

Untempered tongues: Teaching performance poetry for social justice

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ABSTRACT: Despite high levels of disengagement in urban literacy classrooms, few teachers have seen fit to explore spoken word – the performance of poetry – as a tool to engage students in literacy. Spoken word poetry serves as a powerful means of self-representation for youth that are traditionally portrayed as threatening, menaces to society that do not know how to productively manage their temperaments. Drawing on prior, spoken word, poetry research in education, the article examines the impact of a performance poetry unit on students’ critical thinking, literacy and voice from the perspective of a teacher/researcher in an urban classroom. Bridging the critical and the performance aspects of spoken word poetry in a South Los Angeles high school composition classroom, this article offers a concrete example of this praxis and reports on a curriculum project that empowered students to examine issues of privilege, social control and oppression in U.S. society. The article concludes with pedagogical implications for using, and going beyond, performance poetry as a teaching tool for creating student-centred, critical discursive spaces in schools.

KEYWORDS: Critical literacy, critical pedagogy, social justice education, spoken word, performance poetry, student voice.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2005 summer issue of *Speakeasy* magazine, figurehead of the spoken word poetry movement Saul Williams declared, “Either the academics can turn up their noses at it, or they can realize it now....This modern-day spoken word movement will evolve literature” (Lindall, 2005, “Saul Williams”, paragraph 7). At the time of William’s comments I was a high school English teacher in South Los Angeles and was bearing witness to the impact of Hip-hop culture and rap music on my students. Recognizing cultural similarities of spoken word to Hip-hop and rap, I believed in the potential impact of political poetry as a teaching tool and developed a performance poetry¹ unit with a group of Black (86%) and Latina/o (14%) urban high-school seniors. This article will explore some key elements of that unit and its impact on the students that were involved with it. In particular, it will discuss my efforts to develop a language arts curriculum that directly addresses the articulated needs of the youth it is charged with educating while fostering their critical writing, thinking and voice. This curricular discussion is intended to give urban educators instructional insight, while calling into question the limited ways we think about engaging youth culture in schools, sharing a teacher/researcher analysis of a curriculum that used performance

¹ To emphasize the oral communication and literary elements of this writing unit, I referred to “spoken word” as “performance poetry” to my students. Similarly, performance poetry and spoken word are used interchangeably throughout this article to mean the same thing.

poetry to explore issues of difference, diversity and voice with students of colour in a South Los Angeles urban classroom.

To address high levels of disengagement in urban literacy classrooms, more teachers could turn to spoken word – the performance of poetry – as a tool to engage students in literacy. The problem in many urban schools is that too many of us – teachers – view the expressiveness and communicative practice of this form of urban youth popular literacy as subordinate to academic literacy (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Prior research has found that many urban youth find spoken word poetry a viable outlet for articulating the obstacles presented by their social realities (Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005). Even more, it serves as a powerful means of self-representation for youth that are traditionally portrayed as threatening, menaces to society that do not know how to productively manage their temperaments. Early in the decade, few scholars discussed the potential of incorporating urban youth, popular culture in the classroom, specifically the potential of bringing performance poetry to schools (see Bruce & Davis, 2000). As an English teacher who taught social justice performance poetry as part of, not apart from, my composition curriculum, I hope that this article can add a practitioner’s perspective to the growing body of literature.

THE FOUNDATION

Some believe that decentering the traditional knowledge base in education is a threat to the good of society (Hirsch, 1987), while others argue that exclusively canonizing “great books” in schools is a limited project that solely endorses bourgeois ideology (Foley, 2001). This tension lends itself to larger examinations of power/knowledge relations and a hidden curriculum in schools (McLaren, 1998). Donalddo Macedo (1993) even argued that schools aren’t failing to teach, but instead succeeding at what they are designed to do – ensure social stratification. Noam Chomsky’ (1988) adds a similar critique:

[Y]ou find a good deal more sophistication among people who learn about the world from their experience rather than those who learn about the world from a doctrinal framework that [the educated] are exposed to and that they are expected as part of professional obligation to propagate (p. 708).

To challenge education’s role in securing social stratification, literacy teachers must develop pedagogy that foregrounds the interests and concerns of the “less educated”, pushing the boundaries of dominant teaching practices, in order to disrupt the culturally reproductive consequences of school and classroom alienation. Paulo Freire and Donalddo Macedo (1987) question the traditional school practice of maintaining the status quo through the use of educational tools, methods and assessments that privilege career or subject specialization over a critical literacy that examines the inter-relations of the world. This would open up spaces for youth to bring their funds of [prior] knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) into classroom spaces historically marginalized youth have long felt silenced within. Arguing that teaching is not a politically neutral enterprise, they argue that literacy instruction is a form of cultural politics “that functions to either empower or disempower people” (p. 141). Teaching and learning processes are political acts that manifest pedagogically. In this way, the role of a progressive educator taps into students’ prior knowledge bases to

develop critical consciousness in such a way that they interrogate the discursive structures by which they come to know the world. Critical literacy, in this sense, poses an alternative discourse, one that stands against oppressive social conditions, ideologies and the institutions that marginalize the experiences and livelihoods of marginalized people.

Ernest Morrell's research into "critical English education" echoes Freire and Macedo by encouraging, "practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation" (2005, p. 313). In his earlier work, Morrell reports on his own urban high-school, English classroom where he and his colleague used popular media as a bridge to the literary canon for youth that had traditionally rejected or been denied access to the canon. They found that using of Hip-hop culture, and rap music specifically², served as an effective teaching tool since it captured much of the sentiment their students experienced as members of historically marginalized communities. In their analysis, they make a poignant point about the impact of the use of popular (Hip-hop) culture and rap music:

The knowledge reflected in [rap] lyrics could engender discussions of esteem, power, place, and purpose or encourage students to further their own knowledge of urban sociology and politics. In this way, Hip-hop music should stand on its own merit in the academy and be a worthy subject of study in its own right rather than necessarily leading to something more "acceptable" (p. 89).

While their analysis proposes the use of rap lyrics to engage students in relevant discussions, their strategy can certainly extend to the use of other aspects of youth culture and local "street" ideologies and discourses, such as spoken word.

Maisha Fisher (2005) suggests the use of spoken word poetry as a Maisha Fisher (2005) suggests the use of spoken word poetry as a strong pedagogical tool for literacy teachers. She examines the oral tradition of spoken word as part of a longer lineage of Black literacy practices. Fisher discusses two teachers in New York – Joe from the Bronx and Mama C from Brooklyn. These two teachers are described as "old heads", who organized poetry writing and performance spaces outside of class for their high-school youth. For Joe, the writing space he created was a place for students to find their voice and "sing". According to Fisher, Mama C believed that Hip-hop saved numerous people and that there is a deeper value to be found in it by tracing its roots to the oral tradition of West Africa.

Fisher's research is relevant, timely and highly valuable for teachers looking to develop culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies. Her study found that these writing communities were more than just spaces for literacy learning, because they also served as an impetus for the students to attend school and build socializing units in an academic context. Mama C and Joe drew on students' out-of-school literacy

² Hip-hop is a culture historically made up of DJ'ing, break dancing, graffiti art and music, while rapping is the oratorical deliver of lyrics in Hip-hop music. As KRS-ONE argues in his song, "9 Elements", "Rap we do, Hip-hop we live."

practices to “hear” their students and make sure the youth were “heard”. The literacy circle “offered a neutral space where students were encouraged to maintain a non-judgmental attitude toward their peers,” by fostering a “culture of listening and valuing words” (p. 128). Fisher’s study should inform the limited ways we think about helping students become interested in reading and writing. The emphasis placed on sharing by these teachers placed a premium on reciprocity, highlighting the community cultivation that comes from speaking and hearing the creative written word.

Drawing from the aforementioned theories of critical pedagogy and school based studies that examined the application of these theories, I constructed my performance poetry unit. Freire and Macedo called for critical literacy programs that develop a critical consciousness for students to interrogate the discursive structures they come to know the world by. Morrell’s literacy research translated abstract critical literacy theory into classroom teaching practices that drew from the everyday, urban literacy practices of students through Hip-hop, while Fisher’s research validates the affirming qualities of spoken word poetry in schools. Similarly, the goal of this unit was to tap into the socially transformative potential in urban youth, drawing on their words and insights to develop a critical social consciousness. This study contributes to this body of literature by discussing the process both teachers and students experienced with the use of performance poetry in a South Los Angeles high school classroom. This work was driven, in large part, by my recognition that school curriculum is often detached from the needs of urban youth, particularly their need for strategies to cope with and transform the harsh realities of their underserved communities.

DOCUMENTING A MOMENT IN TIME³

During the time of this research, the Coliseum region of South Los Angeles – where the school site of this classroom research is located – has long been one of the city’s most troubled. Though communities throughout South Los Angeles are rich with dignified social networks, strong cultural pride and talented youth, its stigma is largely marked by high levels of gang violence (The Advancement Project, 2006), growing interracial tensions (Hipp, Tita & Boggess, 2007; Hutchinson, 2007), and, similar to other communities of colour in major United States cities, various forms of urban misogyny (Collins, 2005). Recent school years have been particularly tense, with fights occurring on campus often. Administrators directed most of their attention to managing the campus’ massive in-school ditching and tardiness, instead of providing training and time for teachers to develop culturally empowering instruction for their students. In contexts like this, it is important to remember that tensions in the community transfer into the school, and present themselves to us in our classrooms. Community and school hostility is often a product of competing for diminishing resources, social attention, or a sense of power while marginalized into positions of powerlessness (Mears & Avinash, 2006). One way to move from competitive social orientations toward a collective space is to share critical social analysis of power across socially constructed sets of differences. Studying, then performing, political

³ An allusion to a Pharcyde (1995) song, “Moment in Time”. The lyrics offer insight to life as a youth of colour in South Los Angeles.

spoken word poetry provided us with one method for doing this in an English classroom.

Documenting this English teaching unit as a teacher/researcher in this context, I will discuss my use of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and Marc Levin's (1999) film *Slam* in order to facilitate students' writing and performing of political poetry as a means to exercise their critical thinking, critical writing and facilitating their critical voice. Writing produced by the students is a strong exemplar of the high level of critical engagement – participating in learning activities driven in the interests of the oppressed – the unit produced. The writing discussed here evidences spoken word poetry's usefulness when facilitating students' examination of privilege, social control and oppression in United States society. The excerpts of student writing were products of meticulous revisions and exemplify their growth in critical thinking during the semester. By critical thinking, I do not simply mean having the ability to assess accuracy and credibility, or exercise logical reasoning, but also analyzing the world within political, economic and socio-historical frameworks. Critical writing, here, is drawing on sophisticated poetic writing devices to process, document and name their reading of the world. Having a critical voice means finding the power to be heard, felt and understood while communicating transformative ideas in ways that effectively impact and challenge listening audiences.

I selected the poems from many beautiful and incite/insightful ones for three primary reasons: 1) the students who I discuss articulate a critical analysis of their community's social conditions with clear moral, cultural and political perspectives; 2) the performances of their poems effectively demonstrated links between the intentions of the Black Arts Movement and *Slam*, their lived experience and social theory; and 3) these students were "at risk" and "low-achievers", and had previously displayed high levels of disengagement from school. Though "at-risk" could include most of the students on campus based on poverty, race, ethnicity, language, or other factors, the students' whose work is discussed here "fit" at-risk profiles for other reasons.

Four of the five students live in historically low income, single parent, or foster homes. Two of the young men engaged in various forms of Black on Black crime: "Riddler"⁴ was an active member in a local gang while Milestone, a fifth-year senior, was open about his "hustling" – being involved in various forms of the local underground economy – despite living a middle-class home life with his older brother and both of his parents. Virtuous lived with her foster-mother after recently being released from juvenile camp while Jaye moved house-to-house, dealing with the recent death of both her mother and brother while making sure she graduated after a fifth year of high school as well. Yeezy stressed with the day-to-day uncertainties that often surfaced from a mother whose crack rock addiction kept their household unstable. This article will not prove that this performance poetry unit was solely responsible for any sort of life-changing trajectory for these students. Instead, I will discuss work produced by young people who did not find school an open space to articulate their struggles despite constantly experiencing very contemptuous conditions in their communities, homes and schools. Through their work, I will display how creating safe, critically discursive spaces in the classroom for youth most marginalized by traditional curriculum can be a good starting point for bringing

⁴ Students in this article are assigned a self-named pseudonym.

students back into the folds of American schooling while addressing the ideological tensions that bind them.

CRITICAL ENGLISH CURRICULUM & PERFORMANCE POETRY

My goal for this unit was to tap into the disengagement of urban youth in a way that would continue to develop the type of critical social consciousness necessary for socially transformative action. I wanted to honour June Jordan's (1995) "hope that folks throughout the U.S.A. would consider the creation of poems as a foundation for true community: a fearless democratic society" (p. 3). To do this, the intent of this unit was to engage in useful, critical discourse about social issues students deemed important. In the spirit of Jordan's sentiments, I believed that their politics and expressiveness combined would make them a strong, dependable voice that others would respect, identify with and engage in dialogue through. The value of their "voice", as shaped and shared through their poetry, would be its influence and impact on one another – its leadership. When challenged to write with collective responsibility to their community, culture and peers, I knew that their poetry would "go there", questioning and strategizing against the self-defeating and dominant ideologies we have come to accept as normal, no matter how unjust. Through this unit, students would continue to co-construct a space to touch and teach one another, connect with people they were previously isolated from, and incite anger, compassion and action among their peers.

Landscaping a literary tradition of resistance

The three assignments in the performance poetry unit included:

- A) An ideological critique of Marc Levin's *Slam* (1999)
 - a. Organization:
 - i. Introduction (Background on the Black Arts Movement (BAM) & *Slam*, & Thesis)
 - ii. Historical overview of the BAM
 - iii. Theoretical significance of the BAM
 - iv. Film Analysis of *Slam* based on the BAM
 - v. Conclusion
- B) Two poems⁵
- C) A 5 – 7 minute performance of their poems.

It was important for me to frame the performance poetry movement for students by connecting its inspiration to the intensity and meaningful force of rap lyrics, as many young people do not know the historical context of rap, or its roots in spoken word poetry. To do this, the unit began with a reading and discussion of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature's (Gates & McKay, 1996) historical sections on both the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and rap. Tapping into and intellectualizing a literary genre most of my students already embraced better positioned the unit to elicit academic rigour and intellectual intensity in the writing workshops that followed. The purpose of this framing was threefold: 1) To legitimize the often silenced literary tradition of Black nationalist poetry that mirrored my

⁵ See Appendix A for poetry guidelines handout used to guide the writing, modified from June Jordan's (1995) *Poetry for the people*.

students' deeply embodied dispositions on the world; 2) historicize the agency of politicized poetic undertakings; and 3) to ask students to honour the potential impact of political poetry as they took organic ownership of this literary lineage.

The logic behind this was to help students understand that rap was influenced by and emerged from the work of 1960s and 70s poets and spoken-word artists of the BAM. By reading a chapter by Kalama ya Salaam (1995), students found that, “[The Black Arts] movement broke from the immediate past of protest and petition (civil rights) literature and dashed forward toward an alternative that initially seemed unthinkable and unobtainable: Black Power” (p. 70). This exposed students to the important literary history that emerged from the politically popular “Sixties”, the Black Arts movement was the only African American literary movement to advance Black self-determination as an essential condition and absolutely necessary to its aesthetic. For Milestone, BAM’s political aesthetic still had relevance today:

The “new black aesthetic” of the Black Arts Movement was to show Black Nationalism, to redefine the meaning of black, and to continue black consciousness through poetry. By rising up to speak the truth, the voices of the silenced and the oppressed may be able to expose what the government keeps doing to black people.

By recognizing the relationship between liberatory Black politics and the literary functions of poetry, Milestone connected the political conditions of the “Sixties” to the contemporary social conditions his community continues to experience in the United States. Equally importantly, he recognized that the same responsibility assumed by the BAM could drive the consciousness of Black folks today. In her essay, Yeezy echoed Milestone’s sentiments. For her, artists of the BAM were pioneers whose footsteps should be followed:

These voices of literary artists encourage and motivate us to stand up and fight against oppression by following their footsteps... [T]he artists of the Black Arts Movement served as messengers, politicians, spokesmen, role models and counselors to those of us living in the world of dehumanization today.

In addition to being motivated from the BAM literary works, Yeezy also found solace in its content. For those reasons, she believed that the BAM writings could inform those currently experiencing social injustice throughout the world. What the students’ essays pointed to, more than merely summarizing the significance of a Black literary tradition, was the need to align the political content of our creative writing pursuits with the present-day needs of those suffering oppression today.

Many of my students were invested in contemporary corporate rap but were naïve to rap music’s early social significance. They did not connect rap to the Black Arts Movement and were generally unaware of the fact that youth of marginalized cultures in New York created the Hip-hop expression of rap, for and from an urban social condition very similar to the one they were experiencing in contemporary Los Angeles. Tracing the history of rap music, students were able to delineate the difference between early rap narratives and the commercial movement that began foregrounding narratives of violence, sexism and materialism. It was not difficult for students in the class to relate to these literary movements and the political urgency that marked their relevance. This new-found understanding drove many of the students to represent their reality on their own terms and with the liberatory interests

of their communities in mind, while reflecting the political nature of the Black Arts' literary aesthetic.

Concurrently, we conducted a ideological film analysis of Marc Levin's (1998) *Slam*, paying particular attention to the setting's material conditions and how it influenced the content of the film's dialogue and poets' performances. Based in Southeast Washington D.C., *Slam*'s main character, Raymond Joshua (poet/actor Saul Williams), is a small petty marijuana dealer whose real talent is as a wordsmith of spoken word poetry. Caught with a quarter ounce of marijuana at a scene of a murder, "Ray" faces felony charges or a minimum stay of two years in prison with a plea bargain. The story line grapples with issues of poverty, institutionalized White oppression, cyclical Black gang violence, and the use of spoken word poetry as a means for personally and publicly reflecting on socio-political issues. Lauren Bell (actress/poet Sonja Sohn) became Joshua's romantic interest, encouraging him to use his performative and literary talents to voice his agony with the state of Black men in modern day society.

Using the Black Arts Movement as a theoretical framework, our central questions were centred around: 1) How does life in Dar City (Southeast Washington, D.C.) compare and contrast to your lived experience? and 2) How did the characters in *Slam* use their words to change their world and what implications does this have on your duty as a poet? Students took the analytical freedom to develop their own critique of the film. For example, Jaye's approval of *Slam* was affirmed by her respect for, and use of the BAM literary tenets. Still, while *Slam* effectively promoted the spoken word poetry movement according to Jaye, she believed Joshua's character lacked the self-growth necessary to participate in larger movements despite being a powerful poetic voice for social change. Jaye concluded her essay pointing out these qualities in the film:

According to the Black Arts Movement principles and philosophies, the film *Slam* did in fact show that poetry was a way to escape from our problems. The film emphasized the fact that holding all of your anger and frustration in your heart will lead to destruction, but once you voice those feelings, standing up strong and confident is easy. Although Raymond used poetry as a way to voice his anger and used his words as a strong force for change, he eventually became narrow-minded by forgetting that it takes individual change to bring about bigger social changes.

Rigorous and rich analysis emerged from the students' study and, for the most part, they began to understand their social role as poets much better. Furthermore, both Saul Williams' and Sonja Sohn's performances served as exemplary models for the students to study the performance of spoken word poetry. Studying both the BAM and *Slam* were not only processes for students to engage in traditional academic studies of an African American literary tradition and film analysis of relevant, contemporary spoken word poetry in urban communities of colour. It forced them also to recognize the significance of writing and performing poetry with the same responsibility of those who came before them, as well as to identify with the modern day poetry movement happening in United States contexts similar to theirs.

The rigour of (re)writing & (re)presenting our reality⁶

Though we used the poetry written in class for public events and student assemblies, this unit did not operate apart from the rest of my English curriculum. In fact, the performance component of the unit incorporated and improved upon the public speaking skills students had been learning and applying all semester. In this particular unit, closer attention was paid to assure that the vocal and non-verbal quality of their delivery matched the emotional content of their poetry. Empathetic and critical listening skills were emphasized for engaging in dialogue, as I encouraged students to challenge each other's underlying assumptions in the strategies for social change that they offered. Ultimately, the unit concluded with a poetry performance event that I designed to be reciprocal – a rhetorical dance between the performer and their often-affirming crowd – where students would speak in school about fundamental community concerns.

Students appropriated information and analysis from their prior papers into poems so that their performances reflected the depth and relevance of our semester's work. Throughout the semester, students wrote auto-ethnographic narratives, critical reflections on socio-cultural theories and concepts, and engaged in micro-ethnographic studies dealing with issues challenging youth in their communities. These research papers and presentations were theoretically informed and grounded in socio-historical analysis relevant to the needs of a critically democratic society. Their poems were to be informed by the semester's rigorous intellectual fabric so that they did not offer simplistic solutions to under-examined complexities. Structured essays, citations, and the logic of their reasoning were honed into compelling metaphors and rhythms intended to lyrically reshape abstract concepts into concrete descriptions of the change they would like to see in the world.

During this unit, classes usually began with a series of correlating, free-writing exercises. Free-writing prompts dealt with identity, self-love, social change and an ode to everyday people; also redefining gender roles, mission statements against oppression, governance and war, and feelings about school. These activities served as pre-writes that would be revised into two position/opinion statements. Students chose two of the free-writes, formally structured their ideas, and extended them into statements informed by their semester-long readings and research. Ultimately, these statements made up the bulk of the substance of their poems.

Similar to Jocson's (2005) application of June Jordan's "Poetry for the People" program, I drew from the program's poetry-writing guidelines to help guide the students' writing. Students teased out central concepts in their position statements to develop consistent themes in their poems. They shared with peers to make certain their work revealed a profound, intense truth. They removed punctuation and transformed their prose to poetry, with intentions of assuring maximum impact with a minimal amount of words. Sentences turned into precise phrases to intensify the

⁶ This section was written with respect for Hip-hop and not for the purposes of pre-packaging a curriculum or contributing to any "methods fetish". A key motif of Hip-hop is to not "bite", or plagiarize. Instead, utilizing creative faculties to engage one another was a founding premise to "being" Hip-hop. Upon designing a similar unit, I ask that you are creative in its application.

thickness of their expression. Students read and listened to one another in pairs, using peer review sheets to pay particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses of one another's pieces. Paying close attention to the use of descriptive verbs, detailed descriptions and consistency of voice helped strengthen the attentiveness of their poetic sound. Students listened for the vividness of their diction and the development of metaphors and figures of speech. I carefully instructed an attention to rhythm, encouraging the use of alliteration, assonance, dissonance, rhyme, repetition and parallelism. Whole-class instruction in horizontal and/or vertical rhythm and line breaks moved students to independent practice and final revisions. Ultimately, they rehearsed their poems aloud and experimented with a variety of delivery styles to maximize the communication of their message. This process was rigorous, but the efforts were reflected in the literary quality of their poems.

CONVERGING THE COMMUNITY AND THE CLASSROOM

What used to be an annual performance assembly occurred three years running in either the school library or auditorium. Coming to terms with their reality in a school assembly resulted in intense dialogue and emotional outbursts by students who were now given a space to share their social and political dissatisfactions aloud. In a performance assembly three years before, we spread the library with well over one hundred chairs formed in a half-circle. The chairs were positioned in the direction of the microphone stand. The stand sat in front of a graciously adorned Mexican quilt and an Afrocentric red, black and green flag. A standing-room only crowd of young people gathered to hear the words of their peers and to engage in a community forum dialogue afterward.

School administration, however, was not comfortable with the response this type of relevance elicited from the students. Upon applying for what was our annual performance poetry assembly, one administrator told me, "Parents don't send their children here for meaningful learning. They send their kids here for school." Thus, our request for an assembly the year of this study was denied. Another administrator officially reprimanded me for a letter-writing campaign our classes did to advocate for the continuation of the assembly. As a response, students organized weekly poetry performance lunch sessions hosted in our classroom. Students named this newly developed group, C.I.P.H.E.R. (Conscious, Intelligent Poets Highly Elevating Revolution) and saw themselves as a collective of student-artists concerned with heightening community and social consciousness on campus.

Despite the change in venue, the quality of the performances and the intensity of the dialogue did not weaken. Whether in an assembly or classroom, my teaching of this unit rested on the belief that "good poems can... build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter" (Jordan, 1995, p. 3). The first student to perform her poetry was Virtuous:

TKO

The system was created
 To make sure that all of our schools stay under-populated
 And our brothers stay affiliated in an already lost war...
 Except we can't see it
 Blind by lies that stole our vision

Long ago
 And indoctrinated us
 Taught us not to fight
 Taught us how to be quiet
 Even taught us how to think and act white...
 But today
 We got to make it right
 We got to show them
 That we know how to come together
 And we got to show them how soldiers unite

Through her writing, Virtuous displayed profound critical thinking by opening up a touchy dialogue addressing institutional, interpersonal and internalized racism in the Black and Brown community. This poem displays the relationship between critical creative writing and critical thinking along racial lines. Even from the beginning, the title of this poem took a popular acronym from boxing – T.K.O. (technical knock-out) – to suggest that the “knocked out” consciousness of Virtuous’ community is a result of a scientific, or “technical”, process. In a poem embedded with rhyme (fight, quiet, white, right, unite) and assonance (“stole” and “ago”, and “long”, “indoctrinated”, and “taught”), Virtuous also used personification to ascribe human attributes to “lies” that impair the consciousness of marginalized people. This idea was further developed with the lines, “[system] make[s] sure that all of our schools stay under-populated / And our brothers stay affiliated in an already lost war” and “Blind by lies that stole our vision / Long ago / And indoctrinated us / Taught us not to fight.” These lines serve to call into question the paradox of a school system that alienates youth of colour from its learning while Black and Brown men, instead, access power in street affiliations that weaken their communities. The parallelism of “long ago” and “but today” juxtaposes the historical pacification of Black resistance against its oppression to the call for a future of unity among a community of youth that she constructs as soldiers in a historical process that requires collective antagonism against systemic social control. Incorporating critical thinking into creative writing to indict White supremacy and call for racial solidarity helped Virtuous exercise her critical voice.

To understand the significance of this, we must understand this poem in relation to Virtuous as a young Black woman. Virtuous enrolled in the high school after spending nearly a year in juvenile camp, where she attended classes during her eleventh grade year. She lived in a foster home, as her mother passed away at a young age and her father did not have United States citizenship. Virtuous openly participated in local “street” vice, and had dated men in their twenties who could support her financially in ways she felt necessary. Her grade point average was below a 1.5 and she began the school year with an honest disinterest in school altogether. Students began the year stereotyping her as a “whore”, but as she developed self-destructive narratives into critical structural and historical analyses of urban life for African-Americans, her peers began to value her opinion as an intelligent Black woman.

When Virtuous began the school year, she shared her feelings of abandonment experienced living in a foster home, the desperation of selling drugs to earn spending money, and even rationalized her participation in other self-destructive behaviours as normal. As the semester moved forward, she understood the hegemonic implications of her practices and began to develop a new, critical sense of her reality. According to

Virtuous, politicized performance poetry helped her develop this ideology further, and use her “voice” to arouse and inspire her peers:

Our mentality, like those of us in these streets and in this community, are shackled by the government....I feel that I was a voice for those who are still struggling and that I can motivate [others] to have a voice of their own. [Performance poetry] helped me have a way to speak about social change... in a way that makes us feel comfortable....It helped me voice the pain and problems of our society and provide different solutions and ways to overcome our obstacles.

This type of learning fostered her leadership, as she was able to communicate her developing analysis in a manner that her usually disinterested peers could understand. Having this critical poetic voice, she hoped, could inspire others to speak up as well. Rather than silencing her scathing critique against structural White supremacy, poetry allowed Virtuous to share ideas with her peers in ways that she believed were more pleasant for her listening audience.

Similarly, Milestone’s critical creative writing communicated the pro-Black ideologies that shaped his critical thinking. Offering a socio-historical critique of current urban conditions, Milestone swaggered his way to the front of the class, lowered his black Pittsburgh Pirate hat over his face and performed his interpretation of the complex issues facing urban Black communities today:

We’ve got a gun to our head

It’s got a gun to my head
 Its fingers are on the trigger
 Its words are the bullets that’s breakin me down
 I’m tryin’ to figure
 If my history is my Teflon⁷
 Then why should I bet on the teachings of Uncle Tom’s step-son...

The multi-layered meaning of “it’s/its” in this poem used personification and figure of speech, attributing social accountability to both conformist members of Milestone’s community and a destructive historical epistemology charged with educating African-Americans. He used the “Uncle Tom” archetype to critique cultural “sell-outs” that are used by dominant society against the interests of their own community. The character in this poem was representative of African-Americans, with death threatening from two sides – members of his own community and Euro-centric descriptions of Black history. The same socio-historical critique appears in his second poem:

Historical property

Why can’t we make straight our place?
 Stop jokin’ around and make straight our face
 So they don’t degrade and delay our race
 So they don’t make haste and delay our pace
 1492 is when they lied to you
 When they tried to sneak by the truth

⁷ Referenced repeatedly, “Teflon” is street slang alluding to firearms or bullet-proof vests, sometimes used when describing the need to deflect or deny some sort of attack.

But it wasn't just the West Indies
 Not just the Caribbean
 Cause South Africa was rewired too
 Now it's 2005 and it's we who do it
 The red or the bluest
 Who are you shootin'?

By using repetition, rhyme, assonance and consonance throughout this piece, Milestone emphasized key ideas of social responsibility that unify the poem. Posing the question, "Why can't we make straight our place?" Milestone suggested that it is the duty of those in his race to create change. Specifically, he called for maturity ("stop joking around") and the removal of the historical and modern-day minstrelsy (LaGrone, 2000) that has characterized the stereotypes dominant society places on problematic, popular images of Black society. Suggesting this, Milestone argued that these behaviors perpetuate the racialized "lies" that rationalized centuries of genocide in the Americas beginning in 1492. He also connected the pivotal year 1492 to the role Blood ("red") and Crip ("blue") gangs⁸ play in a Black, holocaust-like oppression of their own communities in 2005. Claiming, "it's we who do it" is affirmed by the answer to his question, "who are you shootin'?" In essence, this poem argued that gangs are in large part responsible for the current destruction of Black life. This crafting of ideas creatively communicates his frustration with the perpetuation of White supremacy and Black on Black violence by descendents of Americanized Africans themselves.

Milestone was a fifth-year senior, and had previously failed all of his high-school English classes. English had been irrelevant and disengaging for him, as he never found it useful for his everyday life. Similar to Virtuous, Milestone's grade-point average was below a 1.7. He often visited the school psychologist to sort through some of the struggles he had difficulties coping with alone. In fact, she was present at all of his presentations. Early in the semester, Milestone innocently expressed that he did not know that African-Americans were oppressed. Instead, he believed that their subordinated position in the world was "just the way it is". Not only did he learn otherwise, but began to understand this phenomenon on his own terms – problem-posing his ideas with the contradictions facing African-Americans worldwide.

Performance poetry gave him a space to share his insight with others, pushing the discursive classroom space creatively with his words and offering his developing analysis to peers struggling to figure out the relevance of critical social thought to their own lives. What was an irrelevant high school class for Milestone became, instead, a new space to explore and explain his thoughts as they developed with his growing understanding of himself and the culture he was becoming an even prouder member of. This unit, specifically, helped Milestone connect poetry and Black history to voice his concern for redefining Black identities:

Just like the Black Arts Movement, I used my poems to bring my people to realize that we are beautiful and intelligent despite the negative feedback we receive from others. Talking about black history, black power, and cultural pride in my poetry, I believe that I could shape our own history, instead of letting it be shaped....I just tried

⁸ Bloods and the Crips are predominantly Black and most well known for their history in Los Angeles, California.

to speak about what's possible when we find our own self-realization....[But] make the message sound good too.

Writing and performing poetry had a more meaningful purpose for Milestone. Performance poetry helped him act as a voice for pro-Black ideologies of “self” and society. In other words, performance poetry helped him challenge dominant society's constructs of Black history, notions of what it means to have power as Black people and silencing of cultural pride amongst Black culture. For Milestone, delivering these messages in a manner that “sound[ed] good” was key. Thus, performance poetry played a fundamental role in helping him find his critical voice.

Analyzing similar conditions from a different angle, Jaye reflected on her role as a woman for social change inside of this reality. In her case, engaging in critical poetic writing and performance allowed her to critically reflect on the disconnect between mainstream narratives and the needs of her community while communicating with her target audience in a manner she believed more palatable to her youth audience. For her performance, she stepped to the front of class, wearing a shirt with an image of Malcolm X holding a rifle while looking over his shoulder, and passionately articulated her disdain for the mainstream:

Mind and body at war

‘Yo, J, so what you gotta say?’
 You see I’ve been speaking the truth
 Ever since I woke up from that deep sleep
 And no, I’m not “in” or cut out for Hollywood
 But who cares
 I live out here with the slumlords, drug-dealers, and murderers
 Where crack dust kills
 So Hollywood means nothing
 If I can’t speak the word to those down here
 Who the hierarchy is afflicting
 Then my word
 And Hollywood means nothing
 All the lights, cameras, and action mean nothing to me
 If my soul is still longing to say something...

The narrative scheme in Jaye's poem was lyrical and grounded in her reality. She juxtaposed a disenfranchised South Los Angeles against the neighboring community of Hollywood, which she holds responsible for promoting fantasy lifestyles despite the social inequalities that permeate her section of the city. By recognizing that she was not “cut out for [a] Hollywood” that “means nothing,” Jaye critiqued the trivial, yet socially alienating forces of the media industry. In this sense, “Hollywood” privileged social constructs that run counter to the needs of youth in historically disenfranchised and underserved urban communities like South Los Angeles. Instead, she called for narratives that “speak the word to those down here / Who the hierarchy is afflicting.” These narratives would address economic issues concerning “crack dust” and “drug dealing,” as well as those concerning the relationship between renting communities and their often-stressful relationships with “slumlords”. By marginalizing these narratives in “Hollywood,” her and other young people's souls would “still [be] longing to say something.” Overall, Jaye's poem complicated notions of change and problems facing urban communities of colour, adding layers to the class's complex understanding of oppression.

Similar to Milestone, Jaye was a fifth-year senior, and had previously failed her 9th and 10th grade English classes. Jaye's brother had recently died from gang violence and her mother had passed away two years previously. Though I did not explore the psychological impacts of these experiences on her academic orientations, I did recognize that Jaye was often indifferent towards school altogether. Her peers perceived Jaye as having "an attitude," and being loud and stubborn, often engaging in temperamental arguments with others. While Jaye did engage in much of the classroom activities that took place throughout the semester, her focus was not as sharp as other students in the course. This poetry unit, however, tapped into a literacy modality that she engaged with passionately. In fact, one of the poems Jaye wrote for this unit was used for a campus-wide, poetry-writing contest that she won. Performance poetry gave Jaye a mode of writing and inquiry that helped her articulate the struggles she was experiencing in her community, while also connecting with many of the students she had not agreed with previously. As she described:

Poetry is the one writing that we used that really did change the outlook of many people in here, even the biggest gangsters....Our poems were so good that we could speak on one another and nobody gets mad because we're telling the truth. Knowing how to write essays alone is not as effective as using our poetry to make us aware of what is going on in society.

While she openly admitted that writing essays "alone" were not an effective means to promote social consciousness with urban youth of colour, Jaye did acknowledge this unit's usefulness in shifting students' perspective by facilitating their critical voice. For Jaye, poetry allowed her to speak honestly to her peers without coming across indifferently. For youth in a discursive context driven by self-promotion and defensiveness narcissism, finding a critical voice is crucial to becoming collectively mature.

In another student's poem, Yeezy's critical writing drew magnificently from her profound reading of the world. Evident in her writing were the details of her documentation and the sense of desolation in her analysis. Yeezy begrudgingly made her way to the front, smiled a shy breath and drew in her audience with a complicated breakdown of the drug epidemic facing her community:

On the corner

On the corner of nowhere in particular
 Crumbling pieces of human beings
 Scavenge for crack rocks and exchange their humanity for clouded vision
 While travelling from bag pipe back to slavery
 From the gateways of X to see the traces of first and second hand weed smoke
 Lying on who killed the brain cells and blocked the development of those men
 In cellblocks
 Who think that prison is their natural habitat
 So they form tribes behind bars
 Because their whole village is locked up...
 Strength is hard to find so smokers smoke for the feeling of false freedom
 Until they find themselves in a foetal position
 Squeezing their teardrops dry
 Wishing they could back track their lives from right now
 To the first time they were offered to pick their poison...

And we all become the feature of the transatlantic holocaust
 That ends like every bad day in the past
 As we hang to get high as just another drug slave

This poem, rich with imagery, took us one can easily imagine on a trip through a typical day in Yeezy's life. It reflected the psychology of pain marked by drug use and normalized hopelessness in her community. "On the corner" operated much like an elegy, describing the death of an urban community in multiple ways through slavery, holocaust, drugs and imprisonment. Using an oxymoronic literary device in a phrase like "clouded vision" and alliteration in "feeling of false freedom", she illustrated the self-sabotage members in her community suffer from in their state of unawareness. These community members, though, are held in esteem when referred to as "tribe[s]" of "whole villages." The use of a tribal trope to describe Black men recognizes the African roots of people whose culture has been associated with historical and contemporary constructs of savagery and calls into question those racist narratives. This gesture is important because it points to the ideals of communal social relations that once guided many villages in pre-colonial Africa. In all, the tone and texture of Yeezy's poem makes a volatile truth accessible to its audience without compromising the attention this social ill deserves.

Building on Yeezy's developing interest in socially just discourse and youth-oriented dialogue, this performance poetry unit provided her with another opportunity to read and write about community relevant issues in a schooling context she had little faith in. A rather quiet student during the beginning of the school year, Yeezy refused to complete public-speaking assignments in prior units. As her passion for culturally empowering issues grew, the more Yeezy would insert her voice into the classroom dialogue. Even more, Yeezy began to develop historical and critical understandings for many of the stigmas she associated with her home and community life. During the course of the semester, Yeezy experienced an emotional breakdown and came to me with her frustrations. Part of what I suggested she do was to document field notes as part of her process to critically "read her world". Her composition notebooks began to fill with community observations, journal reflections and theoretical analysis of her lived experiences.

Through the performance poetry unit, Yeezy had a creative outlet to use much of the information she had documented since our conversation. Moving from quiet indifference to a performance of her poetry, Yeezy expressed comfort in using her critical voice to talk about issues in her life, and what she estimated as being relevant to the lives of her peers:

Who really lets us talk about our lives in school?...I tried to use my words [to] ...let people know that they aren't alone and they have people going through what they're going through in their corner that's willing to tell the truth. I know I'm not the only one who sees their family doing drugs at home....I just read my world for powerful examples of real-life situations that have to be solved in our community....I feel like my poem was a teaching aid to educate about drugs around here....I know I stirred up emotions by reaching [the listener's] conscience and heart. (Yeezy)

In this way, Yeezy's voice was fostered by her perception of poetry's relevance to her peers and the usefulness performing spoken word has in being honest about issues students experience in their communities. Furthermore, Yeezy believed that she

empowered her peers and exerted a literary form of leadership while speaking to urban youth of colour's anxieties in very affectionate ways. All in all, the performance poetry unit built on, rather than ignored, Yeezy's love for and tensions with her community, culture and history.

In another performed poem, "Riddler", a reputable member of a local gang, tilted his Seattle Mariners hat up and analyzed the role of psychological violence in the schooling process for young men in South Los Angeles:

Weapons of Mass Destruction

I'm trapped in this system
 That's constructed much like this dope game
 LAUSD
 Havin' me hooked to their cocaine teaching
 And drug paraphernalia textbooks
 Cuz' school is the most dangerous place I've been
 Where the ones we trust to teach us
 Are incarcerating our minds
 And demonstrating social reproduction
 I return from my blind abduction
 With weapons of mass destruction
 Blue Chucks, S dome, white T, blue khakis⁹
 And a bomb education are my Teflon

Riddler's poem did not possess the strong command of literary conventions and his presentation did not show the strong oratory skills central to performance poetry. But, the power of this poem was not in its form, content or delivery, but rested largely on the credibility that this student had amongst his peers in class and the context upon which this student's complex character was established.

A sixteen-year-old young man with a number of visibly placed, gang-related tattoos across his body, Riddler, like Virtuous, was recently coming home from juvenile camp. His peers talked about him often as a respected gang member on campus. With all this in mind, one would expect Riddler to have experienced relatively high levels of danger in his life. So, to claim that "school is the most dangerous place [he's] been" disrupted the prevailing preconceptions many in the class had of his life experience as a gang member and how he made sense of the "street life" often associated with young men like Riddler. Even more, his critique of schools ruptured reverent narratives often uncritically associated with education. Instead, Riddler argued that schools "incarcerate[s] [students] minds" and "demonstrat[e] social reproduction." This straightforward tone sounded of reserved intensity, restrained anger and a lurking aggression that concealed a deeper frustration. His poem not only expressed a disdain for urban schools but also a celebration of street sensibilities. Drawing from "street" imageries correlating school with "the dope game", unjust instruction with "cocaine teaching" and irrelevant curriculum with "drug paraphernalia textbooks", Riddler maintained a balance between credible urban references and a critical stance on urban schools, while advocating for an education that returns students from "blind" lenses of viewing themselves and the world around

⁹ Converse brand Chuck Taylors ("Chucks"), Seattle Mariners baseball cap ("S dome), Pro Club brand white t-shirt ("White T"), and Dickies brand "khakis" are uniforms worn by many Los Angeles gangs, though team logos vary from gang to gang.

them. In contexts where gangs are often the targets of derision from urban school officials, opening up spaces for young men with his orientation towards school to communicate their scathing analysis affirms their dignity as intellectuals while respecting their urban identities.

From his poem, Riddler expressed his desire to tell the truth about schools as he spoke as a young, openly admitted gang member claiming to want, have or pursue a “bomb education” to act as the symbolic “Teflon” to protect him from institutions designed to miseducate young people of colour in urban schools. Riddler, however, did not identify with poetry before the unit began. He even told me, “Keep it real, I used to think poetry was for squares. I wasn’t bout’ to do no poem, really.” Studying the Black Power Movement and analyzing *Slam* not only helped Riddler rethink the value of poetry, but also made him comfortable using it to communicate his ideology on school. This is how he articulated performance poetry’s role in facilitating his critical voice:

Performing my poem the way I did was a way of expressing my own feelings to the public without being soft. I got to be myself but helped others learn from the way I see things. The class had to listen to me talk about life and some of the struggles I face in school. And in the hood... used my poem as relief from my anger and depression...cuz [young Black men] got it hard in school, coming from the hood...[T]eachers lock you up mentally....But with this poetry, my words became powerful to the ear and made people in class think about what needs to be changed in these schools that’s making us this way. And that was hood. (Riddler)

In other words, this unit removed the negative stigma Riddler had originally associated with poetry. By ascribing the unit a quality of being “hood”, local slang which was short for neighbourhood, Riddler challenges preconceived notions often associated with poetry’s literary elitism by, instead, attributing it a merit most used to describe something with local, street credible praise. Political poetry also helped him feel comfortable critiquing miseducation inside of the very schooling context that he believed oppressed other youth of colour. Allowing students to be honest about the ways they feel about school helped students feel comfortable and open in schooling spaces they otherwise feel alienated from and silenced in. Furthermore, the unit was able to maintain Riddler’s dignity as young man with a “street”-oriented identity.

Since much of the students’ poetic sentiments above may give the impression that political, nationalistic performance poetry teaches students hate, I argue that learning to re-define reality is as Paulo Freire (1972) conceptualized, “an act of love” (p. 27). This performance poetry unit was, instead of hateful teaching, a pedagogical process towards student self-actualization – where they were allowed to critically think, write and voice their subjectivities in relation to the history and material conditions that they are implicated in. This self-actualization was marked by their articulations of the very anger and frustration that guided their newfound desire to rename the world one poetic line at a time. As teachers, we need to learn, with relevant pedagogies such as these, to become comfortable with the discomfort that may arise when listening to urban youth articulate their interpretation of reality.

OUTRO¹⁰

As an educator, researcher and product of what Bakari Kitwana (2003) referred to as the Hip-hop generation, I recognize the socially empowering potential performance-poetry has in helping urban youth facilitate a critical social consciousness. My teaching experience and research in education recognizes that school curriculum does not address the unjust conditions that shape my students' experiences. By avoiding and/or marginalizing critically relevant pedagogy in classrooms, we tolerate students' self-defeating ideologies and practices that inhibit the individual and collective growth urban students can undergo in and beyond their communities.

Urban students of colour are continuing to face the negative consequences of educational irrelevance in schools and this demands from classroom practitioners that we move beyond teaching for teaching's sake. However, we must not think of teaching for social justice as teaching apart from the daily realities of the youth we intend to teach. To do so all but guarantees the irrelevance of our project. To date, most of our "good intentions" have given social justice work a bad name among large numbers of urban youth. Far too many youth are turned off by the ways *we* want to improve *their* lives. If social justice teachers want to be more effective with urban youth, we have to channel our students' energy with their own and struggle against the conditions that undermine their dignity as ethnic peoples. To embark on this project we must embrace new pedagogical and assessment tools, ones that encourage the development of critical social consciousness, liberatory literacies, and highly engaging models of learning. Performance poetry is but one such tool. Indeed, the level of investment and engagement that we seek from our young people is possible, and it is high time that social justice educators find and use those strategies with greater fervour and frequency.

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¹⁰ An "outro" (sometimes "outtro") or "extro" is the conclusion to a piece of music, literature or television programme.

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Appendix A: Modified from June Jordan's *Poetry for the People* with a few additions.

Guidelines for Critiquing and Creating a Poem:

1. Have a central concept / theme / title
2. Read it aloud.
3. Is it poetic?
 - a. Does it reveal a profound / intense / insightful **truth**?
 - b. Do you hit hard with less words?
 - c. How precise is the thickness and intensity of expression?
4. What is the poem's purpose? How can you tell?
5. What are the strengths of the poem? How?
6. What are the weaknesses of the poem? Why?
7. What strong images stand out? How?
8. What words or phrases are intense? Why?
9. Technical Checklist:
 - a. Strong, descriptive verbs. Eliminate all forms of the verbs "to be."
 - b. Vivid diction
 - c. Metaphors or figures of speech
 - d. Alliteration / Assonance / Dissonance
 - e. Rich / echoing / "deep" and descriptive details
 - f. Avoidance of generalities and simplification
 - g. Fascinating (horizontal and/or vertical) rhythm and/or vertical line breaks.
 - h. Rhyme
 - i. Consistency of voice
 - j. Dramatic turn of event
 - k. Punctuation (Leave punctuations out!)
10. Is it complete? Is it a dramatic event?
 - a. Does it have a **beginning** that builds
 - b. to a compelling **middle** and move to an
 - c. **ending** that "lands" the poem and fully satisfies the reader/ audience?
11. How does it fit into, change, or challenge a tradition of poems?
12. Read the poem aloud!

Go through it again!