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SANTA CRUZ

**SPOKEN ART PEDAGOGIES: YOUTH, CRITICAL LITERACY
& A CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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with an emphasis in SOCIOLOGY

by

Ruth H. Kim

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**SPOKEN ART PEDAGOGIES: YOUTH, CRITICAL LITERACY
& A CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING**

Ruth H. Kim

ABSTRACT

This dissertation, *Spoken Art Pedagogies: Youth, Critical Literacy & a Cultural Movement in the Making*, is an ethnography of political arts activism in the San Francisco Bay Area centering on spoken word, or performance/“street” poetry, authored by youth between the ages of 13 and 19. As an urban aesthetic, activist practice, and critical form of literacy, spoken word connects young people to social movement work through radical youth development and cultural interventions to youth violence made possible by community-organized spaces. Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork from 2007 to 2010 that includes participant observation, interviews, and youth-authored texts and performances, I capture community-rooted methods of spoken word organizing to reveal a local case, articulation, and trajectory of a cultural movement. I further examine spoken word as a multiracial site of pedagogy and politics in order to expose and substantiate the social possibilities that emerge from this specific framework, location, and application of arts-based literacy. What my research reveals is how the spoken word movement actively and intentionally cultivates a next generation of writers, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and leaders while it shifts and democratizes their social conditions, opportunities, and futures.

My dissertation is organized into six chapters, plus a methodology appendix. Chapter one, “Historicizing Spoken Word Activism: Genocidal Futures and Radical

Possibilities as the Basis for Literacy,” provides an overview of and rationale for the dissertation. I situate spoken word organizing from the perspective of racialized youth violence and violence against youth, highlighting spoken word’s culturally generative, aesthetically transgressive, and dialogic qualities for social transformation, all of which constitute the basis for literacy, popular (expressive arts) education, and youth organizing. In chapter two, “Materializing Voices: Towards a Theory of Cultural Movement-Making,” I lay out the theoretical backdrop and framework for my research by drawing from a sociological and interdisciplinary combination of U.S. third world feminisms, cultural studies, and performance theory. These theories enable me to talk about the performative force of movement-making stemming from spoken word literacies. Chapter three, “Mapping the Local Landscape: Spoken Word in the Bay Area & Beyond,” contains my discussion of the contours of the spoken word movement, primarily as it is manifested in the Bay Area. In this chapter I highlight illustrative youth-centered programs, approaches, and challenges that work to redefine arts and literacy education, especially in an urban center where public schools fall far short in serving students in these areas. In chapter four, “Up Against the Institution of Schools: Arts in Education, or Why We Need Community Organizations,” I trace spoken word organizing in relation to and in partnership and tension with Bay Area schools. In chapter five, titled “‘*BNV Ain’t Nothin’ to Fuck With*’: Complicating Co-optations of Political Art,” I analyze spoken word movement-making further through HBO’s corporate sponsorship and other forms of commercialization, and the profound contradictions and tensions of this

relationship. Brave New Voices (an international youth poetry slam festival) under the auspices of HBO is ridden with tension. On one hand, the relationship spreads the movement's art form and pedagogy worldwide. On the other, sponsorship risks commodification akin to that of hip hop. Chapter six, "Literacy, Pedagogy & Spoken Word: More than Poems Await," is my concluding chapter. Focusing on the case of a young Bay Area poet who was murdered during the time of this study, this chapter reorients spoken word as a crucial site for understanding the pedagogical role of arts-based literacy in radical youth development, violence prevention, and social movement work.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION
Historicizing Spoken Word Activism: Genocidal Futures
& Radical Possibilities as the Basis for Literacy

And I don't know how to do more than be afraid
That an age allowing me to be on this stage
Might have me murdered by Monday
I'm 18, I play pick-up basketball games with ghosts

...
Will they ever call your death beautiful
Your life, a sacrifice
A love story to be jealous of

How many deaths will it take
Before *this* is considered *genocide*?

—Nate Marshall, 18, Demetrius Amparan, 17, and Deja Taylor, 19
Team Chicago, “Lost Count” (Brave New Voices, 2008)

Genocide dehumanizes on a scale of epic proportions. Imagining the lived reality or threat of genocide might take us as far a place as one geopolitically remote, or historically tucked away into a distant past. Yet the young poets in the opening verse call our attention to a systematic killing that has been taking place in the present moment of the United States, one that has taken the lives of a disproportionate number of racialized¹ youth in Chicago, including lives known personally by these young poets. Chicago stands out as a prominent example in the media, reflecting a most dramatic case of youth violence in the inner-city,² a social phenomenon not unique to the U.S. (Hoffman, Knox & Cohen, 2011; World Health Organization,

¹ I employ the term *racialized* to convey the social structural process of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) in the makings of racial subject positions and racial subjectivity (Scott, 1992; Spivak, 1987). Racialization suggests an active, discursive process, one that is largely done to, as well as by, racial subjects through racial performativity (Butler, 1999; Jackson, 2003) and is not limited to non-whites.

² For instance, 70 children between the ages of five and eighteen were murdered in Chicago alone in 2010 (Lu, 2011).

2002). One need not think far back in the past to remember, for example, the brutal killing of 16-year-old Derrion Albert, a black honor roll student whose gruesome beating on September 24th, 2009 was captured on cell-phone video and circulated virally on internet sites like Youtube. Students from Fenger High School, in the South Side of Chicago, were on their way home from school when a fight erupted, turning quickly into a violent street melee involving up to 50 teens, an escalated version of the brewing tension and history of rival opposition between students from the “Ville” and students from Atgeld Gardens public housing complex. Students from Atgeld Gardens began taking the public bus to Fenger, located in the Ville about five miles away, after Chicago Public Schools turned Carver Area High School, in the neighborhood of Atgeld, into a public military academy in 2000.

The contents of the video are appalling to watch, graphically portraying Derrion initially being struck in the back of the head by a wooden plank. After falling to the concrete sidewalk, his attempt at getting back up on his feet is unsuccessful when he is met with an immediate punch in the face, falling to the ground yet again, and then is kicked. In the moments when the camera turns away from Derrion, we see a scattering of young black men in the street, some of them without shirts, and a couple others with splintered boards, as cars honk and drive slowly past the scene. When the camera focuses back on Derrion, he is on the ground, again trying to get back up, but then is stomped on, his head forcefully jumped upon at least twice, and he is kicked while he endures a couple more final

blows by a wooden plank, until his body appears limp and doubled over on the concrete.³

Among the most tragic aspects about this incident is that Derrion's horrific death, in the span of a two-minute video, resulted from the hands of his peers, students from both the Ville and the Gardens who had attended the same school as Derrion, had been known by their teachers, fellow students and family members to be "non-violent," and now face long-term incarceration. Had the incident not been recorded, Derrion's death, alongside the lives of his convicted peers, would have faded even more quickly into a backdrop of invisibility, of disappeared and hidden traumas that hold other casualties and tragedies of youth violence, stored in the farthest reaches of collective memory, erased from consciousness, or far worse, considered "normal."

The young poets from Chicago, in their spoken word performance, both decry and mourn in the fact that they have "lost count," reflecting the title of their poem. They have lost count of the number of young "brown" lives in Chicago that have been violently lost. It is important to recognize and appreciate how the live and even video-documented performance of this piece can emotionally and intellectually touch and move its audience, taking the artistic content and literary meanings of the poem much further and deeper than can any passage of words on page, and possibly

³ I draw from Cathy Cohen's (2011) presentation during a plenary session titled "Queering Ethnic Studies" at the 2011 Critical Ethnic Studies & the Future of Genocide Conference. She described the contents of the video and circumstances of Derrion's death as the basis for her argument that, regardless of sexuality, Derrion Albert is a queer subject in the historical context of how invisibility, degradation, and marginalization are normalized as part of a white supremacist project that pathologizes racialized subjects and communities.

stimulate and open up our senses towards justice. At the beginning of the poem, Deja Taylor, in a voice distinctly unequivocal and deep, sets the melancholic tone and steady rhythm by listing the victims in the order of name, age, school attended, and date of murder. The audience cannot see her as her voice paints the background. The listing, though mechanical and repetitive in format, amplifies a different young life lost with each naming and, therefore, haunts us as it interweaves throughout the poem.⁴ The two other poets, Nate Marshall and Demetrius Amparan, standing side-by-side, each behind a standing mic, soberly yet compassionately address their fallen peers: “Will they ever call your death beautiful/Your life, a sacrifice/Will the meeting of blood and bullet ever be called romantic/A love story to be jealous of.” Each pays homage and deep tribute to the short life of a friend, including Christian Lamott, who lost his life at 17 (“In homeroom, you always had homies in the hallway waiting for you/*We’re still waiting*”), and Eduardo Peña, at 16 (“Possibly the *coolest* dude to ever grace elementary/...your path ended [when you were]/Run down by bad luck and a police officer”). These short lives, they characterize, are “Sentence fragments of a future/And in the 14 days it took us to write this/We’ve had to add more names to this list.” The young poets point out the alarmingly crude and absurd nature of a social epidemic for which there is no easy explanation, but yet their own

⁴ Avery Gordon (1997) compellingly has written about *haunting* as a crucial site for social theorizing and knowledge production, as “that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). By bringing the invisible into visibility, not unrelated to how the hypervisible (namely around race) can simultaneously be a form of invisibility, we are doing the work of tracing. Haunting is a constitutive part of social life. Being haunted “is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look” (22). This is just one example of how spoken word poetry constitutes a site of knowledge production, one that performs affective labor.

lives are so entangled: “Is there a reason I’m making it out of a community/That has martyred young men/I might be mistaken for?” At the poem’s close, they pose the following question that is as disheartening as it is stupefying: “How many deaths will it take/Before *this* is considered *genocide*?” Genocide, for the poets, is the fitting term that names this reality that has become theirs. Genocide signals a profoundly consistent, sweeping loss whose accumulation and continuation are felt and lived by “urban” youth and communities of color, and not just in Chicago. Genocide further signifies a certain disappearance of racialized youth, one that fades quickly in public imagination if it is not cause for isolating and reducing the terms of social policy and public (dis)investment to criminality, for instance, by expanding police enforcement, or attaching and assigning cultures of violence to particular socioeconomic, racially pathologized communities. Genocide, understood as the systematic disappearance of racialized youth, by extension, suggests not only its literal meaning in terms of mass murder and homicide and the mutilation of physical bodies. Genocidal disappearance, in the social present and partially foreseeable future, also services a metaphor by speaking to the violence and multiplicity of violence that operate on a much broader level than the harm and violence that youth might inflict upon each other or on themselves. Discursive and symbolic violence, or the animation of violence in the social realms of discourse, representations, signs, significations, and symbols, circulates through complex and nuanced social technologies such as race, modernity, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism. Fueled by ideology,⁵ discourses of

⁵ Stuart Hall (1996a) discusses the problem of *ideology* as concerning “the ways in which

violence and social power interpellate youth as subjects (Althusser, 1971; Hall, 1996a), working durably in favor of hegemonic forms of homogeneity and erasures of historically significant social difference. The systematic disappearance of racialized youth manifests itself, accordingly, in and through variations of cultural genocide, producing material and very real effects on youth and their lives, communities and social futures.

Youth Violence in Perspective

With the help and expediency of mass communication technology, media frenzy lasting a fleeting moment made the beating death of Derrion Albert a leading symbol of youth violence in Chicago. Along similar lines, media worked actively and diffusely in both adverse and favorable ways around the police killing of 22-year-old Oscar Grant, fanning the upsurge of a foremost political cause in Oakland,⁶ and in

ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a ‘material force’... It has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. It has also to do with the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system” (27). This latter part of the definition, the historical resistance and movement of a mass of people and “‘imagined community” (Anderson, 1996) – or more aptly, of a conglomeration of differentiated, local communities working in solidarity as a historic bloc, is a central concern of this dissertation and to which my focus turns.

⁶ Most killings, assaults and other forms of violence against youth are not captured on video, which is why the shooting death of Oscar Grant in Oakland on January 1st, 2009 by a BART police officer became sorely emblematic of systematic police brutality against Black, Latino, and Asian Pacific Islander youth. As cell-phone videos of Oscar’s shooting death surfaced, decades of heightened tension and conflict with and a deep mistrust of police enforcement and profiling in urban communities of color served only to fuel the indignation, discernible not only in Oakland but other major cities in the U.S. and around the world. On a local level, “Justice for Oscar Grant” became a rallying cry and campaign for mobilization in Oakland, demanding not merely a long-term prison sentence for Johannes Mehserle, the shooter, but a fundamental transformation of a system that hires, trains and arms police officers (Imani, 2010). Public displays of outrage, urgency to further organize, and ongoing attempts to heal

the recent string of suicides among LGBTQ youth that prompted the reactionary establishment of anti-bullying initiatives.⁷ Yet, while it is clear that overall discussion and reporting of youth violence recently have surged, violence against youth, including violence committed by youth themselves, is nothing new. Nor has youth violence itself necessarily increased. On the contrary, homicide rates among youth in the U.S. between the ages of 10 and 24, for example, declined by over 40% between 1991 and 2005, though continue to be disproportionately higher for black, especially, and Latino males.⁸ Violence against LGBTQ youth, moreover, has always existed abounding beyond the heinous murders of Rashawn Brazell, Sakia Gunn, Lawrence King, Brandon Teena, and Matthew Sheppard, just as institutionalized violence, in the forms of police brutality, force, and racial profiling, the criminalization of teen prostitutes, or the detention and deportation of undocumented youth, continues to unduly affect the lives of youth of color in the city. Youth violence itself, it follows, must be considered in much broader terms than murders or direct physical violence

fused with both peaceful protest and isolated incidents of violence, quickly becoming embodied through a multitude of culturally expressive forms, ranging from graffiti tags throughout the city proclaiming “I am Oscar Grant,” to murals and countless flyers serving to visually memorialize Oscar Grant and what his death stands for, to open mic and other politically cultural youth events, to turf dancing, most notably by the Oakland-based group, Turf Feinz, through virally circulated videos co-produced by YAK films.

⁷ March 2011 marked the launch of a White House initiative on anti-bullying, prompted by the series of suicides committed by over a half dozen LGBTQ youth. This initiative and other dominant responses to the suicides overall tend to individualistically isolate blame and place undue pressure on students, parents, and schools, if they do not misleadingly attempt to reassure queer youth that “it gets better” (Halberstam, 2010). These responses ignore the systemic sources of violence in the lives of youth and the social structural nature and deep forces of heterosexism, homophobia, heteronormativity, and racism that envelop individual and groups of students and their schools, and from which schools and youth cultures are not insulated.

⁸ In 2007, the homicide rate for black males 10-24 years of age was 60.7 per 100,000, 20.6 for Latino males, and 3.5 for white males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

inflicted upon individual bodies. When violence is understood as lived everyday by youth, culturally and epistemically, the sources of youth violence as systemic and discursive become more apparent, as do the historical and social conditions of youth in general.

Returning to the beating death of Derrion Albert, if any elucidation⁹ can be made of this violent street melee gone horrendously wrong, we might consider some theoretical combination that looks at, to name a few, racialized masculinities, concentrated poverty, failing public institutions, and apparatuses of racial isolation and social control like prison expansion, ghetto construction, urban gentrification, and rampant joblessness (Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 1997; Wacquant, 2001; Davis, 1997; Collins, 2006; Janowski, 1991). Together these social forces shamelessly attack and subject localities to globalization's terms of economy and social organization while making youth vulnerable given their status as dependents, even not "fully formed" persons (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 2005). On the ground, however, the picture still is always much more complex, more highly textured, and much more nuanced in reality than can be portrayed by analysis partial to sociological intersections and the interplay of sociohistorical structures. When scholarly concern and attention shift social inquiry to the critical domain of the experiences, practices,

⁹ Adrienne Carey Hurley (2012) persuasively argues that we cannot dismiss incidents of drastic and gruesome violence committed by youth simply as "inexplicable." Rather, we must understand youth acts of violence within a larger frame in which youth generally are denied opportunities to develop their own political analysis of their lives and social conditions. She asserts, "violent acts committed by youth...are rarely understood by those youth or society in general as responses to political conditions...when people of any age are prevented from developing...analysis...the results can be horrifying because rage still seeks an outlet" (189-190).

interactions, and relations of youth, situating them squarely at the center of analysis, we begin to see how youth must navigate not just a sociohistorically built environment but an entangled, contradictory, meaning-laden geography of discourse. The discursive landscape is one that contains unmistakably contemptuous, ideological framings that work blatantly against them, fashioning or dismissing their lives and their futures as bleak at best. Also embedded are discourses framed in the more oblique terms of “intervention,” vast and seemingly innocuous attempts, stemming historically from state-sponsored projects of institutionalization, ranging from education to juvenile “corrections” that mark and reinscribe the bodies, minds, and intentions of young people of color and their worlds as crooked, deficient, aberrant, destructive, or quite simply a problem. Traces of racially misopedic discourse have been articulated in more or less pronounced forms in public and media reactions to Derrion Albert’s killing, and in response to the youth violence overall that disproportionately affects youth of color.¹⁰ Such racial discourse illuminates dominant tendencies to individualize and isolate blame by denouncing young people as the sole perpetrators of violence, discrediting and vilifying single parents and absent fathers, morally infantilizing communities of color,¹¹ and solely or overly

¹⁰ Homicide, for example, is the leading cause of death for African Americans between the ages of 10 and 24, the second leading cause of death for Latinos in this age range, and the third leading cause of death for Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

¹¹ For example, John Petro reports that Heather MacDonald of the Manhattan Institute argues that a “lack of personal responsibility” in poor black communities, among single mothers, and overall in “cultures of illegitimacy” are justification for eliminating social welfare programs. She writes, “it’s not hard to predict where Chicago’s future killers will come from” (Petro, 2010; MacDonald, 2010).

implicating under-resourced inner-city schools and their staff¹² without overall regard for the deep social structures, historical makings, and staying power of social conditions that envelop schools, youth, and their families and communities.

Economies of discursive violence extend throughout the urban terrain in the lives of youth, most notably in the domain of traditional public education – newly guised in a variety of forms, most evident in the recent explosion of charter schools – as an institution of modernity that historically minimizes, disregards, and undermines youth formations and productions of knowledge involving histories of their own racial, ethnic, and other “minority”-based communities. A high school, for example, can never achieve the status of a “safe” space if it relies on and perpetuates a heteronormative sex education curriculum that denies or ignores queer expressions of sexuality and intimacy. As scholars like Aihwa Ong (2003) and Max Weber (1953) remind us, modern, secular notions of the liberal, free market individual as the “ideal citizen,” which youth as students purportedly are preparing to become, are underwritten by religious (Protestant) ethics that largely preclude queer-identifying subjects, unless perhaps they are white, able-bodied, with ample purchasing power, and conform to the institution of marriage, for example (Alexander, 2005; Berlant, 2002). Discursive violence in the forms of silencing and the subjugation of certain configurations of knowledge also manifests itself in social studies curricula, and in school curricula in general across the U.S. that erase, ignore, or distort histories of particular racial and ethnic populations. Meanwhile, ethnic studies programs, if they

¹² For example, requests for student transfers out of Fenger High School increased after the beating death of Derrion Albert, though with few alternative options (Mack, 2009).

even do exist, continue to fight for their existence under siege.¹³ Students themselves are positioned as suspect with the increased presence and enforcement of police officers on high school campuses and beefed up security and surveillance measures, including metal detectors, “zero-tolerance”¹⁴ policies, and teacher training for disarming students. Cultures of disciplinization pervade the character of the modern public high school (Foucault, 1977), assisting far fewer Black and Latino students directly into institutions of higher education than onto pathways into the prison and military industrial complexes (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Galavaz, Palafox, Meiners & Quinn, 2011). Schools, at the same time, under the label of “underperforming” are now more than ever vulnerable to closure, as standardized testing, like prison expansion¹⁵, has become “big business” and a highly contested driving force of public education (Hursh, 2005; Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Apple, 2006; Apple, 2004), bringing students and their families and schools farther and deeper into the folds of neoliberalism and its logics.¹⁶ With the closure of schools, in

¹³ As a most highly publicized example, the state senate of Arizona in 2010 passed HB 2281, authored by the state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Horne, which is a measure that curbs ethnic studies programs in Arizona, and specifically targets the Raza Studies program of the Tucson Unified School District, a program credited for reducing dropout rates among Latino students.

¹⁴ Youth-led restorative justice programs, which use a collaborative, healing approach involving all parties involved in and affected by a particular youth crime, are emerging in places like Chicago Public Schools (<http://www.chicagoareaproject.org/programs/restorative-justice>) and Oakland Unified School District (<http://www.rjoyoakland.org/>), as an alternative to traditional disciplinary policies and punitive actions, especially zero-tolerance.

¹⁵ One exception to prison expansion occurred on May 22, 2011 when the United States Supreme Court ruled the mandatory release of 30,000 prisoners from California prisons, declaring that the conditions of California prisons are violent and inhumane (Liptak, 2011).

¹⁶ David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as an ideology and theory of political economic practices that rests on the belief “that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework

some communities considered neighborhood hubs or community institutions, comes the further dismantling and displacement of local communities, concurrent with greater public divestiture, recurring government budget shortfalls, and the doubly assaultive forces of privatization and gentrification (Galavaz, Palafox, Meiners & Quinn, 2011). Where schools do remain, or are merged or reconstituted, class sizes increase, programs (especially art and music) fold, curricula are narrowed, teachers stripped of their professional judgment if not their jobs while their unions are under attack, and administrators hailed for running schools with entrepreneurial focus on cost efficiencies and “disaggregated” standardized test performance. Outside of school, joblessness hits the hardest, out of any identifiable group, racialized youth who, as Robin D. G. Kelley (1996) argues, must be considered as part of the working class and working class histories. Factors such as these, in sum, amalgamate uniquely in the education and lives of youth, revealing how students alone cannot be entirely or exclusively implicated as the aggressors of violence and culprits of bullying (Gender JUST, 2010).

Discourses of violence operate through multiple, complex, social, and increasingly global technologies at work in young people’s lives, technologies that far exceed contemporary forms of communication, information, and entertainment media like Facebook or YouTube. Michel Foucault (1978) describes social technologies in

characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2), guaranteed by the state although, beyond this guarantee, the state must remain minimally involved and subservient to free-market forces. Neoliberalism, in other words, “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3).

terms of *biopower*, which circulates discursively on an archaeological scale of human history. The social circulation of biopower occurs not only through the disciplining of individual and social bodies, including self-policing under panoptic surveillance in a regime of social control (Foucault, 1977), but also through a myriad network and complex deployment and dispersal of discourses in a regime of governmentality of the modern liberal state, whose primary concern is the regulation of life, care, and growth of its population. Youth are increasingly more so subjected to these technologies that conspire, though not in an entirely successful way, to make them particular kinds of racialized, neoliberal, heteropatriarchal subjects and beings within the logics of modernity (Ong, 2003; Smith, 2006; de Lauretis, 1987).

Governmentality extends to “the government of the self by oneself in its own articulation with relations with others” (Rabinow, 1997) through the direct and indirect prescribing of “techniques for living for independent subjects who learn to govern themselves” (Ong, 2003, 15). Social technologies include race (or white supremacy), primarily through racial bipolarization, or between the blackening and whitening that exists as an inherited condition of institutionalized chattel slavery, traceable and flexibly deployed among various ethnic groups and individuals (Ong, 2003). In the spheres of public education and popular culture, for example, youth are interpreted and interpret themselves culturally by their degrees of whiteness (or the related descriptors, “model minority”-ness or “forever foreigner”-ness, that uphold whiteness as the cultural norm and dominant reference), or their proximities to largely stigmatized, suspect, or fetishized blackness. In institutional spaces like school and

through its institutional agents, biopower works actively, oftentimes invisibly, to discipline and manage students towards greater states of cultural homogeneity and erasures of historical and social difference. Within these analytics of social power and its governing techniques, however, it is important to note that normalizing practices, which themselves are multiple, diffuse, and open-ended, do not have a totalizing and determinate effect. Bodies of critical knowledge and alternative formations of identity and cultural and social practice emerge from subaltern social and epistemic locations towards other kinds of logics, expressions, and possibilities around community, solidarity, and critically meaningful ways of living and being under urgent and necessary conditions of social difference.

Youth Cultural Production & the Radical Possibilities of Literacy

Two men disappear like sound

...

The media calls you hacked up

Pistol-whipped

Butchered

Gay-bashed

They forgot to mention that you were human

So today, we paint your names into the wind

Listen to the syllables switch off the tongues of every little boy who was told not to switch in public

Because sons shine hydrogen bomb bright

Even when they switch

— Carvens Lissaint, 19 and Ceez (Cynthia Keteku), 18
Urban Word NYC, “Switch” (Brave New Voices, 2009)

Even before the recent stories of LGBTQ youth suicides began to surface and deluge the media circuits, New York City teen poets, Carvens Lissaint and Ceez Keteku, gave an impeccable performance of this artistically profound commemoration of young, male victims of homophobic violence, both living and

passed, for Brave New Voices¹⁷ audience members in 2009 in, of all places, Chicago. Titled “Switch,” the poem offers acutely heartfelt glimpses of emotional identification with and attachment to what it means to live and express life, or more succinctly, to *switch*¹⁸, as young, black, male, and queer in all of its depth, complexity, intensity, and complication. Living queerly can sometimes mean living a perilous, even fatal, life: “like/A sleeping gazelle in a lion’s den/But I refuse to run/Switch.” Living queerly can sometimes mean living under extraordinary repression: “I hide in the daytime/Walk crooked towards masculinity/It’s tough when feminine tendencies won’t allow me to make a fist/A devil controlling my forearm to hang low like a lynched dream/*Switch*.” Living queer, further, is living a life that is intolerated, even hated: “When the arches of homophobic stares pierce through your core/*Creating this* cocoon/A hideous premature butterfly that will never be able to ascend in heterosexual skies/The testosterone-filled wings that flap uncomfortably do nothing but hold me down/*So I will switch*.” Living queer, at the same time, is also living queer expressions of love: “Let my skin envelop his manhood while the hairs

¹⁷ Brave New Voices is a 15-year running national and international youth poetry slam festival, held every July in a different U.S. city. About 50 teams of youth poets and their coaches from different parts of the U.S. and places like Leeds, England, Guam, and Trinidad-Tobago participate. The festival features workshops, performances, and training for literary arts organization leaders, activists, artists, and educators. In 2009, BNV was deliberately held in President Obama's hometown of Chicago in the summer following his election whereas BNV in the presidential election year of 2008 took place in Washington DC. BNV in 2009 included an organized march to the Life is Living festival to bring attention to the disproportionate number of youth lives that are violently lost in Chicago.

¹⁸ Among its multiple definitions, “switch,” particularly as gay slang, refers to the overplaying of queer gesture. In the poem, every time the word “switch” is used, both poets snap their fingers with a raised arm while quickly shifting their hips to one side (in other words, they switch). The poem includes many other both graphic and subtle gestures, particularly to visually represent emotional intensity and physical violence.

on the backs of our necks give us a standing ovation.” Living queer is also living queer expressions of freedom: “Tonight, I will live life like the universe was a rainbow playground/Like the colors were drinks at a bar/I will sip until the sun explodes/Take shots until I stumble like an intoxicated skyline.” Yet, just as the young poets have eased us into the picturesque depths and heights of living queer, halfway through the poem they deliver a solemn blow that cannot but weigh heavily on our conscience by “switching” to death: “*Two men disappear like sound.*” The two young gay men they refer to are 19-year-old Rashawn Brazell and 21-year-old Matthew Sheppard, “*Two men with exploding stars for futures.*” Rashawn’s 2005 murder ended in the atrocious dismemberment and scattering of his partially found body in the Bushwick borough of Brooklyn. Matthew died days after he was found, tortured and beaten and tied to a fence in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. To memorialize and pay unfathomable deference to these young gay lives violently lost, the young artists on stage perform a transgressive poetics that signifies what becomes the only possible, reasonable explanation for making sense of out of the utter senselessness that characterizes these murders, while honoring the memory of the victims: “Rashawn/He didn’t want to kill you/But when you held him in your arms/He heard the music encaged in your bones/*The same music you switch to/He just wanted to free the melody ... Matthew/They couldn’t understand your brilliance/The way your intelligence backstroked in your cranium/You were bright, like an intoxicated skyline.*”

This poem provides just one example, along with Team Chicago's "Lost Count," that aptly shows how young people themselves are far from being total victims of ubiquitous violence tightly interwoven into their everyday lives. More importantly, through artistic expression, intimate, intellectual engagement with pressing social issues, and a firm grasp of literacy, young people evince a refusal to be victims. These two cases of youth-authored spoken word poetry demonstrate how young people themselves are performers and producers of culture who are not only capable of, but assume a role of leadership in bringing a different kind of world, relations, and being into existence, even if momentarily, through art that works to transform us as listeners and audience members as it has transformed the young artists themselves in the continual process of cultural creation and making. Paul Willis (1981) defines cultural production as "the creative use of discourses, meanings, materials, practices, and group processes to explore, understand, and creatively occupy particular positions in sets of general material possibilities. For oppressed groups, this is likely to include oppositional forms and cultural penetrations at particular concrete sites or regions" (59).

To understand the critical significance of cultural production as an analytical construct, it is important to situate poetic works such as these *beyond* youth spoken word artists as individuals and individualized cultural workers and not overlook the cultural formations and communities that exceed them. These poets, in other words, do not produce these poems, as radically grounded, interpersonally transformative, aesthetically generous, and emotionally or pedagogically moving and precise as they

are, in isolation and apart from social and community influences. Quite the contrary, these works are never without, but rather require and demand a community – imagined or otherwise, harmonious and in conflict, as a source and site of differentiated voices and individuals that come, stay, or go in various forms over time, constituting its historical upkeep and makings – as well as an extensive process of creative labor that draws from and feeds into the community’s array of practice and ritual, all of which together produces, cultivates, and undergirds its writers, authors, and artists. It is within this larger sense of the cultural and community embeddedness of these works that we can understand the real, material effects of youth cultural production, which Willis (1981) contends is not necessarily “innocent,” in the sense that social justice can be achieved and guaranteed, yet can be employed to frame cultural resistance to and transgression beyond hegemonic forms of domination and violence that are socially and culturally reproduced. It is also within this larger cultural sphere of the arts-driven projects, processes, and formation of spoken word that I frame the radical possibilities of literacy, which I define as a kind of sociopolitical agency with words and other tools that demonstrates a fundamental “power from below” (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1980; Rockhill, 1987).¹⁹ By radical

¹⁹ Examples of other literacy tools include but are not limited to voice, digital and news media, finances, and hip hop. My use of literacy in this dissertation is related to the body of literature known as “New Literacy Studies,” as well as other areas critical literacy scholarship that interrupt notions of literacy as ideologically disarticulated and autonomous from social relations and power (Street, 2001; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Morell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Morrell, 2004; Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Haas-Dyson, 2003; Brandt, 1998; Rockhill, 1987). For example, Rockhill (1987) writes, “[t]he politics of literacy are integral to the cultural genocide of a people, as well as the gendering of society. The construction of literacy is embedded in the discursive practices and power relationships of everyday life — it is socially constructed, materially produced, morally regulated, and carries a symbolic

possibilities, I mean much more than the inspirational poems of a few select youth artists who have developed their talents through slam competition and open mic venues. Namely, these possibilities arise through critically organized community spaces and relations that are rooted in an uncompromising belief, intentional fostering, and tireless community advocacy around young people's voices, social inquiry and politicization of their worlds and everyday, as well as their artistic uses of literacy. In this broader cultural context lie also radically *democratic* possibilities that suggest a certain social power and potential inherent in differentiated productions of knowledge, culture, and dialogic interaction among a many different youth who altogether reflect a kind of barometer for the status of democracy in the wider public sphere (Collins, 2006; Kelly, 2002; Lipsitz, 2005; Maira & Soep, 2005; Hosang, 2006). The emergence, amplification, and politicization of these young voices through safe spaces for uncensored speech and dialogue prompt young people, beginning with their own writing and art, to take up leading roles in changing those very social and material conditions of their present lives and social futures.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation, *Spoken Art Pedagogies: Youth, Critical Literacy & a Cultural Movement in the Making*, is an ethnography of political arts activism in the San Francisco Bay Area centering on *spoken word*, or performance/"street" poetry, authored by youth between the ages of 13 and early 20s. As an urban aesthetic and activist practice, spoken word connects young people to social movement work

significance which cannot be captured by its reduction to any one of these" (165).

through radical youth development and cultural interventions to youth violence, including violence against racialized youth, made possible by community-organized practices. I take special interest in community organizing around spoken word's relevance for youth, illuminating a popular education approach that invests in the development, presentation, and application of young people's voices and critical uses of literacy. Literacy is not merely a skill set and competency associated with individual learning and empowerment, but a form of sociopolitical agency with words and other tools (for example, voice, media, technology, or hip hop) that can be collectively mobilized towards more deeply democratic opportunities and social futures. Literacy, in this sense, has an important material effect and dimension that reflect Paulo Freire's (1987) vision of a world where "saying the word is a fundamental right and not merely a habit, in which saying the word is the right to become a part of the decision to transform the world" (55). Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2007 and 2010, I explore spoken word as a cultural site and pedagogical vehicle for critical literacy and literacy development to expose and substantiate the social possibilities that emerge from this specific framework, location, and application of literacy.

I argue that community-organized spoken word – ranging from after-school or school residency-based writing workshops and school clubs, to teen poetry slams, youth open mic, and hip hop theater – works to change the social and historical conditions of young people towards more radically democratic opportunities and social futures. Social transformation of this scale stems from civic engagement that is

inspired through arts-based literacy and literacy-driven arts education, as well as the sustained, intentional community arts activism and both U.S.-based and transnational networks that are constitutive of the cultural movement of spoken word. By emphasizing community-rooted methods of spoken word organizing in the Bay Area, I reveal a local case, articulation, and trajectory of this movement. Evidence of spoken word as a movement can be exemplified by the international youth poetry slam festival known as Brave New Voices, which, as I highlight in the dissertation, provides a window into, and represents a culmination of, at least 50 other local spoken word-based, youth literary arts programs or community efforts that have been established or are emerging outside of the Bay Area. At the heart of this movement work are *safe, uncensored spaces* for speech and dialogue to occur by and among youth, whose praxis of authorship and craft of narrative take root in the struggles, triumphs, pleasures, and pains of their everyday lives – giving new expressions to “the personal is political.” As a result of these spaces, young people not only demonstrate and cultivate aesthetic maturity and social responsibility in their writing and performance, but also witness and exercise the discursive power and generative potential of words and collective uplift through the use and interaction of their own voices. What spoken word pedagogy brings into view is the efflorescence of a new generation of writers, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and social and political leaders. In short, spoken word pedagogy *is* the persistent, deliberate, and ongoing arts activism and community organizing of this cultural movement presently in the making.

The goal of my dissertation is to specify the cultural, historical and sociopolitical relevance of spoken word for and among youth, using the specific case of the San Francisco Bay Area. Using direct and participant observation, interviews, and literary and performance analysis,²⁰ I map, chronicle, and flesh out ethnographically over a period between 2007 and 2010, a movement that began at least 11 years before I came into this study, and one that continues beyond the timeframe of my field work. Consequently, this ethnography captures merely an historical moment and partial location of this literary arts movement and expansive community centered on spoken word and youth.

The research questions guiding the dissertation are as follows:

- What is the significance of spoken word, and of spoken word literacy, community, and organizing for youth, especially for racialized and other marginalized youth from urban communities in the Bay Area?
- How are youth engaged with spoken word, its historical communities, commitments, and activism, and its increasingly transnational presence and role?
- How does spoken word as a contemporary cultural practice and movement contribute to the re-emergence of poetry and spoken word as a cultural formation and everyday tool of politics and pedagogy?

In many ways, the notion of a collective “movement” appears to overstate its reach because a movement’s claims are nowhere as large, catching, or notable as on the scale of traditional social movements of the 1960s and 70s around civil rights, women’s rights, and sexual expression and identity, or the more current Occupy movements that span and bridge immigration, labor, and education. Youth-centered

²⁰ For discussion of my dissertation methodology and research methods, please see Appendix.

spoken word both builds from their foundations and feeds into the work of these movements primarily through cultural form and articulation. Spoken word additionally shifts discourse significantly and deeply for people, both young and old. Social theory has furthered and deepened what is considered to be “the cultural turn” (Williams, 1977; Bonnell & Hunt, 1999; Mukerji & Schudson, 1991; Hall, 1996a; Hall 2004; Gordon, 2004; Alexander, 2005) and the relevance of discourse and the discursive intersected with social power (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1994; Althusser, 1971). This research demonstrates that the cultural dimension continues to be a pertinent sociological analytic and that the terrain of culture must be seen as fluid, continually reproduced, and expedient and not epiphenomenal to economy or polity (Yúdice, 2003). In this sense, the movement-building of spoken word, importantly including youth-authored spoken word, *does* cultural work that contains logics inherent to social change, transformation, and justice.

By taking a critical cultural approach to analysis, I expose how through spoken word as a multiracial site of coalitional politics and pedagogy, youth continually articulate new politics and hybrid forms of identity within the social, political, and economic conditions that shape the contours of their lives (Lipsitz, 2005; Maira & Soep, 2005; Hosang, 2006; Kelley, 2002). Beyond exhibiting how spoken word, its communities and its organizing practices shift the terrain of politics, in many ways favorably, for youth, I illuminate how youth play an important part in this terrain-shifting; in other words, shifting occurs partially *by* youth and not just *for* youth. Spoken word, in this sense, serves as a generative cultural site of politics and

a partially and actively produced formation in which youth drive much of its pedagogies.

This dissertation is neither strictly nor directly about youth violence. It is about historicizing spoken word activism, for which I do not mean a historical survey and overview of spoken word and how it has come to be in its current form today. Rather I situate its projects in the historical present within the contexts of youth violence, cultural genocide, and neoliberalism, race, and other social technologies at work in the everyday lives and realities of racialized youth. Spoken word's projects, more importantly, show us the radical possibilities of other kinds of intersubjective and social relations through the culturally productive powers of literacy. This work thereby shifts and recenters the starting point and conversation for understanding, appreciating, and deepening literacy, popular (expressive arts) education, and youth organizing as well as their utmost urgency.

Organization of the Dissertation

My dissertation is organized into six chapters, plus an appendix that describes my research methods, which are informed by feminist and sociological research methodologies. In chapter two, titled *Materializing Voices: Towards a Theory of Cultural Movement-Making*, I lay out the theoretical backdrop and framework for my research by drawing from a sociological and interdisciplinary combination of women/queer of color feminisms, cultural studies, and performance theory. These theories enable me to talk about the performative force of movement-making centered on literacy's material dimension and effects. Chapter three, *Mapping the Local*

Landscape: Spoken Word in the Bay Area & Beyond, contains my discussion of the contours of the movement of spoken word, primarily as it is manifested in the Bay Area. In this chapter I highlight illustrative youth-centered programs, approaches, and challenges that work to redefine arts and literacy education, especially in urban centers where public schools have fallen far short in serving students in these areas. In chapter four, titled *Up Against the Institution of Schools: Arts in Education, or Why We Need Community Organizations*, I trace spoken word organizing in relation to, and in partnership and tension with schools, particularly in the Bay Area. In chapter five, titled *'BNV Ain't Nothin' to Fuck With': Complicating Co-optations of Political Art*, I illustrate how Brave New Voices, an international youth poetry slam festival, under the auspices of HBO is ridden with tension. On one hand, the relationship spreads the movement's art form and pedagogy worldwide. On the other, sponsorship risks commodification akin to that of hip hop. Chapter six, *Literacy, Pedagogy & Spoken Word: More Than Poems Await*, is my concluding chapter. By taking a specific case of youth violence through the murder of a young Bay Area poet, this chapter demonstrates how spoken word is a necessary cultural site for examining, furthering, and deepening the knowledge base and educational practice centered on youth, literacy, and pedagogy. Throughout the dissertation, I employ and foreground young people's voices, through interviews and their poetry and performances, as my primary source of information. Together, these chapters and the dissertation overall reflect an ethnographic story of spoken word activism not only as a site where youth gain a deepened sense of their own identity, including racial,

gendered, political, intersubjective, among other forms, but as a cultural location in which you and I as spectators, fans, and listeners alike can learn more about ourselves through youth-led articulations of social transformation and struggle for living and learning in a differently inhabited world.

CHAPTER TWO

Materializing Voices: Towards a Theory of Cultural Movement-Making

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. —Audre Lorde

If language shapes or dictates relations between people, their mode of communication, and even their relations to the material world, then to change the shape of that language is indeed a radical act. —Jennifer González

The exilic experience – along with borders, margins, and peripheries – has become a central metaphor of contemporary multicultural and critical practices. Of these many discursive formations leading to paradigms of decentered subjectivity most often overlooked is the condition of youth and their collective enunciation as undeniably exilic. —Tomás Riley

Defining Spoken Word

In her classic essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” feminist author Audre Lorde (1984) locates in each of us “an incredible reserve of creativity and power,” a repository of “unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (36). These storehouses of emotion are places of possibility, “ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness” (36). Poetry, within this framing, is a source for illumination, one that paves our lives in the social imaginary through an aesthetic that names and codifies our sense of ourselves, the social world, and our faculty for transgression. The materiality of experience is central to poetic practice. Its vital inscriptions upon human affect and psyche are the substance that infiltrates the production, consumption, and labor of verse such that everyday life becomes primary text and a fundamental resource for connecting and relating to the poem. “As they become known to and accepted by us,” she writes, “our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas” (37). Poetry it follows is a site of knowledge production,

capacious and profuse. Poetry's visionary abundance can captivate or spellbind us, inflame us, catch us off-guard, take us to another place, stretch our imagination, or perhaps steer us in personal or collective transformation. In this sense, poetry is *not* a luxury but a sheer social necessity: "For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive" (39).

In her writing of this essay, Lorde may or may not have had spoken word specifically in mind as an expansive subgenre of poetry. Yet her words are as intuitive and relevant as they apply to spoken word. Former Youth Speaks²¹ intern, Nana K. Twumasi (2006) defines spoken word as follows:

Generally, a poem that is written first for the purpose of being heard qualifies as a spoken word piece. In a larger sense, spoken word can be defined as a literary art form, a modern variation of the continuing oral tradition. In content, it may be anything, political manifestos delivered with a fiery tongue, love stories told in pleading tones, eulogies for loved ones, a comedy told in two minutes, a personal history mapped out with words that fit together in just the right way. In form, it may be anything. But note the word: *may*. The performance aspect is less song (though that can be part of it), less dance (though this also can be part of it), and more speech. How can your voice deliver your words? The lines that define what Spoken Word is and what it is not are blurry (1).

Different writing and performance pieces qualify as spoken word, a polyvocal, polycultural, non-monolithic form of creative cultural expression that continues oral tradition and constitutes literary art and both an emergent and re-emerging living canon. According to spoken word poet and former Youth Speaks program director,

²¹ Youth Speaks is a non-profit youth literary arts organization based in San Francisco charged with bringing the voices of youth "from the margin to the core" by developing and presenting these voices through writing, poetry, and spoken word. Youth Speaks is the main organization I worked with that forms the basis of this dissertation study.

Tomás Riley (2006), “this new literature already occupies the core of a tradition yet to come” (11). Beyond its primary purpose, “of being heard,” spoken word fundamentally “is not limiting as other forms of poetry might be,” for example, like the structure of an iambic pentameter or the format of a haiku (1, Twumasi, 2006). Spoken word should also not be reduced to, nor conflated with, slam poetry, which is defined by a structured set of rules and rituals, including friendly competition and the animated participation of audience members.²² Spoken word must be viewed broadly to encompass the different forms, practices, and sites in which it occurs. These include, for example, the after-school setting of a writing workshop; youth open mic; spoken word as part of political rallies, teach-ins, and protests; what happens informally in the trusted company of peers who share verses in person or on Facebook; or even journaling in a notebook on public transportation, or wherever and whenever else the urge to compose is irrepressible.

Spoken Word and Hip Hop

²² Nana K. Twumasi (2006) explains the idea behind the poetry slam as follows: “The objective of the poetry slam is not to identify the best spoken word artist in the world, nor is it to lord one’s victory over all the other poets they were up against. If anything, poetry slams build connections where there were no bridges before; strangers rally around each other in celebration of the sharing of their art” (2). Slam poetry scholar, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett (2009) characterizes the cultural form of poetry slam in a larger sociohistorical context: “Poetry slams deliberately took verse outside of the academy, taking evaluative power away from academic critics and giving it to popular audiences” (6). The populism of slam poetry rests on, in addition to everyday lived experience manifested in both content and form, audience participation mediated most saliently by performance: “Slam poetry is verse to which, at least theoretically, anyone can have access and whose worth anyone can determine. The accessibility of slam poetry is facilitated and perhaps demanded by the medium of performance, which is bounded by time, space, and – perhaps most important – an audience’s attention span” (5).

Spoken word in its present iteration inescapably must be understood in relation to its historical emergence with and cultural affinities to hip hop. Hip hop itself is a vast, variegated, global-reaching yet locally experienced and expressed cultural form. Hip hop spans a cultural terrain and conglomerate of aesthetic force rooted in black cultural production whose commercially co-opted dominance by corporate mainstream sources constitutes its most contested feature.²³ Critical hip hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994) sketches the culturally predominant attributes and tendencies of hip hop as follows:

Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics and thematics. Emerging from the intersection of lack and desire in the postindustrial city, hip hop manages the painful contradictions of social alienation and prophetic imagination. Hip hop is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community. It is the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of Black cultural expressivity that sets the critical frame for the development of hip hop (21).

The considerably, often vigorously disputed commercialization of hip hop is one that obscures hip hop's original cultural inventiveness and critical social commentaries, the intimacy of its community-focused foundation, and the nuances of its cross-diasporic fertilization (Gilroy, 1993; Chang, 2005), while distorting the historical context of the widespread urban economic devastation and deindustrialization that contributed to its birth. Critical music scholar Josh Kun (2002) juxtaposes the postindustrial urban milieu of hip hop's origins with its astronomical commercial

²³ Tricia Rose (2008) and others (e.g., Hurt, 2006) report that between 70 and 75% of commercial hip hop is consumed by young white males. Others (e.g., Wang, 2006) have argued that the origins of hip hop come from more varied sources, including the influence of martial arts in b-boying and b-girling and the more mainstream form, breakdancing.

success, highlighting its shifts and contradictions over time and how the notion of hip hop – nowadays “constantly invoked if rarely defined” (582) – nominally has transitioned from noun to adjective. In other words, the “hip-hopification” of fashion, language, literature, basketball, and commercials, for example, has virtually exploded while the magnitude and reach of hip hop itself as a globalizing cultural force, as well as its staggering range of local expression in comparison is nearly taken for granted:

hip-hop has gone from being a cumulative inter-American, Afro-Caribbean product of Reaganomic violence on US inner cities, the booming crack trade, and massive deindustrialization campaigns, which shipped jobs out to metropolises and passed off the decimation of affordable housing and public space as urban renewal, to being a confirmed US national commodity that can bring in over \$1.8 billion in sales during a single year (as it did in 2000). The question we’re left with, then, may be simply a matter of definition. Just what is hip-hop at the turn of the century? Is it, to borrow a framework from Chela Sandoval, a ‘differential social movement’ that produces a ‘differential social consciousness’ that becomes a ‘method of emancipation’ (178-83)? Or has it become another commodified object of African-American cultural expression that speaks as much to the construction and performance of race by music industry marketing campaigns as to the construction and performance of race by hip-hop practitioners who use it to imagine new social realities? (581).

Kun’s answer to his own question, “Just what is hip-hop...?” affirms that “[h]ip-hop is all of this, at once: a bundle of beats, rhymes, and videos – bling-bling on MTV, broke on the underground – that speaks to the heart of the contradictions (and sacrifices and triumphs) that all African-American pop cultural forms have always had to negotiate in order to survive the boom and bust of the mainstream pop economy” (581).

Hip hop and its contradictions importantly extend to the inclusion of women and queer of color hip hop artists who historically have been excluded, marginalized or ventriloquized in a cultural world saturated with commercially-driven images of

male dominance, misogyny, and heterosexism (de Leon, 2007; Pritchard & Bibbs, 2007; Clay, 2007). Discourses of gender and sexuality in hip hop, at the same time, are more complex than what a bifurcated view can offer that cleanly separates hip hop feminism from hip hop misogyny, or progressive hip hop from mainstream hip hop (Rose, 1994; Pough, 2007). Female hip hop artists are not always feminist, and male artists are not always sexist. For example, women rappers have relied upon homophobic insults that emasculate men and reinforce heteronormative masculinity. Ice Cube, as another example, has called for the killing of police officers *and* black women (“bitches”), blaming both for the oppression and disempowerment of black men. Works by groups like De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest, two counterexamples, include songs that speak explicitly against sexual violence against women (Rose, 1994). Within these differentiated terms, hip hop must be viewed as a complex cultural formation that holds as much social tension and contradiction as it does an epistemological grounding in communities of color under advanced capitalism, while continuing to reflect a cultural site for rearticulating identities, politics, and difference.²⁴

Amidst the extraordinary cultural and economic contradictions that mark the complexities, globalization, and commodification of hip hop, spoken word’s ties to the original forms, aesthetics, and spirit of hip hop cannot be disarticulated. Spoken word artist and Youth Speaks artistic director Marc Bamuthi Joseph (2006), in his

²⁴ The contradictions and associated ambivalences of hip hop resonate in and reflect many of the contradictions and ambivalences in the world of spoken word, particularly in relation to its every increasing, global-reaching commercialization and community expansions, which I discuss in further detail in chapter five.

“(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet,” argues even further that spoken word stands as hip hop’s last hope as a critical force for social transformation: “if any cultural mode has the capacity to save hip-hop from itself, it is indeed the spoken word” (12). Joseph’s “(Yet Another) Letter” is an earnest awakening and provocation, written in the vernacular of hip hop, to rouse young people as writers and spoken word artists who have the generative powers of language (“the word”) at hand. He contrasts literacy as advanced by Paulo Freire (1996/1970), which espouses a populist, humanizing ethic and a means (praxis) for challenging the status quo, on the one hand, with the “complacent literacy” found in schools, on the other, through literature that exists in a “*dead-white-guy vacuum that was never meant to include you*” (11): “Young World, your words are *just* as valid” (14). Joseph notes the direct connections and (dis)continuities between hip hop and spoken word:

Everyone is in your cipher. Hip-hop has given you a model to present yourself verbally in the public domain. What the culture hasn’t modeled, at least on the commercial level, is how to be accountable for language once you’ve found your spotlight. This is the essential quality of spoken-word poetry that is clearly rooted in hip-hop yet demonstrates aesthetic maturity where hip-hop has strayed from its political promise. Spoken word inherently adheres to the intellectual and social upliftment [*sic*] of the collective (13).

Joseph insists that a steadfast loyalty to “aesthetic maturity” and accountability with language is decidedly what sets spoken word apart from much of hip hop.

Characterizing spoken word “as youth culture’s most active and accessible response to verbally engage political consciousness” (16), he recognizes that young people already possess literacy, as well as a command and flair with words: “*no way that dude* [referring to Rainier Maria Rilke, early 20th century European author of the

original (unremixed) *Letters to a Young Poet*] could EVER bust like you” (11). He charges young folks to use their words responsibly, to uplift others and themselves, and to utilize and reveal the discursive powers of language. “As a distinct element of hip-hop culture,” Joseph writes, spoken word “is the aesthetic bridge to a reaffirmed free speech. The form and its adherents engender conversation of resistance, spoken in the vernacular of young urban people” (16). Spoken word, in the sense of a free speech aesthetic and discourse of resistance embedded in young people’s home vernacular, represents a contemporary practice of Freireian pedagogy. Spoken word as a popular education form invests in and works towards the sociopolitical empowerment of youth, their critical insertions in conversation and in practices of citizenship, and overall a more deeply democratic public sphere and future (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1987).²⁵

About This Chapter

In this chapter, I explicate the theoretical underpinnings that frame and inform this dissertation. My goal for this chapter is to lay out and unpack the conceptual and theoretical currents and their intersections in order to illuminate the analyses and stories that follow in the remaining chapters. As Homi Bhabha (1994) points out, a central purpose of theory is the process of “intervening ideologically,” and acknowledging “the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse, as a productive matrix which defines the ‘social’ and makes it available as an objective

²⁵ Andreana Clay (2012) discusses spoken word in the context of youth organizing and activism in Oakland as a form of post-civil rights politics, using a case of youth who are part of Youth Speaks.

of and for, action” (34). The task of this chapter within this framing is to theorize the origins and makings of a cultural movement in order to provide a backdrop for understanding, and to give force and weight to, the craft, production and community of spoken word activism. I begin by discussing feminist theories as a starting point and crucial lens for the critical study of youth grounded in a notion of politics as expressed, achieved, and lived in the everyday lives of youth. I proceed by shifting from the location of politics in the everyday to its location in the cultural realm, beginning with the enunciation of literacy in the work of Paulo Freire. I put Freire’s notion of literacy in much larger theoretical context than how it is typically read by bringing into view the workings of ideology, hegemony, and ideological struggle and change, drawing from classic cultural studies literature. This analytical perspective exposes literacy’s material dimension, particularly as it applies to spoken word as a cultural movement in the making. I end this chapter by expanding discursive literacy to its broadest terms, taking a look at performativity through Chela Sandoval’s (2000) “methodology of the oppressed” as a framework for conceptualizing the political logics, deployment and maneuverings of social movement work. What I aim to reveal in this chapter is a theoretical blueprint of cultural movement-making that contains more questions than answers but also accounts for an abundance of cunning, impromptu tactics that always accommodates an array of skillfully organized strategies (de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1985; Scott, 1990; Kelley, 1996; Grey, 2005). I further strive to show how movement work rests on the pedagogical powers of literacy understood primarily as reflective action with definite material consequences.

In the case of spoken word, literacy that centers art in the concerns of its community and youth, and provides innumerable openings for dialogue that serves to transform ourselves with and in connection to others.

Feminist Theories as a Framework: Politics in the Everyday Lives of Youth

[Y]ou can take a young person from Marin, California who's in AP English. And put them in a room with somebody who's, you know. Whatever. Grew up in South Berkeley, as an example. Who's had parents on crack. Who can barely read and write. You put both those kids in a room. You give them a prompt. I guarantee you that that kid from South Berkeley will *blow* that other child away. You know? Time in, time out. So I think that there's probably, there's a natural gift in poetry that comes with deep experiences. 'Cause it can make your poetry deep. And so, obviously those things are not trainable. I think that, for like the AP student, it can maybe get them to touch, to go *deeper* into things that might have happened to them. Or what they want in the world. Or, you know, to connect in some way. And I think for the other young person, it can help them process things that they've been through, and also can give them stronger, kind of grammar tools or vocabulary. So I think it *meets* young people in different places. And guides them accordingly. I think poetry is a unique vehicle for that. 'Cause it's not, "we're gonna write five paragraph essays." They're not gonna demonize you if you don't have, you know, these high-level vocabulary words. It's gonna take your story and then push you. You know. And if you don't want to say it, and you have a secret inside, they will probably get you to be in front of thousands of people and tell your secret. And that's why people are in the audience crying. I mean, that's, you know, that's why there's no one that can touch it. No funder, no school. Because there's a level there that is hard to get to. And once you get a kid to go there with themselves, it's like, what's—there's nothing—what else is there that's impossible? Everything is possible, you know?

—Vajra

I begin with Vajra's words, from an interview I conducted with her in 2008, as entry into discussing feminist theories as a conceptual framework for this research.

Vajra is a former high school teacher, longtime educator, and spoken word community organizer. In this segment, she contrasts the lived experiences of, hypothetically, a young person from Marin, California, a predominantly white, economically wealthy community located north of San Francisco, with a young

person from South Berkeley, bordering North Oakland in an area known for crime and violence and populated by largely low-income and economically impoverished black residents. That the young person from Marin is an “Advanced Placement” student, in addition to the geographic location of her or his school, suggests that this student has far more educational resources and opportunities, or dominant cultural capital in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms, and is immersed in greater material and social privilege than the South Berkeley student. Vajra’s insistence, “that that kid from South Berkeley will *blow* that other child away,” refers to an epistemological position and social location that correlate with life experience and a deeper autobiographical narrative in poetry: “there’s a natural gift in poetry that comes with deep experiences...obviously those things are not trainable.” Spoken word, moreover, reaches a number and range of youth, no matter their circumstances, and enables and challenges young people to write and express their own stories in the public realm. Spoken word, in other words, “*meets* young people in different places. And guides them accordingly.” Pushing young people to tell their story or “secret” translates into an intimacy and immediacy for audience members that fuels compassion and enriches human understanding of youth experience. Because of this intersubjective moment and feat, where a young kid not only goes “there” (or to “a level there that is hard to get to”) with her or himself, but takes an audience there as well, nothing, as Vajra sees it, is impossible.

One’s social location, and the material conditions of and life chances associated with that position, matter a great deal to feminist theorizing in connection

to the deep structures of social domination and oppression that systematically affect groups of people differentially and in correspondence to race, gender, class, and age, along with other axes of social power. These structures, at the same time, in one form or another implicate us all (Aptheker, 2003). One's social location matters not as an individual's possession or autonomous entity disconnected from other people and locations (Naples & Vidal-Ortiz, 2009). Subject positions are shared locations that are situated in communities and in political and social contexts that are intimately and historically tied to particular formations of culture, epistemic knowledge, and material reality (Scott, 1992; Moya, 1997; Wylie, 2004).

On a simplest, most fundamental level, bell hooks (2000) defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (viii, see also hooks, 1984/2000). On the surface, feminism's primary concern “to end sexism...” may appear to largely preclude youth and focus exclusively on the civil and human rights, equality, and inclusion of women and girls. I argue in this section that youth and young people in general constitute a central part of feminist theories and must be squarely situated within the complex, non-unified, non-uniform histories of feminism, or more precisely, *feminisms*. Moreover, while youth as a social category and group, for the most part, are not always an explicit or obvious part of the project of feminist theorizing, nor are generally foregrounded in the feminist literature,²⁶ I assert that youth in fact provide a crucial site for further feminist theorizing.

²⁶ Feminist literature that has focused on youth include a special issue of *Signs* as well as recent and emerging literature on the role and involvement of young women and girls in social movements.

Youth as a social category is most often marked by biological age, as a psychosocial developmental stage of human life (Erikson, 1950), and as a temporary condition if not, paradoxically, unmarked by a “collective enunciation as undeniably exilic,” as depicted by Riley (1996). Youth are also “everywhere and nowhere,” as Maira and Soep (2005) point out, alluding to how youth constitute risk, social liability, or threat yet simultaneously remain in the shadows and behind the scenes of everyday life given how social policies often divest resources away from their social well-being, formal education, and futures. In the social sciences literature, youth are portrayed “as inadequately formed adults, as subjects lacking in the presumably desired qualities of adulthood, rather than as subjects in their own right with specific (even if they are not always unique) needs and concerns” (Maira and Soep, 2005, xxi-xxii). Social scientists have further distorted characterizations of youth historically through the lens of race. Reducing notions of culture to behavioral traits especially in black communities has etched in the popular imagination depictions of these communities and young people as dysfunctional and against an assumed normality of whiteness (Kelley, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006).²⁷ Phil Mizen (2002) emphasizes the importance of youth age in general to the state and its political management of capitalist social relations, arguing for the centrality of politics in youth studies. Lipsitz (2005) aptly characterizes youth as a *social achievement*, understood not

²⁷ For example, Kelley (1997) has noted the overshadowing of inventiveness and symbolic creativity in “playing the dozens” in the social scientific literature, replaced with characterizations of cultural deficiency and pathological deviancy. Asian Americans depicted as a “model minority” serves as another example of the reduction of culture to behavioral traits (Lee, 1996).

necessarily in the positive sense of achievement (Maira & Soep, 2005), but in relation to the work, struggles, triumphs, lived experiences, and conditions associated with occupying “a social position structured by the simultaneous powers of consumption, creativity, schooling, citizenship, surveillance, and social membership” (Lipsitz, 2005, xiv).

The connections that define, shape, and inform the intersections of feminisms and critical youth studies are multitudinous and together reflect fertile territory for mutually furthering both bodies of scholarship. Concerns focused on violence against youth, youth empowerment, and social change premised upon difference convey and coincide with feminist concerns for subaltern groups (Spivak, 1988). Youth are not immune to, but are also not total victims of physical, discursive, and symbolic violence, which bell hooks (2000; 1984/2000) contends are oftentimes expressions of capitalistic patriarchal violence whose structural nature sits at the heart of feminist matters and theorizing. She concludes, “[f]eminist efforts to end male violence against women must be expanded into a movement to end all forms of violence” (66). Many youth, moreover, identify as feminists or practice feminisms whether or not they acknowledge these practices as feminist. Aída Hurtado (2003a; 2003b) refers to this sort of feminism as “underground feminism,” or a “no-name” feminism whose definition extends beyond the confines of the academy and scholarly print into everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1985; Scott, 1990; Kelly, 1994/1996). She curbs the notion of underground feminism, however, to focus on “how poor women of Color *live* without calling it feminism, in contrast to academic definitions that have

not captured fully the complexities of these women's lives" (95). I expand the notion of underground feminism to cover practices of youth (as well as adults, men, and white women) that work against reproducing social structures of domination based on essentialized categories of, for example, race, gender, and class (Omi & Winant, 1994; Moya, 1997; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). This turn towards emphasizing youth in feminisms contributes towards a dismantling of widespread mischaracterizations of feminists as angry or as man-haters, bra-burners, lesbians, and women only. My intellectual stake in feminisms for this research is in the countless compatibilities between feminisms and spoken word written and performed by youth. My emphasis in the remainder of this section, therefore, is to unpack feminisms in further detail, complexity, and historicity to make the connections to youth and spoken word even more explicit.

Feminisms as a body of knowledge and social movement emerged as what is widely known as the second wave of feminism, dominated by white, class-privileged women in the United States during the 1960s, alongside other social movements for civil rights, political and ethnic dignity and liberation, and sexual freedoms and expressions. First wave feminism refers to women's activism in the early 20th century U.S., including organized efforts to attain suffrage for women. Feminist standpoint theory arose from both waves, and was advanced drastically further from feminists of color of the third wave starting from the 1970s and prior to that,²⁸ as a critical feminist theory that focuses on the relationship between the production of

²⁸ For example, see Cohambee River Collective's (1977) "A black feminist statement."

knowledge and the practices of power in connection to the social and material conditions of women. Feminist standpoint theory challenges the conventional assumption that politics impedes the production of scientific knowledge and social objectivity and has become an explanatory theory as well as a methodology. Standpoint theory, to be sure, is not a unified, uniform approach in feminist scholarship. There are differing, oftentimes conflicting views about standpoint theory (for example, the question of the centrality of scientific objectivity) such that the fractious and varied debates give rise to an understanding that “standpoint theories must be recognized as essentially contested” (Hartsock, as quoted in Wylie, 2004, 340). Whatever its particular, nuanced form, standpoint theory emphasizes how all knowledge is socially situated, partially produced, and historically contingent, and that differences in oppression become significant epistemological and political resources (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004).

Feminist standpoint theory grants *epistemic privilege* to “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them” (Wylie, 2004, 339) by virtue of their experiences and how they understand their experiences, and can be made apparent “whenever oppressed peoples gain public voice” (Harding, 2004, 3). Paula Moya (1997) defines epistemic privilege as “a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power” (136). Standpoint theory, in this sense, maps the transformation of relative social and political disadvantage into epistemological,

scientific, and political advantage. The notion of epistemic advantage should not be interpreted as an *automatic* privilege that is afforded to those who occupy subordinated positions. Rather, a standpoint is an *achievement* (Harding, 2004), claiming no “*a priori* link between social location or identity and knowledge, but a link that is historically variable and mediated through the interpretation of experience” (Moya, 1997, 136). In other words, that there are epistemic consequences of social locations is not the same as claiming that particular knowledges inhere within particular social locations. As an achievement, a standpoint is also not merely a perspective or viewpoint. The concern of standpoint theory is “both the effects and the emancipatory potential of *standpoints* that are struggled for and achieved, by epistemic agents who are critically aware of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized” (Wylie, 2004, 343). Similar to the proletariat in Marxist theory who achieve *class* consciousness, Nancy Hartsock (2004) notes, “women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogocentric institutions and ideology which concentrate the capitalist form of patriarchy” (36).

Feminist scholars of color have provided tremendous advances and insights to feminist scholarship, both furthering and deepening standpoint theory, especially in the wake of the publication of the landmark collection, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981/1983), a compilation of creative and intellectual writings, personal narratives, and testimonials of Chicana/Latina, Black, Asian American, and

Native American women. Feminist theorizing by women of color in the U.S., however, dates as far back as the mid-19th century when Sojourner Truth addressed to a convention of white suffragists, “Ain’t I a women?” (Sandoval, 2000; Kelley, 2002), and to the work of Anna Julia Cooper, who lived both during the days of slavery (as a slave) and emancipation, *and* through part of the civil rights movement. In Cooper’s 1892 work, *A Voice from the South*, she writes, “the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the *black woman*” (Cooper, 1892, as cited in Lemert, 1999, 179). The condition of black women, in other words, serves as a barometer for gauging the social conditions of everyone and the state of democracy in the U.S. (Kelley, 2002).

Among the most important contributions of feminists of color have been insights on the intersectional nature of social locations and how “major systems of oppression are interlocking,” namely how race, class, and sexual oppressions are most often experienced simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1995; Combahee River Collective, 1979; Collins, 2000; Moya, 2003; Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Sandoval, 2000; Pérez, 2000; Hurtado, 2003; Gunn Allen, 1986/1992; Espiritu, 1997; Lowe 1996). The rise of women of color feminisms marks a major break from and dissatisfaction with the dominance of white, largely class-privileged women in the feminist movement, as well as sexism inherent to the black power, Chicano, and other raced-based movements, in which the particular conditions, realities, politics, and lived experiences of women of color were rendered invisible, seemingly divisive, or

irrelevant (Moya, 1997; Kelley, 2002; Combahee River Collective, 1979). The erasure and inconsequentiality of black women's lives, for example, in these major social movements stood in stark contrast to the hypervisibility of black women in the mainstream through assaultive, eugenics-based social policies like forced sterilization that restricted their reproductive decisions (Roberts, 1997; Davis, 1981). Widely circulated public policy reports, moreover, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, place blame on what Moynihan characterizes a matriarchal culture of single black mothers for an alleged "disorganization" and "pathology" of black families (Kelley, 2002; Roberts, 1997; Davis, 1981).

All young people inhabit intersectional social locations that are marked, shaped, and to some degree, circumscribed by the simultaneous forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and age, to name a few. The scholarship of feminisms, and the works of feminists of color in particular enable us to consider how the notion of epistemic advantage applies to the conditions, lives, achieved standpoints, politics, and knowledge of racialized youth, whose conditions reflect another barometer for determining general social conditions and the status of democracy in the U.S. (Collins, 2006; Kelly, 2002; Lipsitz, 2005; Maira & Soep, 2005; Hosang, 2006). Feminisms point to the role and significance of politics, not merely in the sense of the official realm of, for example, electoral politics, but in an everyday sense by assigning relevance and giving expression to lived experiences associated with subjugated and marginalized social locations: "Politics is not separate from lived

experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives” (Kelley, 1994, 9). Racialized youth standpoints, further, are not a mere matter of identity politics in the *last* instance,²⁹ but a matter of political consciousness raising that precedes and inspires social and collective transformation. Within the context of feminist theory, the term “youth of color” is designated a political category, constituency, and term for building and furthering political alliances that are necessary for the deployment of a strategic essentialism in the work of youth organizing, coalition-building, and community education and pedagogy, including political arts activism through spoken word (Hosang, 2006; Sandoval, 2000; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003; Morley & Chen, 1996).

From the Politics of Everyday to the Politics of Culture: War of Position, Built on the Backs of Words

*The flesh
Of the word spoken
Is the breath of the one who spoke it
Each word spoken
Is a tangible piece
Of someone*

— Anthony “Amde” Hamilton

*Picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images.
Words are blades of grass pushing past obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable...*

—Gloria Anzaldúa

²⁹ With respect to racialized standpoints in the *first* instance, however, feminist scholars of color such as Gayatri Spivak (1988), Andy Smith (2006), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have suggested the relevance of *strategic essentialisms* around identity and struggle to social mobilization and coalition-building (also see Hall, 1996).

Poetry reaches back through the levels of meaning production to try to lead consciousness out of its disciplinization and inscription in culture to a potential utopia existing between, around, and through language.
—Chela Sandoval

Feminist theories as a framework, in connection to spoken word and the cultural momentum that builds from and reinforces the art form, substantiates a notion of politics grounded in the everyday lived experiences and realities of youth as they are shaped by and embedded in the deep structures of social inequality and injustice that implicate us all along the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and their intersections (Smith, 1987; Crenshaw, 1995; Collins, 2000; Aptheker, 2003). The cultural movement of spoken word, particularly as it is expressed among youth in the San Francisco Bay Area, in many ways reflects the conceptual and practical work of Paulo Freire (1987; 1970/1996). Freire's critical view of literacy comprises not merely a skill set that applies to individual learning and self-empowerment, but a form of cultural politics and a precondition for individuals who are present, active, and in collective struggle towards a more radically democratic society. This view of literacy is situated within a theory of cultural (re)production, in which literacy is the primary vehicle for negotiating and maneuvering the politically discursive terrain of culture. Literacy, in this sense, reflects Freire's deep vision of a world where "saying the word is a fundamental right and not merely a habit, in which saying the word is the right to become a part of the decision to transform the world" (55). Without this entitlement to authorship, literacy is stripped of its political dimension and potential and serves to reproduce dominant meaning and values. For Freire, words and how one uses them matter, as the world at large is part of a greater, historically situated,

social text, one in which we write ourselves into and in relation to all others:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...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 (35).

Writing or *reinscribing* the social world is a matter of historical transformation, not a shifting of power from one group to another, from the dominant to the marginalized, or from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, as if two distinctly homogeneous classes indeed exist.^{30,31} Freire, like the critical feminists, views knowledge as inseparable from social power and as constructed from experience, while the production of knowledge occurs relationally. The production of knowledge for Freire is dialogic in the broadest sense and occurs through social interaction, which accounts for the constant generation of new meanings, consciousness, and discourse (Bakhtin, 1986; Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov, 1973; Hall, 1996; Foucault, 1978):

Knowledge is not produced in the intentions of those who believe they hold it, whether in the pen or in the voice. It is produced in the process of interaction, between writer and reader at the moment of reading, and between teacher and learner at the moment of classroom engagement. Knowledge is not the matter that is offered so much as the matter that is understood (18, quoting Lusted, 1986).

Language, it follows, must be viewed as productive and generative, and not merely reflective of social reality, as “one of the most important social practices through

³⁰ Bettina Aptheker (2003) writes, “(e)ach of us can occupy an oppressor position, depending on the historical moment and our positionality” (229).

³¹ Elsewhere, Freire (1996/1970) writes, “[i]n order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (26).

which we come to experience ourselves as subjects” (153, quoting Macedo).

Language as social practice is central to Freireian thought for language takes on distinctly pedagogical and political forms in the production of knowledge, power, and culture. Put in another way, words function as a form of praxis for Freire, containing both reflection and action: “To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (69). In this final section, I draw from the literature of cultural studies, primarily the scholarship of Stuart Hall (1996), in order to put Freire’s notion of literacy in a much larger social context. Hall’s work, particularly around the ideas of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, helps to unpack the *materiality* of literacy in the sense not of only literacy’s material force as an effect on individual consciousness, but of how social and historical conditions can be changed on the scale of movement work that relies on and tends to organic intellectual formations extant and arising among youth. In essence, this discussion of the material effects of literacy is a Marxist view of literacy, in which ideology itself is the material substance of history. I then turn to strands of thinking on the *performative* nature of identity, in order to situate social change and transformation in the context of culture as a major force of globalization. I focus on the scholarship of Chela Sandoval as a particular theory of performativity to discuss theoretical operations and deployment in movement work, namely what she refers to as a “methodology of the oppressed” through which she accounts simultaneously for difference and coalition-building in

movement-making. Together, I argue that these additional bodies of literature add substantial theoretical value by filling in conceptual gaps in Freire's work as it applies to the study of spoken word and its makings as a cultural movement.

The materiality of literacy can be understood directly in terms of ideology and its material effects. Literacy, more specifically, functions as an outward expression and conveyer of ideology. Stuart Hall (1996) acknowledges the problem of ideology as concerning "the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a 'material force'" (27). He credits Louis Althusser (1971) particularly for his theory of the interpellation of subjects into ideology, which he argues, "opened the gate to a more linguistic or 'discursive' conception of ideology. It put on the agenda the whole neglected issue of how ideology becomes internalized, how we come to speak 'spontaneously', within the limits of the categories of thought which exist outside us and which can more accurately be said to think us" (30). Hall merits Althusser also for his revisions to classical Marxism that insist "on the *function* of ideology in the reproduction of social relations of production and . . . on the metaphorical utility of the base-superstructure metaphor" (30). What Hall rejects is what he dismisses of Marxism in general in its structurally determinate form of the economic and of class relations in the *last* instance. With Althusser, Hall's main problems are that his extension of Marxism is too orthodox in its class-based structuring of ideology, and too functionalist in its coupling of ruling class with ruling ideas. Instead, Hall proposes a "Marxism without guarantees" as his alternative that exemplifies his preference and tendency towards a "middle-level" theoretical position

(between modernism and postmodernism, for example, or between structuralism and poststructuralism) and open-ended theorizing. According to Hall, Marxism without guarantees is about knowing the boundaries of theory but still being able to draw from its strengths:

Understanding ‘determinacy’ in terms of setting limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the ‘givenness’ of social practices, rather than in terms of the absolute predictability of particular outcomes, is the only basis of a ‘marxism without final guarantees’. It establishes the *open horizon* of marxist theorizing – determinacy without guaranteed closures (45).

Hall goes on to state that the usefulness of a “materialist conception of history” (Ollman, 1971; Marx & Engels, 1978) in Marxist theory is based on “‘determination by the economic in the *first* instance’, since marxism is surely correct, against all idealisms, to insist that no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located” (45).

In his later work, Hall (1996) turns to the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971/2003) on the concept of hegemony, applying its significance to the study of race and ethnicity, and delineates the notion chiefly in terms of ongoing and historical ideological struggle that is “necessarily fragmented, disjointed, and episodic.” I argue that this discussion of Gramsci’s hegemony is key to understanding literacy’s longer-term material effects of and potential for changing social and historical conditions as it applies to the case of spoken word and youth.

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is “the *process* by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and the ascendancy of that bloc secured” (Hall, 1996, 44). Hegemony is a historically specific moment that is multi-dimensional and multi-arena

in character. Each hegemonic formation has its own social configuration and composition. Therefore, ruling ideas are not automatically coupled with ruling classes in a zero-sum game of ideology, as in the case of Althusser: “Rather, the effective coupling of dominant ideas *to* the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the processes of ideological struggle is *intended to secure*. It is the object of the exercise, not the playing out of an already written and concluded script” (Hall, 44). Hegemony is neither universal nor uniform; rather, it is “a precarious, ‘moving equilibrium’ achieved through the orchestration of conflicting and competing forces by more or less unstable, more or less temporary alliances of class fractions” (Hebdige, 1996, 198). At the risk of perhaps overly simplistic terms, hegemony, like culture, can be appositely viewed as a verb, rather than a noun, over the course of historical temporality.

Gramsci overcomes the economic and structural determinism of Marxism precisely because he argues, according to Stuart Hall (1996), “that ideological struggle does not take place by displacing one whole, integral, class-mode of thought with another wholly-formed system of ideas ... [Rather,] His is a ‘war of position’ conception of ideological struggle” (42). *War of position*, Hall describes, is “conducted in a protracted way, across many different and varying fronts of struggle; where there is rarely a single break-through which wins the war once and for all ... What really counts in a war of position is ... the whole structure of society, including the structures and institutions of civil society” (426). Rather than focusing all forces into the condensed front of a singular moment of struggle, as in the case of a *war of*

manoeuvre, war of position is increasingly becoming the form of struggle and approach to social and political change, requiring an “unprecedented concentration of hegemony’ ... [and] ‘exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness’ because, once won, it is ‘decisive definitely’” (428). War of position reflects predominantly the struggle on the ideological terrain over common sense, is historically specific and located across institutions and the social landscape, and is not equated to domination but a “process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests” (Slack, 1996).

Hall (1996) reveres Gramsci for implicating culture as a crucial dimension through which differentiation and shifts in an ideological complex can occur. Culture “is the historically-shaped terrain on which *all* ‘new’ philosophical and theoretical currents work and with which they must come to terms” (434, *emphasis added*). Therefore, culture can be a significant location of politics and social change.

Culture as a terrain of struggle presents possibilities through which “old alignments are dismantled and new alignments can be effected between elements of different discourses and between social forces and ideas” (434). Ideological change occurs and is interpreted through the articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation of ideas. *Articulation* represents a focal political project of cultural studies, one that is ascribed multiple meanings. Articulation signifies a way of theorizing the lived world as well as a method for doing cultural analysis. Meaghan Morris (1997) describes articulation as “*process* in the world around us”, as “*method* for analysing this process,” and as a “model of practice.” Articulation can be understood both in

terms of *speaking* and *linking* “to argue that the contingent conditions in which language is spoken ... form the speaker’s point of entry into a particular set of social relations” (Fiske, 1996, 213). Hall (1996) argues, articulation is “a practice of thinking ‘unity and difference’, of ‘difference *in* complex unity, without becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such” (122). It serves as a kind of connection that can unify two distinct elements *under certain conditions*, “a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (115), always constructed through social practice. The practice of literacy can be represented as a particular form and practice of articulation. In the case of spoken word literacy, young people theorize and analyze the world they live in, move through individually and maneuver collectively, and position themselves as new, emerging, and established political subjects in various ways, largely in and through the processes of becoming (Hall, 1996a; Hall, 1996b).

The notion of subjectivity within the project of cultural studies is rearticulated to avoid or minimize problems associated with essentializing identities. In his piece, “New Ethnicities,” Hall (1996) points to how “the black experience” became “a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, [and] became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities” (441). Instead, he speaks of “the end of the innocence of the black subject or the end of the innocent notion of an essential black subject” to more precisely capture the fragmented, historically specific, non-monolithic, and non-essential nature of cultural hegemony: “Cultural hegemony is

never about pure victory or pure domination . . . it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it” (468). As subjects, individuals are in constant negotiation “with a series of different positionalities” rather than “a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others” (473). The politics, therefore, with which to engage should not be based on “the invocation of a guaranteed black [or any other essentialized] experience.” Youth or youth of color represents another sort of fragmented, historically specific, non-monolithic, non-innocent, and non-essential category of identity, based not on a guaranteed singularity of essentialized experience (even age range cannot absolutely determine singularity), but still reflects a necessary category for both analysis and achievement of cultural hegemony, displacements, and shifts of power. The construction of a rearticulated form of subjectivity, as broader than the individual or in terms of *subject positions* (Scott, 1992), and more diverse and conflicting than of a singularity, epitomizes a major contribution of the field of cultural studies: “cultural studies allows us to take the further step of insisting that authority is articulated in contexts which limit the possibilities for what authority can mean and what can be said, by whom, to exercise authority – and how, if necessary, those limits can be changed” (Morris, 1997, 50). In other words, the project of cultural studies deems itself as a “radically contextual” one that engages the shifts, alliances, and contradictions of identification rather than on pure, pristine, fixed, or essentialized identities (Hall, 1996).

The explanatory currents of critical social theory, including cultural studies, provide seemingly little or no room or agency for the subject, and at best, contradictory notions of the subject that are mixed with a much larger-than-subject, semi-autonomous, sociohistorically reified source of control. Saidiya Hartman (1999), for example, in her analysis of the experiences of black female slave victims of rape, illustrates these contradictions by revealing how black slave women were considered under slave law to be both property and sexualized agents who influenced their own circumstances of rape. Agency, after all, like Bahktinian terms of language, “is never wholly one’s own. One has to appropriate it by rearticulating others’ voices. . . . And rather than a frontal action against a single source of oppression, it requires working in a range of groups and organizations, working with and mediating to help provide interfaces among diverse agendas” (Yúdice, 2003, 157). Works that employ an analytical lens of *performativity* redraw discussions of the subject onto a theoretical terrain that opens up a range and scale of possibilities for political struggle and social change. Performativity theory provides a macro-level view of historical shifts and hegemonic struggles by considering culture as a force of globalization, a globalizing plain on which a war of position is protracted on many diversified fronts, locally lived and experienced, yet also transnationally interconnected and fueled. In this final section, I take a look at a performative framing of cultural movement-making from the lens of Chela Sandoval’s work on the methodology and theorizing of U.S. third world feminism, to locate the possibilities

for transposing the ideas onto the field of critical youth studies and interrelated youth movement forms that work differentially towards global decolonization.

Movement-Making in a Performative Framework

Chela Sandoval (2000) offers an insightful analysis in her discussion of the theoretical operations and deployment involved in social movement work. Sandoval draws partially from Althusser as her starting point for formulating a theory and method of a performative oppositional consciousness. Althusser identifies the ideological state apparatuses to be the site of class struggle where “the resistance of the exploited class is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle” (112). Sandoval builds upon Althusser’s ideas that, in her words, “all citizens endure ideological subjection” and “‘means and conditions’ do become generated whereby individuals and groups in opposition are able to effectively challenge and transform oppressive aspects of identity and social order” (43). Yet, Sandoval argues that how and on what terms these challenges and changes occur are not specified in Althusser’s work. According to Sandoval, a theory of ideology must consider consciousness not only as subordinate and resistant, but also “in its more effective, persistent, and self-conscious oppositional manifestations” (43), namely in collective solidarity and action to effect material conditions.

Sandoval’s is a theory that conceptualizes movement work in terms of a social apparatus and technology for transformation, grounded first and foremost as a theory and method of oppositional consciousness and second, as a methodology of the

oppressed for an emancipation that “cuts through the grammar of supremacy.” This apparatus is made up of five skills or methods, including semiotics, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, democratics, and differential consciousness, which she details as manifesting the inner and outer technologies, or psychic and social processes required of practitioners of differential social movements “necessary for forging 21st century modes of decolonizing globalization” (2):

In practical terms, this extended theory focuses on identifying forms of ideology in opposition that can be generated and coordinated by those classes self-consciously seeking affective liberatory stances in relation to the dominant social order. The idea here, that the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to ‘break with ideology’ while at the same time *also* speaking in, and from within, ideology is an idea that lays the philosophical foundations enabling us to make the vital connections between the seemingly disparate social and political aims that drive, yet ultimately divide, social movements from within (43-44).

Ideology, coinciding with cultural studies scholars, is the material terrain from which much of the work of activism and social movements must begin and reconcile.

Sandoval locates her work using as the particular case of U.S. third world feminism, which positions itself against the hegemonic feminism of largely white U.S. feminist scholars, as an essential postmodern resistance movement of the 20th century. Feminists of color, she writes, “exist in the interstices between normalized social categories” (46). In this analysis she reveals a cultural topography by which oppositional theory, practice, identity, and aesthetics can be “cognitively mapped” in order to recognize movement work in the making. Sandoval’s notion of *differential consciousness* is the fifth ideological form in her cultural topography, which maps the critical points of orientation for “individuals and groups seeking to transform

dominant and oppressive powers [and who] can constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional citizen-subjects” (54). Differential consciousness is the mode of oppositional consciousness that allows movement among the other four ideological positionings: the equal-rights form (liberal feminism within hegemonic feminist theories), the revolutionary form (marxist and socialist feminisms), the supremacist form (assertions of superiority and a higher evolutionary level among subordinated groups), and the separatist form (nurturance of differences through complete separation): “These ideological positions are kaleidoscoped into an original, eccentric and queer sight when the fifth differential mode is utilized as a theoretical and methodological device for retroactively clarifying and giving new meaning to any other” (44). Sandoval uses the metaphor of a clutch to describe the function of differential consciousness, as “the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (58). In this sense, differential consciousness works as the medium through which each ideological form becomes *ideology-praxis* that can be “transformed into tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power” (58). Within this framework, Sandoval posits that the dialectical maneuverings allow one to act within but also beyond the confines of dominant ideology, “the practitioner breaks with ideology while also speaking in and from within ideology” (63). As a framework for the present dissertation study, Sandoval’s theory of differential movement and consciousness illuminates an intellectual path for considering how, as historical blocs and citizen-subjects, youth, youth of color, and youth advocates, using spoken word

as the primary pedagogical apparatus, performatively maneuver, artistically and organizationally, in and through materially ideological struggle in order to hegemonically subvert and rearticulate discourses around politically contested notions and assertions of youth, literacy, and culture. As Daniel Hosang (2006) highlights in his research on grassroots youth community organizing, there are significant “contributions of contemporary youth-led organizing in refashioning the ideological landscape through which particular racialized representations of ‘youth’ are constructed and naturalized” (5). What is more, these ideological rearticulations that originate through subjective and intersubjective forms of knowledge and consciousness accumulate and maneuver towards a kind of *war of position* that realizes its long-term political power and impact in the ways young people imagine, formulate, intervene, and identify themselves in, and reimagine and refashion possibilities for the social world.

CHAPTER THREE
Mapping the Landscape: Spoken Word in the Bay Area & Beyond

*The road from Cambodia to Oakland is unreachable
Like the reflection in my bathroom mirror
A part of me was lost
With the language I forgot to speak long ago
And my ancestors have lost touch
...
But I still see the war in Mother's eyes
When she cries
Thirty years in this country
Hard work, sweat and tears
Yet still second-class citizens
...
I represent my mother
A hard-working Cambodian woman
She only had four hours of sleep last night
I represent my culture
A history hidden in the darkness
Now a pedal breaking through the concrete
I represent my family
Six kids, a single, hard-working mom
We're not just a number under the poverty line*

—Christсна Sot, 16

In this passage of his spoken word poem, 16-year-old Christсна Sot traces an historical journey. This journey, stretching from Cambodia to Oakland, is one that he cannot always see clearly or touch directly because it consists of experiences that are not of his own flesh. The journey though very real and present in feeling is “unreachable,” like the image that reflects back to him in the mirror. For Christсна, a second-generation Cambodian American son of a refugee single mother of six, the Khmer language also has faded, as have his ancestors who “have lost touch,” and so “a part of me was lost.” Still, he is able to grasp a sense of his familial and cultural history, one that is scarred by the escape from genocide and war crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979 that claimed the lives of 1.7 million

Cambodians. Christna “reads” much of this history through his mother: the war he sees in her eyes, her typical “four hours of sleep” at night, and her sweat, tears, and hard work. His appraisals help him understand intuitively the historical context of poverty and “second-class” citizenship in which he and his family live, and to assert “*We’re not just a number under the poverty line.*” He takes not for granted his matrilineage (“*I represent my mother*”) and his attachments to family (“*I represent my family*”) and culture (“*I represent my culture*”). Christna further recognizes how this historical journey extends into his life and youthhood in Oakland. That his family’s ties to Cambodian culture reflect “*A history hidden in the darkness/Now a pedal breaking through the concrete*” marks Christna’s poem as hopeful and insists his history is not lost through him, alluding to the imagery invoked by the late rapper Tupac Shakur in his poem and literary collection, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* (Shakur, 1999).

To borrow from Avery Gordon’s (2004) framework, Christna allows a kind of *haunting*³² to take place in his poem, paying attention to and making present and known a certain invisibility and disappearance in his familial and cultural history. Haunting occurs when an “apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us” (63), making

³² Gordon (2004) frames the social study of haunting as follows: “haunting [is] a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted. Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production” (7).

what historically has disappeared reappear. Ghostly matters are the substance of haunting, where the ghost is “a social figure” representing “that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Haunting is a *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977), one that is shared and articulates its presence “as the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences” (Gordon, 2004, 200), expressing “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (Williams, 1977, 132 as quoted in Gordon, 2004, 198). Haunting results in, and is experienced as, “transformative recognition.”

By bringing the invisible into visibility, Christna is doing the work of tracing. Haunting is a constitutive part of social life, “about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look” (22). Gordon argues, “the ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother” (64). Christna’s poem traces structural affect out of a concern for justice, mapping a social space and his own sense of “hospitable” community memory (Gray & Gómez- Barris, 2010; Gordon, 2004). His narrative themes of a determined survival (“*a pedal breaking through the concrete*”) and restored humanity (“*We’re not just a number under the poverty line*”) engage both a unique story and general social discourse found among the Southeast Asian American communities of Oakland. By positioning his story in relation to social injustice and

the marginalization of racialized minority, poor, and immigrant communities in the U.S. inner-city, Christna's work ideologically interrupts dominant racialized-class and -gender discourse, as well as a particular, concurrent silence-yet-presence around historical community memory and identification. His poetry serves as just one example and illustration of spoken word as a site of knowledge production and ideological intervention, one that gives multiple, various, and robust expressions to the old feminist maxim, *the personal is political*, or as Alexander (2000) tells us, *the spiritual* is even political.

A concern for justice infuses spoken word poetry in general. Ebony, a young poet who was 17 years old during the time I interviewed her, breaks down what “a concern for justice” in poetry means for her, not in the explicit terms of haunting and tracing the socially affective and invisible, but rather, in terms of the real, the concrete, and the material in her life:

I feel like there are certain things I'd rather not write about. But I feel like it's *really* our responsibility to *write* about those things that affect our lives, all those things that you *don't* want to write about, you *don't* want to share. It's *so* important that you share those things, because there's really somebody out there who has the *same* story as you, somebody who *really* needs to hear how somebody *overcame* those experiences. Because the longer that we hold those things, the longer that person has to internalize those things. I'm used to writing about growin' up *poor*, or growing up around violence all the time in just my own personal life and not knowing my father, those things that I was so reluctant to share. I just noticed that a lot of people started to come towards me. I had somebody come up to me and tell me that, you know, I didn't know my father either, your *poem* really *gave me* another perspective on it. You know, it really helps other people. I think it's *our* responsibility as poets. To *write* for other people, you know? 'Cause not everybody *has* this *ability*, nobody has this gift. A lot of people are utterly *afraid* to get up on the mic and, you know, express themselves to other people. But, I think we have to do it, it's just something that's *so* necessary for society, you know? —Ebony

Ebony at times finds herself encountering a certain reluctance with writing. She connects this reluctance to the sometimes daunting task her writing requires, of delving into her personal experience of hardship, struggle, and violence. Yet, this writing permits her to engender honest dialogue and healing with others who can identify closely with her experiences. She considers this social dialogue as absolutely necessary, or “*so* necessary for society” (“because there’s really somebody out there who has the *same* story as you...”), and as the unique responsibility of poets as writers (“it really helps other people... ‘Cause not everybody *has* this *ability*, nobody has this gift.”). Her craft with words, in this sense, is a labor of affect, one that resonates strongly with Lorde’s (1984) assertion that poetry is *not* a luxury. By writing through her experiences, Ebony’s work as a poet and writer performs a “tracing” of affect as a social figuration, of “thought as felt and feeling as thought,” by foregrounding concerns not usually talked about in public spaces and in the everyday, concerns that are more visible to or noticed by those who “bother to look” (Gray & Gómez-Barris, 2010; Williams, 1977; Godon, 2004). Ebony shows that she not only is aware of, but also takes responsibility for identifying and empathizing with her audience as both real and imagined, preferring to break social silences and, like Christna, interrupt dominant ideological discourse, rather than having herself or others “internalize those things.” In short, Ebony reveals that the personal is not only political, but also highly and fundamentally intersubjective.

The considerable sense of social responsibility that Ebony feels with her writing is one that is embedded in a concern for justice as well as a care for,

awareness of, and accountability to her audience. *Ebony's* devotion is not unlike the “aesthetic maturity” and accountability that Joseph (2006) speaks of and contends must constitute the heart of spoken word, through which the discursive powers of language can lead to collective uplift, even if temporarily, as well as personal transformation.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how such qualities as artistic maturity, social responsibility, and an accountability with words are cultivated and supported among young people in their writing through community-rooted, organized spaces of spoken word education in the Bay Area. I do this by mapping spoken word not as an urban arts practice in itself, but as what I argue to be a cultural movement. Evidence of spoken word as a cultural movement can be exemplified by the international youth poetry slam festival known as *Brave New Voices*, an annual event and gathering in its fifteenth year of existence, which I merely touch upon in this chapter but examine in further detail in Chapter 5. *Brave New Voices*, or *BNV*, provides a window into, and represents a culmination of, at least 50 other local, spoken word-based, youth literary arts programs or community efforts that have been established or are emerging outside of the Bay Area. By emphasizing community methods of literacy, pedagogy, and arts-based activism in the Bay Area centered on spoken word, I reveal a local case, articulation, and trajectory of this cultural movement. I focus on some of the movement's contours and participant insights, rather than on the “nuts and bolts” of programs, in order to provide nuance and a sense of the culture in relation to this geographic location and cultural site. I highlight illustrative youth-centered

programs, approaches, and challenges that work to redefine arts and literacy education, especially in an urban center where, like in other places, public schools fall far short in serving students in these areas of education. In this process of movement work, challenges remain in terms of reaching many of the young people considered “hard to reach” and underserved by public institutions, yet reflect an issue that is at best a contested one over what can or must be done with relatively limited resources. Among the relatively privileged, in other words, those who *are* able to access the programs and expansive community of spoken word, are young people who exercise the discursive power and generative potential of artistic uses of language and literacy, while experiencing personal growth and collective uplift through the influence and interaction of their very own voices. The notion of literacy within this frame is rearticulated through arts education while arts education itself is redefined. What spoken word in the Bay Area ultimately brings into view is the efflorescence of a new generation of artists, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and social and political leaders. In short, the pedagogy of spoken word as it is manifested in the Bay Area *is* the persistent, intentional, and ongoing makings of a cultural movement or, more precisely, a cultural movement presently in the making. Finally, I illuminate how this local expression and exteriorization of the cultural movement of spoken word as a whole does a kind of “tracing” of social affect. In other words, by exposing and giving form to what exists in the imaginaries of youth, youth are making visible and felt on a scale much larger than the poem what oftentimes may not be seen or felt, or seems not to exist, in relation to young people’s voices and

critical uses of literacy. I attribute this performative force of the movement both to the substance of poetry and artistic narrative authored by youth, as well as the youth-centered community, cultural organizing, and pedagogy of spoken word.

Rarticulating Literacy: But For Whom?

If we take from Freire (1987) the notion of literacy to mean a kind of sociopolitical consciousness and agency that involves the use and application of words or other tools, *poetry*, given the “freeness” in form and content it permits, represents a substantial site for the practice of literacy. Poetry, however, as it has been conventionally taught in public schools exists in a “*dead-white-guy vacuum*” (Joseph, 2006), as a literary genre produced by mostly white British or U.S.-based men of a different time period to be read and analyzed by students, and much less likely to be written by them. While poetry in schools has been inaccessible, uninteresting, or both to many high school students, research is beginning to reveal how spoken word is changing how poetry is taught in schools, as an interdisciplinary approach to education that begins with the life experiences of students themselves (Jocson, 2008; Jocson, 2006; Fisher, 2007; Fisher, 2005; Haas Dyson, 2005). When I spoke with some of the staff members of Youth Speaks, they interpreted spoken word in all of its dimensions (e.g., writing, performance, slams) as a kind of “breakthrough” that stands in stark contrast to the “complacent literacy” commonly found in schools (Joseph, 2006). Below is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Katri, a former programs assistant who began at Youth Speaks as a young poet and writer herself and as a youth participant in its programs. She attests that what

community organizations like Youth Speaks have done “is *really* change what poetry means”:

the *meaning* of the word poetry is *completely* different to this generation of teenagers than it was to any other generation of teenagers. It’s far more accessible, it makes it sort of seem like it’s, you know, it’s a genuine expression of creativity, and not necessarily this hard, like sort of this impenetrable thing...you know, like boring. *Stale* and like, I don’t talk like that. *And*, I don’t know what you’re talking about [laughs]...For kids that *don’t* enjoy reading and writing, to have poetry to be something that they *feel* like *they* can *do* and it’s something that *they* can be part of, I think is really this completely new thing...I think it’s completely changed the youth idea—like the idea of a young person *being* literate. And creative. —Katri

Katri contrasts spoken word to traditionally dominant forms of and approaches to poetry taught in schools, which she characterizes as “stale,” “impenetrable,” and “boring” for students. She believes that spoken word has shifted the meaning of poetry for a current generation of teenagers, making poetry “a genuine expression of creativity” for young people. The shift in poetry that spoken word has made has been drastic enough to where literacy is redefined in a way that begins with the words and inherent creativity that young people already possess, even if they “*don’t* enjoy reading and writing.” Poetry is inclusive of everyone as a praxis of authorship and expression, “it’s completely changed...the idea of a young person *being* literate. And creative.”

Other staff at Youth Speaks addressed the issue of students becoming more engaged with reading and writing and developing a stronger sense of ownership and command with words. Brandon is a programs assistant-turned-poet with Youthspeaks who has been heavily involved with the youth advisory board. Brandon graduated from a continuation high school, which he described “means most kids at

this high school have been kicked out of high school in the City, and are barely gonna graduate, and a lot of them are like fifth-year seniors and even sixth-year seniors.”

He commented that he “had always been reading ‘cause of my *mom*,” but working with staff and the programs at Youth Speaks continually encourages him to read further and learn about activist history:

friends that I knew, it’s just new to them. Like reading and picking up new books, like the way that Youth Speaks definitely helps is just informing like our generation on past generations, like poets, activists. I mean just like for instance the MLK thing that we had on Monday...a lot of people have not even heard of “from Selma to Jena.” A lot of people haven’t even heard of Selma or Jena and what was goin’ on with those two cities. One, for me, I got to do a little performance, it was supposed to be a poem inspired by Paul Robeson. I had never heard of Paul Robeson. So of course had to read literature on Paul Robeson...you’re always being refreshed and like given new ideas...I’m always being told about activists and stuff, people I never heard of. Begin to read books and what not about that, that I never even heard of. So I think Youth Speaks attacks literacy in that way. —Brandon

Brandon considers much of the way that “Youth Speaks attacks literacy” is by introducing poets, writers, and activists of color from previous generations to his generation, historical figures like Paul Robeson whose writings, speeches, performances speak out against conditions of oppression and racial injustice. The writings of activists speak strongly to him as a writer and poet of his own generation, like for many other young writers of color who identify with the struggles of and devotion to social justice activism. One of the events put on by the organization that perpetuates a social activist tradition is *Bringing the Noise for MLK, Jr.*, which takes place every year on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The year I interviewed Brandon (2008), the theme for Bringing the Noise was “From Selma to Jena,” referring to the historical legacy of the Civil Rights marches and movement in

connection to a recent case and trial against six black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana known as “the Jena six.”³³

Lauren, a former program director, poet, and artist also addressed how students who may not have had a previous or conscious investment in words find themselves taking ownership in their own literate processes. She speaks from the perspective of an educator who has faced both the triumph of getting students to experience a love for reading and writing, as well as the intense challenges of when that inspiration just does not happen for students:

when we go into some of the high schools, like McClymonds High School [in West Oakland] and we meet kids that are not interested in books, and are not interested in words, and they’re not interested in writing, they’re not interested in school, they don’t give a damn, you know, because there’s no – the expectation for them is pretty low. And then we go in and we’re like, “okay, we’re going to set the expectation at least four steps higher, and we’re going to challenge you to what you really think, what you really feel, to say it truthfully and honestly. And then all of a sudden, you know, we come across those who never wanted to read or write that are saying, “I love this book, because you guys brought it in and taught me how to love it. I love to read now” kind of thing. So I think we’re introducing them to reading and writing in a way that is not traditional and it allows them, before they even know it, they’re interested in it...before they even realize they’re falling in love with words, they’re already, it’s already happened. And then we, I find that young people are looking at books in a different way, and looking at words in a different way, in a way where they feel some ownership over them, as opposed to being – you know, like weighted with that. So I think, just in terms of promoting literacy, it’s incredible how just allowing a young person to say whatever they want, to write and not worry about punctuation, or

³³ Jena, Louisiana is the location where six black students, ranging in age from 15 to 17, were charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy, facing up to 100 years in prison without parole. The arrests came after a white student was taken to, but shortly released from, the hospital with a concussion and proceeded to attend a school function later that evening. Racial tensions at the school can be traced back to the beginning of the school year when three nooses were found hanging from a schoolyard tree under which usually only white students sat, after a black high school student had requested permission to sit under this tree. The famous case sparked widespread protests across the United States against the excessive racial bias of the charges and the overall case (Democracy Now, July 10, 2007, http://www.democracynow.org/2007/7/10/the_case_of_the_jena_six_).

spelling, or grammar, and saying, “yes this is great, this has meaning, this can work, let’s make it better.” Then they feel like, “okay great, this has meaning, this is great, I want to make it better.” Before I even know it, they’re pushing me to teach them more. —Lauren

For Lauren, getting students engaged with their words and with texts comes from a pedagogical standpoint where the expectations of students are high, where “we’re going to challenge you to what you really think, what you really feel, to say it truthfully and honestly.” The attraction to reading and writing can occur organically for students, “before they even know it, they’re interested in it...before they even realize they’re falling in love with words, they’re already, it’s already happened.” She attributes this affinity to giving students full ownership of their words, “allowing a young person to say whatever they want,” along with positive yet authentic affirmation of and response to their writing, treating them with respect and as the writers they already are. As students become motivated to improve their work or writing, “to make it better,” Lauren finds herself “pushed” as a teacher “to teach them more.”

Lauren also recognizes that, to a significant degree, the young people who benefit the most and become involved with Youth Speaks are self-selected in the sense that they are already open, ready to be challenged in their writing, and take an honest, reflective look at themselves:

It’s also really frustrating. Because this [newfound love for words] doesn’t happen all the time. I think Youth Speaks in most ways is an organization where folks volunteer to come. So in some way, we already know the youth we interact with are ready, willing and able to be challenged politically, socially, and ready to look in the mirror and challenge themselves. And so, a lot of the work is already done for us. And sometimes when we go into the schools, you know, you’ll get two or three students that are like, that are already starting to see the value of words and writing their own story. But

then there'll be the 25 other kids in the class that are, you know, it's frustrating sometimes. But, I think once you sort of break through, then there's like endless possibility on the other side of the wall they've erected. You know? —Lauren

A number of others, both staff and youth, referred to the self-selection of young people who already identify as writers and activists. Many framed this as a main critique of the organization, and that while Youth Speaks does reach out and impact youth who are most underserved by public institutions, it still can do “better.” Some felt that outreach would be a more realistic option if the organization were better equipped financially. As I describe later in this chapter and in Chapter Four, the organization has been intentional about organizing to make its programs even more accessible, including the reorganization of its youth leadership program to consist of student leaders throughout the Bay Area that run spoken word and slam clubs at their own schools. Yet, overall, the issue of whom the organization can and must focus on is at best contested. Artistic director, who goes by the name of and is widely known as Bamuthi, pointed out that while the organization “works with a self-selected population...[t]here are a myriad of ways to *stay* in. But *success*, ultimately is self-determined. Anywhere.” He asserts that what the organization *does* provide are “opportunities, for *all* populations” and that “the violence prevention model that we have” is implicit, not explicit:

We host free after-school workshops, in accessible locations you know, from 4 to 6, when kids are most likely to be in trouble. But that's as far as we go...I'd say ultimately, we *don't* go as far as we *could* go. And I think that's purposeful. And I also think that that's what yields such a high rate of quote “success” in our program. The kids that are transformed, the kids that like kinda grab their spark, then are kind of on a moving walkway. You know, where, they can be, *moved forward*. Because there are all these scaffolded programs that are there to, you know, to help them, you know, to help them,

to help their locomotion. You know what I mean? Because they can get *off* at any point, it really is up to them how far they wanna go. Or how far they're going to go. —Bamuthi

Bamuthi explains that there are many opportunities that exist in the full range of programs, which I describe further below, so that ultimately the organization leaves for individuals to decide the degree to which they become involved, if at all. One of the main groundrules of Youth Speaks, often established in beginner's writing workshops, is that the "standard is yourself." Bamuthi believes that this principle applies in the form of a certain "commitment to *self*" that is essential to any realization of success in Youth Speaks programs. He speaks not merely from the pragmatic perspective of an educator but especially as an artist when he notes, "kids in underserved communities—and this might be a little controversial, but I think it's true, I think that kids in underserved communities are *less likely* to self-invest, or to invest *in* self. And so we *miss* a lot of those kids." Bamuthi's comment here is similar to that of Lauren's when she refers to "the wall they've erected," on the other side of which she feels is "endless possibility" for their writing. Both Bamuthi and Lauren locate barriers for youth in participating in Youth Speaks partially, if not mostly, within individual youth themselves, but not without keeping in mind the social circumstances and institutionalized obstacles faced by underserved youth on a daily basis.

In other interviews I conducted, explanations for why the organization may or may not reach "hard to reach" youth suggested reasons that were more explicitly connected to, and inseparable from, a social structural understanding of barriers.

Erika, a poet and former programs assistant who coordinated the activities of the youth advisory board, Spokes, provided the example of one Spokes member from East Oakland, “Jino,” attributing his frequent absence to issues at home, financial burden, and trying to go to a continuation high school after dropping out. She also displayed both tentativeness and ambivalence around not knowing for certain what Jino was dealing with in his own personal life:

Jino doesn't come through anymore 'cause like he has real issues going on at home, and we don't pay Jino – we weren't giving him traveling stipends, we weren't paying him on time, like it took us a month, like Spokes [pay] was a month late. It's stuff like that...he'll come through like once every two months, three months and it's stuff like that, you know, like he dropped out of high school and I think he's trying to go to continuation school but I don't know. —Erika

Erika empathizes that there are circumstances in Jino's life that prevent him from having a regular presence in programs, especially as a member of Spokes, who represent the most invested youth in the organization as its “ambassadors.” Even though she does not know the exact details of Jino's life, she attributes his limited presence and participation to his circumstances rather than to Jino's commitments to himself or to the organization. Jino has expressed his interest and promise in writing and in outreaching to other youth around writing, as evidenced by his participation at youth open mic and the relatively rigorous process he underwent to apply and be selected for Spokes.

Katri, who shared her thoughts earlier on how spoken word has redefined poetry, also addressed the issue of financial limitation for many youth, namely their

need to work and their lack of availability and time for being involved in Youth

Speaks:

[R]ight now we're sort of in a place, which is like, we're introducing this to *all* sorts of new people, and that's *great*. But I think in terms of our *real* workshop thing and *real* involvement, and *real* influence, we really only work with kids who are *good*. Already. Whatever. *Have* the ability to like, spend their time with us. Are *privileged* enough that they *aren't* working, or like, have time after school. There's this sort of level of privilege that's absolutely necessary in order to work with Youth Speaks at this point. Like just in terms of *traveling* [for example, taking public transportation to attend events]... And I think we really need to think about how to maintain— obviously maintain the relationship with *these* kids. —Katri

In addition to the privilege of having time and not needing to work after school, Katri points out that Youth Speaks attracts young people who already are *good* at writing.

Good writing skills and the privilege of being available to participate is not a coincidental link, as students who are relatively privileged attend schools with strong curriculum and teaching around writing, and perhaps even creative writing or other arts-based opportunities. Katri wishes for the organization to proactively figure out how to work with students who are not from privileged backgrounds and who underperform as writers, while *at the same time* maintaining ties with current students with whom the organization does its best work:

Because it *is* a lot about like, *working* with kids to develop their writing ability and working with kids who are *especially* talented in this. To sort of, *move* them forward as the *next* artist to emerge. You know, of this generation. I think that that's something we're doing pretty successfully at this point. But I think to be able to sort of *do* that while at the same time, having a very like, low-level like, *not* putting these kids on tv [laughs] sort of involvement in the *community*, and sort of *being* a presence in a way—in a more *mentorship* role. 'Cause we have, we're gonna always have like, Simone Crew and George Watsky and these kids who are *amazing*, and go on tv and go on the radio, and get invited to all this *crazy* stuff. You know, and they're *great* writers, and we're gonna work with them, always. I feel like 'cause they're gonna come to us for what we do well. But I think that we *need* to also try to work with kids who aren't necessarily *ever* gonna be

good enough writers to get on the radio, or good enough writers to *be* published, or to get an article done about them in the, you know, *Chronicle* or whatever. —Katri

The media and celebrity attention to which Katri refers reflects the high profile status that many accomplished youth poets and performers achieve as finalists in the Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam, which is held in venues like the 3,000-seated San Francisco Opera House and is promoted through media outlets such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and KPFA's *Hard Knock Radio* and *The Morning Show*. The top qualifying poets of the Grand Slam Finals also represent the Bay Area at Brave New Voices, which captures media attention throughout the U.S., particularly in the host city and in places where other teams are represented. BNV's network also has included representatives of U.S. Congress, President Obama (in 2009, youth Brave New Voices poets performed at the first Poetry Night at the White House), local politicians, legendary arts figures like Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, and celebrities like hip hop artist Common and Robert Redford and the Sundance Institute, to name a few. Katri believes that the organization tries to reach underprivileged youth, but efforts have been manifested in doing "one workshop" at a cultural center, for example: "And we're like, 'here, we're gonna perform, we're gonna do *one* workshop.' Come to our other ones, but we're not gonna come back... We show up for one second. And do a little, 'we're *really* great!' And just *leave*. You know, and I think that, I don't know if we're at a capacity where we can do anything *but* that *right now*."

Another staff person, Kirya, a well established poet and former Arts-in-Education director, referred to this approach of Youth Speaks as “splash and go.” I asked Katri if the idea behind reorganizing Spokes (to consist of school club leaders) and a significant part of the youth programs in the form of school slam and spoken word clubs was mainly to address and outreach to more underserved youth. Her response was that that was part of the idea, but issues and challenges still remain:

There’s also tons of kids that aren’t in school. And the school clubs are a *huge* time commitment. So I think it’s also not necessarily asking kids to give us all their time, but *being* something that *seems* accessible, it seems like we have an open door to them. Even if it’s *not* like, we don’t want them to necessarily feel like they *have* to be around, three hours a week every week. It’s just like, you know, *feel* like you can come to us, and *feel* like there’s people that are *here* that can mentor you in a way that’s most effective...Just someone who you can feel like you can identify with. I think that we really should. I mean I think that’s something that we *all* want, it’s just a matter of like, there *has* to be a training and, money [laughs]. —Katri

Katri addresses the realistic concern of how lack of funds and resources prevent the organization from offering the training and arrangement that would more likely guarantee a safe, accessible environment for young people, one which could extend to their writing and poetry clubs at school. I interviewed Katri before the school clubs program was officially launched. Since then, the organization has grown its inter-school district slam program. Katri’s concerns about organizational and leadership development for school clubs have been addressed, at least partially, through the “slam union” coordinator (and other, newer iterations), whose perspective on school-based programs I share in Chapter Four. Katri points to even further unique and specific challenges that prevent Youth Speaks from reaching many underprivileged youth — for example, that there are “also tons of kids that aren’t in school” whom the

organization neither can nor may ever reach given its resource base. She insists that they should still try given their mission of serving the marginalized and “traditionally voiceless”:

Because we just *can't* be in every low-income community, and serving *every* minority, especially with barriers in *language* and all this stuff that we're not—and *disability*. And all this stuff that we're just *not* able to deal with, given who we have on the staff right now and how many of us there are. But I would *really* like to see us sort of. 'Cause I think that, I mean a lot of what we *wanna* do is *really* give voice to young people who are marginalized. Traditionally voiceless. And I think that we're doing that to some extent, but we're really *not* doing it to a level that I think any of us are really, really happy with. Just *really* being, you know, considered a safe space. For *all* sorts of young people, and not just, highly literate [laughs], you know, very well-read. Or even just people who aren't necessarily highly literate and well-read, but have a great stage presence...I think that we need to be in somehow, in places where kids don't have luxuries of time, and volunteering like—a lot of high school kids *cannot* volunteer basically. They *need* to work. Or they, you know, and then the issue with Jorge was, he would come to some of our events but he – because of like *gang* issues, wouldn't leave his neighborhood. Often. So it's really sort of understanding how to have neighborhood presence and like, *being* accessible to everyone that we want to like reach out to, but we don't necessarily know *how* right now. We don't even have anyone on staff right now that *we* feel could successfully go to like McClymonds High School even and *really* become a mentor to those kids. And *really* become invested in that community and *really* make those kids feel like Youth Speaks is something that they want to be involved in. Because even like, if we *did* get *one* kid from McClymonds High School to like, come to SPOKES meetings and come to events, I mean, to have one *lone* person who's from a *completely* different background and like lives a *completely* different life than every *other* kid, would be very isolating. You know, like the same as someone who was an English language learner, it would be *very* isolating, to have these kids who are all, you know, very well-read and writing these five-page like epic poems. To have someone who barely spoke English. In that group would also be very difficult.

—Katri

Katri reveals her empathic ability to step inside the shoes of a youth who may feel alienated or marginalized even in the space of a Youthspeaks program, given that critical numbers of certain populations are never maintained through their services. In contrast to Lauren's perspective, in which she expresses she has witnessed literacy

transformation among students at places like McClymonds High School in West Oakland, Katri feels that the organization is not equipped well enough to be in such schools and to provide adequate mentorship that students need. She makes the case that, for a student from McClymonds High School, or for an English language learner for that matter, it is conceivably an isolating experience for that student to be among highly talented and well-read writers on Spokes.

The young person that she refers to, Jorge Hurtado, was a young poet, fondly remembered for his groundedness and a grand and loving spirit, who had participated in Youth Speaks workshops and won the San Francisco Unified School District Slam. Jorge was murdered in his neighborhood in the Mission District of San Francisco, around the time that my interviews took place. He participated in some but not many of Youth Speaks programs because it was too dangerous for him to walk through gang-ridden areas where he lived. I engage with Jorge's story and his poetry further in Chapter Six.

The issue of inaccessibility that exposes larger social structures of racialized violence, segregation, and isolation was something that Vajra addressed, but from the standpoint of a cultural gulf affecting youth from the most remote areas of the streets that prevents them from ever being or wanting to be a part. Vajra grew up in South Berkeley in a predominantly low-income, African American neighborhood and holds an education doctorate from Harvard. Her dissertation focused on community organizers of key Bay Area organizations that work with among the most troubled teens whose lives are deluged by the influence of gangs and experiences in juvenile

hall. She draws from both her personal experiences growing up in her neighborhood, as well as her involvement with Youth Speaks and as a former high school student of one of the long-time program directors of the organization (Hodari) at Berkeley High School. In the first example, she describes her friend, “Chee,” who was a poet and writer growing up, whom she persistently tried to get involved with Youth Speaks. Chee repeatedly refused, however, adamant that Youth Speaks was just not his style or type of social circle:

this guy Chee who I grew up with, who’s a little bit younger than me. I have been trying to get him in Youth Speaks. I have got him a ticket, I mean *every* time Hodari threw me a ticket for somethin’, I’d be like man, throw in a ticket for Chee man, throw in a ticket for Chee. Because, Chee is a rapper and, you know, in high school I used to tell him like, man, I think you’re gonna become a teacher. ‘Cause he’s so, you know, give him a game or give him anything, his love is to tell every—he breaks down it, he likes to take anything complicated and make it really simple. I’m like, you are for Youth Speaks, I’ve always been tellin’ him that. He’s like, ‘girl, don’t try to ruin my reputation on the street with that *shit*.’ And I can’t get him to go to an event...And, you know, he’s just like, you know, he’s like ‘I’m a poet. But girl, I’m a poet.’ You know what I mean? So like the HBO and you know the Def Jam and all that stuff, like for him, that’s why he’s like, ‘Mmm no. I’m cool. I’m cool, man. That’s, it’s too pop. It’s too, you know, it’s a little too boxed.’ Even though I *personally* think he would get so much and, you know, it would be a *great* partnership. First, it’s like being in a studio, in a basement, making beats, tryin’ to sell on the under in Oakland. I mean, you know what it’s just like, that is, the hustle life style, which is stressful. It’s like, ‘do this man, they got *real* money.’ You know? But again, it’s that whole like ‘I think I’d ruin my rep. I think that’d ruin my rep.’ So there *is* that side of it, too and I think that, you know, people like Ise Lyfe and you know folks that kind of are that bridge, to be really center-stage so that somebody who sees them are like, ‘Oh, that dude he kinda, you know he’s kinda cool *and* he’s doin’ this Youth Speaks.’ You need kind of those kind of folks.

—Vajra

According to Vajra, her friend Chee, a rapper and poet, saw Youth Speaks as “too pop” and “a little too boxed,” given the popularity of Def Poetry Jam on HBO, which featured a number of Youth Speaks poets, and considered that being involved in that

space would clash with his street credibility. Vajra considers Youth Speaks a legitimate means and place with cultural and financial resources (“they got *real* money”) as well as connections to bolster the work and career of someone like Chee in order to get away from “the hustle life style, which is stressful.” She refers to Ise Lyfe as an example of someone who is a “bridge” between street life and the codes associated with street hustle, lifestyle, and credibility (Anderson, 1999), on the one hand, and the increasingly mainstream presence and influence that organizations like Youth Speaks has, on the other. Vajra argues that individual artists and writers who can code-switch and maneuver the cultural differences between the two general, though not completely separate, worlds are necessary for the impact and outreach that the organization can have.

Ise Lyfe became involved with Youth Speaks as a teenager from East Oakland and since then has become a highly respected hip hop artist known on the progressive underground across the globe. He attributes Youth Speaks as helping him “get down” (away from street life and into his own writing), launch his career, and attain acclaim and stardom while remaining grounded in his music, never veering far from his roots. In a public letter he wrote to young poets (Lyfe, 2006), he discusses how, growing up, he wanted “to be just like [his] Uncle Robert,” who was murdered by a teenager his own age, in front of his Uncle Robert’s own house: “I aspired to be the cat-on-the-crate, smoking weed with a bunch of kids standing around me. I had ABSOLUTELY NO investment in planning my future. I’m not saying I was standing around waiting to die, but I also wasn’t waiting to live.” After his brother was arrested and locked up

on a charge of “secret indictment,” Lyfe realized he did not want to be the source of more of the same pain for his family, but, he explains, “it isn’t always as simple as ‘Okay, I’m out’”: “The cat that suddenly disappears is usually either the snitch, or the cat that when the police wrap everybody else, begins snitching. My brother would have been my only protection from that type of accusation.”

A week after Lyfe’s brother’s arrest, he witnessed a young man being thrown off the second balcony of the Oakland Coliseum (where he and his friends were selling weed), in the middle of a riot that broke out at a concert. After most of the concert attendees, horror-struck, ran out of the corridors, Lyfe could only observe the partying continuing in the freeway traffic on his way home: “It was like nobody had just seen this kid get murdered. Slaughtered.” In the months following the incident, he wrote a poem titled “You Control You.” Wanting to change direction in his life and a reason “to leave [his] homies,” he read his poem at a Black History Month assembly at his high school: “When I read the last line of the poem, (“.....I betcha”), I wanted to climb in A HOLE TO ESCAPE THE SILENCE IN THE AUDITORIUM. But then everyone started clapping and screaming. Even the security guards that I was always calling punk bitches. It was a feeling that I had never even heard spoken of let alone felt personally.” Lyfe became involved in Youth Speaks slams shortly afterwards, after receiving a flyer from “this weird ass white girl” that approached him after the assembly. After two years, losing slam after slam, he became a slam champion. Lyfe’s letter ends with a profound thank you to the organization:

You all have given me a path. I don't know if you understand how special this is. I'm in London right now. I'm a skinny little kid from East Oakland. Last night at my show in LONDON, people in the crowd knew my music. This woman had an iron on of my album cover on her shirt. Over six thousand people have gone into the store and bought a CD I made in an apartment closet. I walk in school hallways and kids stop cursing and saying nigga, and apologize for themselves, even though they're [not] saying it to me. I've shared stages with folks I use to watch on the BOX music video channel. I watch kids being affected by the work we're doing, in the same way I was. I'm not on some crate with a beer... Thank you from the bottom of me. (Lyfe, 2006, 21).

I share Ise Lyfe's story at length to not only illustrate the nuances of one case, albeit an exceptional one, in which the merging of a "hard to reach" young person from remote East Oakland into Youth Speaks programs has occurred in a most mutually fulfilling, productively reciprocal manner. I also wish to further illuminate the potential power and impact of the cultural "bridging" which Vajra spoke of, that she feels the organization must do. Ise Lyfe continues to be a community activist and educator, including through the workshops and performances he has given at Brave New Voices, for example, in addition to countless other roles he plays as an independent artist (for instance, I also saw him speak as humbly as powerfully and compellingly on a panel about his art and pedagogy to an audience of academic sociologists at an annual meeting of the American Sociological Association). In his letter that I just described, Lyfe reveals that he reached a point at which he was willing to have others "break through" the "wall" that he erected for himself, using Lauren's terms. He also demonstrates that he was ready to "commit to himself," in Bamuthi's terms. Lyfe's story puts into context Bamuthi's earlier statement, that "kids in underserved communities are *less likely* to self-invest, or to invest *in* self," making it a less controversial perspective than he suggested it might express.

Vajra provided another example of a young male writer “caught up in the streets,” in connection to the structural violence in the lives of young black males.

“Remeke” was a student whom she worked with and encouraged repeatedly to become involved in Spokes, but who was shot and killed in an act of street violence:

[T]his young person I used to work with, Remeke. Amazing, I mean prolific as Tupac Shakur, looked like Tupac. I was just like, man, this man is going to rule the world. If he does rap, he’s gonna rule the world, if he does Youth Speaks. So I would give him that SPOKES application, I would sit with him to fill out that SPOKES application. I mean, we must have filled out like eight different applications for SPOKES. And, you know, I’m like, I don’t care who I have to call to get you on SPOKES board, we are getting you on SPOKES. And, I mean he would just write all the time. Amazing – awww, so amazing. And, you know, he was shot and killed. And I don’t think that, you know, he was not ready for SPOKES. You know what I mean? SPOKES might have been ready for him but he was still very caught up in the streets, and he needed something intermediary to give him a foundation so that he would be able to fill out an application, so he would be able to have the consistency to do Youth Speaks, do kind of the performances. You know, I think that he would have *ran* Youth Speaks. Like I deeply believe that. But you know, you can’t always take a young person whose rhythm, you know, is *so* different. Even though they’re so gifted in writing. You know? As easy as it can sound, you know, for me it’s like, what is the big deal? Go to a Youth Speaks meeting. Who cares? You know what I mean? It’s not *that* hard. But, you know, there are larger issues. You know what I mean? That I think that have to be addressed for some young people before they are able to engage on that level. Even being able to meet young people from around the country [at Brave New Voices], even being able to stand up when you are amidst a turf war, and you might see somebody from an alternative high school and see something as unpleasant as someone trying to kill you. That’s a different level of engagement. ‘Cause you’re hoping that by, ‘wait, you’re about to see kids from where? Oh, kids from Balboa and kids from Thurgood are about to come together? Oh, I’m cool. I’m not comin’, I’m not comin’ to *that*.’ And I think Youth Speaks probably loses some of those kids because their frame of reference isn’t, ‘oh if we hold this meeting here, we’re gonna lose this whole side of the City.’ You know, we’ll get the squares but are you able to get those kids that are so rough, ride or die, to be there?
—Vajra

Vajra here touches upon the point that while Youth Speaks staff do all that they can to make their youth events accessible – for example, by holding youth open mic at a location close to a BART station – the nuances of local turf wars that take place

between Balboa High School students and Thurgood Marshall students, for instance, are not so much front and center on their radar of program planning: “even being able to stand up when you are amidst a turf war, and you might see somebody from an alternative high school and see something as unpleasant as someone trying to kill you. That’s a different level of engagement.” In relation to her former student, Remeke, Vajra indicates there is a desperate need for “something intermediary” between a young person who finds himself in circumstances similar to his, and an organization like Youth Speaks, in order “to give him a foundation so that he would be able to fill out an application, so he would be able to have the consistency to do Youth Speaks.” Vajra juxtaposes youth that are in situations like Remeke “that are so rough, ride or die,” on the one hand, with “the squares,” or the “well-read” and “highly talented” in Katri’s terms, on the other. She asserts, “you can’t always take a young person whose rhythm, you know, is *so* different,” particularly from the rest of us who live the privilege of taking for granted that our lives are not endangered on a day-to-day basis.

Vajra’s dissertation work at Harvard examined community organizations like United Playaz that are well-known, established, and highly respected for their work with youth who are most “at-risk” of the influences of gangs and street violence. She specifies that organizations like these are namely the “intermediaries” that are so needed before a young person, in life situations like Remeke’s, could even consider being a part of Youth Speaks, that “*in between* there *has* to be something to engage these young people”:

I would say that the groups that I looked at, I mean they were so, they had to be so into like the one-on-one relationship building. And so, kind of intense...really in-depth, really one-on-one. Really being a child's family, being the person to feed them and give them that wrap-around service. That's not Youth Speaks. Youth Speaks shouldn't be that. But, but it is hard... 'cause when I do work inside like juvenile hall, these kids are *hungry* for something. They are hungry to know, why is everybody sitting with them black and brown. Why? They are sober. They are out of their turfs. To reach these kids in East Oakland, in the deep you know? Like Hodari and them they do this thing, but to *really* get those kids that are in the corner, it is *so* difficult. Even if you *are* a Hodari Davis. Even if you *are* a Bamuthi, or you *are* an Ise Lyfe. They will be like, 'man, *fuck* you. People are tryin' to kill me. I don't give a *fuck* about talkin' about my life.' [But if] you get those kids when they're in prison, if they're locked up. I just feel like, the combination would be like revolutionary. Because, they want it so bad, even if they might not have the vocabulary to say 'we want Youth Speaks in here.' They're like, 'man, why is it? Why is everybody look like me? Why is it that we're the ones here. Why why why why why?' And have someone to come in and get them to talk, to even stand up inside the hall and do poetry to each other, I just feel like, it would be a good way. —Vajra

Vajra maintains that the intense, in-depth connection, family comfort and support, and “one-on-one relationship building” that many endangered youth require is simply “not Youth Speaks” and “Youth Speaks shouldn't be that.” She states that while incarcerated youth would conceivably be defiant in a “Youth Speaks style” writing session (“They will be like, ‘man, *fuck* you. People are tryin' to kill me. I don't give a *fuck* about talkin' about my life.”), bringing poetry to them as a means of creatively expressing and authoring their lives would be “revolutionary.” Vajra believes that “these kids are *hungry* for something,” and that “they want it so bad, even if they might not have the vocabulary” to express that desire. Poetry would enable them to confront and tackle questions like, “Why [does] everybody look like me? Why is it that we're the ones here[?] Why why why why why?” Perhaps, at best, a partnership between Youth Speaks and United Playaz, for example, reflects one way to get at the “revolutionary” link between poetry and incarcerated youth to which Vajra refers,

within an environment of trust and the intimacy of close, family relationships. Kirya, the former Arts-in-Education director, at the time I interviewed her mentioned her plan to set up a “crisis intervention” training for poet mentors (who perform at school assemblies and work with students in schools through the Arts-in-Education program) and for Youth Speaks staff. She also expressed interest in organizing a training that would be facilitated by the executive director of United Playaz, particularly in light of “conversations around the office” that were heavily, and soberly, sparked by Jorge Hurtado’s murder.

Youth Speaks staff have worked with youth in juvenile hall, producing a CD of poetry authored by incarcerated youth, for example, and have worked with young people who are part of organizations like Larkin Street, which serves predominantly queer, homeless youth. Although they typically represent “Youth Speaks” in this work, the work itself relies significantly on individual staff persons who care deeply about, take initiative in, and build relationships with such organizations. Another non-profit organization, called the Beat Within, produces a literary magazine which features poetry authored by incarcerated youth with whom the organization closely works. However, as Vajra points out, the quality of poetry and literacy pedagogy is no match to that of Youth Speaks:

I’m tellin’ you, the poetry, girl, is *so* bad. It’s like, ‘the dog is brown. The dog ran fast. I miss my dog.’ And pages and pages of you know, *dry*. It’s just *dry*. It’s very dry. Or Dear Mama letters: ‘Dear Mama. I’m sorry I stole the car that got me locked up—’ you know, just shallow. But I think again, that’s because you have the people running the program, you know, they’re not on some ‘we’re building a movement, we’re gonna get this young person to *write their freedom*.’ ‘*Write your freedom*, bro-bro. Write it.’ *That Youth Speaks can do that. Youth Speaks does that everyday.* —Vajra

Vajra sheds light on another angle of literacy, which becomes revitalized for so many young people through spoken word. She describes how poetry, in the cultural and pedagogical forms that Youth Speaks brings and makes available to youth, empowers and enables young people to “*write their freedom... Youth Speaks does that everyday.*” Vajra here suggests a Freireian approach to literacy, in which literacy reflects a form of cultural politics and production that puts young people in control of authoring their own lives. Vajra’s viewpoint, as well as Katri’s – around how spoken word redefines the meaning of poetry as an accessible form that allows youth to take ownership (away from the “dead-white-guy” canon of school-based literature) – and Brandon’s – of introducing young people to the arts activist literature of previous generations – together illustrate the politics and production of culture at play with spoken word. That is, for young people of color, spoken word provides an arts activist means of rewriting and articulating their histories.

Other Means of Opening Up Access

Much of the appeal that spoken word has for young people is wielded through the social power of popular culture, particularly hip hop, as a means through which literacy occurs. Jason, a former production manager and poet who is a product of Youth Speaks (formerly as a youth poet), addressed this point of the importance of popular culture to literacy, the latter of which he considers to be at the heart of their overall approach to pedagogy: “the concept for us was to put, almost in a sense, *coolness* to literacy again, you know. Trying to excite young folks to read and write. Listen, pay attention.” Jason’s work at Youth Speaks included overseeing the

production of all shows, including the grand slam finals of the Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam and of Brave New Voices, both with audiences numbered between two to over three thousand. His assertion, that Youth Speaks attaches a certain “*coolness* to literacy,” refers to an attraction of young people to words and craft in connection to these shows and other youth-centered spaces that heavily reflect hip hop culture: “I haven’t met – even to this day – young or old, I haven’t met anyone who isn’t interested in spoken word and poetry the way I produce spoken word poetry. There’s no one. [If] it’s not hip hop, it’s not marketable, you know what I’m saying?” Slam elements that constitute the conventions, practices, and expressions of hip hop include a deejay and emcee, the use of hip hop vernacular, a forceful arousal of energy (or “hyphy” in Bay Area terms), “phat” beats, “real” talk (especially embedded in the poetry), as well as “battling” or friendly, even loving, competition.

Joannie, one of the managers on the executive team, whom others overwhelmingly refer to as the “backbone” though very behind-the-scenes of the organization, credited both young and older poets as *role models* for youth of color, a primary draw for so many young people into spoken word. One’s interpellation into spoken word poetry occurs not merely in terms of the popularity of hip hop, but also in terms of cultural identification on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender. Joannie gave the examples of Mush Lee, Ishle Park, and Dennis Kim as significant and inspiring role models for young Asian American poets:

[The] role models up there [on stage] are essentially the same as them, speaking the same language, making it okay to be yourself, you can say what you wanna say. You can also do it in a way that speaks to your creative impulse...It was always accessible, you know, when you’re gonna see

someone, is essentially, you identify with. And there, they call themselves a poet... 15 years old, or they come from the same neighborhood, it's just kind of – it's an inspiring thing.

—Joannie

Joannie further shared that “everybody has a creative impulse. I happen to believe every person does. And [spoken word’s] just about finding that way towards expression.” Here, Joannie hits upon a key aspect of literacy pedagogy in spoken word, namely “finding that way towards expression” based on creative impulse, which she believes that everyone inherently has. She ascribes as attached to this pedagogy the *immediacy* of the culture, community, and craft of spoken word: “it’s created this kind of community of people who accept this as a form of expression. It’s very much—it’s really immediate. You know, we do try to mentor people toward the *practice*. The *writing*. The *craft*.” At the same time, the practice and craft of spoken word writing is centered on a complete openness to form that young people determine for themselves in their own writing: “But then in another way, you know, we’re not teaching *form*. And we’re not establishing the *specific language*. Like the form is open, in terms of the way that the methods work towards mentoring people, the pedagogy.”

Joannie also expressed and broke down the cultural power of oral storytelling, in terms of the inherent *joy* of personal narrative that’s “very immediate with people”:

There’s a joy in language. There’s a joy in hearing that – you know, the oral kind of sensation is like so much, like it’s entertaining, but it’s also very thought provoking. And intellectually, I think it really stretches people, to be able to listen. So when you listen, and you’re able to hear that and enjoy that, then it’s no wonder why people start to gravitate towards people who practice that.

—Joannie

Joannie describes the discursive power of spoken word in terms of a “joy” and “sensation” of orality that is not only “entertaining,” but “intellectually...really stretches people, to be able to listen.” One’s entry into a poem that is orally delivered by another rests on the overall message, its substantive and aesthetic contents, its feeling and emotion or tone, the rhythm of delivery, and the poet her or himself, all mediated by voice, primarily, and performance. Joannie also emphasizes as part of the power of spoken word is its accessibility to many different kinds of people:

[I]t’s a very democratic kind of field. You know, you don’t need to have a degree, you don’t need to be doing good in school. You know, because like they’re telling about experiences, you know, of folks that are coming from all different *types* of backgrounds, but may not ever had—been *afforded* any kinds of privileges, you know, in terms of society. And yet, here they are, you know, doing this great work. And despite, maybe not coming up under the best or the most ideal, they are still able to transcend that, and create that. And I think that’s really inspiring for people. —Joannie

Joannie characterizes the field of spoken word as “very democratic” because poets can find success “doing this great work” regardless of how they do in school as a student, and whether or not they possess a formal degree. Her characterization coincides with a comment made by Youth Speaks Founder and Executive Director, James Kass (2010), on the KPFA *Morning Show*, that spoken word represents “the most democratic art form” in terms of both poets and audience. The widespread accessibility to slam poetry in particular dates back to its origins and original intent in the mid-1980s, when Marc Kelly Smith invented a new public form of poetry “of, by, and for the people,” establishing poetry slam’s first official home at Chicago’s Green Mill Tavern (Somers-Willet, 2009).

While the slams are a huge draw to spoken word, a number of my interviewees expressed that a common misconception many people have of Youth Speaks is how the organization is seen only as putting on poetry slams. According to Kirya (former Arts-in-Education manager), the general impression is that “‘Oh yeah, Youth Speaks. The slam.’ And that’s *all* they think we do.” Similarly, when I interviewed James (Executive Director) at the very beginning of my study, he stated forthrightly, “slams are actually a very small part of what we do.” As I continue to unfold throughout this dissertation, I provide merely a glimpse of an expansive terrain covered by Youth Speaks that includes not only local, Bay Area-based arts and literacy education programs and performances, but also both U.S.-based and transnational networks through large-scale, high-profile programs such as Brave New Voices and the Living Word Project. The Living Word Project is organized around a festival that features original works by select artists-in-residence at Youth Speaks, a number of whom have included staff members. The festival also goes on tour around the U.S. and in other parts of the world. The depth, expanse, and artistic scope of these projects are oftentimes what lead and shape the cutting edge of this arts community, which enable youth development programs to benefit and flourish from the influence. In other words, literacy education for youth is continually renewed through a fresh, artistic lens because professional artistic development ongoingly occurs for spoken word educators as professional artists.

Chinaka is an accomplished poet and playwright who became established as an artist in her teens as an early participant of Youth Speaks. She continued working

for several years on the staff of Youth Speaks as one of the artistic directors. Chinaka summed up the focus of the youth programs of Youth Speaks, centering on how their approach to literacy with youth rests on their own sense of agency with using words:

we allow for a different kind of agency with words – so people who might not feel empowered about reading or interested in creating words, it encourages them and impels them to read on a regular basis. And I think that, we’re also creating a good deal of documents that are youth written, and so it’s kind of changing the way people see literacy and literature. —Chinaka

According to Chinaka, not only is literacy redefined through their work with youth, but a new sense of literature and canon emerge in which young people themselves are the authors. She, like others whose views I previously shared, portrays the pedagogical work in terms of enabling “a different kind of agency with words,” opening up access to those youth who have not been empowered in the past around reading or creating with words. She refers to “a good deal of documents” that are youth-authored. Youth Speaks has an in-house press, called First Word Press, which has published anthologies, chapbooks, and CDs of youth-written poetry.

Katri similarly framed the approach to working with youth in terms of allowing for agency, namely through creativity, pointing out the inseparable relationship between literacy and art:

the way that we approach our curriculum...is through understanding literacy *through* creativity. I think that art and literacy for *us* are sort of like, feed each other hand-in-hand, and one develops the other. You know, it’s a sort of like back-and-forth almost? We take an *artistic* approach to literacy but then we also expect this very high level of, you know, of *literacy* in our art.
—Katri

Katri sees an indivisible link between literacy and art, specifically that literacy occurs “*through* creativity.” She indicates both “an *artistic* approach to literacy” and the

expectation of “very high level of...*literacy* in our art.” That literacy and art go “hand-in-hand” is apparent throughout local programs such as youth open mic, after-school writing workshops, arts-in-education, poetry slams, and other performances such as Queerosity and Bringing the Noise for MLK, Jr. which reflect the culmination of writing workshop series. The “very high levels” of literacy and art are even more apparent through spaces like Brave New Voices, which more accurately is performance-driven. Brave New Voices, or BNV, is a festival where 50 or more teams of young poets gather with their coaches, many of whom are former BNV youth poets, and other seasoned and established artists, activists, and educators who perform during the festival and lead writing and performance workshops for the youth participants. The festival, which lasts a few days, consists of various workshops for youth and spoken word organizers (e.g., starting or growing a youth literary arts organization), performances for BNV participants and the public, slam competitions, and a professional development training for local teachers. The event takes place every July in a different U.S. city each year, organized by Youth Speaks in collaboration with a youth organization in the host city, and typically involves key and legendary figures, including politicians and entertainers, as well as local community organizations. The youth on the BNV teams represent the “top qualifying” poets from their cities or regions, whose works oftentimes display an undeniably high level of quality and such extraordinary talent and precision. As Joseph (1996) explains, the crucial dimension of performance to spoken word poetry rests on the body as an instrument and medium that delivers the intimacy and

immediacy with an audience: “[t]he body gives identity to the poet’s language, constructs flesh for the author’s intention, codifies the disembodied voice, and enables an interpersonal connection between performer and audience” (Joseph, 1996). Spoken word as it is manifested and executed by youth at Brave New Voices displays such a high caliber of performance and literary art that demonstrates how the notion of “youth spoken word” actually is a misnomer and, according to Bamuthi, Youth Speaks artistic director, due to a lack of education about spoken word:

The way that youth spoken word, is typically, *framed*, and marketed, it’s *not* codified as exemplary art that *happens* to be commissioned or presented by young people. Youth spoken word is typically codified as an *outgrowth* of youth development. And so, the demographic is the primary mode of codification not the *quality* of the art itself. What *then* happens...is that folks who witness the art, at which point it’s *impossible* to deny the power, and general mastery of craft exhibited by young people. In which case, the take-away, if you will, is the realization of the quality, of the art itself, and not just who is creating and making the art. *That* it’s being practiced by young people then becomes peripheral.

—Bamuthi

As Bamuthi makes clear, spoken word is generally considered to be “an *outgrowth* of youth development” and noticed more for the “demographic” of youth artists than the quality of art itself. When people witness “the power, and general mastery of craft exhibited by young people,” as they do at Brave New Voices – live, on HBO, or on the web – the division between youth and professional adult performance artists disappears, as does the notion of youth itself, in ways that strictly foreground the beauty and quality of art, writing, and performance.

In the next section, I provide a nuanced glimpse of certain programs in order to fill in details of some of the major contours that typify the spoken word movement, using the Bay Area as a primary site. I highlight some of the practices by

characterizing illustrative youth-centered programs and approaches that work to redefine literacy through arts education, which itself becomes redefined. A more apparent picture emerges around cultural organizing, or arts-driven community organizing. I argue that the expansive community, both real and imagined, its design, and its evolved philosophy of arts- and youth-centered pedagogy and programming ultimately bring into view the efflorescence of a new generation of artists, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and social and political leaders. In other words, the pedagogy of spoken word *is* the persistent, intentional, and ongoing makings of a cultural movement.

Centrality of a Redefined Arts Education

Many of my interviewees considered arts education to be at the center of spoken word activism. According to Jason (former production manager), “our whole thing is arts education. I mean that’s what *everything* is about.” Similarly, Chinaka (former artistic director) articulated that, to address “the dearth of arts programming in public high schools,” Youth Speaks is “primarily an education organization that uses art to a) capture the youth and b) to further the way that we learn.” In relation to the first purpose (a), Chinaka elaborated that using art to “capture the youth” includes “exposure to the fine art of creative writing.” Lauren (former program director) addressed this point further, arguing that introducing creative writing to youth, and deepening their practice as a “fine” art, requires firm encouragement for self-reflection and self-exploration as well as honesty in their writing:

I think [our pedagogy] holds up a nonjudgmental mirror, for youth to look seriously at themselves, and honestly at themselves. And, to talk about what

they see. Youth Speaks is really great about saying there are no wrong answers and the standard is yourself, and we are not going to judge you. We just want you to be able to – not even judge yourself, but to like look at yourself honestly...it gets youth to better understand themselves and the world in which they live. And not only that, but to understand it in a great way, to then take agency in how their voice fits into the conversation. I think we put youth into the conversation, and then youth are honest about their position in the conversation...Even if they don't become writers, they're able to look at themselves as agents of change. —Lauren

As Lauren elucidates, engaging youth in spoken word involves holding up a “nonjudgmental mirror” for youth to examine themselves “seriously” and “honestly,” and making space for them “to talk about what they see.” The key aspect in this approach and pedagogy is non-judgment and providing a safe space in which “there are no wrong answers” and “the standard is yourself.” Lauren attests that this process enables youth to not only be part of the conversation, understood in the most general terms of civic participation and engagement, but that they also “are honest about their position in the conversation” as writers and as change agents.

Returning to what Chinaka contends in her second point (b), the organization uses art as a means “to further the way that we learn.” Herein lies a crucial dimension of cultural organizing. That most of the staff members of Youth Speaks are not only artists and writers, but gifted artists and writers who publicly display integrity and conviction in their own artistic works, does not occur by coincidence. As I explore further, artistic professional development is a key feature that is fostered in building, sustaining, and growing this arts community. Before I delve into this aspect of artistic professional development further, it helps to bring in a depiction that Bamuthi provided in his interview that speaks to an overall vision and framing of how programs are organized. He describes the two organizational areas of youth artistic

development (Chinaka's point a) and artistic professional development (Chinaka's point b) in terms of programming that separates by age the categories of "19 and under" and "19 and over":

Our service model begins with artistic development and presentation. Our constituents that are 19 and over provide service to our *primary* constituency, which is 19 and under. And so, the performance techniques, the writing techniques, the mastery of pedagogical craft, all that begins with artistic proficiency and excellence. And then through mentorships, after-school workshop facilitation, and through demonstration, i.e., the various festivals and, you know, theater projects, we then serve our primary constituency, which is 19 and under. So, my role is to make sure that the *art* is of a quality that inspires our young people. And that we continue to create avenues of publishing, performance and other methods of presentation that *yield* a specific vehicle for our constituency to kind of matriculate into, and develop into. So, to make sure that the books are of a quality, to make sure that the performances are of a quality, and to make sure there is a *structure* for the young people to *move* beyond introductory poems, or towards the application whether civically or artistically of, you know, of the *voice* that they've been cultivating *hopefully* throughout their work with our program. —Bamuthi

Bamuthi provides a condensed overview of how projects and programs are organized and developed on a very fundamental basis of "artistic proficiency, and excellence."

Youth who are "19 and under" are considered the "*primary* constituency," for which there exist multiple "avenues of publishing, performance and other methods of presentation," and an overall "*structure* for the young people to *move* beyond introductory poems, or towards the application whether civically or artistically of...*voice*." He emphasizes his role as artistic director to ensure high standards for books and performances that reflect "*art*...of a quality that inspires our young people." When I asked Bamuthi to clarify how he assesses artistic quality, he described a multidimensional approach that attends to evidence of *personal* and *collective transformation*, display of a *populist ethic*, content that *instructionally*

inspires, commitment to cultural continuity or a “*cultural continuum*,” and arousal of *political and social urgency*.

Bamuthi’s portrayal also specifies that there is a *vehicle* for youth artists who age out of the “19 and under” category into which they “matriculate” and further develop their work and apply their civic or artistic voice. Part of this vehicle involves providing service as arts educators to youth who are “19 and under” (for example, through workshops or working in schools and with teachers). The other significant part of this vehicle is artistic professional development. A number of staff members and “19 and over” affiliates have been commissioned as artists-in-residence to produce their own independent projects, namely books or evening-length theater performances through the Living Word Project, the resident theater company of Youth Speaks. The works produced for the Living Word Festival every year constitute what they call “*future aesthetic directives*,” reflecting in style, substance, and pedagogy what Bamuthi refers to as “post-hip hop” performance. Bamuthi defines post-hip hop in both periodic and cultural terms, particularly as that cultural *something* that is evolving and that will arrive and make its aesthetic and cultural impact after hip hop:

when I say post-hip hop, ultimately what I’m referring to is a pedagogy that’s evolved out of hip hop generation politics and values. So a post-civil rights, post-Reaganomics, you know, aesthetic, that *is* of hip hop in a sense that there are elements, dj-ing, b-boying—and seeing, you know graf writing, et cetera that are present in the work, but *post*-hip hop in the sense that the generation that is creating this work, has grown up with hip hop as a daily reality. There’s no *point* of transformation, or no point of transition where they became hip hop and so, generationally speaking there’s a way that they’ve kind of moved beyond, in terms of the culture. —Bamuthi

Artists that work within the realm of post-hip hop, according to Bamuthi, “grew up with hip hop as a daily reality... and so generationally speaking...they’ve kind of moved beyond” and are culturally defining the next popular aesthetic and cultural form after hip hop, a form that has yet to be named. He describes how there are “pedagogical underpinnings” shared by the artists of the Living Word Project that are “evident in the dance, and film, and narrative works that...they create. So the Living Word Festival is a *hub*, for *that*—for those ideas.” While the pedagogy of resident artists working with 19 and under youth can be identifiably characterized as Freireian, their own artistic works function in the pedagogical realm of post-hip hop. Living Word Project is “an avenue for artistic application, of the voice that we make a point of finding, discovering, and publicly presenting to a constituency that’s 19 and under.” The Living Word Project represents a means and vehicle for the application of voice that has been cultivated through 19 and under programs, for continuing the development of that voice, for finding and discovering voice that has not been represented (for example, artists based outside of the Bay Area or pushing an artist’s existing art into new aesthetic or intellectual territory), and for public presentation primarily to the current generation of 19 and under. In short, one “can actually make a living *as* an artist” and the Living Word Project is one means for professional artists through commissions and touring.

What the Living Word Project, in conjunction with the Bay Area community of spoken word education, brings into view, is the efflorescence of a new generation of artists, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and social and

political leaders. The pedagogy of spoken word, whether at a high level of professional aesthetic quality, or involving a young person sharing a poem for the very first time, rests on the idea and principles of movement-building, centered on finding and inserting new, emerging, and existing voices into more democratic dialogue and conversation: “one of the central arguments that we make, locally and nationally, is that, we represent and foster a movement towards voice, and democratizing voice.” To ensure this representation, and fostering of a voice-driven movement towards democratization, the organization, according to Bamuthi, must consistently remain “ahead of the curve,” staying open, flexible, and responsive to the possibility of *any* cultural shifts that arise and reflect new expressions, identities, and politics among young people and young artists:

We say at Youth Speaks, you know, the next generation can speak for itself. Part of the growth of the organization, and part of kind of like the mandatory construction of the organization, is that we *always* have to stay ahead of the curve, in terms of our aesthetic, and our pedagogy, to provide a platform *for* young people to speak in a way that’s comfortable. Which we have generally, you know, we generally say we are *of hip hop*. And I think that, as we continue to evolve, we have to *entertain* the possibility, that, young people are defining themselves, in a new way. So, making space for that definition to take place is central to our organizational sense of self. And also that which we project *onto* others in terms of making sure there are safe spaces for clarity of voice—for discovery and clarity of voice. —Bamuthi

To accommodate that young people are continually “defining themselves, in a new way,” according to Bamuthi, it is fundamental that there are “safe spaces” that support that self-definition and the “discovery and clarity of voice.” The discovery and clarity of voice reflects an overall movement towards voice among youth that is central to spoken word pedagogy, one that rearticulates and populates traditionally under- or mis-represented voices into a more democratic public sphere, while it fuels

new voices and identities into the conversation. Jason breaks down how the “movement towards voice” and the “democratization” of voice, populated and led by young people, is fostered and nurtured in the specific context and “safe space” of a poetry slam:

You don't just walk in to see a performance, you walk into – you know what I'm saying? You walk into like a hub of support. That's what I've been very deliberate about. Like...making sure my hosts and emcees are talking about this as being the largest movement in the world, which you know, is a very large movement, but also talk about how these cats are writing original work. They're writing original stories, and they're writing from the heart, and they put a lot of time and effort into it. And some of it is lovely, some of it is hard, some of it is strong, some of it is painful. But to actually tell the *audience*, y'all have a *role* in this. You have a role. Feel free to hug somebody. Feel free to learn a little bit about somebody in here, like if this story touches you personally, you know what I'm saying? Feel free to write something, you know what I'm saying? Or feel free to communicate with somebody in this space because this is not just about, you know, the glamour of it. This is about, y'all are moved, y'all are moved by something that's not MTV, y'all are moved by something that's young, raw, strong – you know what I'm saying? Poetry, spoken word. And you're moved by it, and you're in this space. I mean, you got fucking 3,000 people in here. You know? Like don't act like you all came here because this shit was on MTV...You know, you came here because you feel it. You know what I'm saying? You have, you have a sense of *care* in your body. You're not walking in, you know, none of our audience members come into our space, with carelessness. And if they *do* walk in with a carelessness, it's because someone who *cared* brought them into that space because they *knew* that person actually has care in them. You know what I'm saying? It's like everyone who walks inside our space has some kind of love inside of them. And so I try to make sure that our events, you know, I don't want our audience to ever diverge from, be caring to sort of like nonchalant, “oh I'm here at a poetry event, oh yeah it was cool.”...You know, it's interactive. It's a *movement*, like literally is a movement. It involves more than just the performers. It involves everybody, everybody has to take part. —Jason

Jason points out that the movement towards voice, and the movement of spoken word in general, are not just about the individual young poets themselves. The movement is intersubjectively orchestrated such that the audience has a role as well. He wants to make it clear to the audience that they have an obligation to respond emotionally to

what young people write, deliver to, and perform for them: “y’all have a *role* in this. You have a role. Feel free to hug somebody. Feel free to learn a little bit about somebody in here, like if this story touches you personally, you know what I’m saying? Feel free to write something, you know what I’m saying? Or feel free to communicate with somebody in this space.” At the heart of this movement, both in its immediacy and broader scale, is affective interaction: “It involves more than just the performers. It involves everybody, everybody has to take part...you came here because you feel it... you have a sense of *care* in your body.” Jason speaks to a care and feeling that poetry inspires, particularly original works written from the heart by youth, that creates an overall space of intimacy at a poetry slam. Intimacy, in turn, “expands the operating field of communication exponentially” (Joseph, 1996). Intimacy is brought about by, not only the poetry itself but, the body on-stage, the body of the audience as a whole, as well as the live energy led by the voice and interactive nature of the performance. As Joseph illuminates, “color on a blank canvas or static words on paper have and will continue to move the world. But let’s face it, nothing cuts closer to our core than voice. Would you rather read Bob Marley’s lyrics, or hear him sing?” (10).

Jason’s characterization of a teen poetry slam captures Bakhtin’s notion of a “carnavalesque” celebration, which “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they *live* in it, and *everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people*” (Morris, 1994/2003, 198, emphasis added). The carnivalesque form and method produce a gathering that draws from and breathes life into “bodies” (viewed in the widest sense

to include physical bodies, narrative bodies, the body of audience, and youth as a social body, for example) that are traditionally viewed in the dominant sphere as separate and grotesque but get recontextualized as connected, embraced, and fantastic. The carnivalesque space is not merely an inversion of high (or dominant) and low cultural forms but a transgression of this inversion into an original, spirited quality and lived experience of “carnival ambivalence” that is shared across difference, and in the case of a poetry slam, held together and driven by beats, rhythms, words, and community.

The intimacy, care, and emotions that flow through the social space of the teen poetry slam is one manifestation of how the Bay Area’s local expression and exteriorization of spoken word does a kind of “tracing” of social affect. In other words, what typically is not seen or felt, or seems not to exist, is made visible and felt on a scale much larger than the poem, in relation to young people’s voices and critical command of literacy. Parallel to how Christna’s words bring into view what is not seen but can be traced and felt from his family and cultural history, and to Ebony’s insistence of public view and dialogue around her own personal stories of violence, spoken word as an organized cultural form foregrounds young people’s voices as well as a more radically democratic version of dialogue.

The performative force and cultural impact of spoken word can be attributed to both the substance of artistic narrative authored by youth, as well as the youth-centered cultural organizing and pedagogy. These intersubjective narratives, voices, and bodies are the discursive substance that “cuts through the grammar of

supremacy” (Sandoval, 2000). As Jason puts it simply, “these cats are writing original work. They’re writing original stories, and they’re writing from the heart, and they put a lot of time and effort into it. And some of it is lovely, some of it is hard, some of it is strong, some of it is painful.” That the audience connects fundamentally and humanely to these honest and artistic youth-authored accounts of experience reflects the seeds of a movement towards democratizing voice.

I end this chapter with the reflections of young poets themselves to provide insight into how youth are engaged with spoken word and its community organized spaces. The following words are from Ebony, as an example of how seriously a young person can take the craft of spoken word, through which the possibilities for what Bamuthi refers to as “the application...of...*voice*” become endless. She described the writing process and emphasized again an immense social responsibility:

Being a writer is *so much* responsibility that comes along with that. Sometimes I get *headaches*, you know, when I write. It’s like, I don’t understand, I don’t really understand all the psychology involved with that. But, sometimes I’m *afraid* to write. It’s like I feel like, writing is such a *huge* responsibility. And it puts, *you* put a lot of pressure on yourself as a writer to always, be *so* meticulous in *every* word that you speak and everything, every – you’re so, *every* conviction that you have in your writing, you have to be responsible for *everything* you see, you have to be responsible for everything that you write and that you share with people. And it *does* put a lot of pressure on me, as a writer, ‘cause I’m a perfectionist. You know, if you write something good one time as a writer, you have to uphold that standard. So I get, sometimes I really *do* get headaches, before I start writin’ stuff. Yeah. —Ebony

Ebony speaks from the perspective of a serious young writer who knows and appreciates the depths, heights, and challenges required by her craft, and considers writing to demand her “*every* conviction.” When youth poets are mentored and supported through a multitude and culture of youth-centered programs that nurture

their sense of self, foster their voice, challenge them to high standards of excellence, and cultivate their obligation to community, we witness gifted young writers like Ebony and an unwavering commitment to writing as a craft.

Bryant, a young poet, dancer, and artist whom I interviewed when he was 15 years old, explained his own community-rooted experience of personal transformation: “I think now, I’m involved with changing things that go on versus back then I didn’t care with how things can go on because they didn’t affect me directly. It [spoken word] raises a lot of awareness with the youth. And there’s a way, I’m not saying there’s a way things should be done but, there’s a way that things can be done where we don’t hurt anyone else.” During our interview, Bryant had mentioned that his parents, who are Mien refugees, were not familiar with spoken word and his own involvement in spoken word:

Bryant: We speak mainly Mien. My parents, they understand some English. So whatever we [he and his sister] can’t understand in Mien, we just say it in English and we get it.

...

Bryant: My parents don’t know much about spoken word. And, they don’t know a lot about writing in general, as in the craft of writing, and creative writing, so. I invited them to come but they said they didn’t want to come because they wouldn’t understand what I’m saying.

Ruth: ...and Mien, is there a written script that’s associated with the language?

Bryant: I think so. There is a written language but it crosses between English and Chinese characters. But I’m not sure which is more common because I’ve seen a lot of books written in Mien with English characters and a lot of books in Mien written with Chinese characters.

...

Ruth: Seems like in the next few years they’ll, they’ll eventually see you?

Bryant: Yeah, I think so [smiling].

Ruth: Maybe on tv or something. Yeah, and I think that’ll, that’ll give them more perspective.

Bryant, since my interview with him, went on to become a finalist in the Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam *twice*, and went on to represent the Bay Area team at Brave New Voices. This last year (2012) he co-coached the Bay Area Team at Brave New Voices. He and his poetry have been featured in two HBO documentaries of Brave New Voices (Simmons, 2008; Simmons, 2010) and on KPFA's *Morning Show* and *Hard Knock Radio*, the latter most recently to publicize Brave New Voices in 2011, which took place in the Bay Area. In his *Hard Knock Radio* interview, in addition to his poetry and thoughts on the BNV festival, he mentioned that he was part of an organized petition campaign to try to put on the November 2011 ballot the guarantee of free, public education that would be made available to everyone in California.

Hadeel, a 16-year-old poet, writer, and spoken word artist at the time I interviewed her, painted a portrait of the historical intentions of spoken word in the Bay Area, reflecting on the founding of Youth Speaks in 1996 and her own personal experiences with the community:

when James Kass founded the organization, he wanted youth to identify their surroundings and speak out about what they saw to be unjust. What they saw to be blockades, you know barriers that were locking them into a world that they didn't wanna be in – not that they didn't wanna be in it, but just wanted to *change*, wanted to make better for themselves. And that's exactly what we're doing with all the poetry that we *do*. It's just, it's a way to do it creatively, you know. It's a way to do it where we can use art, where we can meet all these people and identify and relate so much with all these people like – I'm around all these people who are near my age and, you know, they care about things that I do 'cause like at my high school no one cares about what I care about you know. Everyone – shoes, clothes, all this stuff. Me, I wanna hear about politics, I wanna hear about the election. You know, I love being around all these people who I know are so intelligent and so charismatic and so you know – that influenced me in positive ways.

—Hadeel

As Hadeel explains, spoken word is meant for young people to creatively “identify their surroundings and speak out about what they saw to be unjust,” “blockades” and “barriers that were locking them” in a world they want to “*change*,...make better for themselves.” Hadeel feels she is surrounded and positively influenced by such “intelligent” and “charismatic” people in the spoken word community, whereas in her public high school, “no one cares about what I care about.” She would much rather engage in a discussion about politics, pressing social issues, and current events than focus on, for example, material items, which predominate in the peer culture of her school. Hadeel’s delineation suggests how spoken word embodies what Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) calls *poetic knowledge*, or that effort to see a differently defined social future in the present, in which imagination becomes a most powerful weapon towards a more socially just future through the re-writing of past and present: like “revolutionary graffiti painted in bold strokes across the great texts of Western civilization; it is a hand grenade tossed with deadly accuracy, clearing the field so that we might write a new history with what’s left standing” (181).³⁴ Hadeel, along with her fellow Bay Area and Brave New Voices slam finalist companions, Bryant and Ebony, and many others at the center of youth political arts activism through spoken word, are writing and performing their selves, lives and communities into a new history, giving expression to a whole range of social issues that affect not just youth but also much broader peoples of the past and present.

³⁴ Kelley more specifically is referring to Aimé Césaire’s (2000/1955) *Discourse on Colonialism* as a prime example of a surrealist text that illustrates poetry as a form of “revolt.” Kelley argues that “surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but a revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought” (5).

CHAPTER FOUR
**Up Against the Institution of Schools: Arts in Education,
or Why We Need Community Organizations**

Please take your designated seats
Do *not* talk!
No need for creativity here
Just fill in bubbles
No colors
No drawings
No poetry
No music
No individualism
Just a checklist of bulleted statements as we work our way down the list

We seem more and more like sheep
Bouncing from standard to standard
We are the antithesis to this new era
Of standardized retardation
Slowing down the way you think
Every classroom comes with a lockdown kit
Fully equipped with a bucket for you to *shit* in
Regurgitate everything you've learned onto the answer sheets
Do not look at any tests but your own
No eating no drinking
No cell phones
No coughing no sneezing no laughing no breathing
Just quiet...

—Miguel Figueroa 18, Reed Bobroff 16, Olivia Gatwood 18, and Eva Crespin 16
Team Albuquerque, “Love Letter to Albuquerque Public Schools” (Brave New Voices 2010)

The young poets from Albuquerque, New Mexico paint a picture of the institutional dehumanization that takes place in U.S. public schools everyday. The current era of high stakes testing determines and weeds out the “underperforming” and “failures” among schools, students, and teachers, subjecting and subordinating all to hyper-testing and standardized curriculum, or what they frame as an educational process of “standardized retardation”. More than restrictiveness, the poets point out how school takes away their fundamental right to an education that promotes critical thinking, expression, and relevance, and magnify what being in school *feels* like,

namely, that of being denied, deprived, and suffocated: “No eating no drinking...*No coughing no sneezing no laughing no breathing.*” As the title “Love Letter...” suggests, the poets convey how certain entanglements of intimacy and abuse are embedded in their relationship to formal education. On the one hand, the abuse of hyper-testing, which insists that knowledge resides and can be best displayed in the form of filling in a correct bubble, is really more about a corporate-driven, modern liberal state-sponsored source of profit that dictates the “cookie-cutter,” “white-washed” curriculum and institutional culture of public education:

Private corporations make money off our low scores
Their salaries are boosted from ignorance
They sit on a pedestal of trust funds and fancy degrees
These companies teach us what to think
Neoslaves bolted to a machine
That grinds and spits out their money
We’re taught in poor schools
With the new revised white-washed history book
Kept from the truth

On the other hand, the “truth” is much closer to students in an educational culture of hyper-testing that veils this truth. Intimacy in education manifests itself as a form of desire and longing that engages more complex, thoughtful, and multiple realities within a social filing system of students who are “taught in poor schools.” This sense of intimacy and closeness in education is what fuels an unwavering determination of these poets’ to transcend the institutional constraints of schooling and “a segregated education” by refusing institutional judgments of their own worth:

We stretch our limbs in all directions
Our fists will be raised
Feeling free
...
I refuse to conform to a segregated education

[Poet 1:] Only I—[Poet 2:] only I—[Poet 3:] only I—[Poet 4:] only I
Can determine who I am

The young poets point out a foremost and longstanding contradiction of public, compulsory education that speaks to how an ideological state apparatus *feels* to them more like a repressive state apparatus, in Althusser's (1971) terms, a "machine of repression" that includes military, police, courts, and prisons. Clearly the repressiveness of education manifests itself to these young poets in ways more obvious than the "very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic" (110) nature of education that Althusser described as reproducing social relations of production.

In this chapter, I set out to complicate the terms, beyond an "economic in the last instance" (Hall, 1996) understanding of standardized tests as *the* socially defining feature of public education, taking the specific case of spoken word organizing in relationship to the institution of schools. In doing so, I unpack some of the ways cultural organizing runs up against the institution, making the case strongly for community-based arts in schools. I reveal some of the tensions, contradictions, and bypasses of spoken word's community foundation and expansion to highlight specific reasons why schools *need* community organizations to provide this service of arts-based education. In working through this analysis, guiding questions include the following: *How might we begin to make sense of some of the tensions, complexities, and contradictions confronting the spoken word movement, using the local case of the San Francisco Bay Area, particularly in relationship to the institution of schools? How does navigation of this organizing work take place in partnership with schools? How does it clash with schools? What do community-rooted spoken word practices*

and instruction offer in complement to schools? What might be some implications for community programs in filling the gaps that are left by a test-driven culture of education and its failure to offer quality, substantive education centered on critical thinking and students' sense of place and belonging in history? What are the challenges and limits of organizing, particularly as the movement expands its scope and relations of popular education?

This chapter is organized into the following sections: In *Using the Heart as a Tool*, I focus on some of the key elements of what community-based spoken word brings pedagogically to schools, namely tapping into the creative writing impulse that already exists among youth and promoting literacy primarily through youth culture. The next section, *Disputing the Terms of Education for Social Justice*, sheds light on the tension of the role community organizations play in relationship to schools, and in the case of Youth Speaks, a role that disassociates heavily from the high-stakes testing component of the institutional work of schools. I provide the example of the First Wave program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison as one spoken word-based (more generally, hip hop arts-based) program that does work institutionally by way of a “pipeline” for getting more historically underrepresented students of color into higher education. In *Further Educational Engagements: With Schools & Beyond*, I discuss school residencies, school visits, and school clubs as primary mechanisms of spoken word organizing that work in conjunction with the formal institution of schools. In addition, I shed light on other related forms and incubating ideas of working with schools, keeping in focus youth at the center of programming,

as well as intergenerational programs for educators and professional development. Finally, in *Expanding the Movement: Dilemmas of Standardizing Pedagogy*, I take an additional look at the expansion of spoken word through its work with schools, teachers, and other educators, and reveal a different set of tensions that arise through the attempt to standardize this widely acclaimed and desired approach to literacy and arts-driven pedagogy. What become apparent are a dialogic process and the intention to be democratic by involving various kinds of advisors who lend help in the effort of making what has worked pedagogically well, both understandable and accessible to others.

“Using the Heart as a Tool”

In describing Freire’s work on the notion of education as the practice of freedom, bell hooks (1994) notes that “education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” (14). In other words, knowledge belongs to everybody, while its production towards emancipation requires collective learning and praxis. In the public school classroom, liberatory education would translate into a process of linking critical social awareness to practice, in which students are active participants. Yet theory could not be further from practice in this regard in many public high schools. Hadeel, the 16-year-old poet who in the last chapter expressed her interest in politics rather than the peer culture of material consumerism that pervades her public school, explains how at her high school there is little room for her to engage seriously as a student because of how school is ruled by unquestioned restriction and authority:

The thing about *me*. My mom thinks I'm like irresponsible because like I don't – I lack in school but that's because *school*, I don't put my high school as a priority 'cause I don't find authority figures trying to tell me what to do so, you know, endearing. So that can't make me want to do my homework and stuff when people are telling me what to do but, if it's like I know what my priority *is*, like I'll be on point with it. Like I'll be like completely – like everything will be [taken care of], you know what I'm saying? *That's* why I want to go to college. It's a lot less – it's like you're really on your own and I need like a sense of freedom. —Hadeel

Hadeel associates going to college with a kind of intellectual and bodily freedom that does not exist for her in high school. She confronts and speaks openly about the *lack* of affect and its detrimental impact on her sense of care and motivation in her school performance: “I don't put my high school as a priority 'cause I don't find authority figures trying to tell me what to do so...endearing.” Yet, she is well aware of her sense of efficacy when it comes to things that do matter to her: “if it's like I know what my priority *is*, like I'll be on point with it.” I want to juxtapose Hadeel's sentiments about school and her “lack in school” with another part of her interview where she talks about her own identity as a writer and the creative identification she has with writing and art:

I always loved to write. Ever since I was a little girl, like I was always just like writing, I was always drawing – I was always into art, you know? I always had like this creative sense to me ... it kind of took over everything else. And when I started writing it was really kind of an escape for me. It was like – it was like a *beautiful obligation*. Like if I didn't write I feel like I was lacking something, and that I needed to write in order to feel like, to feel accomplished – like I was doing something productive, you know? —Hadeel

For Hadeel, writing provides an important source of “escape” that takes her to a place where she is not at all “irresponsible” as her mother sees her, nor apathetic in the sense of how young people are often characterized. Quite the contrary, writing becomes “a *beautiful obligation*,” a source of clarity without which she would feel

like she is “lacking something.” Hadeel’s poetry has been featured in HBO’s Russell Simmons Presents Brave New Voices (2011) and uses powerful imagery and metaphor to articulate pressing social and human rights issues such as the execution of Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer as well as the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Hadeel clearly sees herself as a serious writer and artist in ways that her public school and many teachers fail to recognize or are unable to cultivate, outside of perhaps offering art or creative writing as an elective course.

Hadeel’s predicament reflects an instance that resonates strongly with the insights raised in an interview that I conducted with an advisor to and longtime friend of Youth Speaks. Jeff is also is a professor and a well-known expert on critical literacy, pedagogy, and urban education. He expressed his overall belief that the staff of Youth Speaks “have their finger on the pulse of a major element of youth culture. Which immediately separates them from like 95% of educational programs in the United States...so just based on that they’re a five-percenter.” He spoke more specifically about the impact on young people, like Hadeel, of supporting their literacy production in ways that recognize and merely “*tap*” the “*highly* literate” skills that already exist among youth:

They’ve shown the ability consistently...to do some meaningful literacy development with kids, to get kids who have been historically unengaged in literacy production *re*-engaged, right? And when I say *un*engaged, I mean in formal, institutional ways. So you know, they’ll tell you about kids that come in and start working with them and they find out that these kids have like a *slam* book that they’ve been writing in, right? For *years*. Right? And it just stayed under their bed, and like *never* been integrated in the class, even when they had like a poetry unit in class it would never come out, right? So, you know I think the notion that kids are, Youth Speaks recognize effectively I think that kids are *not* illiterate. And they’re not *a*-literate, right, that they’re *highly* literate. And they’re regularly engaged in literacy production.

And all they do is *tap* that. Right. So they, Youth Speaks is good at an *asset*-based approach to education, right, as opposed to kind of the historical based deficit model that's used. And I think that's why they get the kind of stuff they get from kids. So in terms of developing literacy with young people, I think Youth Speaks is on the cutting edge on the *globe*. —Jeff

Jeff makes the unequivocal distinction between young people's disengagements with and detachments from the "formal" and "institutional" approaches to literacy development found in schools, on the one hand, and the high production of literacy that takes place outside of school, on the other, like the "*slam* book that they've been writing in...For *years*" that "just stayed under their bed," and that had "*never* been integrated" in class or a poetry unit. He stresses the critical fact that "kids are...*highly* literate. And they're regularly engaged in literacy production." He further avows, "all they do is *tap* that," which is the reason he considers Youth Speaks to be, in relation to youth literacy development, "on the cutting edge on the *globe*."

Jeff emphasized how the engagement with and understanding of youth culture, or having a "finger on the pulse" of youth culture, plays a major role in this form of literacy production and pedagogy, especially by incorporating the critical element of "*play*" in writing and literacy.

And I think that that *model* that they use, of *really* understanding youth culture, but also understanding the usefulness of *play* with writing, of *play* with literacy, and of tapping into the various kinds of really *intense* emotions that young people have, whether that be you know extreme pain to really intense joy, and everything kind of in between, those two meter ends. You know, *that's* where the best literacy instruction is. So they are a *model* of some of the best practices. —Jeff

According to Jeff, "the usefulness of *play* with writing, of *play* with literacy" should not be underestimated in literacy pedagogy, along with the range of "really *intense*

emotions” of young people. Studies of the importance of play in learning can be traced to the developmental research of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) theorizes the notion of play as an activity whose defining characteristic is not merely pleasure, but the creation of an imaginary situation, including playing at reality. Play manifests a kind of emancipation, albeit an illusory one, from situational constraints, yet also reflects “more memory in action than a novel imaginary situation” (103) through the performance of a kind of reproduction of real situations. Vygotsky considers play to be “a leading factor in development” in that it offers “a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness” (102), as well as for making “conscious, willful choices that rise above...situational constraints” (Haas Dyson, 1997, 13). Play with words and “*play* with writing” in spoken word poetry translate into transgressive acts of the imagination that can guide consciousness and redirect social practice, as demonstrated in the poem “Switch,” introduced in the first chapter of this dissertation (“He just wanted to free the melody...”; “*The same music you switch to*”), or the title of the 2009 Queeriosity³⁵ theme, “*The Sins of Our Idols*,” marking its cultural defiance to heteronormativity. Sandoval (2000) makes this argument even more explicit by implicating the realm of culture and the importance of cultural reinscription: “Poetry reaches back through the levels of meaning production to try to lead consciousness out of its disciplinization and inscription in culture to a potential

³⁵ Queeriosity is an annual “spoken word and performing arts showcase dedicated to young people who are reshaping the contours of our conversations about sexuality, identity, and community.” The event also is a culmination of a workshop series focused on queer social issues and identities among LGBTQ youth and is advertised as “a place for a diverse population of queer youth and their allies to come together and declare themselves present and unafraid.” <http://youthspeaks.org/voice/performances/queeriosity/>

utopia existing between, around, and through language” (95). The transgressive practice of leading consciousness “out of its disciplinization” includes the young Albuquerque poets’ disassociation with and refusal of being held intellectually hostage to and emotionally imprisoned within an institutionalized culture that pervades public education.

An important, distinct part of this literacy pedagogy is meeting young people *differentially* where they are, including emotionally, or – much more broadly on the level of youth culture – in connection to sociological affect as “structures of feeling” that are shared, intersubjective, and defined by social relation rather than a uniqueness belonging to any one individual. Williams (1977) describes a structure of feeling as “a specific structure of linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions” (134). He uses the case of early Victorian ideology through which social failures and deviations such as debt, poverty, and illegitimacy created a general condition of exposure and isolation that marked these characteristics as connecting instances, over time, “at a reduced tension: the social explanation fully admitted, the intensity of experienced fear and shame now dispersed and generalized” (134). Hardship and so-called failure, typically individualized or blamed upon the individual while localized in experience, are in fact structurally produced, conditioned, and shared, much like the struggles and intense emotions experienced by youth. Youth culture, in other words, contains the material expressions of structures of feeling that are manifested as

both familiar and differentially unique through the literacy production and pedagogy of spoken word.

As Vajra indicated more specifically in the last chapter, spoken word's literacy pedagogy "*meets* young people in different places. And guides them accordingly... poetry is a unique vehicle for that. 'Cause it's not, 'we're gonna write five paragraph essays.' They're not gonna demonize you if you don't have, you know, these high-level vocabulary words. It's gonna take your story and then push you." Katri explained the differential nature of poetry as pedagogy at the level of working with different student populations in schools and with different audiences in general: "So, for something like the Living Word Festival...it's more about pushing their *art*. Than it is about developing, their *reading* level or whatever. But when we're in *schools*, and then it also can change from school to school, it *is* sort of more about, *really* making their education meaningful. *Through* art." Katri elaborates on what she considers the thread that pedagogically connects all of the work, "*using the heart as a tool*" of education:

I think that *really* above all else, what Youth Speaks wants to give, represent when we're anywhere is something that people *don't* have otherwise. So, I think that if we're in, you know, if we're in a school that's—you know, Downtown High School or something like, where it's very like, you know, these kids *hate* school and have already been kicked out of other schools and like, don't care about reading or writing or anything like that—then it is sort of about making literacy interesting *through* things that they already have access to. Like you know, like a lot of them are really into music. So it's like, well what is this *music* talking about? And understanding that there's *themes* in music that are similar to writing. And really using their life experience to approach learning and all this stuff. So clearly the focus is more, is *using the heart as a tool* to understand education. But then when we're on the other side of it and sort of developing that curriculum, it's more about, how can we use—you know it's more about like, like how can we

push our art further to like, you know make this something that someone
hasn't seen before. —Katri

By “*using the heart as a tool* to understand education,” whether through music as an entry point into writing, or pushing art to make it “something that someone hasn’t seen before,” Katri believes that spoken word pedagogy is “to give...something that people *don’t* have otherwise.” She added, “there’s also this understanding...that education, that educating yourself is sort of a *life* process and never ends. So like it’s not even education in the traditional *school* sense of the word. But it’s more about like, in order to become better artists, we also need to remain educated and learn from *all* these different things.” Katri’s words resonate with the take away message of Team Albuquerque’s poem, of the notion of education beyond the confines of traditional schooling. She associates becoming “better artists” with education as a “*life* process” that “never ends,” and learning “from *all* these different things.”

Implicit in Katri’s comment is the role of critical literacy in furthering artistry and artistic development, in what one inscribes or reinscribes through one’s art, particularly against dominant hegemonic formations, in asking critical social questions, or by inspiring reflection and dialogue. Critical literacy itself is a life-long practice of education, not simply an autonomous something that must be taught to students to acquire (Street, 2001; New London Group, 1996; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997), but a practice that furthers one’s art through a deepened or expanded social consciousness. Art, in turn, is a central medium for ongoing critical literacy development, for both its producers and

consumers, one that promotes dynamic social dialogue, engagement, and interchange in the largest sense.

For students, guidance in the arts, or art itself, can sometimes be the only or major source of access to or sustenance for engaging in school or identifying as a writer, which is why, according to Katri, a number of teachers in the Bay Area give extra credit to their students who attend after-school writing workshops, reflecting “how probably most teachers are involved” with Youth Speaks. In the next section, I expand on and complicate the picture further of spoken word’s relationship to schools, particularly around questions, contradictions, and tensions in viewing education in the service of social justice, as well as disassociations or ruptures that come into play at this community-school interface.

Disputing the Terms of Education for Social Justice

I return to my interview with Jeff, who shared sharp criticisms of Youth Speaks, though ultimately connected his criticisms to a deep respect for the work and the staff, especially since he believes the organization has “in terms of urban youth literacy, probably the most potential in the country.” One major critique was that the work fails to connect students institutionally in ways that would help them to pursue college and open up greater life opportunities:

[T]hey’re *really* good at cultivating existing talent. And, kind of taking it to the next level and putting some polish on it. Giving it a form. Which is good, you know. Where...I’m not convinced, I think they can do more and I think they can do *better* with kids that are more, might land more at the middle or at the bottom in terms of their skill level and capacity to perform particularly as the program relates to impact and school achievement. So, if you can get a kid up there and he or she can *bust*, you know, for five minutes in front of a crowd of 500 people, I’m not really all that impressed if that somehow doesn’t translate into better achievement, better attendance, better

life opportunities. And you could argue it does, it kind of has this residual effect [of] confidence...and blah blah blah. And, you know that's probably true. But I'm not more impressed with what they're doing than I am with a sports program putting a kid at the free throw line, making a free throw in front of a thousand people winning the game than, he or she can't go to college because they can't pass the SAT. So unless your program is creating *fundamental shifts* in life opportunities, then I think it's some liberal, hippy bullshit. Frankly. You know, and I think there's a lot of that out there. I think there's a lot of people out there who are interested in getting, living vicariously through the *pain* of urban youth. And giving them this forum to like, you know, speak on their pain and, you know get it out, whatever, right? And it doesn't translate into any institutional ability for the kids. And I think that's, it's a disservice... —Jeff

Jeff's focus and concern are the institutional arrangements of schools that work as obstacles against "kids that...land more at the middle or at the bottom in terms of their skill level and capacity" in school achievement. Comparing a young slam poet to "a kid at the free throw line, making a free throw in front of a thousand people winning the game" but who "can't pass the SAT," he vehemently expresses that spoken word programs must "translate into better achievement, better attendance, better life opportunities" and generate "*fundamental shifts* in life opportunities." Otherwise, "it's some liberal, hippy bullshit."

One can certainly contest the terms Jeff raises, which leave unquestioned the institutional arrangement of schools based on a system of meritocracy that pushes out significant numbers of racialized students of color, particularly in urban areas, related to dropping out and zero tolerance policies that fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. "[B]etter achievement, better attendance, better life opportunities" are more likely to occur with fundamental shifts in the institution itself that reverse and eliminate the pervasive educational conditions of pushout, and there are currently a number of organized efforts aimed at doing so. For example, GenderJust in Chicago as well as

youth organizations in Oakland and elsewhere have targeted efforts that have encouraged and convinced school districts to adopt a restorative justice approach to school discipline. Schools that have provided ethnic studies in the curriculum also have proven its effectiveness in getting students engaged and committed to academic achievement and a college-track.

Elsewhere in the interview, Jeff stated, “there’s a false binary between this creation of...representation culture, this artistic culture, and academic achievement. And I think the *really* good programs explode that binary and make it both.” Programs that integrate the arts, particularly from a youth culture standpoint, with an academic focus as inseparable can occur within, outside, or after school. Ethnic studies is one example that has shown to shatter this binary. Youth Speaks does appear to disrupt this binary, and probably does so in a number of ways. For example, a number of youth poets, who are first-generation in their families to attend college, have earned full scholarships to attend universities such as Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Yet, the organization does not collect the data to reveal that this is indeed the case. For Jeff, disrupting this binary entails providing the hard evidence to show that the work translates institutionally into greater levels of academic achievement: “it’s, how do you *prove*, ‘cause I think their program has the potential to be *significantly* impactful. Not just in terms of *healing* that pain, and like, you know, giving kids a voice, whatever that means because it kind of implies that kids didn’t have a voice before.” Jeff sees healing and emotions as only part of the real education work of spoken word activism, while he is

critical of any claim to the notion of “giving...voice” because young people already possess voice to varying degrees, including expressions of critical social consciousness. For Jeff, providing the hard data and using the data to align the work and make needed adjustments for producing academically prepared students is key to social justice work in education.

In contrast to Jeff’s viewpoint, when I asked staff directly about the connection between spoken word organizing and academic achievement, no one claimed to try to do or further the work that schools are charged to do, as defined by schools, their districts, and the state. On the contrary, though not opposed to education organizations that fuse arts, culture, or sports, for example, with academic achievement into a combined, single focus, these arts educators, administrators, and activists explicitly *opposed* on a fundamental level of principle the very idea of this fusion for their own programs. Director of 19-and-under programs, and long-time critical educator and former high school teacher, Hodari, explained:

It’s kind of hard because we don’t measure ourselves by the criteria that schools measure themselves. That’s like, sometimes a challenge that we come up to. So yeah that’s sometimes a challenge that we face, because, it’s not our intention to meet academic standards. It’s not our intention to help kids do better on standardized tests. We don’t, we’re unapologetic about how—our *lack* of effort, in that area in that regard. That’s *not* our focus. You know what I mean? —Hodari

Before Youth Speaks, Hodari worked several years as the executive director of an education organization focused on academic success, and before that, was a teacher at Berkeley High School. He consequently has both a strong history and familiarity with, for example, California content standards, SAT and exit exam preparation,

project-based learning, and culturally relevant (he taught African American studies) and critical pedagogy:

I spent, what, six years, seven years running an organization that was exclusively dedicated to preparing kids for academic success. That was what we *did*. And the focus was tutoring and getting kids to be ready and *able* to take college track and honors level classes in high school. So they could attend and be ready to apply to any university they wanted to. That was, that was—the *goal*. That was the intention and that was the *focus*, you know. And so then, we *had* to be responsive to standardized, you know, requirements. We *had* to think about exit exams and, and focus on SAT scores and, and really try to, direct our instruction, direct the experiences that we provided them—provided those young people, had to be *focused*—on elevating their *math* score. You know, and getting their multiplication facts. You know what I mean, on getting them to understand, you know, very specifics about how—their language skills, you know. Or, understanding how to write a five-paragraph essay. Or learning the writing process. You know what I mean, the traditional way. —Hodari

Hodari stresses the specific elements that his previous organization focused on and was intentional about, in terms of its service goals for providing academic assistance to students, in order to make very clear the contrast with the intentions and focus of Youth Speaks. Joannie, another arts supporter, administrator, organizer, and artist herself, expressed strongly how the community work of spoken word is not only apart from the goals of schools, but *does* a lot of the work in fact that schools *should* be doing. She stated:

Non-profits wouldn't have to exist if people who were *really* supposed to provide this shit were doing what they're supposed to be doing. If California were *serious* about *their own standards*, these programs would be in every school. But they're not. You know what I mean? So I don't feel we're the greatest thing in the world and we're accomplishing everything we set out to do. I still believe there's a huge gap between the people who need the work, and the amount of people who can get it. But I don't think exclusively that's our fault. —Joannie

Joannie asserts that rather than framing the work in terms of furthering what public schools do, with an overemphasis on standardized curriculum and test score data, the

standards of California in fact are well enough defined and specified such that the state and its schools should be doing more to ensure that they meet them. What is more, because California fails to meet its own education standards, non-profits are absolutely necessary because they partially fill this gap left by schools.

Similarly, Vajra argued, “you know, obviously what we do—literacy development, writing I mean it *is* connected to standards. It’s connected to schools. But when you’re day-to-day trying to do those things, it’s just harder to make those connections.” On the same side of the coin, Joannie pointed out how non-profit work can be exhausting and, in response to my comment about how necessary “meditative moments” are to replenish (speaking largely from my involvement at the Brave New Voices Festival as a volunteer and chaperone), she stated most frankly, “in non-profit work those moments are few and far between.”

Based on this analysis of interview segments, while the educative role of community organizations like Youth Speaks play can be significant for many students, including those who do not traditionally fare well in school, their distinct and relatively autonomous nature from the institution of schools cannot be overemphasized. The disassociation from schools is an intentional one that recognizes, as Joannie puts it, that “there’s a huge gap between the people who need the work [in terms of artistic and literacy production and support], and the amount of people who can get it.” Yet, community organizations are also crucial partners with schools in various ways, a point that I continue to unfold in the remainder of this chapter. Before I discuss this community-school interface in greater detail, I want to

briefly highlight a spoken word-based, hip hop arts program that does exist that explicitly focuses on the institutional pipeline of public schools and getting more historically underrepresented students (predominantly students of color) into higher education.

The First Wave Spoken Word and Hip Hop Arts Learning Community³⁶ is an award winning, internationally recognized program and, among other areas of program emphasis, a formal pipeline partnership between Madison Metropolitan School District and the University of Wisconsin, Madison that focuses on institutional college access. Housed in the Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and with institutional support from the university chancellor's office, First Wave offers full scholarships for 15 undergraduate students every year, including out-of-state students (a few of whom have been from the Bay Area), to pursue study in the hip hop arts and includes spoken word as an emphasis. A major component of this program has been educational outreach and service to institutionally underserved K-12 students in Madison, Wisconsin, as well as an annual summer institute for teachers which draws educators from throughout the Midwest. Bay Area-based arts activists and staff of Youth Speaks helped to initiate and establish the program in 2007 through the Brave New Voices network while the program idea originated through the BNV College Tour.³⁷

³⁶ <http://omai.wisc.edu/>

³⁷ The Brave New Voices College Tour features poets from the Brave New Voices International Poetry Slam Festival. The Brave New Voices College Tour website contains

Josh is an educator and community organizer who joined the staff at Youth Speaks around the time I interviewed him in 2008. Prior to coming to the Bay Area, he was program director of the First Wave program at University of Wisconsin, Madison. He stressed that First Wave is “the first spoken word and hip hop program at a university in the country” and described its aim as engaging and empowering young people through spoken word in order to “get them hooked back, get them kind of on the college track.” Josh emphasized the significance of this hip hop scholars program being housed at the university in terms of its implications for young people of color from the local communities surrounding the University of Wisconsin, Madison:

The thing that was exciting was kind of this connection between the high school kids and the university. Because, it’s a university—I mean Madison is kind of like Berkeley. It’s like this college town. And it’s *huge*. Now Wisconsin is *not* like California. At all. But *Madison*, the local schools—the two biggest schools, Madison and Milwaukee, are majority students of color in the *schools*. So, having a program at both places, kind of like, the *college* students would come, and like most our students are students of color, and they’d feel like, ‘aw, fuck this shit.’ You know, ‘Madison [the university], I don’t like *this*—.’ *Except*, when they [the First Wave poets]’d be with the high school kids, because *then* there would be this culture that was supportive, was exciting, et cetera. And then the high school kids, would see college kids, who were doing the same things *they* were doing, who *love* it, and getting a college *degree*. So that was kind of the most exciting part.

—Josh

On the flip side, Josh spoke of the challenges of being housed at the university, namely educating the campus community about spoken word and hip hop. Part of this effort has included a speaker series that has brought prominent scholars and other

the following description: “The Brave New Voices College Tour...poets aim to unnerve and electrify college students ever slanted towards apathy. **After all, who’s better to instigate students to movement than a crew of their verbally gifted peers?**” (<http://www.bravenewvoices.org/bnv-on-tour/>)

leading figures in the field of hip hop studies to the university, including Mark Anthony Neal, Dawn-Elissa Fischer, and Jeff Chang:

the challenges were the challenges of academia. Being in the academic setting. We *do*, or we did a lot of work to kind of try and *educate* the campus, what spoken word and hip hop *is*. And why, it's a...*new* form of community, it's a *new* form of pedagogy, a way of, you know, engaging folks but we still had the issues of, you know, 'this is—what is this? This is not legitimate.'
—Josh

Josh further elaborated that the program has “buy-in from *certain* departments, Sociology, Afro-Am, Theater, Education. But the *English* department. Uh uh. And *that* would be the *one* that you would hope [to support the program]. But not the English department, not the School of Music. *Not* the kind of like, other than Theater, not really the artistic departments.” Support for the program overall has been institutionally established, however, with “90 percent [of funds] through the university, and then some private funding.” When I asked Josh if a probationary period was required for institutional funding, he stated: “We’re passed *that* point...We’re in the third, fourth year. I mean Wisconsin’s budget—like the university’s budget keeps getting cut and cut. So it’s not, it’s never like *sure* footing. But, its staff has grown and the budget’s grown. So, so far so good.” The program’s significance to the university, particularly the university’s institutional commitment to diversity among its campus body, is the pipeline element of First Wave, which not only focuses on the relationship between high school students and college students, but also involves middle school students and public school teachers:

The pipeline I *love*, the community, the—‘cause now you have, now the mentors, are the college kids, going back into the high school and leading workshops. And then the high schools are going into the middle schools and they do workshops. And then, being in the School of Education...we offer

the annual *teachers* institute, where teachers get course credit, to learn curriculum, community, every summer. —Josh

When I asked Josh if there is anything he believes the spoken word organizing community in the Bay Area could learn from based on his experiences in Wisconsin, he noted, “I think there should be spoken word *classes*...that *schools* should be starting classes. There’s a *new* class at a public high school in Madison called Spoken Word and Contemporary Poetics, that we helped to write the curriculum for. And they’re piloting it this year and if it goes well they’re gonna do it in all the high schools. And like, *that* should exist *here*.” Josh’s concern around offering spoken word classes, in addition to workshops and poetry slams, is that “we shouldn’t just be doing the same things all the time... like, how can we *deepen* the relationships [with schools]?”

Further Educational Engagements: With Schools & Beyond

Kirya, a former coordinator of school residencies and an established writer and spoken word artist, shed light on some of the history of Youth Speaks’ relationship to schools. This relationship largely has entailed school visits during which young poets would perform at a school assembly and a staff educator would facilitate a writing workshop at the school site. The organization, at the time of my interviews, was in the middle of a deliberate process of shifting towards building a stronger, continued presence and relationship with schools and becoming a more stable, reliable, and significant community resource:

I think in the past we’ve had definitely an amicable relationship with schools. But it’s been very sort of touch-and-go like, ‘Here we are! Aren’t we great! Come find us. See you later.’ And *now* we’re trying to say, ‘Here we are

and we're here for you. We want to be a presence in your life, we wanna *help you build*. From where you are.' So that means that we're trying to make our residencies program more consistent. —Kirya

School residencies reflect a major vehicle for educational outreach to youth and a primary form of partnership with schools. Youth Speaks' arts-in-education program ranges from middle school visits (for example, a series of classroom workshops along with a school performance culminating from the workshops), to high school residencies with an in-residence poet mentor and any variation of in-class instruction, after-school workshops, and a school club that participates in the Student-Led Arts Movement (SLAM), a coalition of spoken word high school clubs around the Bay Area, as well as the team-based Unified District Slam. Workshops, especially at the introductory level, are geared towards focusing on "the life of the student...as primary text." Within residencies, which are framed as "standards-based," poet mentors partner with teachers "to help students bring their own personal narratives into dialogue with the issues and themes already being studied in the classroom."³⁸

In addition to school residencies, the organization continues to provide school visits. According to Josh, who organizes one-day school visits, "Kirya does the longer residencies, but I do the kind of—I'm kinda like the cheap date: 'You wanna little taste of Youth Speaks, but you're not ready for a full commitment,' you know, 'let's try each other out' type of thing." The school visit poets that perform at school assemblies have been Spokes (youth advisory board members), former slam champs, and other Youth Speaks participants. Poet mentors, on the other hand, comprise the

³⁸ <http://youthspeaks.org/voice/arts-in-education/in-school-residencies/>

“19 and over” programs geared toward professional artist and educator development, preparing them as resident arts educators. Kirya noted, “at this point we’re trying to come up with a system where we’re delivering the same product every time. And making sure that our poet mentors are supported. And have the tools that they need in order to do their job well.”

School clubs are another major element of 19 and under programs, making up the Bay Area-wide Student-Led Arts Movement, or SLAM union. Josh shared his excitement, especially through the enthusiasm of the young people he works with, about establishing the school club model and relying on his experiences as a spoken word community organizer in Wisconsin. He referred to an initial organizing meeting to propose the idea to youth already involved in the programs of Youth Speaks:

SLAM is kind of, the *real* thing that we want the students to be doing. Is that, you know, these kids come from *all* over. And at the meeting, on Saturday, we had kids from, Antioch, and, fuckin’ South San Francisco, and *everywhere*. And, when we told them about this kind of clubs idea, a *bunch* of them were *excited*, because they’re like, ‘yo, I *really* want to get involved, and I want to get more *people* involved, but it’s *hard*—to always come to San Francisco. So, if *I* could do something, *at my school*, and then have you guys come, whenever—once a semester, every couple months, that’d be—’ they were excited about that. —Josh

School clubs, in other words, widen the expanse of access for youth to be involved in their own communities as writers, artists, and organizers, or just to stay involved in a meaningful activity and group of peers. Josh further addressed the “leadership” aspect of SLAM union clubs, through both carrying out spoken-word based projects and events in students’ own communities, as well as being involved in a youth-based decision making body to manage funds provided by Youth Speaks:

the idea is, you have young leaders in their communities. And then *they* get to develop a project, that *they* want to do for their school—their club gets to develop a project, making a chapbook, making a DVD, doin’ a *East Bay* poetry slam—whatever they want to *do*...It’s kind of like mini-granting. And then the *youth* determine, whether those grants, whether they get to do that. ... So it’s kind of, we’re putting, we’re putting *less* responsibility, in terms of kind of *overall* like, coordination of *everything* on the youth. And *more* responsibility, in terms of like, you don’t have to be involved in Youth Speaks on every single, like level. If you want to be involved in production, you can volunteer, and you can, but the *main* thing is, is *organizing* in your community...Is like, *do* the work where you *are*, that you know *best*, and make it so that, you know, if you’re a junior or senior, you wanna make sure that when you graduate, that spoken word is going on, in Antioch. And building and doing whatever else—That’s the idea.” —Josh

Josh refers to previous iterations of the youth leadership program of the organization, primarily through Spokes. As the organization’s youth advisory board, the original intention for Spokes has been to provide a primary means of communication between young people and the executive staff and staff as a whole. Spokes, however, has had somewhat of a tumultuous, unstable history, lacking a mechanism and channels for substantive feedback and communication, while changing and experimenting with different forms almost every year since the beginning of the organization. At the same time, Spokes has served as a most significant, oftentimes life-changing, opportunity for a number of youth. Kirya shared her insights on some of the turbulence of Spokes’ history:

Yeah I mean, so here’s the thing. My answer might be a little less than some might—less flattering than some might want it to be because *my* familiarity with the program is through the youth. That have been involved with it rather than the administrative side. And from what I observe, it was more of a place to *pull* consistent participants. *Than anything else*. I saw them as, on the positive side, where we knew we had talented poets that we could help develop, that could be showcased in our Bringin’ the Noise series, that could be sent out to other events. That were given the opportunity to really grow as artists because they had access to all of the educators and all that. On the negative side, they were also bodies to stock the merchandise [laughs]. And to stack chairs or whatever. And, I think that sometimes they were pushed a

lot harder than they ever expected. And I think there's a lot of – in terms of like, communication that wasn't effective. And responsibility on both sides that wasn't picked up the way it should have been. So there was a lot of frustration I think. And sometimes hostility. Between some of the SPOKES youth and some of the mentors... And there was a lot of *drama* as there is in any community [laughs], especially of young people. And so, yeah I mean to think about it and the young people I know, a lot of them will go through this period of sort of this resentment about like 'Oh, I have to do all this stuff at these events, blah blah blah.' And then later come back and be like 'Wow, I'm really glad I had that opportunity.' But it took a while sometimes. Because there wasn't, it wasn't quite as pitched as like, 'Oh, you get to be an advisory board, you get to tell James [the executive director] what to do, blah blah blah.' Like that didn't quite happen. The way that it should have, I don't think. I mean I think it probably could've more. I think it's more like, 'Here's a place where we'll let you—we'll give you access to all these tools but you got to work for your goodies.' And that relationship wasn't communicated as effectively as it should've. —Kirya

Chinaka, on the other hand, shared her thoughts on the history of Spokes as one of an organizational entity that has evolved into a more intentionally created youth leadership body (jokingly, she asserted, “and there’s a dispute about who named it SPOKES. Jason believes it’s him. I believe it was me.”). During the time she was involved as one of the original Spokes members and youth poets, “it was less about crafting leaders than allowing the process to create us into leaders...now there is *very* intentional movement...to make sure that SPOKES is leadership building.” Jason shared his insights on the original idea for the creation of a youth advisory board, as “ambassadors of the organization, reflecting a kind of young “spirit” the organization has tried to maintain, including in its present iteration of youth development and leadership:

All in all, it was started off by a white man. An older white man in his late twenties. You know? [Ruth: James.] Yeah. He was in his late twenties and he started this organization to try to get young folks involved. Um, humble enough, he recognized that he can't be the one to try to attract young folks to get down [laughs] with the organization so he wanted, he needed this youth board. He needed it. He needed a group of young folks to be an ambassador

of the organization, to excite their peers about this organization. I mean, you know, all for the movement, in a sense, all for the uh, the um, all for the word and poetry, for spoken word. So, I think because of the *spirit* of that approach is the reason we're able to continue. To stay who we are. —Jason

The aim of having “young folks...to excite their peers” about spoken word continues to be a goal with the formation of SLAM union. Josh pinpointed that maintaining this excitement among youth is a foreseeable challenge, as well as having students feel connected to Youth Speaks: “A lot of these clubs will be at places where, or some of them will be at where we have residencies. So we'll have a poet mentor *there*. But most of them will be places where we *don't* have a poet mentor. And so, how to keep the kids *excited*, and *involved*, and *knowing* what they can *do*. And *really* getting the organizational and artistic development that they *need*, to have these clubs be successful and sustainable.” He mentioned a handbook he was putting together on student organizing, or “SLAM 101.” However, he pointed out, “beyond the handbook, you just gotta keep in contact with all these kids. So I'm excited by it. And there's a bunch of clubs that already exist, that we're just gonna plug in, and then there's people who already want to *start* clubs...And I also know it's gonna be, you know, some clubs, are gonna *fail*. ... But [it should work out] as long as we keep the bigger vision.” What he considers to be part of this bigger vision is, “[h]opefully these *clubs*,—I wanna *institutionalize*, but not without, you know, taking away the creativity—but institutionalize the kind of youth leadership, within the organization. And throughout the Bay. And so, *really* having the clubs, if this could be a *real* kind of like grassroots youth arts movement that we *help* facilitate, that's, I'd *love* it.”

There are numerous other ways the organization works with schools, both big and small, yet too many to list here (and even more so, more than I as a researcher only temporarily in the field can completely know about and keep up with). These partnerships have encompassed, for example, teaming up with Oakland Unified School District on its annual Oratorical Fest around the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, connecting and advertising Life is Living³⁹ through the growing, Bay Area-based network of school and community educators known as Teachers for Social Justice, and hosting teachers' open mic as well as professional development conferences for teachers centered on, for instance, using the *Brave New Voices* dvd in the classroom, to name a few. Vajra talked about her experiences working on an education advisory committee of the organization, particularly on a strategic plan around working with schools. The committee brainstormed and discussed possibilities for working with teachers and to "kind of become institutionalized for a lack of a better word. So that when San Francisco Unified needs to do professional development *for* all of San Francisco Unified, they think Youth Speaks." She shared a few of the ideas generated from the group:

You get dreamers in a room together, like they would *love* a ... credentialing program. If someone wants to be a teacher, that they actually go through a Youth Speaks credentialing program to train teachers. And credential them.

³⁹ Life is Living is a festival and mobilizing campaign around environmental justice that celebrates "Life through urban performance, intergenerational health, and environmental action." The event takes place in multiple cities throughout the year and includes in addition to many health resources (e.g., yoga, holistic health-based organizations), "a traveling environmental caucus & concert, an invitational Graffiti Battle, live action sports, sustainable materials construction projects, and a Speak Green youth poetry event." The intention of the urban-based environmental justice campaign is to "reflect the voices of an emerging cultural majority...[and] recognize that our arts practices must echo and sustain the lives of the communities we engage. <http://www.lifeisliving.org/>

I mean so, you know, some far off thoughts but I think it's probably good to keep the momentum going and think creatively, to think outside the box. I think Youth Speaks was definitely innovative in that way. —Vajra

A major focus of the education advisory board, according to Vajra, included questions such as “How do we engage teachers? How do you take a teacher that feels isolated because they’re a social justice educator and alone in the process in the *beast* of their urban school, and connect teachers, so you have a teacher from San Francisco, a teacher from San Mateo, a teacher from Berkeley. And kind of create professional development around them?” The emphasis on educators (broadly defined) and professional development around spoken word literacy and arts education constitutes “intergenerational” qualities of programming and networking that are fundamental to ensuring that youth programs remain strong:

we’re committed to our *intergenerational* program. You know? And we feel like, even at Brave New Voices, it’s as important to provide stuff for the adults as it is for the kids. That’s what makes—*chains* the community. If you *stop* providing for the older group, then you — you know what I mean— you might *lose* your experience with the younger group. —Hodari

According to Hodari, intergenerational programs that include professional development and social events for teachers, Brave New Voices coaches, and other community spoken word educators are what “*chains* the community” and are intrinsically tied to the access that young people have to robust, well-organized resources and community. Vajra also specified the importance of demystifying the process of working with young people on their spoken word poems, making this process of pedagogy, literacy, and youth development explicit and central in the professional development of teachers:

[L]et's say you see Bobby. You see Bobby go up there and he just blows everybody away with his poem. Now, what did that poem look like a month ago? And how did the staff ... or his own, Bobby's own process, to take something that's a diamond in the ruff, and turn it into a diamond? Like that is literary art. To—that that process. And one of the things that we talked about in the education committee was, is there a way to really reveal that process? You know what I mean? Of you know, this is the first draft. This is what a young person did to turn it into this gem. Because pedagogically I think that could really help teachers. You know versus just seeing the finished product. Just being blown away by these young people on stage [claps] that can rip. You know, and roar, is, what's the behind-the-scenes *mess* of that? To really understand that process even more. —Vajra

What spoken word organizing reveals around working with teachers, schools, and community educators are efforts that take a dynamic, holistic approach to community activism, bringing in and engaging different partners and stakeholders who hold youth at the center of their work. Youth and educator advisory committees are a major element of conceptualizing, envisioning, and mapping potential and existing collaborative connections that solidify and enlarge the web of relations, both shifting and stable, that form the heart of spoken word as a popular education movement and its expansion. It is a web and network that interconnects the needs and craft of youth and their adult mentors and advocates in an intergenerational trajectory that enables and strives to produce professional artistic and educational growth of its individuals and community.

Expanding the Movement: Dilemmas of Standardizing Pedagogy

Another major observation that Jeff shared was that “nobody critiques” Youth Speaks. Implicit in this observation is his praise that the organization has brought in experts in the fields of youth development and education, in the form of an education

committee as one of its formal advisory sources, and has remained open to explicit and direct critique in order to generate further reflection, assessment, and organizing:

one of the problems...is nobody critiques them. I mean, what's to critique? You know, you go to Brave New Voices and it's like psshht! [motions praise] 'Hey!' And a lot of people are like, 'I wish I could get kids to do that.' So really the only people who are in a position to critique them are people who are unimpressed by that. Because they get that kind of production from kids as well. And the thing that I respected about them is that they were trying to bring *those* people in ... Being people who would critique them. And who have the credentials and the performance record to actually *do* it. Because at the beginning they were *so* successful so fast, and so nationally recognized that all they were gettin' were stroked. Right, and they were just surrounded by a bunch of 'yes' people...in terms of a meta-critique—or a structural critique. That could give you a kind of, a critical perspective with a different lens. And I think they were doing a good job of *trying* to bring those people in, and then saying like 'let us have it. Don't sugar-coat it, don't – just *tell* us what you *really* think we need to do.'

—Jeff

Within this context of critical feedback, Jeff has emphasized the need to *show* that programs work well and are educationally effective for young people, specifically through the use of hard data. His argument favors a push towards greater institutional linking with schools, ultimately in ways that can produce fissures and disruption in the status quo of education and the pressures necessary for improving the institution of schools itself:

I've said for a long time to them, you have – *I* see the potential of your program but you have *no* evidence that your program works. And until you can – in *this* culture, in this educational culture, right? Of show-and-tell, or show-and-prove, you've gotta have data. And it's not that hard to get if you're as good as they are. So. And then once you got the data, then you can *push* your agenda in ways that are much more meaningful and will have a bigger impact on kids. Right, so you can *influence* literacy instruction, you could you know whatever, take on multiple schools, you could change the way the district thinks about all these things. And I think they *should* have that kind of voice in the educational community. And right now they *don't*. There's just like little boutique after-school workshoppy-type of programs, which is a shame because they have their *finger* on a pulse that beats pretty strong right now with young people. And, they just not have done the work around – you know, and it's hard, it's hard to ask people to be good at things they didn't set out to be good at. You know but, I think as their, as their

program has grown, it's gotten traction, they should be giving a lot more thought to how they really computize their position inside of schools and districts. And I haven't seen them do that very well yet. —Jeff

Jeff ties the use of institutionally relevant, hard, systematic evidence to showing how a deep embeddedness and engagement of community organized practice in schools has crucial pay-offs, direct and indirect, deliberate and unintentional, for student achievement. He makes a critical comparison to the Raza Studies program of Tucson Unified School District,⁴⁰ which he argues has been “so strategic” because of its fundamental presence on school campuses in order to reach the hardest-to-reach youth, as opposed to being a strictly *voluntary*-based program:

What they did is they said, “okay, instead of like puttin’ these, whatever, Raza Studies minions, right? All over the place. And, bouncing them from campus to campus, and never really, right, having any formal relationship, intense relationship with the [school] community... We’re gonna fund five full-time teachers. Okay. And, we’re gonna make a *heavy* investment in those five sites, right? And *that* teacher’s gonna be with a group of kids, over time. So it’s not gonna be a *shot-gun* approach, right? It’s gonna be a very deliberate, focused, intentional approach. And what happens is, you *change* the culture of that school. And *then* what happens is that, as you change the culture of the school, then those kids who would normally be on the margins, you know who they are. ‘Cause you’re on campus everyday. You *live* in that community. And then you could go on and outreach to that person and have a *real* opportunity to bring that kid in... But if I come to you and you’re one of those kids who’s you know, cutting class, not really that invested in school, and I come to you and you know, and I’m *nobody*. And I’m like, ‘Oh, we have this great new program blah blah blah.’ Whatever. Because there’s countless people on campuses that do that. But if it’s somebody who like, *my* homies co-sign, and this is a person I know from the community, this person I *see* on campus everyday, it’s *a lot* more likely you’re gonna keep comin’ at that kid, right? ‘I see you, I see you, I’m tellin’ you, you need to be in this program.’ And eventually that kid’s gonna come.

⁴⁰ Since this interview, the state senate of Arizona passed HB 2281, authored by the state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Horne, which is a measure that drastically curbs ethnic studies in K-12 public schools, and specifically targets the elimination of the Raza Studies program of the Tucson Unified School District.

And I think that *that's* the kind of ground-level impact [Raza Studies] has. It gets a larger number of those kids that are on the margins. Right? Now I think the *nature* of [community-based spoken word] draws in some kids that otherwise might be struggling in school. Just *based on what they do*. Right? *But*, my point is that it's *not enough*. —Jeff

Jeff advocates working deep within the institution in order to change those institutional spaces by hiring teachers, who are simultaneously institutional agents *and* “homies,” to work closely with students in focused and sustained ways, and over time developing authentic relationships of trust and advocacy. In contrast to this perspective of relying on and working from the trenches of the institution of schools, Hodari addressed, in connection to the program design of service with Bay Area schools, that the intention and approach are based much more on young people taking up ownership of organizing in their own communities:

I *do* believe that there *are* gaps in our ability to *track, our* successes. In a number of different ways. You know what I mean. And oftentimes it causes us to be more anecdotal about ourselves and successes than we would like to be. At the same time, it's hard to, it's just hard to *quantify*. It's hard to quantify, we're trying to set up a program model, this year, that is *more*, quantifiable. So to speak. That lends itself to, you know, collecting information like that, but we haven't, up until this point, really had a service model, that could provide us with the right framework with *how to* quantify beyond how many people come to our events, you know, what their names are, you know what I mean. That was one of the challenges that I had just been having, as somebody who is directing and designing program. Was that, I would *ask*, young people, ‘do you feel like you're a *member* of Youth Speaks.’ And, outside of SPOKES, *nobody* did. And then I would say, you know the only other kids who would ever say ‘yes, I feel like a member of Youth Speaks,’ was the kids who traveled to Brave New Voices on the slam team, but *only* during the time when we're at Brave New Voices. And it was like, okay well, how do we set up systems, in our organization, and so that young people can feel *proudly*, like they're members? You know, and what is it—how can we create these communities, these sort of learning communities *within* the organization, that people could identify with. And then sort of feel *pride* with that identification. And therefore, you know, feel like a sense of ownership, for the organization, that they might not have otherwise. Sort of like an *anti-corporate* approach. —Hodari

Hodari speaks from the perspective of the community organization, keeping healthy distance from the institution of schools, by critically asking why youth may not feel like they always belong to the organization and its movement, rather than contemplating their sense of fit in the formal educational institution. He characterizes the importance of forging this affect of organizational belonging among youth as “anti-corporate,” which alludes to a kind of vigilance, even skepticism, of schools as a key part of and player in the academic industrial complex, where the ones who ultimately most benefit are its corporate financial investors, exploiters, and profiteers.

Hodari goes on further by talking about how youth representation, democratically speaking, is a key element and idea of the organizing model of school clubs. The purpose of this model is to get youth more connected to and involved in their local, school-peer community and build their leadership capacity. The organizing leaders of these school clubs, in turn, are representatives of tangible, community-rooted groups with their own local, unique, and specific focus, needs, and mission:

Before we were like this, we say 24 are ours [Spokes] but they didn't really represent anything. *They* were just 24. They didn't represent their communities per se, 'cause they weren't tied to anything in their community that made them represent *that*. They were just youth who lived in their community. You know what I mean? But they didn't—they weren't necessarily tied to an organization, their community, or tied to—other young people in their community. There was no way—they didn't *represent* other youth. They were just youth *from* those communities, was our *old* model...And *now* we wanna say, we want there to be *clubs*, at local schools...So it's it's *teaching* community organizing on a *different* level. It's on a different level. And if we can—And capacity, and also you know, linking the *coolness* of what we're doing, to their school community *without* necessarily us being the *sole* magnet. Yeah, 'cause it's gotta have its own initiative. The school can't maintain it. And we can't, we're not gonna maintain it, you know, it's for the young people who are excited about it. It

will generate its own energy, and [it can look different] in different places. And they'll call themselves different things. And it's, they'll each have their own identity. And we'll seed them with money if they, you know meet certain criteria and, it'll be fine. It'll run itself. Over time. Ideally—run itself. —Hodari

Rather than developing youth to be excellent students in schools, or engaging them as scholars or scholar leaders through an ethnic studies approach that Jeff refers to in relation to ethnic studies in Tucson, Hodari's emphasis is leadership and educational development through community organizing. More specifically, “*teaching* community organizing” is about engaging youth in a grassroots process of mobilizing resources and people for locally defined community purposes and projects, in tangible connection to something bigger, namely Youth Speaks' mission, financial support, and movement-building.

Along a similar vein, Dennis, a widely acclaimed and established performance artist and an artistic manager and educator on staff, pointed out that central to the organizing work is a deliberately collective, community-based intention and democratic process that informs decision-making. He sees the work of expanding spoken word not merely by spreading and sharing pedagogy as a package for others to use, but much more crucially, articulating and making “*what works for us, understandable*” to others, an approach he sees as embedded within the very work relationships he is part of within the organization:

I think there is a [specifiable] pedagogy. I think it's evolving and ... I'm really interested in the decision that folks are making and how to verbalize that in a certain way, you know. To speak to like relevant parties I guess you could say. It's really interesting, because I feel like the educators and organizers who are really at the heart of that discussion, they're *very* innovative, and they're very, very committed to potential, you know and the latent ability of youth, you know what I'm saying? And they're very *bold* in

ending certain traditional ways of approaching, you know. You know, youth development, and teaching around the issues of literacy and stuff. What surprises me, I won't even say surprise, it impresses me over and over again, that at the same time they're really, really stringent about making sure that what they craft eventually is something that can be like, standardized and measurable, you know what I mean?... There was a, conversation popped off yesterday. It was just a conversation about workshops and what makes a workshop a Youth Speaks workshop. And the folks in the room were like, really, really I hold them in really high regard, as workshop facilitators. I taken workshops as a youth you know what I mean. Some of them, my age or younger, but I've seen them do their thing. They're like really particularly gifted and, reaching the youth and committed to it. And, I know for certain organizations, you know, that might be enough you know what I mean? Like only have a core group of people, we do good work. We have 'x' amount of loot [money] coming in. We're *straight* you know what I mean?... What more can you do, you know what I mean? But to hear these folks talk about, 'oh, no no no, we need to do more,' you know, 'we need to find a way to make what *works for us, understandable,*' you know, 'for other folks to benefit,' you know what I mean? To other folks, to other educators, to other youth, to other organizations. That's a *hell of a hard* conversation to have, you know. And, to like the executive cats, the executive people, be *really* committed to like the democratic process. You know, I'm like *wow*. Wow. You know, and I'm under no obligation to that conversation except to be observant you know. So, it's such a trip you know, it's really unlike any organization I've worked for, you know. And it's, I think it's hard when you're inventing certain things to make sure that even the process and the way it's made reflects the values that you're trying to embody, you know, 'cause it's so much easier for two or three cats to be like, 'We'll be right back,' you know what I mean? Have a meeting and be like, 'Well here it is, we've figured it out,' you know? 'We thank you for all your suggestions and input. We'll incorporate a little bit of you here, and even that.' I think most eyes in this world would be like, 'Wow, that's pretty democratic. We got input from everybody.' You know, and they're like 'No, we'll talk this thing through,' you know what I mean?

—Dennis

What Dennis emphasizes here is a deliberate pedagogical approach that runs and interweaves intricately throughout – practices and principles that not only define the work with youth, but also apply to the work of organizers and mentees with one another. The pedagogy, in this sense, not only is deep and profound in its intention and impact, but is consistent and persistent with its adherence to democratic integrity. This purposeful infiltration of democratic process in the

workings and relations of the organization reflects more a kind of radical democracy, or *practicing what one preaches* in the interest of working across and through social power and difference, which ultimately defines the vision and intent for, and with, youth.

Erika, a youth organizer and Spokes coordinator, inferred this point around democratic process that Dennis makes. She highlighted a conversation she had with Hodari as an example of how she has advised as well as critiqued ideas and plans for the new program design, advocating on behalf of Spokes in the spirit of true community organizing and youth development:

I definitely advise Hodari's ideas a lot...so one of this things I said to Hodari was that like, he had this whole high school club idea and I straight up told him I was like, 'this *isn't* youth organizing because they have to depend on their teachers and on the schools and institutions to do anything,' you know and so like, 'they can't get sponsored by Youth Speaks by a club unless they have a teacher advisor instead of a classroom, unless they are doing outreach on their campus and that all requires the administration to be in, and I was like 'that is *not* youth organizing.' —Dennis

Erika demonstrates insight and a healthy skepticism of working with the institution of schools, which arises from her already several years of experience as a young youth organizer. This skepticism raises an important point around the formation of community organizing identities among young people, including their concepts of what constitutes critical forms of community organizing. Erika reveals further her thoughtfulness and reflections about what comprises youth organizing for social justice, an issue and concern that not only occupies her conversations with friends and co-workers, but is a subject matter that she has taken up in her own studies and the work she does with Spokes:

I don't know, like the other day, Hodari and Brandon and I were talking and he was just like, 'you know the movement is not evolved around one person. It's revolved around the body of people'. And I am going to be majoring in political science so I've been thinking a lot about the Latin American political science, you know, my teacher said the same thing. He just stressed like the power of any kind of social movement you see in Latin America was in the *center-left*, was in like the *middle-bracket* of people, you know. And so like—yeah and so it's kind of like, I think that's a little bit of what I'm concerned about is that I been taking on such a large role that that middle bracket of Spokes isn't in the position to take on leadership by themselves.

—Erika

Erika's reflections of her organizing work are steeped in conversations she has in the office in connection to her studies at school, driven by her questions about how collective power and mobilization incites change, particularly from the "*center-left*" and "*middle-bracket*" of movement-making. She shows that she continues to grapple with this analytical reasoning, wondering if she takes on too much of the work for Spokes, rather than trusting the existing and potential leadership that lies in its "center-left."

Returning to my conversation with Dennis, there was a moment when I was trying to wrap my head around a kind of systematic expansion of spoken word organizing, including through its relation to schools. I asked him about how "standardizing" pedagogy might be both a significant force in the work of movement-building yet, at the same time, a slippery notion that suggests a form of regulating and normalizing practice that takes away from its effect, like top-down, mainstream educational reform. His response was as follows:

Youth Speaks is kind of crazy to me, because it's like, at the intersection of a whole bunch of things, you know what I mean? It's taking something that's really like, you know, the spoken word scene, the hip hop scene are really related. Like your style is *you*, you know what I mean? Like there is so much to it, to be like, 'This is who I am,' you know what I mean? These

other options, we're not like, we're not doing freedom summer you know what I mean, at this point of history. We're doing this...it's a harness, that energy, you know, and walk with youth through this conversation that kind of, comes full circle back to 'how are we gonna change this?' You know, and recognizing the youth who are already feeling and articulating these things, but *need* folks to meet them, be like, 'I'm with you,' you know? And these are the resources we can use to make this happen, these are ways we can get together like to make sure that this beautiful moment doesn't remain just this beautiful moment. You can turn it into you know something that goes forward. And what happens when a movement like that reaches like a critical mass? You know what I mean, and to survive and to grow, it's gonna have to adopt more of the language of the mainstream, to be understood, to be funded, to be recognized, you know, and especially for these educator cats in the conversation, you know, they're degree people, you know what I mean, they want to impact what happens to mainstream classrooms, so it's like, at a certain point we're gonna have to, I don't know, standardize enough of what you do to be comprehensible, you know. And *I don't know* how people feel about it, I don't know. I've always been such an anti-, anti-person, you know what I mean? I think it's probably the alienated teenager in me, you know what I mean, like, but it's a real thing you have to consider and take to gamble. Knowing the kind of kid that *I* was, there were probably certain opportunities I didn't even feel comfortable embracing cause it felt too – I didn't know what it was, it was too square for me, too rigid, or too formal, too whatever, you know what I mean? And, probably because of my own unique life history I worry about those kids the most, you know? You know what I mean, how do you reach those kids, who feel unreachable you know? And who *don't* want to be reached in any old way, 'cause maybe they have a lot of people reaching for them, but they're not the hands they want to be close, you know? They don't want social services, you know, and all those kinds of things. They have a lot of people reaching for them, but no one's reaching them the way they want to be reached. So, I mean, I think because of the people involved and like the track record and the youth that continue to be attracted to the organization, I'm very *optimistic*, you know what I mean. I'm probably like, you know, being a person who has kids now, I *want* to be optimistic, you know what I mean? And I wanna, it's like, I need to crack a view of the world that's not all or nothing, you know what I mean? You know what I'm saying? —Dennis

Dennis identifies a certain threshold point in the work, whose history has witnessed far-reaching successes and accomplishments at the community level, including but well beyond the impact on individuals. In order to expand, the efforts must also confront the realities of adopting “the language of the mainstream” while making sure to “walk with youth,” reconciled with “how are we gonna change...” the current state

of social conditions and the status quo. He, like others both within and outside of the organization, sees the standardization of pedagogy as necessary to some degree in order to build and generate further impact from a critical mass. However, he also sees the risk of standardization backfiring by not being able to reach the hardest-to-reach among youth. Ultimately, though, he believes the risk is worth taking, not only because of a profound trust in the organization's own track record, its staff, and the movement it has created so far. Rather, the work, plain and simple, is just needed for far too many more people, as Joannie explained earlier as well. Therefore he chooses to remain optimistic about the directions towards which the organization is heading. What Dennis importantly suggests here is the necessity of embracing the tensions that hold both the strong desire to reach more youth as well as the risk of losing youth as they work out how to make their pedagogy more accessible, more understandable, and a more adoptable practice.

As I take up in the next chapter, the tensions are found not only in the realm of working with and around the institution of schools, but also in working through avenues of corporate sponsorship as part of the effort of expanding access and furthering the movement. What can be established, from this series and interaction of interview segments as well as the focus of the next chapter, is that spoken word organizing comes from and approaches its vision and mission through all possible angles, remaining open, proactive, and creative in terms of who must be part of the conversation of building and furthering the work. The range of organizing work must include partnerships with organizations, leaders, and community figures in a range of

forms, sustained relationships in schools, as well as shorter term, one-day events and even corporate-level engagements. Together, the dynamic, grandly complex web of organizing spoken word fuels the extensive spirit of an arts-infused, critically pedagogical, civically engaged, youth-focused movement that links across generations.

CHAPTER FIVE

“BNV Ain’t Nothin’ to Fuck With”: Complicating Co-optations of Political Art

At the HBO-televvised grand slam finals of Brave New Voices, held in 2010 in Los Angeles, three members of Team Denver, angled squarely facing an esteemed panel of five judges, posed the following: “*Judges, I dare you to give this poem a 7.*” Their proposition was meant to provoke a rethinking of the norms of scoring in order to resuscitate poetry back to its focus on and potential for revolutionary social justice by holding the judges accountable to a bottom line of integrity. One of the poets recounts how, after her very first poetry slam, where she wore a “shaky smile too big for my scared shitless face,” she felt triumphant upon receiving a score of 6.2: “I went home that night/*Glowing/Beaming/Pumping with adrenaline/Knowing that I could improve/I could grow up to be something more/Something great/Something powerful/That one day/If I worked really, really hard/I might be a poet.*” The poets’ repeated plea, “*Judges, give this poem a 7/Make a difference that will outlive this bout,*” revolts against a standard practice of teen poetry slams, namely an “eight-point minimum designed to keep us safe/To keep us happy/To keep our fragile egos from shattering under the weight of *honesty,*” equating the established protocol to a “*kind of blatant exploitation.*” They denounce what they see as a false scoring system as both illogical and infantilizing, “As if we were children/As if the only way to empower us is to coddle us”:

*I am 18 years old
Of legal age to drive
To vote
To smoke my lungs black
To cradle an automatic weapon deadly*

With bullets flinging from my fingers
But I can't handle a mediocre score in a *poetry slam*?

The poets adamantly insist that they “would rather have your respect than your applause/If you weren't cheering so loud, you would hear the points behind the poetry.” Poetry, they assert, at its *best*, “Changes people, changes laws, changes minds.” Assigning a “7,” it follows, would “give these words *weight*” and “ensure/That thousands of young people in years to come/Will go home/*Glowing*/Pumping/Knowing that one day/If they work really, *really* hard/They might become legends.”

Following Team Denver's performance, the judges showed that they had listened, scoring their poem all but one “7,” with one score of a “10,” to which the poets responded with elation and satisfaction. With the help of the audience's encouragement in anticipation of these scores, chanting in unison, “7! 7! 7! 7!...,” as well as its enthusiasm throughout the performance, Team Denver deliberately bumped themselves from their standing in the competition, along with any chance at “winning” the finals. Denver by then had already demonstrated aesthetic aptitude and profundity, by qualifying for the finals and through their performance of a poem titled “Avatar” (see below) in an earlier round in the finals. Yet, confirmed through their poem, “Scores,” they had chosen even before the finals to disinvest themselves from the competition in the spirit of revolutionary poetry.

Team Denver's resistant slam poem reveals a certain conviction, particularly in an international context and spotlight facilitated and accelerated by HBO, that defies an overemphasis on competition at the expense of spoken word's vital force of

community, particularly a community that values revolutionary impulse in poetry. “Scores” upholds that the craft of poetic writing and cunning of the wordsmith as cultural weapons of resistance and social change should *not* be taken lightly or for granted. At the same time, an entangled paradox resides in their critique. On the one hand, the poem reinforces the value of scores as a ranking and merit-based system that assigns numbers to human expression and emotion. Time and again, poetry slam emcees emphatically play up in their performance that “it’s not about the points but the poetry” (for example, by calling judges “haters,” and encouraging the audience to *boo* the judges). Yet, the scoring of poetry is an established practice and ritual of *friendly* competition and amusement, not unrelated to the cultural vein and spirit through which hip hop emcees and b-girls and b-boys “battle it out,” or teams compete in sports not merely to identify winners and losers but how the game is played. On the other hand, by forcing their ranking to last place in the competition, the poets ultimately transgress the slam scoring system in order to prove their point (no pun intended) that spoken word as an expansive, imagined community must get serious about sustaining integrity in its cultural work and politics as well as its role in social movements. The euphoric high that was achieved through Denver’s message in “Scores” did not fade so quickly, as suggested by post-final plasterings of “7 is the new 10” on Facebook, further fueling the intention, dialogue, and inspiration for other young writers sparked by Denver.

To further complicate the analysis, the poem must be recognized as a partially situated statement, just one fragment and piece in the differentiated makings and

articulation of slam and spoken word discourse. The poem must be stacked further against, for example, a critique and concern raised by spoken word artist and one of the evening's judges, Beau Sia, that the poem possibly ignores "the young poet who might quit writing forever and feel like they don't belong in the world, if they get a 6.2," working against a principal code of teen poetry slams and youth spoken word of providing safe, uncensored spaces for expression and dialogue. At the same time, we might speculate that Team Denver poets already considered this concern in constructing and selecting their words. What becomes at greater stake is the restoring or engendering of public belief and trust in young people and what they are capable of producing, particularly when challenged with high expectations, and that having an organized platform *at all* to speak and be civically engaged is what empowers young folks far more than "coddling." Perhaps the poets already had in mind that organized spaces do exist, like writing workshops and youth open mic, as do mechanisms and catches that enable poets to provide each other feedback and put each other "in check." Spoken word's community-embedded practices and pedagogical relations are therefore such that a score of 6.2 reflects more how a writing community has failed a young writer along the way, rather than a certain lack inherent within the poet him or herself.

The significance of this act of resistance during an HBO broadcast recording, both in upholding poetry's integrity and defying competition, should not be lost. The poem strives to salvage poetry from ever "going through the motions" of a poem, particularly in the context of spoken word's expansion, both through increased

organizing efforts as well as porous exposure through social media sources such as HBO, Facebook, and Youtube. In this chapter, I expose and explore in further detail the complex nature of spoken word's expanding relationship to this mainstream, facilitated largely through commercial means of access and distribution, most prominently through HBO. Denver's poem works partially to deemphasize and minimize the overplaying of the role of competition in teen poetry slams as featured in HBO's televised versions of *Brave New Voices* in 2008 and 2010. Clearly, the Denver poets showed that their concern was not winning the final competition, as did members of Team Philadelphia who disqualified themselves from the finals in 2008, another instance of high-profile resistance that I further elucidate in this chapter. This chapter reflects my overall aim to capture the complicated and contested nature of this relationship to HBO in light of spoken word's cross-generational, vital tradition as a popular pedagogical form, urban political aesthetic, and visionary tool of social movements. *Brave New Voices* under the auspices of HBO is ridden with tension. On one hand, the relationship spreads the movement's art form and pedagogy worldwide. On the other, sponsorship inevitably fosters commodification akin to that of hip hop.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I explore the themes of resistance and self-determination in global and historical terms in order to highlight the weight and significance of these themes in relation to spoken word's expansion. I then launch my investigation of the tension and conflict embedded in the concerns, optimism, and ambivalence of participants, both youth and adult organizers of spoken

word, underscoring HBO's influence, power, and limitations in relation to Brave New Voices. I emphasize these mixed feelings and thoughts through the use of two vignettes that capture instances of the tense interactions and encounters with HBO. The first vignette focuses on a writing workshop. The second highlights moments of collective resistance during the slam finals of Brave New Voices in 2008. Finally, I close with commentaries expressed through a few of my interviews about HBO's role and sponsorship, as well as an excerpt from a poem addressed to HBO in the following year, at Brave New Voices 2009 in Chicago. What my analysis reveals is that spoken word's expansion and relationship to corporate media holds together the inherent contradiction that while spreading spoken word pedagogy is most desirable for youth, growth and extension of spoken word as a cultural movement would not be possible without the financial resources and sponsorship of commercial, corporate entities like HBO.

The Roots of Relationship, Abuse and Self-Determination

...
I yielded my body as your playground
You were so young then
Mischievously playing in my puddles

Until you grew older
Carved vulgarities into my bones
That I didn't even know you knew
What did you become?

I called them oceans
Staying safe in your jungle gyms
And desert sandboxes

Father taught me that everything female
Is less than male
That *she* is a commodity
A piece of meat
A patch of soil
I was just doing what I was taught

So I knocked out her teeth and used them
As white-picket fences
I am rage

I am a woman defiled
Shoreline mascara stencils my face *ugly*
I am *robbed*
You drew me for *all* I possessed
Cut down my trees and still *push* against the trunk of my spine
You don't even look at me
You've obsessed with these industrial landscapes
Like my hills aren't enough for you
These curves never satisfy your aesthetics

The divorce papers between us are apocalyptic
I *know* this
But still I *chase profit*

If you're at all interested
I've begun to name the effects of this abuse
Like countries
You can catch it on the news
Because I am *shaking Haiti*
Drowning New York in sulfur tears
My titled tongue swallows the bath
The blood around Louisiana has grown black
This hatred you've infused scorches Zimbabwe's forests *daily*

Go ahead, bitch, scream
Let's see you challenge the integrity of my cities with your wind
How powerful are you *really*?

I am changing form
This process is unstoppable
I will smash you
End you
If I sign these divorce papers

I am your destruction
But I will rebuild
Because what you didn't know
Is that I *am* the *upworld* of oppressed nations
And revolution is *long* overdue

Let a man step out on his woman

And watch the earth quake

— Dominique Sample, 19 and Kyle Sutherland, 18
Team Denver, "Avatar" (Brave New Voices, 2010)

Dedicated to BP in the aftermath of the devastating oil spill in the Gulf of
Mexico, which flowed for three months and claimed the lives of 11 workers,
"Avatar," performed by Team Denver at Brave New Voices in 2010, animates a

deeply intimate interplay, juxtaposing the environmental destruction of Mother Earth and an aggressively masculine rendition of global capitalism, driven by corporate profit and greed. Lodged deeply within the poem is a historical perspective that implicates human social construction and destruction, including nation and empire, (post-)colonization, urban sprawl and gentrification, and market forces and profitability. The poem soberly plays with the metaphor of domestic violence and violence against women, particularly as manifested in the global south, in partial consequence of (para-)militarization, the battle over the control of natural resources, and the global intrusion of capitalism and neoliberal ideologies. What begins as a relationship of innocence and courtship escalates into a marriage ridden with neglect, abuse, and male domination, figuratively characterizing the unsustainable reaping and over-harvesting of natural resources and wastefulness of modern industrial landscapes and post-industrial (service- and information-based) societies. The poem poignantly illustrates the apocalyptic nature of “signing the divorce papers,” yet decisively only for humankind. That Mother Earth, as “the *upworld* of oppressed nations,” will outlive us all *is* the realization of the revolution for which the oppressed of the third world has been fighting, and anticipating, all along.

The poem displays enormous depth and insight around the themes of social and political struggle for self-determination. In a world where citizenship is defined heavily and more intensely by consumption and consumerism, mediated by a panorama and inundation of commercial media and images, the struggle for self-determination and resistance occurs most significantly at the level of community,

organized or imagined. Although globalizing forces of commercialization both exceed and conspire with state power, any threats they pose to local communities are not simply reducible to processes of cultural homogenization. On the global stage, in other words, cultural economies are marked by shifts, disjunctures, difference, overlaps, and complexity, rather than simple homogenization (Appadurai, 1996). In the case of spoken word, local variation and differences typify its increasingly global character as much as assertions, definitions, and assumptions driven by corporate-produced images, packaging, and claims to “*this* is what spoken word looks like.”

As an imagined community, spoken word has confronted a particular struggle for self-determination, around its historically rooted, political nature and purpose of art, as well as the fine line between widespread exposure and expansion on the one hand, and commercial exploitation on the other. The plight surfaces as spoken word becomes further mainstreamed and popularized through corporate channels and sources like HBO, facilitated by contractual agreement with Youth Speaks. As the traffic of spoken word grows on a global scale through commercial means, new forms of spoken word also culturally transpire that are locally grounded, while the politics, pedagogy, and cultural organizing that have been integral to spoken word are not always guaranteed. What does spoken word look like under these new conditions and wider terms? Certainly, spoken word is simultaneously expanding, deepening, fortifying, and weakening in different places at different times. Spoken word also

continues to be, increasingly, a vastly differentiated cultural form.⁴¹ What can be said for certain is that the issue of the commercialization of spoken word is a contested and contentious one for a number of participants in the Bay Area among a number of other places that has emerged most prominently from HBO's filming of *Brave New Voices* in 2008. In the first of two documentaries aired on HBO,⁴² the film crew followed several teams that participated and competed in *Brave New Voices* in 2008 in Washington, DC, both before and during the festival, including teams from New York City, Philadelphia, Fort Lauderdale, Santa Fe, and the Bay Area. While the festival comprises an array of events for different kinds of participants, including coaches, K-12 teachers, the general public, and *Brave New Voices* Future Corps members, as well as the youth poets themselves, *Russell Simmons Presents Brave New Voices* underscores competition among the teams the most. Its advertising catchphrase, "45 teams, 450 poets, 1 youth poetry slam champion," reductively emphasizes one single champion, conceivably an individual person as opposed to a team, out of the number of participants. Individual poets' personal stories, moreover, unfold and paint the documentary throughout, ranging from the connection between Bay Area's Erica Sheppard's food addiction and her absent, neglectful father, to Philadelphia poet Joshua Bennett's tear-jerking poem that honors the sacrifices of his father, a mail carrier who gave up law school to support his family ["when the Ku

⁴¹ For example, PBS (2011) recently produced a documentary, *Deaf Jam*, on a group of deaf teens in New York who are involved in slam poetry and consider their own art as spoken word.

⁴² The second HBO documentary featured only the grand slam finals of *Brave New Voices* in 2010 in Los Angeles.

Klux Kan burned down your high school at 18/I know what you sacrificed for me... a man/Who held the stars in his stomach/Could crumble a mountain with his smile/And spoke truth to his son/As if the entire world/Were watching”]. Also included are stories of one poet’s struggle with sickle cell disease, and another’s experience being kidnapped and escaping her abductor, who was sentenced to life in prison for the intent to rape and murder based on the pre-meditated evidence found in his car. There are other stories that are as gripping and heartfelt, drawing viewers both closer into the lives of the young people and deeper into the competition.

Any competitive impulse that threads throughout Brave New Voices, however, must be stacked against the sense of community, solidarity, and connectedness that abounds and embodies the festival each year to varying degrees. ESPN columnist Scoop Jackson (2009) captured these sentiments succinctly in his piece, *The Passion of Brave New Voices*, following Brave New Voices in 2009 in Chicago:

As someone who has covered sports for the past 20 years, I've never witnessed or experienced a scene like this -- more than 200 young adults displaying sincere love for one another before they go on stage with the unintention of being better than anyone and everyone who shares that stage. A blood sport in which no one bleeds. A war in which no one dies. A battle in which there is no fight.

That's what Brave New Voices has become. It's a competition in which in the end there is victory, but no victor; where the figurative overrides the literal. Because emotional attachment is something that is impossible to judge, the scores teams get for presentation and performances exist only so something tangible can be attached to what they've done.

After 12 years, poets have become jaded by scores. They don't care. They enter this battle to be heard -- to be *felt* -- not judged.

...the voices of the brave still stand and honor each opponent after every performance, every presentation, every poem in ways that remind their peers that the opportunity for them to express themselves is always greater than the feat of winning or the feeling of victory.

Popular news coverage of Brave New Voices, such as this one, suggests how corporate media have infiltrated its spaces and networks, providing ever-widening exposure and attention. At the same time, commercial points of contact and entry into spoken word culture in connection to youth are ridden with contradiction. In the next sections, I analyze and discuss the commercial relationship as experienced by youth and adults, both artists and organizers in the spoken word community, both in the Bay Area and in other places represented at Brave New Voices, under the auspices and influence of HBO.

Uncovering an Emotional Mix: Heights, Tensions, and Mistrust

It would be an impossible task to capture a full extent and range of sentiments reflecting adoration, love, non-competition, and community that bind the Brave New Voices festival. One of the surest signs these emotions and connections are experienced, outside of the high-profile performances of poetry itself, is the lack of sleep young people often get during the festival. Outside of the festival's packed schedule, poets practice and write with their teams, connect with other youth, or, as I observed in Washington DC in 2008, share or "spit" their own pieces with one another in the dormitory basement at three o'clock in the morning. Vajra touched upon the power and importance of artistic creation and expression in her interview, and the social connections that are made, facilitated, and deepened through

testimonial art at Brave New Voices and bringing youth from different parts of the country and globe into direct contact and dialogue with one another:

[It's powerful] just having young people from vastly different areas of the country, vastly different economic backgrounds and racial backgrounds, coming together in a platform, getting to know each other—being able to share their art. You know, maybe you look like a stuck-up white girl and you're gonna get up on stage and talk about being molested. And this Latina girl from Woodland is like, '*that's* me. That's me.' Where else would that take place? Where else would those connections be able to be forged? But through some type of artistic expression... —Vajra

Vajra stresses the significantly interrelational dimension of Brave New Voices, one that can be manifested in deeply interpersonal form and interconnection. The quality and extent of relations also occur across time as Brave New Voices is comprised of a long-standing network of artists, critical educators, community organizers, and arts administrators, a number of whom came through the circuits of Brave New Voices over the years as youth participants. Lauren shared how, to her parents' surprise, she had the choice of two professional positions, one at Youth Speaks and the other with the First Wave Program at University of Wisconsin, Madison, upon graduating from University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she first became involved with spoken word and Brave New Voices.⁴³

my parents were definitely like, when I was studying English and Sociology, they were like, 'So, law school?' Or, 'what's gonna happen afterwards?' They didn't think there was a job for poets. And so when I had these opportunities after college like, 'Hey Mom, check me out. I got *options* in my poet career.' So they were definitely baffled by that... That just testifies to how [Youths Speaks has been] able to sort of plant these little seeds all over the country and open doors for a bunch of youth...and artists. —Lauren

⁴³ Ann Arbor every year has a team represented at Brave New Voices. One of the coaches for the Ann Arbor team has been Jeff Kass, brother of James Kass.

Lauren's story illustrates how Brave New Voices as an organized community and space works to "plant seeds" in the literary arts, opening up opportunities for young people to build a career in the arts should they choose that route. The historic and dynamic success of Brave New Voices for young people, in providing a momentous foundation and poetry community, has been so profound that Hodari, during his interview, talked about how he hoped to replicate on a local level in the Bay Area what they have been able to accomplish in terms of the spirit, community, and force of impact of Brave New Voices. In other words, both half jokingly and half seriously, they have "piloted on a national level" what they want to do on a local level.

Kirya expressed optimism about the relationship between HBO and Brave New Voices, an optimism that can be attributed to the track record of Youth Speaks in establishing and organizing a robust community and organized space for spoken word to flourish: "we've put spoken word—youth spoken word on the map. We've made it a household name for some people. As the HBO thing happens it'll blow up, you know? People will *know* what we are. And what youth are capable of. And that's really powerful." Not everyone was optimistic about the involvement of HBO, however. Furthermore, any concerns about the commodification of spoken word must be put in larger context and history to reveal that the cooptation of spoken word began well before HBO's filmings of Brave New Voices in 2008 and in 2010. Katri demonstrates this point with a few examples:

You know, it's sort of hard to say because I *know* that it's going to be growing. And I *know* that there's going to be *more* involvement, and that's

definitely a good thing. But there is sort of this, *fear* that I think a lot of people have, definitely a lot of *young* people have about it getting to the point where it's like, I mean already there's, spoken word *beer* ads [laughs]. You know, it's just like—What is *that* mean? What *is* that? WHY? And they asked, like they've asked Raf to do commercials for all sorts of ridiculous things. Like they asked him to do a Coors Light commercial. And it's like, 'just *perform* this thing that you're not even gonna *write* it. You just *read* it, in the way that you *read* things.' ...So there's this sort of fear that it becomes this [coopted] *thing*. That *isn't* what we want it to be *at all*...Already McDonald's did that *whole* ad campaign around like *green*, like it was like an ad, it was this series of ads about *salad* that was done [laughs] in spoken word. So stuff like that is definitely *strange*...even when I was like a teenager they would like, James was like, 'I *feel* like I *have* to let you guys *know* that we were approached by Wendy's and they want someone to do a commercial. And I *told* them that I wouldn't *find* anyone to do it for them, but I *can't* say that, you know, if any of you guys *wanna* do it, I'm not gonna say you *can't* do it. But I am, I'm not gonna like work *with* Wendy's.' You know like, but it *is* sort of, you have to let people know, and if *that's* what they want to do, then that's what they want to do....I think that with rising popularity, and with more kids being involved, or with it becoming this sort of *cool*, young thing, that that's inevitable. And so that's sort of, it's just sort of *weird* to think that that's what happens. But in terms of what I'd *like* to see, that's totally what I would *not* like to see [laughs]. —Katri

The commercial forces and origins that Katri describes, and the definite, associated “*strange*”-ness that accompanies the aggressive cooptation of spoken word as an organic and political art form by corporations such as Coors Light, McDonald's, and Wendy's date back to much earlier than HBO's first filming of Brave New Voices in 2008. Joseph (2006) describes his experience in the early 2000s of getting caught up in and being implicated himself within the co-optive forces of commercialization around spoken word:

It's the summer of 2000, Dumb and Dumber are running for president, and Saul's movie is turning out kids all over America. An ad agency in San Francisco is looking for the newest, latest thing and puts out a call for 'spoken-word-sounding' cats to record some dialogue for a radio commercial. Somehow I hear about the audition, nail it, and me and two other folks from the poetry slam scene do the gig. Man, I'm thinking I just got OVER on these dumb asses! They paid me five hundred dollars (!) to bust some poetry for their dumb-ass product that I've never even heard of, and who the hell pays attention to the commercials on the radio

ANYWAY, ...so about two weeks later I started getting called out. All the community-radio backpackers are apparently listening to Clear Channel on the low. They want to know why I'm selling this whatever-it-is, and did I actually WRITE that shit, 'cuz the poem was hella weak and did they pay me and how much and man did you know that commercial is on like five times an hour and with mumia and gentrification and the lack of real hip-hop on the radio couldn't I have actually SAID some shit with my twelve seconds and what kind of example was I setting for the kids and daaaaamn five hunnit dolla's that's IT you got PLAYED dude and... (16)

Joseph (2006) puts into historical context, pre-the devastating years of the G. W. Bush-Cheney presidency, in the wake of the release of the 1998 film, *Slam*, featuring Saul Williams, how spoken word had already been picked up on the commercial circuits. It is important to keep in mind that commodification began, and the trajectory of commercial cooptation set in, before the events I describe and analyze in what follows. The process reflects one that is engulfed by the overall corporatization of hip hop, which has led to the “hip hop-ification” of a significant part of the popular realm of culture, including fashion and basketball (Kun, 2002). At the same time, spoken word as a distinct cultural form continues to engage with and combat these same forces on its own terms as partially autonomous and locally produced. With the widespread popularization of spoken word, contractual arrangements between HBO and Youth Speaks have opened up and fueled both the resource base and span of reach of spoken word as popular form of culture and education. Yet, the presence and role that the corporate world plays in the production and distribution of spoken word poses a continuing set of contradictions that confronts the work of cultural organizing, in ways more complex than represented in this chapter. For instance, my analysis does not include a close look at the sources of organizational funding, particularly from corporate foundations, nor other forms of corporate sponsorship

such as in-kind donations (e.g., Trader Joe's donated a host of products that provided "breakfast" for attendees during Brave New Voices in 2008), or even reliance on corporate entities such as Subway or FedEx to keep the festival running as smoothly as possible. The aim of this chapter, using the following two vignettes, is to recognize and examine participants' experiences, feelings, and beliefs about corporate influence as sometimes an unavoidable force, other times a necessary evil, but always a presence of reality.

HBO marked its defining, dominant presence throughout Brave New Voices in 2008. HBO bought up tickets for all events and performances, including the grand slam finals, making them available and free to the public on a limited seating basis. The oft intrusion and interference of the HBO film crew was a constancy manifested by a large, black television camera and an oversized, shag microphone hung over the heads of whomever were the targets of recording, regardless of whether not the opportunity to be on camera was desired. The first vignette that follows focuses on a writing workshop at Brave New Voices 2008, on July 19, 2008, conducted by Beau Sia. The workshop reveals just one of the many spaces where antagonistic sentiments towards HBO surfaced among poets. The second vignette, which immediately follows the first, revolves around the grand slam finals of Brave New Voices, where youth resistance was blatantly expressed throughout and following the competition.

VIGNETTE #1 – The Poetics of Unleashing Anger: Writing Workshop

The workshop was on ignorance. Beau began by opening up honestly, saying that it was early for him (it was 8:30 in the morning), that he was very tired, and that

he has made his life and his work so that he is never up before noon. But he insisted that he was there to engage in the workshop space “because you are here,” meaning all thirty or so participants, and asked everyone to engage with him: “The workshop is about getting everyone to understand. We have to make a safe space, for everyone to meet.” This initial message of *engaging*, as a way of opening up the workshop, ended up tying very closely to his main message about the need to engage “others who are different from you, with whom you don’t have much familiarity.” He gave the example of how his performances, when he was younger and starting out as a poet, used to be *very loud*, where he practically yelled his poems. He realized that at times he came off as threatening and not necessarily engaging, and that yelling poetry does not always win over audiences. However, “you don’t *always* have to win people over,” he explained. More important than winning people over is being true to oneself and one’s expressions and emotions, so “if you need to vent on the mic, do it and do what you do.”

The writing prompt Beau gave was on anger, “something that irks you.” He encouraged everyone to write even from a place of hate. “*You don’t know how far you can go* [with your writing] *until you go there. Go there and then pull back.* The point of all this is to have *feelings*. It’s important to have feelings no matter if they are angry feelings.” The only hint he gave that this writing exercise connects to the topic of ignorance was how he defined *ignorance*: “Ignorance is not about being stupid. We are all ignorant. Ignorance is about being so far removed from the experience.” By having workshop participants get in touch with their own feelings of

anger and hate, they were getting in touch with very basic human emotions that are commonly coupled with ignorance. Implicitly, through this exercise, workshop participants were examining the sources of their own ignorance. He had everyone, who appeared ready and eager to write, begin writing for an uninterrupted ten minutes by the simple and abrupt signal, “go.”

After ten minutes were up, Beau asked participants to share what they wrote. One young poet from Chicago read his piece in which he repeatedly uses of the word “fuck,” targeted against HBO – “fuck HBO,” “fuck their cameras,” “fuck their obtrusive, oversize microphones,” and so forth. Explicitly lashing out against HBO, the poem expressed the poet’s anger and frustration that have been built up from HBO’s constant and looming presence and control at Brave New Voices. After the young poet read his piece, Beau asked for more specific information that would help him understand more the feelings that were expressed in his writing. The poet explained that, as just one example, after Team Chicago qualified for the grand slam finals, HBO’s film crew noticed the team ciphering, then asked the team to perform the cipher again, this time by inserting their own names to be captured as part of the documentary. The poets felt they were being asked to perform a phony cipher for the camera and amusement of a broad audience. The artistic moment of their cipher could not be genuinely recreated or fabricated. The documentary itself reveals a certain unevenness, hesitation, and ambivalence, in conjunction with the staging of a sweeping overproduction that characterizes the documentary throughout, when poets on the teams that qualified for the finals provide their own names for the camera.

Beau asked the poet and others in the workshop if it was the *machine* and *system* of HBO that was the topic of discussion, namely around anger and hate, or if it was the *individual people* who work behind the camera, the microphone, and the rest of the film production. In response to this question, the young poet from Chicago, whose writing sparked the discussion, responded by saying that his aunt works for Shell Oil Company and that he still loves her. The point of Beau's question was that "it's not about individuals."

Beau posed the further suggestion, in his comical, seemingly nonchalant voice familiar to many young poets, that "how about instead of saying all the 'fuck yous,' you *tell* HBO what they *need* to do: 'let us be real next year, you dick.'" The difference between the two approaches is that the latter *engages* the "machine" and "system" of HBO while the former forecloses on the dialogue.

Another young poet shared her experience with HBO's film crew, whose members noticed her kiss another young woman. The camera crew quickly ran over to her and asked if they were girlfriends. Then they asked her to kiss her again for the camera. Participants expressed their horror and disgust of this incident as a form of blatant exploitation.

With the agitation stirring among participants, Beau immediately, and vibrantly, insisted that this was now a *new* workshop, in order for participants to talk about HBO's presence and production at Brave New Voices. He exclaimed, "*so* many factors go into this production." While this "new" topic of discussion focused solely on this concern about the presence, interference, and intrusiveness of HBO,

weighed against the value and risk of getting spoken word poetry more in the public sphere of viewing and recognition, one participant reassured Beau that he actually *did* bring the conversation back to ignorance by talking about the need to find middle ground. Specifically, Beau spoke about the need to *empathize* with others' experiences, that may be radically different from one's own because, after all, we are battling *systems* and *structures* of domination, not necessarily – in the big scheme of things – individuals. Engaging is most important because “there's no such thing as *ideal*. That's why they it's called 'ideal.' There's no standard for this.” Engaging, in other words, is the best we can do to change the ways we are run by these systems, or to refuse to be run by them.

At the close of the workshop, after performing his own poem at the request of workshop participants, a piece relating to the themes of race and citizenship, Beau was asked what other writing prompt he would suggest the workshop participants could focus on in their own time. He said, “write about 10 things that you are insecure about, that you don't want anyone to know. And to see how you wrote about it 10 years from now.” This suggestion, a consistent cap to Beau's engagement with young people throughout the festival,⁴⁴ was intended to put their youthhood in larger perspective, encouraging both patience and honesty with themselves in the present, as well as continual and truthful reflection in their future.

⁴⁴ There is somewhat of a running joke among youth poets who are familiar with Beau, who during his performances has expressed his refusal to wear his glasses in public because, as he claims, he's “so vain.” In order to make himself vulnerable and relate better to the experiences of teens, however, especially teen poets at Brave New Voices for their very first time, he wore his thick-lens glasses throughout the festival in 2008. At his first public appearance at the festival, he also sang, with glasses on, to an audience of a couple hundred, saying that his singing voice, which is slightly but noticeably off-key, was something that definitely made him feel most vulnerable.

VIGNETTE #2: “BNV Ain’t Nothin’ to Fuck With”: BNV Finals 2008

During the 2008 slam finals of Brave New Voices, right after being called up to the stage as the last team of the first round of the evening, members of the team from Philadelphia disqualified themselves from the finals. Their reason for withdrawing was that they had gotten too caught up in the competition, especially with the hype of HBO, its film crew, and its cameras, stating that they wanted to bring poetry in its most genuine form to the audience and to be free, without being concerned about any scores or winning:

For this past week, this team hasn’t really been a team. We’ve been caught up in the scores, and the cameras following us, and in the competition. And so, in honor of the poetry that has brought us here, we have decided tonight to disqualify ourselves, to not do it for the scores, and to spit the poems that means the most of us, and do what this is supposed to be about. So we are going to go in. We are going to get free.⁴⁵

The tone was reset for the remainder of the evening.⁴⁶ As one post-BNV blogger described: “The energy with which the show started carried on through everyone's expression. Each piece a monument to pure hearts, clear minds and brave voices answering the call to speak truth to power.”⁴⁷

With Philadelphia, the 2007 slam champs, out of the running yet still performing, the slam proceeded with such conspicuous and striking features as its high-profile judges, including legendary Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez, hip hop novelist Adam Mansbach, and founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, Miguel

⁴⁵ Joshua Bennett, *Brave New Voices* (2008)

⁴⁶ Greg Corbin, Team Philly mentor, responded: “I felt overwhelmed. For them to go up there as a team, holding hands, and forfeiting together. I just saw that as another small victory, towards helping young people to become better *people*, not just better poets.” (*Brave New Voices*, 2008)

⁴⁷ Zaccai Free (2008) <http://bnv2008.blogspot.com/2008/06/test-2.html>

Algarin; an over-polished stage set; and the vibrant, jubilant female deejay, DJ Reborn. At the end of the finals, after Youth Speaks Hawaii was announced the “winner,”⁴⁸ all the poets who performed that evening were called to the stage to be recognized. They profusely gave each other hugs and congratulated one another on performance, art, and courage while the audience stood approvingly on its feet. The HBO producers and evening’s host then attempted to have all members of the five finalist teams – Urban Word NYC, Hawaii, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Chicago – stand with their respective teammates as a final shoot for the documentary. But the youth poets, palpably put off by this request that served only to cap boiling tensions with HBO, *refused* to separate. They began chanting, repeatedly, “*One Team! One Team! One Team! One Team!*” The host and producers, with the cameras rolling, could only concede to this resistance. Though temporary and perhaps quite small on the scale of social change, the unified resistance was profound enough to be felt and experienced in the moment as an overwhelming victory. Shortly after, the chant transitioned into “*BNV ain’t nothin’ to fuck with!! BNV ain’t nothin’ to fuck with!!*” Poets chanted this all the way to the Metro station back to the dormitories, myself included. I found my whole body and self entirely swept up by the rhythm and meaning of this chant.

Mr. Lathan, the power of poetry may be commodified for HBO...the youth voices of truth were being asked to lie as though they were really in a competition, when in reality your bringing them together along with the

⁴⁸ As the emcee was about to announce the evening’s first place team, “to do the honors of figuring out who wins,” an unmicrophoned man in the audience responded, “Everybody won!” (Brave New Voices, 2008)

various spoken word organizations involved in this event, created a family of 500 teens with the energy and fire to ignite the globe. The spirit of unity in the face of seeming opportunity, young people recognizing that the team created by all of their voices held more value than their city team of ten, is an example to us all of what it will take to change our present reality of social neglect, the arrogance of unlimited access to the spoils of war and the lethargy caused by cynicism and cowardice.⁴⁹

Making the Most of, and Staying Focused within, a Catch-22

After the festival, in the remainder of my interviews, I asked about impressions of the 2008 Brave New Voices slam finals and HBO's influence and filming of the documentary. There was much cynicism expressed towards HBO as a corporate entity, and skepticism about its ability to represent youth and accurately capture the spoken word community. Ultimately, however, sentiments for the most part still aligned with the belief that the filming ultimately is a good thing for bringing spoken word poetry to more young people, and opens up spoken word pedagogy to be more widespread and accessible. Josh's comments reflect this response:

So finals was *ridiculous*. And that's where their ugly head came up. And, finals was *not* good in terms of – I mean like it *turned out* great, and amazing. Like, HBO *overstepped* their bounds. *But*, I think in the long run it'll be *good*, to have the documentation, to *show* Brave New Voices. The question is, whether Youth Speaks *has* enough control in terms of the *filming* of their events. And then, on the editing, through how they show it. And the control that they had at finals, was not very—Youth Speaks did not have much control. *That* was evident. So, I'm *slightly* nervous, at what they're gonna show, but *even* if they slightly misrepresent it, which they *will*. And they'll *fuck* it up, and whatever. But, that's the media you know. They *will* misrepresent it. But, I still think that it's a good thing. —Josh

Characterizing the finals as “*ridiculous*,” the way HBO's “ugly head came up” by attempting to once again divide the youth for a final frame and overemphasizing competition as the driving feature of the festival, Josh believes the finals “*turned out*

⁴⁹ Zaccai Free (2008) <http://bnv2008.blogspot.com/2008/06/test-2.html>

great, and amazing.” That young people were able to resist and stand in solidarity with one another against corporate influence, manipulation, and domination was a testament to their capabilities, concerns, and knowledge in a world largely manufactured by the global capitalistic engine. According to Josh, not only did HBO overstep their bounds at finals. He recognizes that, as a corporate entity, HBO will continue to overstep its bounds through its power and control over such things as editing and distribution. Though he believes that HBO *will* misrepresent the young people and “*fuck* it [the documentary] up,” ultimately, “in the long run it’ll be *good*” in terms of “getting the word out” to a lot of people. Josh’s reason for believing the benefits would outweigh the social costs boils down to recalling how significant and influential HBO’s *Def Poetry Jam* was for him when he was seventeen years old: “I had never seen poetry on TV. That was a *big* thing—I can remember watching it. And I *know* that *this* will do even *more* than that.” He stated that the “next time” corporate sponsorship happens, in this or any other form, “you just gotta make, stricter—regulation—but I don’t know! You know? It’s hard. When they have the money, and the power and their cameras.” His statement reveals an ambivalence that makes it difficult to reconcile the inherent contradictions, even in imagining how to make corporate sponsorship better the “next time.”

Dennis also expressed his personal doubt and pause against media forces such as HBO. Yet, he intentionally puts his personal feelings and opinion aside in order to recognize that, if HBO or any mainstream corporate entity will have a hand in sponsorship, partnership, or any sort of cooptation, then “why *not* us?” In other

words, his belief in the integrity of the community, that the work stands for itself, will ensure a best possible outcome within the severely constraining conditions and contested, contradictory arrangement:

I try to be really objective about it. Like, I have a personal prejudice against mainstream media, you know what I'm saying? So like they were in the office, I did my best to stay away from the team, you know what I'm saying? But at the same time, I wouldn't want my personal beliefs to hinder what the organization can do, you know what I mean? It's one of those things where...they are who they are. They'll always find a way to twist it. On the other hand, it's like, well, if they're going to talk to somebody, then you know, why not talk to one of us? *Why not?* You know what I mean?

—Dennis

As someone who was not at the festival in 2008 but in the office during that time, Dennis shared his observation of the range of responses to HBO's presence and influence. He believes that people in the office and in the spoken word community have a well-informed critique and healthy mistrust of commercial media. This "media savvy" enables him to trust that sound decisions have been and are being made. Most especially, he expressed appreciation that *he* was not the one to have to make decisions and be part of the discussion with HBO, and that he has full confidence in those that are in that role:

It's funny for me. I'm just talking to people as they're coming back. I heard a lot of mixed things. I heard a lot of mixed things and some people weren't happy and they felt that HBO's presence, you know, tampered with the flow of the event. And then, you know, maybe certain youth may not have had the kind of experience they might have had if HBO would not have been there. At the same time, there were folks who expressed a lot of excitement and optimism about it. You know what I mean? Like, hey, if we really do believe this work being done, you know what I mean? You want more people to know about it. You want more people to get down with it. You know, this is an opportunity, you know what I'm saying? *We have a lot of media savvy people, you know what I mean?* In the organization, we have. And that's makes *me* feel better about it. To know that like, very aware, very deliberate, you know what I mean, about the kind of partnerships and decisions that they're making. You know, I can admit that I have certain jerk

reactions. But I'm glad it's not my responsibility to be a part of this discussion. They're doing their thing. It's one of those things where it's like, if I had to trust anybody, you know, who could talk to HBO on my behalf or Youth Speaks' behalf, it would be those guys. —Dennis

Dennis refers to a range of “mixed” reactions and responses, including among the youth, to HBO’s heavy hand in the festival, ranging from “excitement and optimism” about the opportunity for “more people to get down with it,” to feelings that HBO “tampered with the flow” and took away from the event. In one of my interviews, stark differences were expressed between two friends, Tiye, 17, and Jeanine, 18, who have been involved in different spoken word communities, Tiye in the Bay Area and Jeanine in Los Angeles and New York, with some earlier experiences in the Bay Area. This interview took place about a month before Brave New Voices in 2008. Tiye expressed much more optimism whereas Jeanine was much more cautious, not trusting HBO or the outcome of a commercially filmed documentary:

Tiye: It needs to get out to the world. Now. Now is the time.

Jeanine: Yeah, but then the thing *is*... it's a *scene* now. Instead of it being like a actual, you know, “oh let's do poetry because this is our feelings and we wanna change the world.” Now it's just a *scene*. It's cool to go to open mic. It's cool to be out late and, you know what I'm saying? At these cafes and stuff like that now... all these kids are going and they wanna dress all nice... People just need to come back to the *love* of poetry. You know? That was once there and that's how it all started – just like hip-hop. There's a *love* for it. You know what I'm sayin? Like poetry *gonna be* like hip-hop. It's mainstream, commercialized – shit basically. In a nutshell.

Tiye: But I think it will be good for people to *see* what we do. And hopefully it will bring more people toward our *cause* instead of like – “ooh, that's cool I wanna *do* that.” You know what I mean?

Jeanine: Hopefully it does *that*, but I know it's gonna – I don't know. 'Cause as soon as something goes mainstream it always goes to *crap*. I also feel like a lot of the responsibility is on the poets and people that – and poet mentors and people that run the organization. Like to stay true. We just have to provide a space for where youth can express themselves in whatever way they choose. If they choose to speak, if they choose to read it in their head, you know what I'm saying? We have to stay true to ourselves for it not to get too ridiculously mainstream.

According to Jeanine, “[p]eople just need to come back to the *love* of poetry.” She parallels the predicament and demise of spoken word with that of hip hop, asserting that “poetry *gonna be* like hip-hop” in terms of the deterioration and alienation of its original quality and intentions. She assigns responsibility to the poets themselves, as well as arts activists who organize poetry events for youth, “to stay true” and to continue ensuring safe spaces for expression to occur for and by youth “in whatever way they choose.”

Tiye and Jeanine also discussed key geographic differences between the organizations, Youth Speaks in San Francisco and Urban Word NYC, namely with the selection of poets that represent the respective teams at Brave New Voices. While they highlighted weaknesses with both approaches, their overall concern was more for making the festival much more accessible to many more youth. Tiye tied this need for increased accessibility and participation to the necessity of HBO’s sponsorship, particularly in generating the resources to support and expand programs. While Jeanine could see and understand the connection, she referred to this connection between needed expansion and corporate sponsorship dependency as “a game” and “a big circle,” namely a vicious cycle of contradiction:

Jeanine: Urban Word has this thing where only one kid can buzz one time. So if I go to BNV in '07, I can't go any more. You know what I'm saying? And Youth Speaks is like, if you're – if you're the *shit*, you can go five or six times, as long as you're not too old. You know what I'm saying? But I don't know whether, the way Youth Speaks does it, is the right way to do it. Because people that are behind me, you know what I'm saying, might not be getting picked just because they [don't] have a relationship with people that are two and three years older. And Urban Word might be discouraging kids because they feel like, “if I don't make it this year, I'm not gonna make it any,” you know what I'm saying?

Tiye: Yeah yeah. I was with kids who – they’ve gone to Semi’s [of the Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam] for like five or four years in a row. And never *ever* once got the chance to see Brave New Voices, which, that’s the part that sucks, you know –

Jeanine: But also it needs to get bigger. It needs to get bigger because five kids from Oakland, five kids from New York, five kids from San Francisco, five kids from Seattle. Oakland has 500,000 people. Six kids is not gonna represent all of Oakland, you know what I’m sayin’? We need to have 10 or 15 kids or something. Shit – ‘cause this ain’t enough kids. That’s why I see people get discouraged. Because they’re like, “there ain’t enough hope for me.”

Tiye: That’s where the mainstream gets in. That’s why they need to make it mainstream to give them more money so 10 people can go –

Jeanine: So, I mean that’s – it’s a game. It’s a big circle.

For Jeanine, the “game” and “big circle” of commercial media sponsorship and mainstreaming is a juggernaut catch-22 because of the contradictory conditions and effects of expansion that do not guarantee quality or integrity for the poetry or the community. While mainstreaming reflects a “no-win situation,” she still insists that the community of artists and organizers needs “to stay focused” on staying rooted and not basking in the attention and knowing “they’re gonna be on the next season of HBO.”

Closing Thoughts

For Jeanine, the assertion of the absolute and fundamental need “to stay true to ourselves” is about providing “a space for where youth can express themselves in whatever way they choose. If they choose to speak, if they choose to read it in their head.” Her insight strikes a major chord from an arts organizing perspective as it was expressed by Hodari during an interview, revolving unconditionally around the necessity of providing youth safe, uncensored spaces for expression and dialogue rooted in the principles of praxis, or reflection and action (Freire, 1996/1970):

We’ve provided opportunities for young people to speak *freely*. Safe spaces for them to speak their mind and reveal their truths and *confront* their truth

no matter how convenient or inconvenient they might be, for *others*. Or for themselves...It's a revolutionary thing to speak your mind and to speak freely. We're not fanciful and we're not apologetic about what we do. We're not asking for permission to speak. We will get the permits when necessary and follow the procedures for an organized protest, but we're not about asking for permission to speak. Free speech is deeply democratic...It certainly strikes a nerve with some people, but it's *so* fundamentally human. —Hodari

Freedom of expression is both a basic and revolutionary human right. Free speech as a “deeply democratic” practice, according to Hodari, extends to everyone, including and especially youth and young children. His challenge as an organizer and administrator of Brave New Voices has been the dearth of representation of youth from the deep, conservative South, suggesting *more* organizing and mobilizing is necessary: “I’m very aware that in many places, this is like, very controversial work that we’re doing, *especially* creating uncensored environments...I’m aware of why we don’t have such a super strong southern presence at Brave New Voices yet. We want to have more *red* states. You know, it would be nice to get more *red* states...Those are *kind of* some of the things that I wrestle with.” With vehicles like HBO for expanding the movement, the efforts of organizing are accelerated further into “non-penetrated” areas like the South. This organizing, simultaneously, demands even more proactive community-rooted approaches. Hodari named specifically the need for building high school and middle school programs, so that services can eventually reach kids at the elementary school level and even younger. Succinctly, he claimed, “I don’t think that there’s necessarily any end to the work. Until free speech is something that is offered to every person on earth.”

Corporate sponsorship of spoken word by HBO, in the interest of targeting youth as its ultimate consumers and producers, leaves and compels us with the task of asking further questions about the role of and needed restriction for corporate entities in achieving a deepened democracy. At the same time, the deepening of democracy will not occur unless free speech, expression, and dialogue can move, travel, and penetrate as swiftly as, if not faster than, capital.

CHAPTER SIX — CONCLUSION
Literacy, Pedagogy & Spoken Word: More Than Poems Await

...I've seen young [em]‘cees die too soon
Not get a chance at this American dream
Die before eighteen
Have their mothers bury them in a hole
...
How would you feel if your mom was in that position?
Where she had to say bye to her baby
...
Honestly, I'm not scared to die
I'm not afraid of death
It's who I leave behind
That goes through my mind
Who's gonna take care of my mom when she's stressed
Who gonna take care of my lil' sis when she gets in a mess
Honestly, I always think of them
Look to your left and right
Go home tonight and tell them you love them
'Cuz sometimes you never get the chance

—Jorge George Hurtado, 16, Slam Champion
Youth Speaks San Francisco Unified School District-Wide Slam, 2006

Eighteen-year-old Jorge Hurtado grew up in the Mission District in San Francisco. On his way home with a friend from a movie on August 24th, 2008, he was fatally shot as the two were walking home on Bryant Street from the 24th Street BART station. Jorge was talking on the phone with his girlfriend at the time. His companion was not hurt. The shooter, who apparently knew Jorge by name, was himself in his teens. According to Jorge's sister, Jorge “rarely went out at night...because he knew the dangers of walking the fine line that divides Sureño and Norteño gang territories” (Begin, 2008). That night was the last night of his summer break, before he was to start his second semester at San Francisco State University, where he was studying sound production and writing. While a high school student at June Jordan Academy, Hurtado was part of the Young Artists at Work program at the

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts where he focused on writing. At home, Jorge had a makeshift music studio in his closet where he and his friends would record songs. While “[s]ome of his friends had the hardened look of the neighborhood,” his sister shared, he “would always insist that guests greet his mother” (Begin, 2008). As suggested in his winning slam poem (“I’ve seen young ‘cees die too soon...look to your left and right”), Jorge could not completely evade the influence of gang warfare in his neighborhood, or its toll on his own life.

Youth Violence Revisited

Jorge was a young person whose life and neighborhood were affected by street violence. Katri recalled, “the issue with Jorge was, he would come to some of our events but he – because of like *gang* issues, wouldn’t leave his neighborhood often.” As discussed in chapter three, Youth Speaks is neither set up to outreach to young people who live and reside in neighborhood conditions similar to Jorge’s, nor, as some believe, should claim this type of work as its focus. Its approach to youth violence prevention, if it even exists, is implicit and indirect by encouraging, inspiring, and engaging young people to be keen observers and honest writers of their own lives and the social world around them.⁵⁰ Kirya shared how Jorge’s death sparked “conversations around the office about what we’re going to do.” She saw the need for “not just the poet mentors but the entire office” to have at least some sort of

⁵⁰ In the wake of increased national attention and conversation on the issue of gun violence and its recent toll on relatively privileged communities (e.g., Aurora, Colorado and Newtown, Connecticut), the theme of Bringin’ the Noise for MLK, Jr. in 2013 was violence. Dennis Kim can be viewed mentally preparing youth performers before the show in a profound video in which he insists that youth violence prevention begins with them and their very performance that evening: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN4sE-ZobZg>

crisis intervention training, like a basic training given by Rudy Corpez, a former third generation gang leader and founder of United Playaz. United Playaz is a highly reputable and successful, award-winning violence prevention and youth leadership development organization in San Francisco. Rudy has been recognized internationally for bringing young people from opposing gang factions to the table to work together towards reducing and eliminating violence and conflict in their schools.

To say that news of Jorge's murder rocked the Youth Speaks community is a severe understatement. His death sent shockwaves that could easily be felt, representing not merely another young life tragically lost to urban violence, but an intensely sober loss that hit home as one of Youth Speaks' own former slam champions. In response to and mourning of Jorge's death, Jason compiled and uploaded a Youtube video, titled "R.I.P. Jorge George Hurtado [Young Artist at Work]," which shows Jorge's performances at the Youth Speaks San Francisco Unified School District-Wide Slam in 2006, and the final moments of the slam when Jorge is announced as the slam champion. In the video, Jorge receives a deluge of hugs onstage by fellow youth poets and friends. He reveals an unassuming personality when he is asked about winning the slam, modestly describing the experience, "It's a beautiful thing." Jason adds his own commentary in the video's conclusion, a poem dedicated to Jorge's memory:

George Hurtado is
A voice silenced...
In a time where
The youth need to
Be heard
His death is not a statistic. His

Death is
Devastating.
His death is not a body dead, his
Death is a loss of
Words

—Jason Mateo
“R.I.P. Jorge George Hurtado [Young Artist at Work]”

By calling Jorge’s death “Devastating,” as well as his strategic placement of words to counter any apathy and indifference towards “Death” in general as “Devastating,” Jason pays homage to this young individual life prematurely and tragically taken. Jorge’s life, now “a voice silenced,” is not unrelated to a larger silencing of young people in general, that takes place both institutionally and in the wider realm of social imagination that is adult-driven, -constructed, and -defined. Silencing *is* a fundamental form of violence against youth that cultivates the social conditions for youth violence itself. The assertion that “The youth need to/Be heard” identifies a social pathology. That Jorge’s death is not merely “a body dead” but “a loss of/Words” pinpoints how young people using their words is no insignificant, inconsequential matter.

Words, Written and Spoken, Matter Most

What god was it that slid us on to this planet
As slick as we are
With lightening for tongues
And gave us the task of poets?
...
We confuse the wind, dismiss it and send it off to all directions
We tap dance on shoulders of waves
And give height to the tides
We talk it, walk mountains
Breathe hurricanes
Hum earthquakes
...
We are nothing less than great
More than divine but great and divine

Are still just words and words still have walls
And walls are nothing but limits
But we are limit-*less*
So we are even beyond articulation
We are nothing less than great
The world is waiting, holding their breath
They are waiting
The poems are waiting
Holding their breath
Waiting for us
They are waiting for us to speak our thunder
Time is flying away on precious gilded wings
Just take my hand
There is nothing I can show you
You can't see for yourself
But take my hand if you do not believe
We are cowards and victims
There is a universe for us to write about
And stars for us to conquer
But let's start right here
On this mountain top
Where we are gods and goddesses
Take my hand if you want
And let's write these poems together

—Tim Arevalo, Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam Champion 1998, “The poems are waiting...”

I set out in this dissertation to capture what I consider to be a cultural movement, centered on spoken word and youth, focusing primarily on its shape, form, and content manifested in the San Francisco Bay Area in connection to Brave New Voices. The importance of looking at and analytically representing and documenting this movement rests largely on the writing practices and community that support, engage, and sustain youth, assisting so many of them, though not all, to flourish through the primary means of critically urgent forms of literacy and pedagogy. In the Bay Area, the spoken word movement began at least 11 years before I came into this study, and continues beyond the writing and timeframe of this dissertation. There are community organizing and movement-building efforts, along

with their impact, that have taken place and continue to happen, undoubtedly exceeding and surpassing this study, and involve even newer generations of young people. Spoken word, in other words and in short, is a cultural movement presently in the making.

My efforts to capture spoken word as a contemporary cultural movement, at the heart of which young people are its focus and authors, began with a framing of not merely a relevance of literacy to youth, but rather its social urgency. I historicized spoken word activism in terms of the cultural genocide, violence, and erasures of social difference that occur in the present conditions of neoliberal capitalism, modernity, and governmentality as they affect, circumscribe, and define the conditions and everyday lives of racialized youth. My argument for viewing literacy in terms of an imperative and exigency arises from a theoretical approach to literacy, grounded in a feminist Marxist view of culture and a post-Freireian understanding of literacy, highlighting its materially ideological dimension and effects. I offered broad and specific brushstrokes of youth spoken word in the Bay Area, taking a close look at some of the specific issues and on-the-ground approaches to spoken word organizing. I then focused on the contact zones of cultural movement-making, namely efforts and partnerships that come up against the institution of schools and the laissez-faire market context of cultural commodification using the specific example of HBO and its involvement in 2008 at the international youth poetry slam festival, Brave New Voices. I ended this analysis of the movement's engagements, triumphs, barriers, and remaining challenges with open-

ended questions about the implications for a more radicalized and deepened democracy and future for youth. Finally, my intent with closing with the local Bay Area case of Jorge Hurtado in this concluding chapter is to ensure that we not lose sight or perspective on youth violence, and the larger circumstances of violence against racialized youth, as *the* context that urgently defines the real purpose of this dissertation. The community's shock and response to his loss gestures strongly towards the role and potential of critical, arts-driven literacy, including spoken word and other discursive forms that constitute and build a kind of literacy of self and community, in producing social impact and transformation, both in the short and long term. The following closing commentary areas of discussion and summation reflect the most salient and distilled themes that emerge from my dissertation.

1. Spoken word is a radical approach to youth development.

Spoken word, written or spoken, relies on as its main organizing device and methodology the examination of one's own life in the social world as primary text. According to Lauren, the practice of engaging youth in spoken word "holds up a nonjudgmental mirror, for youth to look seriously at themselves, and honestly at themselves. And, to talk about what they see...it gets youth to better understand themselves and the world in which they live...then take agency in how their voice fits into the conversation." This examination requires a reflective process driven by the asking of questions that have social implications beyond the young individual poet as an investigator of social inquiry, fueled by a community of youth, artists, and educators who keeps the young poet accountable. Poems as a form of critical

narrative, rooted in everyday “rock-hard” experiences, provide glimpses into social structural realities, histories, and locations. As Ebony explained, “it’s *really* our responsibility to *write* about those things that affect our lives... It’s *so* important that you share those things, because there’s really somebody out there who has the *same* story as you, somebody who *really* needs to hear how somebody *overcame* those experiences.” She goes on to assert, “it really helps other people. I think it’s *our* responsibility as poets. To *write* for other people, you know? ‘Cause not everybody *has* this *ability*, nobody has this gift.” From an organizing perspective, Hodari frames the pedagogical logic of spoken word activism in terms of safe, uncensored, and open spaces for critical self- and social-reflection, growth, and application for engaging in dialogue and social difference: “We’ve provided opportunities for young people to speak *freely*. Safe spaces for them to speak their mind and reveal their truths and *confront* their truth no matter how convenient or inconvenient they might be, for *others*. *Or* for themselves.” Spoken word constitutes a “radical” form of youth development in which “radical” is understood in its first and original definition to mean being rooted, or pertaining to roots and origins.

2. Spoken word is inherently a cultural intervention to youth violence.

Spoken word’s most radical element may be its insistence upon art itself. The community investment in developing, encouraging, and challenging artistry as a supreme practice of pedagogy, among seasoned spoken word artists and educators *and* youth alike, is not unrelated to the notion of art as a form of healing, praxis, and cultural resistance towards a social justice of the future lived in the very present

(Kelley, 2002). José Esteban Muñoz (2005) refers to this pedagogical space of art as “a working on the self for others.” He writes, “to work on oneself is to veer away from models of the self that correlate with socially prescribed identity narratives. The rejection of these notions of the self is not simply an individualistic rebellion: resisting dominant modes of subjection entails not only contesting dominant modalities of governmental and state power but also opening up a space for new social formations” (326). New social formations are critical social relations and intersubjectivities that provide resources for re-imaginings and -arrangements of the social world. Esteban Muñoz goes on to characterize this “care of the self” (Foucault, 1978) in terms of counterpublics, in which “communities and relational chains of resistance...contest the dominant public sphere” (327). In counterpublics, “different subaltern groupings...are defined as falling outside the majoritarian public sphere; it is influenced by a mode of discourse theory that critiques universalities and favors particularities, yet it insists on a Marxian materialist impulse that *regrids* transgressive subjects and their actions as identifiable social movements” (328). Spoken word, in this sense, discursively re-grades as a particular social movement through its dialogic transgressions of subjects and intersubjectivities.

Political art and arts activism as a kind of critical social knowledge and counterpublic represents a platform for young people to explore, understand, and work out conflict in their everyday lives through critical examination, writing, and performance, namely forms of “care of the self”. The importance of audience infuses spoken word dialogue into social networks and spaces where “a working on the self

for others” is actualized, arguably more than doubling the inherent intervention to violence.⁵¹ The presence and influence of these community spaces and relations implicitly, as well as explicitly in much of the writing, manifest spaces and processes that bolster critical reflections of violence of all sorts affecting youth. The cultural intervention lies in the dialogue, both as a literacy of self and as of a literacy of community where the words naming life experiences, social realities, and critical analyses are most powerful weapons against violence.

3. Spoken word connects young people to social movement work.

Spoken word importantly connects young people to social movement work, both historical and contemporary, where their writing and poetry represent and articulate a youth-led vision of social transformation and living and being in a differently inhabited, more socially just world. From the open mic protest and march, *Hearing from the Children Left Behind*,⁵² from Lafayette Park to the White House during Brave New Voice 2008, to the Life is Living march in Chicago protesting youth violence at Brave New Voices 2009, youth come to know, experience, and organize social movement work and coalition building efforts. Yet, in addition to traditional forms of social movement work, youth learn both tactical and strategic forms as well. For example, youth are increasingly organizing spoken word clubs and events in their own schools and communities, and find even more reason to

⁵¹ For example, I refer to Dennis Kim’s mental preparations video, where he urges youth to “put down your [metaphorical] weapons, this isn’t about competition...” before they perform at Bringin’ the Noise for MLK, Jr in 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN4sE-ZobZg>

⁵² Right after these events, I came across a young poet who, in a downpour of heartfelt tears and heavy hugs, shared with me, “*now* I know, what it was like, back in the 60s.”

encourage their peers to write their lives into stories and truth-telling history. Spoken word, in the theorizing of Chela Sandoval, becomes a site of differential consciousness, the fifth mode of oppositional consciousness, like a clutch “that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (58), a tactical and variant form of subjectivity. Differential consciousness is an active, productive, and agential technology, grounded in “politically revolutionary love and desire” to move “erotically” through power, namely through art and literacy, where “youth” and “youth of color” become coalition-based categories that form more prominent voices for political mobilizing efforts and impact.

4. Spoken word is literacy of an activist form, with long-term potential and impact.

Literacy is not merely as a skill set and competency associated with individual learning and empowerment, but rather, a form of sociopolitical agency with words and other tools that can be collectively mobilized towards a more socially just and deeply democratic society. Examples of other tools besides words include using one’s own voice as a tool, media as a form of literacy, technology, and hip hop literacy. Literacy, in this sense, has an important material effect and dimension that reflect Paulo Freire’s vision of a world where “saying the word is a fundamental right and not merely a habit, in which saying the word is the right to become a part of the decision to transform the world.” Spoken word as a sociological site illustrates how literacy’s material force shapes both individual consciousness *and* social and

historical conditions, by fostering organic intellectual formations extant and arising among youth, grounded in their everyday lived experience. Spoken word literacy, consequently, shifts discourse relying primarily on voice and dialogue across social difference.

5. Spoken word is a crucial site of pedagogy.

At the heart of spoken word organizing are safe, uncensored spaces for speech and dialogue to occur by and among youth, whose praxis of authorship and craft of narrative take root in the struggles, triumphs, pleasures, and pains of their everyday lives – giving *new* expressions to “the personal is political.” As a result of these spaces, young people not only demonstrate and cultivate an aesthetic maturity and social responsibility in their writing and performance, but witness and exercise the discursive power and generative potential of words and collective uplift through the use and interaction of their own voices and stories. What spoken word pedagogy brings into view is the efflorescence of a new generation of writers, arts activists, critical educators, community organizers, and social and political leaders. In short, spoken word pedagogy *is* the persistent, intentional, sustained, and ongoing arts activism, community organizing, and both U.S.-based and transnational networks that are constitutive of the social and cultural movement of spoken word and that explains its staying power.

Closing Thoughts

Spoken word constitutes one site of literacy, pedagogy, political resistance, and culture centered on youth. The emphasis of this dissertation need not have been

spoken word. The focus could have been community murals, graffiti art, dance, deejaying, digital stories, or youth radio. The key in this combination of literacy, politics, and pedagogy is arts organizing at the heart of youth development. The implications of this particular cultural site, however, are significant in revealing and illustrating the achievements of community organizations and community organizing efforts and practices as necessary social agents, forces, and partners in education. Spoken word, as a space of Foucault's "heterotopia" (Kun, 2005), is a contact zone for what social justice and humanitarian freedom look, sound, and feel like among youth, showing "how to move toward something better and transform the world we find ourselves in" (Kun, 2005, 17). Spoken word is a "space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other" (23). Literacy is its main thread that is culturally connects the critical with democratic:

[L]iteracy and democracy are intrinsically intertwined and effective revolutionary weapons... Young writers' ability to articulate artistically and politically their beliefs, concerns and demands for change severely alters power relations and creates meaningful social engagement in their communities. Without doubt, the issues young people contend with today are inherently linked to the structural dysfunction of a politic that pits the individual against the impossible, and dynamic new strategies are needed to approach social change through the meaningful inclusion of youth in the social dialogue (Riley, 2006).

Through spoken word, a new generation of writers and artists are rewriting a more socially just and deeply democratic social existence and future into being.

APPENDIX – RESEARCH METHODS

I am not a spoken word artist. Besides the poetry I write for the sake of my own clarity and expression, and a handful of public readings and creative writing teaching gigs, I entered the world of spoken word through its back door. With critical social theory as my lens and compass, I came into this study from academic “boot camp,” namely a combination of Ph.D. coursework, teaching and research assistantships, a qualifying exam, and a dissertation proposal defense. As a newly initiated Ph.D. candidate, I had the theoretical and institutional armor to get busy and analytically critical in the research field. Little had I known or expected that I would be so transformed in the process. By innumerable youth who step up as writers and commit themselves to self-exploration and social inquiry through artistic expression. But also through the immersion in a community that takes art *dead* seriously and as a necessary first step towards social transformation and justice.

The very first teen poetry slam I attended was the semis in 2007 at the Oakland Museum. At once I was infected and hooked by the energy. I was touched by the words young people performed onstage and their bravery for telling such personal stories. I was inspired by the fact that it was poetry that packed the performers and audience together in the auditorium. I was moved by how power had shifted substantially, and was entrusted to the bodies and voices of youth.

I sent a *long* email to James Kass, the founder and executive director of Youth Speaks, introducing myself. With no hesitation, James embraced my research desire, saying that he and other staff would “throw the doors wide open” for me at Youth

Speaks. He also encouraged me to study the politics of the organization evident in any of the relationships. With this generosity and transparency, it would be a timeframe of about three years in which I was able to conduct direct and participant observation in San Francisco, in the East Bay (primarily Oakland and Berkeley), and at Brave New Voices every year from 2007 to 2009 (the latter two years as a chaperone).⁵³ Additionally, I conducted 40 interviews with youth and youth advisory board members (Spokes, or *Spo-OOOOOHHHH-kes!*), professional spoken word artists and community educators, arts administrators, and teachers. I also benefited from a myriad of informal interaction, at events like poetry slams, festivals, and writing workshops, and from newly found and growing friendships. Media sources have also been essential, including but not limited to Facebook, Youtube, countless organization websites and email listservs, HBO's broadcasts of Brave New Voices, and independent news sources like KPFA (especially Hard Knock Radio), Youth Radio, and local newspapers that have featured youth spoken word artists and their poetry.

Bumps, Blocks, Frustrations: Experiential Points for Revising Research

Methods discussions for qualitative research tend to be written giving the appearance of work in the field as error-free, smoothly navigated, or, especially, not involving much in the way of researcher emotions. That has not been my case. I came into this study interested in focusing on youth in general and youth of color in particular, specifically their social, civic, and emotional development through and

⁵³ I attended the finals, but did not participate in the festival in 2010, 2011, and 2012.

engagement with the work of community organizations, in this case, centered on spoken word literacy. Drawing from Deborah Brandt's work (1998; 2001), I took the meaning of literacy on a sociological level to begin with, considering Youth Speaks as a kind of "sponsor" of critical literacy. How does an organization like Youth Speaks intervene in institutionally complaisant literacy? What impact does this intervention have on youth? My initial plan was to concentrate on Spokes, the youth advisory board of Youth Speaks. This decision was based partly on concerns with research access, as members of Spokes are the most involved youth in the organization and therefore the most present. With Spokes, I quickly saw how not only words, but political arts engagement and arts activism stood out conspicuously as a passion and devotion among young people. It was a passion that was bred and fostered through the commitment of staff, artists, and educators in the larger organization and spoken word community. And the process always begins with oneself, taking care of oneself, and looking inward and developing oneself through art. Literacy also became a much deeper and more intimate issue, more than I initially imagined or read about in the research literature. As one former youth poet, Kevin, recently reflected with me, "literacy allows you freedom. Especially when you don't have physical freedom. I never knew how literacy could get at my soul." My training in sociological and cultural theory, as well as listening to my heart as the better half of my training in this project, compelled me to ask much bigger, more relevant questions around pedagogy and organizing methodology, to really understand the context and process of spoken word and youth in ways that pretty

much amounted to making sense of spoken word as a movement. This purposeful and intentional revision in the research process has made this study *feel*, for me, truer to and less forced upon the ethnographic site, culture, and relations that I have been capturing and witnessing, and more importantly, that have changed me, and countless others both old and young, for the better.

Final Thoughts on Research Methodology

U.S. third world feminisms as a theoretical framework has come to define my research methodology as well as my intellectual home. As a non-homogenous and growing body of literature, U.S. third world feminisms has encouraged me to trust my emotions and intuition to serve as major sources and guides of knowledge. As Jacqui Alexander (2005) explains, U.S. third world feminisms as a methodology is grounded in a “rewiring” of the senses, a social healing project of remembering the past inclusive of life, grief, violence, and death as our work in the present, where experience, labor, and praxis are no longer secularized but spiritualized and sacred. And the sacred, according to Alexander, “is inconceivable without an aesthetic” (323). All of these dimensions seem to come together in spoken word, or perhaps in any arts form that critically begins with the lives of its makers, producers, and audiences. U.S. third world feminisms has offered me a methodology that insists upon history as not only our starting point but in its making, most importantly through the telling of stories (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Gunn Allen, 1986/1992) towards a kind of spiritual, yet socially grounded, decolonizing literacy.

It must be stated and emphasized that it was not only the backs of U.S. third world feminist scholars that carried me through this project. There have been a number of influential thinkers and theorists across the disciplines, primarily in cultural and critical race studies. But really, it has been the young people and adults involved and dedicated to this work in the world of spoken word activism and youth civic and arts engagement that have also provided me some great lessons for research methods, practices, integrity, and limits. Through their own social inquiries and critically reflective questions and research involved in the makings of their creative work and process.

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