

Danez Smith on poems as conversations



February 7, 2017 - Danez Smith is a Black, queer, poz writer and performer from St. Paul, MN. They are the author of *Don't Call Us Dead* (Graywolf Press, 2017) and *[insert] boy* (YesYes Books, 2014). They are also the author of two chapbooks, *black movie* (2015, Button Poetry) and *hands on your knees* (2013, Penmanship Books). Smith is the recipient of fellowships from the Poetry Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and is a 2017 National Endowment for the Arts Fellow.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2342 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#).

When you write a poem do you think about it in the context of eventually being performed, or do you write poetry for the page and then you bring it to life separately?

I think that a poem is a poem, and it's my job to make it. That's it. That's the end of it. Everybody should think about the performance of their poems. I don't see that as a spectacular thought to have as a poet. I think poetry has long been an auditory art and writing poetry strictly for the page is actually the newer idea. The job is to make the poem the poem and to make it have a life whether it's on the page or being performed. Point blank. Period.

Are there poems you choose not to read live, that you think don't work necessarily in a live setting? Or do you think all of them can work in that way if you put the work into it?

Anything can. You can have a stranger performance if you want to, and do work that maybe doesn't lend itself to performance quite as well. I think every poem can be figured out. The only question about performing is you only have one time through... The audience can read a poem over and over again, but if they're just going to experience a poem one time out loud I need to think: What experience do I have to provide for the audience and how much information am I okay with them missing from the poem in just being able to hear it from my mouth one time through? Those are the kind of questions that I ask myself when I'm considering what to read.

Your next book is called *Don't Call Us Dead*. It's done, but not out for a bit. What's it like finishing a book and then having to sit around for six months before it comes out? Or do you move onto the next thing and are not really thinking about it?

The book has been done for over a year now. Yeah, I think you're just always making the work. I don't really read a lot of those poems at readings anymore just because when the book comes out I'm assuming that I'll have to read from there a little more. I want the poems to feel new again.

You know, when the book was done, it was just time to make the next thing and time to keep on working on poems. For me, the book as an object is very different than the act of poem making. Once you have the poems, and you make the book, it doesn't stop the creation of the new work that will breathe into whatever project comes next.

I've watched you on YouTube doing readings. You often have a large audience, which is something that doesn't happen with all kinds of poetry.

Spoken word as a whole draws audiences. I think when you put the care into the audience experience, people come. There's a reason more people come to your local poetry slam than your well-funded local MFA reading. It's because MFA readings are boring. I'm not a fan of having to sit through an hour of what I know is going to be bad readers. If that's what it is, I'm not going to show up to that.

If I know I'm going to go some place for an hour and see people that give life to the reading of the work then I'm going to go. I want to have a good ass time, maybe. Sometimes not.

I came up in spoken word and slam. I don't consider myself a slam poet now, but I'm grateful to that particular game and community for being my first poetry community. Still, some of them are like the realest and best poets I know. I think those lines nowadays are getting more and more blurred; they used to be more divided, even 10 years ago.

I don't consider myself that spectacular of a performer. There are people out here doing like really weird, funky shit with their performances that are *really* turning out performances and reaching into the surreal and into the psychedelic and into the strange.

I just care about reading my poems out loud and trying not to have people go to sleep while I'm doing that. I think maybe I question even what we consider to be performance within the realm of poetry—if that is giving a little oomph or a little care into how you pronounce those words and to not be monotone and to not being one note.

I think about avery r. young, who is somebody who sings his poems and who is a phenomenal performer. I think about some of the stuff that I've seen Franny Choi do or LaTasha Diggs. There are people who are doing really cool stuff with performing. I'm not doing shit. I'm really not doing shit that interesting. I'm loud and I took a couple acting classes. I can sound like a human.

Did you take acting classes because you wanted to be an actor or did you take acting classes thinking it would help with the presentation of your writing?

I came to poetry through acting. Really, in like 9th grade. I was doing local theater, little stuff. Whatever you do at 14 and call "doing theater." In my high school, founded by the great Jan Mandell, was this thing called the Black Box which was a social justice theater program. Very much based off the teachings of Augusto Boal, folks like that.

All the plays that came out of the Black Box were written and performed by the students that were part of that class. We were teenagers, high schoolers, really figuring out what was important enough for us to say on a stage. Really some of the first poems I wrote were these things that I thought were monologues until we had some poets come through our schools and until we saw what was happening on Death Poetry. That started up around that time where we were like, "Oh, shit. We've been making poems and didn't even know it."

Poetry was a thing I started to do then but I was originally an actor. Originally I was a theater artist. Eventually that line started to blur and I was just making art. Now I'm definitely more of a poet than I am an actor. Or a theater artist or a playwright or anything.

It was originally theater that filtered me into spoken word that eventually got me to think about, "Oh, yeah, poems can look pretty on a page, too."

You're right, there is a certain cadence to the MFA style poetry reading. The people do read very slowly, very quietly. I wonder how that specific style evolved.

The shady part of me wants to say it's easier not to try. If we all agree not to try then we can call it a style. I got into an argument once with someone because they were arguing for why they read their poems very monotone and flat because they don't want to have an emotional effect on their words. They just want the words to be words. They kept on saying shit that didn't make a lot of sense basically about why we should all strive to be as little of our human selves as possible when we're reading our poems. I say it's the fear of trying, maybe. That's shady. Whatever.

The traditions of spoken word have come out of black and Latino communities since the Black Arts Movement, since before that, reaching back even to the styles of preaching in the black community and across the diaspora... Recognizing that while spoken word has become a lot more diverse, the roots of it are in those black environments and communities. With that in mind, I think it's never been the mode to read like [an academic poet]. I don't know. I can't speak for those people. I can say that I'm bored with it. I can say that it doesn't lend anything to the work. I'm not going to name names but I've heard poems that I've loved read out loud by authors who maybe aren't spoken word artists... or there's people who aren't spoken word artists who are beautiful readers of the work... but there's something about not being a good reader that has killed some of my favorite poems. Like things that I've treasured on my own now lay flat and un-beautified by the reading of it.

I don't understand why people would do that. I don't understand why anybody would want to be that boring.

I think all it takes is a little elbow grease and practice and trying to make your poems sound like a conversation, because I think that's what poems are at the end of the day. They're trying to speak something. If we think about it as a script, think about yourselves as a character, think about it as something that you are trying to tell a friend, the world, a room, whatever it may be—then you can have a better read.

I don't understand what the rise in that style has been. I don't want to say anything about "academic poetry" or something like that. Because I do think there's a lot of lovely things in that space, too. I don't understand the reading style of "let's all make our poems sound as boring as possible." I think it's just people being uncomfortable with their own voice. Maybe that's also part of poetry shifting away from... In some people's minds, shifting away from an auditory form to being a script.

You said you don't consider yourself a slam poet now. What do you consider yourself? A "poet" with no qualifiers?

I think a slam poet is a stupid term because slam is an event that happens. If I'm not currently on stage giving a zero to 10 for my poem then maybe I'm not a slam poet at that time. Maybe I'm just reading a poem. Do I consider myself a spoken word artist?

Yeah, that's part of my practice. A slam poet? No, I always reject that term because a slam is an event.

I just consider myself a poet. My job is to make the poem, whether it's going to be read or heard. At the end of the day is your poem a good poem? If the poem is only a good poem when my body is around to read it, then maybe it's not as good a poem as I think. If my poem is completely dead—and by vice versa if my poem is somehow less juicy by the time my mouth gets to it—then maybe I need to work on how the hell I'm reading this shit out loud.

I think they go hand in hand. It's not one or the other for me. A poet's job is to be the poet. If you're a poet that's currently using paper and pen or whatever as your medium then make sure you write the shit out of that poem so that way when somebody reads it they can have the experience that you intended them to have. Or they have a wilder experience than you intended. If you're a poet whose medium is currently your voice and a microphone or a stage or your hand or however you're communicating then it's your job to make sure that the poem is not dead once it's channeled through you.

It's not a mode of practice. It's instinct and honoring what the poem is and honoring that my audience deserves to not be asleep.

In the current political climate, it seems like a lot of people are coming forward and using poetry as a form of protest—which it's obviously always been for you and for others. It seems like people who weren't necessarily thinking that before are thinking about it now.

Yeah, like you said, the political has always been a concern on my work. It's always been a concern of the work of people who I keep around me. I guess what might feel new for some doesn't feel new for me because I already saturate myself in the people that are out here rallying about some shit. Welcome everybody else to the party.

I was writing up a statement for somebody the other day and I said, "Welcome to how it has been"—to all the people who are currently opening their eyes and realizing how fucked up shit has been and that maybe it's reaching a new level of fucked up. Yeah, sure, you always need more soldiers for the cause. You always need more homies that are down to fuck up some shit and to not let the new chaos become normal. Welcome all those people to doing that work.

A part of me feels like calling that rise in political awareness of poetry "new" does the double work of also erasing the work of poets of color, queer folks, and a lot of folks who have been doing that work for a long, long, long time and whose poems didn't change in November, who kept on writing, who maybe if anything kept doing the same thing but just went deeper into the work they're already doing. But I'm glad that people who thought they could be apolitical before realize how dumb of a thought that was and how irresponsible of a position that is to take as an artist.

Danez Smith recommends:

Watching Naruto, Fairy Tail, and Sailor Moon whenever possible.

Sleep

Season 9 of Project Runway

Sympathetic Little Monster by Cam Awkward Rich

A number 1 with cheese from White Castle.

Name

Danez Smith

Vocation

Poet, Spoken Word Artist, Playwright, Teacher

Fact

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