes for a winning  
361 story and he tells me that "it can't be so emotional" and or "too rehearsed." He mentions Bill's  
362 story and tells me that he thinks he would have received better scores if he hadn't been so  
363 obviously rehearsed. I ask all of the men what they think of the crowd, if it's what they  
364 expected. They shrug and tell me that they hadn't thought of that. I tell them that a number of  
365 the people I've spoken to tonight have said that they would have liked to see more African-  
366 Americans at the show. Two of the men laugh. One of them says that if you were to "tell some  
367 black people, 'hey, come to this story slam tonight,' they wouldn't know what that means. Now  
368 if you were doing a poetry slam that would be different." I find this last comment very  
369 interesting, given what the bartender told me earlier this evening about the cancellation of poetry  
370 slams at Cliff's.

371 We continue talking for quite some time. I learn that Greg's friends each own a night club here  
372 in Detroit. I recognize the names of these places, but for anonymity's sake I won't mention them  
373 here. I will end this series of field notes by saying that I left Cliff's with all three men that  
374 evening and visited their respective clubs. These were places that I would never have attended  
375 on my own or with my usual crowd of friends. In each case, I was the only white woman at the  
376 club. I was well treated, but also obviously there as a guest of the owner. When I drove back to  
377 Monroe around 3am, I found myself pondering the slam and the racial separation present in  
378 Detroit's social scene. Would there, could there be a successful story slam that drew large

379 crowds of both black and white Detroiters? What venue could hold such an event and how  
380 would it be advertised?

## Appendix C

### 1 Field Notes: Thursday, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011

2 Another month, another trip to Bell's for the story slam. Unfortunately, this month I have a very  
3 bad cough. I arrive in Detroit with the unpleasant feeling of mucus draining out of my sinus  
4 cavity and down the back of my throat. My cough sounds foul and my voice is on its way out. I  
5 am afraid that I will be too gross to justify introducing myself to strangers, but I've come ten  
6 hours from Tennessee for this and I'm not prepared to pack it in just yet. I swallow an Advil  
7 before getting out of my car and walk briskly from my parking spot (which is blessedly near the  
8 door) to the club. I immediately order a "Very Hot Toddy" and sip it quickly before looking  
9 around the bar. It helps a little but not much.

10 I am not in the club for more than ten minutes before I run into John, the man from Holt. He is  
11 dressed in a tweed jacket and jeans and is wearing a dark hat in a color that I can't quite make  
12 out in the dim light of the hotel. He tells me that he went to the October slam in Chicago at  
13 Martyr's. He tells me that he had a great time and that he got there four hours early so that he  
14 could grab spot near the stage. He says that the quality of the stories was higher at the Chicago  
15 venue than here at Cliff's and I ask him why he thinks that is. John thinks that it has something  
16 to do with it being a bigger city. I ask him if I can ask him a few questions about how he puts his  
17 stories together. He's hoping to tell tonight and he tells me that he came up with one line for  
18 tonight's story while he was driving home from last month's show. He told me that he's been  
19 practicing and that he's cut it down to nine minutes by cutting out a lot of the "personal  
20 information" and starting immediately in the action of the story. He writes his first and last line.  
21 He records himself via the video on his laptop and says that typing his stories doesn't do him any

22 good. He says that “people tell me I’m in the wrong business” and that he gets his sense of  
23 humor mainly from his dad. John goes back to discussing the Chicago slam and says that the  
24 host, Brian Babylon, was very funny and spent a lot of time picking on him from the stage. John  
25 says that only one woman told a story that wasn’t funny and she didn’t win. He says that the guy  
26 who did win did so because of one line, “I’m riding along on my bike and I know I’m gonna die  
27 and I hear a police officer, and of course he’s on horseback this is Chicago, yell ‘get of the road  
28 you idiot!’” John says the room erupted in laughter at that line and he knew at that moment that  
29 that teller would win. John says that he felt out of his league at that slam. I thank him for his  
30 time and excuse myself to talk to more of the crowd.

31 I make the usual introduction and explanation to two twenty-somethings at the bar. They are  
32 medical students at Wayne State University here in Detroit and they are here for the first time.  
33 They tell me that they listen to the Moth on NPR. They introduce me to three more Wayne  
34 students, all of whom report being fans of “This American Life.” These students are all white,  
35 with the exception of an Asian female and an Indian male. Looking past me, their eyes light up  
36 and they greet a newly arriving friend. I turn around to smile at the newcomer and recognize an  
37 old classmate from undergraduate days – Brandon. I look at him and say “IO Triumphe!” His  
38 eyes bulge and he says, “Oh my god, Io Triumphe!” We both laugh and he apologizes for  
39 forgetting my name. I laugh, tell him my name, and we commence checking up. He’s in his  
40 second year of medical school at Wayne. I ask him if he and his friends come downtown very  
41 often and he confesses that they don’t have much time for going out. This is his first time at  
42 Cliff’s but he says it’s great and thinks that they’ll likely be back. He didn’t know that the slam  
43 was even happening this evening. He says that he’s actually here to celebrate a friend’s birthday,  
44 something that he might not be able to do if he hadn’t just taken a “huge exam” this afternoon,

45 thereby ending a very time-consuming class. I congratulate him and tell him that he's picked a  
46 good place for his R&R. He tells me that I don't sound so good and asks me if I should really be  
47 out tonight. I say "You probably have a good point, doc." I thank the whole group and continue  
48 circulating around the bar.

49 I introduce myself to three more twenty-something's at the bar. They are all here from Ann  
50 Arbor tonight and they are all white. They are fans of the podcast and none of them are hoping  
51 to tell this evening.

52 I introduce myself to a group of three white ladies at the bar. One appears to be in her forties and  
53 the other two look as though they are in their thirties. They are all dressed as though they came  
54 here from a day of office work and they are eating dinner. One of them is a high school teacher.  
55 One of them is from Dearborn and another is from Garden City. They tell me that they are here  
56 because one of them has an Aunt named Mary out in Albuquerque who is a "huge fan of the  
57 Moth and a really funny lady" and she told her neice that it was in Detroit and that she  
58 "absolutely had to go." I thank them and continue on. My voice is getting very thin and  
59 bringing it back to life at this point requires a phlegmy and none-to-pretty cough. I'm starting to  
60 feel very bad about spreading my germs around the bar and wonder how many people really  
61 want to speak to someone so obviously ill.

62 I introduce myself to two men in their twenties standing near the entrance. They are looking  
63 around and appear to be taking in the setting and deciding where to position themselves. They  
64 are both white and tell me that they are from Detroit. One of them listens to the podcasts and  
65 brought along his friend. It is the friend's first time but not his.

66 I cough as I'm leaving them and a massive chunk of nasal gunk lands in my throat. "That's it," I  
67 think, "you've grossed yourself out now." I make my way to the restroom and wait in line  
68 feeling like the grossest thing in the bar, notwithstanding the floor. Five minutes later, I get in  
69 the bathroom and hack the contents of my mouth into the toilet. The Advil doesn't seem to be  
70 helping much because my throat is aching and my head feels like it's about to split open. I  
71 quickly grab some blush and some lip stain from my purse and attempt to lie my way to the  
72 appearance of health. It's going to be a rough night.

73 I start a conversation with a group of three more people at the bar. One is a male from Canton,  
74 Michigan, another is a female who says she's from "Western Michigan" and these two are both  
75 in their twenties. They are with a woman who appears to be in her thirties. She tells me that she  
76 is a "native Detroiter" and that she listens to the Moth Radio Hour. The man from Canton says  
77 that he thinks tonight's theme, "Secrets," is "one of the better topics."

78 I see a young man in his early twenties sitting at one of the small tables attached to the bar and  
79 typing on his laptop. I approach him and ask him if he's blogging about the show. He smiles  
80 and says, "sort of." He tells me that he's a marketing intern for WDET this semester and that  
81 he's a student at Wayne State University in Detroit. We chat for a while and he tells me that this  
82 is his first time at the show. We exchanged E-mail addresses and plan to contact each other and  
83 share our thoughts after the show.

84 The show will be starting in about twenty minutes and there are about 60 people seated  
85 throughout Cliff's and maybe 20-25 people milling about the floor. I start a conversation with a  
86 white-haired man who looks like he's in his late fifties and a man in his thirties who is standing  
87 at his side. They have their backs to the wall and they are looking around the room. I introduce

88 myself and ask them if they are here to tell a story tonight. Both of the men laugh at this. They  
89 tell me that they “didn’t even pay to get in.” They are father and son and they own a liquor  
90 distribution company here in the city. They tell me that they were just here to make a delivery  
91 and the owner suggested that they stick around for the show. They report that they were both  
92 born and raised here in Detroit and that although they do listen to WDET they are not familiar  
93 with the Moth. I ask them if they might consider telling and the younger man says that he might  
94 consider it if the topic were different.

95 I approach two women in their twenties. They are currently students at the University of  
96 Michigan in Dearborn. One is from Farmington Hills and the other is from Detroit. The one  
97 from Farmington Hills is here for the first time and she tells me that her boyfriend is also with  
98 them and that he’s considering putting his name in the hat. They tell me that they both listen to  
99 WDET and the Moth podcasts.

100 The show starts and the judges are introduced. They’ve named themselves, “Flies on the Wall,”  
101 “42,” and “Deep Cover.” At the pronouncement of the last group’s name Alex, the host, says,  
102 “Yeah you would be, over there under the self-contamination painting.” This gets a huge laugh  
103 from the audience (these judges are seated beneath a large painting of a woman lying on her back  
104 and masturbating).

105 The first teller is called up to the stage. He is a white man from Ann Arbor. He tells the story of  
106 a girl he tried, on multiple occasions, to “hook up with” while living in his first campus dorm.  
107 He gets a big laugh when he says, “we’ll call her Jen, cause that’s her name.” In the end, the  
108 teller confesses that he never did hook up with Jen, although he did come close only to be foiled  
109 by a fire alarm. His scores are 8.1, 8.5, and 7.7.

110 The second teller is a white man in his twenties from Ypsilanti. He is tall, thin, tan, and blond.  
111 His hair is longish and deliberately styled to look tousled. He's wearing dark skinny jeans and a  
112 fitted black button-up. At this point, I'm feeling dizzy and I've propped myself up against one of  
113 the back pillars in an attempt to steady myself. He tells a story about the year he was given a  
114 "camcorder" for Christmas at the age of twelve. He details how he spent his family's entire  
115 holiday stay in Florida recording his various family members' mundane daily activities, and then  
116 decided to film himself masturbating in the bathroom – a fact that he conveniently forgot until  
117 the moment that his mother requested he play the family video for everyone at the end of their  
118 vacation. At this point in his story, several people in the audience gasp and many people –  
119 including myself – cry out, "NO!" The inevitable happens and it is hilarious. There are peals of  
120 laughter and hearty applause. His scores are 9.7, 8.7, and 9.3.

121 Next up, John from Holt! I'm delighted to see him finally getting behind the microphone. He  
122 tells a tender story about trying to conceal the truth about Santa Claus from his young daughter.  
123 He seems very nervous at first, but seems to get comfortable after the first two minutes. His tale  
124 concludes with him bringing his daughter into the truth and colluding with her to keep his second  
125 daughter in the dark about that same truth. It's a sweet tale, not too saccharine, but I find myself  
126 thinking that it will be difficult for anyone to compete with the Christmas masturbation video.  
127 John receives a 7.7, 8.9, and 8.2.

128 The fourth teller is announced, a Detroit woman by the name of Asada. However, Asada does  
129 not come when her name is called and everyone is surprised. Alex announces that "this has  
130 never happened before" and pulls a new name. It is a man name Larry from Pleasant Ridge.  
131 Larry is middle-aged and I miss most of his story while trying to free myself from the advances



132 of a nearby drunk at the bar. I get away in time to catch his scores: 7.6, 8.2, and 7.9.

133 Masturbation Christmas is still in the lead.

134 Teller number five is a man named Philip. Alex does not announce where Philip is from. He  
135 tells a story about Paul Howard, the man who runs the bar, but it makes little sense and he is  
136 rewarded with a 7.9, 7.7, and another 7.9.

137 The intermission begins after Phillip's story and Alex takes this time to read a few of the  
138 anonymous submissions. Three of them are audience members confessing that they are attracted  
139 to, want to date, or are hoping to sleep with someone else in the room. For the most part these  
140 are strangers to the confessor and these people are described by their clothing, hair, and in one  
141 case by a description of the table they are waiting on. This gets big laughs from the audience. I  
142 don't hear the rest of the announcements because I make my way back to the restroom for  
143 another opportunity to hack the contents of my sinuses into the toilet. I leave the restroom and  
144 the next lady in line gives me a curious glance.

145 The intermission ends and the sixth tellers is called up to the stage. Her name is Ruthann and  
146 Alex does not announce where she is from. I don't catch much of her story as I am negotiating  
147 my way through the crowd in an attempt to find a view of the stage. The room is growing more  
148 crowded and there is little standing room left. Ruthann's scores are announced. She receives a  
149 7.8, 7.3, and 8.8. I'm struck by how much higher that last score is in comparison with the first  
150 two and find myself wondering about the identities of the judges – none of whom are visible to  
151 me from my current position.

152 The seventh teller is called up. His name is Scott and he's from Grosse Pointe. He is white,  
153 middle-aged, and dressed in apparel that I would refer to as "safari chic." His longish hair is

154 tousled and he grabs the microphone with one hand. He tells the story of a trip he once made to  
155 Chile (pronouncing it chil-AY) while working in the film industry. His story includes playing  
156 soccer with the locals and ritualistic goat killings, but I don't get how it has anything to do with  
157 "Secrets." A man standing nearby echoes my thoughts and says, "entertaining, but how is that  
158 'Secrets?'" The judges must have shared our thoughts too, because Scott receives a 7.6, 7.4, and  
159 8.2.

160 The eighth teller is called. She is a middle-aged white woman by the name of Elaine and she's  
161 from Trenton. She begins by saying, "I'm glad I know the tenor of the room, I can say pretty  
162 much anything I want and not offend a soul. How many people in the room are Catholic?"  
163 Several people are heard calling out "WOOO!" and clapping their hands. I count 20 raised  
164 hands before Elaine continues. She tells a story of going to confession as young girl and how her  
165 own mother was generally better at detecting lies than her parish priest. She tells how she once  
166 bought crayons and paper from her school store when her mother had specifically requested that  
167 she come home with a certain number of stamps, which she obviously could not purchase after  
168 subtracting the money for the art supplies. It was an amusing story, but a little too cute, and  
169 certainly not able to compete with Masturbation Christmas. Her scores are announced. Elaine  
170 receives a 7.5, 7.3, and 9.2.

171 The next teller, number nine, is a white male in his twenties from Ferndale. He tells the story of  
172 how he and his college girlfriend eloped in Las Vegas and then proceeded to hide that fact from  
173 their parents for over a year. This lie ended when the teller, Noah, had a piece of mail addressed  
174 to "Mr. and Mrs." Accidentally delivered to his parents' home. His mother and father then  
175 proceeded to call him and beg him through their tears to tell them that it wasn't true. His story  
176 ends with his decree that much to his parents' relief and his own, the marriage has since ended in

177 divorce. Noah steps down from the stage and while the judges confer Alex asks the crowd,  
178 “How many of you are here for the first time tonight?” About 40 first-timers raise their hands.  
179 Noah receives a 9.5, 8.8, and 8.9.

180 The final teller is called up to the stage. She is a petite white woman from Royal Oak named  
181 Alissa. She is in her late twenties and she has curly brown hair that bobs a great deal while she is  
182 telling because she hops continually from one foot to the other during the course of her story.  
183 Her tale begins with her in elementary school and being outraged and the behavior of a fellow  
184 student who blames the fallout of his own fart on one of the less popular kids in class. She  
185 details her moral outrage at length, making sure to tell us that her young self was greatly  
186 appalled. The she begins telling us about her decision in recent times to join a community  
187 theatre production. She talks about the bonding process between the cast members and its  
188 intensification as their hours and days at the theater grow longer and longer. She tells how they  
189 ate meals together and sometimes slept behind stage. She then tells how, in a moment of great  
190 hilarity and exhaustion, she lets out a loud and very stinky fart. She then confesses that she  
191 blamed that fart on the youngest member of the cast, an annoying and yet innocent boy of ten.  
192 She ends her story with this public confession and an apology to the young boy, “wherever you  
193 are.”

194 During the course of her story, Alissa frequently interrupted herself with uncontrolled laughter  
195 and by the end of the story I am convinced that she might be drunk, but is most certainly tipsy.  
196 When she is done and Alex retakes the stage, he makes mention of her intoxication, calling it  
197 “cute” and arguing that men can’t get drunk and get behind a microphone and look cute, “we just  
198 look like idiots.” I find that this is a strange double standard.

200 The tellers and the people whose names were not called are summoned to the stage. I am  
201 shocked to find that Masturbation Christmas does not win. Instead, Allisa wins with her fart  
202 story. I am relieved that is over and convinced that I am going to be voiceless tomorrow. I make  
203 my way to the door and run into Greg and one of his friends from last month. We hug and I ask  
204 them what they thought of the show. They confess that they missed most of it were only here for  
205 the last four tellers. They then change the subject to tell me how awful I sound. I apologize and  
206 kid them that they know how to make a lady feel good. They laugh and tell me to get home and  
207 go to bed. I tell them that that's the best advice I've had in a long time. We hug again and I  
208 depart, very happy to be on my way to a hot shower and a down comforter.

## Appendix D

1 Field Notes: Thursday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010

2 4:30 p.m.

3 I'm back at Cliff Bell's for the January StorySLAM. I was unable to make it to the December  
4 slam and so it's been about two months since I was here last. I drove up from Monroe amid  
5 snow flurries and radio weather reports that we could be expecting more snow showers this  
6 evening. When I pulled off the Fisher Freeway onto Park the street looked empty. There were  
7 no men or women collecting money for spots in the fenced parking lots that line the block before  
8 Bell's. There weren't many cars parked on the street. I'm not certain if this is because there's  
9 no show at the Fisher Theater, there's no game or concert at Comerica Park, or if I'm finally  
10 getting here early enough. Whatever the reason, I'm delighted to score a free parking spot along  
11 the curb.

12 I walk quickly up Park toward Cliff's. It's windy and the cold is finding its way past my furry  
13 boots and parka. A young woman in her twenties is a few feet ahead of me doing the same. She  
14 is similarly dressed, but her coat is North Face and her boots, unlike mine, don't appear to have  
15 been purchased at Target. I enter behind her and we pay our five dollar cover fee at the same  
16 time. It's so cold that Rosie, the gentleman collecting this fee, isn't standing outside the door as  
17 per usual. He doesn't card me as he's done every other time I've been to here.

18 In an effort to take better notes on the tellers, I've elected to find a spot at one of the small café  
19 tables at the side of the stage. They are small and tightly packed, so I figure I won't offend the  
20 wait staff too much by sitting alone (a ballsy move when attending an event that is usually

21 standing room only). Also, I plan to order some, making a larger bill and leaving a bigger tip,  
22 thereby passing along the good karma of my free parking. I pass by these tables on my way to  
23 the ladies restroom, which I decide to visit before sitting down. In the past I've always used the  
24 unisex bathroom on the main level because this restroom wasn't accessible. It lies at the top of a  
25 narrow staircase that is just to the right of the stage. Even making it to the stage during the show  
26 can be difficult with standing and seated audience members. And if you do make it up to the  
27 table area on stage right, you may not be able to make it past the people perched on the staircase  
28 to watch the show. I open the wooden door with the plaque that reads "LADIES" and I find  
29 myself in a pentagonal powder room, three sides of which have individual lighted mirrors and  
30 wrought iron chairs with tufted cushions. The room is dark but the mirror lights are warm. The  
31 carpet is a black and tan zebra print. The powder room opens to a smaller bathroom containing  
32 three wooden stalls. They have beveled glass in a pyramid pattern at the top and once inside I  
33 am delighted to find that they also have a tri-pronged hangers for coats and purses. A pair of  
34 porcelain sinks with separate spouts for hot and cold water are in the center of the room. When I  
35 leave, I descend the stairs convinced that that was the cleanest public restroom I've ever visited.  
36 As is often the case, I find myself thinking, "Nicely done Cliff's."

37

38 Back downstairs, I look around at the café tables and single chairs near the stage and find that  
39 they have all been marked with little signs marked "Reserved" in curling script. In October, a  
40 number of seats were reserved for the event sponsors but nowhere near this many. I wonder who  
41 these seats may be for and if it will be the same crowd. Still determined to have a seated view of  
42 the stage, I make my way over to the bar and take up residence at one of the semi-circular tables  
43 jutting off from the bar. These tables are barely more than fourteen inches in diameter, but that

44 is plenty for me. There are roughly thirty people in the bar at this point, not counting the wait  
45 staff. I set my purse on the table and, peeling off my parka, elect to sit on it. It's going to get hot  
46 in here once the crowd arrives.

47 I'm approached by a bartender that I've seen at every other slam here at Bell's. I've never  
48 known his name and have always referred to him as "the posh one." Tonight he's wearing black  
49 suit vest over his grey button up shirt and tie. His hair is gelled into a faux hawk and his sleeves  
50 are rolled up just past the elbows. "I've seen you here before haven't I? You're from  
51 Tennessee, right?" "Yes," I reply, "I'm writing about the StorySLAM." "My name's Alvin."  
52 "Nice to meet you Alvin, I'm Cathy." We shake hands. He asks what he can get for me and I  
53 ask for a Hot Toddy and a kitchen menu. He reappears with both and I order the house macaroni  
54 and cheese. My sister raves about this dish and I figure it's about time I try it. The Hot Toddy is  
55 nine dollars (the average price for a glass of wine or a hot drink at Cliff's) but the mac and  
56 cheese is only six. In the past, I've seen couples at these bar-side tables devour larger meals and  
57 martinis over the course of a show. I realize that Alvin is going to lose out with me spending the  
58 entire event at a table in his section unless I order more drinks than I can handle or I leave a  
59 disproportionate tip. He opens a tab for me and I make a mental note to leave him a tip to match  
60 the multicourse meal that should have been seated there. This seat is good and I want to land it  
61 again, I'm not willing to risk staff malice.

62 I slowly sip the Hot Toddy (it's strong) and look around the club. It looks different since I was  
63 here last. A curved wall of darkly stained wood is now positioned in front of the sound board  
64 and the framed art is gone from the left wall. It has been replaced by a large mural painted in  
65 black, dark brown, green, and white. It features a winding river and a man, a child, and a few  
66 cats fishing along its waters. The impression is that of a clean and peaceful space. I find myself

67 contrasting the image with that of the Detroit River. I laugh darkly at the thought of eating the  
68 fish from those waters. Who is the artist? What was the inspiration? And why is it here at  
69 Cliff's?

70 The macaroni and cheese arrives in a tiny earthenware croc. Melted, aged cheddar and bread  
71 crumbs form a thermal blanket over the surface. I pierce it with my fork. Steam rises. It is  
72 delicious. Thanks sis.

73 4:58

74 Alex Trajano enters followed by two twenty-something ladies, that I recognize as WDET staff  
75 and former slam “assistants”, and a bearded man in his thirties. The head straight for the stage  
76 and begin rearranging. They set up a tripod and place a large white flip pad (about 3’x4’) on it  
77 and place a board saying “WDET 101.9” in front of the drum set. The flip pad serves as the  
78 score board and it will be visible to the audience all throughout the show. Anyone sober enough  
79 to do the math can know at any moment which teller is in the lead.

80 Tonight’s theme is “VICES” and I’m intrigued to learn how the audience will have interpreted  
81 this particular theme. Will there be stories of repentance, of reformation? Will we hear stories  
82 of self-destruction or joyful abandon? I’m struck by the pithy nature of the title and how it is  
83 with possibility. As usual, there are small slips of paper on each table inviting those persons not  
84 interested in telling to anonymously share their own experience of the theme. I look down at  
85 mine. It reads:

86 “Be a part of the Moth StorySLAM...From your seat! In the space below, please provide a

87 TWEET (140 characters or less) to the following and drop your



88

Response in the box on stage:

89

VICES Cliff Bell's: What vice will you never quit and why?"

90

91 I'm not planning to tell this evening, so I consider filling out this slip of paper. Then it comes to  
92 me. I write out my vice. I fold the paper in half. I don't walk it up the stage. If I leave me seat  
93 now I'll surely lose it. If a means of delivering the paper presents itself, I'll get it up there.

94 5:17

95 Trajano and the two young women are on the stage. They are no longer arranging things, they  
96 are talking to each other and the few people seated or standing nearby. They have all shed their  
97 coats. Alex wears jeans and collared shirt. The ladies look stunning. One is Indian-American  
98 and the other is Middle Eastern American. Both ladies are wearing form-fitting sweater dresses,  
99 tights, and leather boots. Jazz music has been playing since I entered and continues to play now.

100 I see a young man whom I recognize as a teller and judge from former shows. I wave and he  
101 comes over to my table. I had already asked him about his experience being a teller, but not his  
102 experience as a judge. He reports enjoying both. He suspects that judges give higher scores to  
103 tellers they know. He laughs this off as not being a big deal. He also thinks the scores get higher  
104 as the evening wears on. He supposes that this may be because both the audience and the judges  
105 have had more to drink. But he doesn't think that the "hipsters" at Cliff's drink as much as  
106 people at other bars. "So you think there are a lot of hipsters here?" I ask. "Oh yeah." He  
107 makes a joke, suggesting that his new glasses are going to be his "gateway drug to being a  
108 hipster." We laugh and he asks if I plan to tell. I tell him that I'm not planning on it, that I'm

109 afraid to lose my seat. He tells me to give him a wave if I change my mind and he'll grab me a  
110 consent form so I won't have to get up. I thank him, tell him that I'll let him know, and he takes  
111 my folded, anonymous submission form up the stage before he returns to his table, where he is  
112 seated with two other men and three ladies, all of whom appear to be in their late twenties.

113 A petite brunette woman in her forties with short hair, a form-fitting turtleneck, and long gold  
114 necklace comes up to me. She asks if I'm alone. At first I think she wants to sit down, but she  
115 asks if she can take the other chair at my table. I say "go for it" and she scurries off with it to the  
116 back of the club where she appears to be standing in a group of five men and women, also  
117 middle-aged. I realize that once the standing crowd begins to fill the space between the bar and  
118 the tables my sightline to the stage may be blocked. At this point there are no other seats  
119 available.

120 I start to consider telling. What are my vices? Which of them would I be comfortable sharing  
121 with a room full of strangers? Would any of those be entertaining? Two things come to mind,  
122 but I waver. This seat is too good to lose, even if it meant going to the stage.

123 To the right of the entrance there is a small circular booth where the event staff is setting up  
124 merchandise. To the left of the entrance two people are hanging a white poster with a large gray  
125 ink blot that looks like a moth. Below the image and on either side there is text that I can't make  
126 out from where I'm seated.

127 5:37

128 A group of three just came in and stood in front of me, blocking my view of the stage. The man  
129 and one woman are Caucasian and in their thirties. The other woman is in her twenties and

130 African American, she has short dreads and wears a wrap dress. The other woman wears her  
131 light brown hair straight and parted in the middle. She is wearing jeans and a knit top.

132 At this moment, from where I'm seated, I estimate that the average age of the crowd is thirty-  
133 five.

134 A young man in his twenties walks past me. His blond hair has been gelled into a faux hawk.  
135 He's wearing skinny jeans and a short puffer jacket with a fur-lined hood. The jacket is open  
136 just enough to reveal that he is also wearing a collared shirt and tie. I watch as he joins a group  
137 of twenty-something's (two more guys and a girl) standing near the stairs to the stage.

138 Looking around, I count three young woman wearing knit hats. I even see one girl wearing  
139 glittens (fingerless gloves with attached mitten tops) that she does not remove when she takes off  
140 her coat).

141 Seated slightly in front of me and to my left is a table of four consisting of two men in their  
142 fifties, both wearing denim button-up shirts, and two blond ladies that appear to be mother and  
143 daughter. Their dinners are just now being delivered. I try to see what they've ordered but a tall  
144 man with shoulder-length brown hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and a scarf steps in front of me and  
145 blocks my view.

146 5:53

147 It is about two and half hours until show time and there are about 150 people inside the club.  
148 The jazz music has stopped and alternative rock is now pumping through the room.

149 A young man in his twenties stalls to the left of me. He is trying to see a way toward the front of

150 the room. He has dark stubble on his face and he's wearing a gray hoody beneath his leather  
151 jacket. Directly behind him are three young women also in their twenties. We are so close that  
152 this sort of proximity would be uncomfortable in a less crowded space. They are trying to get  
153 the attention of the bartender and discussing what they'll order. One of them names a wine and  
154 another asks her how it is. She says that it's reminiscent of "that Merlot we had" and a Malbec.  
155 She can't remember the name. "Wait, I think I have it in my phone." She takes her Blackberry  
156 from her purse and begins searching through it. I break into their conversation, asking them if  
157 they've been to the Moth before. They say that this is their first time, but that they've tried to  
158 come before. They were turned away because the club was at capacity. The one with the  
159 Blackberry is from the Frankenmuth area. She moved to Ferndale and likes it much better. They  
160 are served and leave to find a better view.

161 6:04

162 I speak to a woman who is waiting near me at the bar. She's in her fifties and she's ordered a  
163 bottle of a microbrew and a cosmopolitan. She's here with her husband. It's their first time.  
164 They've listened to the Moth on the radio. I ask her if she wants to tell. She says that it might be  
165 a few more times before she's ready to do that. Her drinks arrive and she heads back toward her  
166 husband who she says is standing near the sound board.

167 I say "Hi" to Trajano as he passes by on his way to the back. He gives me a hug and asks if I'm  
168 planning to tell. I admit that I'm afraid to get up and lose my seat. He flags down the woman  
169 who has been seated at the table with the consent forms. She comes over with one of the forms.  
170 "This is Jean. When you're done filling that out, flag her down and she'll come get it from you."  
171 To Jean he says, "She's told stories here before, so we want to be good to her." Alex and Jean

172 leave and I fill out the form. I wave to her and Jean returns to collect it.

173 I look around the room and note that although I can see a few African Americans and Middle  
174 Eastern Americans, the majority of the crowd is Caucasian.

175 I begin to get nervous about the prospect of telling. I hope that if I am called that I'm not the  
176 first. I hope that if I'm called I'll be able to come back to my seat.

177 I look at the crowd standing near the bar. There is a woman in her late twenties in a high-  
178 waisted pencil skirt and cropped sweater. Her deep brunette hair is in an asymmetrical cut. I see  
179 an older gentleman in his late sixties wearing wire-rimmed bifocals. He has short white hair,  
180 white stubble, and a dark parka that must be very warm.

181 6:26

182 It's standing room only and the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd is so tightly packed that it's difficult  
183 for me to look around and try to get a head count. If I lean to the left and I can just barely make  
184 out the heads of the people on stage. I'm getting jostled quite a bit by people making their way  
185 to and from the bar and I've been spilled on a few times.

186 Trajano steps to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please..."  
187 This is his standard welcome. He continues, encouraging those who "are interested in telling a  
188 story" to fill out one of the forms at the back of the room and place it in the hat. He reminds  
189 everyone that it's an hour until show time. His announcement made, he steps away from the  
190 microphone.

191 I see John walk by. He is one his way to other side of the bar where he is seated in the back at

192 the long row of tables and chairs beneath the new mural. I had begun to wonder whether or not I  
193 would see him. He's been at every slam that I've attended here and I might have been worried if  
194 he wasn't there. I still have not hear him tell a story although I know that he's put he's entered  
195 his name in every slam.

196 My newest neighbor at the bar is a young man in his twenties who's wearing a tight black hat, a  
197 black utility jacket, skinny jeans, black side burns and stubble, and sweater with an oversized  
198 turtleneck. It must have been warm outside in the snow, but he's going to melt in here.

199 Trajano passes by again. "Did you fill it out?" "I did." "Good."

200 A group of ladies are near me now and I ask one of them if she wouldn't mind guarding my seat  
201 while I run to the bathroom. She agrees and I begin threading my way to the crowd. I drop a lot  
202 of "excuse me's" and "I'm sorry's" on my way to the ladies room. The stairwell is now crowded  
203 with audience members and I see the group of three girls that I had met at the bar discussing  
204 wine. They look cramped.

205 6:49

206 Trajano takes the microphone again, this time to tell the crowd that they only have five people  
207 signed up. "We can't do this unless we have ten people." I wonder what they would do if they  
208 didn't have the requisite ten.

209 I'm seeing lots of people with coats over their arms and I don't envy them. I'm so grateful for  
210 my seat. I'm starting to debate which of the two story possibilities that I've come up with would  
211 make the best story. I tell myself to commit to one and get it together before it's too late.

212 During my inner debate I discover a new sight line to the stage. No one move! I hope for the

213 impossible.

214 An Indian woman in her thirties walks past me. She is wearing a brightly-colored sari and a  
215 long, chunky wool scarf.

216 My sight line is gone.

217 7:00

218 It's thirty minutes to show time and Trajano again takes the microphone to remind the crowd that  
219 we need more people to sign up. My inner debate continues. I experience slight panic but am  
220 feeling fertile creative energy. I remind myself that I've told both tales before, and in a bar no  
221 less. I hope I don't get called first.

222 I look toward the entrance. Rosie has stopped letting people in. He pops out the door  
223 occasionally to say something to the stalwart hopefuls waiting in the snow. Just inside the door I  
224 see a girl in her twenties with a euro mullet. She's wearing thick-rimmed glasses, long and  
225 close-fitting black peacoat, black nylons, and tall black boots.

226 I decide which story I'll tell. I think of my first and last lines. I'll worry about the middle next.

227 Rosie steps back inside. The cold air from the open door feels good.

228 7:30

229 Trajano takes the stage. The show begins. He introduces Michelle as "my lovely co-host" and  
230 declares that "she's bringing the heat." He explains the rules and shares a few of the anonymous  
231 submissions. They include drugs, masturbation, and "interspecies erotica." The crowd laughs.  
232 Trajano asks "how many people are hear for the first time?" I can see thirty raised hands. He

233 reminds everyone that the stories must be true, saying “please don’t bullshit us, we’re from  
234 Detroit and we will kill you.” He gets a big laugh for this.

235 One by one, he calls on each of the three tables of judges. They have named themselves “Seven  
236 Deadly Sins,” “Wide Stance,” and “The Vice Presidents.” Trajano pulls out the name of the first  
237 teller. Before announcing him, he reminds the crowd that it’s very hard to be the first person and  
238 he elicits a large and welcoming applause from the audience.

239 The first teller is Bryce from Clawson, Michigan. He is a middle-aged white man. He opens by  
240 saying that his particular vice is never checking the weather before he goes outside. He goes on  
241 to describe a time when he went running on what turned out to be the coldest day of one  
242 particular Michigan winter. He was underdressed and returned home to find that not only his  
243 legs and feet, but also his genitals had turned black and blue. His story ended with the awkward  
244 and hilarious conversation he had over the telephone with an ER nurse. Trajano retakes the  
245 microphone and allows time for the judges to deliberate by reading more submissions. This time  
246 they include ‘masturbating for an hour and a half,’ ‘making her scream my name,’ and ‘car sex  
247 – it’s just not good if you don’t honk the horn at the end.’ Bryce receives an 8.1, 7.2, and 9.0  
248 from the judges for a cumulative score of 24.3.

249 The second teller was Erin, also from Clawson, Michigan. She is a Caucasian woman in her  
250 twenties. She recounts her previous job as a retail clerk at an adult toy shop and the time an  
251 elderly man came to her asking for a “beginning dildo” and then proceeded to ask she offered  
252 “services.” In the interim before her scores were delivered, Trajano read more anonymous  
253 submissions. This time they included feeding stray cats, smoking, and “picking my nose and  
254 putting it on furniture, especially when I’m at other people’s houses.” This last one got a big



255 laugh. He also mentioned that all of the merchandise was fifty percent off. Erin scored a 7.8,  
256 8.6, and 7.5 for a grand score of 23.9.

257 Teller number three was Ben from Grand Rapids, a white male in his late twenties or early  
258 thirties with blonde curly hair. Ben confessed to being the sort of guy who learns a little about  
259 something and then acts like he knows a lot about that thing. This particular vice manifested  
260 itself in his story about becoming “The Indian Guy” during a summer when he worked on an  
261 Indian Reservation and got into a scuffle at the “Indian Bar” when he thought he was  
262 successfully mixing with the locals. Trajano’s interim comments included the anonymous  
263 submissions (“wearing women’s camisoles,” singing in the shower, one-night stands, and  
264 “fucking my boyfriend, not my husband) and the announcement that February’s theme will be  
265 “Love Hurts.” Ben received scores of 7.4, 7.2, and 7.6 for a total of 23.

266 Teller number four is S’Tori from Detroit. She is a middle-aged African American woman and  
267 her first line gets a big laugh. She says, “God put two little vaginas in my feet and if you rub  
268 them long enough I will have a footgasm.” Her vice is her addiction to the foot massages that  
269 come along with getting a pedicure. She says that her addiction got so bad that she had to cut  
270 back on her other vices. She shares three of those other vices, the third of which is “weed  
271 money.” She goes on to tell the story of her visit to one of the strangest and least satisfying  
272 pedicures she’s ever had. She runs over time but is very funny and she scores a 9.4, 9.8, and 9.8.  
273 This time the interim anonymous submissions included overeating late at night and eating white  
274 cheddar popcorn.

275 Teller number five is Brent. Trajano does not announce his hometown and the gentleman – a  
276 middle-aged white man and police officer – makes a point of not revealing his precinct. His tale

277 sounds like a tall tale as he recounts a time that he and his partner responded to a call about a  
278 break-in. They arrive at the address and discover that the residents, who are absent at the time,  
279 are rich. He and his partner end up trashing the house through a series of comic and increasingly  
280 ridiculous accidents. He admits that he and his partner never owned up to their misdoings and  
281 closes by saying, “If you’re the owner of the house, I’m so sorry. If you want, meet me at the  
282 bar and I’ll buy you a drink.” The crowd laughs. He is under the time limit. And I’m impressed  
283 by the fact that despite the series of events he managed not to ramble. Trajano does not read any  
284 of the anonymous submissions while the judges deliberate. Instead, he announces that there will  
285 be a brief intermission after Brent’s scores are announced. He goes on to thank the wait staff for  
286 their hard work and remind the crowd to thank them generously. Brent scores an 8.7, 9.1, and 8.8  
287 for a total of 26.6.

288 The intermission begins. I ask a girl who is standing nearby if she will guard my chair while I  
289 run to the ladies room. She agrees and I thread my way through the crowd while a jazz rendition  
290 of gangster’s paradise rises over the din. The line for the ladies room is about six ladies deep but  
291 moving quickly so I make it back to my seat with time to spare. I thank the girl and we begin  
292 chatting. This is not her first visit to the slam. She comes to Cliff’s often. I ask her if she’s tried  
293 the macaroni and cheese. She tells me that it’s “okay” but there’s a bar nearby that does it even  
294 better. Trajano steps back to the microphone and we turn back to the stage.

295 Before calling out the next teller, Trajano asks how many people are Facebook fans of the Moth  
296 Detroit. Many hands go up. He states that this afternoon, his WDET co-worker put a picture on  
297 the page of the two main actors from Miami Vice. She made him promise that if enough people  
298 “liked” the image he would wear a white suit jacket à la Miami Vice. As it turns out, there were  
299 over 80 “likes” when they left the office this afternoon. Alex produces the white jacket and puts

300 in on amid loud applause.

301 Teller number six is Steve from Detroit. He is a white man slightly past middle age. He says  
302 that his vice is telling really bad jokes, a fault which he claims is particularly hard on his wife  
303 who is here with him and who has been forced to listen to these jokes for decades now. He  
304 proceeds to tell three dirty jokes. This is not a story, nor is it true. I wonder if he has somehow  
305 missed the objective. People in the audience begin looking at one another in confusion. The  
306 whistle sends him off the stage. Trajano reads more anonymous submissions. They include  
307 “looking at my poop” and “hoarding things.” He goes on to mention a show on A&E about  
308 hoarders, asking how many people also enjoy the program. There are cheers. Steve’s scores are  
309 announced. He receives a 7.1, 7.0, and 6.9 for a total of 21.

310 Teller number seven is Bill from Detroit. I have met Bill and heard him tell at previous slams.  
311 He is a middle-aged white man. He tells a story about himself as a young social work major at  
312 Michigan State University in the 70s. It’s a funny tale about his obsession with finding R.A.I.N.  
313 – an acronym that stands for R\_\_A\_\_I\_\_Nymphomaniac (can’t quite make this out in my notes,  
314 must ask Bill). He is cut off by two whistle blows even though he has spoken quickly  
315 throughout his tale. He strikes me as rehearsed. Alex reads a few more submissions along the  
316 same lines (food and sex) and the crowd groans delightedly. He points it back at them saying,  
317 “This is you guys, you own this.” When his scores are announced I can only hear two numbers –  
318 8.1 and 8.5 – and I can no longer see the scoreboard.

319 Teller number eight is Maggie from Ferndale. She is a middle-aged white lady and travel writer  
320 whose vice is an eagerness to travel anywhere as long as she’s never been there. She tells a story  
321 about her time at a survival school on a remote island. She is forced off the stage by the whistle.

322 A young man approaches me at the bar and starts trying to engage me in conversation. This is  
323 frustrating because I can tell he's trying to hit on me and he is just intoxicated enough not to pick  
324 up on the fact that I'm not interested. I pointedly look away from him toward the stage and catch  
325 Maggie's scores – 7.7, 7.3, 8.0. I missed the anonymous submissions, a fact which annoys me  
326 because they are sometimes more entertaining than the stories themselves. He's not getting the  
327 point. I tell him that, "I don't want to be rude but I am here to work so if you don't mind." I'm  
328 freed from him when his buddy spots a place to stand and ushers him away. Thank goodness.

329 John from Holt is teller number nine. I am delighted. He is one of the first people that I met  
330 when I first came to the slam in September. He wasn't called up that evening, but he has been to  
331 every Detroit slam since. In November he told me that he's started going regularly to the slam in  
332 Chicago as well. When Trajano calls him up the stage he announces that John was last month's  
333 winner. I am even more delighted now, and disappointed that I wasn't able to make it last  
334 month. John's begins his story. It begins on a funny note, but soon takes a dark turn. He tells  
335 about a time he picked up a prostitute. He recounts their time together and it is shockingly  
336 tender. The club is now so quiet that I can hear the people next to me breath. Tragically, John  
337 learns a few weeks later that the young woman was murdered. He recounts his feelings when he  
338 read that headline, the way that it made him feel "dirty" for the first time as he wondered if it  
339 was his money that kept her out on the streets. He exits the stage to thunderous applause.  
340 Trajano retakes the microphone saying, "What do you say after that?" More applause. Trajano  
341 lightens the mood by reading a few more submissions, including a confession that someone  
342 "can't stop watching The Real Housewives." John's scores are given, he receives a 9.6, 9.9., and  
343 9.6 for a total of 29.2. I'll have to check back in my notes, but I think that's the best score I've  
344 ever witnessed. Certainly the best story. This will make John a double winner.

345 Teller number ten Joseph, a 25-year-old white male from Royal Oak and he is drunk. His words  
346 are unclear and he doesn't seem to be following a plot. He's trying to recount the time he made  
347 out with a girl in college. He says that he was just excited to get a kiss, that that's all you're  
348 worried about when you're eighteen and I hear a few people nearby disagree. The whistle pulls  
349 him off the stage and I'm relieved for him. I settle my tab while the judges deliberate.

350 Trajano calls all of the tellers up to the stage as well as everyone who entered and was not  
351 selected. These people are asked to step to the microphone, "rapid fire", and say the first line of  
352 their stories. I am the first to go. There are about five others. I say hello to Bill and John who  
353 are standing near me on the stage. John is officially declared the winner. After his applause I  
354 walk back with him to his table. He is approached by well wishers and I realize that this is not  
355 going to be a good time to ask him about his experience. I congratulate him and ask him if it  
356 would be all right if I asked him a few questions about his story. He agrees enthusiastically and  
357 gives me his e-mail address.

358 10:50

359 I leave John at his table and turn to see that the club is almost entirely emptied in the ten 20  
360 minutes since I went up to the stage. I don't see any more of the tellers. I head back to the stage  
361 to congratulate Alex on another great show. He says he's sorry that we didn't get to hear my  
362 story. I thank him, tell him that I'll see him next time, and make my way for the door. I want to  
363 walk back to my car while there are still other people from the club doing the same.

364 I walk out into the night and there are still a few flurries falling. I am about ten feet from the  
365 club door, with one block to go until I reach my car, when I am approached by a tall African  
366 American man. He is missing some teeth and wearing a knit cap and athletic jacket, not enough

367 clothing for this night. He holds out his hand and asks me for money. I feel bad for him but I'm  
368 not about to stop and open my purse when walking to my car alone at eleven o'clock at night in  
369 Detroit. If nothing happened to me my mother would shoot me herself.

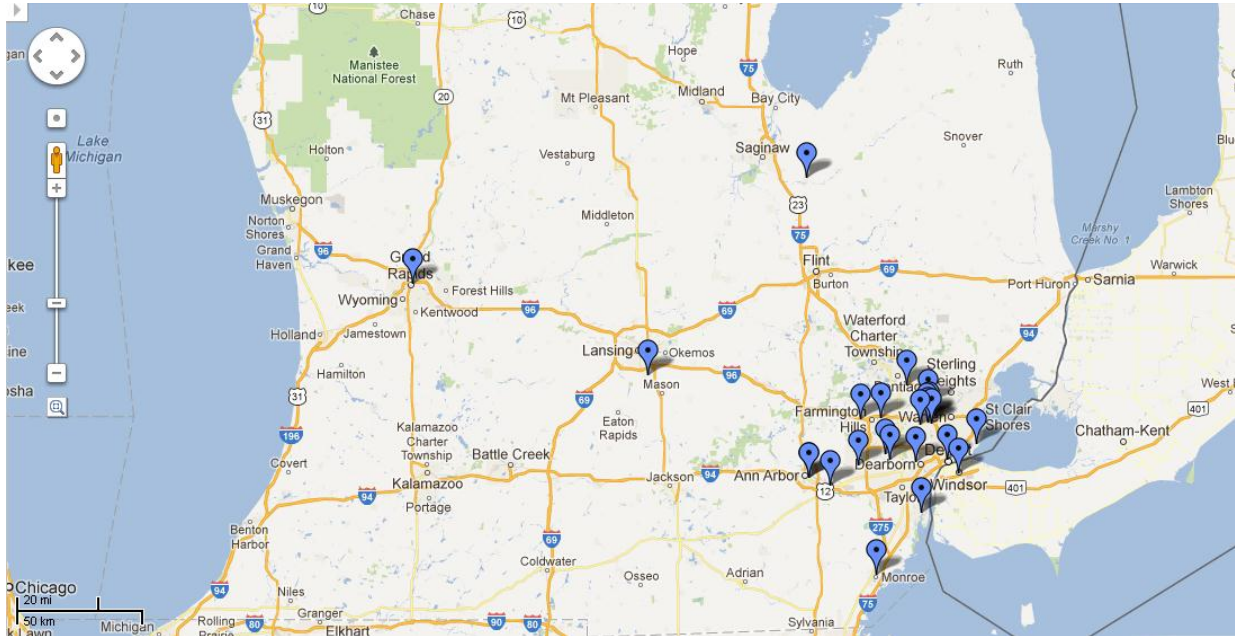
370 So I lie. "Sorry, no cash." And I keep walking. I speed up so that I'm right behind a group of  
371 three – one man and two ladies – who are heading in the same direction. Another man  
372 approaches them asking for money. The man from the group of three deflects him. I get to my  
373 car. There are at least two inches of snow on it. I grab the ice scraper and dust off my  
374 windshields.

375 In two minutes I am back in my locked car and heading south on 75. In twenty-five minutes I am  
376 back at my childhood home

# Appendix E

## Provenance of Slam Participants

### Southern Portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula



© 2011 Google Map data © 2011 Google

## VITA

CATHERINE J. JANSSEN

- Personal Data:                   Date of Birth: February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1985  
Place of Birth: Saratoga Springs, New York
- Education:                        B.A.s English, French Language, Albion College, Albion,  
  Michigan, 2007, *summa cum laude*  
M.A. Reading with Concentration in Storytelling, East Tennessee  
  State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2012
- Professional Experience:        Assistante de Langue, Lycée Jay de Beaufort, Périgueux, France,  
  2007-2008  
Substitute Teacher, Milwaukee Public Schools, 2008-2009  
Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, Cancer  
  Stories Project, 2009-2011  
Module Development Coordinator, The Cancer Stories Project,  
  East Tennessee State University, Quillen College of  
  Medicine, 2011-2012  
Workshop Facilitator, Rural Health Professions Institute, Mountain  
  Home Veterans Affairs, 2010-2012
- Professional Presentations:    *Emergent Forms of Storytelling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*: Panelist,  
  American Folklore Society, Annual Conference, 2011  
*Storytelling in Health and Medicine*: Panelist, The Society for Arts  
  in Healthcare, Annual Conference, 2012
- Honors and Awards:             English Departmental Honors, Albion College, 2007  
John Hart Award for Excellence in Literary Study, Albion College,  
  2007