Marrying theories about the "authentic" from performance studies and critical race studies, Somers-Willett discusses how poetry slams are representational practices which help generate and authenticate marginal identities, and how the systems of reward established by slams embody complex systems of desire between authors and audiences. Focusing on the relationship between African American poets and white middle-class audiences, she weighs the politics involved in awarding authenticity, ultimately looking to poetry slams as sites of social practice from which racial identity is performatively cited, negotiated, and occasionally questioned.

Chapter One, "Poetry and the People," is a literary-cultural analysis of the narratives of blackness and nation employed by slam’s literary and performative precursors. Somers-Willett investigates “renegade” American performance-poetry movements—including blackface minstrel performances dating back to the Antebellum period, the tours of poet Vachel Lindsay, poetry readings of the Beat era, and performances by Black Arts poets—which make an overt appeal to popular American audiences. Chapter Two, “Authenticating Voices,” considers the association of blackness with authenticity in slam poetry. If it is true, as is often claimed, that audiences feel slam poets articulate a more “authentic” verse, then we must be compelled to ask not only how but also why African American performers have so often won the badge of authenticity through national slam titles. SomersWillett’s response is an exploration of a predominantly white audience’s ambivalent celebration and objectification of black voices embodied in fetishism. The commercialization of slam and the fraught issues of representation this entails is the focus of the last chapter, “’Representing’ Slam Poetry.” In it, Somers-Willett considers the film Slam (d. Mark Levin, 1998), the HBO television series Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry, and the Broadway performance of Russell Simmons’ Def Poetry Jam as examples of the mass media’s commodification of urban blackness at poetry slams. In these cases, citations of gender and class function to create a sense of racial authenticity based on the marketability of the black urban male to white bourgeois audiences, a phenomenon which resonates with other current research about image-making in black popular music and culture, particularly that of hip-hop.
Chapter Two, “Authenticating Voices,” considers the association of blackness with authenticity in slam poetry. If it is true, as is often claimed, that audiences feel slam poets articulate a more “authentic” verse, then we must be compelled to ask not only how but also why African American performers have so often won the badge of authenticity through national slam titles. SomersWillett’s response is an exploration of a predominantly white audience’s ambivalent celebration and objectification of black voices embodied in fetishism. The commercialization of slam and the fraught issues of representation, slam poetry espoused universal humanistic ideals and a broad spectrum of participants, and especially welcome is the book’s analysis of how commercial marketing forces succeeded in narrowing public perception of slam to the factionalized politics of race and identity. The author’s knowledge of American slam at the national level is solid and more authentic than many of the slammers who claim to be.” Susan B. A. Somers-Willett is a decade-long veteran of slam and holds a PhD in American Literature and MFA in Poetry from the University of Texas, where she is currently Publications Editor at the Division of Diversity & Community Engagement. She is the author of Roam, a book of poetry. Read more.