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Photographs by Steve Kagan for The New York Times

Roger Bonair-Agard with Patricia Smith at the National Poetry Slam.

Part Art, Part Hip-Hop And Part Circus

Slammers Shake Up an Interest in Poetry

By BRUCE WEBER

CHICAGO, Aug. 15 — They tore the trophy in half. When teams of exhorting, exuberantly defiant performance poets from San Jose and San Francisco finished the 10th annual National Poetry Slam in a tie (ahead of the other finalists, from New York City and Oakland, Calif.) on Saturday night, they sealed the contest more like compassionate artists than cutthroat competitors and split the title, ripping the trophy, a stack of books with a boxing glove glued on top.

Mad dancing ensued onstage. And pandemonium — more pandemonium — reigned at the mammoth Chicago Theater here, among the nearly 3,000 spectators who had spent the evening screaming and hooting (“You go, girl!” “Change the judges!”) and bellowing in support of their favorite poems and poets.

The poets had declaimed their identity. “My name is Big Poppa E, and I am a Wussy Boy!” declared a poet from the winning San Francisco team. They had declaimed their spiritual angst. “God is a blooz man!” declared Regie Gibson, from Chicago who, defending his individual title, barely lost out to a poet from New York, Roger Bonair-Agard. They had declaimed their love of poems. “I’ve decided/I don’t want to be/a poet who just writes/for the slam anymore,” began Sta-

ceyann Chin, another New Yorker, who concluded: “I want to write . . . real poems/poems that are so honest/they slam.” And most of all perhaps they declaimed their birthright: to be heard. Ariana Waynes, a poet from San Francisco declared:

*would you have me forget
that the blessed first amendment of
these united
states that I can raise my voice to
shake the world
or at least the termite-infested
foundation
of this atrocious, ferocious
land that I love
but have never been exactly proud of.*

Whatever else it all meant, it is evident that slam poetry has come of age. For its 10th year the national slam returned to the city where slamming was born. And the four-day event (preliminary rounds were sprinkled over half a dozen bars and cabarets) was raucous and well attended throughout, replete with the celebratory atmosphere of a circus.

As poetry in general has surged in popularity in the United States, this offshoot from the traditions of the art has emerged as a way for passionate people — mostly, but not entirely, young and representing a wide ethnic and racial range — to air their voices and for an

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Dennis Kim, above, reciting his work; contestants, left, celebrating onstage after the slam contests in Chicago.