

**“We Gon’ Fight, Emmett”:  
Gesture, Performance, and Transmediation in Black Resistance Youth Slam Poetry**

When I teach slam or spoken word poetry in my freshman composition classes—slam being the competitive form of spoken word—my students don’t often stop to explicitly acknowledge the inherent multimodality of the genre. They are drawn to aspects of it, to be sure; but they don’t know that until I give them the language for it. The New London Group argues for an integration of multimodality in our classrooms, positing that “new communications media are reshaping the way we use language” and that “[w]hen technologies of meaning are changing so rapidly, there cannot be one set of standards or skills that constitute the ends of literacy learning, however taught” (64). While I agree that there is certainly not one standard for understanding all of the modes that go into slam, I do believe that they deserve more attention. Without its multimodal elements, slam would cease to be slam; thus, I make a point—in my classroom and this paper—to detail how aspects such as sound and gesture enhance slam at a genre level.

In this paper, I utilize gesture and performance theory to analyze the interconnectedness of speech and gesture, and how the two work in tandem to create more powerful, dynamic pieces, especially in Black youth resistance poems. I specifically examine the work from Philadelphia’s youth team—the 2015 Brave New Voices champions—and the ways that their gestures bring their transmediated poem about Emmett Till to life in a multimodal, embodied way. It is my contention that youth poets utilize gesture often and deliberately, and thus create more efficacy in their attempt to bring the audience into their narratives.

Ultimately, I conclude that if I am right in my argument that gesture brings the audience into the performer’s storyworld, youth poets perform even more affectedly as a way to be heard, especially when it comes to resistance. Slam is a platform to legitimize people’s stories; as such, it makes sense that kids are demanding a space to make themselves visible—both on our stages and in our narratives.