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Writing Ourselves Into Existence: A Spoken Word Artist's Autoethnography of a Liberatory Hip-Hop Pedagogy

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by

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ABSTRACT

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While there is growing research about the positive impact of teaching artists (TAs), these professional arts educators are an underused resource. As a TA, I have more than a decade of experience implementing spoken word and hip-hop as a pedagogical approach in urban public school classrooms. By conducting this autoethnographic study, I sought to explore insights from these 10 years of lived experience for understanding and documenting the critical principles of my practice as a TA. This autoethnography of my life as a TA tells stories from urban public school classrooms during my formative years as an educator. The research explored the impact my artistic practices have had on developing my pedagogical approach, including the emotional and financial challenges inherent to working on the margins. By interpreting and analyzing ethnographic material from five residencies, this research resulted in complex narrative accounts, which provide insights for the field of arts education, with a specific focus on TAs. Moreover, this study offers a visionary context for a liberatory educational praxis of spoken word and hip-hop in classrooms and communities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Citizens of Hip-Hop

Hi(story) will no longer be told

by the so-called hi(story)-tellers,

but at open mics

on mixtapes

and in corner-freestyle-sessions

around the world

The time is near,

i can hear the sound of victory

over buildings and over mountains.

Keep your Black & White

composition notebooks close.

Put your words all over the lines

and into the margins

as we write ourselves into existence.

I have recited this poem to hundreds of young people—in classrooms, school assemblies, and community spaces. I use this mythopoetic address to engage young people as citizens of an imagined hip-hop nation, and then hand them notebooks filled with blank pages. Hi(story) will no longer be told by the so-called hi(story) tellers. I use this invocation as an invitation into a sacred practice, which comes with it an urgent responsibility: We must write ourselves into existence.

Education runs in my blood. Both my mother and grandmother were elementary school teachers (see Figure 1). Both earned master's degrees in education. While I was growing up, when asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up," I always answered, "A teacher."

As an African American spoken word artist, I have grown accustomed to living in and speaking from the margins. My work context as a teaching artist (TA) is in the small spaces schools provide for student-centered art practices, an assembly visit and Q&A here, a 12-week residency there. Citizens of hip-hop. I use my own poetry to interrupt scripted curriculums and Eurocentric knowledge. Put your words all over the lines and into the margins. I teach so that educational institutions are filled with the echoing voices of students.

Over a decade of teaching spoken word, I have invited hundreds of young people of varying ages, in dozens of learning communities, to write a poem. During my workshops, I ask students to listen to poetry, to each other, and to themselves; to read poems and to read the world; to ruthlessly self-reflect; to ask questions, play with language, declare their ideas, and to bend to the will of the poems they are composing. During culminating events, students return with the elixir, a poem that they share with their school community.

It was through my experiences in public schools that my passion for learning waned, and my interest in pursuing a profession in education faded. Though I cannot pinpoint the exact moment, I turn back to a memory in Mrs. Brown's math class while I sat in my seat, painfully writing a heading on a blank page to provide her with documentation for missed homework assignments while she waited at the front of each row to ensure that every single student had handed in an assignment: upper, right-hand corner, "school"; "Math 701" below; upper, left-hand corner, "First name, Last name"; "Month Date, Year." Perhaps, it was when Mrs. Steinberg called the only Black boy in honors 10th-grade English to the front of the class and asked, "Do

Figure 1. Education runs in my blood.
My undergraduate genealogy presentation (2006) features photos of my grandmother, Shirley Redmon, mother, Sheila Gasper, and myself in fourth grade with "Student of the Month," commendation card, also framed.

you want to be in the other English class with the rest of the dummies?" As was common knowledge in the communities in which I grew up, the public school system was generally desensitization to the needs, voices, and lived experiences of students of color.

During my sophomore year of high school, I began to write poetry after discovering the poetry of Langston Hughes. Sometimes, I would cut school and go to the park to read and write. Like any beginning writer, I began to write poetry in the style of Hughes. Like a young band of musicians, many of the first poems I composed were "covers" of Hughes. Over the next couple

of years, I assembled a collection of poems entitled, Urban Youth Blues, influenced by Hughes' musical cadence, use of colloquial language, and repetition. My poems expressed my voice striving for a hopeful future in the midst of the negative perceptions, portrayals, and possibilities of myself as a young, Black male against a backdrop of urban decay. I placed a clipart image of a polluted city landscape in the center of my cover page with a subtitle reading, A Book of Poems for the Urban Youth from an Urban Youth (see Figure 2). Already, my vision for using poetry to engage with young people was seeded.

Having discovered a vibrant spoken word community, I began performing my poems at creative venues around the city. I listened to a diverse range of voices, and waited excitedly for the three minutes to contribute my voice. Unlike my experiences in school, I felt safe to express my unique voice in these liberatory spaces. My engagement in spoken word communities encompassed academic skills I resented learning as a public school student. I devoured books while riding on the subway during my long commutes to cultural venues throughout the region. I read, wrote, read, engaged in dialogue, read, wrote, and performed constantly, I developed my voice through participation in these literary communities while studying poets and scholars of my generation, and throughout time. In 2002, I won a highly coveted poetry slam, which led to performances nationally. In the years to follow, I performed on hundreds of stages in bookstores, bars, cafes, libraries, churches, rallies, conferences, panel discussions, prisons, universities, performing arts centers, or anywhere I was asked to perform (see Figure 3). Not only was I gaining notoriety for my work, I was connecting to artistic, social and political communities. Increasingly, I was invited to teach the art of spoken word to young people. In this way, my practice as a TA began.

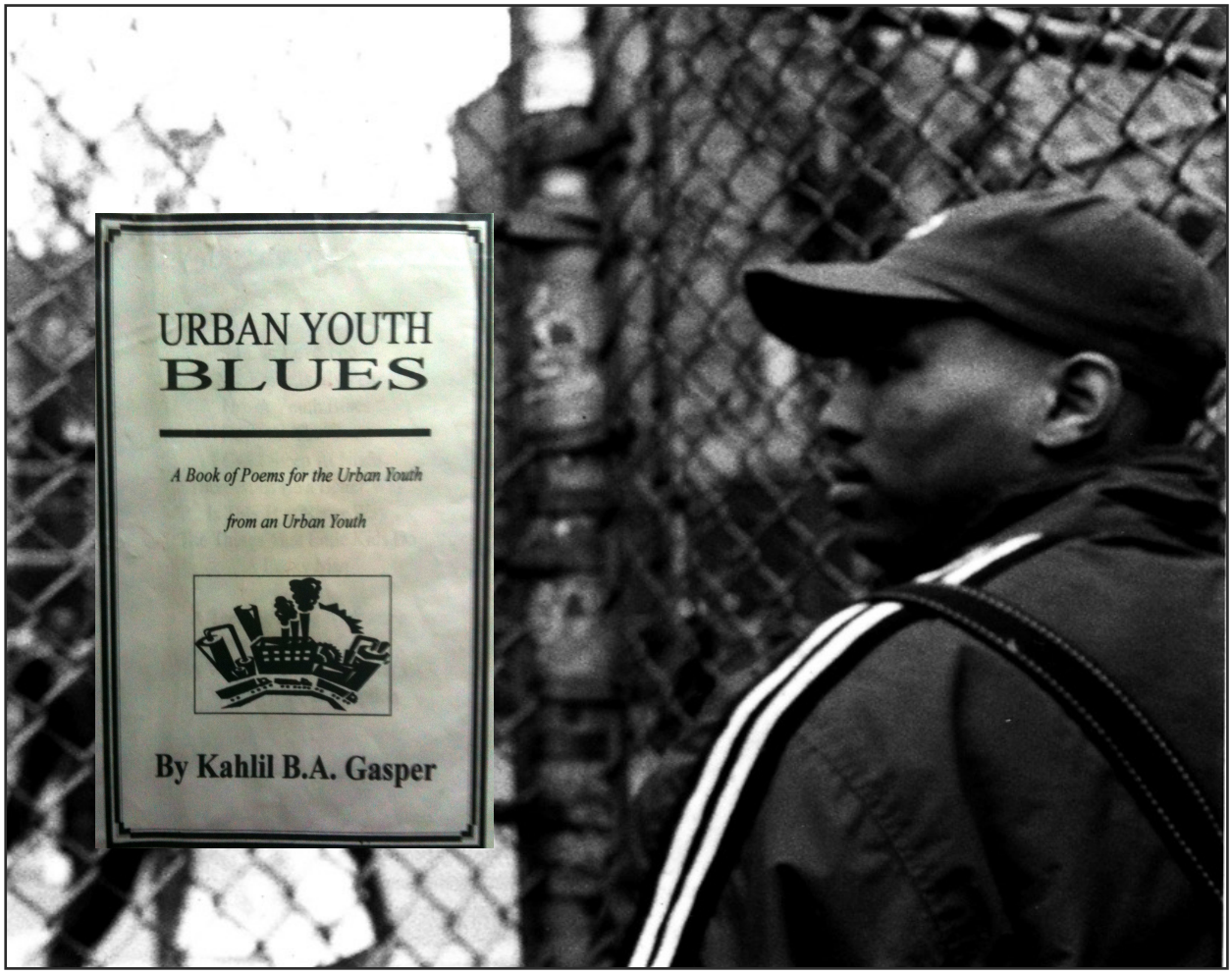


Figure 2. Urban Youth Blues.
Cover of my first collection of poetry with a photo of myself as a teenager at West 4th park, New York City, in 1995. Photo taken by Marléna Gasper.

Poetry reignited my passion to teach. Through my years of teaching, I made the road by walking (Horton & Freire, 1990), developing my pedagogical practice alongside students and educators (see Figure 4). Without formal training, I successfully implemented transformative workshops in varying classrooms, both during the school day and after school. In my workshops, students became poets, community leaders, scholars, and activists. When young people perform their critically considered words, they embody the principles of social justice. In those brief moments, I witnessed the power of education to empower young people to express their truths.

Figure 3. Performing at the Bowery Poetry Club at a benefit in New York City in 2006.

Figure 4. Teaching and reading from my book, "Growing Up Hip-Hop," at P.S. 145Q while students read along in Queens, New York City, in 2006.

Though I was engaged in transformative arts education inside my classrooms, I still found myself, and TAs like me, on the margins of the field of education, unable to provide young people with the quality experiences they urgently need to become critically conscious and self-determined subjects of their own lives. The chronic underemployment, inadequate funding, and years of budgets cuts to arts program left me emotionally and mentally fatigued. I left the bruising winters of NYC for sunny Los Angeles, with the hope of securing stable employment while continuing the work that I remain passionate about. This study, then, is fundamentally rooted in my efforts to survive as a TA.

In this autoethnographic study, I invite readers to witness my life as a TA using spoken word and hip-hop as liberatory pedagogies in NYC public schools. Students' voices are at the center of this discourse, just as their voices were amplified in my classrooms: Shaniqua restructures our class into a hip-hop production team; Elizabeth receives a standing ovation after reciting her poem, "America, as of Yet Untitled," and Jonathan tries to get the class to quiet down for the open mic. Hopefully, this study will provide educators, whose institutional and/or personal mission includes justice, with insights into the transformative possibilities of spoken word and hip-hop in the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

"New York New York, big city of dreams/And everything in New York ain't always what it seems" (Fletcher, Glover, Robinson, & Chase, 1982). It was streetwise lyrics, like these, recorded by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five on their 1982 groundbreaking hip-hop album, The *Message*, which gained notoriety for the young art form's ability to both amplify the lived experiences of socioeconomically marginalized people while also topping sales charts. The song details the hopelessness and nihilism that impoverishment breeds, warning the listener to

look at the hypocrisy behind "what it seems," to the profound inequities beneath. "Staring at a skyscraper reaching into heaven/ When over in the ghetto I'm livin' in hell" (Fletcher et al., 1982). In NYC, referred to as the cultural capital of the world, "public school students do not enjoy equal access to arts education" (Center for Arts Education [CAE], 2009, p. 2). The 2009 report concludes that in the city where the arts could have the greatest impact, students from impoverished neighborhoods have the least opportunities (CAE, 2009).

In education, it has become commonplace to expect that when budgets are cut, art is the first thing to go. Hence, it is no surprise that arts education has been on the decline in U.S. public schools for decades. A study by the Center on Education Policy reported that almost all of the state arts agencies they convened reported cutbacks in their arts education budgets as a result of overall budget restrictions (Herbert, 1995). In recent years, arts education continues to be deprioritized as national policies have prompted school administrators to focus on "core subjects" and test preparation to raise student scores and, thus, measures of school performance.

"When young people are involved with the arts, something changes in their lives" (Fiske, 1999, p. 7). In an analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's student database of 25,000, "students with high levels of arts participation outperform 'arts poor' students by virtually every measure" (Fiske, 1999, p. 11). In report after report, program after program, learning in the arts is "strongly correlated with improved student behavior, attendance, engagement in school, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, social development, and, yes, even test scores" (Rabkin, Reynolds, Hedberg, & Shelby, 2011, p. 4).

Policymakers, from the federal to the district level, agree on the value of integrating the arts into classrooms. During Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, he made a call to support arts education. Early in his presidency, he created an Arts Policy Council made up of

artists, cultural leaders, educators, and advocates to advise him on policy matters related to the arts. The committee stated that it was imperative to nurture the creativity of America's children to remain competitive in the global economy. In 2011, he issued a federal government report, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*. The report refers to research conducted over the past 20 years, which has proven a range of benefits when students participate in arts education, including academic achievement, motivation and engagement, critical thinking, and social competencies (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities [PCAH], 2011).

Echoing the federal government's call, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2010) put forth a resolution for an increase in arts education. Locally, in 2012, the Los Angeles Unified School District published, *The Arts Education and Creative Cultural Network Plan*, a 5-year plan for increasing arts instruction. Sadly, even though arts education is considered good pedagogy, it is still underused in schools, particularly in communities where arts education is most needed.

While President Obama's report asked for a reinvestment in arts education, his policy, Race to the Top, put pressure on school districts to use test scores as measures of accountability for students, classroom teachers, and schools. Still, even President Obama later warned about the overreliance on testing:

> One thing I never want to see happen is schools that are just teaching the test because then you're not learning about the world, you're not learning about different cultures, you're not learning about science, you're not learning about math. All you're learning about is how to fill out a little bubble on an exam and little tricks that you need to do in order to take a test. (as cited in Werner, 2011, p. 1)

Reform leaders from all sectors are calling for a transformation of what students learn, and how they learn it, "yet, paradoxically, the nation's public schools are on a downward trend in terms of providing students meaningful access to the arts" (Fiske, 1999, p. 30).

To present the case for the transformative power of arts education, we must first acknowledge that we live in a society that values numerical, data-driven analysis when making decisions about the allocation of resources. Part of why art education is undervalued is that it is so poorly misunderstood. For most of U.S. history, the purpose of arts education was to transmit aesthetic values to a privileged elite, or teach technical skills that would feed industry (Efland, 1990). Arts education continued to be relegated to the margins after A Nation at Risk was published in 1983, arguing that the quality of education was so poor that it was a serious threat to national security (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). Since the 1980s, arts education has been incorrectly perceived as intellectually undemanding and thus pushed to the perimeter of schools' core curricula (Eisner, 2002).

During recent years, the value of arts education has increased. The arts have been recognized as critically important for developing complex aspects of mind (Eisner, 2002). Arts education fulfills many of the goals of education in a democratic society, providing personal fulfillment, nurturing social consciousness, and transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to the next (Chapman, 1978, p. 19). Increasingly, research is focusing on arts integration "designed to promote the transfer of learning between the arts and other subjects" (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011 p. 9). It is not art for art's sake, but rather "arts for learning's sake" (Weissman, as cited in Rabkin, 2011, p. 25).

Cutting arts funding is especially detrimental for Black and Latinx students, who are disproportionately impacted. In the introduction of a 2015 report by the Art Education

Partnership entitled The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success, they begin advocating for quality arts education for all students by stating that "wide disparities in educational access and opportunity persist among different groups of students based on income, race, and ethnicity" (para 1). Since 1980, for example, arts education for Black students has declined 49% and 40% for Latinx students (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Only 26% of African American youth and 28% of Latinx youth reported participating in the arts in school, compared to 58% of White youth (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). For Black and Latinx youth, the lack of sustained, quality arts instruction is not only an issue of equity and injustice, it is a missed pedagogical opportunity as the differences gained from high arts participation are more significant among students from low-income backgrounds (Fiske, 1999, p. 11). Schools with students who could benefit most from the arts "either do not recognize the benefits of arts education or do not have the resources to provide it to their students" (PCAH, 2011, p. 11).

A critical approach is needed to appreciate the political role of arts education when it is implemented or lacking in the public school experiences of historically marginalized students. Critical arts educators are "committed to the ideal and practice of social justice within schools [and to] the transformation of those structures and conditions within society that functioned to thwart the democratic participation of all people" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 2). Because critiquing and reimagining educational structures is a necessary step toward ensuring quality arts education for marginalized youth, it is an underlying assumption of this study that a critical approach to arts education is essential to achieve goals rooted in social justice.

Arts education has the emancipatory potential to provide young people with learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts, and bodies. Arts education will remain on the margins of educational reform policy until school leaders see it as a tool for disrupting the

normalization of failure that characterizes so many public schools (Rabkin et al., 2011). By providing a first-hand account of a critical arts education practice, my hope is to impress upon educators and policymakers the need to recognize the transformative educational potential of the arts to the schooling of students from oppressed communities.

Spoken Word: A Working Definition

The term *spoken word* is often used to refer to and encompass a range of oral traditions. The best working definition for this research is to pull from the spoken word traditions in which I participated. In an essay, "Crossing Boundaries, Crossing Cultures: Poetry, Performance, and the New American Revolution," Luis Rodriguez (2003) remarked, "Poetry is having a resurgence in America, and mostly from the communities and populations normally not considered poetic" (p. 210). This spoken word tradition is a nationally networked movement that "inherently adheres to the intellectual and social upliftment of the collective" (Joseph, 2006, p. 13).

In *Siempre Pa'l Arte: The Passions of Latina/o Spoken Word*, David Colón (2016) described spoken word as "inextricably linked to the personal and the bodily, a metaliterary mode of creative expression that is embodied as it is performed" (p. 272). In defining spoken word, it is tempting to compare it to performance poetry. Colón (2016) wrote that spoken word "deviates from inherited notions of poetry into the less discrete category of we-know-it-when-we-see-it" (p. 272). *You know? Spoken word.*

To further define, Colón (2016) referred to the spoken word communities in which I participated, originating from the cultural center that was my "Home Mic," the Nuyorican Poets Café (see Figure 5). The strand of this emerging spoken word movement in which I was rooted was the African American poetic tradition anchored by the Black Arts

Figure 5. At a school desk at the Nuyorican Poets Café in 2006. Photo taken by Betty Bastidas.

Movement of the 1960s. One of this movement's most enduring vocal ambassadors, Amiri Baraka (2016), said, "As long as the oppressed tell their true story it will carry the edge of protest" (p. 23). Miguel Algarín (1994), founder of the venue, said, "There need be no separation between politics and poetry. The aesthetic that informs the poet is of necessity involved in the social conditions that the people of the world are in" (p. 10).

These definitions of spoken word are embodied in cultural venues throughout the nation. It was my experiences engaged in these communities where I honed my voice, and my aesthetic

mission was shaped by many others. It was within spoken word communities that I engaged with the complexity that emerges from a diverse range of cultural and political expression. In *Aloud! Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (1994), co-edited with Bob Holman, Algarín (1994) says of the spoken word of the 1990s: "It is clear that we now are entering a new era, where the dialogue is multi-ethnic and necessitates a larger field of verbal action to explain the cultural and political reality of North America" (p. 9).

Teaching Artist: A Working Definition

For the purposes of this study, it is helpful to provide a working definition of teaching artist (TA). To be a TA, first you have to be an artist. Teaching artists are "hybrid professionals," artists, working as experts in their fields, who also teach art skills and lead arts integration projects (PCAH, 2011). Other terms used to refer to these individuals and practices include: "artist-in-residence," "residency artist," "artist-educator," "visiting artist," "arts consultant," "arts expert," "arts provider," "workshop leader," or even just "artist" (Booth, 2003, p. 2).

Teaching artists perform a different function than arts specialists. While arts specialists deliver sequential curriculums geared to state standards, TAs usually focus on engaging students through project-based learning (PCAH, 2011), emphasizing artistic processes, not just artistic products (Booth, 2003). It is TAs learning approach that makes their contributions different, in that there is an emphasis on the "capacity to draw in, to activate participation" (Booth, 2003, p. 4). Teaching artists engage participants as meaning-makers, and are able to "connect their art form to other important areas of life: to other information in schools, to other arts, to things happening in the world, and (most importantly) to relevant aspects of people's lives" (p. 3). Another important aspect of TA's work is as living examples. Teaching artists introduce students to the life of a working artist, as role models for aspiring young artists, and connections to

resources (PCAH, 2011). Teaching artists do not just "teach about the arts, they embody the teaching" (Booth, 2003, p. 4).

Unfortunately, TAs face a field that relegates the arts, and therefore, TAs to the margins. To understand my marginal position as a TA, I refer to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago's report, "Teaching Artists and the Future of Education," published in the fall of 2011 (Rabkin et al., 2011). To provide insights into the state of arts education, the report focuses on TAs themselves. The report argued:

> The best of the new arts education efforts seemed to be finding powerful ways to engage reluctant students in schools, enliven classrooms, improve attendance, illuminate students' lived experience, help them master content and skills in other subjects, revitalize teachers, and make schools happier places to teach and learn. These efforts were reconceptualizing the roles of arts education in schools and the ways the arts are taught. They were making a real difference, yielding promising results in communities across the nation. Teaching artists seemed to be at the center of virtually all of them. (Rabkin et al., 2011, p. xi)

Findings from the report are compelling. Teaching artists' strategies are aligned with what experts agree are the principles of good teaching and learning (Rabkin et al., 2011). Why is this? Only 22% of TAs have formal training in education (Rabkin et al., 2011). It turns out that the skills used to make art also makes good education: "vision and planning, imagination, discipline, attention to detail, seeing the whole, pattern making, reflection, revision, assessment, persistence, judgment, spontaneity, and play among them" (Rabkin et al., 2011, p. 28). Teaching artists know how to engage multiple intelligences and different learning styles, so learners who often struggle in some areas of learning thrive in response to the work of the TAs (Booth, 2003).

The findings also report that TAs are at the center of progressive educational pedagogy, but are underpaid and underemployed (Rabkin et al., 2011). According to a report that covered 12 cities across the country: (a) TAs earn $36,000 a year, on average; (b) 20% do not have health insurance; and (c) half do not have a retirement plan. As far as working conditions, 40% say that opportunities have gotten worse over the years; and while, overall, TAs find their work satisfying, a whopping 87% of those working part-time said they would take more work if it were available (Rabkin et al., 2011). As a chronically underemployed TA, I can personally attest to the accuracy of these findings.

Currently, the term teaching artist is used to describes a practice, not a profession. Some TAs are wary of professionalizing the field (Booth, 2003), given their emancipatory commitment to a fluid and open use of their expertise in defiance of standardization. Nevertheless, there are those who believe that such a move would help shift the perception of "teaching artistry as something more than a quick buck for the underemployed" (Booth, 2003, p. 5). Freire suggested that critical educators develop a strong command of their particular academic discipline (Darder et al., 2003). This commitment to be a critical educator is the motivation behind my own development as a professional.

Previous research provides my study with evaluative tools for interpretation and analysis of my data. The current study builds on prior research by providing an insider's perspective of key themes, questions, findings, and recommendations. I will reference what the report says about TA practices in the following areas: What is good teaching? What do their professional development opportunities look like? How do they develop their practice? What impact do they have on schools? What are their working conditions, and how can we get them paid? How do marginalized critical educators cope with isolation and alienation?

Research Questions

This qualitative study will use autoethnographic methods to explore the liberatory pedagogical practice of a spoken word TA working on the margins of the field of education in New York City. Through telling stories of my educational interventions with students, as a Black, male, spoken word artist-educator, with a hip-hop-based theoretical lens, teaching critical arts education, I seek to address the following questions:

1. What do the lived experiences of a spoken word teaching artist show us about spoken word and hip-hop as pedagogies of liberation?
2. How did I, as a teaching artist, develop my hip-hop pedagogical practice?
3. What are possibilities for documenting the social justice dimensions of a teaching artist's pedagogical practice?

Perception may be the most vital natural resource left on this planet. This was made evident with *The New York Times* report following the largest mass protest in human history on February 15, 2003, there are once again "two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion" (Tyler, 2003, para. 1). Our collective global consciousness may be the lone force that can withstand a military as pervasive and powerful as any in human history. My art happens at this critical intersection, in this fragile moment, pregnant with hope and despair. I believe if human beings could truly see ourselves, the world could be the place of our deepest desires and imagination. I believe another world is possible, and echoing the sentiment coming out of the U.S. Social Forum in 2007, another world is necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to conduct a autoethnographic study to analyze and interpret my experiences as a Black, male, spoken word TA, working in the margins of the field

of education in NYC. The purpose was to understand the formation of my pedagogy, and the tensions associated with implementing liberatory pedagogy in different educational contexts. Through this process, I sought to provide findings that would expose leaders to critical classroom practices in action. In my study, I explored my experiences as a student, as a spoken word artist, and as a TA to provide context for understanding my position within education as well as the evolution of my passion for teaching and learning.

Why tell the story of my pedagogical formation? By providing a narrative account of my lived-experiences, I hope stories from my practice as a TA, in general, and a hip-hop educator, specifically, can provide insights into the potential for implementing liberatory pedagogies in schools in various contexts. Educators who believe in student-centered, culturally relevant, inquiry-based, critical arts instruction can learn from students alongside me.

Finally, this study sought to provide an intimate, frontline view of the impact of arts education. With this research, I hope to demonstrate an engaged, and evolving teaching practice, while documenting stories of student engagement with arts education. By also incorporating student poetry as data, my hope is to provide educational leaders with invaluable insights toward engaging the critical hearts and minds of teachers and students in the struggle for voice and emancipatory knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Building urban public school systems with a human rights framework can "re-energize the promise of public education," and help places like NYC to "realize its best self as a democratic, equitable, secure and culturally vibrant place to live" (Anderson, Barnes, & Blewer, 2012, p. 4). Within a human rights model, education is recognized as essential to human development, and a right for all (Anderson et al., 2012). Within this context, I study spoken word

and hip-hop as liberatory approaches anchored in critical pedagogy, following in a tradition of educators who have given shape to "an emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling in the United States during the twentieth century" (Darder et al., 2003, p. 2). Specifically, these principles engage the schooling of oppressed communities through concerns tied to cultural politics, economics, the historicity of knowledge, dialectics, ideology, critique, hegemony, counterhegemony, dialogue, and the evolution of social consciousness (Darder, 2012; Darder et al., 2003). These critical principles anchor the approaches of critical educators who use spoken word and hip-hop to teach with, and through, the arts in urban public school classrooms.

To articulate the dimensions of these critical principles, I am moved, as was Maxine Greene (2003), to "make some poets' voices audible at the start" (as cited in Darder et al., p. 97). Hip-hop's most critical poets, dead prez, puts forth a scathing analysis of how public schools work against the interests of urban youth in their song, "They Schools": "They schools can't teach us shit/My people need freedom, we trying to get all we can get" (Gavin & Alford, 2000, track 3). The chorus calls for an emancipatory alternative: "They schools ain't teaching us, what we need to know to survive./They schools don't educate, all they teach the people is lies" (Gavin & Alford, 2000, track 3). The lyrics are testimonies of personal experiences in school, including: confronting racist teachers and a Eurocentric curriculum; snapshots of drug dealers and teenage mothers as painful reminders of the material conditions that impoverishment youth face; a call to validate students' lived experiences into their learning; a challenge of the notion of schools as equalizers to socioeconomic inequities; and, ultimately, resistance through nonparticipation, and reclaiming education within the context of an emancipatory practice.

As the song concludes, the emcee delivers a scathing critique of how schools perpetuate asymmetrical power relations that "serve to replicate the existing values and privileges of the culture of the dominant class" (Darder et al., 2003, p. 11).

Cuz see the schools ain't teachin us nothin

They ain't teachin us nothin but how to be slaves and hardworkers

For white people to build up they shit

Make they businesses successful while it's exploitin us

Knowhatimsayin? And they ain't teachin us nothin related to

Solvin our own problems, knowhatimsayin?

Ain't teachin us how to get crack out the ghetto

They ain't teachin us how to stop the police from murdering us

And brutalizing us, they ain't teachin us how to get our rent paid

Knowhatimsayin? They ain't teachin our families how to interact

Better with each other, knowhatimsayin? They just teachin us

How to build they shit up, knowhatimsayin? That's why my niggas

Got a problem with this shit, that's why niggas be droppin out that

Shit cuz it don't relate, you go to school the fuckin police

Searchin you you walkin in your shit like this a military compound

Knowhatimsayin? So school don't even relate to us

Until we have some shit where we control the fuckin school system

Where we reflect how we gon solve our own problems

Them niggas ain't gon relate to school, shit that just how it is

Knowhatimsayin? And I love education, knowhatimsayin?

> But if education ain't elevatin me, then you knowhatimsayin it ain't takin me
> Where I need to go on some bullshit, then fuck education (Gavin & Alford, 2000, track 3).

Through these lyrics, dead prez simultaneously acknowledges and embodies a critique of the school system, the necessity for resistance, and a call for an emancipatory alternative.

Within the context of this study, hip-hop pedagogy reflects an overarching theoretical lens and framework that guides my thinking, while spoken word pedagogy is the pedagogical method that guides my classroom practice. As a pedagogical tool, spoken word addresses many of the critiques of hip-hop pedagogy. In contrast to hip-hop's male-centered, misogynist, homophobic, and heteronormative tendencies, spoken word "allows for issues of race, class, gender and sexuality to be freely questioned and affirmed" (Stovall, 2006a, p. 65); as such, spoken word pedagogy has the potential to create "liberatory spaces" within schools.

In communion with these artists, educators who use hip-hop and spoken word as critical approaches have a deep commitment to the "development and evolvement of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and disenfranchised students" (Darder et al., 2003, p. 11). In their classroom practices, hip-hop educators take on the role of facilitators, "engaging students to shape the class throughout its progression" (Stovall, 2006, p. 587). Liberatory educators take a dialectical approach, engaging students in consciousness-raising dialogue (Darder et al., 2003). Educators begin with students' lived experiences (Desai & Marsh, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005); build on existing assets, especially students' multiple literacies (Fisher, 2005; Hall, 2007, Reyes, 2006; Wiseman, 2007), develop horizontal relationships between students and teachers (Desai & Marsh, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Wiseman, 2007); challenge students through questioning (Hall**,** 2007;

Reyes, 2006; Stovall 2006), and structure their classes using participatory, democratic engagements (Desai & Marsh, 2005; Ellis, Gere, & Lamberton, 2003; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). The goal is to transform classroom practices and school structures that perpetuate undemocratic life (Darder et al., 2003). These pedagogies combine the efforts of hundreds of educators bringing their varied legacies and practices, and are positioned to emerge as a central feature to emancipatory schooling for urban students.

Methodology

For school leaders and policy-makers to understand the power of arts education, it is important to "look at what the practitioners of it do" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5; see Figure 6). Therefore, using an autoethnographic method is not only appropriate, but also an imperative to providing a first-hand account from within the cultural field. This narrative approach is a means toward gaining an interpretive theory of educational practice.

"Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 1). My research is both autobiographic, in that it uses stories from my personal experiences, and ethnographic, in that it is about the cultural experience of a group of people. It is autoethnographic, in that I am a member of the cultural group(s) under study (Ellis et al., 2011). My study falls into the category of "texts by complete-member researchers," who "explore groups of which they are already members with complete identification and acceptance" (Chang, 2008, p. 38). The purpose of my study is to arrive at a critical narrative based upon my experiences as a spoken word TA, working in the margins of the field of education. The purpose is not to produce a standard social science text, but to move others to ethical action.

Figure 6. Performing at MADE Here event in New York City in 2011.

This study weaves my story together with my students' stories and insights from practitioners in the field. The specific type of autoethnography is a hybrid of narrative ethnography and personal narrative. As a narrative ethnography, I present stories about the young people, educators, and administrators who make up the educational worlds my work inhabits (Ellis et al., 2011). While capturing the work inside the classroom, I also tell my personal narrative to present my experiences as a TA as a phenomenon worthy of study (Ellis et al., 2011).

In my position as a teacher-artist-research, I both self-report and analyze my teaching practice, and relationships with students and other educators. Autoethnography in educational contexts is also a study of culture, transcending the autobiographical by "connecting the personal

to the cultural" (Chang, 2008, p. 46), and it is a study of asymmetrical power relations that impact the schools and society (Darder 2012). Like ethnography, the ultimate goal of autoethnography is furthering cultural understanding (Chang, 2008). My study used ethnographic processes of data collection, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation concurrently.

Through my autoethnographic process, I asked the question, what if the social sciences were "closer to literature than to physics, if they proffered stories rather than theories"? (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2). Autoethnography uses a "reader-friendly" approach, implementing a writing style that appeals to readers much more than conventional scholarly writing (Chang, 2008). The possibilities of autoethnographic research are inspiring. I did not enter into this "storytelling institution" lightly (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 2). An autoethnography is an opportunity to provide a thick description, as well as equip the reader with the ability to understand subtle distinctions and complexities (Geertz, 1973). As a critical researcher, this will take consistent practice and rigorous academic work.

Significance of the Study

I am a proud product of public schools. While I was profoundly alienated by traditional schooling practices, I was somewhat inoculated by my mother's labor as an educator in her home with her children. My mother provided a strong foundation, and filled in the gaps as I made my way through the education system. She taught us to be proud of our cultural heritage, and to take pride in our work. She consistently challenged us to learn, and made learning fun through activities and games. She instilled basic skills in my sisters and me, making us sit for hours practicing penmanship on large tablets, and drilling basic math equations into our heads through flash cards and colorful workbooks. On Saturdays, she took us to one-on-one music classes. On weekends, during the summers, and even on vacations, she provided us with a range of books

and educational tools that used the latest digital technologies. When we were teenagers, she made sure that we participated in weekly homework assistance and a tutoring program at our church, which she taught. It was through these foundational skills that I was able to excel at standardized education, scoring well on tests, and earning good grades. Being tracked as an honors student provided me with educational experiences during my adolescent years that were diverse, had access to music and arts programs, special projects, events, and field trips.

So, I take it personally when I hear people speak negatively about the status of public schools. Whether it be a casual conversation with a friend over dinner, or a longitudinal survey of an entire school district, I feel defensive when I hear the listing of negative outcomes. In response, I share stories of my students, often leading to impromptu poetry readings. Last year, I collected my student works in books and handed them out as gifts during the holidays.

So, when report after report arrives at the same findings—that urban, public school youth do not have access to quality arts education, it is profoundly disturbing, and deeply frustrating. Why invest money in research only to arrive at the same findings over and over again? Where are the stories about the transformative work of TAs using spoken word and hip-hop as educational tools in the classroom?

This study sought to address the gaps in current academic research of the lived experiences of TAs who used critical approaches in public school classrooms. This research will specifically contribute to the field of arts education by providing an insider account. While this study will tell stories to explore pedagogical practices, it will also speak directly to the challenges of implementing critical arts education. If educational leaders want to improve the access that urban youth have to quality arts, then the issues explored in this narrative account must be acknowledged and addressed.

As an African American who attended urban public schools and who has spent more than a decade working on the margins of the field of education, my story is one that is seldom heard. Most of the individuals producing the policies, books, journals, articles, and research within the field of education do not share my ethnic heritage, my experiences as a public school student in the largest school district in the nation, or my unique perspective as a practitioner with more than a decade of work directly with students. By using an autoethnographic approach, I used my unique background to produce research from a perspective that is missing from discourse on how to improve education.

The stakes are high. President Obama called for the development of an "Artists Corps," national service program in his 2008 campaign policy. The plan is designed to bring artists into low-income schools and expand in-school opportunities for TAs. The U.S. Conference of Mayors echoed this call, in 2010, urging Congress to appropriate $53 million for the Arts in Education program at the U.S. Department of Education to establish a "national artist corps program to provide services and assistance to schools and arts organizations to improve arts education in our communities" (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2010, para 8). Although the arts are mandated by the State of California, and educational leaders at the federal, city, and school district levels agree that schools should focus on integrating arts into their classrooms—the arts continue to face cuts.

The first recommendation of the Teaching Artists and the Future of Education report is for TAs to tell stories from their classrooms to build demand for arts education:

> Research should be complemented by powerful stories about student learning and development, particularly stories about those students who have the most difficulty in schools. Success stories about them matter, and TAs are a fine source of such stories.

> TAs can document these stories themselves in journals, video, and audio. TAs can also be instrumental in "experiential advocacy" efforts. (Rabkin et al., 2011, p. 21)

The report, moreover, recognizes that TAs' unique leadership role as experiential advocates is "simply not available from other sources" (Rabkin et al., 2011, p. 21). As an arts educator, my fate was intricately linked with those of my students. By documenting my own practice, I hoped to make the case for more funding for arts education in general, and for TAs, specifically.

As educational leaders turn to TAs to provide invaluable insights into student success, I believe stories from my classrooms can provide examples of how young people explicitly engage in critical pedagogy. What I have lacked in financial compensation, I have gained rich experiences as an arts educator. Educational leaders committed to social justice can learn from these experiences to provide other young people with similarly liberatory educational experiences. This is also at the heart of what is truly significant about this study.

Where public education failed me, spoken word and hip-hop provided the context to develop a critical intellectual practice. It provided a place from which to witness hundreds of students courageously perform their poetry in front of their communities. It is these lived experiences that hopefully will provide invaluable insights into a new paradigm where young people have safe spaces to grow. This is especially important in Black and Brown communities with higher needs and fewer supports. Since quality education requires arts instruction, ensuring low-income students have sustained access to the arts is a human rights issue.

Limitations and Delimitations

Since I used an autoethnographic approach, my personal experiences were my primary data. I certainly do not consider my memory to be exceptional, or even above average. As a researcher, it was paramount to not exclusively rely on personal memory and recall as the only

data source (Change, 2008). It was also wise to balance by not over-emphasizing positive experiences or minimizing negative ones. “Memory is not always a friend to autoethnography; it is sometimes a foe. It often reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and unpredictable. Memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (Chang, 2008, p. 72).

Scholars have identified three specific pitfalls in the processes of conducting autoethnographic research. First is the issue of excessive focus on the self in isolation. To account for this, I focused my reflections on the “interconnectivity of self and others [and] digging wider into the cultural context of the individual stories commingled with others” (Chang, 2008, p. 50). Second is an overemphasis on narration, rather than analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). The stories within autoethnographic research are designed to provide insights into complex social science problems. By using theoretical concepts to drive the narrative account, I generated complex, layered stories with specific cultural perspectives. The third concern is the tendency for autoethnographers to neglect ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives. As an autoethnographer, relational concerns are a high priority during the research and writing process (Ellis, 2004). Because my identity was apparent in this study, it was extremely difficult to protect the anonymity of others who were intimately connected with my practice (Chang, 2008). Hence, my intention was to offer a descriptive analysis that led with the intentions of both truth and compassion as I reflected on experiences with different populations.

The first population this study impacted was students. All of my former students were at the time of this study above the age of 18, so no longer considered a vulnerable population, though they were at the time of their participation and writings. Sure, I could only use their first names, or change their names, but their poetry deserves authorship, and the majority of their names have been previously published alongside their poetry in student anthologies, recorded

and/or published online by schools or nonprofit organizations, or included in my own materials, which I have handed out in professional development sessions over the years. Perhaps, the ethical yardstick most appropriate is to handle my students' words and experiences with care, and respect in this reflective analysis of our engagement.

The second collective population worthy of consideration points to other educators, specifically teachers whom I had worked with in the classroom, and nonprofit managers. I have been highly critical of the latter group (nonprofit managers) throughout my career. These nonprofit organizations provided me with vital opportunities for my career, while, in the same breath, exploited my marginal economic status to provide them with unprotected, readily available labor. When my critical analysis could negatively implicate a specific individual, I did not use specific first or last names, and instead, spoke generally, attempting to balance my critique with sincere appreciation for their good work and noble intentions.

My positionality largely establishes how I delimited my study. By telling my story as a Black male TA, I followed the postmodern tradition of "defying the conventional authoritative elitism of autobiography" (Chang, 2008, p. 32). The fact that Black males are over-represented in police shootings outside of schools and suspensions inside of schools, while simultaneously being underrepresented in the teacher work force as well as the school leader work force, alone, provides a basis for my voice as being unconventional. It is my position as a practitioner who has successfully implemented critical arts programming in multiple contexts that made my story uniquely positioned to inform efforts to improve education.

This study was not meant to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach to arts education, which requires a diverse array of program models specific to each school context. Every school that "tries to address the vexing challenges of how to get more arts into schools does so differently"

(PCAH, 2011, p. 10). This study meant to provide insights into processes and practices that can be best learned through an in-depth narrative account.

To get to the heart of this study, I chose to focus only on my residencies within public schools where I taught multiple sessions during the formative years of my teaching practice, 2003–2010. And, although the problems I address are in the large realm of arts education, my specific focus was on "short and long-term teaching residencies for artists," and "arts integration strategies," not on delivery models that include "standards-based sequential arts curricula taught by arts specialists" (PCAH, 2011, p. 10).

Organization of Dissertation

The statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framing, and methodology presented in this first chapter provides an entry into my research. Chapter 2 articulates the critical principles of spoken word and hip-hop as emancipatory practices in the classroom. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for this study, with a specific focus on the intersections of spoken word and hip-hop as art forms and approaches to conducting autoethnographic research. Chapter 4 offers five stories from my formative teaching experiences. These narrative accounts feature the words and poems of NYC's youth while providing an in-depth life of a working TA, including the financial challenges of working in the margins. My fifth, and final chapter, includes discussion, findings, and recommendations directed at the field of arts education in general, with specific advice for other TAs.

Conclusion

There is insufficient research that takes an in-depth look at the practices of TAs. To address this gap in the literature, this study examined my classroom practice, including first-hand accounts of students growing in their expressive capabilities, and the formation of my

pedagogical practices in multiple educational contexts. Instead of being constantly frustrated by the lack of recognition of the contributions of TAs, I conducted this autoethnographic study to tell my own life history. My hope is that my lived experiences as a public school student, artist, activist, cultural worker, and educator, provides insights into hip-hop pedagogy as a liberatory approach for integrating artistic practices in a variety of educational settings.

Above all, the goal of this research was to create the conditions for urban, public school students to experience a way of learning that asks them to be fully present as historical subjects of their lives (Freire, 1970). If I grew up in a world where my vision to become an educator were nurtured, where would I be today? If the institutions of schooling I attended were more robustly funded, and filled with passionate educators willing to challenge and push me, today, I might be running my own school or small school district, writing educational policy, or teaching at my local university. I did not grow up in this parallel universe, however, inside the four walls of my classroom, I have power. I have confidence. I have voice. The classroom is the social location where I advance the social justice mission of providing quality arts education to urban, public school students, one residency, one class, and one student at a time.

CHAPTER 2

HIP-HOP AND SPOKEN WORD IN THE CLASSROOM: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The central purpose for this study was to examine the critical dimensions of my practice as a teaching artist (TA) working on the margins of urban, public school classrooms in NYC, as brushed against the existing literature on hip-hop pedagogy. By critically reflecting on my formative experiences as an arts educator, I hoped to provide insights into a humanizing alternative that enlivens the literature in the field. Hence, I begin this review of the literature with a lived classroom experience.

A Story from the Classroom

At best, the public education system sorts and tracks urban, public school students into low-skilled, low-paying labor (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). At worst, schools are pushing urban, public school students out and fast-tracking them for imprisonment and impoverishment. The lack of arts education in public schools is one way that this dominant culture of schooling operates (Greene, 1995). Throughout the history of public education, the "school curriculum is often detached from the needs of urban youth" (Camangian, 2008, p. 38). I know. I barely survived the NYC public school system myself. The education young people receive in urban, public schools fails to provide them/us with strategies to cope with and transform the harsh realities they/we face.

As soon as I arrived for Session 4, I noticed the T-shirt AK was wearing: "Hip-Hop is Bigger than the Government." The quotation is from "The Healer," a song by Erykah Badu (2008), an ode to hip-hop culture and a proclamation of the scope of its power. AK was an 18-year-old Black boy from Brooklyn who had recently graduated from high school and was headed

to college. He heard about the class through his mother, a dancer I met at a training for artists focusing on financial management. AK was always on time.

As soon as C-Lou arrived, he eyed AK's shirt and commented, "Here we go!" C-Lou was my most passionate and consistent participant from my "Cypher Series" workshop, an after-school spoken word and hip-hop residency I facilitated during the spring in Queens. Spoken word emerged alongside the tradition of hip-hop as a liberatory pedagogical tool implemented in urban, public school classrooms. We closed each of our first three sessions freestyling, so AK and C-Lou had already spent time swapping spontaneous verses. Engaging in a heated debate about hip-hop was the next obvious step.

In alignment with the literature on hip-hop pedagogy, my workshop focused on specific areas of learning: hip-hop as an artistic skill and process (Camangian, 2008; Seidel, 2013); hip-hop as a subject for critical dialogue (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Stovall, 2006b); using lyrics as texts (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2002; Hill, 2009); and hip-hop as a bridge to curriculum and canon (Edmin, 2011; Morrell, 2004). As I did in my own practice, educators who use hip-hop pedagogy draw from critical approaches to teaching and learning, including culturally relevant pedagogy, critical literacy, and popular culture in the classroom. Above all, hip-hop pedagogy is learner-centered. Young people's critical insights urgently need to be heard. Their words are at the center of this discourse, as they were at the center of my classrooms.

AK responded, "What?! You don't like my T-shirt?" C-Lou shook his head at his thoughts as he expressed them and said, "Nah, it's not that. I just know how this goes. We are going to get in a whole big conversation about hip-hop, and it's not going to go anywhere."

I used AK's t-shirt as an alternative text to engage students in critical thinking (Morrell, 2004). Those outside of hip-hop culture might be surprised at the extent of the discourse young

people have about hip-hop. As C-Lou predicted, we quickly ventured into typical discussions: Who has the best lyricists? Whose skills are overrated? Why is there so much disrespect of women? What is real hip-hop? Wanting to incorporate my student's ideas into our learning while also knowing that discussions about hip-hop can become simplistic, heated, and unproductive, I facilitated the dialogue, first by asking questions, then by asking the students to come up with their own questions.

At first, it was challenging for the group to think in terms of questions. I listened, poked, provoked, and then introduced two texts. First, I shared a quotation that was meant to be part of my lesson plan from Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) about a vision to transform the world of several generations of Maroon Poets working in North America's urban centers.

> It was a long dream to be sure, a fantastic, futuristic tale of a group of "Maroon poets" who transform a local struggle over police brutality into a full-fledged revolution rooted in love, creativity, and cooperation over the course of seven hundred years. In my dream, it took thirty generations of poets, surviving and creating in the "liberated zones" of North America's ghettos, to build a cooperative world without wages or money. (Kelley, 2002, p. 195)

I wanted to introduce an alternative perspective of artistic expression, one rooted in communal practice and social justice. Toward this end, I asked questions: "What is a liberated zone? How does spoken word and hip-hop fit in this intergenerational poetic tradition?"

Something in our dialogue sparked me to refer to a passage from the introduction of my collection of poems, "Growing Up Hip-Hop," written by Camille Yarbrough, an elder to whom I looked for wisdom to inform my practice as a cultural worker (Almustafa, 2008). Nana Yarbrough wrote about hip-hop as following in the legacy of the African American spiritual with

a list of seven purposes from Lovell's (1972) book, *Black Song*. These two texts provided us with an evaluative lens and prompted us to think in terms of the legacy hip-hop was inheriting and the world our generation wanted to leave behind.

We discussed the dream of hip-hop being both "having fun," as evidenced by the "block parties," and rebelling against the status quo in the United States. Hip-hop is creative, innovative, original, and artistic. Hip-hop requires authenticity, whether rhyming about "real things" (the conditions in my neighborhood) or for "real reasons" (I just want to make money).

I kept the class committed to our question-gathering protocol. I let their dialogue occur naturally, but I mirrored questions our statements provoked. So, a comment about an artist being good while they are underground and becoming bad once they reach the mainstream became a question about the way the economy impacts and distorts artistic integrity.

Through our dialogue, we developed a list of questions: (a) Where is hip-hop taking us? (b) What will be the next hip-hop movement? (c) What is the dream of hip-hop? (d) How are hip-hop music and videos used to promote misogyny? (e) What does it mean to be an authentic hip-hop artist? and (f) How does the mainstream distort hip-hop music and culture? The dialogue was dynamic, as each student was excited to add his or her voice to the discourse.

Suddenly, a student hesitantly asked, "Is hip-hop the last hope?" The other participants responded with a chorus of sighs and "No." Not before long though, the group circled around to this same realm of inquiry, attempting to answer the question provoked by Badu's lyrics: Is hip-hop the answer? We agreed that "hip-hop is bigger than the government." We agreed that hip-hop has already changed the world. We agreed that hip-hop has a tremendous amount of potential as a form of expression and liberation. We agreed that with this potential comes tremendous expectations. We asked ourselves: Why are we responsible for changing the world?

During this summer intensive, a student dialogue sparked from a T-shirt arrived at many of the same questions and conclusions I would later find in the literature on hip-hop pedagogy.

Darder (2012) argued that liberatory educators must emphasize participation and dialogue in classrooms to ensure students' voices are heard. This story from my practice as a TA shows how hip-hop pedagogy can embody this emancipatory approach to education. While dialogue is a normal aspect of effective teaching and learning, today's educational climate makes dialogical pedagogy a revolutionary practice, especially in urban, public schools (Noguera, 2007).

The Birth of Hip-Hop and Street Intellectuals

It is important to recognize that hip-hop emerged from a youth-led response to systemic oppression. Hip-hop's founders were young people who had the vision and courage to create, although they were relegated to the margins. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as "hip-hop genius," is the "unique blend of instincts, confidence and ingenuity" (Seidel, 2013, p. 11) that oppressed youth have embodied in the founding and development of hip-hop. A core of this genius is young people's "audacity to believe they can do something that's never been done, and the creativity to imagine how" (Seidel, 2013, p. 6).

Hip-hop music and culture cannot be narrowly defined, although many locate the origin of hip-hop as the emergence of deejaying, breakdancing, graffiti, fashion, and emceeing (rapping) in the South Bronx, New York during the 1970s (Chang, 2005). Hip-hop's origins are "multifaceted, politically conflicting, consistently debated, and highly complicated" (Hoch, 2006, p. 350). Hip-hop is the heart of most of my overlapping communities in NYC. Yet, despite its undeniably historic influence on the world's cultural life, the struggle for hip-hop amazingly has only just begun. As hip-hop continues to develop different identities and interests, the directions this cultural phenomenon may take are inspiring. About this, Watkins (2005) noted:

> One can only hope that as Hip-Hop's intellectual class grows, both in size and perspective, it will develop a finer understanding of its true calling, and thus not only stand up and be heard but also stand up and engage Hip-Hop's triumphs and tragedies, perceptiveness and perversities, in a manner that is as unconquerable as the movement itself. (p. 248)

Scholars work across disciplines as varied as performance studies, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and education, contributing to the articulation of the theoretical tenets of hip-hop culture (Petchauer, 2015).

At its core, hip-hop is a "space of communal learning" (Love, 2015, p. 112). Many who participate in hip-hop as a cultural and political movement actively construct a critical identity through an interrogation of hip-hop culture that comes together into a collective discourse shaping youth culture in the United States (Kelley, 1997; Kitwana, 2004). Hip-hop as a theoretical framework is an invaluable resource for scholars who are reimagining the possibilities of liberatory education.

Irby and Hall (2011) wrote, "The first educational arena where Hip-Hop was recognized as an educational force was the streets" (p. 219). Hip-hop pedagogy is the product and labor of organic intellectuals. Gramsci (1971) defined organic intellectuals as individuals who act as a "thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class" (p. 131). Like hip-hop, hip-hop pedagogy was created and developed outside of traditions of schooling and outside of its many reforms. Therefore, its founders and practitioners make up its experts. According to Petchauer (2015), "There are indispensable sources of knowledge with regard to Hip-Hop aesthetics outside of academe" (p. 80). By documenting some of this discourse within the context of the academy, I sought to do so in dialogue with those who are founders in the field.

Martha Diaz: An Organic Intellectual

Several artists and scholars have suggested that educators using hip-hop pedagogy learn from practitioners who are recognized, internally, for their contributions to hip-hop music and culture (Runell-Hall, 2011). Hip-hop artist, stic.man, from the group, dead prez, stated, "If we gonna put Hip-Hop in schools it shouldn't be taught just by teachers and scholars, it should be taught by people who actually do Hip-Hop" (as cited in Runell-Hall, 2011, p. 3). These practitioners are hip-hop's organic intellectuals and should be included in the discourse for invaluable insights about expanding the practice of liberatory education.

Hip-hop has produced a diverse array of organic intellectuals who hold a wide range of ideas—artists, activists, entrepreneurs, educators, poets, politicians, journalists, scholars, and theologians—who "map out the contradictory currents, ideas, and worldviews that percolate throughout the phenomenal world of Hip-Hop" (Watkins, 2005, p. 234). What has emerged is a hip-hop intelligentsia that defy uniform definitions, although "a premium is placed on the ability to identify with and articulate the gritty experiences and irreverent sensibilities that anchor Hip-Hop's inner soul" (Watkins, 2005, p. 234).

Martha Diaz is an organic intellectual who founded H2Ed, an NYC-based organization committed to developing the use of hip-hop as a pedagogical tool. She introduced me to the concept of hip-hop education as a young educator. After reading dozens of articles and several books and dissertations, I returned to a handout I received from her more than a decade ago for a definition. Hip-hop education is

> a layered approach founded on social justice education, embedded in Hip-Hop culture, relying on critical pedagogy and community activism to teach Hip-Hop as a subject, Hip-

> Hop as pedagogy to teach another subject, and/or Hip-Hop as the warm-up, hook or bridge to draw students into the class. (Hip-Hop Education, n.d., para. 1)

This concise definition is followed by a list of eight bullet points providing general guidelines, which I sum up as follows:

- Hip-hop pedagogy is a tool for liberation, but not the answer;
- It does not require teachers to learn how to rap or be in any way inauthentic;
- It does require educators to create a learning environment that is mutually beneficial;
- Social identity and geography matters—Students should be encouraged to investigate cultural narratives;
- Hip-hop was created by, and must remain for, young people;
- Hip-hop perpetuates and interrogates systems of oppression;
- Educators must respect and believe in hip-hop as a culture, complete with agreed upon elements, as well as shared language, dress, style, history, values, and unifying capabilities;
- Educators must recognize that youth culture is intrinsically counter-cultural; and
- Educators must learn with, and from, their students. (Hip-Hop Education, n.d.)

The final paragraph locates hip-hop pedagogy in the theories and practices of critical pedagogy and popular education. The work of Diaz and HSEd is seminal even though it exists outside of the academy. This simple one sheet provides excellent working definitions and accurately captures the many voices and ideas found in the literature on hip-hop pedagogy.

Hip-Hop Pedagogy

Given hip-hop's extensive "history of socio-political conscious Hip-Hop as a tool for illuminating problems of poverty, police brutality, patriarchy, misogyny, incarceration, racial discrimination, as well as love, hope, and joy" (Akom, 2009, p. 54), it is surprising that more educators do not use hip-hop in their educational practices. There is vast documentation about

implementing hip-hop as a liberatory pedagogy in urban, public school classrooms. While hip-hop pedagogy is used as a tool in myriad ways, it is most commonly implemented in secondary English language arts and social studies classes. Within these classrooms, hip-hop pedagogy, according to David Stovall (2006b), is a "transformative element in the development of critical teaching and thinking" (p. 585). Authors include classroom teachers, TAs, and teacher-researchers who use the terms hip-hop education, hip-hop-based education, and hip-hop pedagogy somewhat interchangeably. What emerges from these studies is a "collection of working definitions" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 586).

Most hip-hop pedagogy research is conducted in urban contexts. The use of the term urban is generally used to refer to marginalized educational settings, schools, community centers, or educational spaces for youth who are considered "at-risk." Instead of applying deficit labels to students, the term *urban* is generally used to examine low-income, African American, and Latinx student populations (Irby & Hall, 2011). Too often, the general use of the term urban obscures the complex and nuanced practices and theories applied in diverse, urban educational settings (Irby & Hall, 2011).

Hip-Hop Pedagogy's Critical Roots

For students to receive a liberatory education, educators need to be grounded in emancipatory ethics and morals to guide their decisions with respect to teaching and learning (Darder, 2012; Freire, 1970). Darder (2012) argued that critical dialogue between educators and their students is necessary to provide marginalized students with meaningful educational experiences. These dialogical practices allow both student and teacher to critically reflect upon their social location within society and the conditions that impact their lived experiences (Darder,

2011; Freire, 1970). Hip-hop is, in essence, a dialogue with the world. As Rodriguez (2009) wrote,

> Like the oppressed who reflect and act upon their world to transform it, Hip-Hop culture is a manifestation of the ways that young people reflect and act upon their world in order to find their place in it and, ultimately, to transform it. (p. 22)

Scholars locate hip-hop pedagogy in critical pedagogy's theoretical traditions, referencing, in particular, critical educational scholars, Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and bell hooks (Stovall, 2006b). These critical scholars encourage teachers (facilitators) to "develop pedagogical practice that centers the issues and concerns of students" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 588). Following in the legacy of critical pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy emerged as a "transformative element in the development of critical teaching and thinking" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 585).

Paulo Freire

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) is a staple text in many of my varying overlapping communities of spoken word, hip-hop, activism, and education. Whenever I visited a colleague's home, I would search the spines along the bookshelves for the bright, orange book cover. Originally published in Spanish in 1968, Paulo Freire pulled from his lived experience as an intellectual and educator in Brazil (Darder, 2018). As an educator, I found myself using Freirean methods before I read about them. Freire's ideas readily informed my approach to teaching. A couple of years into my practice, I organized a group of educators that included my wife, her mother, and our close and new friends to a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reading group. We met monthly for 4 months, each one committed to a chapter. Freire's concept of praxis was vital for me as I was attempting to integrate my work as an activist, educator, and artist.

Freire's (1970) educational philosophy is based on a vision of education as a process of freedom, breaking from the practice of education as domination. He contended that education should be a liberatory process that is humanizing for every person involved. His purpose was to illuminate the practices the oppressed must use to transform the world, both for themselves and for their oppressors. He insisted that the oppressed be the historical subjects of their own education instead of objects to be manipulated, and that propaganda was an invalid method of liberatory education. Freire warned the oppressed not to follow in the model of the oppressor. Each of these ideas was foundational concepts for my practice as a TA.

According to Freire (1970), the teacher challenges the "banking" concept of education rooted in the false belief that students are empty vessels waiting to be filled by teachers. This approach to learning was my core frustration as a public school student. By placing the student at the center of the classroom discourse, the educator is required to step out of a banking model of education. In a liberatory classroom, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, engaging students to shape the class (Stovall, 2006a). Like many educators who implemented hip-hop as a pedagogical tool, I used Freirean principles in my workshops, as evidenced in the opening story: developing horizontal relationships between students and teachers, rooting our curriculum in student's lived experiences, building on students' existing assets, and situating our foremost context as learners in the body, and in community.

The central tool in this process was a problem-posing approach that allows teachers to move their students toward *conscientização*, or critical social consciousness, which is both a goal and a liberatory process that emerges from critical praxis (Freire, 1977). This process of consciousness-raising serves to cultivate a more democratic approach for the collective construction of knowledge within classrooms and communities (Freire, 1977). Similarly,

educators who use hip-hop pedagogy critique the U.S. educational system for teaching students to be "unable or unwilling to read the world critically" (Fiore, 2015, p. 813). In response, critical educators teach students to "reflect critically upon the world" (Fiore, 2015, p. 814). Educators who use hip-hop are finding ways to tap into its power and potential as a tool for the development of critical consciousness and social transformation (Rodriguez, 2009).

bell hooks

Black feminist and cultural theorist bell hooks (1994) has been a key voice in speaking to issues linked to educational inequalities and their impact on educators. In her scholarship, she challenges educators to consider the ways their multiple identities impact their position and their biases. Her writing uses personal stories to provide profound insights. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks uses her own practice as an example of an embodied praxis reflecting on the ways teacher classroom practices and theoretical frameworks inform each other.

One of hooks's (1994) core contributions is her critical articulation of feminist theories, including their impact on pedagogical practices (Lindsey, 2015). As a dissident intellectual, hooks (1994) provided a definition for what it means to embark on an emancipatory approach:

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easier to those of us who can teach who also believe that there is an aspect to our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. (p. 13)

Throughout my practice, I turned to hooks's critical commentary for countless insights on the ways culture shapes gender, politics, and education.

Gloria Ladson-Billings

Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing body of research that demonstrates the importance of "appealing to the experiences, cultural orientations, values, and worldviews of students" (Hill, 2009, p. 7). Although I was not originally familiar with her work, educators refer to critical race educational theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings's critical framework for culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1997) outlined tenets for an educational approach that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). These include:

> (a) Students whose educational, economical, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom. (b) Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way. (c) Students' real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the official curriculum. (d) Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory. (e) Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo. (f) Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings. (Ladson-Billings, 1997, pp. 117–118)

With Ladson-Billings's framework in mind, students' lived experiences within hip-hop pedagogy are "legitimized as they become part of the official curriculum" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 588).

Features of Hip-Hop Pedagogy

Teachers who do not understand hip-hop will not understand their students' worldview. Their negative responses to hip-hop may, wittingly or unwittingly, result in ways of being that perpetuate what Freire (1970) termed "cultural invasion": an attempt to impose dominant values

and ways of knowing upon students from racialized communities. Scholars have pointed out that some public school teachers respond negatively because they believe hip-hop music "promotes violence, misogyny, homophobia, hyper-capitalist consumption, and—to add insult to injury—bad grammar" (Seidel, 2013, p. 12). These dimensions can be better understood through features of hip-hop pedagogy that engage the practices and intentions of classroom teachers.

Women and girls. Mainstream educators question the logic of using hip-hop as a theoretical lens because the culture is wrought with such glaring contradictions—foremost of which is the inequitable position and treatment of women. Hip-hop culture is "commonly centered in a heterosexual male aesthetic" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 599). The devaluation of women and girls' contributions is visible throughout hip-hop's history and prevails today (Lindsey, 2015).

Yet, from the beginning, women and girls have played an integral role in the formation and sustaining of hip-hop's cultures as "b-girls, emcees, graffiti artists, journalists, fly girls, community activists, record executives, poets and authors, filmmakers, scholars, producers, and consumers" (Lindsey, 2015, p. 53). Women and girls provide distinct standpoints and perspectives (Lindsey, 2015). One of these contributions is hip-hop feminism (HHF), a "generationally and historically specific iteration of intersectionality and critical race feminist theory" (Lindsey, 2015, p. 54). Hip-hop feminism centers herstories, combats sexism and misogyny—both within hip-hop and in the larger society, and invests in female empowerment as a substantive core of the praxis (Lindsey, 2015). Educators who use hip-hop as a theoretical lens must engage with the issue of women and girls critically.

Culturally relevant pedagogy. Hip-hop culture has historically served as a vehicle for youth to share their stories using their own voices, to be able to create and identify with a

particular cultural group and has, therefore, functioned as a means to communicate their existence to the world. (Stovall, 2006b, p. 585). Many hip-hop generation youth have turned to hip-hop culture to express their lived experiences in their efforts to resist the domination inherent in the traditional culture of schooling. About this, Martin (2014) argued, "Resistance to learning in a culturally non-responsive environment is a healthy way for students to preserve their cultural identities" (p. 264).

Many scholars have pointed to the use of hip-hop music and culture to develop a "relevant pedagogical practice" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 585). To be a culturally responsive educator, one must be a student of culture, power, and the contributing factors to social and economic inequities. Culturally responsive pedagogy takes into account the political lives and work of educators. This approach is not only about students achieving academic success, although this is part of the overall intent. It is, moreover, a pedagogical approach focused on the healing and transformation of students and their communities.

Popular culture in the classroom. Many scholars locate hip-hop in the realm of popular culture (Stovall, 2006b). Scholars emphasize hip-hop's unique ability to use popular culture in the classroom while also providing a pedagogical framework that is culturally relevant. Scholars argue that the inclusion of hip-hop as popular culture allows for a more democratic space because it validates the students' lived experiences. Moreover, it is equally important to note that, "through ongoing participation in critical classroom dialogues about the popular culture they consume, all students can participate together in their empowerment and in the making of a more democratic society" (Darder, 2012, p. 190).

Critical literacy. Scholars have also turned to hip-hop as a pedagogical tool to develop young people's literary skills and identities. When students write hip-hop lyrics through a critical

process, they "rebel in the deepest, most profound way, in their literacy" (Fiore, 2015, p. 822); in this way, they participate in naming their world as it is and as they might dream it to be (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Language is "rooted in a discourse of power" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 73). Freire and Macedo advocated for educators to "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" (as cited in Camangian, 2008, p. 36). Educators have discussed literacy as a vehicle for developing critical consciousness (Darder et al., 2003; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Hip-hop as a bridge. As secondary classroom teachers, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2000) wrote about using hip-hop culture as a bridge in secondary classrooms. They suggested that, by using hip-hop music as a vehicle for youth to express their critical literacy skills, students can transfer these skills to critically engaging texts found in the canon. When hip-hop is used as a bridge, "students have the greater propensity to grasp concepts originally considered foreign or 'uninteresting" (Stovall, 2006b, p. 586). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005), as well as other scholars, have warned educators not to narrowly conceive of hip-hop pedagogy as a bridge to traditional schooling, as this privileges the Western literary canon and "limits the agency and possibilities of students in critical engagement with Hip-Hop culture" (Seidel, 2013, p. 121). Instead, critical education scholars agreed that it is important to recognize hip-hop as a "worthy subject of study in its own right" (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2005, p. 89). Moreover, when using hip-hop as a bridge, hip-hop educators must be wary of instrumentalization (Freire, 1977) and the reification of what is a fluid and living praxis of knowledge production (Darder, 2012). There are, nevertheless, numerous small hip-hop-based textbook companies selling an

assortment of materials in the form of curriculum, a range of literary books, textbooks, educational programs, and professional developments (Brown, 2015). These two must be critically engaged with caution and an eye on maintaining an open discursive field that counters the objectification of the hip-hop pedagogical process (Darder, 2012).

Hip-Hop Pedagogy in Teacher Education

Today, an estimated 300 courses on hip-hop are offered across the United States at prestigious institutions like Berkeley, Stanford, Yale, MIT, NYU, Princeton, Columbia, and others (Hall, 2009). Surprisingly, hip-hop is underused as a pedagogical tool in teacher education programs. In an article exploring the benefits of hip-hop in the field of education, Irizarry (2009) explained, "Teachers can learn as much from Tupac and other rappers as they can from the literary canon of teacher education" (p. 491). With this in mind, many hip-hop educational scholars are challenging teacher education programs, specifically the racial and socioeconomic composition of the educators they are sending into the urban educational workforce.

Furthermore, while the school-age population in urban areas has become increasingly diverse, the teachers in classrooms remain predominantly White and female (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Irizarry, 2009). Research, however, has repeatedly shown that the cultural background of classroom teachers matters (Darder, 2012; Fiore, 2015; hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Educators from middle-class, suburban backgrounds "make assumptions about the beliefs, practices, and shared values of their students and their students' communities" (Fiore, 2015, p. 816). These teachers are often at a loss for how to engage their diverse student populations, resulting in students who are less motivated, feel alienated, and fail to achieve academically (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005).

Spoken Word Pedagogy

As a young, curious, and nervous Black boy growing up in Jamaica, Queens, walking up and down boulevards where crack addicts danced to the ghosts of jazz legends, Langston Hughes was the first poet I read who spoke to me. He used simple language, speaking in the voice and language of everyday Black people. Hughes served "as a sounding board for the articulation of people who are usually voiceless" (Salaam, 1999, p. 18). I found my poetic voice through Hughes and poets throughout the African American tradition.

I understood my artistic approach largely through the lens of poets from the long span of the descendants of enslaved Africans. J. Saunders Redding (1939) presented a measure of "good poetry" within the Black artistic tradition: "A poet untouched by his times, by his conditions, by his environment is only half a poet, for earnestness and sincerity grow in direct proportion as one feels intelligently the pressure of immediate life" (pp. 108–109). In the new Black poetry, Clarence Major (1969) wrote, "Like students burning down buildings that lie to them, our poems aim ultimately to help deliver the capitalist oppressive system to some museum time, to leave it 'out there' somewhere as a relic of western space" (p. 17). The Black poetic tradition provided me with a foundation for developing my own aesthetic imperative.

Black poets were hell-bent on seeing their poetry within a continuum of Black poets and Black aesthetics going back to their Africa origins. Poets who shaped the Blacks Arts Movement during the 1960s grounded their art in the speech patterns, politics, and music of Black people (Joyce, 1999). The poets from these times made it clear that they were "addressing a black audience, with the goal of spiritual awakening and sharpening political consciousness" (Joyce, 1999, p. 112).

The spoken word and hip-hop communities in which I engaged were historically and epistemologically rooted in this Black poetic tradition. This legacy provided me with a way to develop my practice. While I was anchored in the Black poetic tradition, the diverse spoken word and hip-hop communities in which I participated steered my aesthetic direction toward an understanding of the collective experiences and struggle of all oppressed people.

In the spoken word and slam poetry movements that shaped my personal and political evolution, hip-hop informed our content, language, artistic, and entrepreneurial approaches. Many events featured both poets and emcees. The lines blurred between the two, with poets using rhyme, meter, and structure generally used in hip-hop and emcees reciting their rhymes a cappella. Hip-hop has influenced the ways poets incorporate music into their recordings, and poets have been featured on countless hip-hop albums. Spoken word poetry's greatest commercial success, the HBO series Def Poetry Jam, is produced by hip-hop mogul, Russell Simmons. Poets also have played a critical role in the intellectual defining of hip-hop as a counterpoint to the corporate music industry's packaging of violence, sex, cars, drugs, and bling-bling to sell commercial hip-hop music.

Spoken word pedagogy is a powerful approach for fostering participation and dialogue in the classroom. The act of writing and reading spoken word poetry can serve as praxis for social transformation (Desai & Marsh, 2005). Within the context of spoken word, young people's critical thinking, writing, and voices are valued and take center stage. Prior research has found that many youth find performance poetry an excellent outlet for expression (Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). This is even more important for historically marginalized youth, who have long felt silenced in school contexts and who are traditionally portrayed as threats within society (Camangian, 2008; Hall, 2007; Jocson, 2005). To counter this silencing of student

voices, Fiore (2015) argued that spoken word is "in a unique position to facilitate unprecedented social change by providing students with a platform from which to question and negotiate the conditions of their lives" (p. 813).

Tenets of Spoken Word Pedagogy

Within the literature that examines the implementation of spoken word pedagogy in urban classrooms, eight major tenets emerged across the literature: (a) resisting standardization and assimilation, (b) poetry with a purpose, (c) democratizing the canon, (d) students take center stage, (e) empowered literacy identities, (f) close reading for life and liberation, (g) critical consciousness for self-actualization, and (h) embodied social justice. These tenets will be explored in the following sections.

Resisting standardization and assimilation. This is particularly important in that, within many urban classrooms, young people do not have opportunities to explore their identity using English language arts standards (Reyes, 2010; Smith, 2010). When affluent, White children are also part of the unwritten code of what is standard, resisting standardization also means resisting acculturation and assimilation (Smith, 2010).

Educators recognize that the majority of schools promote acculturation into "the mainstream culture" (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009; Smith, 2010), with the expectation that students from racialized working-class communities leave their own cultures outside the classroom door (Darder, 2012; Rodriguez-Valls, 2009). Poetry is a powerful medium for youth to speak about their experiences in ways that are authentic and uncensored (Jocson, 2005). Many classroom teachers find that, by using the methods of spoken word, they are able to meet standards while teaching their poetry unit. One educator's poetry unit, for example, combined traditional educational practices, such as essays, citations, and reasoning, with performance poetry,

"resulting in poems filled with compelling metaphors and concrete descriptions of the change they want to see in the world" (Camangian, 2008, p. 43).

Poetry with a purpose. Due to the standardized educational approach of hegemonic schooling, many young people are confused about the relevance and purpose of poetry. Within spoken word pedagogy, educators demystify students' preconceived ideas about poetry, focusing on facilitating educational contexts where young people connect to poetry's humanizing purposes (Stovall, 2006a). Within the context of spoken word pedagogy, poetry has become a way to express oneself, a political act, a way of building community, a personal practice, a way of connecting with poetic legacies, and a way of building critical consciousness (Camangian, 2008). During the process of the poetry workshop, the value and purpose of poetry shifted from an incomprehensible component of an English class to an accessible, understandable, and usable medium that was accessible to young people's lives.

A popular method for demystifying young people's relationship with poetry is to engage in a dialogue through survey, letters, and informal conversation with students about the meaning and purpose of poetry before, during, and after their participation with spoken word (Camangian, 2008; Damico, 2005; Ellis et al., 2003). In the process, some educators have focused on male students and the need to demystify the idea that expressions of feelings are a sign of weakness (Damico, 2005). For these educators, this process of demystification has provided a space for young boys to reconceptualize poetry as being of both heart and mind, emotion and intellect, and thus, as an intervention in the usual process of gendered socialization (Damico, 2005).

Moreover, several researcher-educators have written about the poetic process of spoken word as a process of politicization (Kinloch, 2005). Critical cultural theorist Bryant Keith Alexander (2006) referred to the cultural and political power of such an act as the social, cultural,

and performative negotiation of self, which holds the potential to ignite social and cultural transformation. But, it is also "performing self in the face of history and in the company of others—and negotiating the problems and pitfalls" (Alexander, 2004, p. 25) tied to the politics of identity within a racialized world. Hence, through experiencing performance poetry, young people involved in spoken word find opportunities to engage themselves as subjects of history (Freire, 1970) as they reconceptualize poetry as a tool that belongs to them. This process of spoken word allows them to more fully steeped in their cultural literary lineage, where the act of writing and performing verses has historically served as an empowering and transformative vehicle for both personal and communal change.

Democratizing the canon. Critical educators challenge the use of a Eurocentric canon. Poet and scholar June Jordan advocated for an end to the tradition of only reading dead White men (Jocson, 2005). In an article about Jordan's work, Jocson (2005) suggested that there "still stands a hegemonic, hidden curriculum that advances the experiences of historically privileged male-dominated whites" (p. 133). In her essay "For the Sake of People's Poetry," Jordan (1985) went beyond challenging the homogenous Eurocentric literature in U.S. society, arguing for collective representation as an element of social change and advocating for a canon that is more heterogeneous, democratic, and inclusive of "ordinary people."

Spoken word provides educational experiences that allow marginalized cultural groups to (re)name their own experiences, while shifting to a multicultural understanding of literature (Jocson, 2005). Transformative educators deem it a moral responsibility to "find stories where the main characters show the struggles many suffer when arriving to this country as well as the possibility of being successful without losing identity" (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009, p. 11).

Rodriguez-Valls selected poetic texts with both students and parents in mind, avoiding texts within the canon that perpetuated stereotypes.

The democratized canon is, in and of itself, social justice oriented (Ciardiello, 2010; McCall, 2004). Poets share their personal stories by addressing systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and other other-isms (Damico, 2005; Desai & Marsh, 2005; McCall, 2004; Wiseman, 2007). For young students, reading age-appropriate poetry with social justice themes starts them on a path toward democratic citizenship (Ciardiello, 2010). When you democratize the canon, McCall (2004) posited, "formerly oppressed people's voices enter into the conversation, and immediately, you have poems which affirm women, praise individuals who resisted oppression, portray the harm resulting from prejudicial or discriminatory (or imperialistic, or colonizing, or oppressive)" (p. 172) actions. This decolonized canon encompasses a critical lens, which allows for a less threatening, personal, concise medium to explore complex, difficult issues of the self and society (McCall, 2004).

Students take center stage. Spoken word pedagogy is student-centered (Jocson, 2005). Throughout the literature, there is a focus on the student as the most important influence on the learning process (Reyes, 2010; Rodriguez-Valls, 2009). Educators find it important that students no longer see education as an upside-down process (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009). In one article, a student who was invited to be on a university panel, explained the benefits her peers experience by having slam competitions at her school:

> I feel in my school, like, there were always adults that were listening to me, but I think that there are a lot of kids who find slam poetry as an outlet that weren't listened to that much in their public schools or whatever high school they went to who were maybe, like, talked down to and suddenly, like, they're the ones who are getting recognition from

adults and kids at the same time for just saying how they feel in common language and beautiful language. (as cited in Ellis et al., 2003, p. 49).

Empowered literary identities. Educators see teaching poetry as a political act, and literacy instruction as a form of cultural politics that function to either empower or disempower (Camangian, 2008). Educators use both extensive reading (a vast array of texts to gain a better appreciation as a reader) and intensive reading (to teach or practice specific reading strategies or skills) approaches (Damico, 2005; Ellis et al., 2003). Educators who encourage extensive reading also encourage young people to integrate the texts they find in their learning (Damico, 2005). The goal is to get students comfortable reading by engaging them with work with which they can personally connect (Stovall, 2006a). Both approaches are used to encourage students to develop empowered literary identities, where young people use literacy to participate in democratic engagements; develop critical thinking, writing, and reading skills; and bridge existing cultural literacies with academic literacies. It is worth noting here that educators have varying perspectives in regard to using spoken word as a bridge to other areas of student growth and learning. Many focus on the skills built in a spoken word workshop as a bridge to contemporary poets and to the canon (Ellis et al., 2003; Smith, 2010; Wiseman, 2007). However, scholars warned against privileging Shakespeare and other canonical texts above students developing their own poetic voices (Ellis et al., 2003).

Classroom practices within spoken word pedagogy are not about instrumentalizing methods, but rather about the relationships students have—individually and collectively—to their literary identities, to the literature, and to literary communities. What is the value of being literate? Do they experience joy while reading? Do they read to acquire knowledge about topics that they are interested in? Within spoken word pedagogy, students recognize that "literacy is

strategic, purposeful, and always linked to meaning" (Fisher, 2005, p. 116). Educators work in partnership with their students to liberate language and empower themselves to be in control of their words (Fisher, 2005).

Within the spoken word workshop, literacy and democracy come together to form literocracy, conceptualized by spoken word pedagogy researcher-educators to capture the intersection between literacy and democracy (Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Kinloch, 2005). Within this context, literacy education becomes a series of "democratic engagements" students have with each other and with language as they write and share their ideas (Kinloch, 2005). Over time, participating in spoken word workshops, empowered young people develop their "literary identities" (Camangian, 2008; Desai & Marsh, 2005; Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2005; Smith, 2010).

Close reading for life and liberation. Spoken word pedagogy sees "close reading" as an essential skill. Workshops require reading, rereading, and re-evaluating of text, bodies, media, T-shirts, and popular culture. Educators provide various guidelines for their students to read closely. Instead of providing young people with their interpretation of a poem, students are encouraged to summarize and interpret poems "in light of their own experiences and prior knowledge" (McCall, 2004, p. 174). Gerald Reyes's (2006) process of close reading, RE-Vision, is about "trying to see and re-see what has been written, and whether it is on track for what was originally visioned or whether it needs to be re-focused" (p. 14). Patrick Camangian (2008) directed his students to listen closely to their peers using "empathetic and critical listening skills" (p. 43). Students use peer-review sheets, paying close attention to their peers' poems and looking at descriptive language, consistency in voice, vividness in diction, and their use of literary devices. Students are encouraged to listen for the "poet's truth" (Wiseman, 2007).

Critical consciousness for self-actualization. Within spoken word pedagogy, the purpose of experiential learning is for young people to experience culture, develop critical thinking skills and critical consciousness, and establish a sense of themselves as social agents of change. Rodriguez-Vall's (2010) described the myriad ways he has had his students play with poetry: "We read, re-enacted, played, painted, deconstructed, and sang the text in order to meet the different learning styles" (p. 2). Students free-write using prompts about relevant social issues (Camangian, 2008) and participate in writing exercises that require them to define their world (Stovall, 2006a). Within the spoken word workshop, young people learn to recognize the varying identities, beliefs, writing styles, linguistic codes, and cultural practices of themselves and their fellow students. For this reason, some educators focus on poetry as a way for young people to gain greater appreciation of cultural differences that exist within their world (McCall, 2004).

The most recurring form of experiential learning within the class is the "workshop," in which students participate in drafting, revising, discussion, feedback, rehearsal, publishing, performing, and recording poetry (Camangian, 2008; Fisher, 2005; Reyes, 2010). For Reyes, the poetry workshop is not complete until young people perform in front of audiences and, borrowing a term from hip-hop, "Move the Crowd." Through sustaining these educational interventions, students form literary communities (Camagian, 2008; Desai & Marsh, 2005; Ellis et al., 2003; Fisher, 2005), in which each poet is both a learner and teacher through their shared and individual processes toward self-actualization (Camagian, 2008; Fisher, 2005).

Embodied social justice. Within the literature, teachers generally do not address issues of social justice explicitly or TAs considerations of embodiment as integral to teaching strategies (Darder, 2009). Some see poetry workshops as a process of politicization (Kinloch, 2005).

Critical educators consider it important to teach poetry alongside history (Fisher, 2005) and to use poetry to teach history (McCall, 2004) as an embodied and lived phenomenon (Darder, 2009). Kinloch (2005) quoted poet Tony Medina, who said that poetry should be judged by "how well one arranges words on a page to produce meaningful, political, and even personally urgent music" (p. 96). This study sought to put flesh on the bones of these tenets by looking at the dimensions of how social justice is embodied in the classroom and also reflective of the works that students and artists of spoken word bring to the world.

Conclusion

Several scholars point to federal education policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), for increasing the uses of standardized testing, which disconnects academic performance from students' lived experiences (Darder, 2012; Hilliard et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2007). Schools and school districts are striving to provide their students with the responsive, learner-centered, individualized, critical, rigorous, holistic, and educational experiences young people urgently need. Schools are often detached from young people's needs for strategies to cope with their conditions and transform the harsh realities of their lives (Camangian, 2008; Hall, 2007). Even well-meaning educational interventions leave far too many young people "turned off by the ways *we* want to improve *their* lives" (Camangian, 2008, p. 53), inadvertently rendering them passive, alienated, and objectified.

Today, thousands of young people participate in youth poetry events, including Brave New Voices, a 5-day national spoken word competition started in 1998, which draws more than 50 teams and 500 youth participants annually (Weinstein, 2010). In *A Unified Poet Alliance,* Weinstein (2010) analyzed transcripts of interviews with teen poets, TAs, and program administrators to situate the national youth spoken word movement within the context of arts

education. Weinstein (2010) examined the commonalities across experiences to establish the particular qualities of youth spoken word pedagogy that makes it so widely beneficial through participation in critical aesthetic spaces that value the "hard work of composing and writing the words, the emotional risk of self-revelation, and, finally, the courage to read or perform the poem aloud to an audience" (p. 19).

Weinstein's (2010) research found that youth experience therapeutic benefits from participating in spoken word. Young people overcome shyness, increase self-esteem and motivation to learn, and grow self-confidence by regularly performing and gaining respect. She pointed to these positive outcomes to argue that the arts can be a site of an "enormously expansive version of education" (Weinstein, 2010, p. 22).

Spoken word pedagogy, as discussed earlier, provides a liberatory educational alternative (Camangian, 2008; Fiore, 2015). Just as spoken word has been used to build critical literacy for young people across the United States, the proliferation of this educational tool offers a foundation for a fearless democratic society. Jordan (1995) affirmed this stance by arguing, "Good poems can build a revolution in which speaking and listening to someone becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter" (p. 3). True to these words, the movement using spoken word and hip-hop as a transformative educational tool is growing. Young people are engaging in these practices across the country, both within and outside the formal classroom. Even though its cadre of practitioners is largely positioned outside of public schools where they are most needed, spoken word and hip-hop are widely used as tools for liberatory pedagogy.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

"Poetry, you see, is as old as breath itself."

– Louis Reyes Rivera 2002

Like poetry, storytelling is "an ancient practice, perhaps as old as human history" (Chang, 2008, p. 31). By using an autoethnographic approach, I join this storytelling tradition. The purpose of my research is to provide educational leaders with a first-hand account of the transformative impact the labor of a teaching artist (TA) can have on young people's classroom experiences. As an author who views myself as a phenomenon worthy of study, I have used my personal lived history in this study to examine the social phenomenon of the TA.

Several characteristics unique to autoethnography have been central to my artistic practice. The researcher must make contributions to existing research (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). The poet must be in dialogue with critical minds both past and present. To contribute to existing research, I am answering the call for TAs to document stories about low-income, urban students who are underserved by focusing my research on experience with former students who attended urban, public schools. The researcher purposefully comments on and critiques culture and cultural practices (Jones et al., 2013). The poet purposefully comments on and critiques culture and cultural practices (Poets, Throughout time). The researcher embraces vulnerability with purpose (Jones et al., 2013). In an open letter initiating an intergenerational dialogue with cultural icon Oprah Winfrey, Williams (2007), referred to as the hip-hop generation's poet laureate, wrote that the poet "realizes that their vulnerability is their power" (p. 1).

> Like you, unafraid to shed tears on countless shows, the poet finds strength in exposing their humanity, their vulnerability, thus making it possible for us to find connection and strength through their work. (p. 2)

In so doing, the poet creates a reciprocal relationship with audiences to compel a response, the fourth identifying characteristic of autoethnography (Jones et al., 2013). The art practices of poets, therefore, translate well into autoethnographic research methods.

Call-and-response is a core concept in hip-hop. Smitherman (1977) defined call-and-response as verbal and nonverbal interactions between speaker(s) and listener(s) in which the speaker's statements or "calls" are met with "responses" from listener(s). The music the deejay plays is a call to which breakdancers and emcees respond. Emcees call out to audiences who respond with their voices during performances. This study is my response to the calls within the discourse of hip-hop pedagogy, in that autoethnographic research methods require a call-and-response between the researcher and the field. Autoethnographic researchers compare, contrast, and critique personal experiences against existing research (Ellis et al., 2011) and examine the self within a larger context by engaging with established or new theories and scholarship (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). These dialogical processes are necessary for grappling with complicated social science problems.

Both autoethnography and hip-hop pedagogy are strongly influenced by critical pedagogy (Hill, 2011), aligning autoethnographic methods well with hip-hop as a theoretical framework. Autoethnography provides the researcher with the space for critical self-analysis (Denzin, 2014; Starr, 2010) and assists researchers in understanding their lived experiences to benefit the self, society, and their community (Camangian, 2010). Hip-hop practitioner and theorist, KRS-One (2009), speaks extensively about knowledge of self as a fundamental aspect of hip-hop culture.

Following in this tradition, students use hip-hop pedagogy to enable "critical conversations and transgressive moments" (Hill, 2011, p. 10).

Hip-hop is more than a popular text. It is a "rich site for complex forms of identity work" (Hill, 2011, p. 1). Hip-hop has democratized the representational sphere in U.S. culture, just as autoethnographic methodologies are designed to democratize representation in the academy (Neumann, 1996). Thus far, many pedagogues using hip-hop as a theoretical lens have turned to autoethnographic methods. If educational research hopes to improve the lives of urban youth, then first-hand accounts of educators using hip-hop as a liberatory pedagogy can be a valuable resource in the construction of emancipatory knowledge.

What You Think I Rap For?

Hip-hop artist Kanye West shouted at the Outside Lands audience from the stage, "I want to see more mosh pits." Yezzus's disciples broke out in circles of drunken youth, forehands and elbows flailing everywhere. Hip-hop, particularly Kanye West's cocky, brazen brand of music, attracts listeners for whom the ghetto is "a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom" (Kelley, 2004, p. 130). In 2014, this annual musical festival drew crowds of 40,000 to 60,000 people per day to San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Across the field from the main stage was the bar where I was working. Kanye began his verse: "She said, 'Ye, can we get married at the mall?'/I said, 'Look, you need to crawl 'fore you ball./Come and meet me in the bathroom stall/And show me why you deserve to have it all'" (West & Carter, 2011). Yezzus was displeased with the mosh pit's level of activity. He stopped the song, chastised his followers, and started the song from the top. According to Bailey (2014), "Engaging in a Kanye song is often a free-for-all of violence, porn, horror, gangster proclivities, and revisited memoirs from pimps, prostitutes, and intellectuals alike" (p. xx).

Like hip-hop, Kanye has embodied a representation of race that both generates terror in the sight of young men of color while compelling "most of America to want to wear their shoes" (Kelley, as cited in Watkins, 2004, p. 557). Kanye West, like hip-hop, is an urban culture that has remained elusive to social science concepts like "coping strategy," "adaptive," "authentic," "nihilistic," and "pathological" (Kelley, 2004, p. 131). While I do not consider myself a fan of West, I recognize the power of studying popular artists, as Julius Bailey did when he edited The Cultural Impact of Kanye West in 2014. For myself and many who use hip-hop as our cultural and theoretical lens, Kanye's career provides an informative reference point.

For oppressed communities, music is an important expression—a tool for healing and communication that connects generations (Bailey, 2014). In studying Kanye and his music, it is important to note that a song is never just a song. Kanye is singular in his place in hip-hop. While being both a product and student of hip-hop, his life and extensive musical catalogue transcends the false, conscious-gangster rap dichotomy. As students of hip-hop, we are able to examine our lives alongside his.

Kanye's soulful music and innovative sampling embody a "blue-collar-black-American music" (Bailey, 2014, p. xii) accented by his "willingness to be vulnerable and honest" (p. xii) rarely displayed in mainstream hip-hop. In his first single, "Through the Wire," Kanye shared his journey returning to recording after his October 2002 car crash shattered his jaw. The distorted sounds of the words shaped by his reconstructed jaw give this recording a raw feel. This song spoke to me personally, having also survived a near-death car accident. The voice of a young Black male who grew disillusioned with the promise of higher education and instead decided to follow his artistic pursuits resonated given that I dropped out of two different community colleges in 1999 and again in 2004 to pursue my passion for performing spoken word.

In 2005, I felt a sense of artistic kinship with Kanye after he released the first single off of his second album *Late Registration*, "Diamonds from Sierra Leone." Kanye addressed an issue I wrote about in my poetry—the role and responsibility of mainstream hip-hop artists who glamorize diamonds while ignoring a brutal conflict in Sierra Leone fought over the right to profit from controlling this natural resource. After Kanye released this track, audiences suddenly had a frame of reference for grappling with this issue when I performed this poem.

It was later that year that I developed newfound respect for Kanye. During a live televised telethon to raise money for Hurricane Katrina survivors who had been neglected by the federal government, Kanye accused then-president George W. Bush of not "caring about Black people." His challenge of the president was a reminder of the political courage needed within hip-hop (Dyson, 2006). For a brief moment in his career, Kanye "was a reminder of the history of Hip-Hop and its role as a truth-teller" (Bailey, 2014, p. 59). This act of resistance gave me respect for Kanye West. Still, his music did not have a transformative impact on my life. I recognized that all aspects of cultural life, Kanye included, have been shaped by corporatization and "reflects a more general trend toward the global spread of consumer culture made possible by new media technologies" (Watkins, 2004, p. 569).

In hip-hop's struggles for "survival and pleasure inside of capitalism, capitalism has become their greatest friend and greatest foe" (Kelley, as cited in Watkins, 2004, p. 557). Kanye's career has embodied this corporatization. His labor has generated profit for himself, other artists, and the corporations who control the music industry, while glamorizing America's worst cultural values: narcissism, ego-maniacal individualism, unabashed misogyny, unquestioned homophobia, and rampant materialism and consumerism. These cultural values are detrimental to society, especially for urban youth.

In 2013, Kanye released his sixth solo album, Yezzus, around the world, reaching number one in digital sales in 40 countries. West used this biblical reference to imagine himself reborn, ascending to god-like status. In a 2012 Interview, Kanye said, "God has chosen me to be the voice and the connector" (Bailey, 2014, p. xxii). Critical pedagogue, Antonia Darder (2011), accurately captures Kanye's bloated self-image in "A Dissident Voice":

> Political dissidents are not performers, rock stars, or celebrities. The very ego-mechanisms that drive such compulsions are in direct conflict with the political aims of dissent . . . celebrity performers, anchored in the profit motives of the entertainment industry, fancy themselves as great contributors to humanity. (p. 3)

Kanye may help corporations convince 200,000 future leaders of the United States to pay $300.00 for a 3-day music festival, but he is not the second coming to hip-hop. Within the long arc of hip-hop history, Kanye West is a "jester in the form of a child attempting to come to grips with the world through the memories he shares with society" (Bailey, 2014, p. xx), hip-hop's prodigal son who may or may not ever return.

I took the next customer, a man wearing a vest and tie with a furry animal hat. Like most customers at this late hour, he did not need another drink. My bar manager pulled me off the register and assigned me to count tips. The flashlight on my cell phone provided just enough light for me to distinguish the denominations of the bills. First, I separated the ones from the fives and the occasional 10s and 20s. Then, I counted the ones and rubber-banded them in stacks of 100. This was life as a chronically underemployed TA, taking odd jobs each summer. Every dollar counted outside of my classroom, just as every student's voice counted inside.

As I counted dirty dollar bills doled out by America's drunken youth, Kanye continued his set, performing "Run This Town": "Police escorts, everybody passports/This is the life that

everybody asks for/This the fast life, we are on a crash course/What you think I rap for, to push a fucking Rav-4?" (Carter, Fenty, West, Wilson, & Bhasker, 2009). Perhaps, the fact that I drove from Los Angeles to San Francisco in a 1996 Rav-4 I borrowed from my stepmother-in-law had heightened my sensitivity to the cultural values being amplified through the speakers. No, Kanye, your life is not the life everybody asks for. There are many who use hip-hop music and culture to elevate social justice, human rights, community empowerment, equity, self-reflection, and personal growth—not this consumer-driven culture you are promoting. I lost count again. Geezus Yezzus. What about the kids?

Rationale for an Autoethnography

What does my experience bartending a Kanye West concert have to do with educational research? Everything! The selection of what to write about in autoethnography is not random. I share this story to provide a glimpse into the complex ways that I, as a cultural worker, artist, and educator engage in hip-hop as a site for critical discourse. These multiple positions inform multiple ways of reading and knowing the world. Autoethnography uses memories to provide complex, insider accounts that can help us better understand ourselves and improve social life. As an artist and educator who claims hip-hop, this story is used to disrupt and speak out against the dominant narrative that defines hip-hop by its mainstream artists and consumers.

Stories are selected according to data collection criteria and their relevance to the research focus (Vicars, 2006). Ellis (2004) wrote, "Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds" (p. 32). The creative latitude in the production of autoethnographic texts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) is articulated in this plan for studying my practice as a creative and critical arts educator who uses hip-hop pedagogy in urban classrooms. This experience symbolized a moment of emergence for me as an organic intellectual. In the days between working these odd

jobs, I organized my hip-hop educator file kit and studied a national report about the professional and financial lives of TAs. By telling this story about counting dollar bills in the back of a tent while listening to Kanye West, I seek to reveal my marginal positions, both as an artist within the dominant culture of hip-hop and within the field of education as a TA.

Epiphanies, such as my memory of counting ones in the back of a tent while listening to Kanye West, are one of the strategic tools used in autoethnographic methods. According to Denzin (2014), "Epiphanies are ritually structured liminal experiences connected to moments of breach, crisis, redress, reintegration and schism" (p. 53). This moment also marked a moment of transition for me as an educator. After 10 years of working in the trenches of arts education, I was desperately looking for financial stability, which was nowhere to be found.

Autoethnography is a valued method of qualitative research that challenges traditional methodologies, claims, and assertions about truth and authority (Vicars, 2006). Critical pedagogues reject distinctions between "high" and "low" culture and examine the complex ways that popular culture operates as an invaluable site for public pedagogy, both inside and outside of schools (Hill, 2011). While traditional academic research insists on a belief in objectivity, autoethnography is a self-narrative that examines the intersection of the self with others in social contexts. Similarly, spoken word and hip-hop are built on an extensive body of writers and performers who speak their lived and examined experiences through their writing and their art.

Denzin (2014) described autoethnography as interventionist in seeking to provide a platform to "those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak" (p. 6) in traditional research. This qualitative methodology examined the "taken-for-granted assumptions about the influence of race, gender, and class" (Denzin, 2014, p. 7).

Similarly, hip-hop music and culture has provided a stage for marginal voices from people of diverse backgrounds from across the world to speak their truths.

Autoethnography as Method

As a method, autoethnography addresses a question that plagues social scientists: Why does this system (in my instance, the NYC public school system) not work, and how could it be made to work better? (Hatch, 2002). As Hatch (2002) wrote, "Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning" (p. 148). This "mindwork" consists of

> organizing and interrogating data in such ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. If often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. (Walcott, as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 148)

Essential to this process is asking questions of the data (Hatch, 2002). Do the data provide sufficient depth to support careful analysis? Am I asking the right questions? Are question strategies biased, inadequate, or haphazard? New questions emerge. Autoethnographers use their personal experiences as their primary data. Like ethnography, autoethnography pursues the ultimate goal of cultural understanding through research processes such as: data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. This study builds on these ethnographic processes in systematic ways, informed by the themes that surface and those particularly salient to the literature.

The categorical classification of this study is narrative ethnography. Narrative ethnographers "focus on a group or culture and use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on themselves and look more deeply at interactions between the self and

other" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). This study is a form of teacher-research in that I have examined my relationships with students and other educators and have reflected on teaching philosophy (Ellis, 2004). This study fits within the category of "texts by complete-member researchers [who] explore groups of which they are already members with complete identification and acceptance" (Chang, 2008, p. 33). In contrast to "complete-member" research, in my study, I view my praxis as the phenomenon of study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

By using research design methods found in the literature, I sought to produce a document that balances the descriptive/self-affirmative with the analytical/interpretive and the confessional/self-critical/self-evaluative (Chang, 2008). It has been important to affirm the student voices that have shaped my practice as a spoken word TA. Their critical insights largely go unacknowledged and un-legitimized in discourse on school reform, but their voices are affirmed in this project. My hope is that my research can provide a blueprint for TAs to document their classroom practices. My story is only one of many about those working tirelessly on the margins of the field to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the nation's underserved youth.

By consulting the literature on autoethnographic methods, I developed a strategy and plan for collecting, organizing, interpreting, and analyzing my data. In alignment with the research, I underwent the steps of data collection, data organization, interpretation, and analysis. The fluctuating nature of autoethnographic research is such that all steps are in constant interplay with one another; therefore, there were no hard delineating demarcations between them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My research steps overlapped and intertwined as the literature suggests (Chang, 2008). Similar to grounded theory, data collection and analysis were conducted

simultaneously (Charmaz, 1983). This multilayered process allowed me to sharpen my research, collect relevant data, and conduct in-depth interpretation along the way (Chang, 2008).

Research Design

Data Collection

Chang (2008) described data collection as a process for building a database for interpretation through artifact collecting, chronicling, memo writing, and writing prompts. I collected data using several processes. First, I referred to my physical and virtual files. These files included journals, school assignments, personal writing projects, and numerous reflections about my artistic and educational practice. Next, I organized these data into categories according to the educational interventions within which they fit and examined each data set looking for patterns and themes (Muncey, 2010). This step allowed me to see a general outline of the story of each of educational context and to identify gaps in my data. Then, I wrote memos about experiences as a TA filling in gaps to engage with the literature on TAs, spoken word pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy, and critical pedagogy.

Data Organization

Organization is one of the most important aspects of autoethnographic research in that it provided me with a conceptual base from which to analyze and interpret my data. According to Hirshfield (1997), "Poetry has historically been defined as particular ways of organizing thought through sound" (p. 7). I approached these autoethnographic processes with the fluidity, mindfulness, and openness of a poet, while maintaining the necessary qualitative organization of my own data (Chang, 2008).

Inventorying was the first major step undertaken in grouping the data collected for the study. Chang (2008) described inventorying as a means to evaluate and organize data by

selecting items, ranking importance, and uncovering themes. Labeling or coding the data followed the process of inventorying. For this study, I used labels to transform my categorization throughout the data organization process. As data were collected, I labeled data in tables with simple identifiers classified by theme, date, type, location, persons, and type of artifact (Chang, 2008). Further, by refining my organization, I discovered excess and deficiency in my data (Chang, 2008).

Using typological analysis, I divided my data into categories, disaggregating the whole phenomenon under study, and read files, as I looked for patterns and themes. Hatch (2002) suggested that researchers divide the overall data set into categories generated from: theory, research objectives, initial data processing, or common sense. I used my sensibilities born of my lived experience to organize my data chronologically based on residencies. This provided a focus for each autoethnographic segment and allowed me to stretch toward the "thick descriptions" that a autoethnography demands.

For each residency, each data set is different. For example, the data from my first teaching experience in 2003 were limited to several email correspondences with the nonprofit with which I was subcontracting; my memories of 4 days, 8 hours in total (1 day of training, and three classes); the handout from the training with my handwritten notes; my curriculum, which contained an overview and two lesson plans; a student contact list; and the most impressive artifact, a 2-page email from a student suggesting how we should restructure our remaining classes. The narrow scope of the data provided me with a clear roadmap for organizing and telling the story. With student voice central to the story, I used her extensive email to anchor the story titling this segment of the autoethnography—Hip-Hop Scholars, the name the student suggested for our group.

Data were sorted and grouped into three topical categories (Chang, 2008): my life as a student, an artist, and an arts educator. I created timelines of major events in my life to gain a chronological understanding of the educational experiences, professional encounters, and episodic experiences linked to my research purpose. While I examined my life categorically, I presented my research in an integrated way, weaving relevant stories from my life as a student who survived NYC public schools and stories from my life as an artist with a critical practice, into stories from my classroom experiences as a TA.

The classification of data assisted me in finding themes to be interpreted and analyzed. These categories of data provided me with a foundation for a critical examination of themes as they relate to my research focus. The purpose of these autoethnographic processes was to bring to surface those taken for granted habitual and unconscious thoughts important for interpretation and analysis.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

In most studies, conducting formal data analysis early during data collection is desirable. It helps researchers shape the remaining analysis. From prior writing experiences, I knew I needed to shift my focus to "sifting through masses of fragmented details to stringing discovered gems together in an intriguing pattern so that the finished product will sound cohesive and interesting" (Chang, 2008, p. 139). With my data organized into residencies, I set out to write. First, I examined the data for each chapter, asking specific questions: How did I support my students to write these poems? What lessons can be learned from their words? What actually happened during the class session versus what is listed on my lesson plan? Which memories do I think had a transformative impact? What did my students say in their feedback forms? Instead of

trying to write down the stories exactly as they occurred, I attempted to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived" (Bochner, 2000, p. 270).

Next, I conducted analysis and interpretation. "Analysis tends to dissect a data set whereas interpretation urges researchers to connect fractured data" (Chang, 2008, p. 128). For this study, I used Hatch's (2002) 10 strategies for data analysis and interpretation:

> (1) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyze inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyze relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly; (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories. (p. 131)

My data constituted stories of memories from the classroom, pieced together with artifacts. As I wrote the stories, I layered in my initial intentions, embedded in my lesson plans, and my students' poems. Since my personal experiences were the foundation for this study, my original intentions as an educator informed my interpretations as a researcher. Therefore, I used the iterative processes of data analysis that had begun before I entered the classroom.

Data in the form of episodic stories were analyzed using interpretive analysis, which sought to "make sense of social situations by generating explanations for what's going on within them" (Hatch, 2002, p. 180). For the purpose of this study, I used a systematic approach and a critical lens to interpret and analyze my data. Steps included: (a) finding recurring themes and exceptional occurrences; (b) analyzing inclusion and exclusion; (c) connecting with scholars, both present and the past; and (d) analyzing relationships between self/other, self/kin, self and cultural and/or imagined community, self/world, and self/the divine (Hatch, 2002).

"The processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 479). There is always more data analysis you can do (Hatch, 2002). Hatch suggested several criteria for completing data analysis that proved helpful: (a) Are all deviant data and disconfirming data accounted for? (b) Can the analysis plan be explained and justified? (c) Can a complete story be told? and (d) Can the analysis be organized into coherent findings? Writing the findings constituted a separate stage of data analysis.

Performative Writing

To tell this story, I used language in myriad ways to provide the reader with my inner world, which cannot be told by "conventional means" (Muncey, 2010). Years of sharing my poetry with audiences in written and spoken forms inspired me with the confidence to affirm that my story is "important and worth telling" (Muncey, 2010, p. 54). Autoethnographic research methods resonate with my practice as a performance poet. As a spoken word artist, I have spent my career engaged in an embodied critical praxis. Many of the methodological concerns and skill sets central to my artistic practice are also foundational to the production of autoethnographic texts. These practices guided my process, transforming memories into more usable data to inform this study. The following features of autoethnography also helped to illuminate the complexity of this approach to knowledge production.

Reflexivity. Richardson (2001) stated, "Writing is a method of discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world" (p. 35). The rigorous self-questioning demands of autoethnography are difficult, and so is "confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738). My writing practice prepared me for these challenges. Developing a critical practice does not happen overnight. It takes time. It is about

internalizing key concepts. As a critical educator, I reflected and worked to be open about my own biases. It took courage, indeed, to face these blind spots.

Storytelling. Literature on autoethnographic methods asks for "writing that shows, does not tell, hesitates, stutters, enacts what it describes, is evocative, reflexive; writing to embrace, enact, embody, effect" (Denzin, 2014, p. 21). To stretch toward this goal, I developed a checklist to focus on literary elements during the revision process: tension, time, setting, characters, dialogue, voice, scene, composition logic/narrative strategy, emotional outline, transitions, and clarity. These storytelling practices are central to interpretive and analytical processes. When researchers write autoethnographic texts, they seek to produce "aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 14). Layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection to tell a story that emerges readers into research. Denzin (2014) provided a list of five components all stories should have:

> (1) People depicted as characters; (2) a scene, place, or context where the story occurs; (3) an epiphany or crisis that provides dramatic tension, around which the emplotted events depicted in the story revolve and toward which a resolution is pointed; (4) a temporal order of events; (5) a point of moral to the story which gives meaning to the experiences depicted. (p. 4)

In addition to understanding the components of a story, Ellis (2000) poses many, varied questions about the goals, claims, and achievements of the author as evaluative criteria: Is the text fully engaged? Does the story have flow? Is it resonant? Does it offer something new? Does it make legitimate claims? Is the research providing a complex, nuanced story? Does it promote dialogue? Questions guided my interpretive and analytical processes.

Evocative. I did not want to write a study that "simplifies, categorizes, slices and dices" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). Autoethnography is a "reader-friendly," more engaging writing style that appeals to readers more than conventional scholarly writing (Chang, 2008). "Rather than produce inaccessible, esoteric, and jargon-laden texts, autoethnographers work to connect with multiple and diffuse audiences by writing and performing in clear, concise and engaging ways." Autoethnographers use "literary, poetic and aesthetic conventions for creating engaging texts" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 25). The goal is to "write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experiences and to write from an ethic of care and concern" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). This care and concern is directed to both the participants and the reader. Performative writing "evokes worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocateable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight" (Pollock, 1998, p. 80).

Performative texts. Performative texts "tends to favor the generative and ludic capacities of language," "[the] interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning, [and] uses language like paint to create what is self-evidently a version of what was, what is, and/or what might be" (Pollock, 1998, p. 80). According to Pollock (1998), performative writing is good writing. "For me, performative writing is not a genre or fixed form but a way of describing what some good writing does" (p. 75). I explored several dimensions of performative texts in the production of this study.

Performance writing is subjective. It rejects the idea of the reader as passive. Instead, its goal is to "activate subjectivity and compel emotional response" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). This form of writing has an embodied subjectivity that tends to "*subject* the reader to the writer's reflexivity, drawing their respective subject-selves reciprocally and simultaneously into critical

‘intimacy’” (Pollock, 1998, p. 86). Subjective writing makes writing a visible subject, and operates to provide reflexive engagement between text and audience. This critical intimacy was essential to my artistic practice.

Performance writing is nervous. “It hesitates and stutters, moving from one charged moment to the next, with a sense of urgency” (Pollock, as cited in Denzin, 2014 p. 91). Performative texts use a layered approach, crossing “various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders” (Pollock, 1998, p. 90).

Performance writing is vulnerable. Writing a “person’s story to words on a page robs it of complexity” (Kraus, 2003, p. 284). What has been said about one’s personal experiences is now up for interpretation and criticism, and published words cannot be taken back (Ellis, 1999). Poets embrace vulnerability as an essential aspect of their practice.

Performative writing is metonymic. “It is self-consciously partial” (Pollock, 1998, p. 82). Metonymic writing “dramatizes the limits of language” (Pollock, 1998, p. 82). “Metonymic writing is often filled with a longing for a lost subject/object, for a subject/object that has disappeared into history or time” (Pollock, 1998, p. 82). Performance writing operates to “metaphorically render absence present-to bring the reader into contact with ‘other-worlds’” (Pollock, 1998, p. 80).

Performance writing is consequential. Performative rhetoric “names a new public.” The hip-hop generation, as an imagined community, is the “new public” that I address in my poetry and in this performative text. Performance writing claims readers as “cowriter” and “co-constituent” (Pollock, 1998, p. 95).

Research that "doesn't break the heart just isn't worth doing" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752). Although research says that TAs are at the center of transformative educational innovations, the dimensions of their practice are relatively unknown. The TA remains a stranger in educational discourse. Thus, this autoethnographic study sought to "evoke the researcher's vulnerable self" (Muncey, 2010, p. 54).

Abstract analysis. Subjective, evocative, vulnerable, metonymic, and consequential writing requires reflective and emotional depth. I needed to use metaphor, verse, and/or meter to interpret and analyze these experiences. From my practice as a poet, I recognize the hidden power metaphor has in framing perception. Metaphor has the power to "condense information, stimulate imaginative and emotive responses, and convey meaning which would be incapable of being communicated through literal translation" (Muncey, 2010, p. 63).

Writing metaphorically was important to capturing the lost worlds that exist inside of the classrooms and school hallways I visited. Honestly, I do not believe that I could have authentically conducted a study about the implementation of critical pedagogy in my classroom experiences with the intention of looking at social justice without the poetic. Writing poetry is a way to conduct "abstract analysis" in autoethnography (Ellis, 2011, p. 19). Within my files were 10s of black and white composition notebooks filled with notes, drafts of poems, free-writes from my classes, and ideas from my practice. During interpretation and analysis, I turned to these unfinished free-writes. For example, here is a poem entitled "Unspoken Truth," written in the margins of a lesson plan:

I walk through New York City streets
a fictional character in a movie of my life
I tuck poems under my tongue

so random police checks won't find them.

Under my headphones is a soundtrack to an epic

saga where I am a terrorist,

a Maroon poet with no village

trying to keep the people from crumbling like the buildings did.

Criteria for Autoethnographic Research

Autoethnography requires different criteria for evaluation (Holt, 2003). This study was meant to disrupt the norms of traditional research practice and representation. Hence, issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability were always in question.

Validity

Autoethnographers recognize the shifting nature of what we understand and refer to as truth. Moreover, autoethnographers acknowledge that memory is fallible, and that stories are factionalized versions of the truth. Memory "often reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and unpredictable. Memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past" (Chang, 2008, p. 72). Autoethnographers argue, though, that any time language is used to recall memories, it cannot truly represent how those experiences were lived and felt. Given that language distorts memory "narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745).

Memory can also "trigger extreme emotions: aversion with an unpleasant experience and glorification of a pleasant one" (Chang, 2008, p. 72). In practice, it is difficult to represent the truth in a story while also making decisions about how best to tell the story (Wall, 2008). "The self that appears to others is a performed character, a public self, attending to standardized social obligations while concealing its true desires" (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Wall, 2008, p. 42). The

danger is that the storytellers will overemphasize aspects that will make them look good while de-emphasizing details that portray their character in a negative light. In this study, I worked to consciously keep this danger in mind and remain as open as possible to the truth of the experiences about which I wrote.

Reliability

Issues of the reliability in the production of an autoethnographic text refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator have had the experiences described within the context of the "factual evidence" that is made available? Does the narrator use "literary license" to the point that the story is better viewed as a work of fiction than a truthful account?

Generalizability

Generalizability is constantly being checked by readers to determine if the text speaks to their personal lives or the lives of others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The issue of generalizability is measured by a text's usefulness. In particular, autoethnographers ask: "How useful is the story?" and "To what uses might the story be put?" (Ellis et. al, 2011, p. 34; Bochner, 2002). For this text, I have sought to move the reader to action with the assumption that powerful stories told powerfully will achieve this aim. In the presentation of my research, my overarching intention was that educators and people outside of the field could understand the ideas and concepts.

Addressing Autoethnographic Method's Critiques

A critical approach addresses many of the critiques found in research methodologies in general and autoethnography, specifically. A critical approach required self-vigilance during the process and presentation of my research. Critics of autoethnography say that it is self-indulgent and narcissistic (Jones et al., 2013); others charge that autoethnographers "do too little field work, have small samples, use biased data, are navel-gazers, and are too self-absorbed, offering

only verisimilitude, and not analytic insights" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 70). My response was to design my autoethnographic research through a critical lens, which required a critical analysis of the cultural lens and other perspectives that informed my story.

According to Carey-Webb (2001), to qualify as critical autoethnography, the research must examine the alienating effects of the dominant culture, explore connections within and across cultures, and theorize strategies for social change. I followed the criteria Engstrom (2008) outlined for critical autoethnographers to use for an embodied approach: (a) assist the individual in understanding their own prejudices, (b) meditate profoundly about the impact of communicative interaction, (c) elevate the researcher's critical consciousness and future endeavors, (d) practice restraint, and (e) posit the researcher as part of the narrative they are telling. Critical educators understand it is important to interrogate the role and impact of their identity in their practice. After all, how can we, as educators, achieve social justice, if we are not aware of the impacts of our identity in our classrooms? Similarly, critical researchers must consider representation in our research processes.

This personal narrative is not a delinquent form of expression. Books are filled with research that is "dry, distant, abstract, propositional essays" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 734). This study sought to disrupt the research tradition of the anonymous voice as the norm. The assumption that objectivity is even possible has been critically contested (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). All ethnographers bring to their research theories that shape what they choose to describe and how they choose to describe it (Wolcott, 1999). Within autoethnography, a marginalized, critical voice can be reclaimed.

In "Language, Power, and Clarity or 'Does Plain Prose Cheat?" Giroux (1993) argued that methodological concerns like clarity become "code word for an approach to writing that is

profoundly Eurocentric in both context and content" (p. 166). From the beginning, autoethnographic writing has been "closely connected to gender, race, family, nation, politics, capital, technology, critical social theory, and cultural criticism; that is, to debates over questions of knowledge, and its representation and presentation" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 71). The counter-claims of autoethnographic researchers resonate. Those who "advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/ upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective" (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 4). By writing explicitly from my multiple identities as Black, as male, as working class, and as a critical hip-hop educator, I followed in the tradition of authors who champion "the cause of reflexive, experiential, autobiographical, and vulnerable texts" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 735).

Autoethnography does not necessarily solve the problem of representation (Clough, 2000). It is not truly possible to have "fully intentional subjectivity" (Wall, 2008, p. 41; Clough, 1998). Performative writing, however, is an "important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life" (Pollock, 1998, p. 75). Moreover, "it will take a while to wean scholars and the American public from a view that measuring, comparison, and outcomes are all that matters" (Eisner, as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 761). What is good scholarship anyway? Is it theoretical abstraction and conceptual elaboration? (Sparkes, 2000). Or, does good scholarship require a partnership with subject and reader to present insights, questions, and characters that become part of their lives, with the hope that this might lead them to take new actions? (Jones et al., 2013). Autoethnography can "reflect a deep command of theory by engaging in it through the methodology" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 24).

"Telling personal stories in/as research always carries personal, relational, and ethical risks" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 19). Ethical questions are rarely raised in autoethnographic

literature, and "there is little guidance" (Wall, 2008, p. 49). Speaking about finances is personal. Do I have an ethical responsibility to my wife to use discretion? Or was her agreement to marry a poet consent to having aspects of her family and her community's intimate experiences revealed? For my sake, and each of the individuals who may be implicated in my stories, my use of discretion was necessary to the process.

Organization of the Autoethnography

This study evolved in a rich, organic manner. This autoethnographic research examined significant facets and experiences of my journey as a Black, male student, artist, and arts educator. This narrative account followed my professional experiences as a TA implementing educational interventions presented chronologically in five segments in Chapter 4, providing a temporal view of my pedagogical formation. These include:

1. Hip-Hop Scholars (2003) recounted my first teaching experience—an after-school, college-level course for students at Bank Street College. Here, you will meet a student whose 2-page email lays the foundation for my educational practice.
2. Use Your Words (2005) followed a seventh-grade, honors ELA integration as the students competed to represent their class in the Poetry Slam. After prompting students to think critically about the relationship between language and dehumanizing processes, they responded with "social issue" poems filled with their critical words.
3. Yo Mista (2006) was when a newly opened Brooklyn school focusing on arts and community hired me to teach a poetry elective, and I am forced to grow as a classroom teacher. Watch me learn through a 4-year journey at one school site.

4. Queens (Where I'm From) (2006) explored the use of a prompt with a range of young people from my Queens hometown as they explored their geographic, ancestral, cultural, and generational identities.
5. One Mic (2007) takes us into a charter school located in the birthplace of hip-hop, The Bronx. When a student reads a poem from the perspective of a child in a gang-affiliated family, he is threatened with expulsion. What happens when a school's approach to safe space is in direct contradiction with how the concept is applied in a poetry workshop? Will a student get expelled for a poem he shares in an open mic or will he get to perform in our classroom slam?

Conclusion

Chang (2008) asserted that the autoethnographic process should be based on disciplined, systematically collected, and analyzed data, so that it is not merely based on personal impression and subjective reflections. By referring to critical scholars, I designed this study to recognize and fill gaps in the data, ask critical questions, write my story in concert with the efforts of other poets and critical pedagogues, and—through an informed and systematic process—generate findings and recommendations. By following the processes discussed here, this autoethnographic study sought to achieve the goal of contributing to educational interventions designed to support emancipatory arts experiences in public school classrooms.

CHAPTER 4

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF RESIDENCIES

This chapter comprises autoethnographic entries for five residencies in New York over a 5-year period that provide rich accounts of my experiences as a teaching artist (TA) committed to social justice. From my autoethnographic accounts of my residencies, in Chapter 5, I identify the major themes and issues that have shaped and assisted me in developing my liberatory pedagogy over the years and its implication for the work of TAs in this country.

Residency 1: Hip-Hop Scholars

I did not account for time to get through security. That is a rookie move! Liberty Partnerships Program, a nonprofit housed at Bank Street College of Education, contracted me to teach a college-level hip-hop course to public high school students enrolled in their after-school program. In October 2003, I did not know Bank Street College was a pillar of progressive education. Back then, I did not even know what the word pedagogy meant.

Bank Street College is located in uptown Manhattan off of Broadway in one of NYC's most affluent neighborhoods, which nestles Columbia University and its ivory towers within a picturesque ole' New York neighborhood sandwiched between Central Park to the east and the Hudson River to the west. I gave myself 90 minutes to commute from Jamaica, Queens, to the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This should have given me enough time to catch the Q3 bus, transfer to the F train, and then connect to the 1. When I arrived at Bank Street, I thought I was going to be late. Usually the guard at the front desk takes a long time to match the young Black man with the short haircut on my driver's license with the young Black man with the dreadlocks standing in front of him. I would get a new ID but those DMV lines are brutal. The guard at the front desk was a Black man. I usually take notice because security guards are often the only

Black adult males working inside of school buildings. After he gave me careful directions of where to go, I made it to Liberty's office on time.

A student at Wesleyan University recommended me to teach at Liberty Partnerships after watching me perform and speak at his university. After originally enrolling in college 1998, I dropped out of my third community college in the spring of 2003. Each year, I became increasingly disappointed with the lack of academic rigor and engagement I was experiencing. Though I did not stay consistently enrolled in college, these were some of the most intellectually stimulating years of my young adult life. As a performance poet, I visited dozens of universities, many of which I was learning about for the first time. As a nationally recognized performance poet, I was invited to perform, teach workshops, and lecture. I was honored to be asked to teach a college-level course by Liberty and committed myself to providing the type of educational experience I found lacking throughout my schooling.

Liberty is a college-bound program, founded in 1989, that served low-income Black and Brown youth, many traveling on the subway from Harlem, The Bronx, and NYC's other outer boroughs. The young people enrolled in this program were probably some of the only youth of color who regularly attended the progressive institution of Bank Street, which included both a private elementary and middle school as well as a graduate college of education. I walked through the sea of White faces in Bank Street's halls wondering what this experience might feel like for my future students.

Before the workshop series began, Liberty requested an overview and lesson plan focusing on hip-hop and identity. I submitted a comprehensive three-page course breakdown. The overview began, "Hip-Hop music is one of the most important artistic and cultural expressions around the world to emerge from the twentieth century." The course was designed to

use hip-hop culture as an analytical framework while studying and creating hip-hop music. The second two pages of my workshop overview included a session-by-session course breakdown, exploring a specific subtheme, and an artistic focus for each class (see Table 1). Originally, Liberty told me that the workshop would be gender-specific, male-only, and focused on identity, which changed weeks before our first session to include female students.

Written beneath these questions was a list I assume Farhad prompted or guided me to generate with him of specific behaviors that could prevent young people from progressing through activities: reading out loud, not looking smart, fear of attention, math (do not have fundamentals), being called on, structure and grammar get in the way of creativity, and pressure from teacher. This list resonated with what I witnessed and experienced in public schools and was a great reminder of the ways young people struggle in traditional classroom environments. As a first-time educator, I greatly appreciated how intentional Liberty's program director was in ensuring I understood the needs of their students so I could develop my lessons to reach those who struggled the most.

In addition to providing me with context for understanding specific indicators for when students struggle, Farhad continued his dialogical crash course with practical advice to facilitate student engagement, including reducing complexity; allowing other modalities (singing, making sounds, dancing); changing the pace; providing students with cues; breaking up into smaller groups; giving students options; providing examples; building on successes; and meeting students where they are. We also discussed ideas for opening the class, including posing conversation-starters like, "What is in your CD?" and "Who is your favorite emcee?"

To close our session, Farhad finally reviewed some new teacher best practices: create managed and controlled opportunities, give students options, and provide several samples. Our

lesson concluded with a mantra, “Students who are progressing think strategically. Students who learn usually have teachers who teach strategically.”

Table 1

Curriculum Focus for Liberty Course

SESSION	SUBTHEME	ARTISTIC FOCUS
1	Defining Hip-Hop Music and Culture	Voice
2	Developing Critical Thinking Skills	Content
3	Deconstructing of Male Identity	Meter/Form
4	Reconstruction of Male Identity	Chorus/Hook
5	Sexuality	Rhyme Scheme & Flow
6	Language	Metaphor & Simile
7	Misogyny, Women, and Rape	Imagery
8	Homophobia	Alliteration and Assonance
9	Materialism, Gangsterism, Drugs, Violence, Prison	Storytelling
10	Images, Videos and Movies	Repetition, Signature, Style, and Other Poetic Devices
11	Hip-Hop Entrepreneurialism and Business	Collaboration
12	Hip-Hop Around the Nation, Around the World	Collaboration
13	Hip-Hop as Resistance	Social Commentary
14	The Show	
15	End of Course Performance	

After this interactive seminar-style beginning, Farhad invited me to use the S.M.A.R.T.E.R. Planning Questions planning process to prepare me to teach my course: (a) shape the critical question, (b) map the critical content, (c) analyze difficulties, (d) reach

enhancement decisions, (e) teach strategically, (f) evaluate mastery, and (g) revisit outcomes. Educators love acronyms, don't we? My hip-hop educator toolkit had begun.

My First Class

After our professional development session, Farhad provided me with a detailed roster for the 13 students, including students' phone numbers, grade level, and guardian's names and phone numbers. I immediately went home and planned the dopest, funky freshest lesson plan ever planned. My first class was in late October, on a Monday after-school, 4:30-6:30 p.m. My lesson included a detailed three-page plan with lengths of time for each segment of the class.

On the first day of class, I opened with a 10-minute "greeting," in which I told the class about myself and performed a couple of poems. I do not recall what poems I would have used to introduce myself to high school students in 2003, but reciting poetry was the way that I have introduced myself to most groups of youth during that time. Then we took 15 minutes to introduce ourselves by sharing our names, favorite artists, song or poem, and our expectations for the class. I reviewed the day's agenda and transitioned into Activity 1.

The first activity was designed to "help students understand how hip-hop music and culture influences their consciousness." With coaching from Liberty's director, I fast-forwarded our curriculum timeline, beginning my first session with what I had planned for Session 2:

> Developing Critical Thinking Skills: We will discuss the most popular themes/genres in hip-hop music. Students will break down lyrics and images and discuss critical analysis.
>
> Content – We will listen to several different songs and determine the main idea, themes and perspective of the artists.

While "discuss critical analysis" is objectively not a sentence, the intent is clear: to have students analyze texts of popular hip-hop music to develop their critical thinking skills. To achieve this, I

began with a game. I am a fan of games, card games, board games, computer games, video games, sports, theater games. Even my engagement in poetry slam was fueled by the democratizing elements I appreciate in gaming.

In groups, students had to list 10 items in a specific category as quickly as possible. I wanted the students to see how easy it was to list categories based on popular culture (rappers, actors, clothing brands, athletes), versus how challenging it would be to list categories not discussed in youth popular culture, like politicians, countries in Africa, entrepreneurs, and poets (non-White). While my notes explicitly stated, "This is a noncompetitive activity," I distinctly remember coaching each team to do better than the others. I gave them 90 seconds to complete the list and used a stopwatch to time them.

The game began. Category 1: Emcees. Within the first 30 seconds, Group 1 had a complete list of 10. I let the other groups finish but I announced Group 1 as the winner when they were all done. Group 1 seemed to have a phenom on their team—a young woman named Shaniqua. In 2003, just as it is today in 2017, a certain image might come into a person's mind upon hearing the name Shaniqua. Forget whether or not your imagination will either confirm or destroy the stereotyped image of little Black girls names Shaniqua. What you need to know is that she gave Group 1 an unfair advantage because she was ahead of all of us in her thinking. Next, Category 2: Actors. Group 1 won again. I skipped clothing brands and moved right to Category 3: Athletes. I encouraged Group 2 to get back into the game. They had most of the boys in their group, so I gender-normatively suggested they attempt to win this round. Group 2 won. Having different winners was important for keeping the game alive. Perhaps the other groups were reinvested. Most likely, Shaniqua was more intrigued.

I let the students know those were the "easy" categories. Then, we moved on to the "difficult" categories. Round 2, Category 1: Countries in Africa. Ouch! I delighted as their faces contorted for 90 seconds, as none of the groups were able to name more than five African countries. Yes, you already said Egypt, and no Guyana is not in Africa.

At this point in the activity, the students were starting to get frustrated with the game. I pushed through. I wanted the students to recognize just how limited their content knowledge was. Once they could not collectively list more than five of the 50-plus African countries, I believed they would not be able to list 10 non-White entrepreneurs or poets. My goal was to spark dialogue and perhaps an "aha" moment about the way popular culture dominates our collective consciousness. To keep them engaged, I told them they could all work together as one team. They took the challenge. They were still invested in the game.

Round 2, Category 2: Entrepreneurs. Immediately, they named Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey. Shaniqua from Group 1 quickly chimed in: "Russell Simmons is an entrepreneur, so is Puff Daddy, and Master P." In a flash, they were up to five. The class also recognized that many hip-hop artists were also entrepreneurs; before we even got to a minute, they were up to 10. The same pattern happened for the final category, "Poets." Maya Angelou, followed by Langston Hughes, then a list of emcees.

After Activity 1, I led a discussion using a list of guiding questions. My first question was about what students liked and did not like about the activity, a practice I continued throughout my practice. The youth quickly understood the concept of the impact of popular culture in shaping collective consciousness, but what we all were surprised by was just how heavily we leaned on hip-hop as a framework for engaging in fields outside of hip-hop.

After our discussion, we took a 10-minute break and took 20 minutes to create and sign a classroom contract. This was suggested by the Liberty staff and was a practice I would continue with young people in each and every class I taught. Most of the youth in my group had been enrolled in Liberty's programs for several years and were accustomed to this practice. I remembered them confidently and quickly listing group agreements like "listening to each other," "doing their best," "having each other's back," and "trying new things." I suggested some rules of my own, likely about being accountable to them to do my best and asking them to participate for the class to be successful. We quickly completed and signed the contract in less than 20 minutes and moved on to the next activity.

Our second activity was designed to analyze the values promoted in commercial hip-hop by looking at popular hip-hop lyrics. In October 2003, for the first time in Billboard history, Black artists had the top 10 most popular singles, nine of them being hip-hop:

"Get Low," by Lil' Jon & The Eastside Boyz, featuring the Ying Yang Twins,

"Shake Ya Tailfeather," by Nelly, P. Diddy & Murphy Lee,

"Stand Up," by Ludacris, featuring Shawnna,

"Damn!" by YoungBloodz, featuring Lil Jon,

"P.I.M.P." by 50 Cent,

"Right Thurr," by Chingy,

"Holidae In," by Chingy, featuring Ludacris & Snoop Dogg,

"Frontin'," by Pharrell, featuring Jay-Z,

"Can't Stop, Won't Stop," by Young Gunz.

I kept the students in their groups and handed out the lyrics of the nine hip-hop singles, inviting the students to conduct a lyrical breakdown, reading and discussing the lyrics and

identifying the themes and main points. Each group reported what they found in the lyrics. During our discussion, the students grew disgusted and outraged as they referred to line after line instructing women what to do with their body parts. Lil' Jon instructed women to "bend over to the front, touch your toes!" Nelly asked women to shake their tail-feathers. Chingy instructed women to "swing your hips when you're walking" and "lick your lips when you're talking." Despite all of this hard work, 50 Cent found it important enough to repeat in his chorus that you still will not "get a dollar out of me."

The students' discussion was lively and dynamic. By the end of this activity, the students fully recognized just how vulgar and narrow the content was in mainstream rap music. They appeared to be hungry for more. I was hungry for more. I felt like my first class was a success and was ready to expose my students to critical, musical alternatives during our next session.

Session 2: Exploring the Power Hip-Hop

For our second class, we began by reading two articles that demonstrated the national and global power of hip-hop. The first article I read in *The Source* magazine, connecting hip-hop's glorification of jewelry with conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone. Before I shared the article, I read a poem I wrote inspired from the article, "Pieces (Bling-Bling)." This poem was one of the first times I used performance poetry to highlight a specific issue of which I wanted audiences to be aware. The song began with my version of lyrics written to the chorus of a popular hip-hop song "Bling-Bling," which popularized the term.

Bling-Bling

Every time I come around yo' city

Bling-Bling

Siera Leone dies

Bling-Bling

Every time I come around yo' city

Bling-Bling

Hear Africa cry, cry

Bling-Bling

In Sierra Leone

Rebels sell diamonds to fund their wars

And terrorize people for fun

Cutting off hands, arms, legs and feet

So there will be no fighting back

And no drum playing.

The poem asks questions for those who claim hip-hop as their cultural reference point:

What happened to Hip-Hop being a voice of change?

Now it's a voice for these platinum chains.

It seems some African people

are not comfortable without their chains.

Though I had performed this poem dozens of times since writing it the previous year, at open mics, at political gatherings, and university stages, I felt a heightened sense of the poem's purpose as a tool for sparking classroom dialogue.

After a brief, yet somber discussion, we moved on to the second article, "The Army Be Thuggin It," published in *Salon* magazine that month about the use of hip-hop culture to promote military recruitment. After this article, the discussion was about the many ways corporations use hip-hop to sell products to youth of color. We were collectively disgusted.

For the second half of Session 2, my goal was to expose students to some alternatives. I made a playlist of 16 hip-hop songs created by artists with messages not heard on commercial radio stations. Each of these artists was considered underground. I knew many of them from performances where we were both featured. I played track after track, asking questions from a list I prepared in advance. Though the youth were impressed by the variety of lyrical approaches and the raw honesty in the music, their energy diminished toward the end of the session. Sixteen songs were clearly too many examples, although perhaps the youth were fatigued by the repetition of the message about the lack of opportunities and obstacles facing them. I left Session 2 confident I had disturbed and stirred my students' worldviews, yet recognized I would need to focus on what we would be creating together as an alternative.

Scholar Studios: A Student's Two-Page Email Proposal

Two classes down, and I was feeling inspired. I believed I had quite possibly found my calling. I relished in the experience of transferring critically engaged art practices to a group of young people for the first time. I found joy in the lively dialogue I had with my students, and the ability to invite young people to grow in their critical consciousness. After my second class, I envisioned the many directions I could take my students. Then, I received a two-page email from Shaniqua from Group 1. It began quite informally:

> Mr. Poet,
>
> This email might be a little long – so bear with me. Some things need to be worked out but this is the basic layout. I have more ideas so make sure u get back to me.

Make sure u get back to me? Apparently, Shaniqua had her own vision for organizing the class. In her overview, she wrote, "The class as a whole works as a production team." In her email,

Shaniqua changed the name of the class from "Hip-Hop and Identity" to "Hip-Hop Productions" and the name of our team to "Scholar Studios." She continued:

> My idea is to create a Hip-Hop production team and produce a final presentation using songs, dialogue and other Hip-Hop elements. The purpose is to allow everyone in the class to take an in-depth look at what goes into producing quality music, while simultaneously learning about old school Hip-Hop and the fundamentals that the creators of Hip-Hop used back in the day.

Shaniqua's initiative and vision were astonishing. Not only was she bold enough to write her instructor an email advising him of the way the class should proceed, she also created a structure to ensure that she and her peers had a meaningful educational experience.

After appointing me "CEO," Shaniqua outlined responsibilities for each of the five different departments: Managers, Producers, Stylists, Artists, and Historians, responsible for deciding "whether or not the production has enough historic perceptions as well as modern day views." Everyone had the choice to pick which department they would like to work in. Once everyone was positioned into their chosen departments, then the process of selecting themes and styles would begin. Everyone must participate and contribute to the general creativity of the production. My high school student wanted to design the class in a way that empowered her and her peers, with different roles working toward a collective vision. I loved the idea of permanent groups with assigned tasks. Approved, Senior Vice President, Shaniqua.

Shaniqua modeled our class after a music label with a complete curriculum map that included field trips, a study plan, and a vision for a culminating performance in April. She had one criteria for her peers: "Everyone is free to take the production where-ever they want to as long as they are willing to develop their thoughts at a consistent pace and back up their ideas

with a creative process." Up until then, I was planning one lesson at a time. Her plan gave the class an overall vision, and a humanizing evaluative criteria. I responded to her email affirmatively, and informed Shaniqua I planned to implement her ideas during our next session—with one exception, we would leave it up to the class to choose our new name.

During our next class, I alerted the students to our new direction, handing out Shaniqua's course outline, giving her credit, of course, and breaking the class into departments. Almost immediately, each group took notes, detailing how they understood their roles and how they wanted to contribute toward the collective project. The Artists shared about poems and rhymes they had written and previous times they had performed. The Stylists discussed looks and visuals for our final performance. They wanted it to be positive and have a mix of old school and new school. The Marketing/Distribution Department brainstormed an extensive list of approaches to promote our project, including getting our music video televised, subway station promotion, tree lighting events, and the creation of our own clothing brand, coffee mugs, and lip gloss. The Managers and Producers merged into one group and, after discussing the importance of organization, handed out a contact sheet so that they could gather each of the students' information. Before we left for the day, I mentioned the possibility of changing our group name to "Scholar Studios," as Shaniqua suggested, and of course, the class all loved it.

I was learning alongside and from my students. We were learning together. Though our first two sessions were provocative, I never considered what it would take to shift the class into the next level of ownership and engagement. I learned how to do that from Shaniqua, a high school student in a college-level class at Bank Street College, a pillar of progressive education, who taught her teacher how to create a student-centered, project-based classroom structure,

including assigned groups with their own goals, roles, and responsibilities. This is the moment I knew I wanted to teach.

Session 3: Cultural Work in the Classroom

That Saturday, I attended a poetry and hip-hop fundraiser sponsored by a local youth group, as I did on many weekends. I was fully immersed in my life as a cultural worker. On this Saturday, I picked up my older sister at her music and bookstore called Mom's (Music on Myrtle) located right in the heart of gentrifying Brooklyn, in Fort Greene. I worked one day of the week at the bookstore. My other days were spent performing, developing products and opportunities, writing and creating, and building community. A young emcee I met invited me to watch her perform. She was an electric and passionate poet trying to find her voice and cultivate her art form. She needed to be witnessed and would persistently call me to read a new poem or ask my advice about art, life, politics, people, and business. My sister also knew her, so we both decided to support her.

My sister was truly a hip-hop head back when I was playing video games. Her bookstore was an institution where she held dialogues and hosted guests for innovative themed album releases. She even started a model that toured artists at local restaurants, salons, and barbershops during their album release, a model that gained her acclaim in the independent record industry. Still, 2003 was not a good year for a brick-and-mortar music shop or a bookstore. Music was increasingly under corporate control, available online, or easily obtained digitally. The markup between the wholesaler and retailer could not sustain a business in the face of the options people had available to obtain music. Why buy a CD at a local music store for $16.99 when you could buy it for $9.99 at the department store register, or get your friend to copy it for you for free?

The fundraiser hosted by a youth activist group was held at their headquarters. This party embodied the mythical Brooklyn house party: a sliding scale door charge; a party in the office with yummy, healthy food on sale to raise funds for the group to attend a conference in Miami; a DJ and dance floor set up in the basement. What impressed me most were the different ethnicities, ages, backgrounds, and styles. The open mic began. First, an emcee, then a poet, and then another emcee that announced free GED courses at the public library where he worked. I performed, then a female poet, then the young emcee I came to support.

It was after midnight, and my sister and I were headed to yet another event. I regularly performed and partially managed a live band called GAME Rebellion that integrated hip-hop with rock. My sister and I reluctantly left the party as people were dancing and a live band was warming up. Two days later, a friend at this organization emailed me a news release announcing that the NYPD raided the party shortly after we left. At 2:00 a.m., over 25 police vehicles arrived to investigate an "open container." The 100 attendees were sprayed with chemical agents, beaten with nightsticks, and harassed by police officers. Eight people were arrested.

After the incident, the EMS visited the precinct to attend to serious injuries, which included bruised ribs, a spinal injury, and severe blows to the head. In the news release, their organization's mission was to focus on "prisons and police brutality, and challenges the belief that policing, surveillance, imprisonment, and similar forms of control make our communities safer." It was no surprise to me that they would be targeted in this way. At the end of the letter they asked a question in all capital letters, "HOW MUCH LONGER ARE WE GONNA LET THEM ATTEMPT TO SILENCE US WITH TERRORISM? THESE ARE OUR CHILDREN!" There was a hearing planned for the same Monday as my next class. I would not be going. I was

uninterested in participating in organizations that regularly had confrontations with law enforcement. It scared me, and I believed in creative responses to oppressive conditions.

I did, however, write up a lesson plan that began telling my personal experience at the party. I wanted to connect my experience at the party with the dynamics we established during our previous classes. While corporations collectively promoted a narrow representation of Hip-Hop and the military uses the same art form to recruit poor youth of color, when youth of color actually come together to use the power of their own music and culture for their own upliftment, they are at the risk of being violently confronted by law enforcement. I wanted these young people to understand the depth of the attack on their cultural and political expression. In writing this lesson plan, a question emerged which remained central to my teaching practice: Do young people know that there is a movement of people of all ages attempting to change the conditions in this country and the world?

After the opening discussion, I introduced the class to Gil Scott Heron, a poet whose single "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" is often touted as the predecessor of hip-hop. After a brief discussion, we played a 15-minute theater game that required constructing structures out of paper. The second half of the class was reserved for Scholar Studios Production Company. I requested a student from the manager/producer group to chair a meeting at the beginning before we broke out for group work. I provided the student with a four-step process, remembering how empowering it was to use meeting procedures as an executive member of The Paper while a student at City College: report backs, management comments, new business, and open comments. The report backs repeated much of what was discussed in the previous session. There were too many ideas and not a clear focus. While I read the students as experiencing general discomfort with the lack of clarity, I could see their sense of ownership increasing.

Then Came the Actual Crash

A day or two after my third class, I got on a plane headed to London. Other than a family cruise to Bermuda and a one-day trip with a family friend across the Mexican border from San Diego to Tijuana, this was my first time leaving the country. My Hip-Hop Production class was off the following week for Thanksgiving and would reconvene the first week in December. I would have to figure out the lesson plan for Session 4 when I returned back to the states.

It was a hectic couple of weeks, and I was excited to be traveling with my brothers in the band. In my evolution as an artist, this was the first group that I banded with. Spoken word is largely a solo endeavor, and I never fully immersed myself in any group. When I first met the band, they improvised guitar and percussion to accompany one of my poems, and we regularly performed together in the weeks and months that followed. I had grown accustomed to the attention our group would get when we traveled together. We were a group of eight 20-something year-old Black and Brown men, many of us with dreadlocks and/or metal spikes embroidered on jackets and amulets.

Traveling with GAME Rebellion (see Figure 7) is as disorganized as it sounds. We spent most of our time figuring out how to get around. After our first show, we scrambled to get rides back to our flat, and I got in a car with a girl we had just met, who probably had a little bit too much to drink, and BAM! She crashed the car.

Next, a fireman was looking into my eyes telling me I was going to be all right. Then, the sound of mechanical arms from the jaws of life, ripping apart the crumpled metal so they can pull me out from the wreck. Then I was laid on a stretcher and rushed to the hospital. In the emergency room, the nurses cut me out of my clothes and check my vitals. They do not find anything wrong, so they stash me in a corner, as I fell in and out of consciousness.

Suddenly, a doctor started to talk to me. He was holding up the results of a scan, and speaking in a grave voice. He informed me that it was imperative that I have surgery. He pointed to a blob of dark shapes outlined in the semi-translucent image backlit by the white lights, while explaining that the scan revealed that my bowels had cut through my diaphragm and my organs where a little jumbled up. He continued saying that the sack around my heart was ripped and that my spleen was bleeding and might have to be removed.

I wanted to leave. I even got up off of the stretcher and started heading for the door. I was scared that I would not survive the procedure. I was scared that all of these White people were in cahoots to getting me into a hospital to harvest my kidneys. I was scared because I was so far from home. I tell him I am all right, and I want to go back home. He tells me if I leave I would certainly be back within a couple of hours, and that by then, it may be too late. Theatre it was. I hoped it would not be my final performance.

After getting drugged up for surgery, a profound life question entered my mind. Have I done with my life what I was sent here to do? In that final moment of consciousness, I reach out to the heavens and submit. If this is my time, so be it. However, if there is still more work for me to do, then I will make sure to spend my life doing it.

My recovery took 25 days. I laid in the hospital bed, thinking about how I had been spending my time here on Mothership Earth. At 26 years old, this meant largely thinking about my time in school. This is where I have spent the majority of my days. So many schools: my elementary years when I got good grades in classes and on tests and was regularly honored as "Student of the Month"; junior high school where I stopped taking the bus to school and started walking instead, because of the number of times I either witnessed or experienced violence along the routes on the city buses provided by the school; an alternative high school; and on and on.

Figure 7. Performing "Afrikans in Bondage" with members of GAME Rebellion at SUNY Purchase, New York in 2003.

I also thought a lot about how much joy and purpose I had found teaching Scholars Studios, how much I wanted to do it again, and who the hell would teach session 4 while I was sitting in a hospital in London. Questions about the past and future swirled around in my head: On what paths of inquiry and creation would these inspired students take our class? Will the course be canceled? How many other adults have disappeared from these young people's lives? How many adults have disappeared from my own life? What would it have been like to have a Scholar Studios in my Queens hometown? I make sure my family contacts the Liberty staff to let the students know what happened.

Epilogue: Evidence Proving My Value as a Teaching Artist

When I arrived back in the States, I was already in the process of filing a lawsuit I had started while still in the hospital. Since I did not have a stable income as an artist, I sent a message to as many people as possible requesting letters stating their intention to hire me: "As

you know, I was in a near-fatal car accident this past November 2003. The accident hospitalized me for 1 month in London and prevented me from performing for 2 months." After the accident, I hired a solicitor to file a claim against the driver's insurance company. You could help me by providing a letter stating your intent to hire me to perform on any day in December 2003 or January 2004 and how much you were going to pay me. This letter became part of my claim, and I would be reimbursed for it. The solicitor warned me that my claim would not be one of these multimillion dollar settlements that get awarded in the United States. The settlement amount would be determined by my monthly and annual income. All she needed from me was documentation of my financial status. Had I been employed full-time with a salaried position, my settlement would have been much larger.

Liberty did eventually have to cancel the class, and Scholar Studios never took off. While I was trying to provide evidence of my financial value for my lawsuit, I was measuring the value of my work during my first residency. Obviously, we did not achieve our goals, but was this experience successful? How was I measuring success? What had we accomplished during the 8 hours we spent together over four sessions. Certainly, my 2-hour crash course professional development with Farhad was an invaluable point of entry into this unwieldy arts education field. He was one of many activists and artists who were part of a movement within the field of education who I would meet within a framework of hip-hop as a liberatory educational tool. In the classroom, I critically engaged students in dialogue about hip-hop inspiring a student to write a two-page email re-imagining how we approached our work together. I had successfully invited my students to be leaders in their own learning. Still, we had four sessions together and had not yet produced any creative work. When a program ends, it is objectively sad, both for the students

and for the TA. What could have happened if we could continue our work? It took me several months to recuperate, and I was not to return to teaching until the following year.

Residency 2: Use Your Words

Sometimes the words just pour out. This was one of those times. I pulled the car over to write about my mother. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I placed words on the page, trying to express something that had been trapped inside me for a decade. My mother died from AIDS 10 years earlier, in 1994, the same year Magic Johnson announced his HIV-positive status and retired from professional basketball. In the 10 years since she passed, I wrote about a range of topics: the danger of blind patriotism after September 11, a poem arguing that Optimus Prime is a Black Man, decoding racial representations in cartoons and television based on the popular cartoon character, hip-hop's glorification of diamonds and the brutal mining industry in Sierra Leone, and even a poem about the politics of Black hair, following the trajectory of my mother's styles from a natural afro to chemically treated Jherri Curls. Until this moment, I never had the courage to write about my mother's sickness and death. At that time, all I could do was write.

The poem about my mother was about silence. It was not about the words I said but the words I did not say during the last couple years of her life. It explored a collection of psychic memories of 15-year-old me sitting next to her bed in the hospital. I parked my minivan on a downtown Brooklyn street and wrote by the dim overhead light, placing words here and there, hoping they would make sense.

People assume I became a poet because I have an affinity for words. Quite the opposite. When I was a young boy, I spoke slower than most, toggling through the words floating around in my head, mining for deeper meaning. I still do. Sometimes, people get annoyed. I see their anticipating faces leaning in and their eyes shouting, jeesh, spit it out already. When my mother

could not take it any longer, she too would tell me, “Sonny Boy, use your words.” Now, my world is words. Since I was a child, I have been weary of words. I still am. Words are used to threaten, to deny, to manipulate, to separate, to disconnect, to destroy. I cringe when I witness the ways we wield words, carelessly handled like handguns, safeties off. I became a poet because I found profound limitations in using words to express the range and complexity of my thoughts and emotions. I became a poet to carve out new words and with them a new world.

A mentor had suggested I attend an event at the International Center for Tolerance Education because the venue’s director was connected to the Echoing Green Fellowship, which funds innovative social entrepreneurs. He thought I should apply. The event featured a poetry reading by youth poets from Urban Word NYC (UW or UDub). In the 3 years I was active on the NYC poetry scene, I heard about the work Urban Word was doing with teens, providing them with space and resources to grow as poets. This reading was not like adult poetry readings I was regularly attending. Adults are often so measured with their expression that our poetry becomes stale. The young people’s expression was raw, vulnerable, and unfiltered. This is what inspired me to park the car and write.

After the performance, I tracked down the director and got the 411 about the fellowship; then, I started a conversation with Urban Word’s Program Director, Desiree. Desiree was a young woman of Caribbean descent who spoke and operated with stealth, depth, and intention. She was one of those people in NYC who I knew from so many worlds that I could no longer remember how or where we actually met, though I do know she is from Brooklyn. Specifics of our relationship withstanding, I was certain we were connected through our shared commitment to Black people’s political self-determination. I told her how much I enjoyed the youth’s poetry. Desiree told me she wanted me to come work for Urban Word: “We need people like you,

especially Black men, who are doing positive work in the community, who are political and caring, to go in these schools and work with our young people." I was humbled. I was honored. Urban Word wanted me to teach. When do we begin?

Onboarding at Urban Word NYC

Desiree signed her emails one of several ways, "ablaze," "take care," or the patios version, "tek it easy." Dez always left me eased and inspired, feeling as if I was building a movement with family. Desiree followed up with an email the following week: "kahlil, it great talking to you and i am energized by your enthusiastic response to the Urban Word NYC community building." Desiree used lower case letters for names and "i" pronouns, like I do in my poetry. Always detail-oriented, she included in the list of workshop opportunities, the site and location with train directions, date and time, and the classroom teacher when that information was already determined.

Desiree used our email correspondence to onboard me into Urban Word's mission and methodology. Otherwise I had to pick up pieces along the way. When I sent her an email requesting more information, she wrote back with an extensive response.

> The series have a loose pattern of evolution: a third of the class establishing group voice and comfort—getting folk to write and have fun writing; a third of the class thinking about techniques, some re-writing; a third of the class, exploring performance technique—ways to speak or act or move the words to life on stage.

The weekly mentor meetings were mandatory but not paid. This frustrated me from the very beginning. As a community-based artist, I was used to showing up without pay to perform at events, open mics, and fundraisers, but I was busy and hesitated to make another weekly obligation, especially one I would not be paid for. Now that I was teaching for a nonprofit, I was

surprised they did not value their TAs' time enough to pay them for trainings, but still insisted the meetings be mandatory. It felt disrespectful of my time as a contract worker. Still, Desiree spoke to the part of me that believes in community building, by encouraging me to use the weekly mentor meetings to speak to other mentors, to get insights into how their classes usually evolve. I put my frustrations aside for the time being.

I was excited, however, to participate in two, paid training sessions where I shadowed existing Urban Word staff. First, I accompanied K-Swift to a training session with local YMCA staff. Swift came up as a youth in Urban Word and both embodied and internalized the organization's mission and methodology. I thought highly of Desiree giving the leadership role of training a new mentor to a young person, who grew organically within the organization. Swift was an adept facilitator; he was comedic and showed love and support for his workshop participants. Throughout the workshop, he consistently sourced the urban word community for stories and cultural practices, other mentors for exercises, and hip-hop practitioners for insights.

During my second training, I shadowed Reggie Cabico, a Filipino man who had won the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe's Grand Slam Champion in 1993, 9 years before I won the same award. I first met Reggie as the featured poet during my finals competition. After winning in New York, I competed with the Nuyorican Team at Poetry Slam Nationals in Minneapolis, MN. Teams from all over the country met for a week of events, and I had the opportunity to perform in front of audiences comprised of poets from across the country. Our team made it to the finals stage, and this exposure led to touring nationally. I experienced the democratizing effect that I had experienced at open mics locally, but now on a national level. So when I found out I was shadowing Reggie, I felt a sense of shared legacy and membership. During Reggie's performance workshop, I witnessed his authentic voice, theater background, and commanding

stage presence translate into a masterfully facilitated workshop for high school students. When a student in his class struggled with the delivery of a line of their poetry, Reggie compared the performance of that line to the throwing of a Frisbee. He had the student mime throwing a Frisbee, as they said their line and coached them to deliver the line with the same precision it would take to have a Frisbee reach its intended recipient. I would repeatedly return to this metaphor when coaching my own students.

Urban Word was on the forefront of building a national youth poetry slam movement. It was about this time that I picked up the book *Brave New Voices*, which shares its name with the national youth poetry slam competition. The author, Jen Weiss, originally started Urban Word as a chapter of Youth Speaks, a youth poetry nonprofit based in the Bay Area of California. Weiss's book was a "how to" on teaching poetry and was designed to represent a national movement of poet-educators dedicated to creating opportunities for youth to develop as spoken word artists. "Brave New Voices" was the most valuable teaching tool on poetry that I had read to date, and I would regularly return to it as a reference when building my lessons.

The United Nations of 12 Year Olds

Following my shadowing of K-Swift and Reggie Cabico, Urban Word threw me into the deep end, a 12-week residency with a seventh-grade English language arts class in Astoria, Queens. Junior high school is defined by middle-ness: in between mom packing your lunch and being too cool to eat breakfast, in between boys having the cooties to boys being cuties. This period of being child/not child begins a quest toward self-definition. Unlike young children, adolescents begin looking toward their peers to forge their identities. This is why many middle school teachers arrange their desks in small clusters with the students facing each other. This is how I find Class 508 when I walk in.

Ms. A.'s seventh-grade class was like the United Nations of 12-year-olds. The 29 students were Chinese, Mexican, Greek, Dominican, Korean, Puerto Rican, Russian, Black, Indian, and Ecuadorian. What they shared in common was that they were all honors students. The diversity reminded me of my elementary classes in the Exceptionally Gifted and Talented (EGC) program my school district used to track their smartest, or should I say, best-testing, students. My own appreciation of a diversity of voices was cultivated during years as a regular participant of open mics and spoken word performances. I wanted this group of young people to experience the benefit of seeing and appreciating one another's unique differences. The poetry slam model was an ideal approach for highlighting the many cultures represented in this group of students.

"Who here knows what a Poetry Slam is?" I began the class. Part of a poetry slam is the ceremonious reading of the rules and guidelines, so I pulled language from this tradition:

> A poetry slam is an Olympic style competition where each poet's performance is scored on a scale from 0 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. By the end of this workshop series, each one of you will perform your own original poem and we will have an in-class open mic. The students who receive the top five highest scores on their poems will comprise our poetry slam team. That team will compete via video-teleconferencing against other schools in Queens, and the winner will go on to compete against the winner of the Bronx team.

The "I Am" Poem

After I introduced myself, the program, and our group agreements, I read a poem, "I Musta' Fit the Description." This was the first poem I wrote after being inspired by Langston Hughes' simple language and use of repetition.

I guess I musta' fit the description again.

Five foot ten, male, African-American.

That must be why the Korean man

follows me from aisle to aisle

with that suspecting smile.

And that must be why I always

get stopped by the cops a lot.

I musta' fit the description

of someone who mugged you before.

I musta' looked like the guy

that tried to rob your store.

As I recited the words, intrigue and curiosity grew in the students' faces. I concluded the poem:

I don't see myself that way

when I look at my reflection.

I see myself in a different way

fittin' another description.

A doctor, lawyer, scientist, astronaut, or engineer.

A poet, author, singer, or maybe a multimillionaire.

That's the description that I'm fittin' in.

Five foot ten, male, African-American.

The students gave me an enthusiastic round of applause. Performing a poem is an excellent way to enliven a classroom.

My first poem was an "I Am" poem. There was a reason for this. What do you think this is? I would write throughout the years. I shared my experience writing and then repeatedly reciting this poem. On the open mic circuit, an "I Am" poem was like a Rite of Passage. So, what is that poem about, somebody tell me? Several hands went up. No calling out. Their teacher had obviously set clear behavioral expectations, which the students all followed. I call on Rontreisha, 508's sole African American delegate. "It is about people judging you for how you look." That's right, and what about the end of the poem? At the end of the poem, you talk about all the ways you see yourself and all of the things you will be because only you get to say who and what you are and will be. That's right and that is the power of poetry. Ready to write?

For our first lesson, we wrote an "I Am" poem that I deemed an appropriate first writing prompt for seventh-grade students. Knowing how challenging it is to write a poem first-hand, I always provided students with some prewriting engagement. First, I distributed a handout with a list of descriptive words (see Figure 8). I instructed them to "circle the words that describe them best, and write one of your five words. Do not worry about punctuation or grammar. Do not cross out or erase. Everything you write is part of your creative process. If you must, draw a single line through any unwanted words. Write for the entire 10 minutes." After our free write, some students shared their words. I told them to continue their poems for homework and be prepared to share during our next session.

The following week, I visited Class 508 for Session 2. To warm-up, we did an activity called a "Word Throw," which I likely obtained from another mentor during our weekly, unpaid, mandatory meetings. The students wrote down words they wanted the class to write about on small strips of paper. Then, I picked a word at random for them to begin their free-write. Every 30 seconds, I picked another word at random and shouted it out for the class to incorporate into

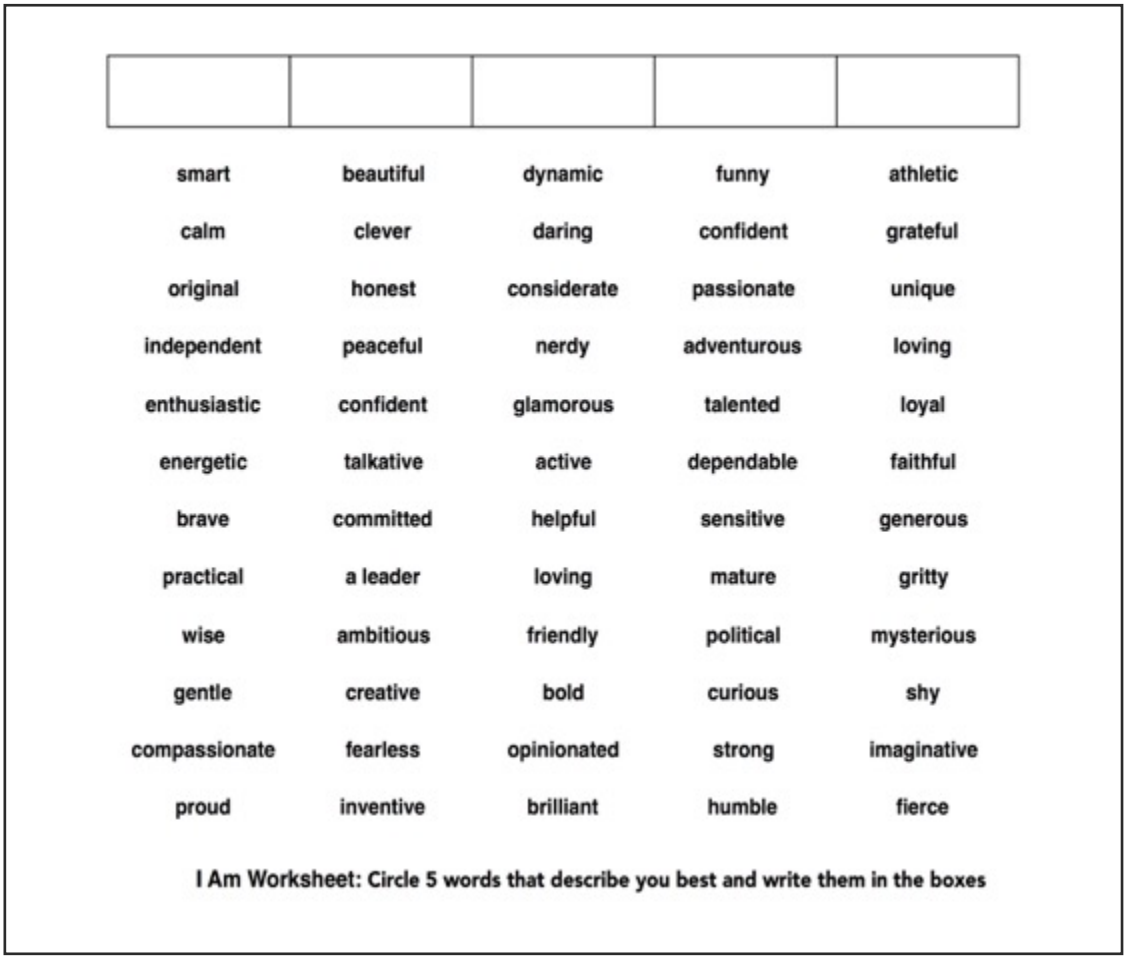


Figure 8. I am worksheet.

their writings. Sometimes, I secretly omitted repeats or potentially distracting words and selected words I thought would inspire interesting writing. The exercise was a hit.

After our quick warm-up, we have our first Open Mic. Who here wants to share their "I Am" poem? Several students volunteered to read. Rontreisha was one of them:

I Am the pen to your paper

Scribbling words of knowledge.

I Am the tissue for your tears

Wiping away the pain and sorrow.

I Am the rock that cannot be broken

Standing tall and proud I will

Rise above the rest.

Rontreisha effortlessly weaved the concrete with the abstract. She only needed this invitation to declare herself. In the fourth stanza, she continued:

I Am the red in a mist of blues,

I Am the voice to a mute city,

I Am the sunshine to a shadowed town,

I Am the cute little Gucci bag

That goes with everything you wear.

I Am not just some rug that you walk on

or an old pair of jeans that you

think went out of style, and I will

Most definitely not be just some

Speck on your wool sweater

At some point during Rontreisha's first 12 years on this third rock from the sun, she developed the understanding that, if given the chance, people in this world, may try to walk over you. Make no mistake though. She was not "just some rug you walk on." Rontreisha was a "rock that cannot be broken." She affirmed herself as unique and significant. Her powerful declaration of self becomes an invitation to her classmates for them to distinguish their unique voices. Our first Open Mic was a success.

The War

Teaching Class 508 brought me immense joy. Teaching was my opportunity to make up for all those bad school memories. It was my chance to prove that poetry could provide a valuable tool in young people's lives.

During our second Open Mic, Thomas stole the show with his poem, "The War." Thomas was a precocious kid who dressed like an adult man. He and I connected the first day of class when we both completed our "I Am" pre-writing exercise with the word, "Nerd." "You're a nerd too," Thomas asks. Yes, I am a nerd and I'm proud.

In his poem, Thomas created a metaphor for his school environment as a battlefield between good and evil.

I never knew of the pain of the suffering
the real world held.
But the school 122 opened a new world,
Its doors like a burning gate of hell,
Releasing the troops of Satan among us.

Dramatic? Yes! Though, ask anyone to recall his or her middle school years and you will receive a similar response. My own middle school years were plagued with low-scale anxiety. Most of my free time was spent trying to keep up to date with my clothes, sneakers, athletic skills, and knowledge of the latest cartoon, toys and comedy sketches, so that I could fit in with my peers. It was obvious to me from his poetry that Thomas was a deep-thinker. The young philosopher continued by making a connection between his personal war and his country's war:

But 9/11 was another way to start war
and me with my own already,

It became a weapon of evil

It changed me forever. Thoughts of evil had come,

Lies flowed through the TV tubes

and straight into me,

So I began following our leader's example.

The battle changed from day to day.

One day I didn't do my homework,

The other I donated to charity.

At the tender age of 12, Thomas could see the hypocrisy of government leaders mirrored in himself. The actions of elected officials impacted him as a young man trying to calibrate his moral compass.

Thomas mentioned the example of these leaders as a cautionary tale. This moment of critical self-reflection was for him, as much as it is for his audience. Thomas continued his epic poem with a list of questions that sound like an adult reflecting on lost childhood. His rhetoric is meant to confront and provoke:

But now I ask you,

Put things in perspective, look at your life,

Whose side are you on?

Have you lost your battle?

Do not end up like me,

Suffering because of the past.

I am a dying warrior and as much as I hate it,

I am losing the fight.

Bit by bit, my morals go,

They become a memory of the past,

Piece by piece my emotions leave,

I no longer care.

There was an "I Am" poem embedded in Thomas's poem. As an adolescent youth, Thomas articulated a self in formation within a larger political and social context. His "I Am" was that of a young person growing cynical with the normalization of accepting the contradictions that come with becoming an adult. For Thomas, poetry, specifically this quest toward self-definition, became a weapon for good.

If you fight back and look at your life

you shall see new and incredible things.

Which of your friends are really your friends?

Who are you?

What is your purpose?

Ask these questions to see

the world in its fullness,

And we can destroy this threat

and take back our Earth,

For Good.

The battle of middle school Thomas described was the same battle on our planet. Each year, young people lose their battles, giving in to a world that normalizes their leaders, their peers, and themselves to lie. I left our third session with Thomas's questions ringing in my head: What if we ask ourselves who we are and what our purpose is? Can we take back our Earth, For Good?

For Our Women: A List Poem

I was still more comfortable reciting poetry than facilitating a classroom of 12-year-olds, so I began the class by reading a poem. For our second lesson I focused on writing List Poems. I wanted to demystify any notions that writing poetry needed to be a complex activity. A List Poem is a simple approach to exploring an idea or emotion. It often uses repetition, while the listing process creates a sense of rhythm. Many of the poems I wrote and performed were essentially list poems, the simplest of which was "For Our Women."

Our leaders
wear churches on their heads
wear churches in their hearts
and love to share God.
Our leaders
wear their sneakers on the trains
wear their shoes in their pocketbooks
because they work so hard.
Our leaders
come widow-peaked, cleft-chinned, teeth-gapped,
underbite, overbite and thick-eyebrowed.
Our leaders
neck break, finger-snap,
chin up and walk proud.

Class 508 gave an enthusiastic round of applause. What I did not realize in selecting that poem was how well received it would be with the class. While the structure of the poem is simple, it

was uncommon for young people to hear a man, especially a young Black man recite a three-page pronouncement of women's various leadership roles in society.

To prompt the class this time, I provided a worksheet with several prompts I gathered from other educators, and included examples of my own to spark their creativity:

- They Think Kids Have Nothing to Say;
- You Don't Know My Family (could be an expression of pride, "my family traveled 5000 miles to create a better life," or humor, "my grandma sneaks home food in her pocketbook whenever we go out to eat.");
- Why I Don't Have My Homework (what are some of the cliché excuses students tell their teachers?);
- This is the World We Live In (This could be fascinating, "I could chat on the internet to kids in Japan about the latest Hip-Hop album," or an opportunity to have social commentary, "I live where there is homelessness and 20-car garages, starving people and eating contests.");
- Things that Drive Me Crazy (This could be passionate and exciting, like the latest pop singer, or frustrating, like "having to watch my little sister everyday");
- Hey, Mr. President (What are some of the things you want to tell Mr. Bush?);
- I Remember (This could be memories that are nostalgic and other people will share, "I remember when the ice-cream man would drive down my block," or this could be a personal memory).

I gave the class the same instructions that I gave during the first class for our free-write. We will write for seven minutes. Write whatever comes to mind. Do not worry about punctuation or grammar. The class wrote together, quietly. I decided to write alongside them. Before I knew it,

the teacher indicated that the bell was about to ring. Great work everyone. Continue your List Poems for homework. Be prepared for Open Mic next session.

That Word

"I really wish you wouldn't use that word." Mrs. A. cringed every time her students giggled when someone recited the word "hobo." Vicky, who I called by her surname in front of her students, was a young teacher, open-eyed and full of passion. She was a perfectionist, making her an ideal teacher for this ambitious honors ELA class. In between our weekly workshops, Ms. A. would assign several writing exercises to develop the work we were doing in Poetry Slam.

Today, I started the class with a prewriting activity called "Everyone Has a Story to Tell," which I learned at one of my unpaid, mandatory trainings. The students write the first line of an "epic story," then pass their paper to their classmate to their left or right who continues the story. The paper circles the room until it reaches the original storyteller, who completes their own story. This exercise is designed to give students an opportunity to collaborate and be creative, often silly, sometimes profound, and usually clever. It operates both as a thermometer and barometer, as it could be used to measure or modulate the tone of the class.

After everyone has written the first and last line of their story, I asked for volunteers to read. As each ridiculous story was read, the students giggled along. As students were encouraged by the riotous receptions their classmates were receiving, more hands volunteered to read. Four keywords quickly emerged: chicken, Michael Jackson, Teletubbies, and hobos. I was surprised and intrigued that Michael Jackson emerged as a trending theme. The King of Pop was no longer the pop icon he was two decades earlier; yet, here he was unifying children of all nations in Queens. Still, by inspiring giggles, Michael came second only to "Hobos."

Hearing the word did not have a triggering impact on me. I probably shook my head while laughing with and at them, waiting for at least an insightful tidbit here and there, something we could possibly reflect on for a moment on for its value as a unit of poetic text. Ms. A., though, cringed each time a student said it, like fingernails were being dragged across her chalkboard. I was prepared to move forward with my lesson, but also found it important to honor my co-teacher's guttural reaction.

I wrote the word "Hobo" on the board and asked the class, "What are some words we think of when we think of the word hobo?" The students hesitated. They knew their teacher was not happy with them.

"What are the words that we think of when we think about someone who is a Hobo?" The students began to mutter out words. Homeless. Dirty. A bum. The class gasped out some giggles. Poor. No job. Smelly. Missing teeth. More giggles. As they said the words, I wrote them on the whiteboard around the word Hobo. They wear torn clothing. They are disgusting. They have no life, no family, and no one cares about them. The giggles slowly faded. I tell the students that these are the connotative meanings of the word. There is the denotative, what the word actually means, the dictionary definition, and then there are the connotative meanings. These connotative meanings of the word are the reasons why we laugh.

After our brainstorming was exhausted and I felt the class' focus heighten, I wrote, "Homeless Person," on the board, drew a rectangle around it, and asked the question, "What's the difference between a hobo and a homeless person?" The students fell silent. Ms. A. looked on with hope-filled anticipation. After some time, Janice raised her hand, breaking the silence to answer. Speaking as if she were asking a question herself, she said: "The homeless person is still a person." As she spoke, I could see the lightbulbs in their heads flickering. After her words, the

silence deepened. I took a couple of moments before continuing, allowing the students this moment of quiet reflection. Is it easier to laugh at a hobo or a homeless person? I answered my own rhetorical question with a mini-lecture about the power of language to strip people of their humanity. So we use the word Hobo because it is easier to laugh, because we erase the person.

School systems do a tremendous disservice to young people with our approach to English language instruction, ramming vocabulary down students' throats each week with no context. I wondered how often have these students as a class been asked to be critically self-reflective. Public schools ask young persons to define a word, to use it in a sentence, to spell it, and to recognize its parts of speech. I was asking these young people to use words to put themselves on the line. Who are you? What do you stand for? What do you believe in?

I erased the results of our shared inquiry. I wanted to demonstrate that this phenomenon was not exclusive to the word "hobo." In 2006, millions of people protested proposed immigration policies in major cities across the nation. Undoubtedly, these laws impacted this multinational student body. I wrote, "Illegal alien." We mined the word for connotative meanings again: "monster from another planet," "wrong," "breaking the law," "foreign," "don't belong." The students were ambivalent in their participation, enthusiastic that they knew how to contribute to our shared inquiry, while also being visibly upset by the negative connotations, and confused about what this all meant. After a short time, I wrote the word, "immigrant" on the board and asked the students the same question, "So, what is the difference between the words illegal alien and immigrant?" There were no answers this time. I wrote "Slave v. Enslaved person," on the whiteboard as another example. Their silence was their sign to me that they understood the lesson. I followed up with my own summations to make sure, "So, the reason that

your teacher was so bothered by the use of the word hobo is because words are powerful. Words create worlds.

The class was deeply impacted by our impromptu lesson, which now had taken the majority of our class time. I invited the students to consider these insights while assigning our homework for the week. “So class, I want you to each write a poem on any social issue you choose.” We brainstormed a couple to get them thinking. The bell would ring soon. Miss A. prompted the class to give me a round of applause, as she did at the end of every class. Next week’s open mic would be on fire.

The Poetry Slam

The next class after our impromptu “Hobo Language” lesson was jam-packed with stellar poems. The open mic was a safe space for the students to explore their identities, while celebrating each other’s journeys toward self-definition. Each week, the open mic in Class 7-508 grew. More students signed up, and session-by-session, students’ voices made up the majority of our class time. In a blink, it was Session 8—time to select our Poetry Slam team.

In the students’ words:

> The finale of our 10 weeks of preparation came so quickly; none of us noticed how time had sped by. But in the end seven slammers were chosen to represent the school. The in-class Poetry Slam held many surprises, but all of us were at our best. For this event Ms. A. set up the English classroom to mirror a café. There were refreshments at the Voice Café, but the poets were truly in the spotlight. The performing and poems shone like never before. Excitement ran through the air that day.

David was an early favorite to make the slam team. David was more personable and well-adjusted than most 12-year-olds. Unlike me and many nerds at his age, David complemented his

academic success with a sharp fashion sense, wearing consistently fresh sneakers and clothing. His rhythmic poem put forth a vision, called “Peace,”

Without peace, what would happen to our lives?

There would be chaos and people fighting with knives.

Without peace what would happen to our dreams?

They would be blurred away by people’s screams.

Without peace, what would we do?

No one knows, no one has a clue.

Without peace, where would we go?

Even He, himself does not know

Without peace there’s always a war,

And I can’t even stand itanymore!

David’s stomped his feet to accentuate his words. As he performed, his classmates bobbed and swayed along:

With peace, our fate should wait.

With peace, the world’s a better place,

so you better remember to embrace.

No more blood-shedded tears,

No more fighting with our peers,

No more living with fear.

Peace should start here!

David's simple vision of a peaceful world inspired the class. I believe that David was the student whom the other students looked to as cool, so having him so fully engaged early in the workshop series went a long way in garnering buy-in from the other students.

Shaharia was a bright-eyed brown girl whom I identified as Muslim by her Arabic names, but largely because of her headscarf, which she wrote about in her poem, "Powerful Memories":

My headscarf,
A shining star
Stretching its legs,
Yawning
Getting ready to lighten up the day
As it stands on top of a slanted crescent.
My headscarf,
A shield
Protecting me from danger,
From fear.

In the years following September 11, the prevalence of Islamophobia had grown in the United States and filtered down to the playgrounds. Through her poem, Shaharia recalled a memory of when a girl made fun of her headscarf.

I remember a teenage girl,
With a huge mouth
Letting her cheers,
But my tears out.
"she's wearing a wig," her lips whisper.

My skin grilled red.

My face, body, legs,

Trembling for revenge.

My knuckles,

Tightening into white wrinkles,

Ready for a punch.

But then,

I realize her pack,

Pack of wolves as I call them,

Ready to get me.

I run away as my happiness drifts away in tears.

Shaharia reminded the class that words can be violent; in this instance, the teasing words of a teenage girl. Those whispered words provoked Shaharia to the thought of violence. Only the threat of violence deterred her.

Shaharia shared a personal reflection of a painful memory. Her classmates listened with care and compassion, as she concluded with a list of questions:

When will a rainbow color the rain in my heart?

When will I reach the end of this tunnel?

When will this memory go away?

WHEN?

The purpose of these questions was not to have answers. Shaharia was creating a new relationship with this painful memory. Perhaps it was not important whether or not this memory

would go away, but more important, that a new memory was created in writing and reciting her poem.

The next delegate to present was Ronjini, another Brown girl with an Arabic surname. Ronjini carried herself with the stature of an international diplomat and recited her poem, "Speak," with a steady, deliberate demeanor:

Women – the very figures who nurtured our world,

We are the very diamonds in the sky,

Glistening through the light of the moon.

We are the very diaries of thought,

Expressing through pen and mind.

Minds – the very source of our knowledge, our truths, our souls.

And the truth is we have no mind,

For it is said we are the maids of the world,

Working and cleaning to create a better day,

For the very forces that shall let us be.

This – is an issue of my life,

Killing women, these damaged souls,

These enemies within, let danger speak!

But we are no more afraid,

No more dormant in these shells we call homes,

No more picking up after our forefathers,

We will be the foremothers of our world,

We will start a new life, a new age.

Ronjini put forth a powerful vision of a world where women were respected, independent, and empowered. She elaborated on her vision of this women-led world in the sixth stanza:

A new way of life,
Starting with us leading the country,
From the hearts of the female body
And our preaching will not shine upon
How to clean the grease off your dishes,
But how to clean the grease
of discrimination off our world.
How we can strive every day to create a world of
Equality...equality...equality and honor...and honor
Honor...and integrity...integrity...integrity...
Integrity and freedom.
Women will have the freedom to sing.
Women will have the freedom to walk the streets proudly.
Women will have the freedom to speak.
Women will have the freedom to be free.

Ronjini challenged gender norms while claiming value for the distinct leadership capacities stemming from "the female body." Her eighth stanza used repetition to declare a future where women are respected and protected. When she concluded her poem, "We are . . . ready . . . to speak . . ." Class 508 responded with an impassioned round of applause.

Ronjini's poem about women set the stage for the final Slam participants, two of the quietest, female students in the class. The in-class slam was Katarina's first time sharing. It may

actually have been the first time I heard her speak. Her poetic coming out was reflected by how she styled her hair. No longer did she wear a long, swooping bang blocking her face. Her hair was pulled back and she was ready to speak. Her poem, "New Chapter," used the metaphor of a book to describe chapters in our country's history:

An old book full of darkness is opened.
Torn pages show all the hatred of the past.
A little black girl playing with a white girl,
Then, through the hatred of their fathers,
They were torn from each other.
Over the years the song of hatred
Is drummed through their heads.
They sing it to their children-
Hypnotizing, covering them
In Hatred's cold blanket.
A new page is turned,
A new chapter begins.

Katarina called for a vision of a multiracial society in which "Every kid is playing with someone else,/Blacks, whites, yellows and the rest." Katarina concluded her poem with a vision of "the last page," with "a message, a warning to read":

Why make the mistakes of so long ago?
Why repeat the past?
If we could flip a page, start a new chapter,
If we have that power,

Then why don't we use it?

Katarina's poem suggested we look at the mistakes of the past as a roadmap to visioning this new society. In her poem, the next page was blank, beginning a new chapter. Her final question confronting the listener was, "If we have the power, then why don't we use it?"

The Open Mic was almost over when Eva Islam, an Open Mic regular, said to me, "Elizabeth has a really good poem I think she should share." Elizabeth was a soft-spoken Latina student who had never shared a poem out loud. When I asked Elizabeth if she wanted to share, she barely looked up and did not even open her lips as she nodded her head, "Yes." Elizabeth stood to reveal that, while quiet, she was by far the tallest student in the class. When she first stood, she held her body confined and constrained, her arms to her side, and her head sunken into her shoulders. The moment she began speaking, she thrust the top half of her body forward. She spoke animatedly with her hands, causing her lanky arms and elbows to jut out at sharp angles. From her first word, she spoke in a booming voice. "America, the land of the free/But if everyone is not free/Why give America that heavenly title?"

Elizabeth's poem, "As of Yet Untitled," was her Social Issue poem. Her delivery combined passionate rage and reason.

America, the land of the free

That may have been true long ago, when America was a new nation,

But now it's only a false hope.

Modern Day. 2006.

We are called

'America, the land of the immigrants.'

But we are hypocrites!

Now, when others try to come to America

To seize the opportunity of a better life,

We halt their dream.

But who are we to do that?

Who are we to call them 'illegal aliens'?

Who are we to call them 'foreigners'?

Who are we to discriminate and isolate them like that and make them feel as if they are monsters from another planet,

When clearly they are not!

Who are so to be SO selfish to hog America for ourselves?

Who are we to do that?

As Elizabeth read her poem, the intensity of her delivery increased line-by-line, until she concluded her poem with a punctuating question: "If it is full of lies, hatred, and revulsion, then what should we call America?/For me, I do not know,/So as of yet, America, you are untitled." Elizabeth's performance won her an immediate spontaneous, unprompted standing ovation.

And the Winners Are . . .

"The points isn't the point. The point is the poetry." I told my students this common Poetry Slam phrase throughout the process, especially when the competitive nature became a distraction. What students did or did not make the team does not matter, though it should be noted that girls were well represented. After our in-class Poetry Slam, we chose seven students, five to be on the slam team and two alternates, to represent our class against two other Queens's schools. We won, and the following day, we faced off against the winner in the Bronx, an

experienced and skilled eighth-grade class. We lost in the finals. Our victory was glorious. Our defeat was bitter.

Class 7-508 published their poetry in a book titled, *Words*. The classroom teacher and I followed the guidelines provided for us during the professional development and broke the class up into roles after the slam team was selected: a "Performance Council" each of the seven students worked with one coach who knew their poem inside and out, learning what they were working on, and helping them with it; and a "Publishing Crew," who wrote in their introduction:

> The purpose of this was for us young adults to learn how to invoke our inner voice through poetry. That inner voice is unique to each person." "The points isn't the point. The point is the poetry."

During the sessions in between, the teacher broke up the students who did not make the slam team into groups: cover design, organizing and naming the chapters, ordering the poems, and writing the introduction. In it, they wrote that the class "fueled what will be for the rest of our lives, different ways to express ourselves and communicate." This anthology was developed after 10 sessions. Queens Writes would invite me back into Class 508 for an additional 10 sessions in the spring.

During our final session together, we ate cake and celebrated. Class 7-508 had one last poem for me, an oversized Thank You card (see Figure 9), which every student signed. I stood in front of the class reading the card. They obviously put care into what they wrote because several of them called out for me to read the card.

> Dear Kahlil,
>
> We thank you for your time and dedication to us and for helping us achieve more than poetry. Your teachings inspired us to continue poetic writing. You taught us what poetry

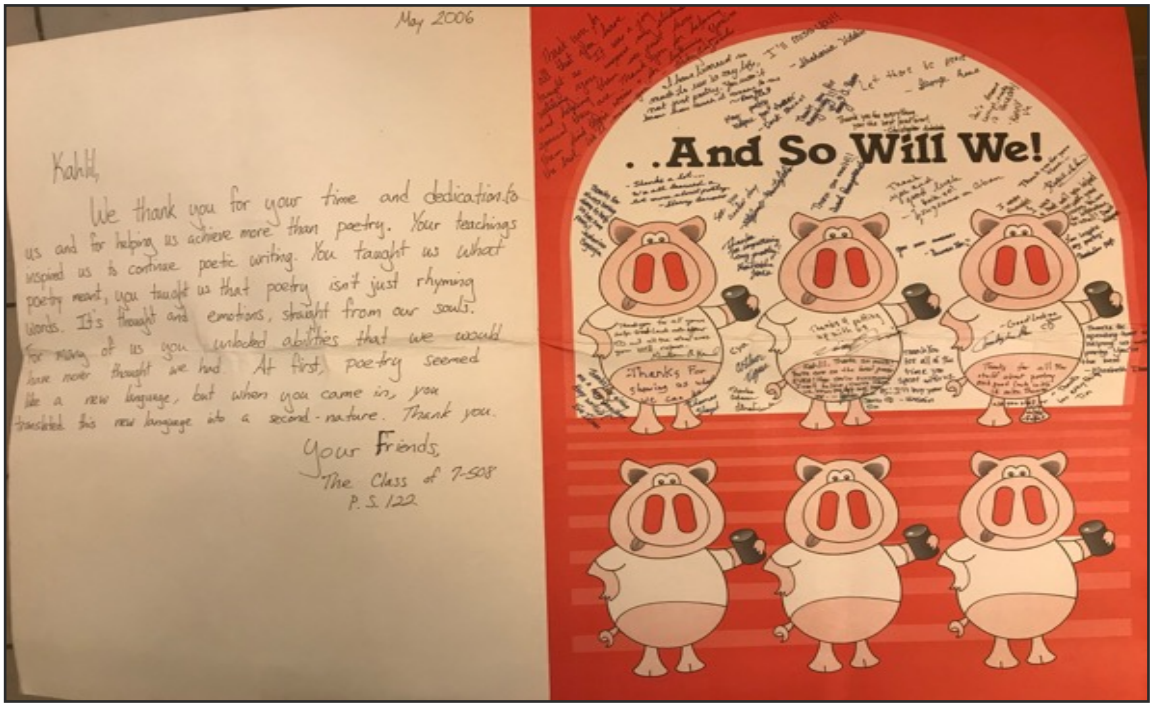


Figure 9. Thank you card from Class 7-122.

> meant, you taught us that poetry isn't just rhyming words. It's thought and emotions straight from our souls. For many of us you unlocked abilities we never thought we had. At first poetry felt like a new language, but when you came in, you translated this new language into a second nature. Thank you, your friends, the class of 7-508, PS 122.

My first long-term residency was complete. I had my evidence of the power of poetry using the most powerful metric, the student's own words. Poetry is more than poetry. Poetry is soul and second nature. As I read their words, I could not help but cry.

Epilogue: A Wildfire of Goodness.

This innovative program was conceived by the most unlikely person: the Technology Coordinator at a middle school in Jackson Heights, Andrea. She applied for a grant to fund all of the equipment, professional developments, and training that came with operating the video-teleconferencing equipment. Ultimately, she was a visionary tech nerd who recognized she could

use technology to leverage the benefits of integrating performance poetry into an ELA classroom and use Slam Poetry to neatly package it, to win the grants, of course. Her program, Queens Writes, was smartly modeled after Global Writes' virtual poetry slams, which had already been running successfully in the Bronx.

Urban Word missed an incredible financial opportunity. They had a school partner using an innovative model to enliven public school classrooms. As a nonprofit, they were uniquely positioned to build a sustainable program model. If they invested their energy and attention into building this partnership, it likely would have thrived, as digital technologies advanced.

If Queens Writes had continued, the organization could have measured the impact of this arts program on student outcomes, including reading and writing comprehension, vocabulary, appreciation of literature, use of literary devices, and even test scores. This report though would have included the clearest data of all, the students' words. To sum up their experience, two students wrote a poem, which the teacher later emailed to me:

> The beginning of the year,
> we had no expectations.
> Another leg on the endless track,
> repeating itself, every year,
> our only goal to burn through, yet again.
> Poetry? How were we supposed to know
> it would change our lives,
> from boring minds trapped in the addiction
> of mass entertainment,
> to opened writers, expressing their dreams

straight from their hearts.

A human's future is shaped by the

people, and the places,

Their ambition strengthened,

Their power for will drawn out by

leading figures, amplified

from one shining light to another,

then spreading from minds to the world -

A wildfire of goodness.

But fires must be fueled,

You fueled us Kahlil.

– Max, George, and the poets of 7-508, PS 122

Residency 3: Yo Mista

When Desiree calls, I answer. I was notorious for sending people to voicemail hell, where their hopes of building a relationship with me lay to rot forever, but I always picked up the phone for Desiree. "I have the perfect school for you."

Desiree, Urban Word's Program Director, excitedly asked me to perform at an assembly at BCAM High School – Brooklyn Community Arts and Media. BCAM is one of NYC's many small school experiments opening throughout the five boroughs. A small school has less than 400 students and ideally less than 230. The theory is that a smaller student body will prevent young people from falling through the cracks because students are more likely to be known by the adults at their school. "I just met with the principal," Desiree continued, "and, Kahlil, let me tell you, you are going to love it."

I am a huge fan of small schools. Until I found a small alternative school, I struggled to graduate from high school, too. My path to graduation was a winding one. When it was time to apply to high school, I strategically avoided my zone schools: Andrew Jackson High School, where a young man was murdered a couple years prior, and August Martin High School, where the seniors routinely threw freshmen in the lake across the street the first week of the school year on "Freshman Friday." The adults who managed the Exceptionally Gifted Children's Program at my middle school made sure each and every single one of us tested and applied to schools outside of our zone. Thanks to their dedication, most of us got accepted somewhere outside of our zone. EGC had music classes, with actual instruments, and since I had already learned to read music in the piano classes my mother enrolled me in, I was pretty good at the trumpet and got accepted into Bayside High School.

That's right, Bayside High School, which was a mere 1-hour-and-45-minute commute from my home in South Queens, to the school's campus in north Queens. I took this commute twice a day for the next 4 years. Bayside High School had a population of 3,000 and was the opposite of a small school. Perhaps that is why, in the final half of my senior year, I dropped out. After my mother lost her battle with the AIDS virus, I lost my battle with maintaining my grades and interest at my gigantic high school.

I then enrolled into an alternative school, dropped out again, enrolled in a GED prep program, took the test and got my GED. I then enlisted in the Marines, and since my recruiter wanted a bonus for enlisting a high school graduate, he placed me at Harriet Eisman, a small school in Long Beach, Long Island. I eventually graduated from Harriet Eisman at the age of 19. It was at a small school that my poetic voice was celebrated, with my teacher encouraging me to

steer clear of the Marines, who had enrolled me in the school to begin with. My experience was proof of the impact a smaller school environment could have on a young person.

Desiree, my fellow Cancerian, listened patiently to the story of my educational journey. She was an exceptional listener. As a matter of fact, she was a phenomenal communicator overall. Desiree never just gives me logistics. She provided me with context for my work, as well as the educational goals, strengths and challenges of the school. BCAM's focus was on the arts and the administration is serious about integrating the arts into the school day, not just in after school programming. She had inspired excitement in me to start the residency and I had not even walked through the school doors.

My first year at BCAM was during the school's first year, so they only had ninth-graders enrolled. Each year, they would add another grade as they built the school from the bottom up. I was impressed by the excellent job they had done recruiting students from all over the city—all students who have a special interest in the arts. The principal was also serious about bringing community partners into the school to provide enrichment to the students. They even offered yoga as an elective.

"BCAM wants to give their students an Urban Word experience so we want to send you and a couple of youth poets to put on a show for them and then do a poetry workshop with their top students." Desiree's excitement was contagious. We would begin with an assembly, with a DJ and several youth poets. Then, I would follow up with three 5-week workshop series. "I am in," I told her. She ended our phone conversations with the same Caribbean phrase she used to sign her emails: "Tek it easy."

I made my way from the G train down Willoughby Street, which was on the border between the Clinton Hill and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn. On one side of the

street was a housing complex. On the other side sat a police station. A short walk past the Brooklyn brownstones in one direction would bring you to Pratt University, a private visual arts college where students pay tens of thousands of dollars for a BFA. In the opposite direction, you would find the housing projects that have been the backdrop for many a gangster hip-hop lyric, where young men aspired to earn tens of thousands of dollars for either selling drugs or selling verses, whichever came first. It was classic Brooklyn at its best.

In NYC, the mayor's office controlled the school system. Instead of the community electing school board officials, the mayor appointed them. Supposedly, this would increase the level of accountability needed to improve the city's public schools. Since June 2002, one person in one office had determined the fate of the city's 1.1 million children. Many criticized Mayor Bloomberg's undemocratic approach. Rightfully so. It completely undermined community involvement in education. On the other hand, Mayor Mike was promoting the small schools movement. The mayor's office extradited the closings of "failing" schools with corporate precision and little to no community involvement; and opened multiple smaller schools inside the same facilities. The number of small schools had quadrupled during his reign.

When I arrived at the school, I told the security guard that I was there to perform at BCAM, distinguishing it from the other two high schools and one middle school co-located in the building. I made my way up to the third floor and was greeted by the school's principal, Mr. O'Brien. His handshake alone was enough to inspire me to do right by his students. Mr. O'Brien looked like he was carefully chiseled from a rock that was made up purely of principals. Physically, he was built like an NYC cop, but he acted like an emcee/business mogul—confident and quick-witted. He told me a little bit about the day's performance and introduced me to some of his staff. You ready to perform?

Rocking a HS Assembly

For the next 30 minutes, this auditorium was my classroom. If these rambunctious ninth-graders did not like the show, they would let us know. I had performed on hundreds of stages, including a nationally televised Rally to End the Occupation in Iraq in Washington, DC, a citywide rally against tuition increases at city and state universities, in front of City Hall, and at the jail at Riker's Island, but nothing was more intimidating than a school assembly.

Principal O'Brien set clear behavior expectations for the students to be respectful during the performance. He was flanked by his staff, which was anchored by several Black women who looked like throwbacks to those one-room schools that seeded African American educational institutions during Reconstruction. Even with Mr. O'Brien's intimidating stance, the ninth-graders were still pretty rowdy. Inevitably, the best chance these students would have of behaving well was if we—the poets from Urban Word—put on a good performance.

High school students are the harshest critics, unwilling to show enthusiasm for anything that has not been deemed cool by their peers. In my experience, you will easily win young people over if you are authentic in what you do. If I had a hit song on the radio or appeared in a reality television series, I would have the audience eating out of my hands, no matter what I said. I did not have any of the advantages of a hip-hop performer, no prerecorded track in the background, no booming beat, no hype man. In BCAM's auditorium, I did not even have a microphone, so I stepped off the stage so the students could hear me.

Citizens of Hip-Hop

Hi(story) will no longer be told

by the so-called hi(story)-tellers,

but at open mics

on mixtapes

and in corner-freestyle-sessions

around the world

I began with a mythopoetic address to these high school students, as citizens of an imagined hip-hop nation. My duty was to hold these ninth-graders' radioactive attention, which diminished by the nanosecond. My spoken word training prepared me to command a stage. In a moment, I would introduce three urban word youth poets and I wanted to make sure the audience was fully engaged when I did.

The time is near,

i can hear the sound of victory

over buildings and over mountains.

Keep your Black & White

composition notebooks close.

Put your words all over the lines

and into the margins

as we write ourselves into existence.

With their interest peaked, I pounded my chest to provide a heartbeat which becomes the rhythm for my next poem. With each line, they leaned in: "True lies on the TV screen/ Democracy, what the hell does that mean?" They began to nod their head to the beat. "We just wanna be free, we wanna be free." By the end of the poem, they were clapping along.

My epic opening earned their attention. I introduced the first poet, a young lady from the Lower East Side. Her poem was a beautiful tribute to a friend whose sneaker collection was his version of poetic expression. The students were in. Next, a young male poet from Brownsville,

Brooklyn recited a quick-tongued diatribe of the internal conflicts created from having a dual consciousness: an upwardly mobile Black youth and a ghetto misguided street kid. Several students got out of their chairs to applaud. The final poet was a young girl from Harlem, who used the nappy roots of her hair as a pride-filled embodiment of the greatness of her ancestral legacy. The ninth-grade class fell spellbound as each poet rocked their poems.

Urban Word's youth poets were vibrating on the same linguistic and aesthetic frequency as BCAM's students. Before we knew it, the period was over. The ninth-grade class gave our poets a standing ovation. I was the opening act for poets who were almost 10 years younger than me. This youth spoken word movement powerfully provided other young people with a model for expression. After the assembly, I pulled aside the only BCAM student who performed in the open mic despite being heckled by his peers, letting him know how much I respected his bravery.

Teaching the Rebel Poets Elective Class

Next up was a workshop in Mr. Greer's honors English class. To BCAM's credit, it recruited a highly intelligent, highly motivated freshman class. I assigned the students an icebreaker that lasted most of the class, and followed up with an obscure writing prompt which failed to inspire the students to write. Let's just say it was not my best class.

After the workshop Mr. Greer and I debriefed about the class. He fired a barrage of questions: "What did you want them to get from that first activity? Do you think the game went on too long? Did you choose that icebreaker to go with that writing prompt? Have you used that prompt before?" For the first time, I recognized how far away my actual teaching practice was from my passion and ideas. While I believed passionately about how important it was to create a safe space for young people, I did not necessarily know how to do it.

Over the residency series, I struggled to implement the liberatory practices in Mr. Greer's class. Still, he saw potential in me. The next year, the school asked me to teach a spoken word elective, 2 days a week, for both the rising sophomores and a class of incoming freshman. My own class twice a week with each grade; I was so excited!

Yo Mista'

The following year, I returned to teach Rebel Poets, a poetry elective. First up, was the 10th-grade class. On our first day of class, I re-introduced myself to the students, as they walked in. The first student to enter was Camille, who wore her hair natural and was as fiery inside, as she was soft-spoken on the outside. She was reading a book and then looked up and asked me a question, "Hey Mr. Kahlil. What's Neoliberalism?"

Whoa!? What!? Wait!? Apparently, Camille, who is the only student who makes sure to call me, "Mr. Kahlil," instead of "Yo Mister," checked out this book from the library about neoliberalism herself, not for a class, not for a project, just to explore in her free time. Camille, I'm not really sure. I explained to her "neo" means new, like the new version of something that has never been done before, like the music genre neo-soul. "Liberalism" is a little more difficult to explain. I noticed the students were starting to get restless. I quickly interjected, "Camille, how about after you read that book and when you are finished, you let me know what neo-liberalism is?" before I lose my new student's attention.

On my first day, I had a special assignment. It was the week of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, so I brought in his I Have a Dream speech. I wanted our class to look at it as a poetic text, analyzing King's use of literary device. Immediately, Camille responded, "Isn't there other stuff like this we can learn about? I'm tired of Dr. King." The 10th-grade class was full of quick-witted, deep thinkers. We managed to get through several activities and a writing prompt.

Up next was the incoming ninth-graders. It was no secret that BCAM's second class was more challenging than their founding class. This is a common problem new schools come across. Yo Mista, when did you become a poet? With certainty, a student in every class will choose this quasi-formal, slang to refer to me. Yo Mista. At 32 years old, I did not even consider myself an actual mister, but many of my students, for whom I was not their daily teacher, and who were likely confused by the name Kahlil Almustafa, referred to me as, "Mista."

Shanice, a ninth-grade student, decided to turn it into a meme. Not only did she call me Mista, she said it over and over and over again, turning it into her own private joke. "Yo Mista. Are you gay Mista? What does your wife think about you being gay? Mista. You funny, Mista. You so funny." Shanice was hellbent on interrupting and hijacking every activity and conversation the class had. I had not yet been exposed to this type of student behavior and had nowhere near the classroom management skills to handle it. I left my first day a lot less enthusiastic than when I arrived.

The Pedagogy of Me

The weekend after my first Rebel Poets poetry elective class, Urban Word held another mandatory, unpaid training. I would have attended out of curiosity and interest anyway, but since it was mandatory, I walked in with a chip on my shoulder. The opening panel discussion was a breath of fresh air. While many of these events paid lip service to student-centeredness, Urban Word opened the 3-day workshop series with youth literally at the center. On the panel were intellectual leaders in the field of each given the task of using a young person's text as a framework for their presentation. Genius on top of genius.

The next day, there was a talk by a graduate student, a friend I knew from protests against the war in Iraq with Uptown Youth for Peace & Justice. At some point during the presentation,

she stated that the problem with education in NYC schools is that you often have a White woman in front of the class as the bringer of knowledge, leaving most of the Black and Latinx students, especially males, feeling isolated and unengaged. In that very moment, I was feeling isolated and unengaged. She was a White woman in the front of the room bringing the knowledge. I was a Black male feeling isolated and unengaged. I looked around the room and most of the attendees were Black and Latinx. I kept looking around. Doesn't anyone else see what is going on?

The same problems that the speaker was addressing were embodied in her presentation. She talked for so long, and was followed up by another White person, a hip-hop generation male who also spoke for a long time, and there was almost no time left over for the third panelist, the only person of color on the stage. The Latinx brother was only on stage for a couple of minutes when the original speaker, who was also the host had to abruptly interrupt and end his presentation. This was not the first time or only time I witnessed the most progressive educators replicating the very problems that they were identifying in their theoretical frameworks.

That weekend, I'd hear the word pedagogy so many times I no longer understood what it meant. "Pedagogy" is one of those words that someone entering academic spaces could either be intrigued by, or like me, turned off by. Even though I had looked it up many times, I was still unsure if I knew what it meant. Yako, a fellow Goddard College alumni, who was also in attendance at the conference overheard my complaint and explained that pedagogy was simply the method through which people learn. I held onto this simplicity and continued thinking about what is hip-hop's pedagogy and how I can use it in my classrooms.

I skipped the rest of the weekend workshops and got out of the city. My wife, her best friend, Miyo, and I went on a weekend getaway to her mother's house in the Berkshires during the school's mid-winter recess. Miyo inducted me into one of her sacred rituals as a classroom

teachers, lesson planning with a glass of wine. Though she was only in her third year as a teacher, she was already experienced in the steps : obsess about your students; do everything in your power to talk about something other than your students and fail; tell stories and realize that you are not as bad a teacher as you assumed on that last day of class; and finally get to your lesson planning over a glass or two or three of wine on the Sunday before returning to teach.

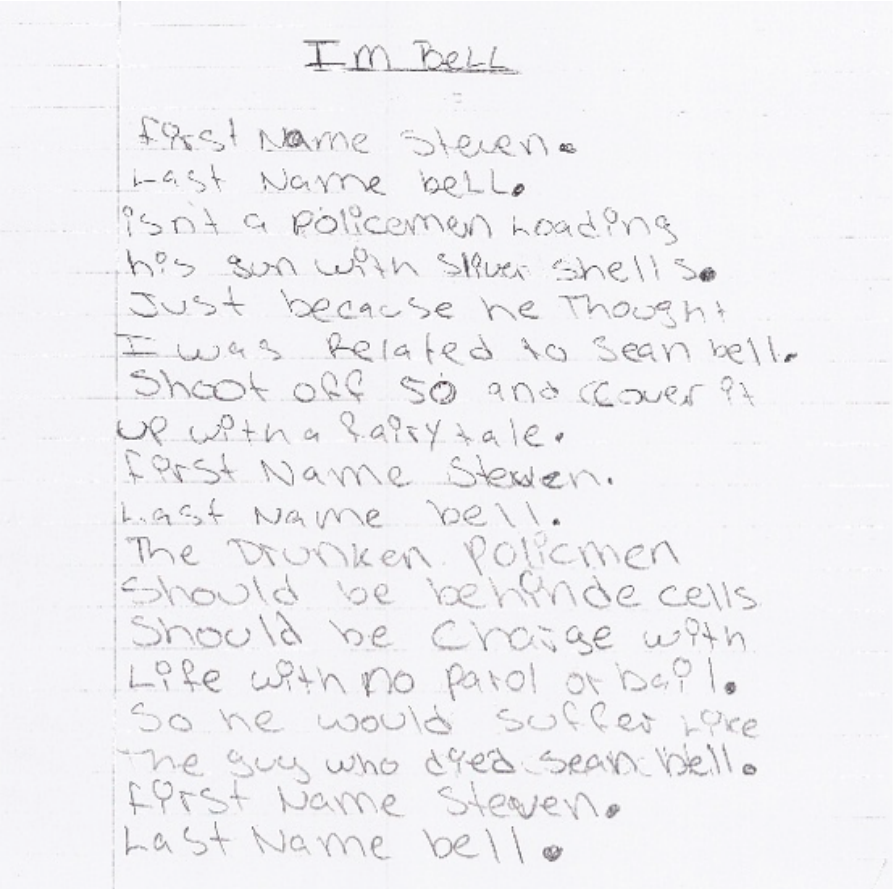
As the wine loosened my tongue, I talked about all of the critical conversations I had with my students in those short first couple of weeks at BCAM. I compared this with the actual conversations I had with my teachers during my 4 years as a student at Bayside High School. First came horrible memories: my 10th-grade Spanish teacher, Dr. Scharfman screaming at an Asian girl for mispronouncing a word that did not come easily to her native tongue until she broke out in tears; and my ninth-grade honors English teacher, Mrs. Steinberg asking me if I wanted to be in a regular class with the rest of the dummies. Then, the positive interactions with teachers: Mr. P, the Physical Education teacher, who let me double up on gym classes so I could remain eligible for the basketball team; a math teacher who told me I could have scored a 90 on a Regents exam if I really studied, since I scored an 84 and barely came to class; my music theory teacher, who left his class while it was in session, and came to the cafeteria and interrupted the spades game I was playing to bring me back to class, letting me off the hook with a this-is-your-last-chance lecture.

That was it. Those are the sum total of the moments I remembered of my teachers during all 4 years of high school. The other 2,999 students at Bayside High School likely had a similar experience. This was not a “fall through the cracks type of situation.” This was like everything, everywhere you see, and your whole life is inside the crack, and your only hope is, maybe, one day, you can climb out. There is something powerful to the small schools idea.

As I think about it, of the approximately 80 teachers I had in my 30 years of schooling, there have only been exactly five Black male teachers. Zero in Head Start and elementary school; two in junior high school, Mr. Morris, a legend who also taught English to my mother and was still riding a bike to school, and Mr. Smith, my eighth-grade science teacher; zero in high school; Dr. Jeffries at City College, who taught me the foundations of Black history; Mr. Payne, a comical and insightful professor who taught a popular genealogy course at Hunter College, and my MFA faculty advisor, Rick Benjamin at Goddard College. That was it: five, From Pre-K to MFA. What if that number were double or four times as much? What if I had 20 different Black male role models during my educational journey? Simple maths says I would be at least twice the man I am today.

Outside of the basketball coach, there were not a lot of Black male teachers at BCAM High School either. I realized that just being in these students' lives was significant. Even students who were not in my class would walk up to me and hand me poems (see Figure 10). A couple of months after a young Black man from Queens named Sean Bell was killed by police in a hail of 50 gunshots on the eve of his wedding, a young man who shared the same last name, handed me a hand-written poem that he wrote in Math class, "I am Bell."

I'm Bell
First name Steven.
Last name Bell.
Isn't a policeman loading
his gun with silver shells.
Just because he thought
I was related to sean bell.



I'm Bell

first Name Steven.
Last Name bell.
Isn't a Policemen loading
his gun with silver shells.
Just because he Thought
I was Related to Sean bell.
Shoot off 50 and Cover it
up with a fairytale.
first Name Steven.
Last Name bell.
The Drunken Policmen
should be behinde cells
Should be Charge with
Life with no patol or bail.
So he would suffer like
the guy who dyed Sean bell.
first Name Steven.
Last Name bell.

Figure 10. "I'm Bell" poem handed to me in the hallway shortly after a young, Black man, Sean Bell, was killed by law enforcement officers in a hail of 50 bullets on the eve of his wedding in 2006.

Shoot off 50 and cover it

up with a fairytale.

First name Steven.

Last name Bell.

The drunken policemen

should be behind cells

should be charge with

life with no parole or bail.

So he would suffer like

the guy who died Sean Bell.

First name Steven.

Last name Bell.

Together, Miyo and I generated a mantra for our teaching, "Do not try to create a miracle in your classroom. Be the miracle, that is you." Maybe, we got some lesson planning done. Maybe we opened another bottle of wine.

Be the Miracle that is Me

Anyone who has worked in a high school knows that students are the best thermometer for changing weather. As Spring flowers blossom, so do the students. Once the temperature heats up, they start baring skin and getting a little hot themselves.

For the remaining year at BCAM, my Rebel Poets mission was to "be the miracle that is me." Any chance I had to engage in a critical conversation with a student, I took it. As my relationships with the students deepened, teaching became easier. There were so many students with so many different needs, especially in the ninth grade. I let Sorel know how unique her intelligence was, and pushed her to complete the poem about her dad. I invited her to attend a poetry event on the weekend and she helped me sell books. We celebrated her braces getting removed by eating ice cream. I worked on a book project after school with Shanice's BFF and number one audience member, Janessa. While she never completed any of the writing prompts I assigned her in class, she'd give me page after page of poems and reflections about growing up in a family generation deep in gang violence.

Inside the classroom, I focused on the student's unique language with the simplest lesson ever. I brought in *The Slang Dictionary*, which is exactly what it sounds like, and quite comprehensive. I asked each student to flip through the pages, choose one word and introduce it

to the class by using it in a sentence. That way they could provide the definition with its use. We ended up having a highly mature discussion about how language both shapes and is shaped by contemporary culture.

At the end of class, I confronted them about their use of the word "gay" every five minutes, especially Shanice. "Yo Mister, that's so gay." I tried to have a serious conversation about the power in the misuse of the word. Unfortunately, Shanice concluded that I was acting gay by trying to challenge her to think about using the word gay so much.

Since I was asking my students to write over spring break, I decided to write my own book of poems for my class entitled, *Yo Mista*. The dedication on the front cover reads:

To my 10th grade class:

Keep believing in dreams

it's contagious

To my 9th grade class:

i am a fraud pretending that i could teach you anything

acting as if our weekly meetings

were about anything more than

ME learning from you

thank you

you have already taught me so much

Inside the book were five poems, three dedicated to specific students. For my 10th-grader, Camille, I wrote a poem in response to her comment about Martin Luther King:

this post-we-done-got-our-equality era

ain't everything it seems

Dr. King's dream

is still waiting

on a rooftop in New Orleans

I also brought in a book called *The Future 500*, which listed youth-led activist organizations across the country, so that she could learn about contemporary struggles for justice. Maybe it will help her understand "neoliberalism."

There were also two poems for each of my most difficult ninth-grade students: Shanice and Courtney. I wrote Shanice's poem in response to her calling me nice once:

> because when i look at your faces, all i see is me hating high school life, wishing i could just be . . . i want to be the teacher for you that never was there for me . . . It is not that i am nice . . . It is just that i have some idea of what you may be going through, i too survived the New York City Public School System, and the teen-aged battlefield of having to be cool . . . i am not nice, this is all for me, . . . seriously . . . you are all part of an experiment i am doing called "yes, I believe my young sisters and brothers who grew up in the ghettos of New York City are truly special human beings and got something important to say, and only when they speak can the world truly change!"

Courtney's poem is called "Homework."

> You, young lady are a genius
>
> Right from the moment you were born
>
> This is the only fact you need to know
>
> This is the only multiple choice, ABCD,
>
> State regents, #2 pencil bubble
>
> You need to fill-in

Knowing you are a genius

Is the only homework you have for your life

On the last day before break, my student Courtney had a nuclear meltdown and I threatened to fail her. All I could think about when I wrote this poem was how this young woman had gone through her short life not recognizing her own value and her own abilities.

I also wrote a poem entitled "That's Gay" to follow up on the conversations I had with the ninth-graders; another poem about not wanting to wake up in the morning; and a poem about why I write poetry. I printed them out in a small chapbook and gave them out to the students after the break. Immediately, the ninth-graders read through the book and the only poem they wanted to hear was, "That's Gay. Read 'That's Gay' mister."

You say "that's gay"

And I say "okay, I get it

I understand, that's gay"

So let's say we went to a restaurant

And we sitting there and you order a hamburger

'Cause that's what guys do cause that's cool

And not just any hamburger

But that new third pounder

One-third pound of cooked up dead cow meat

With six strips of fried up bacon

And I order a salad

And you say "that's gay"

And I say "okay, I get it

I understand, that's gay"

So I eat my salad and you eat

Your third pounder and even though

Half way through it you are stuffed

Eyes bulging out of your head

You keep eating because

That's keeping it real

Cause that's what guys do cause that's cool

By the end of the poem, I, the poet, was happy because I made good choices and the person with me in the poem who was constantly calling me gay was standing in the rain, cold and wet, with an upset stomach, because they made all the wrong choices in an effort to be cool. I am not sure whether or not my students got the point of the poem or if they already knew it, but they loved the poem, and they know I cared about them enough to write them a book of poems.

Epilogue: This Stack of Poems

Shanice did not write a single poem the first semester of Rebel Poets. She participated in all of the activities and dialogue, and had strong opinions about other people's poems. On the final day of class, she finally agreed to write a poem; and instead of writing something serious, wrote a poem dedicated to me as a joke:

Ay yo Mista', Yo Mista'

You da' Man.

How can you always smile

while this world is so cold?

Knowing there's more brothers

in jails than Black fathers in homes.

How can you smile like everything's OK

but I gotta love you, ma dude, you feel me.

I trust you know what's goin' on.

– Shanice, Rebel Poet student

Shanice let me know I accomplished the only goal I could, being myself. My explicit goal was to provide a safe space for young people to express themselves. Shanice and others reminded me that I was successful at this goal. My implicit goal was for young people to see the importance of their perspective and voice. By the end of my second semester with Shanice, her journey revealed some insights into this goal.

At the end of my first semester, I handed out the "Rebel Poetry Feedback Form," with the following questions:

1. Name/Grade
2. How would you rate your overall experience in this class? (On a 1-5 scale)
3. What grade would you give yourself for this class? (Use letter grades with + and -)
4. What game or exercises did you like most in this class?
5. What did you like least in this class?
6. What lessons are you taking from this class?
7. Please use the back for any additional comments.

Shanice's responses are informative. She rated the class a 5 and gave herself a B. What she liked most about the class was "just being around its a good atmosphere." This makes sense, because she did not write a single poem the entire year. She disrupted the class throughout and wrote very little, shared even less, and essentially held the class hostage. With all of this in mind,

surprisingly, what she liked least in the class was "all the extra talking." The lesson she learned: "That it's not always funny or cute to act dumb. People really laugh at you not with you."

Rebel Poets was an elective, and youth increasingly signed up. In this stack of poems are inner truths that needed to be heard. A young woman wrote almost every poem, which prompts me to consider what this safe space must have meant for my female students. Jessica wrote about love. She was the only student who enrolled in my class all four semesters she was able to. She was a grounding force in the Shanice era and then a leader with the frenzy of students. In the later years, while the student body was not as consistent, she remained and wrote prolifically about love. "If I must choose love over myself I choose/. . . myself because no man is ever worth/compromising your soul." Jessica wrote about romantic love, sentimental love, sensual love, soulful love, self-love, betrayed love, and love lost. "I wanna grow old with you/Laying back and reminiscing/On all the special things we used to do/I wanna grow old with you."

Merikha wrote a poem entitled, "Trap in the minds of my people," that she performed powerfully during the "Nite to Shine," end-of-semester event:

They're judging us on the pigment of my skin

But it's a soul that lies within

They're intimidated by our color

The way of blood and soul and amazing intelligence that flows through us.

An anonymous student wrote a poem "Baby Momma Drama," re-appropriating this cultural phrase from a term men use to describe the problems they have with the mother of their children, to the many dramas she faced as a young mother, "They call me ghetto, nasty, trampy,/But they don't know me,/Just cause I'm walkin down the street with my baby."

Kassandra spoke proudly about her sexual orientation in "Love Can NEVER Be Wrong." Jina wrote about resolving body image issues through self-love.

Shanice has several poems in this stack. Though she had not written a single poem between her first three residencies, by the end of the her second residency in our second year, she submitted poem after poem. During my fourth year at BCAM, the third year of the Rebel Poets elective was a space where dynamic poetry was written and shared enthusiastically. I barely had time to implement lessons and activities. Each class students had new poems written in their journals and notebooks ready to share with the class.

Quite honestly, I barely remembered these residencies. By 2009, I was teaching across the five boroughs, and spread too thin to remember the details. All I had was this stack of poems. Unlike the poems from my earlier classes, I did not necessarily recall its inception and many lives. I did not remember the activity that went first, the dialogue and practices that watered the poem along the way, or whether or not it was part of the culminating ceremony. By 2009, there were too many students, in too many zip codes, and too many work tasks to maintain the life of an independent artist, and student, again.

I was really reading Shanice's poems and appreciating them for the first time. One of these poems was a three-page homage to my poem, "A Walk Down the Boulevard."

I walk,

not amazed at what I see no more.

A walk down the boulevard

don't scare me no more.

Walking,

step,

step,

step,

on the right side of me

buildings broken down

smothered in graffiti.

Broken liquor bottles blanket the stairs.

You know Mary Jane was there

her perfume lingers in the air.

In Shanice's poem, she provides snapshots of scenes she sees in her neighborhood, using similar literary techniques: short quick line breaks, and simple end and internal rhyme schemes.

I keep walking and don't look back

I now enter my "ghetto" neighborhood

Where blood is all around

Where cops scream for gang boys

to get on the ground

Where latinos and blacks unite

When sometimes they kill

Just cause one thinks they're better

At some point, Shanice begins to make the poem her own. We discussed the issue of men and boys catcalling young girls when I read my poem, "Yo Shorty." This was part of making sure that the class was a safe space for young girls to express themselves. Shanice wrote about this experience during her walk down the boulevard:

Where wolves look at me

Like they want me to beg them

So they won't rape me . . .

Please

I beg no one . . .

I look on my right and

See some of my family members

Bein' crackheads

They look at me not knowing

Who I am

I just look away

disgusted and keep walking

I look at the corner store on 163rd St.

and see old men watching me again . . .

No wonder I always feel

People watching me . . .

They light up their paper and

just sit conversing about the

nothingness of the world.

Throughout the poem, Shanice provided snapshots of people engaged in conflict and suffering. By the end of the poem, Shanice was immersed in poetic self-reflection:

People just

Lost

and hurt

They forgot how to live life

by the wall they created themselves

But . . .

Why lose yourself

the way

We do . . . ?

People are just lost and hurt. It is wise to recognize that people tend to "forget how to live." We are the ones who created these walls. Why? Why lose ourselves the way that we do? The capacity for profound self-reflection was always within Shanice. Hopefully, Rebel Poets provided a context where she recognized the importance of connecting with her inner wisdom.

Residency 4: Queens (Where I'm From)

The commute from Manhattan to Queens was very different in a car versus the subway. In a car, it was a quick 30-minute drive from the Upper West Side, cutting across Manhattan to the East Side and across the Triborough Bridge (which was recently renamed the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge), with a $5.50 toll to get you back and forth to Queens. For two bucks, the subway took about 90 minutes door-to-door, starting with the one train at 99th Street two stops to 42nd Street, then transferring to the 7 to Queens. Don't fall asleep though or you will end up at Mets Stadium.

Introducing Jackson Heights, Queens; the most diverse zip code in the United States. The 7 train always made me think of John Rocker, the baseball player who caused a controversy with his answer to a question about being traded to NYC:

> I'd retire first. It's the most hectic, nerve-racking city. Imagine having to take the 7 Train to the ballpark looking like you're riding through Beirut next to some kid with purple hair, next to some queer with AIDS, right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time, right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's depressing . . . The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners. You can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English. Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How the hell did they get in this country?

Well, Mr. Rocker, they got in this country the same way your ancestors did: on a boat. How dare you speak bad about my city? I mean, all of your observations were correct. NYC was the most hectic, nerve-racking city imaginable, and we did have kids with purple hair and blue hair and orange hair for that matter, and we had queer people, some of whom were infected with HIV, though they did not let that define them. You neglected to mention that NYC is one location where queer communities, who were disproportionately impacted by the virus, organized, fought, and won public and institutional support, which all people with HIV are benefitting from today. And there are ex-cons, and mothers, and some of them have four children, and we help them up and down the subway stairs, even the ex-cons, because we New Yorkers believe in lending a helping hand, not to mention extending compassion to all of God's children.

When I took the subway that day, it was 8:30 a.m., and I was packed in on the 7 train with the rest of the morning commuters wishing deodorant was a part of all the world's cultures. Oh no, John Rocker was in me. I stepped down the stairs at the 74th Street stop into Jackson Heights. The faces in the neighborhood reflected the diversity I found in my classroom:

Colombian, Ecuadorian, Tibetan, Greek, African American, Dominican, Korean, Bengali, and a multitude of other ethnicities and nationalities from across the globe.

Urban Word understood that I liked to rep Queens, so it assigned me to a 10-week residency at Intermediate School 145. Schools whose primary identifying name was a number and not a name always made me think of a public school as a military unit, colonial outpost, franchise, or factory. I would be working with three classes instead of one, thus scaling up. This would be my second go around integrating the Poetry Slam model into English Language Arts classrooms. I would be working with three different teachers and three times the students. At least I finally would have enough hours scheduled to make a decent day rate. Instead of being paid to work in a school once per week for two hours for $100, I could do at least two, if not three of the classes in the same day; which, best case scenario, would mean a 6- to 8-hour work day onsite for $300 each week. Plus, I would get to use the same lesson over and over again. This provided me the opportunity to test my curriculum in different environments and improve as an educator, while also leveraging the ability to lesson plan for three classes at once.

As I arrived, I was greeted with the sounds of an out-of-control school, 2,000 middle school students in one building, screaming and racket pouring out of the windows. My wife used to work here, and every time I picked her up after her theater workshops, she would tell me stories about the drama happening in the hallways. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

At the time, I was also working at another school four blocks away, The Renaissance Charter School (TRCS), a school with a name not just a number. The difference in school culture was night and day. TRCS was one of those rare pre-Bloomberg K–12 charter schools. It started when a group of teachers and parents organized to create a school that would bring out the unique potential in their students. It has one third of the students of IS 145, 700, and it felt like a

small community, from the lobby where security signed you in, to the large communal spaces in the middle of each floor. On more than one occasion, I had a security guard at IS 145 jokingly wish me good luck as I made my way down the hallway into the fray.

A Walk Down the Boulevard

As a tool, I started to bring in what I called my first poetry book: *Urban Youth Blues: poems for urban youth from an urban youth*; 10 poems in an old beige binder, with sheet protectors for each page. This was my way to allow other learning modalities in the classroom. If a student was having difficulty engaging, I would invite him or her to read a poem from the book while I took the class through our lesson. I noticed that, as students flipped through the pages, they were more interested in my earlier poems than any of the newer ones I performed. Based on this surprising insight, I published these poems as the first chapter in my collection of poems.

One of the poems was my own, "Where I'm From," about my Saint Albans, Queens hometown. It was called "A Walk Down the Boulevard." Part of becoming an adult during the '90s in Saint Albans meant growing numb to the decay in your environment: the drug sales, the gunshots, the vandalism, the litter, the boulevards blotted with liquor stores, bodegas, and abandoned buildings, the gang violence, the men, young and old, with their pants hanging down wandering from street corner to street corner. Since talking about my neighborhood was not part of my school's curriculum, I turned to poetry.

Just like the students I taught today, I needed a venue to discuss what I was seeing in my community. Sadly, none of the institutions that shaped my development created a safe space for this dialogue: not in school, not at home, not in church, not with my peer group. Things were not right and I kept shutting off my emotions to cope with it all.

My eyes and heart turned numb

fears and tears just don't come

It doesn't matter

I don't ask why anymore

I say I'm not scared

but I am

and I'm hurt

I just can't feel it no more.

No young person should have to learn to become numb to their environment on their journey toward adulthood. Poetry had become my way to stay connected to my community. When I asked my students to write a "Where I'm From" poem, they always have something to say.

Free-Writing Is a Muscle

I used my own poetry to inspire my students to free-write. I used a metaphor to encourage them to be patient with the process. "Free-writing is a muscle." I used this metaphor to provide my students with an essential insight into the creative process: "Free-writing, like any artistic endeavor was a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets." Anytime my students struggled with writing, which was always, I let them know: "Writing is hard. It's hard for adults too. Most times, writing sucks, but it doesn't have to."

I always make sure my students write during our first session so they will be accustomed to what will be expected of them in future workshops. After I introduce myself, read a poem or two, ask a couple of questions and facilitate a couple of minutes of dialogue, I ask, "Are we ready to write"? As any educator will tell you, asking most public school students to write will inevitably and immediately be responded to with moaning and groaning. Often times, the entire

classroom will simultaneously exhale a sigh of disapproval. I mock them, groan with them, and then dare them to let out a real groan. Miming an orchestra conductor, I direct them with my invisible baton to really express themselves: "AAAUURRGHHGHHH!" That's better.

As any good educator will do, I also repeat the instructions several times. "So we are going to put our pens on the page, and write and write and write for seven minutes, and then we are going to stop. Our prompt is, 'Where I'm From.'"

Most young people get right to writing. The student's groan was a complimentary Refusal of the Call, not a gesture of noncooperation. Some students needed a little bit more prompting and encouragement. Doing great. Keep writing. I coached the class through our free-write. "Grammar doesn't matter. Punctuation doesn't matter. Just write. Free-writing is a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets." Remember, we are only writing for seven minutes. Actually, I always made the time up as we went along. We would likely write for 10 to 12 minutes. I provided them with additional prompts. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? How does it feel? Who do you see? What are they doing? What are they saying? Keep writing, we only have another 4 minutes and then we are done.

I engaged anyone who is not writing, responding to all comments with, "You should keep writing. I want to hear what you have to say." I lost my pen. Keep writing. I need to use the bathroom. I want to hear what you have to say. And I do. After our free-write, we will share, and genius will inevitably ensue. Keep writing. By the end of our first free-write, most of the class will be fully engaged, making meaning with the words floating on their pages.

Okay class, start wrapping up what you are writing. In a moment we are going to share some of our writing. Our free-write has come to an end. Time for the Open Mic.

I'm Proud of Where I'm From

Like the students of Mrs. A's class, the students of IS 45 come from varied immigrant backgrounds. For many first-generation students, writing a "Where I'm From" poem is an opportunity to reflect on their homelands. Poem after poem reveal immense ethnic and national identification and pride.

Seventh-grade student Anthony wrote, "I'm proud of where I'm from/I'm proud of my country." His list of reasons reads like an ad for a Caribbean vacation: "beautiful beaches, tall palm trees, hot, summer days, cool-breezy nights, and beautiful people." Anthony never mentioned a specific country in his poem though he included clipart of a man looking at a beach.

His classmate, Francisco, began his poem by identifying his homeland, Ecuador, as a tropical paradise. Not only did he write about the "warm weather breeze," but he defended his country. "I might come from a 3rd world country, but it has more sights than you would ever imagine to see." He continued to represent "El mitad del mundo," as a place where "the principles of human beings are more important than petty materialistic wants and needs." After making this distinction about the cultural values between his South American homeland and what he experienced as a citizen of the U.S., he ended his poem with a simple and profound statement, "I come from Ecuador, where my roots and my past are at peace."

A couple blocks away, at The Renaissance Charter School, my seventh-grade student Julian expressed pride for the "cold volcanoes" and "parade bugles and drums in Panama." Rohany wrote that she was "110% Dominican." She was proud of the colors red and blue in her national flag and baseball, "That's our sport." Leena, whose surname came from the Sikh and Hindu people in India, chose to rep NYC in her "Where I'm From" poem. "The buildings, people, lights./The shopping malls/The boulevards./That's where I'm from."

Teen Life

There was a crew of boys in my sixth-grade class who get infected with the poetry bug. They wrote passionate poems about their neighborhood. I watched it spread like a contagious virus through the class. They wrote about young men growing up in an environment full of temptations with little to no outlets or pathways to better their material conditions. Each week, they learned from each other, borrowing phrases, lines and sentiments to incorporate into their own poems. They set the pace for our class to grow with confidence during our workshop series. Their poems were so grounded in their neighborhood community that I could visualize them.

Roeny's poem, "Peer Pressure," began with him sitting on a milk crate telling a story to whomever will listen, "There's a kid on my block/Who sits on the stairs all day/Trying to be gangsta/Just to have it his way." His poem's protagonist made a choice in the next line, "Until one day he decides to join a gang." You know what comes next. The kid starts shooting people with "loud bangs." Roeny warned his listeners that this kid was headed for self-destruction. Roeny, who has the demeanor of a young Willie Perdomo, continued the kid's story with a conversation with God, "Lord, why does this happen for/To prove to my homies, that I'm down and hardcore?" His character asked why would he commit murder, simply to prove himself to his homies? The poem continued with his character reflecting on a litany of consequences: crying, confusion, losing his virginity, suicidal thoughts, smoking which hurts his breathing and makes him cough up blood, getting jumped by another gang, self-mutilation, loneliness, homelessness, and imprisonment. The poem concluded with regret: the kid left home and dropped out of school; he will not be able to go back.

There was a line in Roeny's poem when his protagonist turned to self-mutilation: "He's cutting himself because he thinks it lets out the pain." During the process, I learned about cutting

from one of my seventh-grade students—a highly emotive, exceptional writer. She privately shared a highly personal poem called "Teen Life," a first-hand account of a teen who turns to self-mutilation to provide herself a physical manifestation for the emotional pain she feels. She admitted that she used to cut herself, but assured me that she does not do it anymore. I looked into it—meaning, I looked it up on an online search engine, then had a private conversation with her, and was able to convince her to tell her teacher and to at least speak to a social worker at school. She agreed, and she did, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

One of Roeny's classmates, Andres, was inspired to speak to this problem. He wrote his poem, "Unknown," as a direct address to the kid who might turn to self-mutilation. Andres transformed into a caring and charismatic social worker answering a 911 call. In his first line, he stops the cutting kid from getting defensive and demands he stop for a moment and listen to what he has to say: "I'm not dissin-just stop and listen."

In his poem, Andres attempted to talk the lost and confused kid off of the proverbial ledge. First, he hinted for him to recognize that he was the one who was locking people out, "But no one hears you/Because you locked the door." Next, he suggested the kid practice a little self-acceptance, "The right thing to do is to be you." Then, sympathy: "The clothes you wear/Don't cover the pain—that's unfair." Next, he offered the kid some hope: "One day I hope you can just say/What's on your mind/and not hide it behind the blind." For the remainder of the poem, Andres took the reader on many surprising and creative directions, leaving his muse with these final words: "I hope you can let the words out/and be free/God is with us and he wants to protect you/Please let it out—it's only gonna help you."

Another one of Roeny and Andres's classmates, Benny, wrote a hip-hop-tinged poem called, "Why," which began with three rhyming couplets before dropping into a 5-line stanza, filled with internal rhymes and ending with an onomonopeia police siren.

Don't drink and drive because then u want to
try to dance with the devil in the pale moonlight
advance at the level that you can't do right
lay hands on the fella like the men in blue lights
BBUUUAAATTT BBBUUUAAATTT do it twice

Benny carefully configured the spelling of the siren sound and nails it in his performance. Benny's poem ends with the same core message as Andres's poem. Only now, instead of being directed to one misguided youth, Benny delivers it like an emcee at a hip-hop concert, "C'mon just shout, yeah scream it out just tell me/what the problem is about."

The class responds, letting MC Benny know his call has been heard. You can almost hear screaming fans in the distance responding to Benny's commands from the stage. "C'mon, just shout." He concludes his poem with a message for us all,

There's so much pollution people doing
Let's save Earth from ruins
From criminals, from fatality
why not love and soul not violence or discontrol
WHY!!!

Each of our three classes loses the poetry slam, and we don't move on to the next round to face The Bronx. Again, my students put forth an amazing effort and a phenomenal performance, but no one got to witness it. Not their parents. Not the school community. Not their friends and

neighbors in their Jackson Heights community. Not my colleagues at Urban Word. Just their teacher and I are their witnesses.

Bringing Poetry to the Garden

For the show, I wore my poetry super hero outfit: a T-shirt with a Michelle Obama print, blazer, and trucker-hat with my name tagged in graffiti font across the front by some elementary school students I worked with in the Bronx (see Figure 11). The young people arrived on time! The last time we saw one another was via video-teleconference. As proud as I was of the work that my students had accomplished that semester, Mrs. Straubinger's students were clearly more advanced in both their writing and performance. They had won the Queens slam and then lost to the Bronx, so this performance opportunity provided them with an appropriate and worthy consolation prize.

When I visited Queens Council on the Arts to try to get funding for my work, they offered to feature me in their annual festival, Queens Arts Express, a celebration of art along the 7 Train in collaboration with the NYC Metropolitan Transit Authority. I immediately asked whether or not they had any youth representation. When they replied "no," I suggested featuring some of my students at IS 145. For years, my students have put on brilliant performances without a public to witness them. After brainstorming with the festival director, we targeted the Queens Botanical Gardens as a performance venue for my students. Queens, stand up!!

Unfortunately, I quickly ran into a slight problem. None of the classroom teachers I was working with was willing to go through the extra effort to bring their students to perform on a Saturday afternoon. Fortunately, I also invited all of the classroom teachers in the Queens Writes programs to attend with their students, and a teacher from IS 230 responded. Mrs. Straubinger emailed me a week before to confirm that they would be there. While her class won the Queens

Slam by beating my students, she felt they were robbed in their slam against the winning Bronx class. I am thankful for her investment to go to extra length to give her students more opportunities to perform. I wonder what it would have been like to teach in her classroom.

The morning of the show, I practiced the intro from my book, *Growing Up Hip-Hop* (see Figure 12), another "Where I'm From" poem about growing up in Queens. "I lived in the ghetto and my grandmother lived in the suburbs and we lived in the same house. I grew up in South Jamaica, Queens which is located somewhere between New York City and nowhere." My book just went into print. I am so excited but also a little worried. I have never actually had a phone conversation with Mrs. Straubinger, only emails, so I am desperately hoping that she will follow through and get her students to the performance.

Figure 11. Wearing Michelle Obey t-shirt by rebelution and hat by students. Photo by photobysol.

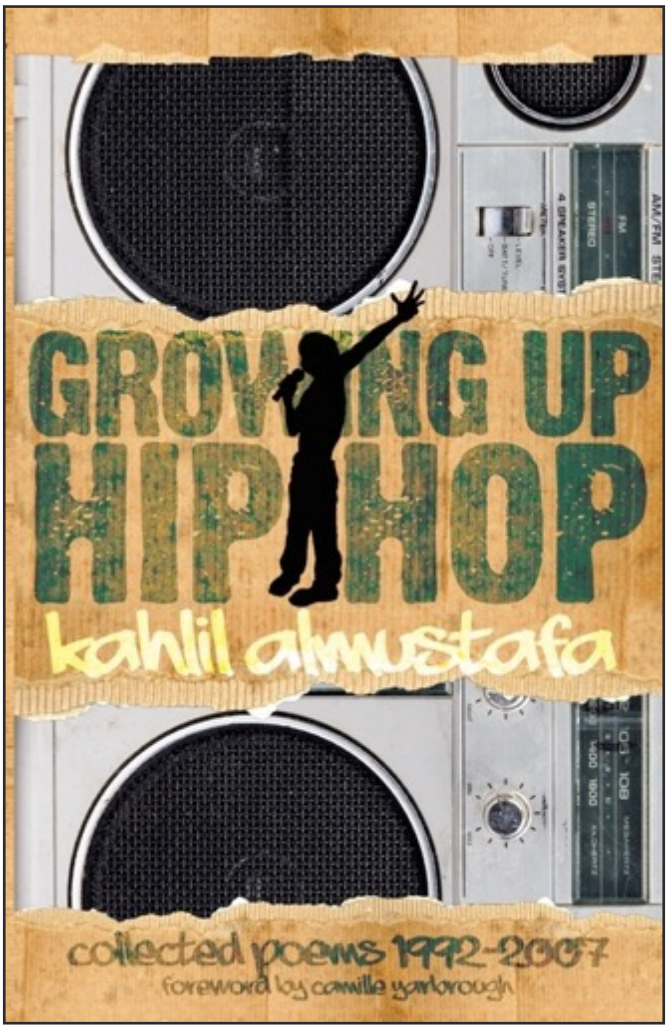


Figure 12. Growing up hip-hop: Collected poems 1992-2007, book cover published by MVMT Milk in 2008. Cover designed by Michael Cordero for 1 Soul MVMT.

The six students who showed up were all different shades of the same shade of brown: Bengali, Guatemalan, Ecuadorian, and Dominican. Before the performance, I took them aside so we would get comfortable with each other and so I could learn how to pronounce their names. Then, it was time for our international delegation to take the stage.

I performed my intro to get the audience warmed up. It was made up mostly of their families, the staff from Queens Council on the Arts and Queens Botanical Gardens, my wife, and

a couple of strays who were walking around the gardens. I informed the students that they'd perform in the same order as their slam. Then it was time to bring up the poets.

The first poet was Aisha. Not pronounced I-esh-a. Just Ai-sha. In her poem, "My Name," she provided a charming history of her name. She began with her name's religious origin, "It was indeed the name of/Prophet Muhammad's last wife." She provided her audience with some additional details. The Prophet Muhammad's had 12 wives and a list of their names, though "Aisha was strikingly beautiful."

In the following stanza, Aisha shifted into a conversation with her math tutor, giving her audience another piece to the puzzle of her name and also a piece of her personality:

My math tutor once told me
a long time ago
that I was in luck, and that my parents should be delighted.
It was because the meaning of the name is the opposite of being cursed.
I didn't believe him
I thought he was trying to be nice
so I bit him.
Later, I went on the internet, and to my surprise,
luck it was.
After all he was the tutor for a reason.

This young poet mixed the sublime with the absurd. Her name meant the opposite of being cursed (she looked it up to verify), and she was willing to bite someone if she thought they are lying to her just to be nice.

Aisha's third stanza composed an extended metaphor about one of her name's meanings, "precious,"

They say it means precious.

Like a beautiful expensive diamond ring that

you wouldn't dare to lose

or like a sentimental necklace that you had

since you were a child,

given by your mother

who is now rotting deep in the ground.

Does Mrs. Straubinger have an interrogation room in the back of her class where she holds her students hostage until they have layered enough details to bring their poems to life? Aisha's next two stanzas were dedicated to the connotations behind her name when it is pronounced correctly, juxtaposed with the way they pronounce it here in the schools in America.

The harmony of my name is Aisha

makes me imagine

the calm peaceful blue waves of the ocean.

It reminds me of the soft touch of silk

on my Bengali skin.

To me it means graceful.

Elegant and delicate.

But Ayesha makes me think

of something completely different.

I think of a flaming red fire

strong and powerful

Ayesha to me sounds like

Bold, Fearless, Brave and Independent

. . . A Warrior.

Obviously, she has acclimated, because no matter how you pronounce her name, you are referring to a strong, elegant Bengali warrior.

Next up, Kavya read her poem, "Memories That Will Last Forever." Within the first couple of lines, I could tell Kavya was given an "I remember" prompt because she begins every line with "I remember." I was relieved to discover that even a super teacher like Mrs. Straubinger had trouble getting her students to use the revision process to help evolve the poem, so the original prompt was invisible. Still, Kavya got the job done. Her poem was a touching account of migrating and acclimating to America. She began with the sun splashing on her face as she left her aunt's arms, weeping, and boarded a plane for the first time.

In Kavya's journey to a new country, she learned about the seasons: trees not being cut down for firewood, snow on her hands that feels like small spikes bristling into her skin like bullets, birds chirping on the first day of Spring that sound like a classical song composed by Beethoven, and the rhythmic sound of leaves crunching under her white shoes. Kavya also spoke about the challenges of acculturation: going to school without knowing any English words other than "hello," with students who are different, "their colors, behaviors and words were fragmentary to me, it was a puzzle that I didn't fit into." My favorite line of all was a comedic rant about the first time she ate McDonald's:

I remember eating McDonald's for the first time. I bit down into that stuffy bread and layers of who knows what. Right at that point, I declared that I would never eat there

again. Eventually, my parents convinced me. They took my brother and me there every weekend or they brought it home. I guess eating it often enough made me actually like it. Actually Kavya, it was probably the secret sauce that made those Mickey D burgers taste so good, but consider yourself lucky that you had to adjust your taste buds to fast food.

Next up to the mic was Shahara with her poem, "Aayatul Kursi," about the origins of her name. In her poem, she strung together a varied array of manifestations of her name: a fox, smelling minty like mojito, the color peach, moonlight, smelling like daisies, a throne, a cinnamon bun, a puzzle, a fish biting your toes in the teal sea, the age 18, free and girly. Her next line acted as the bridge in her poem, "Live it. Love it. Breathe it." Throughout the remainder of the poem, Shahara gave her name a life of its own and invited the reader to interact with it in a myriad of ways:

Let it sit upon your head.

Let it fall down on a cold summer's day.

Roaming around on a dark night.

Illuminating the street lights.

Singing on the wire fence by the park.

Bleeding words as it runs down the track.

Say I love you,

and it will consume the words

like a sponge,

hard when out of the warm plastic package.

Punch it. Try.

Step on it. Try.

Breathe on it. Try.

You could keep pulling the string and, instead of unraveling, Shahara's poem weaved together an elaborate quilt of her name. The payoff at the end of the poem was well worth it. Being so adaptable, so willing to do and be anything and to withstand any and all things was so scary that, "until you clasp your hand around every possible open part of your body," you will not be able to understand that, "the malleability of Shahara is terrifying."

Another student, Jorge, turns his "Where I'm From" poem into a stand-up comedy routine. His poem, titled "El Pais Donde Naci," repeats the refrain "Where I'm From," bobbing back and forth between punch line and gut punch:

> Where I'm from, you get up to the deafening screech of the brown rooster from the farm next door. If it isn't the rooster, it's the cow . . . MOOOO!!
>
> Where I'm from, you have to wear sun block S.P.F. 60 on every sunny day or else you won't be seen in the dark. The sun in my country BURNS! That's why my skin is the color of chocolate.
>
> Where I'm from, whenever you're in your car, you can't have your window down or you risk getting . . . BAM!!
>
> Where I'm from, you never really feel safe, not in your car, not in your own home . . . always afraid of the unexpected.
>
> Where I'm from, you can't go out to eat every weekend, maybe once a month even with a good job. Besides that, you're stuck with arroz con pollo o arroz con frijoles.
>
> Where I'm from, eating Pollo Campero at least once in your life means you have been baptized to be Guatemalan.

> Where I'm from, everyone sits around the television each night to hear of more tragedy. All their reports are about dead people. Dead . . . Dead . . . Dead!! It seems there is nothing good to report.
>
> Where I'm from, whenever the United States sneezes, my country catches a cold. While the United States battles their bad economy, Guatemala shivers with the fear of what's to come.

Jorge finishes his poem, "Where I'm from, you may or may not be proud of your country, but you are still un Guatemalteco." He claims the good and the bad that comes with his identity.

These students explored the complexity of their communities, hopscotching back and forth; in and out of the beauty and ugliness they found in the hoods they called home. They used their poetic lens to write the world as they saw it. I hope they were able to find themselves somewhere in the midst of their neighborhood observations. These young people are writing their own histories. They are the experts of themselves. After the performance, each family walks through the gardens, taking a moment to admire the flowers.

Residency 5: One Mic

Urban Word had a new program director. Desiree, her patois, and her soulful, community-building, pedagogy of radical love were all gone. Our new Program Director seemed to be new to the United States, and to NYC, and to NYC youth, and just to Black and Brown people in general. What was with these nonprofits hiring European transplants in these roles versus looking to promote leadership from within the community? "*Please remember that regular attendance at Mentor Meetings is required to teach with UW*" Even though the email began with "missing you," and ended "with love," I could never be resolved with the idea of a nonprofit requiring a mandatory unpaid training as a qualification for employment.

In addition, there was required, unpaid, participation in the Mentor Training during one weekend during each fall. October 2–4. Under the leadership of the new program director, these weekly meetings were increasingly irrelevant to my practice. Still, I regularly showed. I connected with young people and supported their work. I volunteered for the first 4 years to judge their cattle-call-styled annual poetry slam, which drew hundreds of youth contestants.

Though I did not appreciate the change, the program director was my lifeline. Her phone calls meant financial contracts, opportunities to engage young people, and to continue growing in my practice. She knew that I was an experienced and committed educator; and communicated with me with great respect and consideration. I appreciated her greatly, and liked her personally, but could never get beyond my frustration with her in this role. While Desiree was a connector, and weaver of community, moving swiftly and adeptly from school site to school site, inspiring confidence with her school partners and TAs, this new director was removed.

"So, did you ever hear about what happened with the residency at IS 145? Are we going to work with them this year?" As I was leaving the office, I asked her a question that I already had the answer to. The Queens Writes program was still in effect, only the school chose to contract a different nonprofit, that although not as cool, used a two-TA model, had TAs who showed up on time, did not suddenly miss classes, and focused vigorously on documenting student work by publishing a thick student anthology at the end of every residency cycle.

The new Program Director responded, "Oh that program, I think the budget for it was cut, so, unfortunately, we won't be there this year. But we will have lots of opportunities for you this year. You are first up on our list." Perhaps budget cuts was the reason that she was given. Maybe she was just using it as filler, because she did not think I needed to know the specifics. This may

have been the first time I recognized that "budget cuts" was a weird nonprofit catchphrase meant to obscure more critical engagement around organizational choices and priorities.

While Urban Word was no longer working at IS 145, I still was. The director of the program and I had a great working relationship. While she was disappointed with the organization's lack of professionalism and attention to maintaining quality in the program, she was excited to work with me. I grew to lead the professional developments with teachers, hosted the virtual poetry slams, and our end-of-year open mic gathering. She supported me outside of the school, coming to my multimedia show with her niece.

Andrea contracted me to develop a 5-week curriculum for teachers using poems from *Growing Up Hip-Hop*, and then organized a "Meet the Author" style video-teleconference, simultaneously with three different schools in an interactive, virtual performance, and Q&A. In 2009, this was innovative technology. The iPhone was just released in 2007. I recited poems upon request, answered questions, sometimes with poems from the book, instructing students of which page to turn to at three schools. Budget cuts.

Five years into my life as a TA, and my portfolio of experiences had already grown rich and diverse. In addition to contracting with Urban Word, I was contracting with multiple nonprofit organizations. With so many residencies, the young people were starting to blend into one another. My relationship with organizational leaders became tenuous. I grew increasingly critical of White arts education leaders that used spoken word, hip-hop, and cultural arts as its baseline aesthetic and engaged primarily with youth and artists of color. I felt frustration,

I was disappointed when I did not get invited to participate in special programs. When they announced that another TA won a grant providing them with an artistic residency, I expressed disappointment at not being asked to apply. My relationship to nonprofit organizations

was like that of day laborers who show up outside of hardware stores with nothing but a pair of gloves and boots to prove their readiness. I floated from contract to contract, organization to organization, attempting to serve enough young people, and engage with enough communities to provide a decent workload and annual income. Still, my combined annual salary hovered around $36,000 per year. My wife's was primarily a TA too, and she averaged a similar annual income.

I thought about money constantly. I was married now, and my wife and I were no longer shacking up at her mother's house on the Upper West Side. Barack Obama was president, and we had our own apartment in Brooklyn, with a rent subject to increase every time a new coffee shop opened. Every couple of months, I would write a budget in my journal, with a list of each residency and financial opportunity I had, each time with the goal of equaling $60,000.

In 2008, I was invited to conduct a teacher training from a group of more than 40 beginner educators at an Ivy League university. I used student poetry from my classrooms as our guiding texts. The professor who invited me was a chief organizer of a group of radical educators from across NYC. They joined together to engage in critical dialogue and develop collective strategies for resistance. They invited me to be a workshop leader during their conference.

At the conference, I met a passionate, and serious young teacher, Heidi, who was using my collection of poems in her classroom in The Bronx. Heidi followed up with an email:

> I talked with you really briefly at the Preemptive Education training about my 7th-graders in Hunts Point. We're starting workshops here at our site with Urban Word this month. I just wanted to say hi, see what you're up to, and find out how you're working with UW currently. Also, l mentioned to you that I was reading your book to the kids last year and they were loving it! What I didn't mention is that one of our little tough guys who ended up leaving the school swiped the book on his way out (as reported by friends on his

block). I guess you can consider that a good review. I would love another copy, but wasn't able to order it online—on your site or otherwise. Is there a way I can order one from you directly or can you point me in the right direction? I'd love to share it with this year's kids as well. Look forward to hearing from you!

Now that's a good book review. As he was making an exit from the school, a tough, 12-year-old from The Bronx stole my book and was letting it be known back on his block. Heidi sent the email to me, and cc'd Urban Word. My new Program Director followed up in an email contracting me for five 1-hour workshops with three seventh-grade classes, on Fridays from 9:00am to 3:00pm. I replied the next day, clarifying, "There is a 3-hour break, 3 hours of teaching and a 6 hour day in the school. Should I assume I will be getting paid $150 for three hours of teaching OR should I assume I will be paid $300 for a 6-hour day? Since I do not like to assume, I thought I would ask."

The Program Director replied back a couple of days later,

Yes, it is a long break. For this reason, Heather (lead teacher) is setting up some lunch-time workshops for other grades that will be more informal and 40-minutes long. Right now, there is a possibility of 2 40-min sessions, or only 1 and alternating the grades every other week.

So, when this is set up, you'd be earning at least $200 per day ($250 if 2 lunch sessions) and having a shorter break. I understand breaks can be a drag, but my hope is that they can be useful as personal work/ reading time.

Does this work for you?

Does this work for me? No, it does not. I was 5 years into my practice, and I was still in a position that required me to advocate for myself as a professional on an hour-by-hour basis. No, that does not work for me.

The next day, I followed up with an email to all of the Urban Word staff about my "Workshops/Pay."

> As you know I have spoken to each of you about my pay rate in regard to workshops. I am committed to working with young people and representing Urban Word, but it is increasingly difficult to work for the $50 hourly rate. I am trying to graduate into an adult life with health care, etc., etc. In the "good old days," once a man got married the boss gave him a pay raise.
>
> Currently there are three workshops in consideration: Hyde Leadership, BCAM & Henry Street. Please take a look at the budgets and see if there is any way to pay $60-$75 an hour. This would be extremely helpful in moving forward with this work.

The staff was responsive. They were able to pay me $60 per hour for workshops at two of the three sites. Hyde, however, could only pay $200, as the organization was providing this workshop for the school at cost. I responded back, "Yes, I'll take the workshop for $200."

Teaching in The Bronx, the Birthplace of Hip-Hop

I was excited to begin teaching in The Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop. The school was located in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx right around the corner from The Point, a community-based arts institution. Five years ago, I performed at The Point at a hip-hop concert to benefit families who lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina. When I was growing up, Hunts Point's was known for prostitution, prompting HBO to make four different documentaries set in the neighborhood. On the flip side, Hunts Point was now known worldwide for innovative

green, urban renewal projects, spearheaded by Bronx-born, MacArthur Genius Award winner, Majora Carter.

Hyde Leadership was part of a larger charter organizational network, and nonprofit movement of expanding charter schools in NYC. In 2002, there were 17 charter schools serving about 3,000 children. In 2008, there were 4 times as many charter schools, 78, serving approximately 24,000 students. This should be kept in some perspective. While the charter school movement grew at a breakneck pace, the percentage of charter schools in comparison to the total number of schools was relatively small. The NYC public school system was the largest in the world, with 1,700 schools and 1.1 million students, making charter schools only responsible for about 2% of the overall student population.

One of the big criticisms of charter schools was that they led toward the creation of a two-tiered educational system in NYC public schools, with highly inequitable conditions often existing in the same school buildings. In my experience, charter schools attracted parents who were empowered enough to find out about, apply, and ensure their child's acceptance. When this is the case, the whole school benefits. This was how the two-tiered system develops. Public schools are full of the children whose parents did not find out about, were unable to get in, or were kicked out of the charter schools. Hyde Leadership fit in this model. Hyde calls their approach, "family-based character education." A key feature of Hyde was very involved parents. Parents even received their own report cards.

At Hyde, the students had diverse ethnic backgrounds, mostly a panorama of Black and Brown, Caribbean, and African American. Admissions was conducted by lottery with priority given to siblings and residents of the neighborhood, and there was a long wait list to get in. Like many charter schools, Hyde emphasized character development in addition to high performance

in all academic areas. Hyde enforced a strict uniform dress code: dark or khaki pants, skirts for girls, white-collared shirts, ties for boys, navy blue sweaters and vests with yellow letters that read "Hyde." Like other charter schools, Hyde featured an extended school day. Teachers often worked at the school from 7:30am until 7:30pm. Since they depended on young teachers who graduated from programs like Teach for America, their teacher attrition rate was higher than most public schools.

It took a little over an hour to get to Hyde Leadership from Brooklyn. Hyde requested that Urban Word also send a female poet so that the class would meet twice per week for 5 weeks, with alternating male and female workshop leaders. I was intrigued by any school that put gender-balanced pedagogy into practice.

Soon after I introduce myself, and spit a poem, I went over my poetry workshop agreements. "During our time together, we have two rules. The first rule is One Mic, which means one person speaks at a time." The inspiration behind the language for our classroom agreement was from a song, "One Mic," by fellow Queens-native, hip-hop artist, Nas. Over the years, the term has evolved into a vital cultural tool in the youth spoken word movement. If you are at an Open Mic anywhere in the country, you might hear an adult or youth call out to the group, "One Mic," to remind each member of the community to respect the voice of the individual currently holding the mic, as this would be the same respect they receive when they are holding the mic. This kept the cypher sacred. Respect the mic. Soon after I told the students about the One Mic rule, a student started using it to quiet his classmates. "Yo, yo, yo, One Mic guys." The class was off to a great start.

"Our second rule is Safe Space." First, I asked the students what they thought Safe Space means and why it would be important in our poetry workshop. Young people are used to having

their voices challenged, outright disregarded by adults, and thoroughly disrespected by their peers. Their responses expressed how important it is for young people to have a Safe Space to express themselves with urgency and precision.

Nonetheless, I told the class what Safe Space meant to me:

> Safe Space is important because sharing your poem in front of your classmates takes a lot of courage. What do you think will happen if someone takes on that courage, and says something, and then you say something to discourage them?

I immediately answer the rhetorical question: "Then that person is not going to want to say their poem, right?" I pause hoping to prompt reflection. Scan the room, look each one of them in their eyes, and offer them this responsibility.

> So, it is going to take every single one of us to make sure that this classroom is a safe space for people to express themselves. We will respect that each person is saying his or her own truth. Our responsibility in the poetry workshop is to listen for each poet's truth.

Classroom culture was strong in Heather's seventh-grade class. Whenever classmates said something another student agreed with, they would use a hand gesture which resembled knocking on an invisible door. It meant "ditto," which I started doing immediately. The class took quickly to adopting our two poetry workshop agreements.

To its credit, Hyde lived up to its name. Their five words, "courage, concern, curiosity, integrity, and leadership," and five principles, "destiny, humility, conscience, truth, and 'brother's keeper," were not just words on a website, it was clear from working with the students that the staff was actively fostering these leadership qualities in their students. Students routinely stepped up for themselves and in defense of each other. They also took accountability for their behavior. On any day, a student will address the class and apologize for talking too much or for

getting upset over something small. Usually, Miss C. prompts them, but often, the students will take the initiative all on their own.

When a student was about to share her poem. Jonathan, along with several other classmates, helped to get their classmates quiet. “Yo, yo, yo, One Mic guys.” On that cue, Saneida read a poem about love and abuse:

Let me tell you love is not supposed to hurt
Love is not supposed to turn your skin blue
Love is supposed to make you feel the way
You want to feel and be real
Cuz I can’t take your piercing words your
Hard punches, your slaps, your thoughts
Your hits in the nose. You are destructive and it
Pains my soul the way you laugh, breathe,
Cry, eat, makes me wanna know how can
I be with you if you can abuse
Love is not supposed to hurt, listen I’m
Talking to you cuz my pride in myself
Will be lost forever if I don’t leave this
Stormy weather bye bye, I’m leaving
You, you and you cuz love is not supposed
To hurt, love is not supposed to bruise.

As Saneida read her poem, several students knocked on invisible doors throughout the room, using the ditto hand gesture to express the poem’s resonance with them.

Wait, nobody call Child Protective Services. This raw expression was why the poetry workshop was so vitally important. What other classroom activity provides a child access to their own internal wisdom? In her poem, Saneida boldly defined what love means to her and embodied a voice breaking from a cycle of abuse. When a student reads a poem like this, it is a testament to the safe space the classroom community is holding for the poet's truth.

Brother's Keeper

I arrive at Hyde Leadership Charter School early for Session 5 out of five of my seventh-grade poetry workshop. Heather, the classroom teacher, informed me that there was some drama. Last week, a student read a poem in the Open Mic from the perspective of a child who grew up in a family of Bloods. Of course I remembered him—his poem was about being a child whose choices in life were limited because he grew up in a family that was in a gang. The school's Brother's Keeper principle encouraged students to speak to adults any time they were concerned about their own or their peers' safety. This cultural tool was in direct conflict with the "No Snitching" street code, which condemned providing any information to authorities to be used against any other member of the community. Several students told the principal, and the student was immediately removed from the school. Right now, the student and his father were meeting with the assistant principal. Heather suggested we sit in on part of the meeting, since the poem was written in my workshop and the student said his poem was inspired by me.

As I entered the assistant principal's office, I felt like I was going to get in trouble. The room was narrow and dimly lit. I thought pseudo-adulthood would have alleviated me from this feeling of fearing authority. Heather introduced me to the young man's father and reintroduced me to the AP, both working-class African Americans who looked as if they could be members of the same church. I handed each one of them a copy of my book, so they could see my poetry for

themselves. Perhaps, they would think that it was positive for the young man to be inspired by a published author. The father was gracious but short. He was focused on getting this handled.

The AP emphasized the school's zero tolerance policy of any gang activity or gang affiliation "whatsoever." The school removed two students last year because they spoke about being in gangs. The school did not want to remove the man's son, but they took this behavior very seriously. They had to protect the safety of all of the students. The father responded emphatically in full agreement, stating that he understood that safety is the school's top priority. He followed up to state that his son was not involved in any gangs. His family was not involved in any gangs. He came from a good family of hard-working people who take education seriously and he could not understand why his son would behave in this way.

When they turned to me, I attempted to provide some perspective. First, I began with a truth I had learned from my poetry workshops: When I assigned a writing assignment and a student does not want to write, it is usually because they are scared to share what will come out. When I ask young people to write, they almost always write about what is foremost on their hearts and their minds. If we, as educators, do not provide young people with a safe space to write about what they want to write about, then how will we as adults ever get them to write about what we want them to write about?

Seeing that my safe space mumbo-jumbo was not getting anywhere, I got a little more specific with my explanation, tying it into academic practices. Here was a young man, practicing a literary device that we learned in class, speaking from another person's perspective. In our class, we read "Mother to Son," a poem written by Langston Hughes from the perspective of a parent to their child. In this instance, the student wrote from the perspective of a child growing up as a Blood because his parents were Bloods, and that was all he knew. Actually, the poem

was an intelligent analysis of what he saw. Your son is using the literary device we learned in class to speak from the perspective of a young man caught up in a cycle of gang violence. I stop here. I want to say, "Duh, you did remove two of his friends who live on his block because their families were in gangs. Maybe this is his way to process that traumatic change." Hopefully, they were able to read between the lines.

The AP and the father quickly let me know this meeting was not about understanding this child's behavior, it was about setting a tone for correcting the child's behavior. The father directed his son to read the poem they worked on at home, "A Positive Society." The boy read the poem, something about a beautiful world and coming from Kings and Queens. It's good. The young man has talent. I suggested the student be allowed to read it during the Poetry Slam during Friday's class. Unfortunately, the AP had no intentions on reversing the child's suspension.

Epilogue: One Mic

The dynamics happening in my seventh-grade classroom reminded me of the controversy between Nas and Bill O'Reilly, a Fox News personality. O'Reilly struck first, calling Nas "vile" and criticizing Virginia Tech for allowing him to perform at a memorial concert. The Virginia Tech Massacre was on everyone's minds. A senior at the school murdered 32 people and injured 17 others before committing suicide himself. O'Reilly pointed to Nas's violent lyrics and a past gun charge, calling the decision to let him perform insulting to the victims. As usual, someone was blaming hip-hop.

Hip-hop amazes me. It quickly becomes the central focus of so many conversations. Whether you are talking about politics, art, economics, theater, revolution, human evolution, the prison industrial complex, capitalism, globalization, humanism, race, the environment, the media, all roads seem to lead back to hip-hop. Nas responded to the Fox News talk show host: "I

can't understand how Bill O'Reilly can be angry at a song called 'Shoot 'Em Up.' If I didn't have a microphone, I could never talk about 'Shoot 'Em Up,' and I was talking about Queens, New York, being shot up." This debate has raged on throughout the history of hip-hop. Conservative voices accusing hip-hop of glorifying crime, violence, and other unsavory behavior, with artists responding by stating they are capturing the violence in their environment.

The beef between Nas and Bill O'Reilly is a mirror image of what happened with my student. I handed a student the "mic," and he used it to speak from the perspective of a child caught up in a cycle of gang violence. I told him that our classroom was a safe space for his expression. Instead of the assistant principal and the student's father applauding him for shedding a light on what was going on in his community, the student was penalized for glorifying violence. Nas asks a rhetorical question, which I find myself asking: "What do I have to do to get somebody to turn around and hear what I'm saying and take it serious?"

O'Reilly, on the other hand, was appealing to people whose preconceived ideas about hip-hop are rooted in centuries of racist rhetoric and fed daily by the corporate machine behind mainstream hip-hop music and images. He was merely using Nas as a villain in a narrative in which he and other White men are heroes, who must defend the country from those whose seek to undermine our cherished values.

In contrast, Nas's interpretation of his own song, "One Mic," and the cultural tool it had involved into offered a critical opposing viewpoint to the Bill O'Reilly's of the world:

> "One Mic" just gives me the ability, no matter how much ignorant people are mad that I'm exposing or talking about our country, no matter what the language is, I'm talking in a language that the people can hear, I'm not sugar-coating it. So if it scares people and people feel guilty, people feel like they've got to make up excuses to why the world's this

way, no matter what they say, like they've got their mic, I've got mine, and that's what that song's about.

Nas makes a powerful statement about free speech and the title of his song is echoed in poetry workshops across the country. Yo, yo, yo, One Mic. One Mic.

Visioning My Life

In the Fall of 2011, people from all over the country and all over the world convened at a public park in downtown Manhattan to protest economic injustice. The target of their frustration: Wall Street, the same location where enslaved Africans were once auctioned off to the highest bidder. Occupy Wall began just a few days after the start of the 2011–2012 school year. Though I was an active participant in NYC's political movements, I did not make the pilgrimage to this historic protest. I had spent years lobbying for free and affordable tuition at city and state universities; petitioning to free political prisoners; organizing for reparations for African Americans; and protesting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the unjust Rockefeller Drug Laws, and nuclear proliferation. By 2011, my activism was expressed through my work was in classrooms with students. I did not have time to occupy Wall Street. I was too busy occupying NYC's public schools.

As a TA, I was applying the basic principles behind the Occupy movement to public school classrooms. The Occupy movement emphasized the simple idea that public space must serve public good. Occupying public schools and other educational institutions became my way of enacting civic resistance. In concert with a movement that was occupying the physical spaces where our collective economic realities were determined, I occupied the physical spaces shaping the minds of our young people, and with them, our future.

Actually, I have been in one school or the other for most of my life. In my years as a student I attended three different elementary schools, six different high schools and five different colleges. It took my five-and-a-half total semesters to graduate from high school and six-and-a-half combined semesters to earn a college diploma. I have spent the majority of my waking days in one room or another where the stated purpose was learning. I dare to wager that over the past decade, I have participated as a student or educator in more, and more uniquely different educational settings than most other human beings on the planet.

A decade as a NYC TA was a serious hustle and grind. I am a TA. It is my job, my vocation, and my passion. It does not pay much. There is no manual. There is no union, certificate, or credential. There are no stable work conditions. There is not even a consistent schedule or site. No health benefits, so certainly no dental. No sick days. No vacation days. No personal days. No raises. No FSA. No 401K. Your retirement plan is you work until you die.

As a TA, I worked with more than 200 young people in dozens of classes each year. This was my life, dragging supplies from borough to borough, commuting from one educational institution to the next, engaging students, teachers, administrators and parents with a shared project or educational goal. Sometimes our sessions lasted a couple of weeks. Sometimes our work would span a semester or an entire school year. Other times, our encounter was no longer than a single, 45-minute class period.

Just recounting my educational experiences makes me dizzy. So many children with poems in their eyes. So many memories. Elizabeth, the shyest girl in class receiving a standing ovation from her classmates after reading her poem out loud for the first time. Nigel beaming with pride once we completed the video from our neighborhood walk. Explaining to Ryan how he actually was hurting himself when he calls Harold retarded. Letting Nigeria know that I know

what it feels like to have a parent die from AIDS. The seventh-grade boys' faces transforming from silly to compassionate after listening to their classmate express his pain for being teased for being Mexican and the deep pride he felt for his family and his country. Six-year-old Lily running up to hug me after reading her poem at the art gallery. Recording C-Lou's freestyle as he took over the cypher. Janessa crying as she told me that I was her diary and that I have helped her through the hardest year of her life. Ashley giggling as she reads her poem while I beatbox.

I began to lose my way in the process of trading poems for dollars. The teaching conditions led to burn-out. Increasingly, those sacred moment with that young person on that day, became rife with stress and friction about some looming contract between me and some institution many miles away. Then, there was what I took home: the poems to edit for student anthologies, the stories, the humor and the laughter, the wisdom and the pain. In the midst of those moments of being an artist, cultural worker, mentor, and friend, was a monetary amount calculated and counted by the hour.

With money unstable, life felt uncertain. It was difficult to fall asleep at night. I gritted my teeth while I slept, and clenched them during the day. Anxiety festered in my gut, and in the bad choices I made. I did not allow myself the time to experience the pain in my feet and in my knees from working too much. I moved faster during the day to ignore it, and self-medicated in the evenings to numb it. I became a bad habit magnet. My wife and I attempted to manage our financial conversations but they spilled over into every part of our lives. Everywhere we turned, we saw dollar signs. My body turned acidic from the bad food choices and as my blood vessels widened from the stress, acid pumped through my veins. Before long, I was experiencing heartburn and heartache, a phenomenon I had only previously associated with adults.

What frustrated me the most was not the students. It was the adults, the teachers, school administrators, the nonprofit managers circling around NYC's Black and Brown young geniuses looking to peck away at the carcasses that starve on the side of the road. I did not want to make enemies, so I put on the mask. Will teach for food. Call me anytime. I am available. Anything to keep me connected to the work. When my Saturday class was cancelled, I wrote the nonprofit manager an email to protest and present the irony of the situation:

> Dear nonprofit manager,
>
> Why is it that the Teaching Artist is the only person who will not get paid. All of the staff at the school will still get paid. All of the staff at the nonprofit will still get paid. All of the building facilities staff will get paid. The staff at the foundation that provided the funding will get paid. The only person who gets paid, weather-permitting, is the one individual who actually does the work of teaching the children which everyone else's salaries are dependent upon.

The answer was, "No." Yes, "we hear your pain." Yes, "we are compassionate to your situation," and still, "No." You know what that means? I don't get paid. Though I have committed a decade to working with young people as a TA, my economic relationship was as contract labor, waiting outside the gates for the chance of work for the day.

It was during the 2011–2012 school year that I began to whisper to myself during the frigid walks from subway to subway, school site to school site, "This is my last year of teaching." It was my seventh year as an educator, and I was working in two different schools without contracts. In both cases, school administrators called upon my services to work with their young people, but had no clarity about what monetary compensation they would be able to provide. I used several strategies from my years as an independent contractor to negotiate the

terms of our arrangement. Still, after I had already started to work with their students, the two organizations were unresponsive to my appeals to reach an agreement. Understandably, this lack of financial security put a tremendous stress on me and my family. Still, I knew I could not let it negatively impact my work with the young people. So, I did the work.

As the year progressed, I proclaimed: this is my last year of teaching in unsustainable work conditions. No more low pay and inconsistent schedules. No more showing up for classes that were cancelled, and everyone forgot to tell me. No more being taken for granted. Without any other potential sources of income, I felt trapped in the TA grind. Still, I was committed to visioning my life after teaching. Hence, this autoethnographic study has been, indeed, a step toward visioning my life in a new way.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 1986, Greene wrote, “There is little sense of agency, even among the brightly successful; there is little capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 429). This is no longer true! Practitioners from spoken word and hip-hop communities embody a fierce urgency and are actively disturbing and imagining a new world. My goal for this study was to share particular insights into the processes and outcomes I encountered while using spoken word and hip-hop as a liberatory approach in urban public school classrooms. During my pedagogical formation, I witnessed agency in the form of hundreds of students and educators. It was through an autoethnographic approach that I was able to tell the stories from five classroom experiences to provides rich data for critical analysis.

If I was checking a box on a list, I would check “Students experienced positive outcomes in multiple educational contexts.” Check. “Students participated and were able to engage in co-constructive experiences where their voices were at the center.” Check. I admit, when I set out to conduct this self-study, I hoped the stories I told would provide evidence for me to make these assertions. Look at the work I did with my students. See?! It has value. It is important! It works! Findings from a study of self, however, cannot be fully anticipated. It was only through conducting this research that I gained a greater appreciation of how long I was committed to an emancipatory practice. Even though economic instability kept me on the move, I archived extensive files from my classes for the purpose of retelling these specific stories.

What I did not fully anticipate was the depth of sorrow I would also find. There is real heartbreak here. Liberatory work is undervalued, and I, as a person doing this work, experienced profound financial and emotional challenges. It is generally assumed that individuals laboring in

the margins of any field find ways to negotiate a lack of resources and investment. What is less understood and appreciated is that engaging in liberatory work also meant dreams unfulfilled.

Sadly, I can no longer count the number of times I have witnessed children's love of learning stifled out in the same institutions of education that are supposed to provide them with a safe space. I do not despair though. Even after a decade of teaching at some of New York City's most under-resourced schools, my heart is still filled with hope. I know first-hand that spoken word and hip-hop fills students with an exuberance for education which they desperately yearn for. My pride is now grounded in the knowledge that these claims were generated through years of enacting the principles of critical pedagogy in public classrooms.

I recognize that my findings are unique to my experiences. The purpose of this study was never to generalize specific methods, but rather, to amplify the impact that I, and other TAs had while working in the margins of the field of education. My findings are organized into four stages in my journey of pedagogical formation. First, is "The People's Poet," a discussion about what I brought to the classroom. My work as an artist and cultural worker was how I developed the ideas and critiques about U.S. society that I brought into the classroom. The second part is "Move the Class," where I discuss my pedagogical formation by looking at my classroom practices. I discuss hip-hop as a pedagogical tool, and spoken word as embodying critical pedagogy's principles. The third is "Into Existence," where I discuss the tensions of enacting a critical practice within the field of arts education. And finally, the fourth is my vision of a Maroon Poets Society, inspired by my TA stories of love, resistance, and persistence.

One of the critiques of critical pedagogy is that it is only about politics, and that its theoretical ambitions have no practical value in the classroom (Darder et al., 2009). Within the framework of critical pedagogy, such critics are understood as part of a larger hegemonic

structure, which seek to devalue and discredit liberatory practices (Darder et al., 2009). These are the stories that, I believe, are most fundamentally important, yet most marginalized in educational discourse. I know that my experiences are not unique. I follow in a long tradition of under-valued educators who labor on behalf of liberatory educational practices. By leaning on these critical principles to frame the theories and practices found in my stories, I am able to amplify my own voice and honor my humanity and that of my students.

The People's Poet

With my right hand open, I pound my chest two times to simulate the rhythm of a heartbeat. Boom-Boom. Before offering my words, I offer my heart. Boom-Boom. Boom-Boom. Boom-Boom. Boom-Boom. After four measures of four beats each I begin Verse 1:

Projects and shopping malls

Legitimize genocide by law

The object is to own our souls

video game, remote control

True Lies on the TV screen

Democracy, what does that mean?

Deer Park, what's in the water?

Fatten us up, prepare for the slaughter.

What's happening cuz? Is we ready for war?

We own the whole Earth. How could we ever be poor?

Got everything we want. Only thing we want is more.

Why dying up in these wars. What is we fighting for?

Stop trying to sell us these American Dreams.

We don't want 'em. We just wanna be free.

We just wanna be free, wanna be free.

This poem is filled with questions. Questions meant to provoke. Questions without answers. Questions with the answers already in them. A verse can bring a classroom to life. Quickly, students lean into the rhythm, bodies bop and sway, and the movement becomes contagious. Heads swivel. Shoulders and backs bounce to the rhythm of the words. A student bangs their knuckles on their desk to make a beat. Faces twist from interest to intrigue. Spoken word performance powerfully enacts a pedagogy of the body (Darder, 2009).

A couple of years into my vocation as a spoken word artist, I started using the moniker, "The People's Poet." Multiple elder activists used this phrase to introduce me before performances. Then I started using it myself. Eventually, I incorporated this nickname into my logo, a silhouette mid performance, "Kahlil Almustafa/The People's Poet" (see Figure 13). I took pride in announcing my poetic practice as a public one. I used this symbol to shape and direct my aesthetic mission. I used this image to communicate that my poetry was for the benefit of people, especially for those whose voices are marginalized and excluded. Claiming this title grounded me in a universally human, and longstanding poetic tradition. My poetry incorporated common language, references, descriptions and observations. I wrote about the impact that culture, politics, and economics has on people and communities. I asked provocative questions about public issues. As The People's Poet, serving people was the mandate which drove my aesthetic formation. The purpose of my poetry was to challenge the dominant, oppressive structures within U.S. society. This critical artistic practice transferred readily into my classrooms.

Figure 13. Kahlil Almustafa/The People's Poet logo designed by Michael Cordero for 1 Soul MVMT.

Cultural Worker

Individuals within these educational institutions turned to me to provide their young people with practices that they knew were both essential to their students, and missing from their schooling experiences. My work as a cultural worker led directly into and shaped my work as an educator. The spoken word and hip-hop communities that I was an active participant in provided me with a bridge into emancipatory educational work.

This loosely networked band of critical arts educators provided me with a community to understand and cultivate my own artistic and pedagogical practices. Woven into my story is the emergence of a larger movement of educators using hip-hop and spoken word as emancipatory educational tools. "The progressive educator rejects the dominant values imposed on the school because he or she has a different dream, because he or she wants to transform the status quo" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 134). We understand that the ability to communicate meaning is

infinitely more valuable than knowing where to put a comma. Today, there is a growing movement of educators turning to spoken word and hip-hop to address young people's needs.

Being a cultural worker was my best approach to professional development, and isolated working conditions. As a TA, I received minimal trainings. Often, my labor was unpaid and disconnected from institutional access and support. Yet, throughout my stories are instances of personal connections with practitioners and educational leaders. As an artist, you have to work collaboratively. Like artists, educators "have to work collaboratively in order to succeed in integrating the cultural elements produced by the subordinate students in their educational process" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 134). This is an essential skill that can only be gained through practice. You have to be able to receive critical feedback from your peers. It was my relationships with other cultural workers engaged in similar work that sustained me.

The critical texts I read as a cultural worker were essential to my work as an educator. It was through a study of self through poetry and reflections, combined with a study of culture, history, society, and politics that I conducted largely outside of traditional schools which prepared me for work as an educator. When I entered my classrooms, I brought with me a specific perspective on education, that of an African American male, and as the descendant of enslaved Africans. When I developed a lesson plan, or a curriculum map, or a project plan, it was informed through a study of my experiences, and those of my familial and historical ancestors.

In my independent study, I also read a wide span of voices of Black women: poets, story-tellers, and intellectuals. It was only because I conducted a study of Black feminism and Womanism, and supported and engaged with the critical voices of my female colleagues, that I was prepared to create classroom environments where my female students felt safe to express themselves. The majority of the positive experience in my stories are from girls. This would have

not been possible without years of engaging in dialogue and study about the unique perspectives, histories, and issues of women and girls.

It was only through years of critically engaging with the problems which stem from dominant U.S. society that I continued to believe that "new possibilities for humanizing power relations can emerge" (Darder, 2018, p. 138). My liberatory mindset was cultivated through relationships, study, and practice. The numerous years I labored as a cultural worker forged my belief in the tremendous capacity for resistance which sustained my teaching practice.

Move the Class: My Pedagogical Formation

Motivation for Teaching

This may come as a surprise to some, but the overwhelming majority of urban youth I encountered, including my younger self, understand that schools work against us. It was my experiences attending NYC public schools that motivated me as an educator. The poem I wrote to Courtney summed up my intentions:

> because when i look at your faces, all i see is me hating high school life, wishing i could just be . . . i want to be the teacher for you that never was there for me . . . It is not that i am nice . . . It is just that i have some idea of what you may be going through, i too survived the New York City Public School System, and the teen-aged battlefield of having to be cool . . . i am not nice, this is all for me, . . . seriously . . . you are all part of an experiment i am doing called "yes, I believe my young sisters and brothers who grew up in the ghettos of New York City are truly special human beings and got something important to say, and only when they speak can the world truly change!

Throughout my journey, I exhibited a consistent drive to use poetry to engage urban youth as my life's work. My implicit goal was to provide the type of educational experiences I found lacking throughout my public school journey.

As a former public school student, I knew the frustrations from enduring mostly white, teachers using standardized, Eurocentric curriculum to prepare me for culturally biased tests. Year after year, an endless cycle of dead White men, ghosts haunting us from outdated textbooks which we tagged and etched our names into, graves for lost days. The issues and topics we discussed in classrooms were "often alien to the realities of students from oppressed communities" (Darder, 2018, p. 154) and, thus, had little consequence or meaning to our lives. My peers and I mumbled through the Pledge of Allegiance each morning before wandering from class to class, worksheet to worksheet, test to test, without ever really connecting to the content, to the processes of learning, to our peers, or to the majority of the adults. Though I entered primary school eager and passionate about learning, I was disengaged by my sophomore year, and dropped out 6 months before graduating.

My educational approach was motivated by the questions I asked myself as a youth. Why did I only have four African American teachers in more than 12 years of schooling? Why these books never be about my people? Why do schools lack funding for music, art, social workers, guidance counselors, teaching assistants, community organizers, and cultural programming? Why is educational equity in urban neighborhoods in NYC and throughout the country seemingly impossible to attain?

The Teacher and the Emcee

Hip-hop culture had me believe that my story was important. Not only did my stories have value, but my words could play a variety of roles, as testimony, ceremony, currency,

evidence, and weapon. So, I wrote my stories down incessantly, even when there were no audiences to listen. I approached my workshop sessions as if they were part of a sacred ceremony. As a spoken word artist who was frequenting classrooms and using hip-hop as a subject, I felt pressure to actually write in the style. During a 2-week residency in Plymouth, New Hampshire, of all places, I wrote a verse alongside one of my students. He was known throughout the school for his lyrical, and we surprised his peers with a hip-hop performance during the culminating show:

I'm a professional, scholar and intellectual.

Why act cool when you can be presidential?

Why act fool when you can be exceptional?

Make your own rules. Never do what the rest'll do.

Hip-Hop is my religion, and this mic is my confessional.

Headphones, stereo pews, to get my message through.

The teacher and the emcee have a lot in common. The crowd listens with their whole bodies; so when you Call, you must come correct, or you will get no Response. There must be knowledge in what you say, and style in how you say it. Your set list must be well-planned but you must also be able to improvise. School administrators, parents and students will, at times, question your legitimacy and/or authority and you must know how to freestyle on the spot. Own your square. All eyes are on you.

The definition of the hip-hop educator is still evolving, still in the process of asking itself what it intends to be. Hip-hop educators know the dangers of defining, plus we are too busy, in classrooms and community spaces, doing the necessary and difficult work. The hip-hop educator

is a roots worker, going beyond artificial walls and borders; we are organic intellectuals, cross-pollinating possibilities to transform collective realities, ya dig!?

Let me break it down. Embedded within the phenomenon of hip-hop are all of the pedagogical components of building knowledge—a.k.a. making-meaning, the foundation of education: the sacredness of the cypher, the call-and-response interplay between the community and the individual, the combined focus on style, meaning, and form, the dual importance of originality and sampling, innovation, and honoring legacy. Hip-hop as imagined community provides a mythopoetic context for a range of artistic and political expression. As a social movement, "hip-hop enables its participants to imagine themselves as part of a larger community; thus, it produces a sense of collective identity and agency" (Watkins, 2004 p. 566). Hip-hop has provided a platform for generations of young people, with the spectrum of musical and cultural influences representing every tribe in the global village.

The Open Mic

It was 3 years into my work as a performance poet when I taught my first class. My context as a critical artist greatly informed and readily transferred into enacting a liberatory context in my classrooms. Before I could articulate the dimensions of my practice in academic language, my approach actively incorporated the components of cultural pedagogy.

The open mic is a powerful tool for developing a dialectical classroom. "Every human has a poem to write, a compulsion to contemplate out loud, an urge to dig out that ore of confusion locked up inside" (Rivera, 2002, p. 1). In the spoken word workshop, students participate as "free thinkers and actors within their world, with an eye toward the development of a critical thought" (Darder, 2018, p. 157). Students are encouraged to read relevant texts while considering their own lived experiences. This process of individual and collective reflection

embodies Freire's (1970) pedagogy in which students generate meaningful themes to name their world, and consider the impact of our collective perceptions on our social conditions.

The open mic has transformative value as a practice in the classroom. Critical scholars have asserted that freedom "must be achieved through dialectical engagements with the social and economic obstacles we find standing in our way (Greene, 1986, p. 441). At the open mic, each voice is listened to equally. The dialectical nature of critical pedagogy enables the educational researcher to see the school as a "cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation" (McLaren, 2003, p. 70).

My poetic approach reflected my pedagogical approach. I incorporated several elements that were important to me as an artist into my educational approach. I used a similar approach with my students as I did with readers and listeners, staying as grounded as possible in a co-constructive relationship. My artistic practice led me to be flexible as a teacher. I transferred the detailed attention and focus I used to prepare for performances and developing projects to creating lesson plans and curriculums. A range of artistic tools, such as solitude, vulnerability, silence, and adaptability, provided intangible value in my facilitation skills and approaches.

Students shared traumatic memories, asked profound questions, and declared their visions for a new world. When Shaharia shared a personal reflection of a painful memory, her classmates listened with care and compassion. Her list of questions resonated with me as I concluded this study:

When will a rainbow color the rain in my heart?

When will I reach the end of this tunnel?

When will this memory go away?

WHEN?

While my student's rainbow-hearted visions remain in some utopic future, I remain hopeful that the practices and experiences we shared were truly healing. My students' poetry was medicine for me. Their "poems address our freedom; they call on us to move beyond where we are, to break from submergence, to transform" (Greene, 1986, p. 429).

Words Become Worlds

"Words become worlds. Does anyone know what I mean when I say that?" From my first day working with students, I emphasized the constructive power of language. "If you are a child of Hip-Hop, the simple truth is that in the beginning was the word, and the **word** was **spoken** in body language" (Joseph, 2006, p. 12).

Language should never be understood as a mere tool of communication. Language is packed with ideology, and for this reason it has to be given prominence in any radical pedagogy that proposes to provide space for students' emancipation" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 135). Words are culture, perception, philosophy, perception and values. Words can be used to indoctrinate and dehumanize. Words can also be used to heal and to empower (see Figure 14).

So much of the words we use are part of a dead language. Language is limited. There can never be enough words to explain all of life's infinite meanings. Metaphor, on the other hand, does not assume to be capable of definitively capturing some truth. It only announces its ambitions to shine a light on meaning. The language of poetry is alive.

"Schools should never impose absolute certainties on students" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 72). In my classrooms, I used dialogue about the power of language to invite students into the recognition that, since words are used to construct knowledge, then all knowledge must be co-constructed. I know that this truth-table liberated me. Critical educators understand that

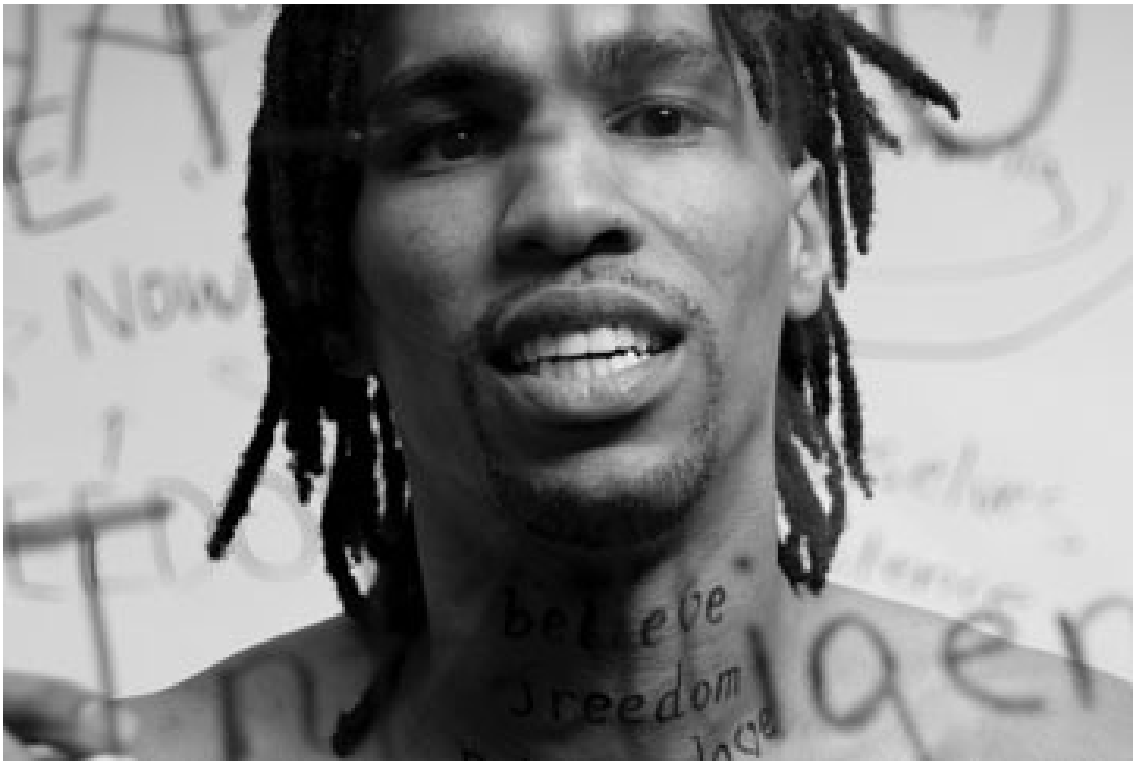


Figure 14. Words everywhere photo shoot for *Plateau Magazine* in 2007. Photo taken by Cam.

knowledge needs to be recognized as a "social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations" (McLaren, 2003, p. 72).

Spoken word provided me with this context for collaborative teaching and learning. This was missing in the standard curriculums in the public schools I taught. The standard knowledge young people receive in public schools, is "never neutral or objective but ordered and structured in particular ways; its emphases and exclusions partake a silent logic" (McLaren, 2003, p. 72). During my 10 years in various educational settings, I spent time considering the political implications behind the types of knowledge that is privileged in schools.

To prepare young people to read we must first prepare them to read their world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). According to Freire and Macedo (1987):

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (p. 51)

We expect our young people to learn the English language when we, as adults, even us educators, have proven to be uncritical about the ways language strips people of their dignity.

"Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge" (Morrison, 1993, para 13). Some words are themselves the problem. Take the word "orphan." This word does not exist in all languages because not all cultures have the concept that there could be a child who belongs to no one. Even if a child has no known mother or father, they belong to the community, and all adults bear responsibility. The word "poverty" is an equally nefarious word. The dictionary defines poverty as "the lack of food, shelter, money and clothing that occurs when people cannot satisfy their basic needs." It is a noun, which if we can remember from elementary school, is a person, place or thing. Not having access to basic needs cannot logically be a "thing." Except, we made it a thing.

The Earth provides all of the necessities for sustaining life. Embedded in the human design is the impetus to take care of oneself and one's family. Human beings have made sustainable communities across every climate on Earth—from arctic, snow-covered mountains, to wet, tropical rain forests, to dry, dessert plains. What prevents people from being able to

sustain themselves are active forces: governments removing people from their lands, corporations privatizing natural resources, state-sanctioned and rogue militias demolishing communities through violence and forced migrations. If not for the actions of some humans separating others from the Earth's abundant resources, there would be no such thing as poverty. There is only impoverishment. Each time we casually use the word, "poverty," as a noun to refer to some condition, we become complicit in the actions that keep people from fulfilling their basic needs. How can we teach young people to use their words when educators are unaware of the co-constructive elements of language itself.

According to Yang (2006), "Through reading the world, young people begin to meaningfully develop strategies for pursuing social justice, and take increasingly public roles in advocating, organizing, educating, and being educated by our communities in an effort to create positive social change" (p. 1). In essence, they become what Gramsci (1971) termed "organic intellectuals" (p. 131).

Unlearn

In 2006, as I was preparing to release my debut album, *CounterIntelligence*, my more business-minded associates suggested that I design a T-shirt to promote my CD. I knew immediately what I wanted it to be, the word "Unlearn" in a graffiti-inspired font followed by a period. That's it. Unlearn (see Figure 15).

Whenever I entered into classrooms I always considered the messages that I was sending, from committing to being consistent and on time and sincerely apologizing when I fell short, to my interactions with their classroom teachers and administrators. So, I always considered the messages printed on the T-shirts I wore to each session. I considered myself walking pedagogy.

Figure 15. Wearing "Unlearn" T-shirt to promote *CounterIntelligence* CD in 2006.

So, when a young person asked me is "Rob the Ruling Class," my emcee name, we shared a chuckle, and I steered the conversation to the politics of our economic conditions.

Hip-hop as inherently counter cultural. "Within hip hop youth have fought to create productive spaces to counter the dominant discourses deployed to demonize and discipline them" (Kelley 1997, p. 566). Disrupting the dominant narrative was at the core of my work as a critical arts educator. From the clothing I wore to the lessons I developed and the texts I brought into classrooms. For example, an impromptu lesson about the dehumanizing connotative meanings behind the word "Hobo" challenged my honors students to consider the humanity of people who

are homeless. This dialogue provided a space for young people to disrupt their unconsidered notions about class consciousness. The students went from laughing at "hobos" to writing poems about their own social status and material conditions.

Making the Road

My teaching practice informed, then grounded, and then expanded my artistic practice. Freire's discussion about the pitfalls of verbalism and activism sparked me to deepen my practice as an educator. I witnessed the pitfalls of verbalism while traveling the spoken word circuits, both locally in NYC and throughout much of the country. I was often frustrated with all of the talking without doing. Much of the activism I encountered also seemed in danger of this same tragic flaws, with panel discussion after panel discussion culminating with a collective sigh of "What's Gonna Change?" I also experienced the activist circles I engaged in as veering toward doing without critical dialogue, interaction, and reflection.

Freire (1970) provided me with a compass and a blueprint. I engaged strategically in ongoing reflection, dialogue, and action. In my journals, I found in-depth descriptions of lesson plans, explicating activities with step-by-step directions outlining me and my co-teacher's roles and responsibilities, including details about how much time each activity would take down to the minute for each step. In the end, these reflective practices helped me to develop the integrated, balanced, and embodied praxis necessary to be successful as a liberatory educator (see Figure 16).

My experiences working with youth and educators constituted my teacher training program. Professional developments were often unhelpful and detached from what was happening in my classrooms. However, the positive learning from these activities were long-lasting. There were numerous times when a single experience in a professional development

Figure 16. Posing as Huey P. Newton in front of the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City in 2006. Photo by Betty Bastidas.

would lead to a profound shift in my practice, even if it was mandatory and unpaid wealth of knowledge amongst the practitioners in the field doing this work. Still, my work in the classroom was my best form of professional development.

Into Existence: Working on the Margins of the Field of Arts Education

There were overarching forces that perpetuated cycles of oppression for me as a TA. Throughout my years as a practitioner, I encountered countless individual and cumulative experiences, which presented barriers and reinforced my marginal status within the field of arts education. Above, all my major finding is that financial instability inspires a range of painful emotions, especially sadness, and rage. Three specific occurrences stand out which epitomize the frustrations with my position, and my insistence on the need for humanizing work conditions. In the end, critical education is necessary to interrupt and create the cultural shifts necessary to impact these economic and social realities.

Steal Your Soul

Seven is the number for divinity. Purple is the color of royalty. On page seven of the annual report, there is Me, wearing my purple shirt. It is the same purple shirt I wore the day that asked the boss for a raise. I knew him from way back. We've worked together. I have sat at a bar and had drinks with him. He was wearing a purple shirt that day too, so I thought it was the perfect day to ask for a raise. I did not get the raise, but on page seven, there's a photograph of me.

Looking up from page three is the executive director, who looks more like a stockbroker than the leader of an organization that provides arts education to NYC's urban youth. In his address, he brags about being "New York City's largest arts education organizations." The four/five-page spread is another assault of numbers and keywords. On page six is a demographic breakdown of their student population. There I am, on page seven, in my purple and white checkered shirt, with a purple paisley tie. Purple is the color of royalty.

Next to the photo are the words "Teaching Artists" with text about what they do beneath. Our staff "bring a combination of professional arts and education experience to the classroom. Working with in-school teachers, they infuse the arts into traditional subject matter classes, like math, reading, and science, and bring in-school themes into after-school studios." Though my image is used, my name is not listed. It makes me think of a story I heard about Native Americans when the camera was first invented. Supposedly, they did not trust having their photographs taken, and often refused. They believed that it was a way to steal a person's soul and was considered a disrespect to the spiritual world (Marr, 1996).

I am left with some questions for my educational partners. If I am one of their 90 TAs, combining "professional arts" and "education experience," then why not just put me on staff? If you want me well enough to do the job, then where is my health insurance? Where is the investment to me as a professional? Did you not have the money? Could you have taken it out of the $600,000 that you deposited into the bank during the fiscal year? Did the executive director need to take home a $180,000 salary!? Where is the counseling so I can process all of the trauma that flows from my students' poetry into my body, and into my gut?

An Open Letter

I wrote an "open letter" requesting that the executive director of one of the organizations I worked at resign. While I laid out sound reasoning to explain why I was using a public format to explain why he was not right for his position, I was really just trying to call him out because of my frustration with my own unstable work conditions. Since he and the organization used hip-hop in the classroom, I referenced hip-hop's qualities as being dialogical and dialectical, with artists battling one another throughout the culture's history. So, since, you use hip-hop, you must abide by its rules! It was mean-spirited, but I meant it. He needed to step down, and still does.

I never sent the letter. I did write an outline, and then a rough first draft. Both the outline and the first draft lacked any actual reasoning, but it did point to what was at stake. These arts education organizations are "responsible for shaping the culture of youth expression and meaning-making at the heart of the empire in a post-September 11th world." I went on to state that while these organizations have the mandates of their respective Boards, that there is a higher mandate, a liberatory mandate, found in the constructive components of the histories and practices of the art forms that are being used in classrooms.

In my opinion, his experiences as a White male who was not from NYC rendered him incapable of fulfilling the mandate which the organization needed to grow. In the outline, I made sure to include that this did not mean that I thought that he was racist. Through our work throughout the years, I did not personally experience him as someone who would expresses overt racial prejudice. I acknowledged him for playing a pivotal role in the organization's growth. I stated, directly, that for these arts education organizations to "grow the way our communities need them to grow, it must take a shift in another direction which you cannot take it in."

To achieve this mandate, I laid out two specific priorities. One, for these organizations to be bridges to the elder cultural workers in these art forms who come from the communities where these schools are located, and two, for the organization to develop their youth into practitioners who would return to their communities to spread these practices.

Emotional and Financial Costs of Marginal Labor

Throughout my professional career, my financial life was unstable (see Figure 17). When I returned from the hospital from London, 30 pounds lighter, with foot long scars tracing my left rib cage and abdomen, my task was to prove evidence of my economic value for a legal claim I was filing against the driver's insurance company. There was one simple question:

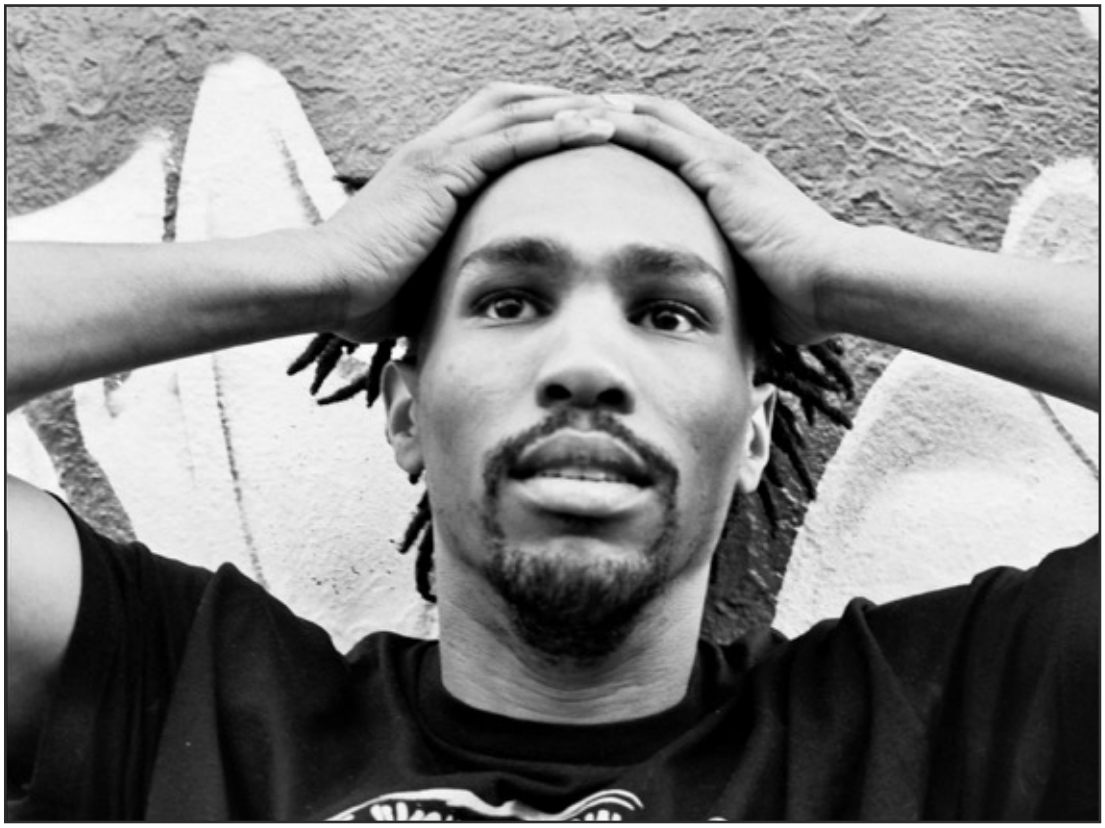


Figure 17. Close-up in front of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City in 2006. Photo by Betty Bastidas.

approximately, how much money do I make weekly/monthly on average, and I would be paid this every week for the time that it took for me to recover. As a subaltern artist, I could not prove my financial worth.

Life as a TA can feel like being a deadbeat dad. After all of these faces and classrooms, I am left asking myself similar questions to those who used their bodies to represent the 99%. What was it all for? What did my students learn? What did I learn? How did these educational experiences shape these young people's lives? I have more questions than answers which is usually the best way to know that learning happened.

Throughout my teaching experiences, my relationships with my students were the most important. My students were my primary teacher. I did not need some department administrator

to observe my class to tell me how to improve. My students regularly assessed me and my teaching approach. My insistence on co-creative classrooms provided a context for my students to shape their own learning.

McLaren (2003) argued that "the major drama of resistance in schools is an effort on the part of students to bring their street-corner culture into the classroom" (p. 91). For my students, this act of resistance was driven by the desire "to fight against the monitoring of passion and desire" (McLaren, 2003, p. 91). I shared their resistance to traditional schooling, and conspired with them to co-create liberatory approaches.

My hope is that these educational experiences meant as much to my students as they did for me. At some point, I lost touch with my students. By the later years of my career, I was working in so many different educational spaces, attempting to monetize my passion to work with young people that I had actually lost the ability to relate deeply to the young people I worked with.

After all of these years working with so many children, and I have none of my own. This is partially because my wife and I lacked the stability, and therefore the financial confidence necessary to grow our own family. I have apologized to my wife for not living a stable economic life on more than one occasion. There are times when I wonder if this sacrifice was too great.

Walked for many moons. Seen so many suns.

Learned from many daughters. Built with many sons.

Seen a lot of sons die too, that's true.

Scars on body tell stories like tattoos.

This one is from the crash.

I lay awake at night picking at these scabs.

So these scars never heal like memories from my past.

All the pain that I feel preparing me for these tasks.

Will this suffering last?

The answer is my ancestors. I just had to ask

for the blessings and the lessons in the stresses of the challenges.

Freedom is a practice that requires many calendars.

They lied. They said I was a savage kid.

I survived to defy the law of the averages.

Saw them white lights, and yeah, I choose to live.

Recognize the road to heaven paved by what the body did.

Maroon Poets Society: A Visionary Context for Liberatory Education

As a TA, I worked in multiple contexts, each with their own organizational mission and rules, leaving me without a unified approach for my work as an educator. After about 7 years of teaching I developed a code for myself and other poet-educators that articulates the guidelines of my own critical practice. Maroon Poets Society is the mythopoetic context that guides my liberatory approach. Within this context, my roles and responsibilities are outlined and directed to provide an emancipatory context for education. This imagined society has real people living in it. For me, it includes my students, cadres of practitioners, and millions worldwide who participate in spoken word and hip-hop as part of an overall objective of achieving human liberation.

A Maroon Poet is someone who has escaped some form of oppression, whether self-inflicted or from outside forces. After escaping, a Maroon's dual role is to create community

while also creating pathways for others to be liberated. There are seven characteristics that identify Maroon Poets:

1. A Maroon Poet lives their life as if it were a poem.
2. A Maroon Poet seeks truth.
3. A Maroon Poet's primary function is to create and develop "liberated zones."
4. A Maroon Poet studies life and liberation.
5. A Maroon Poet respects different forms of expression, language, and currency.
6. A Maroon Poet honors legacy.
7. A Maroon Poet knows the validity of dreams and of dreaming.

A Maroon Poet does not just write poetry, but lives their life as if it were a poem. They do not write poetry, poetry writes them. Poetry is their life practice.

For us, poetry is medicine, passport, psalm, prayer, ritual, song, spell, story, theory, therapy, tradition. Poetry is living, and we are committed to living. Being a Maroon Poet is a praxis for living which requires ongoing and constant question-posing, interaction, and reflection. A Maroon Poet is a seeker of truth. This mission to seek truth makes the Maroon Poet a listener of the world both internal and external, of sound and of silence. Finding power in this mission to seek truth allows the Maroon Poet to be vulnerable. The Maroon Poet values the journey toward truth with the understanding that it is a process without end.

Maroon Poets understand the danger of escaping and do not accept false forms of escape. A Maroon Poet understands that escaping is not enough, and knows their primary function is to create and develop "liberated zones." A liberated zone is a community that intentionally practices cooperation, creativity, and love. People in liberated zones strive to live in partnership with each other and with the universe. They are life-affirming and earth-centric. Liberated zones

provide a counter-hegemonic space that nurtures the human potential and capacity for resistance. A liberated zone is a place where both communal and individual expression is valued and seen as a call and response shaping one another. Liberated zones are places where the individual can remain their whole selves.

A Maroon Poet is committed to liberation. A Maroon Poet is not only committed to their own liberation but to everyone's. This causes the Maroon Poet to diligently study liberation and develop their skills in the service of the liberation of others. The Maroon Poet's ultimate mission is to develop conditions for the empowerment of culturally and economically marginalized people. This requires a critical analysis of the theories and practices that perpetuate undemocratic life. A Maroon Poet develops an analysis of the root causes preventing liberation and expertise of possible escape routes. A Maroon Poet strives to be a skilled traveler and storyteller to develop a liberatory culture which fosters voice, participation, and action.

A Maroon Poet respects different forms of expression, language, and currency. A Maroon Poet is dialectical, engaging the world through a relational, interconnected lens with complexity and fullness. The Maroon Poet's commitment to the liberation of individuals and of humanity is reflected in their respect of different expressions of identity, sexuality, and language. The Maroon Poet respects the power within these expressions as they strive toward liberation. The Maroon Poet does not believe in a fixed world, serving itself, but rather a multilingual, multi-ethnic, multinational world, working in co-creation toward individual and collective liberation.

A Maroon Poet honors legacy. A Maroon Poet knows the value of those who came before and does not see it as separate from what is here in the present. In so doing, the Maroon Poet understands that knowledge is created within a historical context and recognizes the possibilities for change which spring from history's lessons. A Maroon Poets studies legacy, taking what they

can immediately use while understanding there may be value they cannot understand. A Maroon Poet calls on this legacy with intent and pays homage to those who came before them through their actions.

A Maroon Poet knows the validity of dreams and of dreaming. A Maroon Poet knows that liberation cannot be achieved within a vision, a way forward, a dream destination. A Maroon Poet knows that hope can only exist in the presence of dreaming, and knows that hope is necessary toward liberation. A Maroon Poet nurtures and honors dreams, and dreaming.

Recommendations

The following speak to two recommendation discussions, rooted in the essence of this autoethnographic study of my residencies as a TA. The first recommendation "The Children Are Fine," is more of a general reminder to the field of arts education. The second recommendation is specifically for the teacher education programs to invest in TAs who are working to bring an emancipatory practice to their classroom and community efforts with young people.

Recommendations for the Field of Arts Education

The children are fine. When a member of the Maasai tribe greets a fellow member, they say, "Kasserian Ingera," which in Swahili means, "Are the children well?" The Maasai, known as fierce warriors who successfully resisted enslavers, place such a high value on the well-being of their children that it is reflected in their greeting with one another. Instead of constantly assessing their young, their children are their assessment. If life is good and peace and safety prevail, that tribe member, even if they do not have children of their own, will respond, "All the children are well."

After a decade teaching in NYC public schools, I can assure you that the children are well. Despite what test scores, graduation rates, and other statistical data points suggest, the

young people of NYC are exceptionally resilient, incredibly creative, keenly aware and remarkably intelligent. Young people value education and want to learn. It is us adults that concern me.

In the tribe of NYC, we have our tradition when it comes to checking in on the status of the children. Instead of being embedded into our greeting, we complain at checkout lines and at cocktail parties, "Budget cuts. Bad teachers. Bad parents. Too many tests. Something about class size. The students aren't motivated. Schools are failing. Blah. Blah. Blah and something about America falling behind." When did we give up on the promise of public education? All is not well.

Don't get me wrong. I am intimately aware of the challenges plaguing our educational system. I know that young people are faced with "unwarranted inequities, shattered communities, unfulfilled lives" (Greene, 1986, p. 427). Teaching at more than 100 schools and after school programs has made me profoundly connected to the plight of young people. I have lost contracts because of budget cuts to art programs. I have overheard the raw, naked contempt some teachers express for their students in teacher lounges. I have listened to young people's poems and stories about neglectful, abusive parents. "We expect kids to adjust to the schools and if they can't, we say something is wrong with the child - instead of focusing on engagement and nurturing the love of learning in kids" (Noguera, 2016, p. 1). Regardless of my personal experiences and rose-colored glasses, I know that young people are the ones who are losing in the battle over education.

Still, I refuse to determine the well-being of our children or even of our public schools by statistics. Tests do not measure their humanity, their creativity, their sense of justice and self-worth. No exam can assess the many ways young people learn to overcome obstacles and build

healthy relationships. Formal assessments have little to no chance of evaluating whether a child will be successful in life. The children are well, or at least they are doing their best, considering the obstacles us adults put in front of them.

U.S. schools have always been structured to replicating social inequities. The education system plays a central role in preparing individuals for the world of alienated and stratified work relationships (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

> The predatory, competitive and personally destructive way in which intellectual achievement is rewarded in U.S. schools and colleges is a monument not to creative rationality, but to the need of a privileged class to justify an irrational, exploitative, and undemocratic system, (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 108)

Educational reform has failed as a solution because liberal reforms are born of the same mentality, and therefore replicate similar inequities.

Educational reform movements have "faltered through refusing to call into question the basic structure of property and power in economic life" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 14). We set young people up to fail and then blame them for the grades we give them. The measurements with which we judge students, teachers, and schools have less to do with how young people are doing and more to do with the ways adults value education. Children, B+. Adults, F. To be serious about educational reform, you have to believe in a pedagogy that addresses the gap between our current state of so-called evidence-based accountability education and our utopic vision of education as a liberating force.

In fact, schools are not the great equalizers that politicians claim them to be during election season. "The liberal goal of employing the education system as a corrective device for overcoming the 'inadequacies' of the economic system is vain indeed" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976,

p. 148). We need to create schools that liberate youth, and schools cannot do it alone. Transforming schools into liberatory spaces will take a movement of people that expands way beyond any one school, social movement or even generation.

Make space for hip-hop pedagogy in teacher education. Scholars advocate for using hip-hop pedagogy in teacher training programs. "Teachers can learn as much from Tupac and other rappers as they can from the literary canon of teacher education" (Irizarry, 2009, p. 491). According to these authors, hip-hop pedagogy should be used to bring Black male teachers into the teacher force and to ensure Black male students achieve comparably to their peers. For this shift to occur, educational leaders will need to face some difficult truths:

> Given the hierarchal structure of education, to make changes that would increase teachers of color would, in turn, reduce the number of teaching posts for white educators in the field—particularly for those with little experience or interest in further preparing themselves to teach working-class students of color in culturally relevant and meaningful ways. Instead, many of these teachers who object most loudly seem smitten by their own privileged belief in themselves as good teachers for *all* children. Thus, many of the teachers and educators from the dominant culture are hard pressed to accept that there might be very important cultural pedagogical knowledge that can best be provided by teachers who come from the same communities as the children themselves. (Darder, 2011, p. 84)

The time is now for teacher education programs to "capitalize on the relationship between Black men, urban youth, and Hip-Hop culture to attract Black male teachers and to captivate the minds of students from all cultures" (Bridges, 2011, p. 325).

In November 2013, a group of educators at the Hip-Hop Education Think Tank III who referred to themselves as the "Def" Committee, provided a framework for an alternative teacher credentialing process (see Appendix B). The pillars of this teaching certification program are

- Demonstration of Creativity: Demonstrated ability to aid students in self-curating a demonstration of creativity i.e., a gallery showing, live performance, reading or online portfolio.
- Social Justice – Human Rights: Capable of helping students identify a problem within their community, craft a plan to improve the situation, and analyze the results.
- History: Demonstrated ability to create and deliver three hours of lesson plans about phases in hip-hop's history.
- Entrepreneurship/Sustainability: Demonstrated ability to add an entrepreneurship component to a program that helps sustain the program, the students within it or an organization the students have agreed is deserving of their support.

The Committee's certification process is more rigorous than 8-week, training intensives, like Teach for America, which provides an alternative route to certification and entering the field.

The Committee's proposal includes suggested outcomes for students in the areas of subject matter, student learning, instructional strategies, and pedagogical environment, for both TAs (practitioners) and nonpractitioners (classroom teachers). Finally, they weigh the benefits of standardization against the potential of "silencing particular voices," welcoming suggestions and feedback, and ending with a list of four questions. A framework exists.

Students and educators across the United States are hungry for transformative pedagogy (see Figure 18). While hip-hop pedagogy has the capacity to address many of the needs espoused in the discourse about educational reform, educators who use this pedagogical framework

operate on the margins of the field of education. It is as important to put these educators in the center of the discourse about education as it is to putting the student in the center of the classroom. An alternative credentialing program could be a solution.

Recommendations for Teaching Artists

Cell phone studio. When the demands of being a TA continued to expand, I started to think about how to make my work sustainable. Even though being an artist was at the core of my practice, I noticed that making my own art was becoming less and less part of my daily life. One of the ways I kept my own creativity alive was by recording music and poetry into my cell phone as I traveled from site to site throughout the day. I would begin with some shaped sound which popped into my head, a melody, lyrics, a baseline, simulated percussive instruments. Then, I would improvise some vocals to accompany the music. Later, when I returned home, I would try to compose a song. I told myself that these songs were for an album directed to my two nephews, but they were really for me. It took only a couple of years before I had my own soundtrack to help me get through my day. "Practice. Do your best, and you can past any test. Never settle for average. Be Great. You can face any challenge. Be great."

I'm looking through my window.

The sun is bright. I'm gathering my info.

Just did a page of the Inner-view.

I got to thank the PurposeFinder. I booked the interview.

This is the new business model generation.

We got solutions and we running out of patience.

Made mistakes on our way to greatness.

While they slept we were meditating with the ancients.

Figure 18. Declaration of Hip-Hop Independence video shoot with students from various schools throughout New York City at New Design High School in New York City in 2008.

My practice is the way I pray.

Gratitude attitude each and every single day.

Stay one with the elements.

Review my plan close so I can manifest my excellence.

My recommendation is not for every TA to also open up a "cell phone studio" of their own, but to find practices which sustain their creativity, imagination, and spirit.

Carry the weight

Carry the weight like them Pullman Porters.

Boom-boom. Clap. Clap. Clap.

Carry the weight. Carry the weight.

One of the songs I created was called "Carry the Weight." It is a reminder to myself to take honor and pride in carrying the emotional and physical weight that comes with commitment to a liberatory practice.

> Revolutionary leaders must realize that their own conviction of the necessity for struggle was not given to them by anyone else-if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of totality of reflection and action. (Freire, 1970, p. 67)

Since my grandfather was a train conductor, I was curious about the Pullman Porters, the African American men who served wealthy train travelers a century before me. I took pride in being a part of a tradition of men who had carried the weight.

Said I've been too Black, and too strong, for too long. (Clap. Clap. Clap.)

Done built this country on my back. Who's wrong?

Who's right? Who put up a fight for whose rights?

Who did the work, and who make's the sacrifice?

Boom-boom. Clap. Clap. Clap.

Carry the weight. Carry the weight.

Future Research

This project focused on my story. This autoethnographic study was limited by my experiences, and perspectives. There are numerous TAs using spoken word and hip-hop to motivate public school students to engage in transformative artistic practices. Future research should focus on strategies to put TAs, and their work at the center of education. Teaching artists are the frontline of arts education. Since TAs generally conduct their work without institutional

affiliation with a single organization, it will be important for the field of arts education to listen to TAs stories. These stories should focus on classroom practice and TAs' pedagogical approach and formation. Hence, future research should honor and enliven the work of TAs rather than devalue our contributions or leave us stripped of our dignity as second-class professionals.

To continue developing findings from this project, I would like to examine these stories in the context of a teacher education program. Though I have more than a decade of experience, I do not have a teaching credential. Could this autoethnographic project be used to qualify me for a TA credential program? If not, what else would be required? An alternative credentialing process has the potential of tracking highly experienced TAs into leadership positions.

Personally, the future research I am most excited about is finishing these songs that I sketched out. Though I have verses which speak to a range of relevant concepts, I have not recorded a full-length hip-hop album, or even a single, complete song. I am looking forward to building on this raw material.

An Epilogue

If I grew up in a world where my love for education and vision to become an educator was nurtured, where would I be today? If the institutions of schooling I attended were more robustly funded, and filled with passionate educators willing to challenge and push me, today, would I be running my own school or small school district, writing educational policy, or teaching at my local university. I did not grow up in this parallel universe, and today, these are powers I can hardly imagine being granted.

When I walk amidst my fellow NYC straphangers, I often feel as if I am a ghost. I seem to be the only person who notices the brown-skinned women dragging baby strollers up the subway stairs, the men with tattered-skin-and-clothes selling stories for quarters, nickels, dimes,

"even a penny," the sounds and silences strangers make when toggling through their cell phones. Some say these dreadlocks dangling from my head are antennae tuned into emotional and spiritual frequencies.

Each day I travel a thousand lifetimes. This is the life of a empath living in the center of the empire. Sometimes I pull my black and white composition notebook from my bookbag and write. I am a poet searching the cracks and crevices of myself, placing words here and there, hoping they make sense. This is a practice I began when I was a 15-year-old Black boy living in the secluded world beneath my fitted cap. Words is the way I walk this world. WORD!

As I travel from site to site, from one community of poets to another, I rehearse at full volume on the subway platform, masked by the screams and roar of the passing trains.

This is the story that has never been told.

Ever since I was a youngin' about 15 years old

Walked the whole world trying to learn to be a man

I read the text of Malcolm X trying to formulate a plan

I live and work in New York, NY, known in hip-hop's reggae roots as Babylon. Some refer to this tiny island off the East Coast of the United States as the financial center of the U.S. empire. I call it the perception-making capital of the Western world. When I look up at the cranes carving concrete into the clouds I see the centralization of the meaning-making industries: publishing, advertising, marketing, research, media, universities, Wall Street—all scrambling for that over-depleted resource known as human attention. I too am battling for this scarce resource. My weapons are words. My urgent mission: to promote rebellious life-affirming intelligence through poetic expression.

Figure 19. Poetry in the streets. Holding a microphone looking toward the New York City streets in NYC in 2006. Photo by Betty Bastidas.

I am not alone in this mission (see Figure 19). I know there are more. We have huddled together at open mics, swapping stories. I find them in the pages of the books I read on my subway commutes. I learn from their shining faces in the classrooms I visit. For us, poetry is medicine, passport, portal, psalm, prayer, ritual, song, spell, story, theory, therapy, tradition. Poetry is living, and we are committed to living.

> It was a long dream to be sure, a fantastic, futuristic tale of a group of "Maroon poets" who transform a local struggle over police brutality into a full-fledged revolution rooted in love, creativity, and cooperation over the course of 700 years. In my dream, it took 30 generations of poets, surviving and creating in the "liberated zones" of North America's ghettos, to build a cooperative world without wages or money. (Kelley, 2002, p. 195)

I return to this quotation to provide a mythopoetic context for a liberatory educational model. There are communities using spoken word and hip-hop to cultivate “liberated zones” across the United States and around the globe. This cadre of practitioners are increasingly applying these practices and principles as educational tools with young people, planting seeds for many future generations to come. Within these cultural movements are the foundation for “a living pedagogy for the establishment of a permanently free society” (Darder, 2018, p. 157).

APPENDIX A
Martha Diaz Organizational Definition of Hip-Hop Education

Our Assumptions about Hip-Hop Education:

It is a layered approach founded on social justice education, embedded in hip-hop culture, relying on critical pedagogy and community activism to teach hip-hop as subject, hip-hop as pedagogy to teach another subject, and/or hip-hop as the warm-up hook or bridge to draw students into the class.

- It is not the answer to urban education problems, white supremacy, or other societal ills. It can be a tool for liberation when utilized in an affirming and exploratory way.
- It doesn't require or encourage educators to speak in Ebonics, slang or learn how to rap, dance, dress in a particular way, or otherwise appropriate a culture that is not their own.
- It does require you to merge your knowledge as a teacher with the knowledge of the students; creating a learning environment that is mutually beneficial.
- Social identities matter for both the teacher and the student. We all have a worldview that is informed by experiences within our various communities; it is not helpful to ignore this in the classroom.
- It requires that you have an understanding and belief that levels and types of oppression exist; such as institutional and cultural racism, classism, sexism, etc. and Hip-Hop both perpetuates and interrogates these ISMs. It does not exist in a vacuum. Hip-Hop was started by and for young people of color in urban areas; this should never be left out of the analysis, discussion or history-otherwise it is likely to replicate oppression.
- It is essential to your understanding as an educator that you respect and believe in Hip-Hop as a culture complete with agreed upon elements, as well as shared language, dress, style, history, values and unifying capabilities.
- Geography matters. Hip-Hop culture generally has local influences, heroes, stories, and values. Hip-Hop music in Israel will likely sound very different than Hip-Hop music in Atlanta, Georgia. Utilize your students' expertise to investigate how the narratives and culture are influenced by geographic locations.
- Hip-Hop has a short shelf life particularly with young people; as soon as you figure it out as a teacher, it has probably become dated. Accepting the short shelf life and the desire for youth culture to be counter-culture will serve you well. It is ok not to know what is "hot." It is more important that you are open to learning how to keep the students engaged.

Utilizing Hip-Hop music and culture to reach students is based on tenets of critical pedagogy and Popular education theories and practices. The methodology is transferable beyond Hip-Hop culture.

APPENDIX B
Hip-Hop Education Center Teaching Certificate Proposal

Hip-Hop Teaching Certification Proposal

Presented by the Teaching Certification Committee at the Hip Hop Education Center's Think Tank III.

I. Intro: Considerations on the Proposal

This Think Tank and similar events across the world are testament to the amazing work already being done in Hip-Hop education. Establishing a Hip-Hop education teaching certificate will further professionalize and affirm the validity of the field of Hip-Hop education by associating it with a revered institution and providing a central location for educators to learn together. Providing a permanent home within the academy for Hip-Hop education will provide an opportunity for individuals to advance their careers and the caliber of scholarship on Hip-Hop education.

While codifying and institutionalizing a discipline as revolutionary and creative as Hip-Hop education presents unique challenges and concerns, we believe the lack of a recognized credential results in a shortage of bargaining power for qualified educators as well as a missed opportunity for educators to share their scholarship and best practices in the field.

In our time together this committee generated ways to move forward with the creation of such a certificate program. We also found many issues with the existence of such a program. We expect to find more great ideas and criticisms today. We will welcome questions and comments at the end of this presentation.

II. Teacher Certification: Existing Routes to Certification

1. Traditional Teacher Certification Education Programs

Degree achieved through a school of education at a college or university.

Components

- B.A. or five years of college work required
- 30-75 semester hours in general education for a secondary certificate
- Certain number of hours in professional teacher-education courses and hours in a specific academic subject

Examples: Teachers College MEd

Limitations: Excludes talented teachers who have not studied education in college. Variation in hours and course content between university programs creates variation in skills and concepts mastered by certified teachers. Cost of program.

2. Teacher Residencies

To address the fact that half of all teachers in urban schools leave within five years, partnerships have been established between school districts and teacher colleges, in many cases increasing retention to 85 percent of teachers.

Components

- Full-year residencies (many culminate in a Masters degree) with supervision from seasoned certified teachers

Examples

Chicago/London Spoken Word Teaching Certification Program

NYC Teaching Collaborative (formerly NYC Teaching Residency for School Turnaround)

3. Alternative Certification

Many states have adopted alternative certification programs to address shortages of certified teachers in certain subjects or to recruit a more talented teaching force.

Components

- No B.A. or college work in a school of education is necessary
- Intense supervision, accelerated coursework, and professional development during first few years of teaching

Examples: Teach for America (eight weeks of intense training prior to placement). Tens of thousands have been trained.

Limitations: Potential lack of adequate supervision. Teacher attrition. Cost of program and lack of placement.

Notable Professional Development & Inspiration

All certified teachers must have ongoing professional development to get recertified every five years.

Example: University of Wisconsin Hip Hop Educators and Community Leaders Institute

III. HHEC Teaching Certification Proposal Components

Recommendations for the pillars of a teaching certification program. Components are derived from best existing models and customized to suit our communities, collective vision and preserve the integrity of Hip-Hop education.

Demonstration of Creativity

Demonstrated ability to aid students in self-curating a demonstration of creativity i.e., a gallery showing, live performance, reading or online portfolio.

Social Justice – Human Rights

Capable of helping students identify a problem within their community, craft a plan to improve the situation, and analyze the results.

History

Demonstrated ability to create and deliver three hours of lesson plans about phases in Hip-Hop's history.

Entrepreneurship/Sustainability

Demonstrated ability to add an entrepreneurship component to a program that helps sustain the program, the students within it or an organization the students have agreed is deserving of their support.

Suggested Outcomes

Subject matter

*Understand all certificate components

*Ability to scaffold learning across disciplines to develop powerful readers, writers, scientists, mathematicians, speakers, critical thinkers, cultural producers, and changemakers

Student Learning

*Understand critical theories of language, literacies, learning and teaching

*Understand the context of teaching in 21st century learning environments

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