

SEA OF VERSES

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- *Black poetry as a revolutionary act* •

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses social relations between poetry slams and cultural rap circles in Rio de Janeiro and seeks both to understand their roots and also establish possible connections. In addition, it discusses the elements of negritude that permeate the discourse of poets and MCs (rappers) who participate in these activities. Through the heritage of hip-hop culture, participants seek to draw attention to alarming social inequalities in Brazil, in particular racial inequality. Poetic activism and political identity are strengthened through verse. The slams and the cultural rap circles are events that claim, above all, affirmation of black culture in the discursive universe of Brazilian society.

KEYWORDS

Slam | Hip-Hop | Rap | Negritude | Poetic Activism

"The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence"
(Bakhtin)

1 • Introduction

Protests within rhymes, poems and performances, express voices that will not be silenced. Over the past decade, many in Brazil have watched the rise of an event that takes young people to the streets to protest through poetry and to share experiences with diverse social effects. Resounding verses and strong metres lead us to rethink the conditions of our reality and to question our democratic value, or rather, that which we consider to be democracy. Proponents of this lyrical form of protest are the individuals who most suffer from social inequality in the country, i.e., black people. I have observed that the most commonly recurring themes in verses are violence, criticism of institutional policy and racism. These are dealt with by nearly all the poets.

I am referring to poetry slam, a poetry battle that involves performance art and an intellectual impetus. Slam often speaks directly with the constituting elements of black music, more specifically with rap, in that hip-hop culture is also strengthened by notable social, cultural, political and artistic aspects. Poetry slam, like other urban, peripheral interventions that explore poetry, forms a counter-narrative to the hegemonic, elitist and eurocentric model that has historically defined poetic and literary parameters in Brazil. Participants and organisers place the issue of race at the centre of their verses, encouraging discussion on black human rights and make the anti-racist struggle emblematic, favouring direct, continuous action with regards to social and political change.

Despite slam having been organised in the 1980s by the poet Marc Kelly Smith in a white, working class community in southeast Chicago,¹ decades later in Brazil it was heavily enriched with components of black origin. According to references, the slam emerged in parallel with the formation of the hip-hop culture in the United States. However, slam and hip-hop came to Brazil at different times, which is why I discuss the influence of hip-hop culture, specifically rap, on the social players who currently organise and participate in slams.

Slam became a legitimate space in which individuals seek to talk about, reflect on and listen to stories that transmit narratives and perspectives that drive a broad political struggle through affirmations of identity. Poets use verse as a resistance strategy, claiming and representing their world visions. They perceive themselves as subjects and act on their own images according to their interests, which they understand as agency. They retell stories and strip back stereotypes, so that African and Afro-Brazilian culture, once denied, becomes a highly relevant political act that challenges and transcends the objectification of racial existence. Many black poets, working along the lines of what was called Black Experimental Theatre of Abdias Nascimento² in the 1940s, discovered a vilified opposition through the essentialisation of their phenotype traces, which negated their humanity. Through this they found alternative means and consolidated strategic movements to confront this imposed damnation.

In the words of Fanon, “it is the white man who creates the Negro, but it is the negro who creates negritude”.³ Consequently, slam became a space that claims and affirms black culture in the discursive universe of Brazilian society. It is where black poets expose their perceptions and notions of racial discrimination, through verse, telling their personal experiences in rhyme.

Between November 2016 and June 2018, I participated in four slams and five cultural rap circles, as part of my fieldwork. I decided to explore different areas of the city of Rio de Janeiro in its metropolitan region, investigating these two types of event with the aim of drawing parallels and similarities and confirming some presupposed theories. Among them, I sought to understand what the relationship was between cultural rap circles and slams, how they developed and what their significance is to the black people who participate in them. These are the points that I examine in this text. I carried out six open exploratory interviews and spoke with six different spokespersons – among them long-standing MCs and poets, who participate in and organise literary gatherings, slams and cultural circles in Rio.

I used elements that I wrote about based on my observer participation in the events.⁴ It is crucial to highlight that all the data obtained are included in the partial results of the study “Literary Territories: new technology, reading practices and sharing in contemporary life,” carried out by the Centre for Applied Social Studies (CESAP),⁵ coordinated by Doctoral Professor, Maria Isabel Mendes de Almeida.

2 • Ethnographic notes: the political dimensions of the poetry slam and some correlations

One factor that deserves attention is my political, emotional and historical (*habitus*) link with rap and consequently with poetry. As the author of this article, my life path has been deeply interconnected with hip-hop culture. In addition, I am responsible for the production and organisation of a number of cultural events that are connected with both slam and rhyme circles, charting strategies for fighting racism. I believe that “being silent gives the impression that one neither judges nor wants anything, in some cases not wanting anything is true.”⁶ Classic anthropology failed in its narrative and political omission regarding its position on the political issues surrounding experience in the field. If anthropology is a discipline of dialogue, in which ethnography is the privileged moment of describing a conversation, I see it as crucial to expose my personal proximity to the theme in question in this article.⁷

Once I had been affected by the power of rap’s political and revolutionary verses, which express social reality and its consequences in the lives of black people, I committed myself to introducing new types of poetry events, the impact of which would be capable of modifying people’s personal stories.

Slam is like an MC battle, without music or a beat, which appeared in Brazil as a divergence from the rhyme circle. It has become a specific field of performance, which

is neither seen in terms of rap nor of rap battles, and therefore constitutes a different genre of speech. However, an element of confrontation is present in MC battles and in the slams. This principle finds its place in the antiphon, in competitive poems and in competitions of sung poetry, linked to the political game expressed by participants. The two kinds of events are run in different ways, but they both follow underlying premises and rules and are adapted to demands of the organisers.

Before the slam starts, there is usually a warm-up between the poets who will compete for the “prize”. Positioned in circles, they throw rhymes to each other. To some extent, this eases the anxiety caused by the competition. Next, a small team of judges is selected from the audience, and then the slammers sign up. The poem must be recited within three minutes – points are lost if the competitor goes over time – and it must always be the slammer’s own work. Verses can be read from a sheet of paper or from mobile phone screens. However, most of the poets prefer to memorise the verses, which appears to have more impact on the public. The use of scenery or sound accompaniment, such as requesting the audience to clap hands or use instruments, for example, is not allowed. As a rule, there are three phases: general selection, from which five poets go through to the semi-final; the semi-final, from which three poets classify for the final, in which the champion of the slam is revealed.⁸

The slam has a sense of playfulness within which political responsibility is established through words. The competition, I noticed, informs a range of performance acts. One of these perceived acts is the quality of play in the poetry. The apparent competitive nature points to a dispute, but also expresses that this is not the central reason for the poets who are there. There is also a kind of competition that is unconnected to the prize. I understood this to be poetic activism. Within this logic, the competition appears merely as a pretext to improve the quality of the writing and its wittiness.

There is also freedom in the slams to take into consideration local peculiarities and backgrounds, or rather, “social situations”.⁹ Although there are general rules, the events function in their own way, meeting demands and specific themes so that “the slam practice becomes organic and not rigid and limiting.”¹⁰ From this perspective, the slams I watched expressed constitutive elements of rap, with some interconnected components.

At one of the events, “High School Resists: Slam and Poetry Festival on Police Violence,” in March 2017, hosted by the Rio de Janeiro state Association of High School Students (AERJ), the slam had a theme. In the description of the event on social media, I noticed that the theme was thought of because of the constant police violence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro state.¹¹ The organisers of the slam thought of an urgent demand that needed to be discussed or talked about in poems; it was a theme being debated in the media that was shaping public life and affecting these individuals. But the alternatives given by the state government for the issue, according to the organisers, were flawed and did not appeal to them. In response, the event would increase awareness on the theme, taking into account different points of view, above all those of black people, who suffer most oppression at the

hands of the Military Police. A strategy can be seen here, for fighting against necropolitics, which in short means the power to dictate who should live and who should die. It operates according to racial criteria to regulate and distribute death and makes the state's function as a murderer possible.¹²

In a different way, the cultural rap circles, which are an artistic production of the hip-hop culture, are movements of resistance that manage to unite different people through cultural representations. For example, the aesthetic of graffiti in the streets and squares, breaking with normal standards in cities; the MCs who through music shout about the need for the oppressed to have self-esteem; action and political protest in corporeal expression in breakdance; and DJs who put together artistic sets, mixing beats, rhythms and tunes. Through these and other influences, most of the people I interviewed stressed the importance of the traditional *batalhas de sangue* (blood battles) and *batalhas de conhecimento* (knowledge battles) – also known as *batalhas de freestyle* (freestyle battles) – which happen in the cultural circles. In the interviews, people also stressed how participation in *batalhas de conhecimento* allowed them to use a wide range of vocabulary and vocal techniques. This enhanced the “quality” of their poems in the slams, leading to a kind of lyrical cycle of feedback.¹³

The type of slam that happened at AERJ reminded me of the *batalha do conhecimento*, made popular by MC Marechal, an important name in hip-hop in Rio de Janeiro. The aim is to value the content of the rhymes in rap battles and tackle specific, controversial themes that cause an impact on society. MCs have to be up-to-date on a number of themes and to deepen their understanding of these themes, as well as being politically responsible in their rhymes. These are the keys to an MC's hegemony in the hip-hop world. Unlike the slam, however, the themes are randomly selected at the time of the battle, by the organisation or by the public who are there. The MCs are also selected randomly. Then, they start the dispute to see who performs best on the subject in question and who will go through to the next phases.

Consequently, this battle is different from the famous *batalha de sangue*, which is well-known and is more common in the daily life of MCs. This is a different kind of battle and has essentially different objectives, such as criticising the adversary through rhyme, with the aim of humiliating and, in this way, going through to the next phase. It was noted that in these battles an understanding of historical and social issues does not play an important role. In fact, the public's attention is drawn to creativity in name-calling or “dissing” the opponent, in response to a freestyle attack.¹⁴ However, this does not mean that victory in these battles is unfair. Instead, “the criteria for classification are based more on emotional response than on technical evaluation. The flow, ‘rare rhym’ and metre are favoured as well as non-poetic criteria such as a pleasant personality, a sense of belonging, tone of voice, insults, among others.”¹⁵

From these examples, it is possible to discern some elements of rap that are present in slams and to draw some correlations, for example cultural and political resistance. This role, attributed to rap, is initially justified by the type of reflection it brought to the underprivileged areas of Sao Paulo in the 1990s. As well as through the relationship between hip-hop and

African ethnic awareness and the problems that arose in the *favelas* as a result of a process of self-knowledge and recovery of self-esteem. This process was driven by contact with the music and history of the black North American diaspora. In this sense, slam is a practice that can be understood as a continuum. As indicated above, when talking to people at the two events, I noticed that many of the people who go to slams were involved in hip-hop culture or had been “formed” by it in the cultural circles.

When we look at the poems that appear and are recorded at slams, we note crucial elements of rap: referential poetry; the use of metalanguage and metaphorical meaning in the writing. The poems are rich in figurative meaning. Metres are quite close, seeking to express feelings metaphorically through irony and satire. References are fundamental to gaining prestige. The poet is considered to have appropriated content when s/he cites historical, revolutionary events and films. In addition, this content further consolidates their role as an interpreter who is seeking to revive roots of identity and deconstruct expressions that lower the self-esteem of the group in question. These elements are evident in this sung poem by Andréa Bak, presented at “*Slam resistência + Slam Grito Filmes*”:

On a vast horizon, I see vestiges of a past that does not hide away
 I look to the apartment blocks of Leblon and I see the heirs of the masters' households
 I look to Vidigal I see the heirs of the slave quarters
 they have always carried their swords with great resistance though
 There were five million people, five million of us were brought by force
 They denigrated our colour, threw our culture and our identity to the noose
 “Hammer his teeth”, “throw boiling water in her ear”
 With every act of torture she gained more strength
 Now, go to Church, your *Orixá* doesn't exist
 But with every sigh, she resists
 “She tried to run away, tried to escape, didn't she? Six more whiplashes for her”
 Quick, swallow your sobs, join the struggle Dandara!
 We built *quilombos*, long live Zumbi!
 Revolts and rebellions, they tried to oppress us
 We were ninety percent of the population
 Imagine how beautiful that was, all those smiles of black people?
 Black, we slay even in our name
 I don't know if you know, but resistance is our second name
 My heroes weren't turned into statues
 They died fighting against those who came
 And with every rhyming verse, I hope the message gets across
 Black people are getting it together
 Black is in power, black is ascending
 Did I say that we're slaying it? So proud of my brothers
 Yes, there are going to be more black people in the universities
 than at the police station

What are you waiting for little black girl? Grab your doctor's coat
and leave the washing-up
Do like that guy, André Rebouças
That's right, he isn't just the name of a tunnel
Black, abolitionist, engineer, astronomer
They don't tell us that at school
Because they don't want to accept that we're in charge.¹⁶

3 • The power of verse

Participants in this and in other poems represent the resistance through verses that symbolise the periphery and the positive role of black people in constructing Brazilian history. These are practices of discourse that demand a cultural, social and political space that strengthens the legitimacy of this discourse. As seen, in both Bak's verses and in the poems of other competitors, "the poet in possession of his/her own personal history uses it as an exercise of socialisation of experience, transforming individual experience into collective experience, in a continuous play of interaction."¹⁷

According to Matheus de Araújo, a poet who was at most of the slams I went to and who recently published a book of poetry called "Maré Cheia" (2017),¹⁸ slam has been revolutionary in the *favelas*, which he perceives as positive. The poet, body and voice produce what he calls "intimate revolutionary acts", because they break barriers indirectly. In the words of Matheus, slam educates people and makes them reflect, generating radical, long-term change.

This astute investment is a reinvention of urban space and is a break from the elitism of art, demystifying the issues surrounding artistic production, without any restriction on those participating and with responsibility in the transformation of territories. Slam is here to spread culture and to encourage the search for knowledge with the purpose of raising awareness. It presents issues that were previously only accessible in a more educational setting. Therefore, most of the poets insist on this space producing what they describe as marginal poetry or marginal literature, a form of expressing the day-to-day life of people living in underprivileged, marginalised areas of cities. This meaning "is linked to the intellectual project of the writer to re-interpret the conditions of oppressed groups of people, seeking to portray them and represent them in texts, which include their experiences."¹⁹

However, it is important to note that the concept of marginal poetry is controversial. The poet, Cizinho Afreeca, member of the Negro Denegrir collective and organiser of the black poetry event called "Griotagem", who recently published the book "Desakato Lírico",²⁰ says that according to the perspective of the writer and black literature expert, Cut, the concept of marginal does not specifically refer to the black population, which is why it is important to question and re-evaluate it.

These concepts fall within the field of political debate, as “concept is a possibility for creation that intervenes in a way that can either change or stagnate the world.”²¹ With this in mind, a number of black poets prefer to use the concept of Brazilian black literature or black poetry,²² in an attempt to intervene in the world from a place of black agency.

It is important to stress that when we speak about black agency we are taking a perspective that perceives black people as subjects of a phenomena, acting on their own image and according to their own human interests, speaking about their own experiences. We can interpret agency as devices and resources that seek to recover the sanity of the black population, as an interpretative key to “reorientate and recentre, so that a person can act as an agent and not as a victim or a dependent.”²³

4 • Final considerations

One of the principal characteristics illustrated in this study is the political responsibility that both slam and cultural rhyme circles have and the relationship between them. These two events express particular demands, the axis of which is collective production. They both present resistance through poetry. Each of them, in their own way, builds bridges and guidelines that defend and affirm social rights. Therefore, I defend the point of view that the majority of poets and organisers were initially greatly influenced by hip-hop culture. When slam emerged, they directed their demands to other channels, but remained alert to the principal factor: the consolidation of the rights of the black population and questioning the values of the colonial domination that still appears in contemporary life. The interviews and dialogues held with organisers and participants of both kinds of event showed that, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, there is a symbiosis between hip-hop culture and slam, in that it is impossible to disassociate certain elements and in that they adapt to each other.

These events have become collective productions that feed into an understanding produced by the people in this specific environment. It is not merely a question of a competition. The people who seek out these events think about how other people will act and the opinion they will have of the reading that is being shared and of their writing and their verses. The poets already present very specific performances and issue diacritic signs. This offers a sense of value and meaning and places the performance and how it is presented in context, thus establishing coded interplay between the artist and the audience.

The search for access to democracy that appears in words and lyrics has enriched the artistic scene in recent years. It has made the desecralisation of poetry possible and we can say it has strengthened other genres: black and marginal poetry. Nonetheless, participants move between the two types of event. They recognise the formation exercised through words in national rap, learning components and devices for poetic competitions and through their identification and through what they say, hear, feel and reflect upon. In this way, space for dialogue is created, in which the artist’s performance is highly relevant.

Cultural rap circles are aimed at turning poetry into music that is born out of metre, reminding us of medieval troubadours (there is a reason why rap means “rhythm and poetry”) or of lending a musicality to poetry. Slam, meanwhile, stems from recital. In slam the word is the priority and intervention is centred around it through rhythm. In the MCs’ battles, the combination of the beat and the word is fundamental. In slam the word itself is central. The aim is to string words together in a continuous discourse of content, in which the different metres and rhythms form a place for a more profound poetic narrative. In other words, it seeks to give poetry to the narrative of their experiences. Participants and those who construct slam, appropriate poetry within the quality of act/genre of speech. Slang, accent and innate categories are the elements that transform common speech into the genre of speech/code of identity, in which the context at the time of the act of speaking is more significant than the words themselves.

It is a fact, particularly important today, that those who participate in slam aim to diminish the low self-esteem that is exacerbated by routine experiences of racism. Therefore, through the events, they reconstruct an urban space, re-writing understanding, recognising cultural identities and questioning representations imposed on “others”. They also make the streets into a space for cultural criticism and for the production of new understanding. This turns the events into a place of criticism of the social injustice that exists in racism, in inequality, in police violence and in the violation of human rights.

NOTES

1 • Marc Kelly Smith, *Stage a Poetry Slam* (Napperville: Soucerbooks MediaFusion, 2009).

2 • See: “Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN),” Enciclopédia Itaú Cultural, 16 August 2016, accessed November 30, 2018, <http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/grupo399330/teatro-experimental-do-negro>.

3 • Read: Deivison Mendes Faustino, *Frantz Fanon: Um Revolucionário, Particularmente Negro* (São Paulo: Ciclo Contínuo Editorial, 2018).

4 • The slams observed were: “Secunda Resiste: Slam e Festival de Poesia sobre Violência Policial”; “Slam Trindade - 2ª Edição”; “Slam Grito Filmes + Slam Resistência”; “Slam Vila Isabel - 4ª edição”. While the cultural circles were: “Roda Cultural do Jardim Catarina” (Batalha da Lona); “Roda Cultural do Alcântara” (Batalha RCA); “Festival de Rap São Gonçalo”; “Roda Cultural de Vila Isabel”; “Roda

Cultural de Campo Grande” (Batalha dos 50CENTS). In the case of the cultural circles, all the rhyme battles were carried out within the style known as “batalha de sangue”.

5 • The interviews are available on the CESAP database. In addition, the people interviewed and quoted provided authorisation for the use of their names and stage names. The interviewees were black, as I sought to give visibility to these poets. For further information access: “Pesquisas,” Centro de Estudos Sociais Aplicados, 2018, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://cesap-ucam.com.br/pesquisas>.

6 • Albert Camus, *O Homem Revoltado*, 9ª ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2011): 26.

7 • Based on a perspective developed by Teresa Pires do Rio Caldeira, “A Presença do Autor e a Pós-Modernidade em Antropologia,” *Novos Estudos*

CEBRAP 21 (1988), accessed December 7, 2018, <http://novosestudios.uol.com.br/produto/edicao-21/#58dad2c2d70ed>. Caldeira states that any field research is, above all else, an interaction between two or more particular people at a single moment in time, given the cultural condition. Therefore, we must consider that the data we are going to produce represents partial, fragmented and inter-subjective results between the researcher and the group analysed at a certain time.

8 • The jury is chosen at the time of the event, and is known as a popular jury. People who are competing cannot be on the jury. Points are given based on criteria such as: theme, words, rhythm, fluency in reciting and interpretation. A different poem must be recited in each phase. If there is a tie in a phase other than the final, in principle, all the slammers who got the most points, go through to the next phase. If there is a tie in the final, new poems are recited in a tie-breaker.

9 • See the concept and discussion on social situation in the work of Max Glukman, *Análise de Uma Situação Social na Zululândia Moderna* (São Paulo: Editora Global Universitária, 1987): 227-344.

10 • Roberta Estrela D'alva, "Um Microfone na Mão e Uma Ideia na Cabeça: O Poetry Slam Entra em Cena," *Revista Synergies Brasil* no. 9 (2011), accessed December 7, 2018, <http://gerflint.fr/Base/Bresil9/estrela.pdf>.

11 • Through the Amnesty International campaign "You killed my son", it was reported that 25% of murders in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro in 2017 were committed by the police. The majority of those executed were young, black and male ("25% of Murders in the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro in 2017 were Committed by the Police," Amnesty International, 18 January 2018, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://anistia.org.br/noticias/25-dos-assassinatos-rio-de-janeiro-em-2017-foram-cometidos-pela-policia/>).

12 • For a broader discussion, see: Achille Mbembe, "Necropolítica," *Arte & Ensaios, Revista do PPGAV/ EBAUFRJ*, no. 32 (2016), accessed December 7,

2018, <https://revistas.ufrj.br/index.php/ae/article/view/8993/7169>.

13 • Although the two types of battle are different, in both of them the MCs develop their flows, fitting their verses into the beats generated by the DJs, to improvised rhythms, within a limited time. Each one, in their own way, explores the versatility of the flow. Someone who synchronises voice with beat, in a meter between the words and the diction in the tune, stands out. The beat or base, played seconds before the MC rhymes, is sometimes changed from one MC to another, and verses are adapted on the spot. These battles sometimes take place without a beat, which is known as a cappella. I was able to see this several times in the Jardim Catarina Cultural Circle (*Batalha da Lona*), on 20 August 2017.

14 • However, in recent years, I have noticed in my observations and participation in these events that the rhymes have evolved. As the struggle of the social movements becomes stronger and as valuing and mobilising political identities reaches the *favelas*, as well as increased self-affirmation of black identity, mostly through aesthetics, more is expected of the rhymes. So much so that DJs and organisers warn participants not to present racist, sexist or homophobic material, before the start of this type of battle. When they ignore these warnings, MCs are heckled and disqualified by the public. It is important to mention that there are two classic styles of battle in this category: the traditional style and back and forth (*bate-volta*). For further information: Christian, "Tudo Sobre Batalha de Mcs." *Be Rap*, 12 January 2018, accessed January 16, 2018, <https://berap.com.br/blog/tudo-sobre-batalha-de-mcs>.

15 • See Rôssi Alves, *Rio de Rimas* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2013): 25-34.

16 • Poetry recorded and made available at "Slam Grito Filmes + Slam Resistência 'Andréa Bak', YouTube video, 3:31, posted by Grito Filmes, 20 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghJ1urfvFUM>. This slam was in Praça Mauá, in Rio de Janeiro, on 18 September 2017.

17 • D'alva, "Um Microfone na Mão e Uma Ideia na Cabeça," 124.

18 • Matheus de Araújo, *Maré Cheia* (Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2017): 176.

19 • Érica Peçanha do Nascimento, "Literatura Marginal: Os Escritores da Periferia Entram em Cena," Master thesis (University of São Paulo, 2006): 11-12.

20 • Cizinho Afreka, *Desakato Lírico* (São Paulo:

Ciclo Contínuo Editorial, 2017).

21 • Fernando Santos de Jesus, *O Negro no Livro Paradidático* (Rio de Janeiro: Gramma, 2017).

22 • For a broader discussion, see: Cuti, *Literatura Negro-brasileira* (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2010): 151.

23 • See: Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Philadelphia: Afrocentricity International, 2014): 94.



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